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## **THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF RACE... AND WHY IT MATTERS**

Audrey Smedley  
Professor of Anthropology Emerita  
Virginia Commonwealth University

The position taken by many anthropologists, both biological and social, and increasingly many other scholars in the social sciences is that “race is a cultural construct.” It should be clear that this is not a definition or even a characterization of “race,” but an assertion about the scholarly or existential domain in which we can best examine and explain the phenomenon of race. Race should be analyzed as a social/cultural reality that exists in a realm independent of biological or genetic variations. No amount of research into the biophysical or genetic features of individuals or groups will explain the social phenomenon of race. When five white policemen shot a young unarmed African immigrant 41 times in the doorway of his New York apartment, this can’t be explained by examining their genes or biology. Nor can we explain employer preferences for white job applicants or discrimination in housing or any other of the social realities of racism by references to human biological differences.

This does not mean that we deny that there is a biological basis for some human behaviors at the individual level which is a perfectly legitimate perspective for those who are engaged in this kind of research. Nor does it mean that the existence of race as a cultural phenomenon has no impact on the biology of human beings. On the contrary we know a lot about the sometimes devastating effects of race and racism on the biology and behavior of individuals and groups. Because of several hundred years of racism, during which both physical and psychological oppression have characterized the lives and environments of those people seen as members of low status races, differences in health status and life styles among them have appeared and continue to impact all of us.

The significance of History. In the middle of the 20th century, a new generation of historians began to take another look at the beginnings of the American experience. They spent decades exploring all of the original



documents relating to the establishment of colonies in America. What these scholars discovered was to transform the writing of American history forever. Their research revealed that our 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas and beliefs about races did not in fact exist in the 17th century. Race originated as a folk idea and ideology about human differences; it was a social invention, not a product of science. Historians have documented when, and to a great extent, how race as an ideology came into our culture and our consciousness. This is the story that I will briefly tell here. (One of the first of the publications and perhaps the one with the greatest impact was a book by Edmund Morgan entitled, *American Slavery, American Freedom* [1975]. It is the detailed story of Virginia, the first successful colony. On its publication it was hailed as a classic that has inspired numerous other historians.)

The establishment of Jamestown in Virginia by English colonists occurred 400 years ago this year, in 1607. From the beginning, Jamestown was a crude, rough, and turbulent community of mostly young Englishmen who came to seek their fortunes and return home. They planned to emulate the Spanish; to obtain wealth by conquering and enslaving the native peoples, and forcing them to produce gold and silver. However, the Indians didn't take well to slavery; many died of European diseases and others escaped to unknown territories. Also there was no gold and silver immediately available; but settlers soon discovered a crop, tobacco, whose trade would bring them wealth.

But growing and processing tobacco required very hard work. The greatest problem the colonists constantly faced was lack of labor; many settlers would not or could not do such intensive work. Within a decade, the colony began to import indentured servants, mostly from England, and it was this pattern of servitude that provided a model for the slavery that was to come later. Servants were bought and sold, ill-fed, ill-clothed, and poorly-housed. They were punished cruelly for petty crimes. Mortality was high, but the surplus poor emigrating from England in the early 17th century had few choices. If they survived the period of debenture, usually 4-7 years in the New World, they could be set free, allowed to acquire land and servants, and to make their fortunes for themselves. However, there were many degrees of servitude; and most did not survive.

In 1619, the first Africans arrived. There has been some debate about who they were, but we know that they had Spanish or Portuguese names and were already familiar with European culture. In the US it is widely and popularly believed that the colonists brought Africans to the New World as slaves from the beginning and that Europeans were "naturally" prejudiced toward Africans because of their physical characteristics, specifically dark skin. Historians now hold that true slavery did not exist in the early decades of the English North



American colonies (see Allen 1997, Fredrickson 2002, E. Morgan 1975, P. Morgan 1998, Parent, Jr. 2003, among others). Englishmen were unfamiliar with the institution. They saw their society as a free one, based on free labor, and believed that English laws had terminated all forms of slavery centuries before their arrival in the Americas. But they were familiar with many forms of bond servitude which they saw as unfree labor, and some men who purchased headrights to laborers treated them as if they were slaves for life. Masters were often brutal; they flogged servants for disobedience, or cut off their ears, or put skewers through their tongues. But the settlers were also callous and cruel toward one another. Often servants were called slaves, and a distinction between servitude and slavery was not at all clear.

