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COMMENTARY

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By George M. Frederickson

When we talk about "Black images in whites minds," we are of course referring to an aspect of race relations. In my view, and here I quote from my book, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study of American and South African History* (Oxford University Press, 1981), "Race relations are not so much a fixed pattern as a changing set of relationships that can only be understood within a broader historical context that is itself constantly evolving and thus altering the terms under which blacks and whites interract."

In other words, I take what might be called a socio-historical or situational approach to race relations. I see no need, for most purposes, at least, to resort to primordial "givens," such as an instinctive white aversion to the color black. It would seem to follow therefore that there has been no single and permanent Black image influencing the thought and behavior of whites throughout American history. There have been some continuities, of course, but there have also been substantial changes over time—and I will attempt to describe some of the most important of these from the early colonial period to the present.

The main variable has been the relative importance given to biological race or group heredity as a basis or rationale for differentiation and discrimination. An alternative emphasis would be on culture or class—group characteristics attributed to Blacks that are thought to derive from environment, cultural background, and historical experiences. This is, of course, the classic distinction between "racism and ethnocentrism," between group prejudice based on physical or genetic criteria and bias derived from cultural differences.

Either emphasis can inspire and rationalize discrimination. But the first points logically to an explicit ideological racism and to firm caste-like distinctions between *all* whites and *all* Blacks. The second may permit access by selected members of the minority group to most of the rights and privileges of the so-called dominant group.

At first glance, the distinction may seem academic—a mere difference between *de jure* and *de facto* white supremacy. But it seems obvious to me that the absence of rigid caste-like barriers between the races—even if only a relatively small proportion of Blacks are in a position to benefit from the opportunities thus provided—allows for a more open-minded situation than an official and uniform pattern of discrimination. It creates, at the very least, the possibility for a further evolution toward genuine equality, and toward a society where racial or ethnic origin does not significantly affect an individual's access to power, prestige, and wealth.

Recent scholarship suggests that the earliest phase of Black-white relations in the United States was characterized by relative openness and a stress on culture and class rather than on race *per se*. Although slavery was taking root in the southern colonies during the 17th century, there was a class of free Blacks who, until late in the century, do not appear to have been the victims of flagrant discrimination.

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Before the 1660s and '70s, the legal basis for enslavement in the Chesapeake was religion rather than race. The surviving records of court cases involving manumission seem to demonstrate this fairly conclusively. Until laws were passed explicitly denying the right of all Christians to freedom, converted slaves who were able to get their suits before the courts had a chance of success.

There were undoubtedly negative responses to early Black immigrants but they seem to have focused on heathenism and "savagry." As English attitudes toward the Irish in this period reveal, these characteristics were not inextricably associated with color. In the 16th century, English domination of Ireland was justified on the grounds that the "Wild Irish" were the most savage people on earth and that their apparent Catholicism was only a veneer covering their essential paganism. Prejudice based on physical differences must have contributed something to feelings against Africans, but, in my view, it was less central than is sometimes alleged. If a Black person converted to Christianity, learned English, and acquired property, he could gain the status and rights of a freeman.

The property-owning Black yeomen discovered by T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in the mid-17th century (and described in their recent book *Myne Own Ground)* exemplified this opportunity. These free Blacks quarrelled with whites, sued them, and even fornicated with them without arousing a perceptible white supremacist reaction. A few Black planters in Virginia apparently owned white indentured servants. The law of 1670 prohibiting such a Black-master/white-servant relationship was perhaps the first significant and clear-cut indication of a trend toward racial discrimination. It roughly coincided with a shift in the legal basis of slavery from "heathenism" to "heathen ancestry."

By this time, racial origin was just beginning to displace cultural deviance from an ethnocentric norm as the principal rationale for Black subordination. The main reason for this shift was a change in the labor system. When it

became more profitable to use Black slaves rather than white indentured servants on the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake—a change which occurred in the 1660s, according to Edmund Morgan—a powerful incentive was created for degrading all Blacks to an inferior status.

When African slaves became available in greater numbers and at lower prices around 1700—this was the time when the British became heavily involved in the Atlantic slave trade—the stage was set for the emergence of a slave society and rigid racial hierarchy. The pressures that existed elsewhere on the continent to create an intermediate group of relatively privileged mulattoes were absent because large numbers of non-slaveholding whites were available to police the slave population and put down insurrections. They could also provide a variety of ancillary services required by a plantation economy. Color distinctions among Afro-Americans would remain important in certain times and places, but the governing tendency was toward a sharp demarcation between all whites and all those with discernible African ancestry.

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We now come to the period when an explicit racism gradually came to the forefront of white consciousness. The image of the African as a benighted savage theoretically capable of being civilized and assimilated was superseded by the deterministic view of Blacks as naturally subhuman and suited only to menial roles. But there was a long period of evasion, ambivalence, and inconsistency—lasting from the end of the 17th century to the early 19th century.

