The Construction of Whiteness in the Work of The Swedish State Institute for Race Biology

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Introduction

In 1922 a eugenic research centre, The Swedish State Institute for Race Biology, was founded in Uppsala. The purpose of the institute was to survey, document, and classify the Swedish people according to race criteria. The data collected was intended to make a foundation for a rational population policy, aiming at improving a healthy livestock by securing the Nordic (Swedish) race. Compared to other races living in Sweden, primarily the East Baltic (Finnish) and the Lappish (Sami), the Nordic race was deemed superior, both with regard to physiological characters and inner mental qualities, i.e. moral capacities and intelligence. But due to miscegenation and a depraved urban lifestyle this Nordic race was under threat and needed to be rescued.

Of decisive importance to the Institute's inception was the physician Herman Lundborg (1868–1943), who became its first director and professor of race biology. For several years before the Institute was established, Lundborg worked in different ways to institutionalize racial hygiene, and he came to be seen as one of the central figures in the Swedish eugenic movement. To enable political decisions that favored the eugenic cause, and to promote the idea of an institute of race biology, it was important to influence the public opinion. An important tool for the eugenic movement's opinion moulding was the photographic image. In 1919, Lundborg organized a traveling eugenic exhibition, "The Exhibition of Swedish Racial Types" (Svenska Folktypsutställningen), where the Nordic race was exemplified with, among other things, portraits of Swedish members of the social elite. As a contrast, to illustrate low-quality racial traits (and threats), were also shown photographs from criminal records and of people from 'foreign' groups, such as Gypsies. The Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene, of which Lundborg was of course an influential member, issued a publication series, which was an important channel for eugenic propaganda. Lundborg was the editor of several pamphlets in the series, and in 1921, the same year the Swedish parliament made the decision to establish the Institute; he was responsible for the publication of the ambitious jubilee book *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*. This magnificent work, richly illustrated with photographs, was especially directed towards prospective patrons who could be convinced to support eugenic work through financial donations. The propagandistic use of photographs shown in these earlier examples would prove to be manifest also in the Institute's pictorial practice.

Aim and research questions

In the scientific practice of this eugenic institute it was the external aspects of the humans, i.e. how they looked, that decided what race a person belonged to. A vast amount of bodily data was therefore collected – bodies, skulls, and face angles were measured, and hair and eye colours determined, to decide what race a person belonged to. Beside these records photographic portraits of the persons examined were also taken. One important aspect in this work was that the data compiled needed to relate to a set race standard. If a person were going to be classified as Nordic, East Baltic, Lapp or some other race for that matter, these

race classes had to be set and defined in advance. *How these race standards were created will be the first question to address in this paper.*

The use of photography in the scientific practice of the institute is not surprising - with the focus on how people looked it was a convenient and efficient tool in the research practice of the institute. The camera could not only rapidly produce a vast amount of photographic records but was also, in this period, deemed objective and reliable – just capturing the world as it was. (Anthropological photography) Our next question to address is: *How was the race standard implemented and communicated in the pictorial material?*

To set a standard

The institute operated with six different races: purer Nordic type, purer East Baltic type, light mixed type, medium dark type, dark mixed type, and dark type. They were defined as:

1. Persons having a light eye colour and light head hair, with a stature over 168 cm. and a cephalic index under 78, have been designated *purser Nordic type*.
2. Those having a light eye colour and light head hair, with a stature under 173 cm. and a cephalic index between 80 and 85, have been designated *purser East Baltic type*.
3. The remaining persons with a light eye colour and light head hair have been designated *light mixed types*. [. . .]
4. Those having a light eye colour and brown head hair, and those having a dark eye colour and light head hair, have been designated *medium dark types*. [. . .]
5. Those having a dark eye colour and brown head hair, or light eye colour and dark head hair, have been designated *dark mixed types*.
6. Those having both a dark eye colour and dark head hair have been designated *dark types* (Linders and Lundborg, 1926, 151).

The Nordic type was represented by persons defined as Swedes, while the East Baltic type was represented by Finnish people and the dark type by Lappish people. The formation of these six categories is of course interesting. Most obvious is the ranking of the racial type-groups, from the pure Nordic type – the Swedes – at the top, down to the dark types – the Lappish people – at the bottom. The categories are constructed using both objective measurable factors (cephalic index and stature), and more subjective, imprecise factors (eye and hair colour).

