

Writing based on Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika: 1871– 1875* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1878), excerpt

Ernst von Weber's first foray into American high society in 1869 troubled him for years to come. When introduced to his party's host in Baltimore, the governor's son mistook von Weber for a Spanish national. In hindsight, Weber speculated years later, "my brunette physiognomy and long, black beard" probably led him to such a conclusion. Yet before the party's host could be corrected, Weber suffered yet further insult after expressing interest in another ball that had been advertised that week. The host sharply cautioned against attending: "Don't go, for heaven's sake, you will find a most inferior company, nothing [but] Germans and Irish!"¹

"The blood shot through my head, and I was filled with the impulse to express my indignance through fisticuffs," Weber explained. And yet, as he traveled on from New York to California, stewing on this incident, he concluded that such a dim view of Germans was commonplace among the higher reaches of American society. The "average Yankee," he informed the German public, had a "deep-seated feeling... that their nationality was much more distinguished, civilized, and progressive than the German. And who can hold this against them," Weber reasoned. Given how many Germans there were "disgustingly" making up America's "uneducated social strata,"² it was little wonder that Yankees "saw the German nation as an un-aristocratic,

¹ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika: 1871– 1875* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1878), 2:572.

² Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:573.

ungentlemanly people, as a plebeian race who were not born to rule but to serve.”³ The “low social value” in which Germans were held was, he elaborated, why upwardly mobile German immigrants are typically “ashamed of their Germanness.” They insisted they “prefer to speak English,” and “Americanize their names” in droves. The Schmidts become Smiths, the Schneiders become Sniders, and the Oswalds become O’Swalds—all so they can appear to be “full-blood Yankees!”⁴

After traversing the American West and spending another four years touring British South and East Africa, von Weber made his way back to Central Europe, where he published his impressions of the world. His book both expressed his “great admiration for the British” and his frustration that Germans (outside of Hamburg at least) lacked not only “initiative or real Anglo- Saxon entrepreneurship” but also the type of confidence in themselves of the English gentlemen. What the Germans needed was to follow in their footsteps. “The three powers who feel the ability and desire in themselves to divide the earth up amongst them—the British, the North Americans, and the Russians—believed in the idea that nature has given them a concrete and apparently historical occupation, which the Anglo-Saxons express in the apposite phrase ‘Manifest Destiny.’”⁵ Because Germans “remained inferior to the hard and energetic English *Volksselement* [and] will be absorbed into it...” due to their “great weakness and inability

³ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:572.

⁴ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:572.

⁵ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:568.

to resist,” they needed to take steps to redirect German immigrants to South America.⁶ Because “in South America the German Volkstype is as superior to the Spanish American in education, power and tenacity as the Anglo-American is to that of the German.”⁷ If they planted their “unsatisfied...and hungry proletarians” in South America, they would mature with time into “well-fed, wealthy and satisfied German farmers with child-rich families; [and] as the density of the German population increases,... Germans will eventually dislodge the Hispano-American republics, through their numerical superiority... and the political control of these same countries would naturally fall to us as well.”⁸ By creating such a “German daughter state on the other side of the ocean,” they would secure for Germans everywhere “an equal status next to the Anglo-Saxons, [and] the Slavic-Russians.”⁹

⁶ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:557.

⁷ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:557.

⁸ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:563.

⁹ Ernst von Weber, *Vier Jahre in Afrika*, 2:574.