

Race: An Evolving Issue in Western Social Thought

By John Henrik Clarke

◆in the kind of world we live in, being Black and beautiful means very little unless one is also Black and powerful. There is no way to succeed in the struggle against racism with out power. That is a part of our new reality and our new mission.

Early in this century, the elder scholar among African Americans, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois said: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Unfortunately, his prophecy was correct. In spite of all the talk and the sociology◆good and bad◆we have not made much progress in resolving this issue. We have talked about it extensively without really dealing with it. To deal with it, we will have to identify and explain its genesis. To explain its genesis, we will have to ask ourselves some hard questions, and we will have to be boldly honest with our answers. Some of the hard questions are: How did racism start in the first place and for whose benefit was it created? Who benefits from it now? Why do we lack the strength, or the nerve, to destroy it?

In this paper I am dealing, mainly, with the form of racism that affects people of African descent (or Black people in general). I am aware of the fact that certain manifestations of racism existed in Europe before the massive European expansion into the broader world of Africa, Asia and the West Indies. The racism that I am now attempting to examine is distinctly different because the factor of color was added, and the Christian Church played a major role in creating the rationale that sustained this racism in the mind of Western man. The genesis of this racism is in the rise of Europe after the fifteenth century; the development of the slave trade and the colonial system that subsequently followed.

It is too often forgotten that when the Europeans gained enough maritime skill, and gun power to conquer most of the world, they not only colonized the bulk of the world's people but they colonized the interpretation of history itself. Human history was rewritten to favor them at the expense of other people. The roots of modern racism can be traced to this conquest and colonialization.

In a speech delivered to the Pan-African Students Organization in the Americas, New York City, November, 1964, Richard B. Moore observed: "In the attempt to justify the conquest and enslavement of African people, European rulers and their spokesmen found it expedient to regard and set forth Africans as beings of a low and brutish order who indeed were hardly human. Such creatures then were deemed to have done little or nothing which could be dignified as history."

The dehumanization of the African people had already been started. The false images were in the making. The stereotypes and mental images of "savage Africa" and the "Dark Continent" were deeply impressed upon the minds of Europeans. The distortions were repeated until some of the victims began to believe them.

In his book, *Race, Science and Humanity*, (p. 111) Dr. Ashley Montagu refers to the belief in race as a "widespread contemporary myth in the Western World." He further states that, "It is the modern form of the older belief in witchcraft."

This point of view is extended in the following quote from the introduction to his book:

I am convinced that when the intellectual history of our time comes to be written, the idea of "race," both the popular and the taxonomic, will be viewed for what it is: a confused and dangerous idea which happened to fit the social requirements of a thoroughly exploitative period in the development of Western man. The idea of "race" was developed as a direct response to the exploitation of other peoples, to provide both a pretext and a justification for the most unjustifiable conduct, the enslavement, murder, and degradation of millions of human beings.

European interest in formalizing the concept of race, that started with the slave trade, dates back to the early part of the eighteenth century. Dr. Montagu¹ maintains that the development of the idea of race may, with some justification, be traced back to the scholastic naturalization of Aristotle's doctrine of Predictable Genus, Species, Difference, Property, and Accident. He further maintains that the concept of race had another development during the early days of the "Age of Enlightenment" when the Swedish botanist, Linnaeus, in 1735, took over the concepts of Class, Species and Genus from the Theologians to serve them as systematic tools.

These conclusions show how important it is for us to deal with both the genesis and the present application of racism.

The great human drama that was being called "The Black Revolution in the U.S.A." has deep historical roots, and it cannot be fully understood until it has been seen in this context. In his book, *Capitalism and Slavery*², Eric Williams places the origin of this revolution in historical perspective and calls attention to its early development"

When, in 1492, Columbus, representing the Spanish monarch, discovered the New World, he set in train the long and bitter international rivalry over colonial possessions for which, after four and a half centuries, no solution has yet been found. Portugal, which had initiated the movement of international expansion, claimed the new territories on the ground that they fell within the scope of a papal bull of 1455 authorizing her to reduce to servitude all infidel people. The two powers (Spain and Portugal), to avoid controversy, sought arbitration and, as Catholics, turned to the pope—a natural and logical step in an age when the universal claims of the Papacy were still unchallenged by individuals and governments. After carefully sifting the rival claims, the Pope issued, in 1493, a series of papal bulls which established a line of demarcation between the colonial possessions of the states: The east went to Portugal and the West went to Spain.

Though the announcement of the fact came much later, the European "Scramble for Africa," and subsequently Asia and North America, started with this act. The labor and raw materials of Africa, Asia, South America, and the West Indies financed the European Industrial Revolution.