Although it is hard to understand the very precise measurements given – how is it that a Swede cannot be shorter than 168 cm and a Finn no longer than 173 cm – it is even harder to understand how more imprecise and vague traits can be decisive in separating two categories. Is there really a reason for separating persons who have “light eye colour and brown head hair” from those who have “light eye colour and dark head hair”? It is reasonable if you want to have more rather than fewer categories, if it is important to create as big differentiation as possible. Thereby you provide a proper distinction between those who belong to the highest category and those belonging to the lowest. It becomes very obvious that there is a big difference between the Nordic race and the Lappish. The eugenic project based on race would be rather pointless if it failed to demonstrate significant differences between the races.

It is obvious when looking at the empirical material collected by the institute, that almost all citizens in Sweden had white skin and were white, if judged by the famous Blumenbach scale of five races: the Caucasian or white race, the Mongolian or yellow race, the Malayan or brown race, the Ethiopian or black race, and the American or red race. According to the rhetoric of the institute the skin therefore was not an issue “since this varies only slightly

among the Swedish population”. Skin colour was recorded just in exceptional cases, “where the skin was unusually dark” (Linders and Lundborg, 1926, 10). It became more important to use other aspects, such as hair and eye colour, the stature, and the relation between the height and width of the skull, etc. to separate one white from another, i.e. to define who was really white. This urge to show that the white race could come in many shades was not unique to the Swedish eugenic project, on the contrary; due to nationalistic ideas of nations and folks, also other European nations were engaged in this categorizing practice. In the rhetoric of British imperialism and German Nazism for instance, it was of utter importance to separate the people of Europe, especially the northern folk types from the inhabitants in southern Europe. As a result of these separating operations, Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons and Germans, became whiter than any other European race type (Kjellman, 2013, 197).

To visualize a standard

In the work of the institute the pictorial material was very important. In research journeys conducted throughout the country a vast photographic material was produced and more than 12 000 photographs were organized in folders and albums in the archive of the institute. These photographs were then used to illustrate the research results in the publications published by the institute during the 20's and 30's.

This picture material clearly visualizes the race rhetoric presented in the section above. The blond, blue-eyed, tall, shapely Nordic race was always placed in a superior position compared to the blond but short and stocky East Baltic type, and the small, dark and tiny Lappish race (fig. 1). But *how* was this rhetoric produced in the pictorial material? What methods and pictorial practices did they use to produce these images of the superior Nordic race type?

Figure 1. The Nordic race, the East Baltic race and the Lappish race (Linders and Lundborg, 1926, plate XLI). Reproduced courtesy of Uppsala university library.

When looking at the non-pictorial empirical material, the institute shows a true meticulousness in the way social and bodily data of the Swedish citizens was collected and analysed. With thorough instructions and guidelines for what demographic information to register and what measurements to take, and how, long lists with tables and diagram of standardized data were produced to show where in the country the pure Nordic type

dominated the population, and where more dark and mixed type dwelled (Linders and Lundborg, 1926). But when looking at the image material it is obvious that it was used and produced in a less strict and standardized way. The photographic portraits in the publications and the photographic archive show a great variety in the ways the photographs were shot; there seems to be no exact method or formula for how the persons and the race characters should be captured. Even if the staff, conducting the surveys, was given brief instructions to portray the person examined in enfaces, profile and semi-profile (fig. 2, a mug-shot formula, also commonly used to document criminals) many photographs show the persons portrayed in a various ways: in full figure or waist up, alone or in groups, in activities or just stationary facing the camera, completely naked exposing the body features from different perspectives, or in settings with props and full clothing – a photographic practice that actually hide the body traits that was supposed to witness of a persons race character.

Figure 2. Photograph taken according to the instructions from the institute. Reproduced courtesy of Uppsala university library.

What becomes obvious when analysing the material is that this freedom was used to create the supremacy of the Nordic race. The measurement of bodily data could only indicate the variation of the races, but with the camera a hierarchic order of the races, and the superiority of the Nordic race type, could be emphasized in a much more efficient way.

