

The Solutrean Hypothesis and the Epistemology of White Supremacy

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Twenty-one thousand years ago, before the Last Glacial Maximum, thousands of years before the Age of Discovery's proliferation of European oceangoing trade and exploration, some believe seal-skin boats crossed the Atlantic Ocean, then the host of an ice bridge.¹ These voyages would begin as modest hunting trips in search of seals, escalating--possibly by accident--into thousands of kilometers across the ocean.² The ocean would be intensely harsh and frigid, demanding the utmost physical agility and stamina in their seal-skin boats that would quickly wear out from overexposure to the seawater.³ Over months, the voyagers would make their way through the sea ice into a stop-and-go routine. First, after their vessel was on the verge of wearing out, they would rest on a glacier in the warmth of it so it would dry enough for reuse.⁴ Then, they would go back out on the water to traverse further, repeating this sequence until, finally, North America was reached unexpectedly. Conventional wisdom states that the first North Americans came here from Asia via the Beringia land bridge.⁵ However, there are other interpretations of history that suggest migration to the continent came in the opposite cardinal direction, most likely by such seal-skin boats. The "Solutrean hypothesis" posits that members of the Solutrean culture of the Solutré region of France and the southwestern coast of Europe were the first to colonize North America.⁶ Since its first proper instance in scientific literature in 2004, the Solutrean hypothesis has been widely

¹ Phillips, "SOLUTREAN SEAL HUNTERS," 580.

² Phillips, 580.

³ Phillips, 578.

⁴ Phillips, 578.

⁵ Bradley and Stanford, *Across Atlantic Ice*, 67.

⁶ Bradley and Stanford, 67.

discredited as being unsubstantiated.⁷ Despite this, it has become a minor fascination of both popular and alternative cultures, becoming the subject of popular science journalism, and most concerningly, agitprop of the political far-right. Given the scientific inaccuracy of the proposition, what explains the continued relevance of the Solutrean hypothesis? Its most remarkable implication is that it reorientates the human origin of North America as fundamentally European, a profound revision of history that contravenes the self-conceptual autonomy of Indigenous and non-European people of the continent. Because of its historical implications, the continued relevance of the Solutrean hypothesis suggests that it is an epistemic device that legitimizes white supremacy both within the fringes of the far right and the mainstream media.

The Solutrean hypothesis is the product of a 120-year history – once an obscure assemblage of various studies of Paleolithic America eventually consolidated into the proper theoretical proposition that we understand it as today by the early 2000s.⁸ The concept was given its foundation by the American naturalist Charles Abbott in 1892, who was among the first to study paleolithic life on the North American continent, comparing them to ones found in Europe.⁹ But the discoveries prior to the 70s were merely setting the stage for the true development of the Solutrean hypothesis.

In 1970, approximately 74 kilometers east of the Virginia Capes, Captain Charles Thurston Shawn and the crew of the small wooden scallop trawler the *Cinmar* reeled in the skull of a mastodon while dredging.¹⁰ While cleaning the bone from the dredge, they discovered something else within the remains: a stone tool.¹¹ This tool - a thin, sharp, bifacially flaked rhyolite knife¹²,

⁷ Vastag, "Radical theory of first Americans," February 2012.

⁸ Phillips, "SOLUTREAN SEAL HUNTERS," 573.

⁹ Meltzer, *The Great Paleolithic War*, 41-70.

¹⁰ Stanford et al, "New Evidence for a Possible Paleolithic Occupation," 74.

¹¹ Eren, Boulanger, and O'Brien, "The Cinmar Discovery," 708.

