

THE NEVER ENDING STORY: AMERICAN RACISM FROM SLAVERY TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year.
(Malcolm X, 1964)¹

In the early 1960s White Citizens' Council leader William J. Simmons explained the reasons why he and other segregationists opposed the civil rights movement. "I was born in Mississippi and the United States and I'm the product of my heredity and education and the society in which I was raised, and I have a vested interest in that society, and I along with a million other white Mississippians will do everything in our power to protect that vested interest," he stated. "It's primarily a struggle for power and I think we would be stupid indeed if we failed to see where the consequences of a supine surrender on our part would lead."² Simmons' stark admission of the economic and political motivations driving white Americans' resistance indicated that proponents of racial equality were up against more than just the individual prejudices of a few ignorant rednecks. Ending racism meant ending policies that offered concrete material benefits to white people, and they were not going to relinquish those privileges easily.

Simmons' generation of white supremacists offered the latest round in a series of defenses of a racial system that emerged in the late seventeenth century and withstood multiple challenges over the next 300 years. Blackness first became a significant marker of social identity with the enslavement of large numbers of Africans by Europeans in the colonial period. In the nineteenth century the Jim Crow system replaced slavery as a means of subordinating black people and maintaining the connections between class and race that underlay American racial ideologies. Government policies in the New Deal era both reflected and reinforced those links, building racism into social welfare measures that offered economic assistance to white Americans and excluded most black citizens. In each instance the racial order was

modified to adapt to new circumstances and to meet the needs of people who benefited from the system. Understanding the historical processes that created and perpetuated racism, and the vested interests it served, is essential to explaining its persistence into the post-civil rights era.

Capitalism, Slavery, and the Origins of American Racism

The English settlers who colonized North America in the early seventeenth century came from a society that was undergoing significant transformation. Feudal relationships based on mutual obligations between lords and serfs gave way to new arrangements favored by landowners, merchants, bankers, and business owners. These groups promoted the conversion of common lands to private property and encouraged peasants to become free agents selling their labor on the open market. English political leaders along with the rising middle class placed considerable importance on accumulating wealth, and the search for new commodities that could be developed as marketable goods was a key motivation behind the colonizing effort.³ The production of cash crops such as tobacco and cotton in America promised lucrative opportunities for entrepreneurs, who rushed to acquire large tracts of land and the labor needed to work them.

Some colonists advocated enslaving native people, but attempts to coerce the region's original inhabitants into working for Europeans were not very successful. Native Americans' familiarity with the territory made it easy for them to run away and rejoin their communities. Over time, imported European diseases decimated Indian populations, further limiting their use as a source of labor. Colonial landowners therefore relied on surplus workers from their homeland. The privatization of resources in England enriched some people but left others without any means of support, resulting in widespread poverty and the occasional riot. English political leaders viewed the American colonies as a dumping ground for the nation's unwanted and discontented poor. Sometimes voluntarily, and often involuntarily, these destitute citizens were shipped to America as indentured servants, contracted to work for their colonial employers for terms lasting up to seven years.⁴

English colonists at first showed little interest in another potential source of labor, African slaves. Although slavery had been practiced in various forms in European, Mediterranean, and African societies since ancient times, it had faded from existence in England and other parts of western Europe by the seventeenth century. Access to African labor was also limited because the North American colonies were off the usual route taken by the Dutch ships that monopolized the Atlantic slave trade. With no major market for slaves in existence in Virginia or New England, traders saw little

value in taking a detour to those regions on their way to the Spanish colonies in South America.⁵

The small number of Africans who lived in North America in the early seventeenth century occupied a very different position from those who arrived in chains later on. Some were what Ira Berlin terms “Atlantic creoles” – Africans who served as translators, sailors, and servants within the trade networks that traversed the ocean between Europe, Africa, and America. Often of mixed African and European descent, they were fluent in the languages and cultures of both worlds, and their skills were highly valued. Their status in the English colonies was not much different from the other settlers. Europeans and Africans in America were all recent migrants creating new societies in a context that necessitated a willingness to adapt and experiment. Africans had the same opportunities as their European counterparts. Many labored as servants for a set number of years and were then free to work for themselves, buy property, and participate fully in the political and social life of the community. Some African settlers acquired large plantations with many servants and enjoyed the same privileges as English gentlemen.⁶

Initially, then, Africans were incorporated into the English colonies on equal terms. Yet Africans’ status as outsiders made them vulnerable. A key difference that set them apart was their ambiguous legal standing. They were not English subjects, and those who were servants often lacked written contracts setting out the terms of their employment. Landowners could easily hold African workers in bondage indefinitely, and by the mid-seventeenth century some black people were essentially enslaved. When an African man named John Punch ran away with two English servants in Virginia in 1640, the courts punished him by forcing him to serve his master for life. The other two servants had their terms extended for a few years. In 1656 the will of deceased landowner Rowland Burnham stipulated that the English workers on his plantation were to serve his family for the remainder of their terms and the African workers “forever.” Such differential treatment was inconsistent, however, and the first Africans in America did not experience the systematic discrimination that afflicted later generations. White and black colonists worked and lived alongside each other, formed friendships and intermarried, attended church together, and generally suffered the same punishments for crimes. Occasionally, lower-class English and African settlers joined together to resist mistreatment by colonial elites.⁷

Plantation owners in seventeenth-century America were equal opportunity exploiters. Many of the brutal, dehumanizing practices that characterized slavery were initially inflicted on white and black servants alike. Laborers endured poor housing, inadequate food, and overwork along with beatings, whippings, or maiming if they displeased their masters. Employers

could buy or sell workers during the period of indenture, with or without servants' consent. Gamblers sometimes used their servants as stakes. As Edmund Morgan explains in his study of colonial Virginia, "A servant ... became for a number of years a thing, a commodity with a price."⁸ Even before the development of racial slavery, a labor system was emerging that reduced human beings to the status of property, and in its early phases it did not distinguish between Europeans and Africans.

