

# THE SUPERIORITY COMPLEX

A new book from the “Tiger Mom” seeks to explain why some groups succeed in America and some fail. But when does cultural pride cross over into racism?

BY SUKETU MEHTA

FROM TIME TO TIME, EVERY INDIAN AMERICAN FINDS an email in his or her inbox, wearing a font of many colors, like the one my grandfather once sent me: “Take a Pride—Being an Indian. 38% of Doctors in U.S.A. are Indians. 36% of NASA employees are Indians. 34% of MICROSOFT employees are Indians. India invented the Number System. Decimal Point was also invented by India. Sanskrit is the most suitable language for computer software ...”

On my desk now is a book-length version of such an email: *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America*, by Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld. You may remember Chua as the “Tiger Mom” whose 2011 memoir about the rigors of Chinese parenting set off waves of anxiety among aspirational American parents who had been raised with Dr. Spock’s permissive child-rearing attitudes. Her new book, co-authored with her husband, widens its aim, purporting to explain why not just Asians (like Chua) but also seven other groups—Cubans, Jews (like Rubenfeld), Indians (like me), Nigerians, Mormons, Iranians and Lebanese—are superior when it comes to succeeding in America.

The book claims that these groups thrive because of three traits: a superiority complex, insecurity and impulse control. The ones lacking the “Triple Package”

are African Americans, Appalachians, Wasps and pretty much everybody else.

Does such thinking shock you? If not, it may be because it has become so insidiously commonplace over the past decade as a new strain of racial, ethnic and cultural reductivism has crept into the American psyche and public discourse. Whereas making sweeping observations about, say, African-American or Hispanic culture—flattering or unflattering—remains unthinkable in polite company, it has become relatively normal in the past 10 years to comment on the supposed cultural superiority of various “model minorities.” I call it the new racism—and I take it rather personally.

I am an American, Calcutta born. I’m writing a book about immigrants in New York, dedicated to my two American sons. I want them to know why we came here and how we found our place in this new land. I want them to know about the teachers at the Catholic school in Queens who called me a “pagan,” and the boy there who welcomed me to the school by declaring, “Lincoln shoulda never let ‘em off the plantations,” and the landlord who welcomed us to the country by turning off the electricity.

I also want them to know why their family did well in the end. We worked hard, yes, and we read books and went to the right schools and are “well settled,” as our relatives back in India describe us. But we also

benefited from numerous advantages—from cultural capital built up over generations to affirmative action to an established network of connections in our new country—none of which had anything to do with racial, ethnic or cultural superiority.

When my family went to America, we left behind a system in which people are often denigrated because of their caste, religion, language or skin color. The U.S., of course, has its own deeply troubled history with regard to race, but its path has tended toward more equality.

Recently, though, the language of racism in America has changed, though the plot remains the same. It's not about skin color anymore—it's about "cultural traits." And it comes cloaked in a whole lot of social-science babble. The new racialists are too smart to denigrate particular cultures. Instead, they come at things the other way. They praise certain cultures, hold them up as exemplary. The implication—sometimes overt, sometimes only winked at—is that other cultures are inferior and this accounts for their inability to succeed.

**The Rise of Groupthink**

THE U.S.—LIKE BRAZIL OR ENGLAND—LIKES TO THINK it has moved beyond race. After all, we elected a black President, twice. But in reality, the terrain of race-baiting has simply shifted. The condescension once aimed squarely at African Americans now also claims as its targets Latinos, Muslims and—in a novel twist—large swaths of whites. And the people doing the condescending might be black or brown themselves.

A Congolese immigrant whom I met in the course of researching my book told me about the African Americans she knows at the supermarket where she works. "We are really different," she said about her community, as opposed to African Americans. "They don't have African values. They don't have the values to be black." I asked her what that means.

"To be black," she explained, "means you get married and you don't have children before." The American blacks at her supermarket, she said, need to go to college. "They ask if you want to have marijuana. It's just normal for them. It's easy for them to say that 'My ancestors were oppressed.'"

A book like *The Triple Package*, even if it takes pains to argue in nonracial terms, is an example of this sort of ethnocentric thinking writ large. And it is only the latest in a long line of books—spanning more than a century—arguing for the superiority of this or that American group over others. The roots of alleged superiority have changed over time from race to class to IQ to religion and now to culture.

