

Notes on Historical Origins and Early Development of Racism and “Race”

Rank

Use of the word “race” to describe classifications of people is relatively new in human history, emerging only a few hundred years ago. The idea of social hierarchy, though - the ranking of different groups in a society - is very old. In fact, evidence of unequal social categories stratified into hierarchies of power and status dates back to the earliest records of the emergence of the first cities in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Central and South America.¹ While ranked social groups frequently are called “classes”, historically they most often have been castes. The distinction being that people are born into castes and unable to exit them.²

Following are some examples of social stratification in early societies. The ancient Sumerians more than 5,000 years ago divided society into 4 groups: nobles, tenants, commoners, and slaves. Around 3,000 years ago Chinese society was divided into royalty and aristocracy, farmers, merchants, and slaves. About the same time, Aryans in present-day India were organized socially into warrior elite (including rulers), priests, merchants and artisans, laborers and conquered peoples, and slaves. Over time these groups evolved into a strict explicit caste system. In early Muslim society, 1,300 years ago, there were 4 levels: rulers, converts, protected peoples, and slaves. About the same time Mayan society was separated into elite, ruling landowners and scholars; free workers; serfs; and slaves. A thousand years ago society in Ghana was divided into aristocrat rulers and administrators; merchants; farmers, miners, and artisans; and slaves.³ It is apparent from these examples that from the start social hierarchies included slaves at the bottom. The oldest available written records of legal mandates reflect that the practice of owning and selling persons as property was already well-established. Slaves most often were foreign-born persons, prisoners of war, persons serving punishment for criminal activity, or debtors.⁴

Social hierarchy, the ascription of superior and inferior rank to different groups, is entrenched in the development of so-called “Western civilizations” as well. Around 2,400 years ago, for example, the influential Greek philosopher, Plato, taught that an ideal society would be organized into 3 levels, reflecting 3 parts of human nature. At the top of Plato’s 3 castes were the guardians consisting of rulers and soldiers who, because of their noble natures, would know best for everyone else and so they should be in charge. The middle group consisted of the auxiliaries who were warriors and protectors. And the third caste would be the farmers and artisans.⁵ Plato formalized the belief that social rank was right and merited because it reflected the inner character of more and less excellent persons rather than reflecting merely coincidental, chance circumstances of birth.

Racism

Plato's student, Aristotle, took his teacher's beliefs further and formalized a justification for the superiority of some people, i.e., the Greeks, over others. He maintained that extremely cold climates, populated by pale-skinned persons, and extremely hot climates, populated by dark-skinned persons, naturally produced people who were inferior in body, mind, and spirit. The result, he claimed, was a natural division of all humans into 2 groups: masters, born to dominate, and slaves, born to be dominated.⁶ In so doing, he insisted that quality of internal character can be identified by its association with distinctive external physical features, the conceptual roots of racism.

Note that from its inception racism identified distinctive privileged groups as well as distinctive subordinate groups. Physical features that racism has used, and continues to use, to justify privilege and oppression include not only skin color, but also facial features, hair texture, skull contours, and others. Racism alleges that these physical features are visible distinctions of different levels of virtue expressed in socio-cultural structures and practices. Romans followed Greek thought to rank themselves superior to others they labeled as uncivilized barbarians. Medieval Europeans identified themselves as Christian, superior to those they branded heathen. American colonialists distinguished themselves as civilized in contrast with those they termed savages.⁷ Nascent racism festered and metastasized into a destructively toxic contagion, spewing devastation in multiple forms including, eventually, the pernicious myth of race.

Nearly 1,700 years after Aristotle the writings of a Muslim global trader contested his claims with first-hand descriptions of Mali in West Africa as secure, thriving, and sophisticated. The veracity of these descriptions was successfully challenged with a deliberate campaign of misinformation by Ibn Khaldun, a Muslim scholar with vast influence at the time. Khaldun insisted that what he called "Negro nations" and "Slavs" were closer to animals than humans.⁸ His campaign was successful because his assertions reinforced what his contemporaries already believed and wanted to continue to believe: there are natural social ranks that distinguish different populations into superior and inferior groups and these ranked distinctions are evident in visible physical features.