Servants resisted these abuses as best they could. Workers who knew that colonial practices regarding indenture violated English law or custom sometimes brought lawsuits against employers who treated them unfairly. Africans whose masters illegally tried to hold them in permanent bondage frequently petitioned the courts for redress. John Baptista, for example, was sold by a Dutch merchant to Thomas Lambert under ambiguous terms, and when he was not freed after four years he appealed to the General Court in Virginia. The judges ruled that Baptista had not been sold for life and ordered Lambert to free him after he had worked for two more years. Some Africans converted to Christianity to secure their freedom in accordance with the English common law prohibition against enslaving fellow Christians. The courts also had to grapple occasionally with the unclear status of children of mixed parentage, as was the case with Elizabeth Key, the daughter of an English planter and his African bondservant. English custom was for the status of the child to follow that of the father. In 1655 Key successfully petitioned for freedom on the grounds that her father was a free man.⁹

Laborers frequently deployed other methods apart from the legal system to express their dissatisfaction, including running away, refusing to work, and theft. In 1663 the eight workers on Richard Preston's Maryland plantation complained that the diet of "Beanes and Bread" he provided was not enough sustenance and refused to perform their duties until they received redress. A group of three English and two African servants employed by John West came up with a different solution to the problem of inadequate rations, habitually stealing hogs from their master to supplement their diet. Instances of interracial cooperation by working people were common in the first half of the seventeenth century. When English servant Sibble Ford ran away from her master in 1645, an African laborer named Phillip helped her to hide for 20 days in a cave on the plantation of his owner. African and European workers often ran away together, and both servants and free laborers were more likely to harbor these fugitives than turn them over to the authorities.¹⁰

Dealing with what the Virginia Assembly called "the audacious unruliness of many stubborne and incorridgible servants resisting their masters and overseers" was a perpetual problem for colonial rulers. There was also the dilemma of what to do with these people once they became free.

Established planters concerned about increasing competition from newcomers used their influence in the colonial government to enact legislation solidifying their control over resources and making it difficult for others to gain access to land, credit, and transportation. Those laborers who survived their terms of indenture entered an economy that offered shrinking opportunities for advancement. Widespread discontent with the situation created new challenges for colonial rulers in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1661 and 1663 authorities in Virginia uncovered and suppressed servant conspiracies in two different counties that aimed to protest deteriorating living conditions and demand freedom for workers. Small farmers trying to eke a living from marginal land in the frontier regions were also restless and angry. Government corruption alienated some wealthier planters as well. In 1676 landowner Nathaniel Bacon led an open rebellion against the colonial leadership, promising freedom to any bound laborers who joined him. Several thousand of these workers participated in the rebellion; among the last of the rebels to be subdued after English forces arrived to crush the uprising was an interracial group of 80 African and 20 English laborers.¹¹

A royal commission investigated the causes of the trouble and colonial leaders passed some moderate reforms as a result, but neither they nor authorities in England wanted to do anything that interfered with the profits generated by the existing system. In 1681 observers reported that the colony was “poorer and more populous than ever” and that “extreme poverty may cause the servants to plunder the stores and ships.” Two decades later the fear of lower-class rebellion still weighed on Virginia authorities who rejected a proposal to arm servants to protect the colony from enemy attacks. “If they were armed ... we have just reason to fear they may rise upon us,” colonial leaders explained. Similarly, Maryland governor Francis Nicholas expressed fears that African and English laborers in his colony might join together to foment “great disturbances, if not a rebellion.”¹² Such concerns influenced efforts to construct a new social order that alleviated the burdens of one set of workers and heightened oppression of the other. In the second half of the seventeenth century the fates of African and other laborers began to diverge, leading to a system that ensured freedom for white workers and made most of their black counterparts slaves for life.

Political motivations coincided with economic factors that encouraged a shift toward greater reliance on enslaved African labor. After the 1660s the expanding English economy and the need for soldiers to fight in European wars absorbed more workers than had been possible earlier in the century, alleviating the unemployment problem and causing a decline in migration to the colonies. Planters in North America gained easier access to African workers after English victory in a war with the Dutch passed control of the

Atlantic slave trade to the Royal African Company. Falling tobacco prices intensified landowners' efforts to keep labor costs as low as possible, and the shortage of English workers made African labor the less expensive option. Virginia's colonial secretary Nicholas Spencer asserted in 1683 that the "low price of Tobacco requires it should bee made as cheap as possible, and that Blacks can make it cheaper than Whites." Noting the handsome revenues that England's rulers earned from the import taxes on tobacco, the colony's governor urged the Royal African Company to keep slave prices within reasonable limits. "I conceive it is for his Majesty's Interest full as much as the Countrys, or rather much more, to have Blacks as cheap as possible in Virginia," he stated.¹³

Colonial authorities also took measures of their own to ensure that they reaped maximum benefits from the employment of African labor. The Virginia legislature passed a series of laws in the late seventeenth century that effectively cut off avenues to freedom and made Africans coming into the colony, along with their children, slaves for life. In the 1660s the government negated established English custom by deciding that conversion to Christianity did not alter a person's enslaved status and declaring children's servitude status to follow that of the mother instead of the father. Planters could thus increase their fortunes by impregnating their female servants, secure in the knowledge that the resulting progeny could not sue for freedom as Elizabeth Key had done in 1655. A measure enacted in 1691 made it illegal for masters to free their African slaves. Finally, legislation passed in 1705 defined enslaved people as property inheritable like other belongings from one generation of slaveholders to the next.¹⁴

These laws secured for plantation owners the permanently enslaved, cheap labor supply they sought. Other initiatives implemented in these decades aimed to draw clear distinctions between the social status of European and African colonists. In 1668 the legislature declared free black women liable to pay taxes, explaining that "though permitted to enjoy their freedome ... [they] ought not in all respects be admitted to a full fruition of the exemptions and impunities of the English." A law aimed at preventing "abominable mixture" and "spurious issue" imposed fines on white women who bore children with black men and banned interracial marriage. Other laws passed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries prohibited free African Americans from owning European servants, holding political office, owning guns, or serving in the militia. In 1723 the Virginia Assembly denied voting rights to free black people. Asked to explain the reasons for the act by officials in England who could not see why "one freeman should be used worse than another, merely upon account of his complexion," Governor William Gooch revealed the deliberate intent that lay behind discriminatory policies when he replied that the new law aimed "to fix a perpetual Brand upon Free Negros & Mulattos" and "to make

the Free Negros sensible that a distinction ought to be made between their offspring and the descendants of an Englishman.”¹⁵