Consequently, the first Africans who arrived in Jamestown were not initially or uniformly perceived as slaves (Parent 2003). They were assimilated into the colony as laborers under varying contracts like those of Europeans. Some Africans worked off their debts and became freedmen. A few ambitious men obtained land and livestock, built substantial houses, married, and established themselves as well-to-do planters. Some became entrepreneurs and engaged in trading and other commercial activities and had business dealings on an equal footing with whites. One famous family, that of Anthony Johnson and his two sons owned more than 440 acres of land; they also had headrights for, (that is, owned) three Africans, three Europeans and two Indians as servants. They exercised the same rights as propertied Europeans. They participated in the assembly, the governing body of the colony, voted, served on juries, and socialized with white planters. Like their white counterparts, free black property owners were often contemptuous of government, arrogant and insulting toward those considered their social inferiors, assertive of their rights, and prone to fighting. In fact, numerous court records provide clear evidence that these 17<sup>th</sup> century Africans did not act differently from whites of the same social class.

Edmund Morgan wrote, “There is more than a little evidence that Virginians during these years were ready to think of Negroes as members or potential members of the community on the same terms as other men and to demand of them the same standards of behavior. Black men and white serving the same master worked, ate, and slept together, and together shared in escapades, escapes, and punishments” (1975, 327). “It was common for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together. It was not uncommon for them to make love together” (1975, 327).

No stigma was associated with what we today call intermarriages. Black men servants often married white women servants. Records from one county reveal that one fourth of the children born to European servant girls were mulatto (Breen and Ennis 1980). Historian Anthony Parent (2003) notes that five out of



ten black men on the Eastern Shore were married to white women. One servant girl declared to her master that she would rather marry a Negro slave on a neighboring plantation than him with all of his property, and she did (P. Morgan 1998). Given the demographics, servant girls had their choice of men. One white widow of a black farmer had no problem with remarrying, this time to a white man. She later sued this second husband, accusing him of squandering the property she had accumulated with her first husband (E. Morgan 1975, 334). In another case, a black women servant sued successfully for her freedom and then married the white lawyer who represented her in court (P. Morgan, 1998).

By mid-century, the colony was in a crisis. A few men from among the earliest settlers had taken over most of the fertile land; they had established large plantations and grew tobacco to make huge fortunes. Poor servants who achieved their freedom found it difficult to acquire land. The freed poor and servants, which now included Europeans, Africans, mulattoes, and a few Indians, became unhappy with their lot and especially the corruption and abuse of power on the part of wealthy men who ruled the colony. They threatened rebellions, plundered their neighbors, showed contempt for colony leaders, and generated unrest throughout the settlement.

In 1676, the most famous rebellion took place. Led by Nathaniel Bacon, this uprising of thousands of poor workers was the first major threat to social stability. The rebellion dissipated after the death of Bacon, but British royal commissioners sent out to suppress the uprising realized that the population at large had supported the rebellion and were “sullen and obstinate.” On one occasion they faced a dissatisfied rabble of “400 African and 600 or 700 European bond laborers, chiefly Irish” (Allen 1994, 218). They soon recognized the need for a stratagem to prevent such occurrences in the future and ensure that a sufficient number of controlled laborers were made available to plantation owners.

The decisions that the rulers of the colony made during the last decades of the 17th century and the first quarter of the 18th century resulted in the establishment of racial slavery. They began to pass a series of laws separating out Africans and their descendants, restricting their rights and mobility, and imposing a condition of permanent slavery on them. Africans were now being brought directly from Africa. They were different from earlier Africans in that they were heathens, that is, not Christians, and were unfamiliar with European languages, customs, and traditions. Some colony leaders began to argue that Africans had no rights under British laws and therefore could be subject to forced labor with impunity. After 1672, British ships entered the slave trade and the numbers of people shipped directly across the Atlantic greatly increased.



