The Rattling Chains of Race: Tying Together History

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Abstract
Race in America has historically been a crucial point throughout, From the cruelty of Slavery to the terror of Jim Crow. The social reality of race is often looked at from a single point or time period, but it may be better to see it from a holistic perspective. Sociologically, racism has evolved and changed in history. While many people would like to say that this is merely a chapter that can finally be put to rest, the conflict of black and whites is still present in ever more covert and overt ways. The story of Racism is controlling, dominating in today's society, from our justice system to hiring to distrust of the police. So the focal question is “how did we get here?”

Cover Page Footnote
Brian Zirkle, Sociology, was the faculty mentor for this Honors contract.
The whip cracks on the slave’s back, felt through generations still, in the twenty-first century. America is a country petrified by fear of the black body, and has set in stone the boundaries as to leave the black body as a sheep in a pen: racism perpetuates in ways beyond the overt chains, collars, and plantations; it exists as a system that has grown from slavery, evolved into newer forms of racism, and now sits calmly as a specter that has never died. Slavery has remained in our society as a structural and cultural reality, shaped by centuries of decrepit discourse that many people would rather just assume collects cobwebs in a library to be forgotten. It is controlling, dominating any discourse of being “beyond race.” The focal question: how has our social and cultural discourses of race become used as this form of social control?

This question requires us to delve into those old libraries in history, to try and gather the constant trend, the phantom, the social construction that has evolved and grown to help understand the full truth of this social control. To ask the question of American Racism, it is necessary to traverse three periods of history: Slavery both Northern and Southern, the period of Jim Crow, and today’s “Post-Racial” society. It shall become quite clear that neither slavery or Jim Crow truly ended in full, nor have we moved beyond race.

Slavery

The basis of slavery, which came to dominate our view of race, can best be understood through a materialist viewpoint of history. This view, espoused by Karl Marx, works to understand history as a constant affair in which major political events are defined not by higher ideals, but by a constant transfer of resources: A constant fight for resources, who owns them, and how those resources are distributed—these events are the real drivers of historical change and progress (Smith 513). While there are differences amongst materialists, the consensus is that slavery was a system of materialist interests. Our historical conception of slavery had been the wish to turn human life into a usable resource. During the conception of an American democracy, the founders were split between the values of freedom and the values slavery, a system which resulted in the denial of freedom to over 40% of the general population (‘The Unholy
Trinity” 545). In the attempt to remove this confliction of values, the people redefined the slave. This definition was shown specifically in Scott v. Sanford in 1857: “The only two clauses in the Constitution which point to this race treat them as persons whom it was morally lawfully to deal in as articles of property and to hold as slaves” (sec. 6). It is this historical example, one of material interest winning over ideals, provide a backdrop for the constant conflict of the material interests of people between different groups.

Slavery was a system that “set [black] apart from the white on the continent” (Degler 56). Not only did it define people as property, but it provided a caste system. A caste system was quickly developed placing slaves as immutable property, as animals. Slave codes in the South wrote out systems which allowed for punishing a slave, even to death, without legal recourse (Degler 56). This caste system comes down to a false division. Two groups, black and white, are created and segregated by outside interests, often economic. This concept is described by Marx and Engels as false consciousness, to which people are divided into false categories as to maintain a fight against each other, rather than the landowners, or slave-owners, or corporations (qtd. in Allahar 102). This caste system had two distinct forms before the civil war: Southern Chattel Slavery and Northern Wage Slavery.

Southern Chattel Slavery existed as the direct ownership we come to expect when talking about slavery. Field hands, mostly black, were forced to work from the morning to the night, assisting work at the farm from maintaining crops, preparing food, and return to the fields; oftentimes, failure to do as the master told meant lashings (Steele 33). Slaves were, by no means, treated kindly in the South. Living conditions at one time included “mud-walled housing”; and there are many examples of slaves creating small indoor storage pits to hide pilfered goods (Singleton 124). Slavery was an industry, and often times propped up other industries, fueling whole economies; One slave and one master became, “an investment” that became the south’s “central institution” (Jones and Hoepner 299).

