

The Prejudice towards Blacks in the 16th and 17th Century America

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Abstract

Historians believe that societal or implicit racism appeared very early, as a consequence of pre-existing European attitude towards blacks. Economic Necessities in America which called for some sort of controlled labor made Africans slaves. By 1640 it was clear that English Settlers kept Negroes as hereditary slaves for life. When English confronted with Africans, they did not realize that Africans were potentially subjects for a special kind of obedience and subordination which was to arise as adventurous Englishmen sought to possess for themselves and their children one of the most bountiful territories of the earth. In England the concept of blackness was full with intense meaning. Englishmen found in the idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their ingrained values.

Keywords: Blackness, Englishman, Negroe, prejudice, slavery

Introduction

Extensive English Participation in the slave trade did not develop until the seventeenth century. As Jordan writes "English contact with Africans did not take place primarily in context which prejudged the Negroe as a slave, at least not as a slave of Englishmen. Rather, Englishmen met Africans merely as another sort of men" (Jordan, 1981, p. 4).

It is assumed that English social forms were shifted to America not simply because they were nice but because without them the new settlements would have fallen apart and English settlers would have become men of the forest, savage men bereft of civilization.

The First Encounter with Africans The Concept of Blackness for Englishmen

Crucial significance bears the fact, that when English confronted with Africans, they did not realize that Africans were potentially subjects for a special kind of obedience and subordination which was to arise as adventurous Englishmen sought to possess for themselves and their children one of the most bountiful territories of the earth. "When they came to plant themselves in the New World, they were to find that they had not entirely left behind the spirit of avarice and insubordination. Nor does it appear, in light of attitudes that developed during their first two centuries in America, that

they left behind all the impressions initially gathered of the Negroe before he became pre-eminently the slave" (Jordan, 1981, p.25).

"Negroes" looked very different: they were not Christians, the manner of living was absolutely different. The most striking characteristic of African was his color. Every traveler commented upon it; when describing Africans they frequently began with complexion and afterwards moved on to manners, dress. This shock with Negroe's color probably was caused with the suddenness of contact. One of the lightest-skinned of the earth's peoples suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest.

We have to pay attention to the fact that, in England the concept of blackness was full with intense meaning. As Jordan says, "Long before they found that some men were black, Englishmen found in the idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their ingrained values. No other color except white conveyed so much emotional impact" (Jordan, 1981, p.6). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, before the sixteenth century, black was defined as "deeply stained with dirt, dirty, malignant, having dark or deadly proposes... horrible, wicked... Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment. White was its direct opposite. These colors connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil" (ibid).

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Englishmen had some different ideas concerning the Negroe's color. Some believed, that the sun was to blame. People living on the Line were getting too much sun. But what about the people who lived on the same Line America? They were not blackened. So this method did not work. It was not logical.

Another group of people were certain that the Negroe's blackness was innate and that no amount of cold was going to alter it. Some believed in God's curse on Ham.

Englishmen found blackness in human beings a peculiar and important point of difference. The Negroe's color set him apart from Englishmen.

Even though the color of Negroes' was shocking for newcomers, their heathenism was not surprising, Englishmen and Christians were acquainted with this concept. The important factor is that the heathenism of Africans was a counter-image of their own religion and a directive to remove an important distinction between the two people. Very important point of English reaction to African heathenism was that they did not regard it (heathenism) as separable from Negroes' other attributes, they linked it with blackness and savagery. Negroes were entirely different from Englishmen...

According to Anthony Giddens "religion is a central part of human experience, influencing how we perceive and react to the environments in which we live" (Giddens, 1993, p. 452).

The heathen condition of Negroes had an impact on Englishmen's perception. For some settlers it was also associated with the condition of slavery.

The English settlers distinguished themselves from Negroes by the term Christian, though they also sometimes described themselves as English.

In the sixteenth century, the English mixed together religion and nationality. As Jordan writes, "the qualities of being English and Christian had become so inseparably blended that it seemed perfectly consistent to the Virginia Assembly in 1670 to declare that no Negroe or Indian though baptized and enjoyed their own Freedom shall be capable of any such purchase of Christians, but yet not debarred from buying any of their own nation" (Jordan, 1981, p. 51).

From the very beginning the term Christian represented the idea and feeling of "we against them. To be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English rather than African, white rather than black" (ibid). This term proved to be elastic, for by the end of seventeenth century it was used to define a slavery which lost any connection with clear religious difference. In 1705, the Virginia code defined the term as a race than religion. Christianity became linked with complexion, "that all servants imported and brought into this country, by sea or land, who were not Christians in their native country... shall be accounted and be slaves, and as such be here bought and sold notwithstanding a conversion to Christianity afterwards" (Virginia Slave Code, 1705). Jordan argues that, by the end of the seventeenth century dark complexion became an independent basis for enslavement.

