

Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America

Two years ago, a sports announcer in the United States lost his job because he enlarged indiscreetly—that is, before a television audience—upon his views about ‘racial’ differences. Asked why there are so few black coaches in basketball, Jimmy ‘the Greek’ Snyder remarked that black athletes already hold an advantage as basketball players because they have longer thighs than white athletes, their ancestors having been deliberately bred that way during slavery. ‘This goes all the way to the Civil War,’ Jimmy the Greek explained, ‘when during the slave trading . . . the owner, the slave owner would breed his big black to his big woman so he could have a big black kid, you see.’ Astonishing though it may seem, Snyder intended his remark as a compliment to black athletes. If black men became coaches, he said, there would be nothing left for white men to do in basketball at all. Embarrassed by such rank and open expression of racism in the most ignorant form, the network fired Jimmy the Greek from his job. Any fool, the network must have decided, should know that such things may be spoken in the privacy of the

locker-room in an all-white club, but not into a microphone and before a camera. Of course, Jimmy the Greek lays no claim to being educated or well informed. Before he was hired to keep audiences entertained during the slack moments of televised sports events, he was famous as a bookie. He claims expert knowledge about odds and point spreads, not about history, biology or human genetics. But those claiming to be educated—and employed on that basis—have proved to be just as superstitious as Jimmy the Greek. Belief in the biological reality of race outranks even astrology, the superstition closest to it in the competition for dupes among the ostensibly educated. Richard Cohen, the house liberal of the *Washington Post*, wrote a column defending the underlying assumption of Jimmy the Greek's remark, if not its specific content. According to Cohen, Jimmy the Greek was wrong for overestimating what can be accomplished by the deliberate breeding of human beings, not for believing in physical race. 'Back in my college days,' Cohen began, 'I dabbled in anthropology. In physical anthropology we had to do something called "racing and sexing" of skulls. That entailed looking at a skull and determining whether it was once a man or a woman—and which race.' The circular logic of first defining certain characteristics as 'racial', then offering differences in those same characteristics as proof that the 'races' differ, did not trouble him, even in retrospect. In matters of virtually religious faith, logic carries no weight. Cohen capped that shameful display with a tag that ought to have warned him of the intellectual quagmire into which he had strayed: 'Yes, Virginia, the races are physically different.'¹

Most Americans, though perhaps few others, will recognize the allusion. Many years ago, a newspaper editor answered a query from a troubled child named Virginia, who was experiencing her first painful doubts that Santa Claus was a real person and who had written to the newspaper to get an authoritative answer. The answer came in a famous editorial entitled 'Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus.' Cohen spoke more truth than he realized in thus equating his own—and, presumably, his readers'—need to believe in race with a child's need to believe in Santa Claus. **Anyone who continues to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals, despite the now commonplace disclaimers of biologists and geneticists,**² might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real, and that the earth stands still while the sun moves.

Newspaper and television journalists are entitled to be as silly and irresponsible as they wish, and it usually does no harm, since nobody in his right mind pays attention to them. (Richard Coven underlined his scientific illiteracy by speaking of 'white genes'—entities known to

¹ Richard Coven, 'The Greek's Offense', *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 25–31 January 1988.

² For example, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, New York 1981; Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose and Leon Kamin, *Not in Our Genes*, New York 1984.

no geneticist that I am aware of.)³ But in May of 1987, the Supreme Court of the United States provided a much more serious example—more serious precisely because it *was* the Supreme Court and not a half-baked journalist. The Supreme Court had to decide whether Jewish and Arab Americans could seek relief under civil-rights law for acts of discrimination against them. Instead of taking its stand on the principle that discrimination against anybody is intolerable in a democracy, the Court chose to ask whether Jews and Arabs are racially distinct from ‘Caucasians’. If so, then civil-rights laws forbidding ‘racial’ discrimination might be applied to them. The Court decided that, because Jews, Arabs and a variety of nationalities were regarded as racial groups in the late nineteenth century, they may therefore be so considered today.⁴ In other words, **the Court knew no better way to rectify injustice at the end of the twentieth century than to re-enthroned the superstitious racial dogma of the nineteenth century.** In fact, the Supreme Court had little choice, bound as it is by American precedent and history—bound, that is to say, by its participation in those rituals that daily create and re-create race in its characteristic American form. The Supreme Court acts, no less than Jimmy the Greek, within the assumptions, however absurd, that constitute racial ideology in the United States. Unfortunately, so do historians and other academic specialists, who vitally need to take a distance from these assumptions in order to do their job.