Northern Slavery, very distinct from Southern Slavery, often included the earliest forms of emancipation, and the earliest forms of wage slavery (Feagin 179). There was always a disparity between
North and South, but even within both spheres, there was always a disparity between white and black. Historically, we have only focused on the South, but this obfuscates and ignores the disturbing trends of Northern Wage Slavery, which many can still see today. As Feagin described, “despite the early emancipation of slaves in the North it remained there, not merely as fossilized remains but as a deeply engrained coding for the future” (179). Northern blacks were of cheaper labor than whites, and inasmuch created three tiers between the wealthy, the working whites, and the diminished blacks (Bonacich 603). This caste created a constant conflict, not with the corporate elites, but white against black. White workers, for example, feared the educating of slaves, as such might make them more profitable, and therefore displace more white workers (Bonacich 610). Many responses to Northern Abolitionists by slave owners in the South came down to Wage Slavery. Slaves were maintained, even to a minimalist level, in well-being, but wage earners are a commodity to maintain themselves (Steele 375).

The use of social and cultural consciousness was one of the more prevalent aspects of racism. By attaching these undesirable categories, rich wealthy elites informed both black bodies and white bodies, adding modifiers to each group. These modifiers created conflict. The Black Body was classified as “the African savage, […] the nightmare of the rampaging brute” (Fredrickson 213). Slaves in general became, as is a slave property, fungible: a commodity to be thrown away after its use ran out. Not only that, but their bodies became sinly, especially of note being women. Often, women slaves were subject to sexual exploitation, ultimately modelled by the stereotype “Jezebel” as impure and unlady-like (Miller 36). The white body became un-hirable. This contrast created a need for racism, or in reality, a need to continue racism now that the system became so deeply entrenched.

Of importance, should be the end of Slavery. We tend to have this revisionist view of the end of slavery, describing it as finally working out the kinks in our democracy, perfecting it to a system where all men were truly equal. This statement is wrong on two accounts: 1) the end of slavery was not based on the improvement of the ideal of democracy, and 2) the system has never been perfected, and we have not become equal. Ultimately, the end of slavery was the material interests which behind the system itself.
Slavery was a system that required constant costs. As American Slavery came to become the dominant force of America, it also became a costly institution; a slave had to be whipped if they started to slow down in work, they had to be tended to if they became sick, and one had to find something for them to do in the off-season when labor was less required (Steele, 371). The system of slavery was replaced with a system that benefitted the master more than his freed slave.

Slavery never died after the 13th amendment. In the South, slavery was replaced with a system of sharecropping, or best described as debt peonage. Booker T. Washington, born slave, famously described this new system as "a kind of slavery that is in one sense as bad as the slavery of antebellum days" (Feagin 181). The system often meant that the newly freed slave was bound back to the same land and plantation and slave-owner they worked to escape. Whereas people became free of slave bondage, they did not become independent (Ruef and Fletcher 450). Sharecropping was a system whereby freedmen were to rent out the equipment, the crop, the land, and the housing; they were given a loan to which they could, in theory, pay off at the end of the season (Mann 776-777). In this sense freedom became a burden, rather than a release. The system was more akin to “relations reminiscent of semifeudal or semifree precapitalist forms of labor” (Mann 777).

Jim Crow

Wage labor was, as seemed prophetic, much more pervasive a form of slavery. This new form of slavery, known simply as Jim Crow, came down to two forms of segregation: Economic Segregation and Social Segregation.

It should probably be done to describe social segregation before economic segregation. This is because the social sphere came to define the economic. Jim Crow was an accommodation of “group in the United States functioning on a basis of inequality in the social system which has resulted in social stratification and segregation” (Smythe 46). As society worked to integrate African-Americans into cities, mostly European-American, this basic inequality which emerged from Slavery came create lines between
people, social stratification. This integration happened slower, as African-American youths moved away from rural society and slowly found way in factory jobs, industrial labor in the north. This demographic change lead to uneasiness. Under the undercurrent of stratification came the message of “the so-called black menace” (Ethnic Notions). Films and media depicted something tragic about the freedom from slavery of African-Americans. Patterson described this period of post-slavery as a “Symbolic Death” whereas cultures become stereotyped, working to rend invisible the actual lives of African-Americans through images of violence and chaos (Wallace 88). The Brute became a destructive form of silence, marked on the black body.

With the increase in African-Americans in inner cities, there was an increasing feel of “black encroachment.” As Black populations and White populations came to integrate, vying for the same resources, there was a call for Jim Crow Laws throughout an area (Wilson 440). Thus came the doctrine of “separate but equal”, as a form of removing Blacks from Whites. This separation and anxiety was seen throughout America in what is known as the White Flight. There were a number of reasons that led to the movement away from the innercity by white families, and the reason many Blacks were not as lucky. Whites moved out of the cities and into Suburbs, leaving the innercity a flood of slums, and slums for Blacks (Frey 425). While there is racial reasons for White Flight, this is not the main reason. Many people left for other social and economic strains. People did not want to be in places with a majority of poor residents, or safety often noted by higher susceptibilities of crime (Crowder and South 794).