Eighteenth century Blacks were, for the most part, *treated* as if they were genetically inferior, but there was no available body of thought or set of ideas that could justify such treatment in a persuasive way. Both the Christian doctrine of the unity of mankind, and the Enlightenment conception of physical environment as the determinant of human differences worked against the articulation of overt racism.

The gap between theory and practice was no great problem so long as the legitimacy of slavery as an *institution* was not seriously challenged. Blacks were identified in the white mind with the degradation of slavery, but precisely why they were relegated to such a status was a question best answered indirectly by drawing on the traditional view that inequality was the natural state of man and hierarchy the inevitable form of social organization.

This premise of universal inequality was sharply attacked from two directions late in the 18th century—by proponents of the natural rights philosophy and by evangelical Christians committed to a more literal conception of human brotherhood. They denounced the institution of slavery as an obvious and flagrant denial of the new doctrine of human equality that was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and used to justify the American Revolution.

But southern slavery survived the Revolutionary era intact. It did so partly because the planters could now appeal to entrenched racial prejudice. Slavery might be wrong in principle, they argued, but it was a *necessary* evil; for the alternative was turning loose a horde of uncivilized" Blacks and provoking a race war that, in the words of [Thomas] Jefferson, would result "in the extermination of one or the other race."

The racial fears and phobias that first arose as a byproduct of the economic and political interests associated with plantation slavery had by now taken deep root in the white consciousness and can be said to have had life of their own. (I would distinguish my point-of-view here from two others. I disagree with those who see racial consciousness as a decisive factor from the time of early settlement *and also* with those who tend to regard it as being forever and always simply a smokescreen for some kind of class domination.)

Realizing the power of prejudice, even the most sincerely anti-slavery southerners of the post-Revolutionary era simply could not conceive of emancipation without some program for colonizing the freedmen outside the United States. But the colonization idea was obviously a pipe dream, and it was eventually denounced by the new breed of northern reformers as evasive, ineffectual, and out of harmony with the more aggressive humanitarianism emerging from the second great awakening.

The rise in the 1830s of a more radical anti-slavery movement in the North, one that denounced slaveholding as a sin and called for its immediate abolition, provoked the beneficiaries of Black subordination to change their tactics and defend enslavement as "a positive good," rather than as a "necessary evil." A core element of the new pro-slavery argument was the assertion that Blacks were innately inferior to whites and that their natural or God-given role was to serve the "superior race." It was not merely intellectual inferiority that was asserted but also differences in moral character.

Blacks were allegedly lacking in self-control and the capacity for disciplined

endeavor. Hence they had to be ruled by whites lest they revert to their naturally "uncivilized" state. This view was endorsed by a school of 19th century anthropologists which gave scientific credence to slavery and white supremacy by affirming that there were unalterable differences in character and capacity among "the types of mankind."

Emancipation and Reconstruction did not discredit the dominant 19th century image of Blacks as members of an immutably inferior race. Even radical Republicans, with a few possible exceptions, were not convinced that Blacks were biologically equal to whites. They favored political and civil equality because they did not see why differences in genetic potential should be a test of citizenship or equal opportunity in a capitalistic democracy. For the most part they qualified their racism by asserting that Blacks, whatever their *intellectual* deficiencies, had the same *moral* capacities as whites. This was a tenuous and vulnerable position, especially when viewed from the vantage point of ex-slaveholders who lived in proximity to large Black populations. It did not survive a southern white-supremacist uprising against Reconstruction during the 1870s.

By the 1930s, the urban Black voter was in a position to decide the outcome of state and municipal elections.

Most southern whites remained convinced of the validity of the pro-slavery racial argument, and they sought new ways to apply it in the post-emancipation era. With the triumph of disfranchisement and "Jim Crow" segregation toward the end of the century, Blacks were once again relegated to the status of an inferior caste. This process set off the most violent outbreak of Negrophobia in American history—a kind of dark age of racism lasting from about 1890 to the 1920s. This was the period that Professor [Rayford W.] Logan has described as the "nadir" of American race relations.

In the wake of lynchings, race riots, and a torrent of racist propaganda, the image of the "Negro as beast" gained wide currency, not only in the South but in the North as well. A variety of frustrations and anxieties were associated with the transformation of the United States into a modern industrial society with new concentrations of power and privilege. Emerging class tensions and the cultural disorientation resulting from massive changes created the need for scapegoats, and Blacks were the most available and vulnerable targets. Darwinism provided some refinements on the old biological arguments, and the eugenics movement promulgated a rigid concept of genetic determinism that was readily applied to racial differences.

From the 1920s on, the doctrine of biological inequality came under increasing attack from scientists and liberal reformers. But the new underlying factor in American race relations in the 20th century was the mass migration of Blacks from the rural South to the urban North. Despite the violence and discrimination that these migrants encountered, there can be little doubt that this great population movement significantly altered the basic position of Blacks in American society.