In 1916 Madison Grant wrote *The Passing of the Great Race*, which purported to demonstrate the racial and cultural superiority of Northern Europeans over Southern Europeans. The book was influential in drumming up popular support for passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which barred Asians from immigrating to the U.S. and established quotas for Southern and East Europeans, to keep out Jews. Decades later, an influential 1959 article by Bernard Rosen declared that "Protestants, Jews and Greeks place a greater emphasis on independence and achievement training than southern Italians and French-Canadians." They were more



**DEFENDING UNEQUAL TREATMENT**

A primer on scientific justifications for racism through American history



**1839** Samuel George Morton publishes *Crania Americana*, stating that Caucasians have bigger brains than nonwhites.

**1840** An erroneous census shows that freed blacks are more likely to be insane: "the condition of the African, instead of being improved, has become worse."

**1899** Harper's Weekly publishes a cartoon depicting the different profiles of different races.

successful because of an "achievement syndrome"—which sounds suspiciously like the Triple Package. (Italians, particularly, were portrayed in these works as an immobile ethnicity. But by 1975, they had assimilated, and now, as the sociologist Richard Alba has demonstrated, young Italian Americans have higher than average levels of college and postgraduate education.)

This line of argument expanded in the 21st century. In 2004 Samuel Huntington, the Harvard professor who became famous for his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, warned against Latino culture in a *Foreign Policy* cover story bearing the title "José, Can You See?" In his book published the following year, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, he explained the differences between Anglo and Latino culture by quoting a Texas entrepreneur on "Hispanic traits ... that 'hold us Latinos back': mistrust of people outside the family; lack of initiative, self-reliance, and ambition; low priority for education; acceptance of poverty as a virtue necessary for entrance into heaven."

In 2009 an article by Jason Richwine, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, caught the attention of my people with its title, "Indian Americans: The New Model Minority." East Asians continue to excel in the U.S., he noted, but Indians are clearly the latest and greatest model. Why? "Exhibit A is the spelling bee." Success in spelling and other similar cognitive tasks, according to Richwine, proves that we are smarter than whites as well as Ashkenazi Jews—a happy finding for my father, who spent a lifetime in the diamond market, where they have a big presence. Richwine's conclusion: immigration policy should favor these model minorities over, say, Mexicans.

Then there is Stanford University's Thomas Sowell, who in *Migration and Cultures: A World View* identified six model "middleman minorities" who exemplify the entrepreneurial virtues he thinks the U.S. desperately needs. Last year he took the argument to another level, writing that there are some cultures that are just incompatible with Western values, primarily (surprise!) Muslim culture.

These bromides don't just come thundering down from the ivory tower. They're all around us in casual conversation about group accomplishment and group blame. Typical was a recent podcast by the comedian Adam Carolla, in which he interviewed San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom. Newsom noted that half of Latino and African-American families in California don't have access to a checking account or ATM.

"What's wrong with them?" asked Carolla. "I want to know why those two groups don't have access ... Are they flawed? ... Do Asians have this problem? ... They were put in internment camps. Are they at the check-cashing places?"

"Look at the history," Newsom responded. "It's naive to suggest that those things don't matter."

"How about the Jews?" asked Carolla. "No problems in the past? ... Why are the Jews doing well? ... Why do some groups do so much better? I'll tell you why: they have a family who puts an emphasis on education." He may have been speaking lightly, but Carolla's words show how easily the line can blur between cultural praise and cultural denigration.

CRANIA AMERICANA: SMITHSONIAN LIBRARIES



**New Americans** Vishaun Lawrence of Jamaica during a naturalization ceremony in Chicago last year

**Of Ethnicity and Reality**

THE ONE THING MY SONS ARE ALWAYS AMAZED BY when they visit India is the condescension displayed toward entire groups of people. They hate the way people speak to their maids, their drivers, their waiters—anybody Indians consider socially inferior. I try to explain to them that India has been independent for only 60-odd years and the U.S. for more than three times as long and that while India has made great progress in pursuing democracy, it hasn't yet translated into social and economic equality.