Less than 50 years after Khaldun, Portuguese traders were actively competing with the Ottoman Empire to exploit what they viewed as immense economic resources on the African continent, including gold and captives. Prince Henry of Portugal sponsored multiple expeditions for this purpose over more than 3 decades. During this period, Muslim, Spanish, and Italian traders were active in capturing, buying, and selling persons from Africa and eastern Europe (i.e., Khaldun's "Negro nations" and "Slavs"). But things were changing. Settlements in eastern Europe began to fortify themselves successfully against marauders. Consequently, that source of enforced labor began to be much more costly to exploit.⁹

By the time others turned their attention and resources to concentrate on the commercial exploitation of Africans, Prince Henry's sponsored raiders had already established routes and markets. It had begun with his first sponsored expedition that brought 240 captives from West Africa to Portugal in August of 1444. In a celebratory account of Prince Henry's life and exploits, commissioned by the king of Portugal, Gomes Eanes de Zurara depicted the slave auction over which Prince Henry presided with great pride. Zurara described those who were displayed on the auction block as being like beasts without any evidence of capacity for reason. For support, he wrote that they were unclothed, unsheltered, uncultured, and without ethics. Zurara estimated that, during the time period covered by his account, Prince Henry supplied and oversaw the enslavement of more than 900 Africans. Zurara justified the celebration of these atrocities by insisting that Prince Henry's primary concern was the religious and cultural salvation of these persons he presented as barbarians without any other hope.¹⁰

Zurara did not include in his account that he, Prince Henry, their partners, and the king of Portugal amassed immense wealth from the slave trade. One traveler to Portugal observed that the king brought in more revenue from exporting captives as slaves than he did from all the taxes he collected throughout his realm.¹¹ One of the primary reasons Zurara's justification was available and believable was that the year before he published his work Pope Nicholas V publicly issued an official church document authorizing the kings of Spain and Portugal to "invade, search, capture, and subjugate... any...unbelievers...as well as their kingdoms...and other property...and to reduce their persons into perpetual slavery."¹²

In the mid to late 1400s, colonizers armed with these justifications were invading and taking possession of territories in what they termed the "New World". While some of the European conquerors described the peoples they encountered with admiration, they all were clear that the "savages" were uncivilized, pagan, and far beneath them morally and socially. So, the same types of stereotypes crafted and used to justify enslavement of Africans were employed to vindicate violent domination of indigenous civilizations.¹³

By the start of the 16th century Portuguese slave ships were providing workers to Spanish plantations and settlements in the Caribbean. When the Spanish first arrived, they enslaved native populations. But disease and abuse quickly depleted this resource and there began to be calls for substantial increase in the import of enslaved persons from Africa. These calls claimed that "negroes" were distinctly fit for physically demanding labor while the natives of the New World were too weak for hard work. These stereotypes caught on and spread on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴

About this same time, an educated 24-year-old Moroccan youth was captured and presented as a slave to Pope Leo X. Shortly before his death about 3 years later the pope freed the young man and changed his name to Johannes Leo. He became known as Leo Africanus. About 5 years later Leo Africanus published what he asserted was an

accurate description of African lands, cultures, languages, and illnesses based on his personal observations though there is no record that he ever visited any of the lands he claimed to know. He summarized the peoples of these lands as living like beasts of the forest. This increasingly familiar defamation of entire populations from the African continent was readily accepted as fact by Europeans.¹⁵

About a hundred years after Prince Henry led his nation to monopolize the slave trade from Africa, the British began their pursuit to end Portuguese control of the market. In 1554, Robert Gainish and his 2 partners landed in England with nearly a quarter ton of gold, a large amount of ivory, and 5 slaves from Africa. Gainish described Africans as beastly, godless, and lawless. Throughout the remainder of the 16th century British and other European plunderers extended their reach and published accounts of their travels that enthralled people back home. These accounts repeated and reinforced the malicious myths of African, and indigenous, stereotypes. Near the end of the 1500s and into the next century, playwrights began to fortify engrained prejudices with dark-skinned characters such as Aaron in Titus Andronicus and Othello who represented loathsome and self-loathing evil.¹⁶

Just shy of 2 decades into the 17th century the first recorded African slaves were brought to the British colonies in America and sold to the governor of Virginia, George Yeardley. When he died, less than 10 years later, he left to his heirs his possessions, his financial obligations, his servants, his slaves, and his cattle, in that order according to his will. By this time racism was well-entrenched as a “moral” justification for economic privilege sustained by violent oppression.¹⁷

It wasn't long before the economic hierarchy was given legal support. For example, in 1630, just 3 years after Yeardley's death, a White man was whipped by court order for “defiling” himself through physical intimacy with a Black woman. In 1662, Virginia lawmakers established the legal standard that the status of children depended on the status of their mothers. If the mother was a slave, her children were slaves, even if the father was White. Before the end of the century both Maryland and Virginia had set severe punishments for White women who were physically intimate with non-White men.¹⁸ These were legal expressions of existing social rankings in what is now the United States that ranked persons viewed as White as superior to all other groups, including not only persons of African descent but also indigenous peoples, and, later, persons from eastern and southern Europe, persons from various regions of Asia, and more.¹⁹

Race

Joe Dunn has said that naming is an act of creating.²⁰ We may realize, though, that when we name a thing or an idea or a perspective, we give substance to what already has been created. And doing so makes the what that is named much easier to describe and promote. It is evident that by the middle 1600s racism was the pervasive mindset among those in power in Europe and in the European colonies and for many of those

they dominated. Yet, a name was lacking for the malicious stereotypes on which they were basing their power. By the end of the century that had changed.