As Africans faced declining opportunities for advancement, Europeans gained new legal protections that shielded them from abuse. In 1660 Virginia’s leaders repealed an act passed in 1655 that required Irish immigrants to serve longer terms than their English counterparts, amending the law to equalize terms of service for all colonists from “Christian” nations. In 1705 the legislature stipulated that masters must provide adequate food and shelter for “christian white servants” and refrain from harsh physical punishments such as whipping them naked. White servants were allowed to own property, a right that was denied to enslaved people under the act. The same law that transformed black workers into chattel ordered the livestock and other belongings they had acquired to be confiscated, sold, and the proceeds used to help poor white people. Colonial leaders ensured that the new racial order benefited lower-class European Americans in other ways as well. South Carolina and Georgia both passed legislation in the eighteenth century that required the employment of one or more white men to oversee every four to six slaves and barred the use of enslaved people for skilled work except on their owners’ plantations. These measures increased job opportunities for white workers and protected them from black competition. Over time, working-class white Americans came to view the privileges they gained from racism as rights and actively participated in maintaining the system. Instances of interracial cooperation by working people became less common once skin color superseded class as the most important indicator of social position.¹⁶

The racial system taught Americans to associate blackness with slavery and to accept this as the “natural” place of African Americans. Meanwhile, whiteness connoted free status and exemption from the worst jobs and harshest abuses associated with the economic system. These developments spawned the ideology of white supremacy that played such a central role in the history of the United States. As Anthony Benezet wrote in 1762, observing black people “constantly employed in servile Labour, and the abject Condition in which we see them, from our Childhood, has a natural Tendency to create in us an Idea of a Superiority over them, which induces most People to look upon them as an ignorant and contemptible Part of Mankind.”¹⁷

White supremacy was more than just a belief held by individuals. It was an entire social structure designed through law and policy to subordinate African Americans and channel an unequal share of colonial wealth to European Americans. The freedom and opportunities that white Americans perceived as their birthright were the direct result of denying those rights to black people. White colonists in the seventeenth century were fully aware that their rising fortunes depended on African slavery. Noting the tendency

of English servants to “desire freedom to plant for themselves, and not stay but for verie great wages,” New England settler Emanuel Downing asserted in 1645: “I doe not see how wee can thrive until wee get into a stock of slaves sufficient to do all our business.” Similarly, migrants to Georgia in the early eighteenth century quickly perceived the disadvantages they suffered as a consequence of the colony’s initial ban on slavery. Contrasting their own poverty with the prosperity of slaveholding neighbors in South Carolina, they drew the obvious conclusion and began smuggling slaves into Georgia. Under pressure from the colonists, Georgia’s rulers eventually ended the prohibition against slave labor, and plantation owners’ profits increased accordingly.¹⁸

Racial Exclusion in the Early Republic

Few slaveholders held any moral qualms about holding people in bondage or felt the need to defend their actions in the early colonial period. Slavery was just one form of coerced labor that had existed among many others in the course of human history, and its role in the achievements of ancient civilizations in Rome and Greece enhanced its legitimacy. The rise of Enlightenment philosophies in the eighteenth century presented the first real challenge to the system. The proposition that all men were born with certain natural rights, including the right to freedom, implied that slavery was morally wrong. Complicating matters, however, were the tangled connections between property and liberty posited by Enlightenment theorists. Property ownership was the basis for the enjoyment of liberty, because people who had the means to provide for themselves could not be forced to submit to the will of others. Since the system of human bondage in America defined enslaved people as property, ending slavery endangered the property rights, and therefore the liberty, of slaveholders.¹⁹

The presence of enslaved workers deeply affected colonists’ interpretations of Enlightenment principles and the revolutionary ideals that created the United States. White Americans in the eighteenth century were economically better off and enjoyed more political rights than their counterparts in Europe. The contrasting treatment accorded to African Americans provided stark examples of what could happen to people whose liberty was revoked. Colonists’ ideas about the benefits of freedom and the dangers of its absence were thus based on observed realities, not abstract theories. Nor was it possible to overlook the links between white and black experiences. As Edmund Morgan points out, the greatest proponents of liberty in the revolutionary era were also slaveholders. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and others who promoted independence “inherited both their slaves and their attachment to freedom from an earlier generation, and they knew that

the two were not unconnected.” The founders of the United States understood that freedom for white Americans was built on the enslavement of black Americans. Their wealth and that of the nation as a whole depended on the production of tobacco, cotton, sugar, and other commodities with slave labor. In debates over whether slavery should be tolerated in a society based on Enlightenment ideals, therefore, the rights of enslaved people to liberty were repeatedly sacrificed to protect the property rights of their owners.²⁰

When the framers of the Constitution met in 1787 to devise new regulations guiding the relationships between the federal government, the states, and the people who made up the nation, they included several measures that protected slavery. Delegates rejected a proposal to halt the importation of slaves and allowed the slave trade to continue for another two decades. Article IV of the Constitution mandated the return of fugitive slaves to their owners and promised federal assistance to states threatened by slave rebellions. The compromise three-fifths clause allowed states to include three-fifths of their enslaved residents in the population counts that determined representation in the House of Representatives. This clause accorded slaveholders disproportionate influence over the national government and enabled them to block efforts to interfere with the slave system. The same goal was served by reserving important powers for the state governments and limiting the federal government’s authority over local institutions. In later decades the defense of “states’ rights” served as a crucial mechanism for preserving slavery, segregation, and other racist structures in the United States.