The new American racism, however, is turning the clock backward. While Chua and Rubenfeld are not the only ones peddling this pernicious line of thought, their book is likely to make them prominent spokespeople for it. So it's worth taking a close look at the "evidence" they marshal for their argument. Too often they—and their compatriots—ignore the realities of American history to make their half-baked theories stick.

The authors attempt to barricade themselves against charges of racism by protesting that the Triple Package has nothing to do with race or IQ; it's about ethnicity. So not all blacks are losers—look at Nigerians and Liberians! They are so well represented in the Ivy League! But the authors fail to acknowledge that Africans and Afro-Caribbeans are beneficiaries of affirmative action, won through the civil rights struggles of African Americans. What's more, African Americans are not in a bad way because of lack of racial pride or a problem with



**1910s** Scientist Henry Goddard applies intelligence tests to immigrants and finds that almost 80% of every immigrant group is "feeble-minded."

**1920s** American Eugenics Society founded to give lectures on racial betterment and promote so-called genetic improvement.

**1961** Mankind Quarterly begins publication, seen by many as a journal for scientific racism.

their impulses. Their challenges as a community trace back centuries; they were brought here in chains, their women raped and their families deliberately broken. This is what President Obama was talking about in his remarks after the Trayvon Martin verdict, when he said, "I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away."

Time and again, when examining the claims of the new racialists, we find other, deeper, often more complex explanations for why the children of some groups do better than others.

As Nancy Foner, a leading immigration scholar, points out in an essay, "Today, the way East Asian—as opposed to black or Hispanic—immigrants fit into New York's racial hierarchy makes a difference in the opportunities they can provide their children." Because they are not black, she notes, "East Asian (and white) immigrants face less discrimination in finding a place to live and, in turn, send their children to school." That translates into greater access to heavily white neighborhoods with good public schools. Moreover, even if they attend school with native-born blacks and Latinos, they do not feel a bond of race with native minorities—making them less likely to become part of a peer culture found among some disaffected inner-city black and Latino youth.

Cubans, meanwhile, are in favor over other Latinos among the new racialists, since they appear to do better

in America than groups like Mexicans. But as City University of New York's Philip Kasinitz, an expert on ethnic assimilation, notes, "If Mexicans threw out the top 10% of their population into America, you'd be singing a different tune about Mexicans." And among Cubans, there's a subset that hasn't done well: the "Marielitos," who immigrated in 1980 when Fidel Castro emptied the island's prisons and told the inmates they were free to head to America. They were much darker in complexion than the first wave of Cubans, and they have not done anywhere near as well as their light-complected compatriots. What does this suggest? First, that if you were doing well in the country you're leaving, you'll do well in the country you're going to, and vice versa. Second, that lighter-skinned people tend to fare better than darker-skinned people when they immigrate to the U.S., even if they're from the same country.

What about Jews? Scholars like Stephen Steinberg in *The Ethnic Myth* have pointed out that the success of immigrant Jews was largely due to the fact that they arrived in the U.S. with "industrial experience and concrete occupational skills" well suited to the booming urban economies of the new world. Not, as Chua and Rubenfeld posit, because "Jews maintained for millennia the idea that they were God's chosen people."

Perhaps somewhat uniquely, Chua and Rubenfeld single out Mormons for model-minority status as well. They attribute Mormon business success, for instance, to the group's principles of child rearing. "Mormon teenagers," they write, "are less likely to have sexual intercourse, consume alcohol, smoke pot, or watch X-rated films than teenagers of any other faith." The authors overlook one small point about Mormons, however: they have their own state. Eighty percent of the Utah legislature is Mormon; its entire congressional delegation is Mormon. Utah has had only three non-Mormon governors in its history. This translates to tremendous political and financial clout for the religion, which is an indispensable part of Mormon business success.

Lastly, what shall we make of Indians—who, aside from Chinese, are perhaps the new racialists' favorite model minority? Indians in America are, as Chua and Rubenfeld note, "by any number of measures, the most successful Census-tracked ethnic group in the country."