Cities were structured as to create further stratification. The main proprietor of this being JC Nichols in Kansas City who laid the framework in cities; “Kansas City is marked by sharp physical contrasts. There are tenements only a few blocks from skyscrapers, […] and there are area shanties only a short distance outside the business district” (A City Without Slums, 298). Not only did it become residential, but it included jobs available, transportation, education. Brown v. Board in 1952, for example, stated that this segregation had “a tendency to retard the educational and mental developments of the negro children” (494). This geographical segregation was often direct and indirect. During this period,
schools which tried to integrate would be squashed near immediately, and with legal authority (Missed Opportunities, 8).

In this sense, the city became a key marker of race. It also became the marker of wealth, inextricably linked; unemployment, poverty, health problems all became identifiers on a map of black and white (David and Tamela Eitle 436). Crime becomes attached to these communities, from a lack of securities in poorer black communities and over-policing and brutality. Unemployment, joblessness, and criminal punishment plays a devastating role in the family life of black communities. As family life was disrupted, there became a rise in crime (Richardson and St. Vil 72). Even these communities, without the unemployment and health problems, for people with jobs, became a form of control. Economic mobility. A way to see this control lie in a concept known as “economic citizenship.” That there are certain “social and civic entitlements” to “economic independence” that include such things as healthcare, transportation, and a stable income (Brodkin 117). It is by no surprise that these things disproportionately inaccessible for blacks, compared to whites. During Jim Crow, these cities meant low-paying jobs that required no education, or any education to get higher pay jobs. This meant little to no economic citizenship for African Americans.

Jim Crow was, in many ways, a leviathan. Its resistance struck at a different cord for that reason. The civil rights movement was a movement to “derive power from disrupting the social order” (Fleming and Morris 108). The Civil Rights Movement was categorized by acts that worked to disrupt the economic power and stability of those who had sustained the system, elites. This came by sit-ins, marches during normally bust streets, strikes, protests; ones new, but also ones that included violence. Much of the issue of Civil Rights at the time became mobilizing African-Americans. During three wars, Both world wars and the Korean war, there became a need for more employment (Feagin 185). After each war, the situation returned to the norm. At the time, Gandhi’s work towards nonviolent protest against apartheid became a powerful motivator of the later movement, especially to Martin Luther King Jr., and other leaders at the time (Fleming and Morris 109). These rebellions, nonviolent and otherwise, sent the issue to
the fore, changing sentiment across America. It is this nonviolence that finally showed “the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry,” and that “compelled [people, white and nonwhite] from silence to activism” (qtd in Fleming and Morris 112).

It had been a massive effort to create a system that finally stamped out Jim Crow. A success for equality. But this success was imperfect, often hiding still present wounds. But how do you hide these invisible wounds? America was a land of individual groups. To note, Jim crow as a legal institution died, but it lived on as a geographical reality. Lichter et al. noted that “[c]urrent economic conditions suggest that spatially concentrated poverty […] is on the rise” (2011). The racial society morphed in the discourse from more legitimate racism, to that which people of large do not legitimate in daily life. Color out race in neighborhoods, and people only see bad ‘neighborhoods’ or ‘urban cities’. The issue, as noted by Bruce Western, was “street crime”, which came “squarely on the national agenda” (59). The social sciences fared even worse. The physical hatred of black people moved from how people “were” (black) but how they “acted” (black). This link of crime to poorer neighborhoods had come to be seen as indicative of a “defective culture” (Massey 5). The black culture is the problem, yet it is not a condition of black people.

**Post-Racial**

The Immediate pushback, or resentment, to equality for African-Americans was one that seemed like a predictable undercurrent of history. Drugs often played as a form of racialized control, with drug laws often being pushed to counter the Civil Rights movement (Rosino and Hughey 2). This targeting only intensified during Nixon’s war on drugs, which led to “crime control, punishment, and sentencing” on racial lines (Coates 849). The war on drugs became the latest force working to “[maintain the] racial caste” of Jim crow and Slavery (Fortner 253). This meant several targeted policies, community control, and far worse. President Nixon described his goal as a war on “the criminal elements which increasingly threaten our cities, our homes, and our lives” and Reagan furthered this claim with extreme sentencing laws (Western 60). These elements meant urbanized ultimately black communities, and the threats that
black crime had on the lives and families of white people. Drug crimes, of note, unequally targeted blacks for drugs—like crack cocaine—and let off drugs similar or of the same vein found to be taken more by whites—like powder cocaine (Lichtenstein 255). This treatment should be noted specifically as more a ‘war on race’.