The Single ‘Race’

One of the most important of these absurd assumptions, accepted implicitly by most Americans, is that there is really only one race, the Negro race. That is why the Court had to perform intellectual contortions to prove that non-Negroes might be construed as members of races in order to receive protection under laws forbidding racial discrimination. Americans regard people of known African descent or visible African appearance as a race, but not people of known European

³ Cohen is by no means alone. An NBC network broadcast during the spring of 1989, anchored by the gullible Tom Brokaw and vigorously defended by one of its producers in the columns of the *New York Times*, similarly affirmed the essence of Jimmy the Greek’s instinctive prejudice. The broadcast featured an Israeli doctor who, by measuring muscular movements of world-class athletes, claimed to identify typical ‘racial’ characteristics. No one asked whether ordinary people use their muscles the same way world-class athletes do; that is, whether his experiment proved something about typical racial characteristics or something about exceptional athletes. Nor did anyone ask whether athletes classed as black are more likely than those classed as white to have learned their moves from coaches and fellow athletes also classed as black; that is, whether the experiment dealt with race or training. Needless to add, no one ventured to ask the most embarrassing question of all, the one that stumped the scientific racists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: how to assign the subjects of the experiments to one ‘race’ or the other without assuming the very racial distinction the experiment is supposed to prove? Try as they would, the scientific racists of the past failed to discover any objective criterion upon which to classify people; to their chagrin, every criterion they tried varied more within so-called races than between them. It is likely that Brokaw’s neo-racist would find the same true of muscular movements had he the honesty and intelligence to pose the question.

⁴ St. Francis College, et al. v. Majid Ghaidan Al-Khazraji, and Shaare Tefila Congregation v. John William Cobb et al., 18 May 1987.

descent or visible European appearance. That is why, in the United States, there are scholars and *black* scholars, women and *black* women. Saul Bellow and John Updike are writers; Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison are *black* writers. George Bush and Michael Dukakis were candidates for president; Jesse Jackson was a *black* candidate for president.

Moreover, people in the United States do not classify as races peoples of non-European but also non-African appearance or descent, except for purposes of direct or indirect contrast with people of African descent; and even then, the terms used are likely to represent geography or language rather than biology: *Asian* or *Hispanic*.⁵ Even when terms of geography designate people of African descent, they mean something different from what they mean when applied to others. My students find it odd when I refer to the colonizers of North America as *Euro-Americans*, but they feel more at ease with *Afro-Americans*, a term which, for the period of colonization and the slave trade, has no more to recommend it. Students readily understand that no one was really a European, since Europeans belonged to different nationalities; but it comes as a surprise to them that no one was an African either, since Africans likewise belonged to different nationalities.

A second absurd assumption inseparable from race in its characteristic American form takes for granted that virtually everything people of African descent do, think, or say is racial in nature. Thus, anyone who followed the news commentaries on the presidential election primaries of 1988 learned that, almost by definition, Afro-Americans voted for Jesse Jackson because of racial identification—despite polls showing that Jackson's supporters were far more likely than supporters of any other candidate to identify him with specific positions that they agreed with on issues that mattered to them. Supporters of the others regarded their men as interchangeable, and were likely to switch again and again, in response to slick advertising spots or dispiriting rumours.⁶

Perhaps most intellectually debilitating of all is a third assumption: namely, that any situation involving people of European descent and people of African descent automatically falls under the heading 'race relations'. Argument by definition and tautology thereby replaces argument by analysis in anything to do with people of African descent.