Many people who believed slavery was incompatible with the ideals of the Revolution were nonetheless doubtful that African Americans could be incorporated into the nation as full citizens. According to the prevailing political ideologies of the time, only economically independent property owners could be trusted to make wise political decisions. People who depended on others for their support, including women and poor white laborers as well as enslaved workers, could too easily be influenced by those who held power over them. Associations between black skin and dependence that grew out of slavery affected the treatment of free African Americans in the early republic. The gradual demise of slavery in the northern states after the Revolution was accompanied by restrictions on black people’s rights, including curfews, limitations on travel, disfranchising measures, and denial of the right to testify in court or serve on juries.²¹ As working-class white men successfully struggled for the extension of voting rights to themselves in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the ability of free black people to participate in politics was curtailed.

White workers were key participants in defining the place of African Americans in the United States in the nineteenth century. The transition to

industrial capitalism undermined the ability of many young men to follow the expected path to economic success: starting out as an apprentice in some trade, acquiring enough skill to become a journeyman at higher wages, and eventually earning enough money to establish a business and work for oneself. Instead, the factory system and mass production techniques trapped many workers in unskilled, dead-end jobs with few opportunities for advancement. In 1836 a handbill distributed by a group of tailors who were trying to organize a union in New York asserted: "Freemen of the North are now on a level with the slaves of the South."²² Such comparisons might have encouraged some identification with enslaved workers and led to efforts to free both groups from exploitation. That approach, however, risked reminding other Americans that working people's status as dependent laborers did not meet the ideal of republican citizenship. White workers therefore distinguished between treatment that was appropriate for black people and treatment befitting other citizens, emphasizing their whiteness to demand protection from capitalist abuses. Early craft unions excluded free black people from membership, and white laborers participated in violent campaigns aimed at driving African Americans out of skilled occupations. As the southern labor system came under attack from antislavery forces that coalesced into the Republican Party in the mid-nineteenth century, working-class white northerners who feared competition from emancipated black labor joined with wealthy plantation owners in the Democratic Party in a fight to preserve slavery and uphold white supremacy.²³

The coalition of elite and poor white factions within the antebellum Democratic Party reflected the multiple functions of racism and the diverse class interests it served. Defining black people as inferior beings that could be subjected to all kinds of dehumanizing treatment secured for plantation owners the cheap, reliable workforce they wanted. Exempting white Americans from such treatment encouraged even the poorest among them to believe they had more in common with wealthy landowners and business people than with African Americans whose economic status more closely resembled their own. This helped to suppress class conflicts among white Americans and discourage interracial uprisings by the poor. At the same time, white workers gained material and psychological benefits from the system. Racial discrimination enabled them to reserve the best jobs and access to other resources for themselves. Even after the exclusion of black workers, the fruits of white people's labor often proved meager. Nonetheless, no matter how poor they might be they were comfortable in the knowledge that at least they were not black. Racism was central in the formation of the American working class and in shaping white workers' identity, and they along with more powerful white people had a stake in its preservation.²⁴

Given the advantages that white Americans accrued from the existing racial order, advocates for a more egalitarian society faced formidable obstacles in their efforts to overthrow slavery. Increasing antislavery sentiment in the nineteenth century was met by more strident defenses of the institution from its practitioners. Proponents of slavery drew on a burgeoning body of scientific “evidence” that made European dominance over other people seem natural and inevitable. Samuel Morton, for example, conducted a series of deeply flawed experiments that involved measuring skulls collected from various parts of the world and concluded that Europeans had bigger brains and greater intelligence than the native inhabitants of Asia, Africa, and America. When Morton died in 1851, Robert W. Gibbes praised his role in scientifically bolstering white supremacy in the *Charleston Medical Journal*. “We of the South should consider him as our benefactor,” Gibbes explained, “for aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race.”²⁵

Far from being the result of impartial inquiry that proved the “true position” of any people, race scientists’ conclusions were shaped by a global social context in which Europeans were busy subordinating darker skinned peoples to serve their own economic interests. As Audrey Smedley points out, support for these ideas was drawn from “the writings, descriptions, commentaries, speculations, musings, opinions, and beliefs of travelers, explorers, traders, missionaries, plantation owners, and the like” who were involved in a variety of projects where Europeans interacted with others on less than equal terms.²⁶ Scientific racism grew out of and reinforced these relationships, giving them an aura of legitimacy that for many Americans erased any doubts regarding the proper place of black people in their society. Race scientists linked behavioral differences to physical characteristics, making them seem biological and inherent rather than cultural and changeable. Evidence that African Americans could be prominent property owners and responsible citizens was ignored or discarded in favor of a rigid racial hierarchy that denied nonwhite people the capacity for economic advancement or democratic participation.

After Slavery: Labor Control and White Supremacy in the Jim Crow Era

The abolition of slavery as a result of the Civil War provided opportunities to challenge racist assumptions. Emancipation altered the context for interaction between white and black people who had previously known each other only as masters and slaves, opening possibilities for new ideas about race to emerge. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution granted citizenship to black people and accorded them

the same political and legal rights as white Americans. The Fifteenth Amendment prohibited states from denying voting rights on the basis of race. In the 1860s and 1870s black men voted in large numbers and held political offices at the local, state, and national levels. The influence of African Americans within the interracial, Republican governments elected in the southern states during these decades led to some modest projects that benefited poorer people, including tax reform, the establishment of public schools, and legislation protecting the rights of workers. Freed people enjoyed a modest amount of bargaining power that enabled them to resist planters' attempts to restore the gang labor system that existed under slavery, resulting in a compromise solution that allowed families to work small plots of land as tenants and sharecroppers instead.²⁷

