

HISTORY, SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE EVOLVING IMAGE OF AFRO-AMERICANSRhett S Jones, *Brown University***THE SOCIAL SCIENCE CONCEPT**

It took black riots in the streets followed by militant black student demonstrations to transform white scholars' negative concept of Afro-Americans. Why were such powerful pressures required to alter the negative perspective of social scientists, and in particular, of sociologists? Negative stereotypes have persisted among white scholars because they have not understood the unique, peculiar history of North American blacks. They have ignored the past of Afro-Americans in order to interpret and explain their present. The predisposition to neglect black history has made it possible for social scientists to regard blacks as pawns, as a people who are important only because of what whites have done to them, and as a people who have had no say in determining their own fate. This tendency was buttressed by the unrecognized racism which characterized anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Though this racism is now widely acknowledged, it continues to influence the social science concept of black folk. This racism has also distorted the thinking of historians on matters pertaining to Afro-Americans and race relations. Even if social scientists were to incorporate historical thinking into their theories, they would have found historians with the same negative bias.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In ignoring the importance of history, sociology and psychology have enshrined perspectives on blacks which take no account of the long unparalleled structural isolation of North American blacks.

Blacks in British colonial North America were isolated from the whites who lived beside them in a fashion unique in the hemisphere. Reasons at first were economic. In a new developing society, Europeans and European Americans saw opportunities which did not exist in an Old World where birth and position were paramount. North America was a land of opportunity where skills, knowledge, talent and the ability to work hard counted for much more than in Europe. Those in Britain monopolizing positions of power, prestige and influence as members of the higher

socioeconomic classes were conspicuously absent in North America. There were few members of the gentry, and none of the nobility. But if the white settlers did not have to contend with aristocracy, they were confronted by a rude, hard-working group of West African slaves who were willing to take advantage of the open North American society. Their challenge had to be blocked, and the fact that most blacks came to the North American colonies as slaves meant that they could be socially isolated and prevented from competing with whites. Even free blacks were denied the chance to improve their position in the social order:

Neither freedom nor skill was sufficient to bring about a change in black status. In effect, one status — the status of black — came to override all others. No matter what the knowledge and skill possessed by the black, he generally remained at the bottom of the system. (Jones 1971c)

Throughout British North America it was frankly admitted that blacks were essential to the economic development of the colonies, but the white colonists hoped to profit from the work of black slaves while denying them the fruits of their labor (Taylor 1920 20; Flanders 1933 22; Drake 1950 1). This was accomplished by segregating blacks from whites to prevent black folk from being able to transform their skills, labor, and talents into prestige, power, or influence. The physical distinction served to establish a legal line between black folk and white, and the laws gave slave holders absolute control over their human property. And free blacks were subject to so many restrictions that their position was little better than that of slaves. The intent of the law was to deny blacks access to the higher economic strata. An East Jersey law in 1683 sought to prevent the emergence of a black class of entrepreneurs by prohibiting free blacks from trading with slaves who were their logical suppliers and customers (Zilversmit 1967 13). A Maryland law not only barred free blacks from "peddling" but also forbade them to enter politics, public service, the military and the learned professions (Wright 1921 151). They were thus pretty certain to remain laborers. Segregation which began in economics spilled into other areas. Even in the middle

colonies, slaveholders were reluctant to expose their chattels to religion or to make any serious attempt to Christianize them, and where blacks attended services, the prevailing tendency was to segregate them.

There were fragments of racist thought in Britain long before her colonization of the Americas (Jordan 1969). Race hatred is ancient in the British Isles, and continued tension between England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales is to be explained by English ethnocentrism (Hechter 1975). Thus, the prospects for a tolerant multiracial society founded by commercially minded bigots were never good.

The United States made the worst of both possible worlds. At the very beginning the slave South imported a Protestant bourgeois, Anglo-Saxon tradition with strong racist overtones. (Genovese 1971 111)

In British North America negative concepts of blackness were organized into a fully developed system of racist thought (Williams 1944; Cox 1978).

Having isolated black folk, the North American colonists became afraid of them, although the white settlers almost always outnumbered the blacks (Harris 1964 71; Klein 1967 258; Degler 1971 89). Being cut off from blacks, whites had no reliable way of knowing what went on in the slave quarters. The colonists realized that their many spies which they planted in the black communities often told their masters only what they wished to hear. Their isolation from black people fed their fears, which led them to inflict greater cruelties on blacks than did colonists elsewhere in the New World. The early North American settlers did not have the fully developed system of racist thought that comforts their descendants. They knew that Europeans carried on the slave trade on the West African coast only at the sufferance of black folk, and were not convinced of the unworthiness of people of color. According to David Walker, an early 19th century agitator:

The whites know well if we are *men* — and there is a secret monitor in their heads which tells them we are — they know, I say, if we *are* men, and see them treating us in the manner they do, that there can be nothing in our hearts but death alone for them. (Jones 1975 26)

