

Answers to the Question: “Who Developed Race?”

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BIOLOGISTS AND SOCIAL SCIENTISTS have conclusively demonstrated that race is a culturally constructed notion.¹ As several authors have noted, communicating this reality to students, many of whom assume that race is immutable and biologically determined, is a difficult task. Many of these same instructors have presented valuable suggestions about how to demonstrate the true nature of race to students attending United States colleges and universities.² Furthermore, documentary films such as *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003) and *Africans in America* (1998) also help students learn that race has been a nebulous and created category rather than a fixed or biological reality.³

In spite of the recent work on pedagogy in this area, however, little has been said about how to address root questions such as “Where, exactly, did the concept of ‘race’ come from?” or, to express this as a recurring theme through history, “Who has been responsible for the creation, transmission, and perpetuation of racial ideologies?” Obviously, these are extremely complicated questions with many possible answers.⁴ Yet it is critically important that we help students develop and discover answers, because their role, as educated citizens, will be crucial in the future construction or deconstruction of racial categories. Indeed, illuminating past human agency and responsibility in the process of developing racial ideologies is one of the payoffs of systematically addressing “Where did ‘race’ come from?” in the classroom.

Having served as a college and university instructor at several institutions—including a community college, state university, and Research I university—I have taught numerous history courses that have dealt with race relations in the United States. A class that I currently teach, titled “Race in America,” focuses specifically upon this topic. It is designed for non-history majors who are in their early years of undergraduate study. One of the major goals of the class is to historicize the concept of “race” itself, explaining that it is a constructed category. While teaching this and other history classes, I have found that providing three conceptual answers to the question of “Who has been responsible for race?” effectively triggers interpretive thinking among students who often otherwise lack interest in the subject.

“Top-Down” Theoretical Model

The three theoretical models I present to students regarding the origins of race, as imperfect and imprecise as they are, are rooted in recent scholarship on the subject.⁵ Rather than presenting these models as definitive and accurate explanations, however, I try to emphasize to students that they are a starting point for thinking about the origins of racial ideologies. I also make sure that I do not “endorse” one model over the others, but instead try to present, in as balanced a manner as possible, reasons to believe or disbelieve each of them. Each “answer” has its own strengths and weaknesses, in terms of its methodology, ethics, and historical accuracy.

The first conceptual answer I present is what I refer to as the “top-down” model. It suggests that elites, such as political leaders and intellectuals, were the driving force behind the creation and imposition of racial ideologies. This answer has much to recommend it, including the fact that primary source material related to elites—in the form of diaries, letters, publications, and other documents—explicitly and directly mentions their thoughts and attitudes regarding racial issues. The presence of such a “smoking gun” is hard to refute, such as when Thomas Jefferson discusses setting aside land and displacing Native Americans or when James Calhoun explicitly lays out his rationale defending slavery.⁶ There is also damning evidence that connects elites to the implementation of racist policies, such as legal documents, including even the Constitution. The film *Africans in America—Part 1: Terrible Transformation* also clearly describes how racialized slavery developed “one law at a time.”⁷ Speeches by Strom Thurmond or George Wallace serve as more contemporary examples of political leaders explicitly supporting racial ideologies.⁸ In addition to this historical evidence, the simple fact that elites held positions of power in the United States is also particularly convincing for most students.

In spite of its clear strengths, the "top-down" model also has its weaknesses. For one, elites themselves could never completely agree about the exact status of Europeans, Africans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, or any other group. They presented varying answers about who was white or black. They never developed a "race Bible" that even a majority of elites could agree was canonical. Furthermore, one could argue, some elites actively opposed the creation of racial ideologies or rejected certain racist notions. The classic debate between two Spanish clergy, Juan Sepúlveda and Bartolomé Las Casas, shows how intricate and complex debates regarding the racial status of Native Americans could become.⁹ The noted Massachusetts minister, Samuel Sewall, condemned laws banning interracial marriage, while other elites, including Francis Le Jau, argued for kinder treatment of slaves.¹⁰ Likewise, during debates regarding Indian Removal in 1830, many prominent Americans, including Jedidiah Morse, Theodore Frelinghuysen, and Sam Houston, argued against the unjust treatment of Native Americans.¹¹ There were also some examples of elites, such as William Berkeley, governor of the colony of Virginia from 1641-1652 and 1660-1677, who strenuously attempted to restrain the land-hungry impulses of ordinary colonists (see the next model below).

