

BOOK REVIEW

CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE
ORIGIN OF RACIAL SLAVERY:
THE INVENTION OF THE WHITE RACE

by

Theodore William Allen
Somerville: New England Free Press, 1976

Did the English really invent racism? Andrew Young's apology closed the matter for some. To historians it only brings the issue into the spotlight again. In the heyday of Anglo-Saxonism it was often claimed that Egyptian, Roman and Arab civilisations had collapsed because of race-mixing. The invention of racial segregation would prevent the 'Anglo-Saxon' nations, especially Great Britain and the United States, from a similar collapse.

Other thinkers feel that racism is much older, being an expression of an innate hatred for Blacks which is natural to Whites. In opposition to both these schools of racists are those historians who feel that racism is a recent invention which was created for the purpose of increasing social and political control. Thus, racism will disappear after it serves no further purpose.

Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery belongs to this last school. Its author claims that racism and racial slavery originated in colonial America as a mechanism to control labor and assure the expropriation of surplus value. He claims to have found the specific origins of institutional racism in the imperial response to Bacon's Rebellion and other such insurrections of the late 17th century.

After these rebellions, in which Black and White indentured servants fought side by side, the ruling class realised it needed a mechanism to 'divide and rule'. The mechanism decided upon was racism. Every White was defined as 'free', every Black as a slave for life. By means of racist propaganda and the opportunity (however slim) of upward mobility, poor Whites could be convinced that it was in their interest to crush any uprising by Black slaves. "The non-slavery of white labor was the indispensable condition for the slavery of black labor."¹ This made a plentiful poor White class necessary if the planters were to successfully keep the Blacks enslaved.

Allen develops his thesis thoroughly with primary sources. The stages in the creation of White supremacy are shown to have lasted over fifty years. It is difficult to argue with his thesis that racism is an artificial system, recently if gradually created for economic reasons. But the author's concentration on colonial Virginia leads him to ignore events elsewhere which had their own impact on the development of modern racism.

The first appearance of racial segregation was not in colonial Virginia but in 14th century Ireland. The first conquerors of Ireland to come from England were the Normans of the 12th century. These conquerors married local inhabitants, adopted Irish customs and in a few generations became completely Gaelicised.² To prevent another such loss of Ireland, the Anglicised Normans of England passed the Statutes of Killkenny in 1367.

In addition to suppressing Irish customs in the areas controlled by England these statutes instituted a "virtual system of apartheid."³ Distinctions between English and Irish were henceforth to be made on the basis of descent rather than place of birth. Interracial marriages and adoptions were forbidden. Even churches were to be completely segregated. To murder an Irish person was no longer even a crime unless that Irish person had submitted him or herself to English authority. Even then, a fine was the only punishment, not for taking a human life but for depriving the English crown of a servant.⁴ The parallel with the situation of Blacks in the New World should be obvious.

Cromwell's famous policy of 'To Hell or Connaught' extended this system. All Irish were to be removed from three-fourths of the island and sent to the West Indies as slaves.⁵ Later it was discovered that 72 young English boys and girls had been included in the shipment by unscrupulous English slave dealers. The resultant investigation led the English to use West Africa as the main source of slave labor on their New World plantations. Black skin became a badge of slavery in British America because it was distinguishable from White and for no other reason.⁶

Had Allen investigated Irish history he would have found that the idea of racial segregation originated three centuries before Bacon's Rebellion and that it was first used against Whites. He would also have known that he was, in part, describing the impact on Virginia of the ethnic conflicts of the 17th century British Isles.

Allen makes another serious mistake in his discussion of the reaction of poor Whites to racism. By failing to make

regional distinctions among poor Whites he perpetuates the ignorance about Appalachian history which is so common among historians. He even seems to ignore the Civil War when he says that poor Whites and Blacks in the late 17th century "made common cause....to an extent never duplicated in the three hundred years since."⁷

The racial attitudes of poor Whites could not be controlled where there were not enough planters to influence them. Thus many mountain poor Whites realised that their farms were in direct competition with large slave plantations. They had an interest in freeing the slaves. The result was strong abolitionist sentiment among the mountaineers. Although continually crushed by planter-dominated governments, this sentiment gave birth to the 'Western Abolitionism' of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, as well as the Unionist sentiments of the mountain South in the Civil War. It has even been claimed that William Lloyd Garrison was converted to abolitionism by Tennessee mountaineers.⁸

Allen dismisses the anti-slave patrol sentiment of a Kanawha county legislator by saying "of course" this man "was opposed as all the rest...to...establishing equality of Black and White labor in Virginia."⁹ This is not only false, it perpetuates misleading and reactionary stereotypes of 'white trash'. The effect may be one unintended by Allen.

Allen's work is still important. Despite its shortcomings, it proves that racism is not natural, but a recent development serving to provide capitalism with a means of labor control. When class society disappears, so will its servant, racism.

John Philips

Footnotes

1. Allen, Theodore William. *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (Somerville: New England Free Press, 1976), p. 5.
2. Fitzgerald (from French 'fils Gerald' or 'son of Gerald') perhaps the most famous of the Gaelicised Norman families. The French origin of the name is now almost completely forgotten, and the name is considered typically Irish in the United States.
3. Morton, Grenfell. *Elizabethan Ireland* (Harlow: Longman, 1971).

4. Bagwell, Richard. *Ireland Under the Tudors* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1885): 80-83; Daniel O'Connell, *A Memoir of Ireland: Native and Saxon* (Dublin: James Duffy and Co., Ltd., no date) 5th edition.
5. White, Terence DeVere. *The Anglo-Irish* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), p. 275.
6. Davidson, Basil. *The African Slave Trade* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1961), p. 47; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 19.
7. Allen, *Class Struggle*, p. 3.
8. Woodson, Carter G., "Freedom and Slavery in Appalachian America," *The Journal of Negro History* I, 1 (1916) rpt. Appalachian Movement Press, 1973; Don West, "Freedom on the Mountains" and "Robert Tharin, Biography of a Mountain Abolitionist" (Huntington: Appalachian Movement Press, 1973). William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co., 1891) 2, pp. 174-5. Woodson, the 'Father of Black History', grew up in West Virginia. As an Afro-American historian who was also a mountaineer, Carter Woodson was in a unique position to evaluate the history of race relations in Appalachia. Articles on Appalachian history frequently appeared in the journal which he edited.
9. Allen, *Class Struggle*, p. 13.

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