Well, if Indians are so great, what explains India? The country is a sorry mess, with the largest population of poor, sick and illiterate people in the world, its economy diving, its politics abysmally corrupt. For decades, those who could afford to get out did. The \$1,000 that it takes to purchase a one-way ticket to the U.S. is about a year's salary for the average Indian. If India shared a border with the U.S. and it were possible for its poorest residents to cross over on foot, we would fast cease to be the model minority, and talk-show hosts would rail against us just as they do against Mexicans.

The groups Chua and Rubenfeld and the other new racialists typically pick out as success stories are almost without fail examples of self-selection. Forty-two percent of Indians in the U.S. ages 25 and older have a postgraduate degree. But only about 20% of those they've left behind in the motherland even graduate from high school, and 26% of the population is illiterate. It's the same with Nigerians: the ones who are here

**THE SPECTRUM OF IMMIGRANT SUCCESS**

Median household income, by country of origin, in New York City

- India **\$83,821**
- U.K. **\$80,441**
- Native-born **\$54,679**
- Pakistan **\$50,912**
- Jamaica **\$49,283**
- Haiti **\$48,875**
- Ecuador **\$46,126**
- Italy **\$43,784**
- China **\$42,766**
- Bangladesh **\$35,129**
- Mexico **\$34,518**
- Dominican Republic **\$25,456**



**Tiger Mom** Chua's last book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, caused controversy for her harsh parenting style

represent a vastly richer and better-educated subset of the country's population as a whole.

Further, the authors pay almost no attention to the role of networking, which accounts for so much of the success of groups like Jews, Cubans and Indians. Part of the reason so many immigrant groups thrive is that when they arrive in the U.S., they already have an uncle who runs a store and cousins who are tutors, doctors or lawyers who can help them negotiate the new country.

When my family immigrated in 1977, we didn't do well because of delayed gratification or cultural superiority or a chip on our shoulder. We did well because my uncle in Detroit, an engineer, brought us over on the family-reunification bill, not in shackles or in steerage. When my father started his diamond business on 47th Street in Manhattan, there was a network of Indian diamond merchants who could show him the ropes. My sons, in turn, will benefit from my connections.

Much of *The Triple Package* focuses, naturally enough, on immigrants in New York City—then and now the immigrant capital of the country, if not the world. So you could profitably browse a gold mine of a book just put out by the NYC department of city planning, *The Newest New Yorkers*, a compendium of figures about the diverse groups that make up my hometown.

Chinese Americans in New York City, it turns out, earn less than other groups lacking the Triple Package. The median household income of Chinese in the city (\$42,766) is lower than that of Ecuadoreans (\$46,126), Haitians (\$48,175) and Pakistanis (\$50,912). The New York City group with the highest percentage of high school graduates isn't Chinese or Indians; it's Ukrainians (94.4%). But rarely are we treated to encomiums about the cultural superiority of the Borscht Mom.

BEN STECHSCHULTE/REDFUX

**America's Real Exceptionalism**

THE PITY IS THAT THIS BOOK, AND THIS ENTIRE LINE of argument, is taken seriously—among my relatives, for instance—when all the scholars I've consulted laugh at it. "Every one of the premises underlying the theory of the Triple Package is supported by a well-substantiated and relatively uncontroversial body of empirical evidence," the authors assert. "Give me a break," said Foner, who is one of the authorities cited in the endnotes. "There is a large body of literature showing that the most important factor predicting success among the children of immigrants is parents' human capital." That is: skills and education, from family to family and individual to individual.

Which is not to say culture is meaningless—even if "bad culture" is a convenient way to throw blame at struggling groups, as opposed to dealing with the structural causes behind those groups' disparate outcomes. We all have a linguistic, religious, racial, ethnic or national culture that shapes much about us. The cultural values of a group are an important part of the answer to the question of why certain groups seem to do better, at particular times, than others.

But cultural values are never the *whole* answer—even as we've come to privilege them over all other explanations for success and failure, such as political and economic ones. And culture is rarely either an unambiguously good force or an unambiguously bad one. Thus, Confucian values of education and family fealty certainly are *one* factor in explaining why Chinese students from low-income backgrounds do better than their peers. But as we've seen, that's not the whole story. Meanwhile, many in China would like to see less conformity in their culture, believing that it inhibits much of the freethinking that powers creativity and innovation in America and that it results in a citizenry that passively tolerates suppression of dissent and censorship of the Internet.