Freed people and abolitionists also advocated more sweeping economic reforms to break the power of plantation owners and redistribute land to poor white and black southerners. These activists argued that true citizenship meant more than just voting rights and equal treatment under the law. Former slaves needed access to land, equipment, and skills to successfully navigate the capitalist economy and participate fully in American society. Redistributive policies were too radical for the northern business leaders who dominated the Republican Party to accept, however. Like their land-owning counterparts in the South, these men believed large-scale agricultural production was more efficient than small farms and considered maintaining the southern plantation system essential to the future prosperity of the nation. They expected African Americans to continue to work for white employers as free laborers, not aspire to become independent land-owners. (The same expectation consigned increasing numbers of white workers to the status of permanent wage labor in the late nineteenth century.) Failure to grant economic rights to black people in the 1860s left them dependent on white employers and powerless to prevent the erosion of their political rights. Over the next decade southern Democrats in collusion with the Ku Klux Klan and other paramilitary groups employed economic reprisals, intimidation, fraud, and violence to discourage black voting and restore white dominance.²⁸

Despite the return of white racists to power in the late 1870s, the southern racial order remained remarkably fluid for several decades after the end of Reconstruction. Mass black political participation declined but some African Americans continued to vote and hold office in the South until the turn of the century. A growing black middle class emerged whose members increasingly asserted their right to be treated the same as white people of their social status. Black people with money patronized the same stores, restaurants, and theaters as their white counterparts.²⁹ In 1878 an English visitor to the South observed white and black people sharing public facilities "on terms of perfect equality, and without the smallest symptom of malice

or dislike on either side.” Seven years later black Bostonian T. McCants Stewart took a tour through the southern states and reported from South Carolina: “I feel about as safe here as in Providence, R.I. I can ride in first-class cars on the railroads and in the streets. I can go into saloons and get refreshments even as in New York. I can stop in and drink a glass of soda and be more politely waited upon than in some parts of New England.” In 1897 a white newspaper editor in Charleston opposed a proposed law to segregate trains on the grounds that it was unnecessary and “a needless affront to our respectable and well behaved colored people.”³⁰ As C. Vann Woodward notes in his study of the gradual and unsteady rise of the Jim Crow system, the first few decades after the Civil War were “a time of experiment, testing, and uncertainty – quite different from the time of repression and rigid uniformity that was to come toward the end of the century. Alternatives were still open and real choices had to be made.”³¹

As had been the case in the transition to racial slavery in the seventeenth century, the choice between allowing black equality and reinstituting legal structures aimed at holding African Americans in positions of inferiority was influenced by the rise of an interracial movement of poor people that threatened the interests of the wealthy white men who dominated southern politics. Small farmers and workers had not benefited much from economic policies that granted tax breaks to corporations, altered crop lien laws to favor large landowners and banks, slashed funding for public services, and undercut union organizing in the late nineteenth century. Dissatisfied constituencies joined together in the People’s Party in the 1880s, attacking inequities in the economic system and the ways that white supremacist ideologies divided the nation’s working class. In an article calling for unity among white and black farmers in 1892, Georgia Populist Tom Watson explained the role that racism played in facilitating the exploitation of both groups. “You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings,” he wrote. “You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both.”³²

Populist successes in state and national elections in the 1890s frightened the business-oriented leaders of the southern Democratic Party. Their approach to boosting regional prosperity relied on promoting low property taxes, an abundance of natural resources, and the availability of cheap labor to lure northern capital to their states. The Populists’ plans for higher taxes on the wealthy, more government regulation of the economy, and better wages and conditions for workers threatened the interests of large landowners and corporations. Convinced that these reforms were a recipe for stifling investment and economic development, Democrats employed the same tactics they had used to overthrow Reconstruction to prevent further

victories by the People's Party. Appeals to white supremacy played a major role in this campaign. The fragile coalition that Populist leaders had been working to build across racial lines split apart as white southerners of all classes joined together to preserve the benefits they gained from racism.³³

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries southern legislators constructed a new racial order that blocked opportunities for economic advancement and confined most black southerners to agricultural labor or other unskilled, low-wage jobs. Segregation laws consigned African Americans to separate and inferior schools and other public services. Labor legislation empowered plantation owners to restrict black workers' mobility and cheat them out of their earnings, ensnaring many sharecropping families in a system of perpetual debt peonage. Additional qualifications for voting limited political participation by the poor and ill-educated, a category that included most black southerners. Relegation to the status of non-citizens made African Americans vulnerable to extreme acts of individual and mob violence aimed at keeping them "in their place." Between 1882 and 1946 more than 4,700 black people were lynched in the South, for reasons that ranged from suspicion of murder to insulting a white person. White southerners defined black "crimes" that warranted such brutal punishment broadly to include virtually any action that challenged the racial hierarchy, including attempting to vote, using facilities designated for white people, or simply asking to be paid.³⁴

The Jim Crow system was not the inevitable result of white prejudices held over from slavery. It was designed to cut off the alternatives that existed in the first few decades after the Civil War, when African Americans enjoyed expanding opportunities and racism could have been mitigated or even eliminated through continued interracial interaction on the basis of equality. South Carolina resident Mamie Garvin Fields remembered that black and white families on her street lived amiably together, played together, and shared food and other resources with each other in the decades before the state legislature began mandating segregation. "The Jim Crow law made friends into enemies overnight," she stated. Children began calling each other "nigger" and "cracker" and fighting each other in the streets. "The law made the children do this," Fields explained. "The law made it that we weren't really neighbors any more."³⁵

Segregation was literally and figuratively a system of signs that aimed to teach a new generation of southerners who had no experience with slavery the meaning of race. When the word "White" designated drinking fountains, train cars, or schools that were luxurious and clean compared with the filthy, decrepit facilities reserved for "Colored" citizens, the association between blackness and inferiority was recreated in people's minds. Although proponents argued that the new laws were necessary to minimize racial friction and safeguard public health, these rationales conflicted with

evidence that white people considered close interaction with black people problematic only in certain circumstances. The same white citizens who refused to share public facilities with “dirty” or “diseased” African Americans had no such qualms about hiring black domestic workers to cook and clean for them. Policy makers separated white and black school children and restricted African Americans’ access to quality education for economic rather than social purposes. “What I want here is Negroes who can make cotton, and they don’t need education to help them make cotton,” one landowner explained. “I could not use educated Negroes on my place.” Employers believed education “spoiled” black people by making them unwilling to work in the occupations designated for them in the racial order. “White people want to ‘keep the negro in his place,’ and educated people have a way of making their own places and their own terms,” observed white Mississippian Thomas Pearce Bailey in the early twentieth century. Like slavery, Jim Crow was a system of labor control that kept black people working for white people and prevented African Americans from competing with white Americans for the best jobs.³⁶