This ‘war on race’ has led to the “most extensive changes in criminal justice policy and the operations of the justice system […] since the due process revolutions of the 1960s” (Jensen et al. 100). There are reasons behind this. The expansion of drugs also necessitated the expansion of the courts, prisons. Police are redirected from violent crime because of the workload, courts now had to create specialized courts to specifically handle the load, and industries have become built around this new prison system (Jensen et al. 101). What comes is a policing that focuses on specific communities, inner-city ‘violent’ neighborhoods. “Young African American men are often targeted by police” for arrests and warrants, (Lichtenstein 255) and in doing this comes a culture of antagonism. Ironically, it is this targeting and criminalization that leads to further ‘crime’ whether crime was there or not, as many people find less social mobility and fewer legitimate opportunities, (Lichtenstein 256). It seems that, more than any other race, African Americans have been sent to a ‘Black’s only’ justice system.

As African Americans were funneled through the ‘Black’s only’ justice system, they enter into a penal system grown larger than ever before. As quoted in Jensen quoted, “In the Mid-1990s, one out of every three young Black males was under some form of state supervision” (106). The prison system has become so vast as to affect community and social life. Quoted in Western, “Incarceration often means that fathers miss out on key events that serve to build parental bonds” (135). The effects of removing one source of income for a family and putting all pressure on the other mate should be somewhat clear. This can provide an “economic strain” on families often already in poverty (Tasca et al 460).

All the while, other factors have come to define the social landscape. Isolation has become more prevalent than maybe even during Jim Crow. African American communities, often described as ghettos,
have, in many areas become nearly 80-100 percent segregated by race, as Massey noted (160). It is this high level of alienation that leads to a form of social isolation (Massey 160). Even within suburbs with racial transitions, the situation has only moderately improved. As Feagin noted, these suburbs were often only spillover from the core of the city (black communities), and that these are often coupled with further expansion in suburbs away from these cities (195).

So an important question: why has racism become so pervasive? We wish to be a Post-Racial society, so why has it become so pertinent? There may be two factors to this problem. Both have a resident place in the Civil Rights Movement. We have a general hesitance to acknowledge race today, rendering these issues individualistic rather than group based; and an outlook that race is no longer an issue, thus becoming blind to the deep and vast color lines left on society.

At the base, this color ‘erasure’ seems to be an ideal. We do wish for a society where race becomes a relic of the past, but even had it, the artifacts seem to exist today. Unfortunately, in a world where these differences exist, “this masks the continuing inequities involving race” (Andersen 190). It is ironic that this logic seeks to create an equal state, yet becomes the exact opposite. The logic is “regressive” and ultimately only does to work to “[return] to ‘the social vision and the analytics that constitutionalized the massive inequality of separate-but-equal’” (Winkler 39). The subtlety of this racism, or more of invisible roots still lying that this racism ignores, may be the darkest power colorblindness has at its disposal: the ability to leave certain things “in the dark to others.”

The power behind these words comes also from the changing view of race. With race no longer a concept, what do we look at? If I have a problem, and nobody else around me is, who should we try and fix? Our individual focus more comes from distinct American values of freedom and living the American dream (Fischer 364). There does seem a problem with this division. It is that, as quoted by Allik and Realo, “[individualism] attacks and destroys all others and is at length
absorbed in down-right selfishness” (31). With a clear, individual prospect, we isolate ourselves from others, selfishly believing the problems everyone face is themselves.

It is this new third wave, the racial equivalent of ‘whiteout’, does one of the odder things to the black and white bodies. By marking each person as not a part of the group, one can label them as criminals, or as cheap labor, or as lusting for more, without seeming racist. Ironically, there is a dissonance here between labelling everyone of a race with charged rhetoric, yet not believing your rhetoric is racially-charged. It is this sense of “entitlement” to certain powers, and the denial of any entitlement shared equally by others, such as actions taken by affirmative action to equalize these entitlements, that fuels a portion of this conflict (Hall 570). This ‘new racism’ constitutes a mix of new and old. It is a type of “racial resentment,” which is noted by this view that Blacks who do not succeed are simply “Lazy” instead of affected by their social environment (Gainous 255). The underlying message is that this new conception of race is one that hides as more insidious than others.

The annals of race often seem like less of a path of A to B to C. It is more of a constant ever-present specter. One thing doesn’t die off, but in some cases, transforms. Slavery has taken on many different forms in history. There are certain constants, in structure. There are clear lessons that can be seen, the need for integration and for recognizing this geography as something constant and necessary to fix.
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