

Race as Class Conflict In American History: Pre-Columbian to Reconstruction

Throughout the history of America there are a wide variety of prominent themes and tendencies which together form the larger flow of its history that brings us to the present day. Throughout that same history the field of history itself has also seen many themes, from theological determinism, the great men theory, historical idealism, historical materialism, and many others. There have been a great many important figures in philosophy and history who have influenced these historiographical themes as well. These approaches to history mainly aim to serve the purpose of understanding the flows of the past; understanding the currents of history from which we all have floated downstream. Herein I will draw on a varied philosophical heritage to prove that race in America has established itself as class for its utility to the ruling classes across Pre-Columbian through Reclamation-era history. Specifically, I will be highlighting the conceptions of race and class with which to analyze and applying them to the history of the racialization of Native Americans and Black Americans.

Before we dive into analysis we must become on the same page about race and class. Firstly, it is important you remove yourself from the bioessentialist conception of race, which has been entirely dismissed by modern biologists and anthropologists, and as we will discuss later emerged as a political tool. One can find no shortage of studies and articles denouncing the biological view of race and decrying the dangers it opens, such as Megan Gannon's article "Race Is a Social Construct, Scientists Argue", Yudell, *et al.*'s "Taking race out of human genetics", the American Anthropological Association's 1998 *AAA Statement on Race*, or Keita, *et al.*'s propositions for alternative, less ambiguous language in "Conceptualizing human variation". Race is instead presently understood to be a product of social imposition by a given society on ambiguously defined groups of people within that society (Gannon) (Schaefer 1091). The social

construction of race is even clearer with a historical view of its genesis. The “scientific racist” ideas which formed the foundations for much of the societal conception of race were brought to prominence by aristocrats such as Arthur de Gobineau and Carl Vogt, both of whom were direct beneficiaries of European imperialism (Britannica) (Marx). Later, the plantation barons of the Americas popularized and developed these clear delineations of race further, which Justin Roberts notes was a development of a new conception of ‘race’ from what it had previously been altogether (9). This idea that race is not only a social construct, but emerges as an imposition of one group upon another is important when we synthesize it with class.

While the concepts of class and class analysis we will employ herein take great heritage from their congruent ideas within the classical Marxist philosophical mode, for class to embody the greatest power of analysis in the modern world it must be moved beyond the purely industrial-economic conception as outlined by Marx in his own time. While the Orthodox Marxist classes relate specifically to the means of production, we will let class relate to something more general: Power. We will let *agency* be called a sort of measure for Power, it represents the capacity of an individual to act upon the world. This differs from labour-power in the way that it relates not to one’s individual physical capacity to act upon the world, but to one’s capacity of *will* to act upon the world. Now, consider these interactions:

...an individual of lower strata exists in conditions which result in their lower relative agency (and therefore a lack of ability to act in ways which result in independent self-satiation of needs), thus requiring cooperation by any means with those of higher relative agency; the individual of lower strata must surrender all or most of their agency for the individual of higher strata agreeing to use some of that agency to guarantee them at least a meager subsistence in return. (McDonald, *The Life; The Art* 3-4)

We can call the first interaction *hierarchy*, essentially a differential flow of agency between two subjects or groups; we can call the second interaction *exploitation*, the leveraging of hierarchy by those of relatively higher agency to coerce those of relatively lower agency; lastly, we can call the different strata of relative agency *class*. This definition of class as a *direct interaction between groups* is important because it ties in with the idea that class is the imposition of pre-defined identity onto a given group using the leverage of material conditions. With this, you might have spotted the synthesis of race and class which will form the foundation of our analysis: while class is the imposition of pre-defined identity on one group by another, race is simply a specific instance of this centered around group appearance, culture, and behavior.

This interaction of race as class can be seen in the earliest stages of Columbian exploration of the Americas. Columbus believed that he had sailed to the Indies, and despite the fact that he had named the island on which he landed, the people he found were not referred to as their own group—he most likely would've used *hispañolanos* if that was the case. No, he referred to the natives he found as if they were a singular group, Indians, unified with the rest of everyone else on the continent, which obviously isn't the case anywhere on Earth. Even after Ramón Paré had spent *four years* with the Taíno people, he still chose to title his account *An Account on the Antiquities of the Indians* (Lepore 5). What has been done here is called *racialization*, the act of one group imposing a definition of race upon another group (CARED Collective). The Taíno people were for all of their history simply the Taíno, but with the pen strokes of Columbus and his entourage they became *Indians* and Columbus became the *White Man*. To add to the substance of this as a classed interaction we must examine both the interaction itself and its material impacts. It is immensely simple to identify that the Taíno people

were of conditions that made them much less powerful than Columbus, with the backing of the Castilian Crown and all the technological superiority and wealth that came with it; the potential for hierarchy and outlines of class. Make no mistake: the racialization of the Indians served a specific function for the aristocratic classes of the different European empires, and later for the American colonists and the United States; reified hierarchy and established class.