¹² Dennis Stanford et al, "New Evidence for a Possible Paleolithic Occupation," 75.

nearly 8 inches long¹³ - demonstrated skilled workmanship, given the difficulty of flaking rhyolite correctly. The lithic technique used to construct this tool resembled that of the Clovis culture, a Paleoamerican culture seemingly predating all other inhabitants of North America, whose sites had been discovered across the continent since the 1930s.¹⁴ The crew of the *Cinmar* did not know this, of course. Nor did they care to. So, absentmindedly, they split up what they wanted to keep amongst themselves and either tossed what they didn't want overboard or sold it to Gwynn's Island Museum on Virginia's Middle Peninsula.¹⁵ Captain Shawn took notice of these discoveries, making sure to note the water depth and the area on his navigation charts for future reference.¹⁶ However, the location of these charts is unknown.¹⁷ Every detail of the *Cinmar* discovery, from when to where exactly it took place, has been approximated by crewmates and confounded by the second-hand accounts of researchers. The story was inconsistent, and the crew of the *Cinmar* did not recognize it as all that significant anyway. But a group of researchers and scholars took notice of it: whatever was found off the coast of Virginia should not have been there.¹⁸ Over the next 40 years, research was conducted on the Clovis and Solutrean cultures, piecing together their artifacts.

The Solutrean hypothesis was initially proposed by American researchers Dennis Stanford and Bruce Bradley in 2004 in the journal *World Archeology*.¹⁹ They argued that the Solutreans possessed a twofold advantage: (1) they existed before the Last Glacial Maximum, giving them an ice sheet in the North Atlantic to travel beside or across by wood-frame or seal-skin boats, and (2) they had the technical aptitude to construct, unprecedented for that time in human history.²⁰ Upon

¹³ Vastag, "Radical theory of first Americans," February 2012.

¹⁴ Vastag, February 2012.

¹⁵ Eren, Boulanger, and O'Brien, "The Cinmar Discovery," 709

¹⁶ Eren, Boulanger, and O'Brien, 709

¹⁷ Eren, Boulanger, and O'Brien, 710

¹⁸ Vastag, "Radical theory of first Americans," February 2012

¹⁹ Bradley and Stanford, "The North Atlantic Ice-Edge Corridor," 465.

²⁰ Vastag, "Radical theory of first Americans," February 2012.

reaching the east coast of North America, the Solutrean colonists spread throughout the continent, settling as far south as present-day New Mexico and as north as eastern Canada and Alaska.²¹ The scientific community has laid four main charges of implausibility against the hypothesis: (1) it is chronologically inconsistent,²² (2) it lacks cultural evidence,²³ (3) it lacks physical and genetic evidence,²⁴ and (4) it is oceanographically ahistorical,²⁵ therefore, making the geographic separation between the Clovis and Solutrean cultures a weak point in the theoretical integrity of the hypothesis.²⁶ This repudiation effectively ended its life as a credible scientific idea, leaving its corpse to be taken up by less empirical domains.

The scientific community's near-unanimous dismissal of the Solutrean hypothesis prompted it to permanently relocate to the domain of pop-sci clickbait because of the concept's lopsided ratio of speculative intrigue against insubstantial evidence, making it particularly palatable to the attention economy. Given the North American continent's long and profoundly violent history of European colonialism, the seemingly inoffensive alternative interpretation of history has become politically charged. Beginning in the 2010s, the Solutrean hypothesis became mainstream thanks to a novelty-seeking media, indifferent to the consequences of their actions in the public sphere.²⁷ These consequences came in many wildly unlike forms, ranging from the well-meaning to the worst of tastes. On one end, there's CBC's *The Nature of Things* episode "Ice Bridge,"²⁸ a David Suzuki-hosted TV documentary matter-of-factly interviewing many of the scientists – including Dennis Stanford and Bruce Bradley – distilling their research into 44-minute-

²¹ Bradley and Stanford, *Across Atlantic Ice*, 2-84.

²² Straus, "Solutrean Settlement of North America?" 220.

²³ Straus, 223-224.

²⁴ Straus, 223-224.

²⁵ Straus, 223-224.

²⁶ Straus, 221.

²⁷ Vastag, "Radical theory of first Americans," February 2012.

²⁸ *The Nature of Things*.

long infotainment. On the other far less benign end, the Solutrean hypothesis has served as fodder for aberrant, fringe literature such as Kyle Bristow's self-published far-right extremist epic *White Apocalypse*. The novel follows "a rogue anthropologist [who] teams up with a proponent of the Solutrean Hypothesis and a fiery lawyer" to reveal (to the dismay of the liberal status quo)²⁹ that Solutreans, are explicitly depicted as white people. Not only were the first North Americans but were the first to be "systemically murdered" by invading colonists in the form of non-white "Amerindians" who crossed the Bering Strait.³⁰ Although this media is not at the forefront of everyday conversation, it is put out consistently enough in the background of the cultural current for it to be endemic of larger social forces: the drumming up of the id of Western culture. The continued relevance of the Solutrean hypothesis suggests not that it possesses some unfairly neglected empirical merit that demands reassessment by the scientific community but that the concept serves a particular purpose in the culture that captured it.