In the year 1457, the Council of Cardinals met in Holland and sanctioned, as a righteous and progressive idea, the enslavement of Africans for the purpose of their conversion to Christianity, and to be exploited in the labor market as chattel property.

This devilish scheme speedily gained the sanctimonious blessing of the Pope and became a standard policy of the Roman Catholic Church and later the Protestant churches, enduring three centuries. And thus the ghastly traffic in human misery was given the cloak of respectability and anointed with the oil of Pontifical righteousness in Jesus' name. And so, the slave trade began, inaugurating an era that stands out as the most gruesome and macabre example of man's disregard for the humanity of man.

There is no way to understand the African slave trade without understanding slavery as an institution. It is almost as old as human societies. Every people has at some time or another been slaves! In fact, Europeans enslaved other Europeans for a much longer time than they enslaved Africans. Yet this slavery did not give birth to racism, though it did lay the basis for feudalism.

Slavery was a permanent feature of the ancient world, in Egypt, Kush, Greece and Rome. The African slave period is best known to us because it is the most recent—and the best documented. These documents on slavery have often done more to confuse the issue than to explain the subject. Most people write about slavery in a manner that makes the victim feel guilty. There is probably more dishonesty related to the interpretation of this subject than any other known to man.

The "Christians" of European descent have never felt at ease in an honest discussion of this subject, because every examination of the subject will prove that slavery and the slave trade were the incubator for present day racism.

In the book *The Idea of Racism*³ by Louis L. Snyder, attention is called to the statement of the British historian, Lord Bryce, who says that: "self-conscious racial feeling hardly existed in any country until the French Revolution." In spite of what seems to be an exaggeration, there is more than an element of truth in what Lord Bryce has said, if we qualify this by making a distinction between racism, which was rampant, and self-conscious racial feeling, which was developing.

From the sixteenth century onward, Europeans ranged the earth conquering, mainly, defenseless people. They set themselves up as ruling aristocracies. In this world-wide rape of peoples and countries, they destroyed many cultures and civilizations that were old before Europe was born. Their rationales and justifications for these actions were the rankest form of racism ever conceived by the human mind. This tragedy continued during the era of colonialization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and again in the era of neo-mercantilist revival called imperialism that had so many articulate defenders in the nineteenth century.

The Christian Church was the handmaiden for the development of racism. While it propagated the theory that all men were created equal in the sight of God, in practice, it found all sorts of arguments to prove that non-European peoples, especially Black men, were inferior and could not be considered as men in the general sense.

A search for ways to justify European domination over most of mankind led biologists to the works of Linnaeus and Buffon. Thus, the classification of races began. In deciding the distinctions between higher and lower races, the Europeans, of course, became the hierarchy of races.

In many ways this was a continuation of the rationales set up to justify the slave trade. We will have to look at this trade, and the periods of its development again and again in order to understand that we are now reaping the bitter harvest of human discord and social dislocation that was planted over five hundred years ago.

The demand for Black power and Black history has made publishers, from time to time since the 1960's, realize that books on this subject can be a profitable enterprise. In the rush to capture this market, a number of hurriedly written books on the slave trade have been published. None of the new "authorities" on the subject seem to see the African slave trade as the incubator of modern racism that it was.

The African slave trade◆like African history in general◆is often written about and rarely ever understood. I think this misunderstanding grows out of the fact that we nearly always start the study of the African slave trade in the wrong place.

The story of the African slave trade⁴ is essentially the story of the consequences between the passing of the Roman Empire in the eighth century and the partial unification of Europe, through the framework of the Catholic Church, in the fifteenth century, Europeans were engaged mainly in the internal matters within their own continent. With the opening up of the New World, after the expulsion of the Moors from Spain during the latter part of the fifteenth century, the Europeans started to expand beyond their homeland, into the broader world. They were searching for new markets and materials, new manpower and new lands to exploit. The African slave trade was created to accommodate this new expansion.

The Europeans, mainly the Portuguese who came to the West Coast of Africa in the fifteenth century, were not at first looking for slaves. The search for gold and other treasures lured them to Africa. They did not have to fight their way onto the continent. They came as guests and were treated as guests. Finally, when they grew strong enough, they turned on their hosts and decided to stay as conquerors.

The basis for the future European industrial revolution had already been established. They had already created an embryo technology◆principally the gun.

The Chinese had gunpowder before the rise of Europe and the African had iron. It is interesting to speculate on why they did not put the iron and gunpowder together and form a partnership to take over the world, inasmuch as they knew each other and were carrying on peaceful trade for a number of years, along the coast of East Africa. The Europeans created the gun to protect themselves from other Europeans.