The oldest available record of “race” in print is from 1481 in reference to hunting dogs. And the word was first included in a dictionary in 1606 with the definition of “descent” and a statement that it could be used in reference to men or animals whose race could be described as good or bad. It was nearly 80 years later, though, that the first printed classification of all human beings into different races was published in a French scientific journal.²¹ Earlier in the century Italy, France, Germany, and England had formed national academies to recognize and promote scientific thought and discovery.²² Keep in mind, however, that science as we know it was new. Previously, in European-based societies “science” was a philosophical pursuit of “logical” conclusions. The most influential proponent of this approach to advancing knowledge was Aristotle. We have already reviewed one of his “scientific” conclusions. It was early in the 17th century that what is now known as the scientific method with its emphasis on observation and experimentation rather than logical deduction was first proposed. And it rapidly became the accepted approach to advancing knowledge.²³

In 1684, the journal of the French academy of science published an essay by François Bernier, a widely traveled physician. In his document, titled “A New Division of the Earth”, Bernier expressed the conclusion from his observations that all the world’s peoples should be viewed as divided into a hierarchy of four “Species or Races”. The first race consisted of people from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, India, the Americas, and Southeast Asia. The second race was made up of Africans. Next came East Asians. And at the bottom were the people of northern Finland. Bernier insisted that these separate groups were so different from each other that his classification of people into distinct races was a “just foundation” for “a new division of the world”.²⁴

Throughout the 1700s this notion of race-based hierarchy gained popularity as the commercial exploitation of enslaved Africans and the legal dispossession and genocidal assault of indigenous peoples in the British colonies rapidly expanded.²⁵ Racism flourished, now given substance with a malicious myth labeled “race”, because it supported economic exploitation of many by a privileged few.

In 1735, the Swedish botanist and physician, Carl Linnaeus, published his *Systema Naturae* in which he offered the first comprehensive systems for classifying plants and animals. He classified humans, “homo sapiens”, at the top of the animal kingdom. He categorized the human species into a hierarchy of four groups. At the highest level were homo sapiens europaeus which he described as highly intelligent and ruled by law. Next to them were homo sapiens americanus governed by custom. Then came homo sapiens asiaticus regulated by opinion. And at the bottom were homo sapiens afer who were lazy, untrustworthy, slow, foolish, and ruled only by impulse. Even lower still was a particular group of people from South Africa which he identified as the missing link between apes and humans. Voltaire, the highly influential French

historian and philosopher, took Linnaeus' hierarchy even further, insisting with his published work in 1756 that different races were actually different species, as different as different species of dogs, and that these distinct racial species were separated in a natural hierarchy. He described people from Africa as cruel, violent creatures with inferior natures subject to their physical appetites.²⁶

These racial stereotypes with their moral and social hierarchies were strongly supported by Christian church leaders at the time. Some of the labels and sequence were revised, but the concept of racially based social hierarchy, i.e., racism, remained dominant. The combination of ecclesiastical and "scientific" support for racism was essential as the colonies moved toward independence because the ideals of liberty and equality contradicted enmeshed practices of oppressive dominance. If, though, as racism insisted, natural hierarchies existed in character and capacity, dominance was not only acceptable; it was mandated, for the good of the dominated.²⁷ How convenient that it also profited the oppressors. It is not surprising that 20 years after Linnaeus' publication, Thomas Jefferson recognized no inconsistency in opening his draft of the Declaration of Independence with the assertion that all men are created equal while profiting from the labor and self-gratifying from the abuse of enslaved persons he treated as property.²⁸

Rancor

Rancor is intense, malicious, ruthless hostility, an apt description of activities in the preceding paragraphs and what has followed. By the 1800s the established, dominant view among the privileged members of society and scientists they respected was that each separate race possessed its own essence that distinguished it from the other races. Each race's essence produced distinct physical features, mental patterns, and moral traits.²⁹ In the early part of the century, this view was used to justify the rancorous continuation and expansion of violent enslavement of persons of African descent and genocidal assault of first peoples. Toward the end of the century and in the early 1900s it was used to justify "Jim Crow" laws, strict segregation, economic exploitation, and violent terrorization of Black Americans and others.³⁰