One important idea in the race biological discourse of the Swedish institute, was that the Nordic type was not only superior with regard to its bodily character, i.e. that it had an extraordinarily strong and healthy physiognomy, but also that it was more intelligent, cultivated, and of a higher moral standard in comparison to other races. These inner qualities were actually connected to external bodily aspects - a strong and beautiful body was perceived as an evidence of mental health and capacities. These qualities also affected the social mobility in the society. To the top, with important professions and positions in society, only the superior Nordic types could reach, while people of mixed race types were destined to criminality and low social standings. Mixed races were seen as inferior to all races since miscegenation caused degeneration according to the rhetoric of the institute. Thus, people exposed as criminals are always designated as race mixed in the photographic material (fig. 3).

Figure 3. About this mixed race female type, designated as criminal, is said: "[it] reminds of inferior and primitive races where the moral degeneration is clearly expressed in their faces" (Lundborg, 1919). Reproduced courtesy of Uppsala university library.

If the mixed race was exposed as a threat to society, the Nordic race was presented as contributing to the welfare of society, as the guarantee of a stable and sound nation. They are often presented in their professions, in uniforms (for instance as nurses, priests, soldiers etc.), or at work on farms or in the industry (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Nordic types in uniforms. From the archive at Uppsala university library and Lundborg, 1919. Reproduced courtesy of Uppsala university library.

Since the aim of the institute was to provide the government with eugenic data, so they could make informed decisions on what strategies to implement to improve the Swedish livestock, i.e. to make the Nordic race to reproduce and ensure that the mixed race types did not, "family" and "reproduction" were central concepts in the discourse of the institute, and also clearly visualized in the picture material. In prosperous environments and idyllic landscapes, healthy farmer families with many children were repeatedly exposed alongside mother-and-child-pictures with captions defining them as pure Swedes, i.e. Nordic types. It seems like it is always a sunny summer day, promising verdure and wealth, in these pictures.

Fig. 5. Mothers and families of Nordic race type. Lundborg, 1919. Reproduced courtesy of Uppsala university library.

On the opposite side of this breeding scale, contrasting the fertile and fruitful Nordic race, people of mixed race, and with an uncertainty of gender, are placed. In mug-shot pictures, with no context and with a sharp and revealing light, these persons confront the camera with none of the contentedness shown by the Nordic types. If the inferior races were contextualized, they were placed in poor and gloomy surroundings, with worn out clothes, and physiognomies witnessing of their less benign genotypes.

Fig. 6 Women of male type and Eats Baltic races types from the north of Sweden, Lundborg, 1919. Reproduced courtesy of Uppsala university library.

The camera was at this time a quite new scientific tool; it entered the scientific practice in the end of the 19th c. Many disciplines avoided the new technique since it was a problem to capture general concepts and aspects with photographs since they, per se, depicted individual items – and general aspects is what science is about, not the incidental. It was also a problem

to emphasize significant aspects in a photograph, since it captures all aspects, even the most insignificant (Topper, 1996, 234). In the same time the camera had a reputation of being objective; the general idea at this time was that it captured reality as it was (Daston and Galison, 2007, x). By using this supposed objectivity of the camera, the race science could present pictures of the different races in a most biased way, and still appear as scientifically reliable. By using different perspectives, surroundings, clothing, lighting in studios, and of course by using a biased selection when picking from the stock of photographs those who should represent the different races, they could use the photographs in a way that served their purposes best. It is no coincidence that the Lapps, the East Baltic types, and the mixed races, are represented by often elderly, not very well dressed or unhealthy looking persons, while the Nordic type is represented by young and well dressed people in good condition.

Conclusion

To show that the Nordic race was whiter compared to other European race types, the institute needed to refer to other aspects than their white skin (which they usually shared with other races living in Sweden). When setting their race standard, physiological traits, such as hair and eye colours, stature, height and width of the skull, etc. were therefore used. But whiteness was not just a physiological and bodily aspect, it also referred to inner mental qualities – moral and intelligence for instance – and these should also be shown and related to when defining the race type. The scientific tools, generally used in the work of race biology, could not capture these aspects, instead camera work was put into practice. With photographs, used in a most biased way, the institute could submit evidence of the superiority of the Nordic race. Since a good race character vouches for a high position in society and a good looking and healthy body, the Nordic race was always depicted as such, while more inferior types were exposed in worn out clothes, in front of poor homes and surroundings.

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f) eugenics, whiteness, visibility, classification, photography, race