During the fifteenth century, they found other territories for this weapon, though they still needed it in the never-ending wars with their neighbors.

In the centuries that followed, they used this weapon and other advantages, mainly a large fleet of ships and mercenary sailors and soldiers, to take over most of the world. In so doing, they destroyed a large number of nations and civilizations that were older than Europe.

In order to justify this destruction, a monster that still haunts our lives was created: racism. The slave trade and the colonial system that followed were, figuratively, the mother and father of this catastrophe.

The opening up of the New World opened up more than new territory. It opened up a new era in human relations, mostly bad. The Europeans, being "Christians," had to find a way to live with their consciences after the formal starting of the slave trade. The Africans made the original mistake of asking the Europeans to settle some of their family disputes. Unfortunately, the Europeans many times conquered both branches of the family.

The Europeans were no strangers to Africa, and this really wasn't their first meeting. But in order to justify the slave trade, they had to forget, or pretend to forget, all that they had previously known about Africa. They had to forget that a lot of the early culture of Europe has as African base. They also had to forget that there were periods when Africans and Europeans lived in comparative harmony and Europeans married into African royalty and saw no difference in one royal personage and the other. Therefore, the Europeans had to forget that the Africans had a history and a heritage that could command respect.

In the opening up of the territory called the New World, two competing slave systems were set in motion, and each of these systems served as some form of racism. The dehumanization of the African had started in European textbooks, geographies, and travel books. In South America and the Caribbean area, the plantation owners generally bought slaves in large lots and kept the lots together principally because they thought they could work them better that way♦and they were right. In the United States, however, where the most vicious form of racism was manifested, the slavery system operated more like a brokerage system. A plantation owner could and would very often buy ten slaves and re-cell five of them before the end of the week. This meant the immediate breaking up of the cultural continuity, linguistic continuity, and all things that held the African together within Africa, therefore, creating a family dislocation that the Black American has not recovered from to this day. This dislocation was a form of racism.

The mentality, the rationales, and the various ways of justifying the slave trade had already started in Europe with Europeans attempting to justify the enslavement of other Europeans. This is a neglected aspect of history that is rarely ever taken into consideration. There was at first a concerted effort to obtain European labor to open up the vast regions of the New World. It is often forgotten that, in what became the United States, white enslavement started before Black enslavement.

In an article, "White Servitude in the United States," *Ebony Magazine*, November, 1969, the African American historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., gives the following information about this period: "When someone removes the cataracts of whiteness from our eyes, and when we look with unclouded vision on the bloody shadows of the American past, we will recognize for the first time that the Afro-American, who was so often second in freedom, was also second in slavery.

"Indeed, it will be revealed that the Afro-American was third in slavery. For he inherited his chains, in a manner of speaking, from the pioneer bondsmen, who were red and white."

The enslavement of both "red" men and white men in the early American colonies was a contradiction of English law. The colonies were founded with the understanding that neither chattel slavery nor villeinage would be recognized. Yet, forced labor was widely used in England. This system was transferred to the colonies and used to justify a form of slavery that was visited upon "red" and white men. Concise information on this system and how it developed is revealed in the book, *Slavery and Abolition, 1831♦1841* by Albert Bushnell Hart, first published in 1906.

It was decreed that the apprentice must serve his seven years, and take floggings as his master saw fit;

the hired servant must carry out his contract for his term of service; convicts of the state, often including political offenders, were slaves of the state and sometimes sold to private owners overseas. The colonists claimed those rights over some of their white fellow countrymen. A large class of "redemptioners" had agreed that their service should be sold for a brief term of years to pay their passage money. There was also a class of "indentured" or "indented" servants bought by their masters and under legal obligation to serve for a term of years and subject to the same penalties of branding, whipping and mutilation as African slaves. These forms of servitude were supposed to be limited in duration and transmitted no claim to the servant's children. In spite of this servitude, the presumption, in law, was that a white man was born free.

The English settlers had, at once, begun to enslave their Indian neighbors, soothing to enslave their consciences with the argument that it was right to make slaves of pagans. In large numbers, the Indians fled or died in captivity, leaving few of their descendants in bondage. The virgin soil of the new English settlements continued to need more labor. This led to a fierce search for white labor that subsequently led to a search for Black labor.

The continuation of Lerone Bennett's comments on this situation is, "It has been estimated that at least two out of every three white colonists worked for a term of years in the fields or kitchens as semi-slaves ♦ white servitude was the historic foundation upon which the system of black slavery was constructed."

Mr. Bennett's statement is indicative of the new insight into the slave system. African slave labor and the raw materials taken from the countries of the enslaved were important features in the development of the European industrial revolution.