There were critical reasons for the preference for Africans. As early as the 1630s, planters had expressed a desire for African laborers (“If only we had some Africans!”). Records of plantation owners in the Caribbean and in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland reveal the fact that Africans were initially considered a civilized and docile people who had knowledge of and experience with tropical cultivation. They were accustomed to discipline, one of the hallmarks of civilized behavior, as well as working cooperatively in groups. They knew how to grow corn, tobacco, sugar cane, and cotton in their native lands; these crops were unknown in Europe. And many Africans had knowledge of metal work, carpentry, cattle-keeping, brick-making, weaving, leather tanning, and many other skills. Colonists soon realized that without Africans, their enterprises would fail. They often wrote, “We cannot survive without Africans!”

A good example is the history of the colony of Georgia, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. This colony was founded (1732) by followers of John Wesley (founder of Methodism) with the objective of settling here poor people from Europe. The founders and organizers had an anti-slavery policy and Georgia became the first non-slaveholding colony. But the experiment failed; the settlers endured hunger, disease, poverty, and many deaths. They soon petitioned the trustees to alter the policy and to allow slaves. They argued that they could not survive without African slaves. Nearly twenty years after the founding, the act prohibiting slavery was repealed and Georgia began to prosper (see Smedley 1999, 2007).

Although there were more Irish slaves in the Caribbean Isles than Africans, those peoples captured in wars with the English, knew nothing about tropical agriculture and were seen as “savages,” (they had a “dangerous nature”) (see Smedley 2007). They often ran away to join their co-religionists, the catholic Spanish, and were considered a “rebellious lot.” Historian Leonard Liggio, quoted from one letter sent to traders by a planter, “Don’t send us any more Irish; send us some Africans, for the Africans are civilized and the Irish are not” (1976, 8).

In contrast to Indians, Africans also had natural immunities to Old World diseases. European colonists recognized that Africans lived longer and were able to produce more than Europeans who had a high mortality rate. Moreover, Africans were in a strange land with no powerful allies and, unlike the Indians, could not escape to familiar territories. They were the most vulnerable of all the peoples of the Americas.

Sources of English servants began to decline in the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as jobs became available at home. The slave trade to Africa increased as internal warfare in Africa made more and more people available for enslavement. Leaders of the colonies, all large planters, had two objectives: to impose effective social controls over the population and provide themselves with



cheap and easily controlled workers. They readily perceived that they could use the differing physical characteristics of the population to divide them and demarcate some for permanent slavery. Historian Anthony Parent (2003) argues that a powerful planter class, acting to further its own economic interests, deliberately brought a new form of servitude, racial slavery to Virginia over the period of 1690-1723. In this period, hundreds of laws were passed restricting the rights of Africans and their descendents. By 1723, even free Negroes were prohibited from voting.

Colonial leaders were also doing something else; they were laying the basis for the invention of race and racial identities. They began to homogenize all Europeans, regardless of ethnicity, status, or social class, into a new category. The first time the term “White,” rather than “Christian” or their ethnic names (English, Irish, Scots, Portuguese, German, Spanish, Swede) appeared in the public record was seen in a law passed in 1691 that prohibited the marriage of Europeans with Negroes, Indians, and mulattoes (Smedley 2007, 118). A clearly separated category of Negroes as slaves allowed newly freed European servants opportunities to realize their ambitions and to identify common interests with the wealthy and powerful. Laws were passed offering material advantages and social privileges to poor whites. In this way, colony leaders consciously contrived a social control mechanism to prevent the unification of the working poor (Allen 1997). Physical features became markers of racial (social) status, as Virginia’s governor William Gooch asserted, the assembly sought to “fix a perpetual Brand upon Free Negroes and Mulattos” (Allen 1997, 242).

However, the earliest rationale for racial slavery was not differences in physical features, but the identification of Africans as uncivilized heathens. The first “savages” that English had created in their minds were the “wild Irish.” In the late 16th century, after centuries of conflict and brutal warfare with the Irish, Queen Elizabeth declared that the Irish were natural “savages” incapable of civilization. Such attitudes generated extreme hatred of the Irish that has continued into the 21st century. In fact, the Elizabethans came very near to racializing the Irish, and in the 18th century the term “race” was imposed on the Irish.