⁵ That is not, of course, to deny the well-justified annoyance of Japanese-, Chinese-, Korean-, Vietnamese- and Indian-Americans at being classed together as *Asian-Americans* or, still more inaccurately, as simply *Asians*. Nor is it to overlook the nonsense that flourishes luxuriantly around the attempt to set terms of language and geography alongside the term that supposedly represents biological race. Survey-researchers for the United States government often ask 'Hispanics' whether they wish to be considered 'white' or 'black'. The resulting classifications can divide members of a single family. As often as not, the report of the results proceeds to distinguish *Hispanics* from *blacks* and *whites*. Moreover, the government regards Portuguese-speaking Brazilians as 'Hispanic' and requires that they so identify themselves when applying for a social security number, as the Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado discovered during a recent visit.

⁶ *New York Times*, 10 March 1988, A26.

Probably a majority of American historians think of slavery in the United States as primarily a system of race relations—as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco. One historian has gone so far as to call slavery ‘the ultimate segregator’.⁷ He does not ask why Europeans seeking the ‘ultimate’ method of segregating Africans would go to the trouble and expense of transporting them across the ocean for that purpose, when they could have achieved the same end so much more simply by leaving the Africans in Africa. No one dreams of analysing the struggle of the English against the Irish as a problem in race relations, even though the rationale that the English developed for suppressing the ‘barbarous’ Irish later served nearly word for word as a rationale for suppressing Africans and indigenous American Indians.⁸ Nor does anyone dream of analysing serfdom in Russia as primarily a problem of race relations, even though the Russian nobility invented fictions of their innate, natural superiority over the serfs as preposterous as any devised by American racists.⁹

Loose thinking on these matters leads to careless language, which in turn promotes misinformation. A widely used textbook of American history, written by very distinguished historians, summarizes the three-fifths clause of the United States Constitution (article 1, section 2) thus: ‘For both direct taxes and representation, five blacks were to be counted as equivalent to three whites.’¹⁰ The three-fifths clause does not distinguish between *blacks* and *whites*—not even, using more polite terms, between black and white *people*. (Indeed, the terms *black* and *white*—or, for that matter, *Negro* and *Caucasian*—do not appear anywhere in the Constitution, as is not surprising in a legal document in which slang of that kind would be hopelessly imprecise.) The three-fifths clause distinguishes between *free Persons*—who might be of European or African descent—and *other Persons*, a euphemism for *slaves*. The issue at stake was whether slaveowning citizens would hold an advantage over non-slaveowning citizens; more precisely, whether slaves would be counted in total population for the purpose of apportioning representation in Congress—an advantage for slaveholders in states with large numbers of slaves—and of assessing responsibility for direct taxes—a disadvantage. The Constitution answered by saying yes, but at a ratio of three-fifths, rather than the five-fifths that slaveholders would have preferred for representation or the zero-fifths they would have preferred for taxation. When well-meaning people affirm, for rhetorical effect, that the Constitution declared Afro-Americans to be only three-fifths human, they commit

⁷ John Anthony Scott, ‘Segregation: A Fundamental Aspect of Southern Race Relations, 1800–1860’, *Journal of the Early Republic* 4, Winter 1984, p. 425. Scott did not originate this preposterous assertion. Nevertheless, he endorses it enthusiastically.

⁸ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, New York 1975, ch. 1; Leonard P. Liggio, ‘English Origins of Early American Racism’, *Radical History Review* 3, 1976.

⁹ See Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*, Cambridge, Mass. 1987, pp. 170–91.

¹⁰ Winthrop D. Jordan, Leon F. Litwack et al., *The United States*, combined edition, 5th edition, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1982, p. 144.

an error for which American historians themselves must accept the blame.

When virtually the whole of a society, including supposedly thoughtful, educated, intelligent persons, commits itself to belief in propositions that collapse into absurdity upon the slightest examination, the reason is not hallucination or delusion or even simple hypocrisy; rather, it is ideology. And ideology is impossible for anyone to analyse rationally who remains trapped on its terrain.¹¹ That is why race still proves so hard for historians to deal with historically, rather than in terms of metaphysics, religion or socio- (that is, pseudo-) biology.