American abolitionists, Black and white, were fighting against a form of racism that had begun to crystallize itself in the embryo of the colonies' educational systems, filtering down from the attitude prevailing in the churches. During the period of the founding fathers, the Black Americans heard promises about democracy, but the American promises really weren't made to them. That was the basis of their dilemma during the formative period of this country, and it is the basis of their dilemma right now. This country was born in racism, and it has evolved in racism.

Finally, in the early years of the nineteenth century, the system of chattel slavery gave way to the colonial system, after the British abolished slavery ♦ at least on paper ♦ in 1807. This was not the end of racism as it affected Africans and other people of color throughout the world; it was only a radical change in how it would be manifested. The Europeans would now change the system of capturing Africans and other people of color and enslaving them thousands of miles from their homes. They would now enslave them on the spot, within their own countries, and use those countries as markets for the new goods coming out of the developing European industrial revolution, as well as use the homes of the colonized and their labors to produce the grist for new European mills. So the industrial rise of the West has as its base a form of racism. Racism helped to lay the base of the present economic system we now call capitalism.

Theoretical racism, in the main, is of nineteenth century origin in America and in Europe. And yet the nineteenth century was a century of the greatest resistance against racism. It was during that century when Africans the world over began to search for a definition of themselves. The concept of African redemption is of nineteenth century origin. The theoretical basis of the Black Power concept started in 1829, with the publication of David Walker's *Appeal*. The great Black ministers of the nineteenth century, such as Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and Prince Hall, who founded the black Masons, were all using Christianity in a struggle against racism.

The highwater mark of the Africans' reaction to European racism came in the middle of the nineteenth century in the presence of great Black intellectuals such as: Martin R. Delany and Edward Wilmot Blyden. Delany wrote a number of outstanding papers on the subject; the best of these papers were brought together in his book, *Origin of Races and Color* published in 1880. During this period, the great defenders of the Africans' history, culture and right of self-determination, were Black Americans and "West Indians." Singularly, the most outstanding was Edward Wilmot Blyden.

Edward Wilmot Blyden, who was born in what is now the Virgins Islands, was the intellectual bridge between Africa, the Caribbean Islands and the United States during the second half of the nineteenth

century. Some of his nineteenth century plans and programs for the redemption of Africa were realized in the twentieth century. Many of our modern day African American youth, who have mouthed the phrase "Black and beautiful," do not know that Edward Wilmot Blyden said the same thing, and much better, over fifty years before they were born. Dr. Blyden went back to Africa, physically and spiritually, and started to reclaim his heritage in the eighteen-fifties. He became, in many ways, more African than some African-born Africans, and he became the defender of the history and culture of that continent and its people.

Dr. Blyden did not originate the formalized Pan-African idea. This started among a few "West Indian" and African American intellectuals in the early years of the twentieth century as a reaction against the enslavement of, and discrimination against, Africans in the New World and their reputed backwardness on the continent of Africa. This group came to view the problems of the African people as a whole, and their solutions aimed at bringing prestige and dignity to the entire people. They came to reject any white-dominated society as unfit for African people's habitation and thought in terms of establishing societies and nations in which Blacks would have unfettered opportunities for demonstrating their talents. Unquestionable, they were influenced by those British and American "humanitarians" who wished to "regenerate" Africa and under whose auspices free Blacks from Britain and North America and founded the colonies of Sierra Leone (1787) and Liberia (1822). The early Pan-African nationalists optimistically regarded Sierra Leone and Liberia as a new kind of society which could combine the best in western and African cultures. They believed that sustained New World African "repatriation" would result in the establishment of major progressive African nations through whose agency the African people would make a distinctive contribution to world civilization. Such were the views of Paul Cuffee, Daniel Coker, Hilary Teage, Elijah Johnson, Lott Cary and John B. Russwurm, all of whom played prominent roles in the early history of Liberia or Sierra Leone or both, and all of whom but Cuffee died in the service of the new societies for which they held such high hopes.

With the death of the above leaders, the next Pan-African figure to emerge was Edward Wilmot Blyden who, because of his intellectual brilliance, his single-mindedness of purpose, and a long life, became easily the greatest of the Pan-African figures of the nineteenth century. Blyden became a convert to Pan-Africanism in 1850 at the age of eighteen, while on a visit to the United States from his native St. Thomas. The young West Indian had come to the United States to seek entrance into a theological college. Not only were his applications turned down because of his race, but he had the traumatic and humiliating experience of witnessing the recently passed Fugitive Slave Law unscrupulously brought in to operation against the free Blacks of New York; he himself "feared being seized for a slave." From his American and other experiences as well as from his readings, Blyden became convinced the Black people would never be treated as the equal of whites in the New World. In the meantime, he had learned of Liberia and had become greatly excited by the possibilities for development of the former colony of the American Colonization Society which in 1847 had achieved full sovereign status as a Republic. Accordingly, Blyden emigrated to Liberia, arriving there in late January, 1851. The remainder of Blyden's long life, apart from visits to Europe and America, was spent doing "race work" in English-speaking Africa.

