

Race in American History

by Gary Foley 2001

One of the intriguing aspects of the history of the African-American is the development of the underlying ideology of race that underpinned the enslavement of Africans. In this essay I will examine notions of race that prevailed at various stages of the historical development of America; from its system of slavery to beyond. I will look at the prevailing social, economic and political factors that might have influenced the emerging definitions of race, and consider the impact in the past and present of 'race' as an issue in America. In doing so, I do not necessarily seek to draw any major conclusions, but rather simply reflect on how notions of 'race' and the 'other' might have shaped American history and race relations.

In the beginning it is useful to explore the history of the notion 'race'. Barbara Jeanne Fields has argued that, 'race as a coherent ideology did not spring into being simultaneously with slavery'. Fields states that during the heyday of the cotton empires in the nineteenth century that slavery, 'limited the need for free citizens (white people) to exploit each other directly and thereby identifying class exploitation with racial exploitation.' She says that by doing so, 'slavery permitted and required the white majority to develop its own characteristic form of racial ideology'. This is partly borne out by Higginbotham's observation that 'it was obvious that the financial viability of southern states was primarily dependent upon slave power'. Further, Jordon noted that, 'Negroes became slaves, partly because there were social and economic necessities in America which called for some sort of bound, controlled labor', and Eric Williams insists that 'Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was a consequence of slavery.'

It had been the 'discovery' of the New World by representative of Spanish royalty, Christopher Columbus, in 1492 that 'set in train the long and bitter international rivalry over colonial possessions.' The prosperity of these new colonial possessions (thus the motherland's prosperity) was dependent upon both 'plenty of good land' as Adam Smith observed, and also a supply of labor that is constant and 'must work'. Thus racism was not necessarily part of the American landscape in the early colonial period.

Patrick Wolfe reminds us of Morgan's 'central paradox of American liberal ideology, whereby revolutionary ideals of universal freedom and the rights of man coincided with the consolidation of African slavery in colonial north America.' It is therefore interesting that the 1776 Declaration of Independence did not use the word 'white' at all, whereas in 1790, when Congress enacted migration and citizenship legislation that all 'free white people' were welcome to the rights of migration and citizenship. From then on 'the word "white" did attain wide usage in New World political discourse, and it was written into an immense body of statutory law' And these new notions did not just affect the populace of slave-owning states, as Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1831, 'the prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those states where servitude has never been known.'

In early stages of the legal establishment of slavery in the 1660s the prevailing justification for enslavement was 'heathenism', but blatant contradictions existed in these laws, such as the state of Virginia's 1682 definition of a slave to 'rest on religious difference while excluding from possible enslavement all heathens who were not Indian or Negro.'

In 1859 Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species*, and when these theories developed to incorporate a general theory of human and social development, the notion was used by some to justify conceptions of superior and inferior peoples and nations. According to Smith,

'The concept of survival of the fittest used to explain the evolution of species in the natural world was applied enthusiastically to the human world. It became a very powerful belief that (black) peoples were inherently weak...'

From the Enlightenment project emerged a theory of knowledge called empiricism and the 'scientific paradigm of positivism', which involves ideas on how humans can examine and understand the natural world. Smith says that this 'understanding' was viewed as being akin to measuring, thus institutionalizing an obsession with measurement, classification, and 'knowing'. As Smith points out, the theories and ideas of the West are,

...underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race.

The eighteenth century had seen the development of race consciousness as the European slavers and colonizers became more familiar with the enslaved and the colonized. Eze reminds us that, 'Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular perceptions of the human race'. Roberts says of the Enlightenment that its greatest political importance lay in its legacies to the future, and that the 18th century was thought to have, '... not merely to have invented earthly happiness as a feasible goal but also the thought that it could be measured and it could be promoted through the exercise of reason. Those ideas all had profound political implications.'

No more so in the post-slavery South was this evident as Genovese observed that each slaveholding class had 'European roots' and carried 'a European inheritance into its American present', thus Social Darwinism would play a significant role in the justification of the emergence of 'Jim Crow' segregation laws. Frankenberg says,

For the greater part of...history...arguments for the biological inferiority of people of colour represented the dominant discourse...for thinking about race. Within this discourse, race was constructed as a biological category, and the assertion of white biological superiority was used to justify economic and political inequities ranging from settler colonization to slavery.

In the post-slavery era in America, despite a cardinal principle of Reconstruction being *equality before the law* (enshrined in the 14th Amendment in 1866, which conveyed citizenship on all born in the US regardless of race), African Americans still lacked even the most basic forms of self-determination. Again, even the northern states were as culpable for race discrimination as the south, as states such as 'nearly every northern state considered, and many adopted, measures to prohibit or restrict further immigration of Negroes.' Even those in the African American community that were able to bring some improvement in their life soon found that they 'generally achieved a greater respectability only among their own people and found no escape from the scorn and ridicule of white society.' Leon Litwack pointed out that obvious economic improvement might provoke even greater hostility and suspicion because 'Northern whites had come to accept irresponsibility, ignorance and submissiveness as peculiar Negro characteristics, as natural products of the Negroes' racial inferiority.' Patrick Wolfe also states that in the northern states, all blacks 'were subjected to oppressive restrictions that in many ways anticipated the Jim Crow system that was not established in the south until the 1880s.'

The era of Jim Crow segregation and the reign of terror that accompanied it so that blacks might be firmly kept in their place merely serves to highlight the virulent tone and nature of white American racism. The development of the 'one-drop rule' to classify who was black after *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896, and the rabid fears about miscegenation reveal a white community every bit as obsessive about 'racial purity' as Adolf Hitler's Nazis some thirty years later.

It is thus a significant irony that 'although most Americans are sure they know "race" when they see it, very few can offer a definition of the term.' The most important unresolved historical questions in America today are all about race. The situation of Native-Americans and African-Americans today, along with the emerging dominance of Latin-America, clearly shows white America has a long way to go in resolving these historical contradictions. This should come as no surprise to those who are aware of the long history of racial antagonism shown by white America to all those who have been perceived as 'different' throughout their history. It seems sad that a nation born of such high ideals and the belief that all people 'are created equal' has found it so hard to reconcile these contradictions and fulfil the potential for a genuinely equal America.

But then, if the real origins of slavery and its ultimate products was really economic after all, perhaps we have all been looking at the wrong part of the problem and we need to address the very real question of exploitation and economic deprivation as much as we do the 'race' factor.

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©12th June 2001

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