Nothing so well illustrates that impossibility as the conviction among otherwise sensible scholars that race ‘explains’ historical phenomena; specifically, that it explains why people of African descent have been set apart for treatment different from that accorded to others.¹² But *race is just the name assigned to the phenomenon*, which it no more explains than *judicial review* ‘explains’ why the United States Supreme Court can declare acts of Congress unconstitutional, or than *Civil War* ‘explains’ why Americans fought each other between 1861 and 1865.¹³

¹¹ A well-known historian once illustrated this fact for me in the very act of denying it. Challenging me for having made a statement to the same effect in an earlier essay (Barbara J. Fields, ‘Ideology and Race in American History’, in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, New York 1982), he declared: ‘Someone could accept the evidence that there is a racial disparity in IQ and still believe in integration.’ Well-intentioned, but trapped in racial ideology, he cannot bring himself to question the scientific status of race itself, let alone IQ. Nor, although an accomplished user of statistical methods, can he perceive the fallacy of statistical studies claiming to have eliminated the social determinants of intelligence and isolated the genetic ones, while perforce using social criteria—there are no others—to assign subjects to their proper ‘race’ in the first place.

¹² Inseparable from this conviction is the reification of race that impels many scholars to adopt and impose on others, as a pious duty, the meaningless task of deciding whether race is more or less ‘basic’ to historical explanation than other—and similarly reified—categories; a waste of time to which I drew attention in ‘Ideology and Race in American History’, p. 158. Someone might as well undertake to decide in the abstract whether the numerator or the denominator is more important to understanding a fraction, instead of settling down to the more sensible task of trying to define and specify each one, recognizing their difference as well as their relationship and their joint indispensability to the result. A recent example is David Roediger, ‘“Labor in White Skin”: Race and Working-Class History’, in *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s*, ed. Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, Verso, London 1988, pp. 287–308. Roediger apparently believes that distinguishing analytically between *race* and *class* necessarily implies ‘privileging’ one over the other (to use his slang). And, in defending the identification of racism as a ‘tragic flaw’ that helps to explain American history, rather than as part of the history that needs explaining, he confuses a rhetorical device with a historical explanation.

¹³ Alden T. Vaughan, ‘The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia’, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, July 1989, is a good example of the use as explanation of the very facts needing to be explained. The argument ends in explicit tautology: ‘It may be more useful to see Anglo-American racism as a necessary precondition for a system of slavery based on ancestry and pigmentation.’ That is, Anglo-American racism is a necessary precondition for Anglo-American racism. The argument ends as well in unseemly agnosticism about the possibility of rational explanation: ‘[R]acism was one cause of a particular type of slavery, though it may be better to avoid the term *cause*, for causation is itself a shaky concept in complex situations.’ The quoted sentences appear on p. 353.

Only if *race* is defined as innate and natural prejudice of colour does its invocation as a historical explanation do more than repeat the question by way of answer. And there an insurmountable problem arises: since race is not genetically programmed, racial prejudice cannot be genetically programmed either but, like race itself, must arise historically. The most sophisticated of those who invoke race as a historical explanation—for example, George Fredrickson and Winthrop Jordan—recognize the difficulty. The preferred solution is to suppose that, having arisen historically, race then ceases to be a historical phenomenon and becomes instead an external motor of history; according to the fatuous but widely repeated formula, it ‘takes on a life of its own’.¹⁴ In other words, once historically acquired, race becomes hereditary. The shopworn metaphor thus offers camouflage for a latter-day version of Lamarckism.

The History of an Ideology

Race is not an element of human biology (like breathing oxygen or reproducing sexually); nor is it even an idea (like the speed of light or the value of π) that can be plausibly imagined to live an eternal life of its own. Race is not an idea but an ideology. It came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons and is subject to change for similar reasons. The revolutionary bicentennials that Americans have celebrated with such unctiousness—of independence in 1976 and of the Constitution in 1989—can as well serve as the bicentennial of racial ideology, since the birthdays are not far apart. During the revolutionary era, people who favoured slavery and people who opposed it collaborated in identifying the racial incapacity of Afro-Americans as the explanation for enslavement.¹⁵ American racial ideology is as original an invention of the Founders as is the United States itself. Those holding liberty to be inalienable and holding Afro-Americans as slaves were bound to end by holding race to be a self-evident truth. Thus we ought to begin by restoring to race—that is, the American version of race—its proper history.