The adoption of the Solutrean hypothesis into the mainstream media and the ideological vernacular of the far-right could be described as a kind of kitsch phenomenon. In the essay "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste,'" German scholar Winfried Minninghaus describes Benjamin's definition as being an aesthetic that "offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance [found in classical works of art], without sublimation. It usually presents no difficulties in interpretation and has nothing to do with the aesthetics of negativity."³¹ The term is typically relegated to the arts but has been adopted by cultural criticism to describe the "kitschification" of culture or the "mass diffusion of art through the diverse media: radio, TV, large-scale reproduction,

²⁹ "Kyle Bristow." Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.

³⁰ Bristow, *White Apocalypse*, synopsis.

³¹ Benjamin and Rice, *Walter Benjamin*, 41.

records, cheap magazines and paperbacks sold in supermarkets, etc.”³² Applying this concept to the proliferation of the Solutrean hypothesis, it can be understood as a mild aesthetic of white supremacy (European indigeneity in North America, triumphant colonization, etc.) which offers instantaneous emotional gratification in its simplicity and its appeal to white-dominated North America. This aesthetic is then diffused through mass culture, disseminating its ideas covertly regardless of the intention or distance between the creators that propagate it. The effect of the Solutrean hypothesis, as it remains in mass and alternative cultures today, is white supremacy taking up a conceptual framework to express itself, whether covertly or overtly, allowing its danger to hide in plain sight. This cultural malleability is what gives its proliferation the viral character that it has, spreading far and rapidly throughout the noosphere, being able to subtly reinforce the violence of white supremacy and its institutions under the epistemic guise of scientific validity, being equally palpable to government-funded media as it is to the vulgar fringe of neo-Nazi politics. The consequence of this marriage of scientism and chauvinism is the neutralization of the latter, allowing the harm of its ideas to proliferate unfettered. The Solutrean hypothesis is not the only example of this phenomenon. More overtly, the mainstreaming of American white supremacist ideologue Richard Spencer, a prolific public speaker and editor who unabashedly advocated for “peaceful ethnic cleansing”³³ whose rise to prominence among influential figures such as former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon got enabled in part due to the “dapper” characterizations of him in the reportage of mainstream outlets such as the Washington Post,³⁴ neutralizing him in a similar (albeit more aggressive) way that their work with the Solutrean hypothesis did. Ultimately, these examples make up a phenomenon that broadly seeks to defang

³² Sheldon, “Crimes and Punishments,” 70.

³³ “Richard Bertrand Spencer,” Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.

³⁴ Cox, “Let’s Party like It’s 1933,” November 2016.

the inherently violent ideology of white supremacy, adapting them to be more palpable to resistance and maintaining it as the dominant culture through it all.

The proliferation of the Solutrean hypothesis is emblematic of how white supremacy defines itself epistemologically, the consequences of which are relevant to the contemporary era. As established previously, the actual scientific merit of the hypothesis is irrelevant. However, its appearance of scientific validity is what is of use, giving the institutions, concepts, and iconography a veneer of empirical legitimacy, obscuring its true baselessness with the decorum of science. This relationship to appearance reveals that white supremacy is an ideology that is fundamentally about force. Its objective is violence and domination for their own sake. Any appearance of empiricism or rigour is merely a means to an end, being the violent domination of those othered by whiteness. The conditions by which white supremacist knowledge constructs itself are immaterial and idealist, affirming Walter Benjamin's notion that fascism - one of white supremacy's most vulgar and explicit incarnations - is "the aestheticization of politics."³⁵ In the image-laden attention economy of the contemporary era, this idealist epistemology is particularly palpable, allowing its violence to take hold as it has in past centuries.

³⁵ Hillach, Wikoff, and Zimmerman, "The Aesthetics of Politics," 99.

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