Native Americans became “savages” when they resisted English appropriation of their lands, but this image began to change in the late 18th cent. Now, early in the 18th century, by reducing Africans to permanent slavery, prohibiting owners from freeing slaves, prohibiting their education and training, the English invented a new savage. From the early 18th century on, negative characterizations of Africans formed part of a new rationalization for enslavement. These became the stereotypes of races and race differences that we inherited in the 19th and 20th centuries. What colony leaders were doing was



establishing unequal groups and imposing different social meanings on them. As they were creating the institutional and behavioral aspects of slavery, the colonists were simultaneously structuring the ideological components of race. They exaggerated human differences and even invented some that could not be sustained empirically, such as the belief that Negroes had black brains and blood.

By the end of the 18th century, during the Revolutionary era, a great debate over the nature of “the Negro” had developed. Anti-slavery forces, particularly in Europe, castigated the leaders of the American Revolution for advocating freedom, yet holding more than two million people enslaved. In response, pro-slavery proponents developed an ideology about human group differences that dehumanized “the Negro” and demoted him to a status closer to the apes. Thomas Jefferson was the first to proclaim that we should leave the question of the Negro’s status in nature to science, which was just beginning to emerge as a separate and distinct institution in Western culture. From the last decade of the 18th century on, the writings of learned men appeared to proclaim the natural inferiority of blacks.

In the 1860s, slavery ended, but “race” as social status and the basis of our human identities remained. Race ideology proclaimed the existence of separate, distinct, and exclusive groups that were made unequal by God or nature. African-Americans, the most inferior, were at the bottom of the hierarchy, European whites (some of them) were at the top. Each race was thought to have distinct physical and behavioral traits that were inherited “in the blood,” and passed on to their children. Thus, we have the continuing stereotype of African-Americans as lacking in intelligence, lazy, overly-sexed, loud, irrational, musical, emotional, and superstitious. Finally, it was believed that these race differences could not be transcended or transformed (see Smedley 2007).

In the 19th century, “science” using techniques of measuring various aspects of the human body, sought to affirm the differences between blacks and whites and to justify the retention of phenotypically-based separate and exclusive groups. In the 20th and 21st centuries, race scientists turned to IQ tests and the new measure of human differences became primarily “intelligence.” In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, race scientists persist in promoting these supposed heritable characteristics of different races (see Smedley 2007).

The legacy of Race. This is the legacy about how North American colonists constructed human differences, establishing a hierarchy of “races” for social, economic, and political purposes. There are many benefits to knowing this history. We have inherited a legacy of enslavement without fully understanding the realities of the 17th century world in part because most histories taught in the



19th and 20th centuries contained negative stereotypes about who our African ancestors were. Modern historians have provided a corrective to such distorted history by restoring accurate accounts of events and their causes, especially the role of Africans in the making of this country.

Knowing the broader context in which our ideas and beliefs evolved gives us a better understanding of who we are as human beings. Most importantly, it forces us to confront the reality of race. There is a passage in the Bible that says “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” Race is like a vise that constricts our spirits and damages our psyches. I think Thomas Jefferson understood this, despite his ambivalence and apparent moral duplicity, when he wrote about the damages done to white children by the presence of slavery:

“The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it.... From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do.... The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances” (Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia [1785] 1955, 346). (Jefferson was very much aware of these terrible consequences; two of his grandchildren beat a slave to death for breaking a cup!)

Both the high-status racial whites and the low-status races, especially blacks and Indians, have been scarred in their daily lives by the racial images to which we all have been conditioned. Knowing the truth about our history will help to free us from the beliefs and attitudes about human differences that were deeply embedded in our culture with the invention of “race” and “races.”

Finally, freedom from the lived experiences of racism, that so acutely damages especially young African-Americans, may help to transform our entire society. By expanding freedom and opening up access to cultural knowledge for all people, it may well be that we will come closer to the ideals of equality and opportunity.

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