By the 1930s, the urban Black voter was in a position to decide the outcome of state and municipal elections. By the 1940s and '50s, Blacks were becoming a significant segment of the organized industrial work force. At the same time, the special role of southern Blacks as dependent plantation workers was being undermined as a result of the modernization and mechanization of southern agriculture, a change that may have been a necessary precondition for the success of the Civil Rights movement in the '60s.

A relative gain in the power resources available to the Black community and a simultaneous decline in the incentive for traditional forms of racial control helped inspire white opinion makers to come out against blatant forms of racism. This repudiation of the concept of genetic inferiority and the segregationism associated with it was also conditioned by World War II and the Cold War. Hitler gave racism a bad name, and the post-war propaganda struggle against Communism turned America's discriminatory practices into a serious international liability. How could we win "the war for the hearts and minds of men" in Africa and Asia, it was asked, if we practiced Jim Crow at home?

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As a result of the Civil Rights movement that the new circumstances made possible, a new Black image penetrated the white mind. It was an image that reflected a widespread acceptance of at least a token integration. What many whites were now willing to concede was that *some* Blacks might be eligible for incorporation into the mainstream of American society. The tests were similar in some ways to those that were operative in the mid-17th century. They were tests of class and culture. If Blacks adopted the lifestyle of the white middle class and were successful by the standards that whites used to measure achievement, they were accorded a degree of acceptance that would have

been totally unthinkable at an earlier time.

But most Blacks were not in a position to capitalize on the new opportunities. Black poverty and high employment persisted or even worsened in an economy with a declining need for unskilled and semi-skilled industrial labor; and white prejudice survived in the form of negative gut reactions to the thought of Black people improving their *collective* position through special, non-market devices such as affirmative action, busing, and anti-poverty programs. These and other factors have combined to create a huge Black underclass in our central cities.

The Black community is now bifurcated into a relatively successful minority that can take advantage of the new opportunities created by the Civil Rights movement and a majority that remains trapped in a deteriorating ghetto environment without the education, skills, and access to decent jobs that would permit upward mobility. One inevitable result of this situation is an increase of crime and social disorganization among lower class Blacks.

Because of this bifurcation of the Black community, and the broader historical changes that made it possible, the white image of Blacks has also become a divided one. Members of the successful middle class are treated and regarded as equals by a significant number of whites. But the Black lower class is viewed in stereotypical terms as the "dangerous class" of American society. When they think of non-elite Blacks, most whites automatically think of the ghetto mugger, conveniently ignoring the fact that the overwhelmingly majority of lower class urban Blacks are not only law-abiding but are themselves the principal victims of the criminal element.

It is somewhat misleading to argue, as sociologist William Wilson has recently done, that we are witnessing a decline in "the significance of race" and that the crucial fault-lines of American society are now strictly a function of economic class. That members of the ghetto underclass are Black and not white, adds, in my opinion, to the anxiety or even panic that their alleged criminality generates among whites and helps explain the callous indifference to their plight that one finds among white politicians pandering to what appears to be a "conservative" mood in the country.

We have to some degree "Brazilianized" American race relations.

What has changed is that middle class Blacks are relatively immune from the disabilities traditionally associated with race in the United States. In the era of overt and comprehensive racism, it was precisely such upwardly mobile Blacks who would have aroused the greatest hostility. But the current acceptance of Afro-Americans in positions of power and prestige remains a conditional one. It depends on their willingness to identify with the aims and ideologies of the white-dominated institutions with which they are associated. This creates an acute dilemma for many Black intellectuals and high-achievers. Should they fight prejudice by beating the whites at their own game, or reject the terms of integration and identify directly with the struggles of the Black masses? An effort to resolve this internal conflict was one of the main sources of the Black Power and Black nationalist movements of the late 1960s and early '70s. It continues to give urgency to the search of Black intellectuals for an effective strategy for achieving group identity and equality.

But let us return to the Black image in the white mind. In a sense we have come full circle. Something like the differential incorporation of Blacks that existed in the mid-17th century has re-emerged in a new form. Seventeenth century whites could apparently differentiate between "heathen" African slaves and Christianized Black freemen. Thereafter—for more than 250 years—Blacks were, for the most part, viewed through a single lens. Racist stereotypes denied to *all* Blacks the kind of esteem that was automatically accorded to whites simply by virtue of their ancestry.

Once again, in our own time, there is a split-image. The Black cabinet officer, judge, professor, or business executive is likely to be viewed very differently from the unemployed ghetto youth. Race *per se* is no longer a definitive criterion for success or influence in American society. But this is little consolation to those who suffer simultaneously from the burden of race and class. At best, we have to some degree "Brazilianized" American race relations. Money, education, and accomplishment do in a sense "whiten." But the very fact that this language still seems appropriate shows how far we still have to go before we can say that white supremacy is a thing of the past. □

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