Racism served political functions in this period as well. Disfranchising measures such as poll taxes and literacy tests were aimed mostly at African Americans but they also discouraged many poor white people from participating in the political process. Voting restrictions effectively removed two potentially troublesome constituencies whose interests were not well served by the business-friendly policies favored by wealthier citizens. Additionally, the presence of a large pool of economically desperate black workers undermined white workers’ ability to demand higher wages. Employers frequently responded to union organizing efforts by threatening to replace white laborers with African Americans. As during slavery, racism hindered efforts by black and white workers to form interracial coalitions based on their common economic interests in the twentieth century. Political analyst V. O. Key Jr. observed in 1949: “When a glimmer of informed political self-interest begins to well up from the masses, the issue of white supremacy may be raised to whip them back into line.”³⁷

Segregation and the racist beliefs it fostered were not purely southern phenomena. Federal officials who allowed blatant violations of black southerners’ constitutional rights were complicit in the construction and maintenance of the system. The Supreme Court sanctioned racial discrimination by ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that requiring white and black people to use “separate but equal” facilities was within the law. In the northern states, government policies as well as informal practices confined black residents to substandard housing and schools, shut them out of higher paying skilled jobs, and excluded them or offered second-class treatment in hotels, stores, and restaurants. Negative depictions of African Americans in a newly emerging mass culture comprised of popular magazines and

literature, vaudeville acts, music, and films also perpetuated racist stereotypes on a national scale. In the first half of the twentieth century white Americans rarely encountered any real or fictional black people who were not poorly educated menial laborers. The Jim Crow system thus perpetuated the same assumptions of black inferiority that had helped to justify racial oppression in earlier centuries.³⁸

New Deal Reforms and Institutional Racism

Racial ideologies deflected attention from deficiencies in the capitalist economic system that prevented many Americans from enjoying possibilities for property ownership and wealth accumulation that were presumed to be available to everyone. Industrialization and the growth of large corporations concentrated wealth in the hands of a relatively small number of people and generated increasing economic inequality at the turn of the twentieth century. If poverty was understood as the result of black people's inherent inferiority instead of social structures that limited poor people's economic options, citizens could assume there was nothing wrong with the nation's core institutions. Such beliefs fit well with the laissez-faire economic policies promoted by business owners and absolved political leaders from trying to solve social problems.

The crisis of capitalism sparked by the Great Depression in the 1930s shook the confidence of even the strongest opponents of government intervention in the economy. Millions of middle-class Americans lost their jobs, savings, and homes, exposing them to the same hardships that poorer people already endured. Overwhelming evidence that the economic system had failed opened possibilities for experimentation and a shift in direction. Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies gained enthusiastic support from social reformers as well as poor white and black people who benefited from efforts to enhance economic security and encourage labor union organizing. Thousands of black Republicans shifted their allegiance to the Democratic Party in the 1930s, forcing party leaders to reassess the organization's commitment to maintaining white supremacy. At the same time, challenges to scientific racism from anthropologists who debunked biological determinism undermined previous rationales for excluding black people from economic opportunities and political participation. Confident that class, not race, was the underlying source of black people's problems, the architects of the New Deal expected equal access to government programs to raise African Americans' social status and eliminate racial inequality in the United States.³⁹

Racist resistance from other Americans and the policies pursued by key government agencies meant that these hopes were not realized. Unwilling

to upset powerful southern Democrats whose support was necessary to implement reforms, Roosevelt left control over relief programs to state and local officials. The president's sensitivity to states' rights allowed administrators to discriminate against black residents in the allocation of jobs and other government assistance. Pressure from large landowners in the South and West convinced Congress to exclude agricultural and domestic workers from the unemployment insurance and old age pension programs created by the Social Security Act of 1935. Sixty percent of the nation's black labor force and 75 percent of those who lived in the South were employed in occupations not covered by the act, causing black lawyer Charles Houston to label it "a sieve with the holes just big enough for the majority of Negroes to fall through." Most African Americans, therefore, had no access to important social services that greatly improved the lives of working-class white families over the next few decades. White Americans who saw their Social Security taxes deducted from their paychecks each week viewed these benefits as rights that they had earned through years of hard work. In contrast, most poor black families relied on public assistance programs ("welfare") that were funded by the states with help from federal grants. These were widely perceived and stigmatized as unearned government handouts to people who were "too lazy" to work. Racism was thus built into and perpetuated by a two-tiered social welfare system that offered more generous assistance to white people than to black Americans.⁴⁰

Federal programs aimed at facilitating home ownership also buttressed racial inequality. The development of housing policy in the United States illustrates how individual and institutional racism acted in mutually reinforcing ways to generate interconnected forms of discrimination that restricted African Americans' opportunities for economic advancement in the twentieth century. Contrary to assumptions that racially segregated neighborhoods reflected people's natural preference for living among those who look like themselves, the spatial structure that characterized many American communities in the 1930s was a relatively new phenomenon. In the nineteenth century housing was integrated in both the North and the South. White employers needed their black workers close by and scattering African Americans throughout cities instead of concentrating them in one area helped to minimize the threat of slave rebellions. Black people's accommodations were often substandard but they lived among wealthier people in economically mixed neighborhoods. Middle-class African Americans lived in houses alongside white families of similar status, sharing the same services and sometimes attending the same churches and social events. A white man who grew up in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward in the early twentieth century recalled, "Everybody helped everybody else. Every Saturday night, the blacks across the street would have a fish fry, and they

would always bring a batch over to my mother. There was never any hatred between us; we all lived together and that's the way things were."⁴¹