Having a vaguely defined but discursively justified term for an entire continent of exploitable people has both social and legal utility for an exploiting class. For example, for the fiercely nationalist peoples of colonial-era Europe, the outright enslavement of your own good Christians would be abhorrent, but the enslavement of an othered group is an exception, for they are not your own people, and if your own people are superior then it is only natural to enslave others outside your nation, especially if this othered group are just “savages”. On this clause then, Columbus made his report to the Castilian Crown that “With 50 men all of them could be held in subjugation and be made to do what one might wish,” (Lepore 18). Furthermore, with the convenient and nigh universally accepted divide between the White Man and the Indian, entire groups of diverse peoples could be captured into the bureaucratic machinations of law and dealt with in horrific rationality and efficiency. One can write them into the U.S. Constitution, as in Article I, Section II, excluding “Indians not taxed” from the body of Representation; a roundabout manner of empowering the State to deny privileges on the basis of race-- a vague enough concept so that this power essentially becomes *ad arbitrium* ("American Indians and the Constitution"). One could also write them into their bill of territorial expulsion, as in the Indian Removal Act of 1830, giving loose but still “real” legal backing to the forced removal of an arbitrarily defined people from their homes and villages (Office of the Historian). The arbitrage

of this whole affair is even better illustrated by the next primary example of racialization in American history.

Black Americans have seen quite possibly the most tossing and turning in the character of their racialization across history. The genesis of their raced status was quite similar to the Native Americans we examined above. Despite the fact that West Africa is quite possibly the most ethnically diverse place on Earth, full of an extreme and beautiful variation of peoples, languages, and cultures (Kröner), for the purpose of class-based utility in the area of slavery and legal classification, they were racialized into a single unitary group, the Negro. With this group in acceptance, the imprecisions of the sciences in colonial and early-republican America could be applied to entire swathes of diverse peoples, as in the pseudoscience of phrenology, which examined the shapes of skulls and declared they were indicative of the volumes of different regions of the cerebrum, and ‘therefore’ indicative of bioessentialist differences in behavior. This idea was applied gratuitously by the slave aristocracy of the American South to “scientifically prove” that their so called Negroes were biologically *designed* to be tamed and put into servitude (Titowsky). The point at which the arbitrage truly reveals itself, though, is when you consider the *reracialization* of Black Americans after the ratification of the 13th Amendment. First, let's read it. “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction,” (US Const. amend. XIII). Slavery was not completely abolished, it was abolished only for those not incarcerated. The consequence of this, according to Smiley and Fakunle in their article published in the Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, “This growth in power [as a result of the 13th-15th Amendments] challenged White supremacy and created White fear of Black mobility... This fear was met with a shift from Black people

being viewed as compliant and submissive servants to savages and brute monsters,” (5). Smiley and Fakunle later identify and substantiate how this has further evolved into the social conception of the Black Man as a “thug” and “suspicious” (7-18), despite the fact that, as I examine in my own essay *Structure to Community to Individual*, all data points to crime rate disparities between ‘racial lines’ being directly caused by structural inequalities (6-7). The initial change in the characteristics of the racialization of Black Americans as discussed above found their beginning in the Reclamation period, directly after the XIII-XV Amendments were ratified.

One only need take a single look at incarceration statistics in the United States to view how significant of a social shift this Reclamation-era reracialization was. Despite the fact that Blacks make up only 13.4% of the population in the United States, according to the Census Bureau, they make up 38.1% of the prison population. Furthermore, while the US is home to only about 4% of the world’s population, it represents roughly 20% of the world prison population (Walmsley 6). As Angela F. Chan argues, the roughly 2 million citizens in prison are legally considered slaves under the constitution, property of the State, allowing them to be worked for profits just as they did in the 17th century. Indeed the industry revenue of correctional facilities in the United States is \$9.3 *billion* as of 2021 (“Correctional Facilities Industry in the US”). “Blackness” in the Americas has been enforced through material conditions by the concept of “Whiteness” in convenient accordance with social norms in order to maintain an institutional power differential between the two groups, by definition a system of hierarchy, putting “Blackness” firmly within the purview of class. This class, as shown, has been made and remade across time for the utility of profit.

The analysis of the classed nature of racialization as it has existed in the Americas and around the world is truly one of the most important endeavors we can engage in today.

Deconstructing our history, such as the history of Native and Black Americans, elucidates us to the continuing, more conniving forms of hierarchies and domination which form the principal flows of our modern society. By using analysis such as this, through viewing race as class, we can understand both that race is weaponized against us, and therefore our enemy, but also that it is constructed arbitrage, and that what we bring into existence we can bring out of existence as well. I am not arguing for faux color-blindness as was practiced after the 1960's, we all know that didn't work. No, by understanding race as class we can figure out how to orient ourselves as non-race; we can make ourselves defined aggressively in opposition to being raced by our ruling class. There can be no recourse, no resolution of the contradiction which forms the ontological ground of our undead Empire if we cannot understand the currents of history and our place within those currents. If we truly desire a better world, we must study the walls of our labyrinth to find the opening with which we will escape it, and once we do, we can walk ourselves to the cliff's edge just beyond the exit and take our last step off this world into the new world. If we can do that, if we can gather the courage to take the leap into the abyss at the bottom of ourselves, then we may yet find a lush new universe full of space to build a new life: the life which must be obtained to live at all. The ideas I put forth here are but weapons to blow through the labyrinthine walls, and it is my true hope that they can be of use to that end. Will you take up these arms, hearts full of love, and escape with me?

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