

Kant on Lazy Savagery, Racialized

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ABSTRACT Kant develops a concept of savagery, partly characterized by laziness, to envision a program for human progress. He also racializes savagery, treating native Americans, in particular, as literal savages. He ascribes to this “race” a peculiar physiological laziness, a supposedly hereditary trait of blunted life power. Accordingly, while he grants them the same “germs” for perfections as he does the civilized Europeans, he allows them no prospect of fulfilling any such perfection. For the road to perfection must be paved through industry, a condition that Kant denies to the “savages” by racializing their alleged laziness. This case will shed new light on the debated relation between Kant’s moral universalism and his racism.

KEYWORDS Kant, race, laziness, savagery, native Americans, germs, human progress

I. INTRODUCTION

Kant calls both blacks and native Americans “lazy.”¹ What he means by this label is not immediately clear. Complicating things, he also holds that *all* humans are lazy, that they are so *by nature*, and that laziness can even be *useful*. My main goal in this paper is to shed light on Kant’s view that native Americans, representing “savages,” are lazy. We can fully assess this view, however, only in connection with his other claims about laziness.

Here is how I will proceed with this assessment. I begin with the notion of laziness as a universal, natural human predisposition. After explaining how Kant relates this notion to human progress, I turn to his concept of savagery as a state of useless laziness and lawless freedom (section 2). I then ask what it would take for him to *racialize* savagery, using a study of Rousseau’s nonracial account of native Americans as lazy “savages” for contrast (section 3).

Kant’s view of Americans fundamentally differs from Rousseau’s partly because he studies them as a natural philosopher, who feels obliged to investigate

¹By ‘native Americans’ with the lowercase ‘n,’ I am referring to indigenous peoples of the American continent.

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phenomena that are of significance to humanity and uncover their law-governed natural causes to whatever extent possible (section 4.1). Speculating about race from this standpoint, Kant argues that the original human phylum must contain certain germs and natural predispositions, which developed differently in the early humans as they adapted to four separate climates, and that four skin colors (white, yellow, black, red), once formed during this early adaptive process, became unfailingly hereditary. Four basic races were established thereby. Native Americans represent the red race (section 4.2).

Theorizing this way, Kant can also racialize characteristics other than skin color, such as laziness. As a natural predisposition, laziness may be circumstantially suppressed in some humans while developed in others (section 2). Blacks and native Americans are assigned to the latter category. Each of these races developed laziness, according to Kant, as an adaptive effect of the climate in which they formed their skin color. Native Americans are deemed lazy in a peculiar way, however, which makes them utterly useless as far as Kant is concerned (blacks, in his view, can still be trained for hard labor). For he understands their alleged laziness as a blunted life power and a lack of any usable drives or feelings and, according to his system, this physiological laziness is as indelible as their skin color (section 4.2).

The implications of this racialization of lazy savagery become clear in light of Kant's account of human progress. On this account, the human being must be *disciplined* first, before he can be cultivated, civilized, and finally moralized.² One is susceptible to discipline, however, only if one has certain drives and feelings. Kant denies native Americans this prerequisite for discipline—and, a fortiori, for any hope of progressing toward moralization—by racializing their supposed laziness. He does so even while granting them the same “germs” for morality as he does for all other humans, yet without thereby contradicting himself (section 5). This reading suggests a new way to address the supposed tension between Kant's racism and his moral universalism. There turns out to be no real tension: he can, without contradiction, affirm racism while being genuinely committed to his moral universalism (section 6).

2. LAZINESS AND HUMAN PROGRESS: PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Kant sometimes presents laziness (*Faulheit*) as a universal and natural human propensity. A propensity is “the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination (habitual desire, *concupiscentia*), insofar as this possibility is contingent for humanity in general”—contingent in the sense that a propensity is “only the *predisposition* to desire an enjoyment which, when the subject has experienced it, arouses *inclination* to it” (*RGV* 6:29).³ So, while a propensity may be deemed “innate,”

²As a historian explicating *Kant's* views, I will retain his practice of using male pronouns to talk about “the human being,” in order not to paper over his sexism. For discussion, see Kleingeld, “Gender-Neutral Language.” Similarly, I will retain Kant's practice of referring to non-whites and non-Europeans by such terms as ‘Negro,’ ‘Oriental,’ and ‘savage.’ A reader today may find such terms offensive. If so, may that feeling be an impetus for further inquiry.

³References to Kant's works are to the volume and pagination of his *Gesammelte Schriften*. Abbreviations and translations of the specific works used are specified in the bibliography.