Unquestionably, it is primarily as a man of letters and ideas, rather than as a man of action, that Blyden made his greatest impact. He began writing at the age of eighteen, at first for the colonization journals of America. His writings, apart from condemning slavery and advocating the emigration of free African Americans to Liberia, were concerned with proving that the Black Race had a history and culture of which it could be proud. Thus, at the outset of his career, he realized that an indispensable prerequisite to Pan-African action was the creation of pride and self-esteem among his people.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the great intellectual giant, W.E.B. DuBois took up this fight and ably carried it to the middle of the twentieth century. He is the father of the present struggle against racism and for African redemption. Men like Marcus Garvey, though they differed with W.E.B. DuBois, would draw in part on his intellectual conclusions on this subject.

There is now an international struggle on the part of people of African descent against racism and for a more honest look at their history. On university campuses and in international conferences they are demanding that their history be looked at from a Black perspective or from an Afrocentric point of view. This has taken the struggle against racism to the world's campuses, where the theoretical basis of racism started. This has helped to create new battlelines and a lot of fear and frustration on the part of white

scholars. They still do not recognize that removing the racism that they created is the healthiest thing that present day Black scholars can contribute to the world; that in the cry for Black power and Black history, Black people are saying a very powerful, complex, yet simple thing: "I am a man." The struggle against racism all along has been a struggle to regain the essential manhood lost after the European expansion into the broader world and their attempts to justify the slave trade. This struggle has brought us to where we are now, standing on the "Black and Beautiful" plateau. From this position, Black people will walk into another stage, much higher and more meaningful for mankind. After reclaiming their own humanity, I think they will make a contribution toward the reclamation of the humanity of man. First they will have to realize that in the kind of world we live in, being Black and beautiful means very little unless one is also Black and powerful. There is no way to succeed in the struggle against racism with out power. That is a part of our new reality and our new mission.

References

1. Ashley Montagu, *Race, Science and Humanity* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand Insights Books, 1963), pp. 2♦3.
2. Eric Williams, "The Origin of Negro Slavery," *Capitalism and Slavery* (Capricorn paperback, 1966), Chapter I, pp. 3♦29.
3. Louis L. Snyder, "Race and History," *The Idea of Racialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1962), pp. 25♦39.
4. Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade* (Boston, Mass., Little Brown and Company, 1961), Chapter I, and pp. 1♦25.

Bibliography

W.O. Blake, *History of Slavery and Slave Trade* (J. and H. Miller Co., 1858).

Barry N. Schwartz and Robert Disch, *White Racism: Its History, Pathology and Practice* (N.Y., Dell Books, 1970).

Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (Pantheon Books, 1970).

Richard B. Moore, *The Name Negro: Its Origin and Evil Use* (New York, N.Y., Afro-American Publisher, Inc., 1960).

W.E.B. DuBois, *Color and Democracy* (New York, N.Y., Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., 1945).

Jacques Barzun, *Race, A Study in Superstition* (New York, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1965).

Earl Conrad, *The Invention of the Negro* (Paul S. Eriksson, Inc., 1967).

Buell G. Gallagher, *Color and Conscience* (Harper & Bros., 1946).

Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922).

Thomas F. Gossett, *Race ♦ The History of an Idea in America* (Schocken Books, 1965).

Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* (Modern Reader paperbacks, published by Monthly Review Press, New York, N.Y., 1970).

Gilbert Osofsky, *The Burden of Race* (Harper Torchbook, Harper & Row, 1968).

Ruth Benedict, *Race ♦ Science and Politics* (Compass Books edition, Viking Press, 1964).

Ashley Montagu (ed.), *The Concept of Race* (Collier Books, 1969).

Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism* (Cornell University Press, 1964).

Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America* (Doubleday & Co., 1965).

Lewis Killian and Charles Grigg, *Racial Crisis in America* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964).

E. Franklin Frazier, *Race and Culture in the Modern World* (Beacon Press, 1965).

Paul Lewinson, *Race, Class and Party* (Russell and Russell, 1963).

[John Henrik Clarke Virtual Museum](#) | [FRONTal View](#)
[NBUF Homepage](#) | [DuBois Learning Center Homepage](#)