As convenient a place as any to begin a brief summary of that history, along with that of plantation society in British North America, is in seventeenth-century Virginia. Virginia foundered during its early years and survived only through the good will and, when the colonists had exhausted that, the extorted tribute of the indigenous Indians. But during the second decade of the seventeenth century, Virginia discovered its vocation: the growing of tobacco. The first boom in what

¹⁴ George Fredrickson has attempted to retread the old tyre once again in ‘Race, Class and Consciousness’, the introduction to his collection *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality*, Middletown, Conn. 1988. See also Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, Chapel Hill, N.C. 1968.

¹⁵ In elegant fashion, David Brion Davis has located the moment when racial ideology came into its own in the United States precisely in the era of the American Revolution, and has had the courage to admit that anti-slavery publicists and agitators were complicit with their pro-slavery counterparts in establishing race as the frame of the discussion. See *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1975, esp. chs. 4, 6, and 7.

would eventually become the United States took place during the 1620s, and it rested primarily on the backs of English indentured servants, not African slaves. Not until late in the century, after the boom had passed, did landowners begin buying slaves in large numbers, first from the West Indies and, after 1680, from Africa itself.¹⁶ During the high years of the boom it was the 'free-born' Englishman who became, as one historian put it, 'a machine to make tobacco for somebody else'.¹⁷

Indentured servants served longer terms in Virginia than their English counterparts and enjoyed less dignity and less protection in law and custom. They could be bought and sold like livestock, kidnapped, stolen, put up as stakes in card games, and awarded—even before their arrival in America—to the victors in lawsuits. Greedy magnates (if the term is not redundant) stinted the servants' food and cheated them out of their freedom dues, and often out of their freedom itself, when they had served their time. Servants were beaten, maimed, and even killed with impunity. For expressing opinions unfavourable to the governor and the governing council, one man had both his arms broken and his tongue bored through with an awl, while another lost his ear and had to submit to a second seven-year term of servitude—to a member of the council that had judged his case.¹⁸

Whatever truths may have appeared self-evident in those days, neither an inalienable right to life and liberty nor the founding of government on the consent of the governed was among them. Virginia was a profit-seeking venture, and no one stood to make a profit growing tobacco by democratic methods. Only those who could force large numbers of people to work tobacco for them stood to get rich during the tobacco boom. Neither white skin nor English nationality protected servants from the grossest forms of brutality and exploitation. The only degradation they were spared was perpetual enslavement along with their issue in perpetuity, the fate that eventually befell the descendants of Africans.

Scholars occasionally maintain that English indentured servants escaped that fate while Africans fell victim to it because Europeans would go only so far and no farther in oppressing people of their own colour. But they really only believe such folklore when they are floating in the twilight world of racial ideology, a world in which even the Supreme Court of the United States finds itself mentally disarmed. Once restored to honest daylight, they know better. They know that the Greeks and Romans enslaved people of their own colour. They know that Europeans held other Europeans in both slavery and serfdom, and that the law in Tudor England provided for the enslavement of vagabonds. They know that the English considered no brutality too extreme in bringing to heel the supposedly savage and undoubtedly

¹⁶ Edmund S. Morgan estimates that Virginia's black population numbered fewer than 500 in 1645 and fewer than 2,000 in 1660. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, New York 1975, p. 298.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 114–30.

fair-skinned Irish. Oliver Cromwell sold survivors of the Drogheda Massacre as slaves in Barbados, and his agents systematically auctioned Irish children off to planters in the West Indies. Nazi concentration camps swallowed up not only Jews and Gypsies but also partisans, resistance fighters, and Communists, whom even the United States Supreme Court would be hard-pressed to define as racial groups. From Peterloo to Santiago, Chile, to Kwangju, South Korea, to Tiananmen Square and the *barrios* of San Salvador, humanity has learned again and again that shared colour and nationality set no automatic limit to oppression. Ultimately, the only check upon oppression is the strength and effectiveness of resistance to it.

