WHY ANTI-SEMITISM GROWS STRONGER:  
A Reply to Professor Hooton

Leslie A. White  
[1939]

In “Why the Jew Grows Stronger,” (Collier's for May 6, 1939) the distinguished Harvard anthropologist, Professor Earnest Albert Hooton, has presented some very interesting views on the question of anti-Semitism and has proposed a solution for this malady. Coming from a man of Professor Hooton’s scientific eminence and from one of America’s foremost institutions of learning, this article bears great prestige and is likely to exert considerable influence among the many readers of Collier’s. However, some of Professor Hooton’s statements and conclusions should be scrutinized with considerable care. At least, they should not be accepted without some thought and reflection.

Put very briefly, Professor Hooton’s thesis is this: Jews are characterized by certain recognizable physical features by means of which they can be distinguished from non-Jews. Associated with these Jewish physical characters are certain Jewish intellectual and temperamental characteristics. The forces of natural selection have improved the Jewish stock so that it is now superior to that of Gentiles. Gentiles hate and persecute Jews because they (the Jews) are superior. And, finally, the answer to the Jewish problem is intermarriage with non-Jews – the obliteration of the Jews as an ethnic group. Let us examine this thesis point by point.

It is quite true that it is frequently possible to recognize a Jew by sight. It is also true that one frequently makes mistakes in such judgments, mistaking Jew for Gentile and vice versa. Jews are sufficiently difficult to recognize as to have made it necessary for their persecutors in times past to compel them to wear some distinguishing mark to identify them! Moreover, as an anthropologist above all persons should know, a person frequently betrays his race or nationality by some accent in speech, way of dressing, gesture of hand, facial expression or shrug of shoulders. The present writer has on many occasions discovered that certain persons were Jews only when he heard them pronounce the ‘g’ in such words as ‘singer’ as the ‘g’

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1 This unpublished piece was, as White said, “sent to Colliers [sic], but they sent it back – did not want ‘to open their columns to controversy’.” The manuscript is housed at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Leslie A. White collection, (box 13) and is reproduced here by permission of that institution. The manuscript has been lightly edited for punctuation and grammar and all footnotes are by Mark Worrell, editor, NYJS. Send all correspondence to: mark.worrell@cornell.edu.

2 Hooton (1887-1954) earned his Ph.D. from Wisconsin in 1911 and after a Rhodes scholarship taught at Harvard from 1913 until his death. His notable books included Up from the Ape and Apes, Men, and Morons. For more, see Shapiro’s 1954 obit: (http://www.aaanet.org/sections/gad/history/083hootonobit.pdf).
in ‘finger’ is pronounced. In short, in many instances success in recognizing Jews depends upon evidence, which is not physical at all.

Professor Hooton declares that the “highly evolved and specialized physiognomy so frequently characteristic of the Jew is correlated with certain equally highly evolved and specialized characteristics of mind, temperament, and personality.” What does he mean by this slippery term “correlate”? A scientist should make his meaning clear. There is a high correlation between the Negro race in America and the profession of Pullman porter; a high correlation between Chinese in the United States and laundries. Also, there is a high correlation between the clothing industry in America and the Jews; a concentration of Jews is to be found in the medical and legal professions. But this is not what Professor Hooton means by “correlated.” What he means is that the behavior traits that are correlated with Jews are innate, biologically determined characteristics. And he is quite right when he says that this thesis will “arouse the ire of ... scientists ...” For it is a conclusion that has not been scientifically established. We do not have a single scrap of convincing evidence to prove that the Jews possess innate, biologically determined behavioral tendencies that distinguish them from non-Jews. They may have; they may not. We have no right to declare for either alternative when we simply do not know. False knowledge is worse than ignorance – in science at least.

For a long time the Church prohibited Christians from lending money at interest. As a consequence, the Jews became the moneylenders. Similarly, the Church prohibited the study of anatomy by dissection, so the medical profession was left to Jews and Moors. Thus “correlations” between Jews and banking, Jews and medicine, became established. But let us not confuse history and custom with biological heredity.

Professor Hooton declares that the Jews are superior biologically – physically and mentally – to non-Jews. This is sheer inference. One might expect a moderately ignorant Jew to make a statement of this sort, but not a scientist – least of all a physical anthropologist. Professor Hooton is a physical anthropologist, a biologist. One would expect from such an expert some direct evidence of a neurological, anatomical, endocrinological, physiological, sort. But instead, he derives his biology by dubious inference from social phenomena as the much-maligned man in the street might.

Furthermore, even if we grant that the Jews have produced more than their share of great men and women – in science, art, and business – it does not follow at all that they are biologically superior. In many instances, so far as we are able to know and judge the facts, people who have some defect or shortcoming win out over their more generously endowed brethren because of their very inferiority. Handicaps frequently serve as incentives to supreme effort and accomplishment. The Jew suffers the handicap of discrimination and persecution. Very often he must be better qualified for a position than his Gentile competitor in order to enjoy an equal opportunity to secure it. Thus the superior accomplishments of the Jews (if these be granted) may be due to the added incentive that is supplied by anti-Semitism. At any rate, we have in this explanation some concrete, tangible facts as evidence, and this is much superior to mere inference of biological superiority.
Professor Hooton comes dangerously close to circular reasoning in one of his explanations of anti-Semitism. "We hate them," he says in effect, "because they are superior." But according to his reasoning, they became superior only because they were persecuted, and in the struggle for existence they weeded out their inferiors. Thus, the Jews are persecuted because they are superior, and they became superior because they were persecuted. It is rather difficult to tell, through Professor Hooton's eyes, which is the cart and which the horse.

But it is his solution to “this festering sore” of anti-Semitism that is perhaps the most disappointing part of Professor Hooton's essay. "If the Jews would intermarry with the Gentiles, then the Jewish problem would be solved." This is undoubtedly true. It is likewise true that it would be solved if the Jews would go jump in a lake – or do anything else that would terminate their existence as a group distinguishable from other human groups.

If iron would not rust we would not need to paint bridges. If rain did not fall we would not need umbrellas. If wolves would eat grass sheepherders could rest easy. And so on. For Jews to marry Gentiles, Gentiles must marry Jews. And it is likely that as few Gentiles will seek to “leaven the stupidity” of their offspring by intermarriage as there will be Jews who are charitably enough inclined toward their age-old Gentile tormentors to give them some of their brains. Anti-Semitism is the result of the operation of certain definite economic and political forces. As Professor Hooton himself observes: anti-Semitic outbreaks will recur whenever societies get into economic messes and politicians are looking for scapegoats..." Why not, then, cure the “festering sore” by treating the economic and social system that brings it forth? This would seem to be the sensible approach. To say that "if the Jews and Gentiles would intermarry," when natural social forces have been and are today operating to keep them apart, is as senseless as to say that “if milk would not expand upon freezing, then milk bottles would not break.”

Finally, in our judgment, Professor Hooton's article is precisely the sort of thing that will aggravate anti-Semitism. Although bearing the trademark of science, much of it is mere specious inference. And if Professor Hooton had tried, he could hardly have come to a conclusion better suited to fan the flames of race hatred than the dogma of Jewish superiority. If propaganda can turn an ordinary Gentile into a Jew-baiter, it is quite likely that telling him “he should marry a Jew if he wishes to leaven his own lump of stupidity” will do the trick. And any encouragement of conceit and arrogance among the Jews as a result of Professor Hooton's flattering estimate of them is hardly likely to improve relations between Jew and Gentile.

All in all, Professor Hooton’s article is very unfortunate. It is scientifically unsound and socially injurious.