As the nation moved into the 3rd decade of the 20th century, African Americans, in the ongoing struggle for their survival against relentlessly ruthless rancor, took to the streets to express long-repressed frustrations over entrenched discrimination and overt oppression. An example is what occurred in Chicago. In a very brief period of time the Black population of the city increased to nearly 2½ times what it had been. Redlining, restrictive covenants, and related policies and practices strictly limited housing availability to a specific area on the south side of the city. Job opportunities were scarce even for Black military veterans returning from the war. The tensions erupted into a violent White invasion of Black neighborhoods in July of 1919. Similar events occurred in major cities across the country that summer.³¹ Only 2 years later, the atrocities of the Tulsa massacre left at least a hundred African Americans dead, and their prosperous neighborhood destroyed.³²

Thirty years later, following the end of the second World War, conditions had not greatly improved. In fact, toxic, segregationist nationalism was growing in strength, targeting individuals and groups struggling for change. One of those who was publicly and vigorously calling for change was Paul Robeson, a world-famous African American actor and musical artist. In August of 1949 he was scheduled for a civil rights benefit concert in a small town north of New York City. On the day of the concert a threatening mob of demonstrators showed up and the event was called off at the last minute leaving many concertgoers trapped in the outdoor venue. There was a cross-burning, anti-Black and anti-Semitic slurs, and calls to lynch Robeson. Those who had come in support of the cause and to enjoy the concert were violently attacked and beaten. Their cars were overturned. Police officers either stood by and watched or joined in the attacks. Robeson was adamant and returned the following weekend. He performed the concert protected by Black and White union members who surrounded the venue and was able to leave safely. However, as audience members left, they and their vehicles were violently attacked once again.³³

Over the next 20 years, race-based social hierarchy was reinforced in more insidious ways by the popularization of the terms “minority” and “ghetto” as synonymous with Black Americans and other communities of color. Whether “minority” refers to number or wealth or political power, it is inherently a pejorative description in contrast with privileged, dominant Whites. It only has meaning as a label for subordination to the so-called White majority. Similarly, the application of what had been the name for Jewish neighborhoods cruelly segregated by the Nazis to Black communities in American cities quickly came to represent what were assumed to be inferior places known as the “dark ghetto” where inferior “ghetto” people lived.³⁴ Some found proof of these assumptions in the violent Watts Uprising in 1965. In fact, similar events have been identified in more than 400 U.S. cities between 1961 and 1968. Were these expressions of flawed people in flawed communities? Or eruptions of pent-up frustration over relentless, entrenched, violent, raging oppression?³⁵

The same ideas, beliefs, and stereotypes used to justify vast cruelty against persons of African descent have also, throughout the history of European exploitation and colonization of this continent, been used to legitimize racist rancor directed toward indigenous peoples in the Americas, immigrants from south of our national borders, persons of Asian descent, Pacific Islanders, and many others. Five hundred years ago when European colonization of the western hemisphere began in earnest, though the language was not yet in common use, the racial stereotypes were already embedded in prevailing attitudes and activity. Supported by the dominant religious structure in Europe, conquerors and settlers believed that violence toward and subjugation of both native populations and populations with ethnic roots outside western Europe was not merely acceptable; it was right.³⁶ As our nation took form and grew, racist rancor was enshrined in government policy and practice and legal doctrine. Just a few examples are the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Plessy v Ferguson ruling of 1896, the annexation of Hawai’i in 1898, the mass

deportations of persons of Mexican descent in the 1930s, the imprisonment of Japanese Americans from 1942-1945. A complete list would fill volumes.³⁷

Review

Racism is

- a system of social ranking based on Race
- fostered to sustain and expand social, economic, legal, and political dominance and privilege
- expressed in multiple forms of hostility ranging from demeaning disparagement to distancing discrimination to dispossessive dominance to devastating destruction

Race is

- a myth fashioned from faulty assumptions and self-serving, hostile prejudice
- that claims physical characteristics and ancestry are external markers of natural social ranking that separates populations into groups innately superior or inferior to one another physically, mentally, morally, and culturally

Stereotype is

- a belief about or ascribed characteristic of someone based on prejudicial judgment that they represent an assigned category (such as Race)

Privilege is

- status, access, advantage, and/or benefit granted to some and denied to others

Notes

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