"Mob-Rule" Theoretical Model

The second model that addresses the question of "Where did race come from?" is one that I refer to as "mob-rule." This conceptualization suggests that the masses of ordinary Europeans and whites were most responsible for developing and imposing racial ideologies. Like the other models, this one has compelling supportive evidence. First, in terms of sheer numbers, if ordinary Europeans had wanted to join forces with racial minorities and overthrow systems of oppression, they could have theoretically done so. Yet, they did not (at least for the majority of United States history). Instead, they joined with elites and collectively embraced the benefits of "whiteness." Indeed, at many critical moments, including the Civil War and during Reconstruction, ordinary whites literally fought and died trying to defend a system of racial hierarchy. There is also dramatic video footage, as seen in the film series *Eyes on the Prize* (2006), of ordinary whites throwing rocks and shouting racial slurs at activists and protestors during the Civil Rights Movement.¹²

Perhaps one of the best case studies for addressing and considering this model is Bacon's Rebellion, which occurred in Virginia in 1675-1676. The governor of the colony, William Berkeley, sought to honor treaties signed with Native Americans. He even sought to raise taxes and build forts along boundary areas to maintain order and prevent violence between

English colonists and neighboring Indians. His reasons were not altruistic; he was interested in avoiding war and keeping in good graces with wealthy planters, but nonetheless his policies were, in effect, “anti-racist.” However, many English colonists, especially former indentured servants who wanted to own their own farms, opposed these measures. Tobacco cultivation was depleting the land of nutrients and many colonists sought access to the Indian land that Berkeley was trying to protect. In the end, Nathaniel Bacon led these colonists on a bloody rampage through Indian communities, killing scores of Native Americans and defying Berkeley’s orders. Berkeley himself lost his own plantation in the conflict and, in the long run, the colonists ultimately secured access to Indian land.¹³

Although Bacon’s Rebellion and other historical events offer strong support for the “mob-rule” theory, this model, too, has its weaknesses. When examining early American history, including events such as Bacon’s Rebellion, it is often hard to document conclusively the attitudes and feelings of ordinary Europeans. In eras before opinion polls and with a lack of diaries and other reflective literature among many groups of Europeans, historians must focus upon documented behavior. One could argue that many of those who followed Nathaniel Bacon were not doing so out any clearly conceived sense of racial hatred toward Indians, but that they were instead simply seeking economic gain. I find this argument doubtful, but I must admit that the number of “smoking guns” for ordinary Europeans and their descendants is relatively few, especially when compared with elites. Furthermore, there have been numerous instances when elites deliberately joined forces with ordinary colonists when they could have instead fought racist ideas or policies. Andrew Jackson’s support of Indian Removal comes to mind, as does Woodrow Wilson’s screening of *Birth of a Nation*.¹⁴ There are also cases of ordinary Europeans attempting to resist racial policies, via the violation of miscegenation laws or the support of abolitionist publications such as *The Liberator* and *The North Star*.¹⁵ Film footage from *Eyes on the Prize* also clearly shows that students and other whites often actively supported African Americans in their attempts to secure civil rights during the 1960s.¹⁶

“Negotiation” Theoretical Model

The third, and last, conceptualization I present to students is the “negotiation” model. This explanation for the origins of racial ideologies is perhaps the hardest to communicate and has the most potential for misuse and misunderstanding. It suggests that all Americans had some influence and involvement in the development of ideas about race. Some groups, such as Europeans, had more power than others, but nonetheless, African

Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and other minorities remained active historical agents who shaped or tried to shape race relations in important ways. A necessary precaution when presenting this model is making certain that students understand structures of power and control in the United States. It is not viable to claim that minority groups were primarily responsible for racial attitudes or that they were free to believe or articulate whatever ideas they desired. It is reasonable, however, to suggest that minority groups had, in spite of significant obstacles, some influence over their lives and a limited degree of influence upon the beliefs of others. Especially in regards to this model, the material students read needs to continually reinforce the realities of power structures in the United States.

With the appropriate caveats embedded in students' minds, the "negotiation" model has several positive attributes. It more accurately captures the complex realities of life, in which everyone, arguably, has at least some ability to shape their destiny. It also restores a degree of historical agency to racial minorities, including Native Americans and African Americans. Rather than viewing minorities merely as passive victims who suffered under racial oppression, it suggests that, in addition to suffering, they played pivotal roles in shaping American race relations. It emphasizes how, from the beginning of United States history, minorities have resisted and shaped racial ideologies. It allows for the possibility of disagreement and division within ethnic and racial groups, as occurred between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, for example. The model also avoids simplistically blaming any single racial or ethnic group for injustices or problems. It also highlights how ordinary people of various ethnic and social backgrounds have the potential to be influential players in the shaping of ideas and events. Hopefully, this helps students see that they too can be active agents of change in regards to racial issues.