The attempt to reduce men to animals has often been made in history, always without success. The North American whites did

succeed in frightening blacks who witnessed the steady erosion of their freedoms and a growing cruelty that was intended to solidify white control. The Afro-American awareness of what was taking place was heightened by the fact that it coincided with the revolutionary ideology, and that black Americans lost in the newly created United States many of the civil rights which their ancestors had enjoyed under British colonial rule. Having seen Euro-Americans win their freedom, Afro-Americans determined on a similar course, filling the time with pamphlets, petitions, resolutions and demands couched in the language of the Revolution (Aptheker 1943; Kaplan 1973; Jones 1975). They also rebelled, rioted, escaped, poisoned white folk, committed arson and rape, destroyed property, and generally struck back at their oppressors. Such actions alarmed the whites who further tightened their oppressive control.

The situation was very different outside British North America, where race relations generally got off to a harsh start, but gradually mellowed through the 1800's. Some offer an economic explanation for the end of harsh abuse of blacks in the greater Caribbean (Williams 1944 Harris 1964; Davis 1966; Gratus 1973). Some cite a rising tide of humanitarianism (Lascelles 1928; Griggs 1936). Whatever the reason, while race atrocities and cruelties increased in North America, they became less common outside the region.

Throughout the New World there were three socially acknowledged, culturally legitimated groups: white, mixed blood, and black (Jordan 1962; Harris 1964; Hoetink 1967; Jones 1974). But in North America the mulatto caste did not exist. Any inheritance of color made one completely black. Elsewhere, the mulatto served as a bridge over which information could flow, enabling members of the races to learn about one another. Stereotypes outside North America did exist, but they tended to be more complex, and because of the mulatto caste, the fear did not develop. Nor were blacks as restless and dissatisfied with their lives as those in North America. Most did not have unreasonable expectations. If they chose the right mate, their children might move into the mulatto caste. The mixed group served to bind non-whites more tightly to the established

social order.

RACIST THOUGHT PATTERNS

The failure of Euro-American social scientists to consider the unique history of black folk is explained by disciplinary racism. It has become fashionable of late to use the term *racism* rather carelessly, and this has clearly warped the thought of 20th century social scientists.

In psychology several theorists are convinced that racism has been so powerful a force in the minds of Euro-Americans that they have denied the very humanity of black people (Erikson 1966; Kovel 1971; Welsing 1972; Ordway 1973; Pettigrew 1973). Racists create a world which exists only in their own minds. If a person came to a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist and attributed to all blue-eyed persons the characteristics which North American whites routinely ascribe to all blacks, the therapist would think him deluded, and arrange therapy. But because the white therapist himself holds racist assumptions, such an outcome is unlikely.

The central problem is the tendency of psychologists to perceive blacks as objects, as a people to whom things only happen, and who have comparatively little control over their own destiny. The attitude has deep historical roots and derives in part from the fact that whites, long separated from blacks, have difficulty perceiving black humanity. While blacks have not been as powerless as many scholars have suggested, Afro-Americans have comparatively exercised less control over their lives than whites. Blacks have been denied the right to live where they wish, hold prestigious jobs, or even to exercise the franchise. The tendency to regard blacks as less than human is understandable, and is not limited to social scientists (Erikson 1966 153; Gough 1968 63; Delany 1970 157; Jones 1972; Ollman 1973). Kovel (1971 185) theorizes that since slavery made blacks the property of whites, black folk were thereby reduced to a subhuman level; even those who sought an end to slavery and celebrated black character still regarded Afro-Americans as objects.

The black man, for all the noble things said about him, never really emerged as a real person. If he had done so, real problems demanding real

solutions would have had to be faced; instead the caricature drawn of him produced a warm glow of sympathy which soothed the white man's uneasy conscience. (Gratus 1973 117)

Some whites revealingly modify their laudatory statements by affixing to them the word *black*. A writer is not the best writer, but the best *black* writer, and a pilot is not the best pilot, but the best *black* pilot (Cleaver 1968 79). Since by Euro-American cultural definition, anything black is inferior to anything white, blacks remain in a separate non-human category.

Psychologists perhaps more than any other group of social scientists, were at one level acutely aware that Afro-Americans are every bit as human as any other people, and yet on another level, they were influenced by the culture's definition of blackness, and therefore powerless to take an aggressive stand against the dehumanization of black folk. Hampered by their own racist beliefs, North American psychologists have been reluctant to confront racism.