Resistance does not refer only to the fight that individuals, or collections of them, put up at any given time against those trying to impose on them. It refers also to the historical outcome of the struggle that has gone before, perhaps long enough before to have been hallowed by custom or formalized in law—as ‘the rights of an Englishman’, for example. The freedoms of lower-class Englishmen, and the somewhat lesser freedoms of lower-class Englishwomen, were not gifts of the English nobility, tendered out of solicitude for people of their own colour or nationality. Rather, they emerged from centuries of day-to-day contest, overt and covert, armed and unarmed, peaceable and forcible, over where the limits lay. Moral scruples about what could and what could not be done to the lower classes were nothing but the *shoulds* and *should nots* distilled from this collective historical experience, ritualized as rules of behaviour or systematized as common law—but always liable to be put once again on the table for negotiation or into the ring for combat.¹⁹ Each new increment of freedom that the lower classes regarded as their due represented the provisional outcome of the last round in a continuing boxing-match and established the fighting weights of the contenders in the next round.

Custom and Law

In the round that took place in early colonial Virginia, servants lost many of the concessions to their dignity, well-being and comfort that their counterparts had won in England. But not all. To have degraded the servants into slaves *en masse* would have driven the continuing struggle up several notches, a dangerous undertaking considering that servants were well-armed, that they outnumbered their masters, and that the Indians could easily take advantage of the inevitably resulting warfare among the enemy. Moreover, the enslavement of already arrived immigrants, once news of it reached England, would have threatened the sources of future immigration. Even the greediest and most short-sighted profiteer could foresee disaster in any such policy. Given how fast people died in Virginia, the lifetime’s labour of most slaves would probably have amounted to less than a seven-year term

¹⁹ For illustration, see Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*, London 1977; Thomas A. Green, *Verdict According to Conscience: Perspectives on the English Criminal Trial Jury, 1200–1800*, Chicago 1985; and C.S.L. Davies, ‘Slavery and Protector Somerset: The Vagrancy Act of 1547’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 19 December 1966.

of servitude (fifteen thousand immigrants between 1625 and 1640 only increased the population from some thirteen hundred to seven or eight thousand).²⁰ And the prospect of gaining enslaveable children in the future—an uncertain prospect, considering how few women arrived during the boom years²¹—could not compensate for the certain loss of adult immigrants in the present.

Some of these same considerations argued against employing African-descended slaves for life on a large scale; others did not. Needless to say, adverse publicity did not threaten the sources of forced migration as it did those of voluntary migration. Much more important: Africans and Afro-West Indians had not taken part in the long history of negotiation and contest in which the English lower classes had worked out the relationship between themselves and their superiors. Therefore, the custom and law that embodied that history did not apply to them. To put it another way: when English servants entered the ring in Virginia, they did not enter alone. Instead, they entered in company with the generations who had preceded them in the struggle; and the outcome of those earlier struggles established the terms and conditions of the latest one. But Africans and Afro-West Indians did enter the ring alone. Their forebears had struggled in a different arena, which had no bearing on this one. Whatever concessions they might obtain had to be won from scratch, in unequal combat, an ocean away from the people they might have called on for reinforcements.

Africans and Afro-West Indians were thus available for perpetual slavery in a way that English servants were not. Indeed, Virginians could purchase them ready-enslaved and pre-seasoned; and so they did in the earliest years of the traffic. Only much later did this become a matter of what we now call race. It took time, indeed, to become systematized as slavery. Although African or African-descended slaves dribbled in from 1619 on, the law did not formally recognize the condition of perpetual slavery or systematically mark out servants of African descent for special treatment until 1661. Indeed, African slaves during the years between 1619 and 1661 enjoyed rights that, in the nineteenth century, not even free black people could claim.²² Simple practicality decided the matter. Until slavery became systematic, there was no need for a systematic slave code. And slavery could not become systematic so long as an African slave for life cost twice as much as an English servant for a five-year term, and stood a better-than-even chance of dying before five years could elapse.²³

Not until the 1660s did that morbid arithmetic change; and by then other things had changed as well. The price of tobacco had fallen, and so had the numbers of English servants emigrating to America. Afro-Americans began living long enough to be worth enslaving for life, and Euro-Americans began living long enough to claim both the

²⁰ Morgan, p. 159.