Chua and Rubenfeld make another mistake when they try to set up a hierarchy of good culture vs. bad culture—in which good culture invariably means getting rich. They take their definition of success from that of Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.: "the gaining of money and position." Nowhere are cultural traits like kindness, community and public service or martial valor given any value.

Immigrants, claim Chua and Rubenfeld, are wary of "an excessively permissive American culture"—the bogeyman that haunts the dreams of so many who see the U.S. as losing the vigor of a former age. But isn't that permissiveness exactly what makes America work: this messy mix, this barbaric yawp, this red-neck rondeau, this rude commingling? Isn't that what permeates its films, movies, books? And isn't that what the principal product it can still export? It is American culture's permissiveness, its new world energy, that still attracts the masses to the "golden door."

As it did with my father, who in college in 1950s Calcutta was first exposed to the great rock-'n'-yell of Chuck Berry and Elvis—music the Jesuit deans of St. Xavier's tried to ban because they couldn't stand to see students gyrating their pelvises. My father had never heard such an awesome caterwaul before,

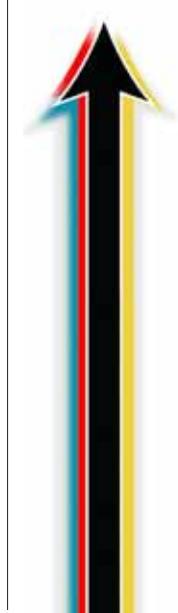
**42%**  
of Indians in the U.S. ages 25 and older have a postgraduate degree

**20%**  
of Indians in India have graduated from high school

**26%**  
of people in India are illiterate

**27%**  
of Nigerians in the U.S. ages 25 and older have a postgraduate degree, compared with 11% of the general population

**39%**  
of Nigerians over age 15 in Nigeria are illiterate



and—along with America's decadent movies and books—it seeded the young man's desire to go live there someday.

It's not conformity that makes this country great; it's an individual striking out against the expectations of his culture, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg dropping out of Harvard, Miles Davis coming out of heroin addiction to produce *'Round About Midnight*, the 14-year-old Billie Holiday turning the pain of her childhood into the bluest beauty, Sylvia Plath taking on death with pills and poetry, William S. Burroughs writing from the bowels of his addiction in *Naked Lunch*; it's Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Cheever and Carver drinking and writing, writing and drinking through their demons. Imagine what American culture would be if American artists had kept a tight check on their impulses.

When people dream of moving to America, it's not just so that they can be prudent, studious, restrained. My uncle Vipinmama would tell me a story about his parents, my grandparents, who had emigrated from Ahmedabad in India to Nairobi in the 1920s. All their lives, they denied themselves luxuries in the new country in order to store them for their retirement. They had rented a room in Ahmedabad, which they filled with refrigerators, washing machines, steel cupboards, juicers—all the goods and furnishings of life they abstained from in Nairobi. When they retired they were going to buy a house in Ahmedabad and stock it with their hoarded treasure.

As the room in Ahmedabad bulged with the goods sent from Africa, the ranks of appliances waiting to be turned on one distant day, their lives in Nairobi continued in great simplicity and thrift. One day in her 50s, my grandmother had a heart attack and died—she "went off," as the Gujaratis say. My grandfather left Nairobi then and went to Ahmedabad and bought a house. But he could not bear to live in their dream without the one who was to share it. So within a month, he sold both the house and all the goods they had so patiently saved up, without ever having used them, and left for London.

This had a powerful influence on Vipinmama, and he lived every day of his life in the pursuit of happiness. Every good bartender in Bombay, New York and Antwerp knew him. He played the guitar. He played cricket for his college. He went on vacation, even when it wasn't good for his business. He too went off, following a heart attack at 34 from congenital heart disease—but it was not after a life postponed. Whatever he purchased, he brought home and turned on immediately. If it was a stereo, he danced to its music; if it was a VCR, he invited all his friends over to watch movies that very evening. You might think my grandfather would have wanted my uncle to be more prudent, more restrained. But in fact, my grandfather was very proud of his son—prouder than any of the fabled Indians in the email he sent around—because his life was not spent deferring happiness, waiting for power. ■

*Mehta is the author of Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found and teaches at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University*