**INVENTION OF THE WHITE RACE**

Enslavement of black Africans began in Europe as early as the mid-1400’s due to Portuguese explorers and slave-traders. Africans were considered “black” and also considered to be inferior savages. Two theories as to their skin color were (a) the hot sunny climate in which they lived; and (b) the biblical interpretation that they were cursed as the children of Ham, one of Noah’s sons. However, Europeans did not at the time consider themselves to be a ‘white race’, different from a ‘black race’. The English certainly considered themselves superior to the blacks, largely due to their Christianity, but did not look at it in racial terms. Also, Muslims were capturing Eastern Europeans (Slavs) who were not black, enslaving them, and selling them to Europeans. This is perhaps where the term “slave = Slav” came from.

Early uses of the term race generally referred to differences between populations that are now considered ethnic, such as language and cultural characteristics. The idea of a white race was actually constructed during the colonial period. According to Theodore Allen, the invention of the white race involved an effort to manipulate European Americans into remaining divided from other groups.

To understand how slavery can exist separately from a ‘race construct’, consider that in England white English persons could, by law, be enslaved if they were unemployed and refused to work for simple board. This law was repealed later on the basis that it was unseemly for Christians to own Christians. Also, in the colonies earliest years, some African-Americans held a legal position similar to European American indentured servants. In 1666 in Virginia almost 11% of African Americans owned land, while 17% of European Americans owned land. However, although European American bond-laborers were being treated more harshly than before, African-Americans were treated worse. While European Americans could obtain freedom once their terms of indenture were over, African-Americans could not. There was a gradual push for lifetime involuntary bond-servitude for African-Americans. Still, the concept of race differences were not recognized.

However, in the mid-1600’s some important changes occurred. One was to overturn the English common law term ‘partus sequitur partem’ or descent through the father. Rather the condition of the child follows the condition of the mother. Therefore, any child born of an African American female bondswoman was considered to be enslaved for life. Also, in 1667

A law was passed that baptism into Christianity would no longer change the bondholder’s condition, thus eliminating a way for an African-American to obtain their freedom. Then it became illegal for African-Americans to purchase ‘Christian’ bond-laborers, only other African-Americans. Thus new laws provoked differential treatment of European- and African-Americans.

Laws allowing increased oppression of both white and black bond-laborers caused increasing tension and dissatisfaction. At the same time an increasing number of Africans were being stolen or purchased directly from Africa, which helped grow the tension. During Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676, white and black laboring class workers, both free and bond, was fought side by side to end unpaid labor, against capitalism, and for the chance to become independent farmers. The wealthy landowning elite recognized that the system of capitalist agriculture was dependent on lifetime hereditary slavery, and drove a wedge between the whites and blacks. They recognized the need to induce a ‘new birthright’ for European Americans, both free and bond. This would be a new identity that could set them apart from people of African descent and enlist them in supporting lifetime hereditary slavery. The new identity was ‘white’. Soon after Bacon’s Rebellion new laws began appearing to this end.

The Virginia General Assembly enacted a series of laws of “white skin privilege”.

* 1691: owners could not set enslaved Africans free
* 1691: whites who married non-whites are banished
* 1705: Codes granted privileges to white servants and denied rights to free Africans
* 1723: New laws against free Africans: cannot vote, cannot testify against whites, cannot possess any gun or powder, cannot join the militia; also whites found in the presence of {illegally congregated} Africans would be fined or receive lashes

This effectively created a system of racial oppression where rights were now based on race rather than bond or free status, that promoted contempt by whites for blacks and native Americans. Now, being white allowed even the poorest of whites to feel a sense of self-pride and hold power over anyone considered not-white, enacting violence without fear of reprisal. Whiteness as a racial construct was deliberately invented for economic and political purposes.

The economic gains that white racial membership afforded help explain why other European immigrants, such as Irish workers, struggled to be accepted as white in the 1800’s by siding with anti-abolitionist and white supremacist political movements.

**A NEW IDENTITY: BECOMING AMERICAN, BECOMING WHITE**

The development of a white identity involved more than offering European Americans economic and social privileges. The development of a new racial identity also included creating defining characteristics and norms. To some degree, the development of this identity interpenetrates and infuses the economic pressures previously discussed. Yet additional assimilation pressures also contributed to the development of a white, American identity.