When addressing the negotiation of racial ideologies, there are several events and types of documents that are helpful. I typically try to focus upon a single point or issue of negotiation, such as sexual relationships or religion. When examining complex, triadic scenarios involving more than two racial groups, this helps narrow the lens through which students view negotiation. For example, sexual relationships provide a window through which to view historical actors' racial sensibilities. How did English colonists, Africans, and Indians in early North Carolina relate to one another sexually?¹⁷ Why did so many members of the Mashpee community in Massachusetts marry African Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?¹⁸ Why were slave owners willing to impregnate but not marry slaves? Addressing such questions, through the use of court documents, genealogies, and other historical sources, sheds light

upon how people from a variety of racial groups viewed one another. In regards to religion, the response of specific Native American communities to European imperialism provides clues regarding their understanding of race. Some Native American religious leaders developed creation stories emphasizing a separate creation, and potentially distinct human identities, of Europeans and Indians.¹⁹

Suggesting that Americans of a variety of backgrounds negotiated racial ideologies does have its problems. Ethically speaking, the “negotiation” model has the potential to assign too much power or agency to slaves, Indians, and other groups who definitely suffered as a result of racist policies. Even if the instructor goes to great lengths to emphasize the realities of power structures in the United States, there is still the risk that some students will slip into a “blame the victim” mode of thinking. There can also be a tendency among some students to adopt a “they did it too” or “everyone is a racist” attitude. Rather than focus upon the complexities of human life and historical actors, students may simplistically seek to blame minority groups for economic disparities and other inequalities.

Pedagogically, perhaps the greatest challenge with the “negotiation” model is finding primary sources, especially from earlier periods of American history, that incorporate minority perspectives. The vast majority of slaves did not keep diaries or write letters that might reveal their developing race consciousness. Nor did many Native Americans explicitly record their thoughts and attitudes regarding race. In many cases, documents reveal behaviors, such as sexual activities among racial groups, but little about the thoughts that were behind such actions. A few exceptions to this include Olaudah Equiano’s narrative of his life’s experiences (1789), portions of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), and *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) by Yellow Bird (John Rollin Ridge).²⁰ For later eras, there is more abundant documentation of racial attitudes among minority groups. Editions of *The Northstar*, an abolitionist newspaper founded by Frederick Douglass, and speeches by Malcolm X are examples of sources that relate African American racial views.²¹ Books such as *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) and films such as *Days of Waiting* (1990) highlight Native American and Asian American perspectives and experiences.²²

The Benefits

One benefit of systematically addressing the issue of human responsibility for racial ideologies is that it concretely unveils the notion that race has been culturally constructed. Instead of simply stating that “race is a cultural construction,” I want to help students see the real people and

events that contributed to the construction process. By adding meat to the conceptual bones, students see in practical and tangible terms how, when, and why people developed and used racial ideologies. It is much harder for students to deny the culturally constructed nature of race when they study example after example of people creating and/or negotiating racial ideologies.

A second benefit of addressing the responsibility issue is that it helps deflect and transform some students' negative emotional reactions to course material. Many students, particularly those who would self-identify as "white," grow bitter and resentful when presented with the stark realities of the United States' racial history. In discussions, papers, and student evaluations, such students often express frustration about course material that "bashes white people" or "blames 'me' for slavery."²³ Similarly, many students, when commenting on racial issues in their papers, use generic pronouns such as "we" or "us" when referring to white Americans and Europeans. Phrases such as "When we enslaved the blacks" or "Blacks have every right to hate us" suggest a vague identification with and sense of ownership for racism. In my editorial responses, I often ask "Who is 'we'?" or "Who is this 'us'?" By asking students to identify specific historical actors who participated in the creation, imposition, and/or negotiation of racial ideologies, I help them be more specific and concrete in their understanding of historical events. I also help them understand that my course is not about blaming "them" for past wrongs or failures.

A final benefit that comes when students consider the human origins of racial ideologies is that students understand that the construction of these ideas has been an ongoing process; one that still continues to the present day. If specific people created race in the past, it seems reasonable that Americans still participate in its creation or deconstruction today. Instead of focusing on a vague sense of guilt or blame for the past, students begin to realize that they, like historical actors who lived before them, can shape and resist racial ideas. This is more constructive, in my view, than simply documenting past injustices or moral failures. It helps students see that they can collectively take ownership over intellectual, political, and civic life in the United States

Notes

1. Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University

Press, 1992).