With the emergence of the Jim Crow system came local ordinances that sought to confine black residents to separate neighborhoods in some cities, but the Supreme Court struck these down in 1917 in response to a lawsuit filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Consequently, homeowners and policy makers who favored segregation had to resort to other methods. White perceptions of black people as undesirable neighbors were based on actual disadvantages that resulted from racist discrimination (such as poverty and lower education levels) as well as fabricated stereotypes disseminated by mass media (such as African Americans' purported propensity for crime). Segregationists fearing competition for jobs, lowered standards in schools, higher crime rates, and declining property values deployed a variety of methods to exclude black people from their communities. African Americans seeking to buy or rent homes in white neighborhoods frequently encountered threats, intimidation, physical attacks, or offers of money to look elsewhere. In the 1920s white homeowners' associations formed in many cities with the goal of forcing existing black residents to leave and preventing new ones from moving in. These organizations lobbied local governments to pass zoning ordinances prohibiting undesirable uses of properties (such as leasing them to African Americans), boycotted stores and businesses that catered to black people, and raised money to pay unwanted neighbors to move away. They also promoted and enforced restrictive covenants – private agreements that prohibited homeowners from renting or selling their properties to black families.⁴²

Exclusion from white neighborhoods restricted black families' housing options and created all-black sections of cities characterized by overcrowding, exorbitant rents and home prices, and strained resources. Local officials allowed services in black areas to decline and diverted city funds to white constituents instead. Black communities often lacked paved roads, street lights, recreational facilities, sanitary sewer systems, and garbage collection services. African Americans who overpaid for their homes were left with little money to pay for repairs or upkeep, and landlords assured of a ready market for rentals had few incentives to maintain their properties. All of these factors strengthened the association of blackness with slum conditions in the minds of white homeowners and reinforced their determination to keep African Americans out of their neighborhoods.⁴³ In 1924 the National Association of Real Estate Brokers adopted housing segregation as standard practice, writing into its code of ethics: "A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood ... members of any race or nationality ... whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."

The belief that the presence of African Americans *in itself* lowered property values influenced the policies of federal agencies that were created during the New Deal era to encourage home ownership. The Home Owners Loan Corporation and later the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) established the 30-year, fixed-payment mortgage as the industry standard, making housing purchases affordable for millions of families and greatly expanding the American middle class. In their efforts to ensure some consistency in home valuation practices, however, government officials incorporated racist assumptions that had long been a feature of the profession into federal guidelines. Criteria used to determine neighborhood desirability included the ethnicity of residents along with the age and type of housing, demand for homes, and local amenities. Homogenous, upscale, white neighborhoods received the highest ranking (colored green on “residential security” maps), while those with mixed or nonwhite populations were given the lowest ranking (colored red). Lenders then used these designations to determine whether to make loans. The FHA discouraged banks from loaning money to people who lived in “red” areas, deeming them too risky to qualify for federal mortgage guarantees. “Redlining” referred to banks’ practice of refusing to make loans for home purchases or repairs in those (mostly nonwhite) neighborhoods. The FHA also urged homeowners to protect the value of their property through the use of restrictive covenants. Residential segregation increased throughout the United States in the wake of these developments, the result of government policy as much as individual bigotry.⁴⁴

African Americans were also largely left out of programs that were designed to help returning World War II veterans in the 1940s and 1950s. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (more commonly known as the GI Bill) rewarded those who had fought in the war with generous benefits that included stipends while they looked for work, preference for civil service jobs, money to attend college, and low-interest loans to buy homes, farms, or businesses. Eighty percent of American men born in the 1920s received some kind of assistance under these programs, accepting more than \$95 billion in government benefits between 1944 and 1971. As white veterans secured college degrees and high-paying professional jobs, bought suburban homes, and passed those advantages on to their children, however, many African Americans found access to the programs blocked. Local officials often discriminated against black veterans and discouraged them from seeking higher education or skilled positions. The Veterans Administration also thwarted African Americans’ aspirations by following the FHA’s practices of denying home loans to black families and preventing them from integrating white housing developments.⁴⁵

From the 1930s through the 1960s the federal government financed the geographical and social mobility of white Americans while making it

virtually impossible for black families to leave declining inner-city neighborhoods. African Americans Jim and Ann Braithewaite faced repeated obstructions from realtors when they began looking for a suburban home in Philadelphia in 1957. Agents claimed they had nothing available or that houses the couple expressed interest in had already been sold. One realtor simply stated, "You're colored, aren't you? I can't do anything for you." Finally, in 1959, the Braithewaites bought a vacant lot and quietly built their dream home, visiting the site only at night to avoid drawing the attention of neighbors. A black engineer who recalled a similarly prolonged and humiliating search stated, "In all my life I have never felt so completely shut out."⁴⁶

Obstacles to black suburbanization as well as the increasing migration of rural poor people to the nation's cities exacerbated the problems of deteriorating urban areas. In the 1950s Congress made an effort to address these problems by providing federal funding for slum clearance projects and redevelopment of blighted neighborhoods. Rather than improving conditions, however, urban renewal disrupted black communities and worsened conditions for many families. City officials often targeted African American neighborhoods that threatened to spread into white enclaves for destruction, razing homes and relocating residents to poorly constructed high-rise public housing projects erected in other black areas. Stacking people on top of each other instead of allowing black neighborhoods to expand was the way many cities chose to contain growing populations of African Americans (see Figure 1.1).⁴⁷

The nation's racialized class structure meant that concentrations of black people were also concentrations of poverty. Many African Americans who migrated to urban areas during and after World War II were former sharecroppers who had received little or no education within the segregated southern school system. Consequently they lacked the expertise necessary to succeed in an economy that increasingly demanded high school or college qualifications. Fewer positions were available in older manufacturing enterprises such as steel and auto making that had once offered black workers stable employment, and new jobs opening up in high tech industries were out of reach for most African Americans. As more highly educated white workers moved to the suburbs, industries and businesses followed. Plant closings resulted in a shrinking job market that made it difficult for inner-city residents to find work. Lower incomes meant fewer purchases, causing stores and businesses in poor communities to close and eliminating even more jobs. Residents' poverty left local governments without the tax base needed to provide adequate schools, roads, parks, public transportation, or other services. These factors in turn discouraged new industries and businesses from locating in black communities, perpetuating the spiral of decline.⁴⁸