According to Fredrickson, "the United States has been a genuinely racist society, it has treated blacks as if they were inherently inferior, and for at least a century of its history this pattern of rigid racial stratification was buttressed and strengthened by a widely accepted racist ideology" (Fredrickson, 1988, p. 190). Historians believe that societal or implicit racism sprung up very early, "as an end result of pre-existing European attitude towards blacks. It is very interesting to examine to what extent was America born racist as a result of pre-existing attitudes and to what extent did it become so as a result of social, economic, and political developments that took place well after the colonists' initial contact with Africans?" (ibid, p. 191).

First of all let's define the term racism: The American Heritage Dictionary defines racism as Discrimination or prejudice based on race; the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others.

It is a well-known fact that among Englishmen was some prejudice against blacks before they came to North America. As we have discussed above, after the initial contact between Englishmen and Africans, their blackness was associated with savagery, heathenism, and "general failure to conform to European standards of civilization and property" (ibid). Also it was mentioned the aware connotation of black color; its association with evil was very deeply rooted in western and Christian mythology. Satan was the Prince of Darkness, witchcraft- black magic. Carl Jung has claimed that the Negroe for European whites became a symbol of unconscious itself- the shadow.

Undoubtedly, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Englishmen were predisposed to accept an unfavorable stereotype of black character (ibid). However, sociological investigations and analyses suggest that "it is quite possible for individuals to have a generalized notion about members of other race or nationality that bears almost no relation to how they actually behave when confronted with them" (Raab & Lipset, 1962, pp. 29-55).

G. Fredrickson notes that, the relations between whites and blacks in seventeenth century America is a story of "an evolution towards societal racism" (Fredrickson, 1988, p. 193). Historians have long been debating about which came the first in the southern colonies, slavery or racial prejudice. Between 1619 and 1640s, blacks were brought as servants. Most of them were freed after their term of service. By 1640s it became evident, clear, that some blacks were being held in servitude for life; there is an evidence that discriminatory practices set black servants off from whites of similar status. When talking about seventeenth century British colonies, we observe that in Virginia all immigrants were not regarded as slaves from the beginning, however, the first blacks to arrive in the Massachusetts bay Colony in 1638 were regarded as slaves. How can we explain this difference? On the one hand, slavery was not sanctioned in England, but on the other hand it was not prohibited. Moreover, according to the International law of seventeenth century slavery was legal and proper condition for people captivated in the war, particularly if they were heathens. This served as a basis for countries like Netherlands and Great Britain in the in-

ternational slave trade. Consequently, when blacks arrived in most colonies, they were seen as enslavable because of their origin. We come to the conclusion that whites were not driven by intense racial prejudice. Although, it would be absurd to contradict to the fact that the ethnic prejudice played a role in the degradation of blacks in Virginia.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ethnocentrism as "characterized by or based on the attitude that one's own group is superior". In other words it is the tendency to discriminate against stranger, the alien, the physically different. This phenomenon is universal in group contacts, therefore it is not unexpected that there were some of its examples in Virginia.

According to M. Harris "the Negroes were not enslaved because the British colonists specifically despised dark-skinned peoples and regarded them alone as property suited to slavery; the Negroes came to the object of virulent prejudices because they alone could be enslaved" (Harris, 1964, p. 70). In Virginia the vulnerability of blacks, probably made them the logical candidates for enslavement, even before there was any dependence on their labor. However, earlier examples of strong prejudice are quite vague.

Even though in 1662 Virginia had a law imposing a fine for interracial fornication, it did not ban the interracial marriages until 1691. In Maryland a law banning interracial marriage passed in 1664, it banned marriages between Negroe slaves and English women, however it says nothing about marriages between whites and free blacks. The main reason of this act was to avoid legal complication developing from such contacts.

In the seventeenth century Massachusetts free blacks had the same basic rights as whites and were not victims of discrimination. According to Fredrickson "Even Slaves enjoyed a semblance of equal rights before the law" (Fredrickson, 1988, p. 97). As for Virginia, the status of free blacks was undergoing a change that would end in quasi - freedom or lower caste status that was characteristic of them in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some slaves became free after serving a specific term; some were free because of the tendency to regard black servitude as similar to white indentured servitude. There were also "manumitted" Negroes. And of course there were mulatto children of white mothers, who were free at birth.

Before the eighteenth century, free blacks had almost no difficulty in acquiring property or exercising an equal right to vote in Virginia. They were recognized members of the community. Before 1670 they were even permitted to own white servants! Consequently, there are some grounds for arguing that before the 1690s Virginia was not a racist society, regardless of the existence of black servitude.

In 1690s, the situation started to change, Intermarriage was against the law, the first restriction were placed upon the manumission of slaves. After the act of 1723, free blacks were deprived of their rights, including the right to vote. This transformation was simultaneous to the transformation of Virginia into a slave plantation economy

Conclusion

Undeniably, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Englishmen were subject to accept a negative stereotype of black character. However, sociological investigations and analyses suggest that "it is quite possible for individuals to have a generalized notion about members of other race or nationality that bears almost no relation to how they actually behave when confronted with them" (Raab & Lipset, 1962, pp. 29-55).

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