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Roots of Racism

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Race is a Social Construction

Race, racism, and slavery are deeply engrained in society as these social constructions have affected the social, economic, and legal structure of modern day civilization. Many biological and cultural anthropologists consider race and racism as synonymous because these unscrupulous social stigmas have created an artificial barrier between “humans” and “animals” that has caused a division of mankind and a cycle of oppression that emanates from generation to generation. Race and racism were created to establish a social hierarchy in which European oppressors used their power and advantage over populations with darker skin for personal enrichment, economic support, and political advantage; these ideas are not as old a human history as there are no genetic or intellectual differences between individuals of lighter and darker skin tones.

Race is defined as “permanent varieties of the human species, characterized by certain prominent distinctive traits” (Thomas 593). Biological anthropologists argue that the social construction of race is genetically unjustifiable since one particular trait is indistinctive to one race. This concept of indistinctive genetic variability supports the idea that race is a socially subjective concept. Rather than knowledge proven by scientific investigation and data, the social construction of race is an outcome of the way people perceive human and cultural differences. Race represents biological possibilities as there is a large range of pre-existing genetic variations that have existed since the beginning of human history. Eye color, hair color, and skin color are

not unique to one specific group of people. These qualities are shared by multiple groups of people that have diverging geographic and cultural differences. Furthermore, because people have different methods and dividing lines of racial classification, it is difficult to organize an individual to a certain race. Race is a social phenomenon and is not a theory that can be explained or proven by scientific examination or evidence.

Racism is a product of social reality, social constructivism, and the belief that those with lighter skin have absolute power and control to deprecate and manipulate beings with darker skin. While many people in modern day civilization attempt to classify individuals to a certain category in order to understand our world and the people that reside within it, the original purpose of racial distinctions was to create a social hierarchy to justify the actions of the oppressor. Furthermore, the strongly held racial beliefs of non-European peoples before the revolutionary era of the late seventeen-hundreds were assumed long before Europeans interacted with people of color. Though Europeans' worldview and knowledge was extremely limited and often based on fairytales and myths, enlightenment thinkers continued to proclaim the racial inferiority of individuals with darker skin complexions.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biological realism, which is the idea that races are biologically real, dominated collective thought. Europeans believed categorizing groups of people into classes based on geography and physical characteristics was morally justifiable. Europeans sought to justify slavery as the transatlantic slave trade forcefully migrated between twelve to fifteen million people from Africa to the Western Hemisphere. As Europeans exploited trafficked Africans to strengthen western powers, scientists began to construct paradigms based on limited to no scientific justification or evidence.

Two large groups, identified as “hard-liners” and “soft liners” arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hard-liners believed Africans were biologically inferior and accordingly found enslavement and colonization to be acceptable. Soft-liners believed Africans were inferior, but had a right to be free individuals, on the basis of the idea that freedom should not depend on one’s level of intelligence (Gould 63). While hard-liners and soft-liners differed in their belief of African’s right to freedom, both groups believed Africans were genetically inferior. This idea of the innate and unchangeable biological differences between Europeans and Africans contributed to how profoundly biological realism influenced society.

European and American power and influence enlarged as a result of slave labor. Slaves laid the foundation for economic, social, and academic development of numerous western societies. Racial and class hierarchies propagated by slavery established many of the most powerful and influential institutions in America. Nearly all of United States’ Ivy League Universities were established and linked to the slave economy and the exploitation of African slaves. As African slaves entered America the Atlantic economy improved which allowed the infrastructure of the colonies to grow and support the founding of new universities. During the height of the Triangular Trade in the eighteen-hundreds, the number of American universities tripled. Slave-owners provided both monetary and intellectual support and allowed “governors and faculties [to use] slave labor to raise and maintain their schools, and they made their campuses the intellectual and cultural playgrounds of the plantation and merchant elite” (Wilder 138). Craig Steven Wilder suggests that the blood money of the slave trade enabled faculty members to fulfill the mission of the university. Furthermore, the first medical colleges were founded because scientific researchers had access to the dead corpses of African slaves captured

during the slave trade. The bodies of African slaves were used for scientific research and medical development because slaves did not have legal protection of their bodies.

Beginning in the late Enlightenment period, scientific researchers began to analyze racial differences in relation to sexual and gender differences. Researchers concluded that gender was analogous to race and scientists could use racial differences to explain gender differences, and vice versa (Leys 360). Enlightenment scientists believed “women’s low brain weights and deficient brain structures were analogous of those of lower races, and their inferior intellectualities explained on this basis” (Leys 360). Africans were seen to have jutting jaws like women who were perceived to have primitive and inferior traits similar to individuals with darker skin. An individual that was not a European male was considered sub-human and animal-like. Scientists believed this difference human variation justified their act of categorizing women and individuals with darker skin as animals. The European’s idea of White Man’s Burden justified colonialism and slavery given that the alleged duty of the white race was to civilize people of color and other minority populations who carried inferior genetic characteristics. This philosophy influenced the idea that women and Africans were possessions which manifested the analogies that women were pieces of land and Africans were pets.

While many theorists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strongly supported the idea of biological realism, a new frame of thought developed in the twentieth century that contradicted the unsubstantiated arguments tyrannizing “unhuman” individuals in society. The *no human subspecies* argument claimed that even if non-human subspecies did exist, there are no human species and hence no races. Theorists supported this idea by expressing that fact that there is as much genetic variation within one racial group as there is among people between different racial groups. This idea refuted the idea of Nott and Gliddon in their 1868 scientific investigation

of European, African, and Chimpanzee skulls. Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon falsely concluded that African people have extended jaws hence African people are therefore more inferior than Apes. Comparing chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans to Africans created hundreds of years of racial slavery where Africans were labeled sub-persons and natural slaves. The analogy that Africans were unhuman and animal-like was supported by many scientists and political leaders including Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson believed there was a physical difference between whites and blacks which forbid the groups from achieving political and social equality. African's considered animal-like physical and intellectual characteristics were used as a means to justify European superiority. Furthermore, Scientists did not gather objective data to justify their actions or their social beliefs. Scientific research arose centuries after African inferiority was a collective social belief (Gould 66). Scientific racism perpetuated the slave trade and allowed the act of racial oppression to continue to be considered a justifiable and moral social phenomenon.

Plato's philosophy that diverging human groups have different social and behavioral tendencies as a result of inborn distinctions has influenced the methods in which western society was constructed (Smedley 52). The idea that "Racial prejudice may be as old as recorded human history, but its biological justification imposed the additional burden of intrinsic inferiority upon despised groups, and precluded redemption by conversion or assimilation" has both deliberately and unintentionally influenced society as demonstrated in the differences of opinion between hard-liners and soft-liners (Gould 63). While different groups of Europeans had diverging views of how people of color should be treated, a collective belief perpetuated by scientific formalities created a social structure that inflicted harm and derogation on individuals with darker skin which continues to divide and detriment society today.

Works Cited

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