²¹ Men outnumbered women more than five to one in 1624. Morgan, p. 111.

²² Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America*, New York 1976, pp. 16–18; Morgan, pp. 154–57.

²³ Morgan, pp. 197–98.

freedom and the freedom dues—including land—to which they were entitled at the end of their terms of servitude. This last provoked countermeasures by those whose fortunes depended on the labour of servants. One such countermeasure was to concoct excuses for extending servants' terms, and that the Virginia Assembly set about with a vengeance during the 1650s, '60s and '70s. Another was to engross all the available land in the tidewater, forcing freed servants either to rent from the landowners (and thus continue working for the landowners' enrichment) or to settle in frontier regions, remote from water transportation and exposed to reprisals by Indians, who understandably resented this new encroachment by the aliens who had already driven them from the tidewater. By the 1670s, the rulers of Virginia faced a potentially serious problem: a large class of young (white) freedmen, landless, single, discontented—and well armed.²⁴

Sure enough, trouble arrived on cue. In 1676, a group of just such young freedmen, joined by servants and slaves as well, launched the largest popular rebellion of colonial America, plundering the property of the well-to-do, burning the capital, and sending the royal governor and his cronies temporarily into hiding on Virginia's Eastern Shore. The rebellion ended abruptly, without accomplishing—or for that matter attempting or proposing—changes in the prevailing system of power and authority. What it did succeed in doing was planting suspicion and fear of the growing white lower class in the minds of the rich and powerful.²⁵

It was a fortunate circumstance—fortunate for some, anyway—that made Africans and Afro-West Indians available for plantation labour at the historical moment when it became practical to buy slaves for life, and at the same time difficult and dangerous to continue using Europeans as the main source of plantation labour. The importation of African slaves in larger and larger numbers made it possible to maintain a sufficient corps of plantation labourers without building up an explosive charge of armed Englishmen resentful at being denied the rights of Englishmen and disposing of the material and political resources to make their resentment felt.²⁶

Eventually, European settlement pushed into the interior, and freedmen—declining in numbers anyway as the immigration of servants slowed down—found it possible to take up land of their own. As the labour of slaves for life replaced that of servants for a term, the problem of providing for freedmen receded into the past. (So far into the past, indeed, that when providing for freedmen appeared once again on the nation's agenda, during the Civil War era, the ancient precedent of freedom dues had been all but forgotten. When Abraham

²⁴ Morgan, pp. 297, 215–49, 404; Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800*, Chapel Hill, N.C. 1986, ch. 1.

²⁵ Morgan, pp. 250–70.

²⁶ Slaves imported into Virginia came first from the West Indies and then, beginning in the 1680s, increasingly from Africa. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, three-quarters of black people in Virginia were of African origin. Ira Berlin, 'Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America', *American Historical Review* 85, February 1980, p. 71.

Lincoln and his contemporaries spoke of compensated emancipation, they did not feel a need to specify compensation for whom. No one talked of freedom dues, only of the folly of offering Negroes an unearned 'gift'.)

From Oppression to Inferiority

Race as a coherent ideology did not spring into being simultaneously with slavery, but took even more time than slavery did to become systematic. A commonplace that few stop to examine holds that people are more readily oppressed when they are already perceived as inferior by nature. The reverse is more to the point. People are more readily perceived as inferior by nature when they are already seen as oppressed. Africans and their descendants might be, to the eye of the English, heathen in religion, outlandish in nationality, and weird in appearance. But that did not add up to an ideology of racial inferiority until a further historical ingredient got stirred into the mixture: the incorporation of Africans and their descendants into a polity and society in which they lacked rights that others not only took for granted, but claimed as a matter of self-evident natural law.²⁷