2. Joel M. Sipress, "Relearning Race: Teaching Race as a Cultural Construction," *The History Teacher* 30, no. 2 (February 1997): 175-185; Margery Mazie, Phyllis Palmer, Mayuris Pimentel, Sharon Rogers, Stuart Ruderfer, and Melissa Sokolowski, "To Deconstruct Race, Deconstruct Whiteness," *American Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (June 1993): 281-294; Adrian Burgos, Jr., "Teaching Migration, Race, and Place: A U.S. Latino Historian's Perspective," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 65-70; Shirin Housee, "Should Ethnicity Matter When Teaching about 'Race' and Racism in the Classroom?" *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 11, no. 4 (December 2008): 415-428; Bárbara C. Cruz and James A. Duplass, "Making Sense of 'Race' in the History Classroom: A Literary Approach," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 4 (August 2009): 425-440.

3. *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003), California Newsreel, 3 episodes, 56 minutes each, DVD, 2003; *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* (1998), WGBH Boston, 4 episodes, 90 minutes each, VHS, 1998, DVD, 2000.

4. Scholars have offered their own sophisticated analyses, including those who focus upon materialist explanations for the origins of race. Barbara Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May-June 1990): 95-118. Others argue for cultural and intellectual explanations, including Michael Gomez, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant. See Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

5. It should be noted that my emphasis is upon the "who" rather than the "what" when addressing the origins of race. Whereas many scholars focus upon impersonal processes, factors, or forces, I have found that students are more interested in people and events. Furthermore, most undergraduates lack knowledge about Marxism or other important theories that explain human behavior, so introducing such concepts when explaining the origins of race becomes cumbersome and confusing for them.

6. See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1954); Peter Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000); John C. Calhoun, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. H. Lee Cheek, Jr. (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003); John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

7. *Africans in America—Part 1: The Terrible Transformation*.

8. Nadine Cohodas, *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); Gregory Busch, ed., *Campaign Speeches of American Presidential Candidates, 1948-1984* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1985); Alabama Department of Archives and History, "Statement And Proclamation Of Governor George C. Wallace, University Of Alabama, June 11, 1963," <http://www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html>.

9. Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind is One: A Study of the Disputation Between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indian* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).

10. Mark A. Peterson, "The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International, 1689-1733," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4, Special Issue On Race and Slavery (2002): 1-22; Frank J. Klingberg, ed., *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1956).

11. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial*

Anglo-Saxonism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 189-207; Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

12. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1964* (1987), Blackside, 6 episodes, 60 minutes each, VHS, 1993, DVD, 2006.

13. For more on Bacon's Rebellion, see Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 37-58; Wilcomb Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

14. Horsman, 189-207; Wallace; John Hope Franklin, "Birth of a Nation': Propaganda as History," *The Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 417-434; PBS, American Experience, "Wilson: A Portrait—African Americans," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/portrait/wp_african.html>.

15. Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 44-69; *Africans in America—Part 4: Judgment Day*.

16. *Eyes on the Prize*.

17. Fischer.

18. Mark A. Nicholas, "Mashpee Wampanoags of Cape Cod, the Whalefishery, and Seafaring's Impact on Community Development," *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 165-197; Ann Marie Plane and Gregory Button, "The Massachusetts Indian Enfranchisement Act: Ethnic Contest in Historical Context, 1849-1869," in *After King Philip's War: Presence and Persistence in Indian New England*, ed. Colin Calloway (Hanover, PA: University Press of New England, 1997): 178-206.

19. Gregory Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 23-46;

20. David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), ed. Peter Hinks (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Bretheren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (1789), ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 1995); Yellow Bird (John Rollin Ridge), *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), new edition (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955).

21. Bill Lawson and Frank Kirkland, eds., *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999); George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

22. John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), The Premier Edition (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008); *Days of Waiting: The Life and Art of Estelle Ishigo* (1990), Farallon Films, directed and written by Steven Okazaki, 28 minutes, VHS, 1990, DVD, 2000.

23. Others have noted similar responses. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, revised edition (New York: Verso Press, 2007), xv-xvii; Mazie, et al., 288-293; Housee, 415-428.

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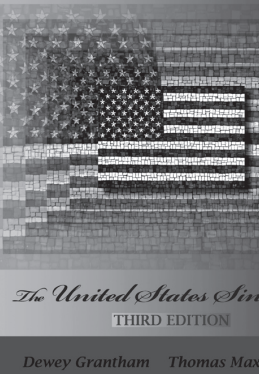
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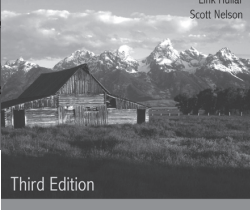
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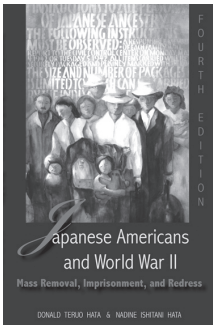
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