Much has been written about the impact of bigotry on the psychology of the black American. However, very little in the literature deals with the psychodynamics of white racism. This imbalance is crucial, for the continual harping on what impact white racism has on blacks still maintains the myth that it is a 'black problem.' (Delany 1970 156) Psychologists have been reluctant to confront racism in their own discipline (Thomas, Sillen 1973; Kramer 1973; Brown 1974). A black psychologist insists that there are no white social scientists without racial bias, and that those who pretend to be most neutral are generally those who are least sympathetic to the problems of blacks:

The tendency to discuss disturbing social issues such as racial discrimination, segregation, and economic exploitation is full of detached, legal, political, socioeconomic or psychological terms as if these persistent problems did not involve the suffering of actual human beings is so contrary to empirical evidence that it must be interpreted as a protective device. (Clark 196775)

These examples from a discipline devoted to the understanding of individual minds is depressing, but they are readily matched in sociology, anthropology, and history. The sociological record is shameful indeed, as North American sociologists entered early and enthusiastically into efforts to prove the blacks inferior (Jones 1971b). From 1900-1925 white

sociologists, while permitting black students to earn advanced degrees at their institutions, were unwilling to try to secure employment for them at white schools, and having trained them, left them pretty much to their own devices. A separate, isolated black sociology developed which, while it shared certain characteristics with white sociology, developed certain interests of its own (Jones 1971a; Blackwell, Janowitz 1974). The profession has not been opened up even to the most talented black sociologists.

Things were somewhat different in anthropology though it took herculean efforts by men such as Boas to rescue that discipline from its initial racist assumptions:

The racists of the 1920's rightly regarded Boas as their chief antagonist. Although his opinion was a minority one, he never wavered before the onslaughts of biological interpretations of history and civilization. More importantly, he was able to meet his opponents with arguments which could not be brushed aside as humanitarian twaddle. It is possible that Boas did more to combat race prejudice than any other person in history. (Gossett 1965 418).

In altering the course of anthropology Boas made it more difficult to combine racism with anthropology than with sociology. The American Anthropological Association sponsorship of a work which advances arguments against neo-racist theories is in Boas' tradition. He also revealed personal concern for the careers of individual blacks trained in social science.

Anthropologists also revealed that they were in advance of their sociological fellows by outgrowing their fascination with the exotic. At one time, accounts of strange far-away peoples could more easily be published than accounts for those with more pedestrian folkways. More recently, they have increasingly been willing to study communities in the United States, thereby blurring the line between anthropology and sociology. Urban anthropology is now a reality with a sensitive study undertaken by an anthropologist (Liebow 1967).

Sociologists have moved to the beat of a different drum. The sociological literature seems on the surface to suggest that the entire black population of North America is divided in two groups. First there are the middle class black "strivers" who suffer from various identity

crises. They are not certain whether they are black or white, are confused about their relations with white people, and struggle to construct white-like middle class organizations. Second, there is the black "underclass" composed of felons, pimps, prostitutes, welfare mothers, and charlatans. Lost in the shuffle is the vast majority of black folk who work 50 weeks yearly and who have been neither to the university nor to prison. Census data, Marxist agitators, and the sociologists' own studies reveal the statistical importance of these people, yet they receive comparatively little sociological attention.

If the record of the other three social sciences is depressing, that of history is grim indeed. It took a full scale political battle led by students in the 1960's to force history departments to offer Afro-American history courses. The attitude of professional historians toward the study of blacks stands in sharp contrast to that of anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists, who, while they often held a racist conception of blacks, still have long regarded them as a legitimate area of study. The historians' traditional, rather conservative conception of what constitutes history is responsible. Since history depends on written records, societies without written records have no history. Not all historians have been so narrow, and many have demonstrated willingness to use of scientific techniques. Some have tried to draw on the anthropological perspective. Entire schools of black history based on the use of oral sources and quantitative methods have emerged, but these are recent developments.

A second reason for the failure of North America historians to acknowledge black history is the fact that in the period 1850-1950 white southerners gained control over the interpretation of black life. There gradually emerged a concept of history at leading universities which relegated blacks to the level of subhumans, important only as they figured as pawns in the struggles of white folk. This is regarded as the nadir of the history of black peoples in America (Logan 1954). This negative perception of blacks persisted until the 1960's.

Even the opponents of the southern view tended to share many of the assumptions about blacks. Among the most pervasive of

these was the tendency to view blacks as creatures to whom things happened. Blacks were essentially passive; they were acted upon and not actors (Jones (1972). For most historians black folk in the United States were not important because they were not seen as a force in the nation's history. They were regarded as the subject of fierce quarrels among the white men, but were themselves innately unable to participate in such arguments.

In the 20th century the three arguments against the study of black history were mutually reinforcing. The inability of blacks to influence their own destiny helped explain the lack of written sources, and the lack of sources provided support to the southern insistence on the inferiority of blacks which in turn, helped to explain why blacks were unable to improve their lot. So it went. Instead of reflecting on the unique structural isolation of black people, North American historians built a system which demonstrated, at least to their own satisfaction, that Afro-Americans had no history worthy of study.

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