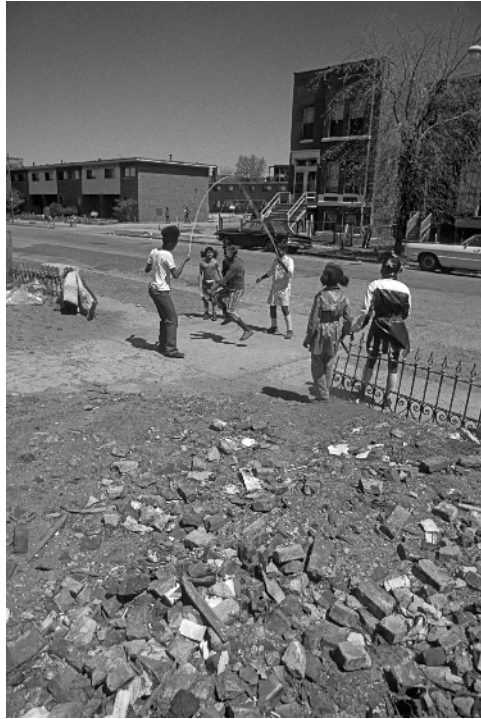


Figure 1.1 Black children playing outside the Ida B. Wells public housing project in Chicago, 1973

Source: John H. White/National Archives and Records Administration 412-DA-13707

Jim Crow and its Shadow: Dual Challenges for the Black Freedom Movement

Disparities in the types of housing, schools, and jobs available to black people compared with white Americans in the mid-twentieth century reinforced the racial lessons of past eras. Being white meant having access to quality housing, good schools, higher education, and work that paid enough to enable participation in the nation's burgeoning consumer culture. In contrast, black Americans remained confined to low-wage jobs, deteriorating housing, and inferior schools that did not prepare them well to participate in the postwar economy. Most white Americans did not perceive the privileges they enjoyed under this system as unearned advantages. They attributed their success to hard work and individual effort, ignoring the role that New Deal social programs and government subsidization of suburban

development played in lifting them into the middle class. Federal officials encouraged such beliefs by portraying the emergence of all-white suburbs as the result of private choices within the free enterprise system even as they regulated housing markets in ways that limited black people's residential options. As David Freund notes, "In addition to creating wealth for some while helping to marginalize others, federal intervention also helped create and popularize a unique postwar political narrative that obscured the origins of race and class inequality in the modern metropolis."⁴⁹

Racial oppression in the mid-twentieth century United States was multifaceted, encompassing both the overt discrimination of the southern Jim Crow system and the less visible racism built into government policies and private industry practices that enhanced white Americans' fortunes while excluding large numbers of black people from opportunities for upward mobility. At the same time, social conditions had never been more conducive to overturning the blatant forms of discrimination practiced in the South. Nazi atrocities in Germany during World War II discredited white supremacist ideologies and encouraged more racially egalitarian beliefs among large numbers of Americans. Mass migrations of black southerners to cities in the North and West opened new opportunities for economic advancement and political activism. Southern plantation owners responded by mechanizing their operations, reducing their need for black workers and the repressive methods they had used to control the labor force. Two decades of unprecedented prosperity after the war suggested possibilities for a more equitable distribution of resources between white and black Americans. The Cold War with the Soviet Union made ending racial discrimination a matter of national security as the United States courted allies among newly decolonized nations in Africa and Asia. These developments provided African Americans with their best opportunity since Reconstruction to push their demands for equality.

The NAACP intensified its efforts to challenge racist beliefs and policies, culminating in the Supreme Court's decision declaring segregated public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954). The ruling had implications for other discriminatory practices and offered further encouragement to local protest activities across the nation. Members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) deployed nonviolent tactics such as sit-ins and boycotts to assert black Americans' right to equal treatment in the 1950s. In Montgomery, Alabama, African Americans engaged in a year-long boycott of the city's segregated buses that gained national media attention and elevated Martin Luther King Jr. to prominence as a leading spokesman for the civil rights movement. King and other activists formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 to facilitate communication and the development of unified strategies among local movements in the region. Another new organization emerged

in the early 1960s as college students who were impatient with the slow pace of change came together in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) with the goal of engaging in direct action against racism. Older groups including the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL), an organization formed in 1911 to assist rural black migrants to northern cities, in turn adopted more confrontational approaches as they competed for members and funding in an era when most African Americans favored bold action.⁵⁰

Civil rights activists deployed lawsuits, boycotts, sit-ins, mass demonstrations, and voter registration drives to make the case for black equality and force action from political leaders. Violent reactions from white supremacists, including many southern Democrats, embarrassed the national government and presented President John F. Kennedy with some politically difficult choices. Kennedy sympathized with black aspirations but did not want to upset the southern wing of his party by siding too strongly with the freedom movement. Persistent protests, the clear injustices of the Jim Crow system, and concerns that American global leadership was being undermined ultimately convinced Kennedy to propose comprehensive civil rights legislation banning racial discrimination in public accommodations, education, and employment. After Kennedy's assassination in 1963 his successor Lyndon B. Johnson strongly supported passage of the bill, and Congress finally outlawed overtly racist practices with the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Legislators provided protections for black political participation in the Voting Rights Act passed the following year.

Black people's struggles did not end with these victories. Activists' initial focus on segregation and disfranchisement in the South was the first round in a fight that many participants knew must ultimately address the structural inequities that lay behind black unemployment, poverty, and political powerlessness in communities throughout the nation. These complexities notwithstanding, most white Americans interpreted the civil rights movement as a simple and morally persuasive demand that African Americans be treated the same as other citizens. After passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, many people expected African Americans to stop protesting and rely on the new opportunities now open to them to improve the conditions of their lives. The belief that civil rights legislation magically transformed the United States into a colorblind nation posed significant problems for activists seeking more comprehensive reforms in the late twentieth century.