Put simply, the early colonists, by and large, sought new lives in a land with little familiarity and rapid change. These new lives, built around capitalism and racism, required a new identity. The disorientation that involved an economic crisis also involved a moral one. Early colonists held a religious view of valuing the humility of a “self” working for the communal whole. But this moral way did not support a capitalist system. In order to survive within the system the colonists had to adopt a more ambitious individualistic self. The colonists needed to see God as expecting his followers to become personally ambitious, fending for themselves and their families, acquiring wealth, increasing their knowledge, and seeking material possessions. Since there was no longer a common “communal” identity, American society developed a “negative identity”, a way of determining the ”correct” way by determining what was “other than American”. What it meant *to be white* was constantly reinforced by what it meant *not to be* white.

This was accomplished in part by making fun of and dehumanizing other racial groups such as blacks and native Americans. The minstrel stage was used by European Americans during the 1800’s as a way to negatively characterize African-Americans and strengthen white self-identity. Commonly black African American men were portrayed as lazy, stupid, clownish, jolly, comic and flashy. African American women were depicted as crude, unclean and hypersexual. Women controlled the marriage and men were worthless. As European Americans watched these portrayals, they came to see that being white meant the exact opposite of being black. As Tony Morrison put it:

“Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive but desirable, not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”

Similarly, native Americans were negatively depicted as ignorant, savage, heathen, lazy, dishonest, and worst of all communal. They were seen as antithetical to capitalism and lacking bourgeois values.

The bourgeois American self of the 1800’s that developed by the 1800’s was viewed as individualistic, hardworking, frugal, moralistic, able to postpone gratification, able to tame nature through hard work, and used others labor for personal advancement. What was considered acceptable was rigidly defined. High levels of sexuality, communalism, fear, hopelessness confusion, and mysticism were looked down upon. Ultimately, in the midst of rapid socioeconomic change, the pressures faced by European colonists prompted the creation of a rather rigid and isolated white American self. This self was contrasted with the other groups found in America for the sake of a cohesive community of white people with a similar set of values.

This common value system born from negative views of others held great value for white Americans, allowing them to hold a positive sense of self-worth. But also, importantly, the stereotyping of other racial groups as wrong, ill and worthless also masked the shadows that came with a rigid and restrictive way of being. Finding all devalued characteristics within the community of the other allowed our European ancestors to protect themselves from acknowledging their own wishes to push back against the productive, individualized white self.

Most likely, without consciousness, newly created whites projected their own unacceptable thoughts and desires onto white groups. In this way, the negative views of others, as portrayed on the minstrel stage, can be seen as European Americans attempts to deal with the “illnesses” faced by many whites, illnesses such as personal rigidity, loneliness, isolation, and lack of imagination, humor and creativity. In other words, white Americans soothed their own distress by relishing in negative portrayals of others, in effect focusing on blaming attention elsewhere, rather than acknowledging the effects of their constricted way of being.

The totality of these and other perspectives reveals an argument favoring the view of the white race as:

* A social construction.
* Initiated for the sake of political and economic privileging of one group of people over another
* In the service of social control and economic/political stability
* That depended upon increased individualism and the devaluation of communalism.
* Which was made possible by the modern philosophical worldview
* And the creation of a new American identity based on negative views of others
* That was supported by prejudicial pseudoscience
* And was reinforced by the U.S. Court system that linked naturalized citizenship with membership in the white race until 1952.

The information presented is from the book “Witnessing Whiteness” by Shelly Tochluk and in part from “Stamped From the Beginning” by Ibram X. Kendi

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Did this discussion give you any new perspectives on racial identity? On white identity?

2. Do you think this presents useful information for teaching whites about the development of racial discrimination and/or white privilege?

3. How do you see the development of racial discrimination portrayed here being played out today?

4. Ibram X. Kendi states that the idea that {ignorance + hate → racist ideas → racial discrimination} is misinterpreted. He says the correct direction is {racial discrimination ⇒ racist ideas ⇒ ignorance + hate}. Do you agree?

Prepared by:

Bill Weisrock, CRJC Member