All human societies, whether tacitly or overtly, assume that nature has ordained their social arrangements. Or, to put it another way, part of what human beings understand by the word 'nature' is the sense of inevitability that gradually becomes attached to a predictable, repetitive social routine: 'custom, so immemorial that it looks like nature', as Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote. The feudal nobility of the early Middle Ages consisted of people more powerful than their fellows through possession of arms or property or both. No one at that time, not even they themselves, considered them superior by blood or birth; indeed, that would have been heresy. But the nobleman's habit of commanding others, ingrained in day-to-day routine and thus bequeathed to heirs and descendants, eventually bred a conviction that the nobility was superior by nature, and ruled by right over innately inferior beings. By the end of the fifteenth century, what would have been heresy to an earlier age had become practically an article of faith.²⁸ The peasants did not fall under the dominion of the nobility by virtue of being perceived as innately inferior. On the contrary, they came to be perceived as innately inferior by virtue of having fallen under the nobility's dominion.

Facts of nature spawned by the needs of ideology sometimes acquire greater power over people's minds than facts of nature spawned by nature itself. Some noblemen in tsarist Russia sincerely believed that, while their bones were white, the serfs' bones were black;²⁹ and, given the violence that prevailed in those times, I must presume that noblemen had ample occasion to observe the serfs' bones at first hand. Such is the weight of things that must be true ideologically that no amount of experimental observation can disprove them. But because tsarist Russia had no conception of absolute equality resting

²⁷ See Fields, 'Ideology and Race in American History', pp. 143–77.

²⁸ Jerome Blum, *Our Forgotten Past: Seven Centuries of Life on the Land*, London 1982, pp. 34–36.

²⁹ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, p. 170.

on natural law, it did not need as consistent or radical a version of absolute inequality resting on natural law as developed in the United States in the wake of the Revolution.³⁰ When self-evident laws of nature guarantee freedom, only equally self-evident laws of equally self-evident nature can account for its denial.

Historians can actually observe colonial Americans in the act of preparing the ground for race without foreknowledge of what would later rise on the foundation they were laying. A law enacted in the colony of Maryland in 1664 established the legal status of slave for life and experimented with assigning slave condition after the condition of the father. That experiment was soon dropped. Paternity is always ambiguous, whereas maternity is not. Slaveholders eventually recognized the advantage of a different and unambiguous rule of descent, one that would guarantee to owners all offspring of slave women, however fathered, at the slight disadvantage of losing to them such offspring as might have been fathered on free women by slave men. Nevertheless, the purpose of the experiment is clear: to prevent the erosion of slaveowners' property rights that would result if the offspring of free white women impregnated by slave men were entitled to freedom. The language of the preamble to the law makes clear that the point was not yet race: 'And forasmuch as divers freeborne English women forgettfull of their free Condition and to the disgrace of our Nation doe intermarry with Negro slaues by which alsoe diuers suites may arise touching the Issue of such woemen and a great damage doth befall the Masters of such Negroes . . .'³¹

'Freeborne English women'—not white women—were forgetting their free condition and disgracing their nation—not yet forgetting their colour and disgracing their race. And from their forgetting and disgracing arose 'diuers suites' and 'a great damage' to the slaveowners. *Race does not explain that law. Rather, the law shows society in the act of inventing race.*³² Practical needs—the need to clarify the

³⁰ In explaining why slaveholders in the American South developed a more thorough and elaborate pro-slavery ideology than Russian lords of serfs, Kolchin comes to the brink of this conclusion, only to back away from it into tautology. He argues that the presence of a 'racial' distinction between owner and slave that did not exist between lord and serf 'partly' accounts for the difference. But, as he quickly concedes, owners of African-descended slaves elsewhere in the Americas did not develop a thorough or consistent pro-slavery argument either. The racial distinction did not 'exist' in either the American South or Russia, but was invented in one and not the other. The 'racial' distinction between Southern owners and their slaves does not explain anything, but is itself part of what needs to be explained.

³¹ 'An Act Concerning Negroes & other Slaues', in Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America*, New York 1976, p. 24.

³² A law enacted in colonial Virginia illustrates the pitfall of anachronism awaiting historians who handle such material ahistorically. An entry under 'Negroes' in the index to a compilation of Virginia's laws refers readers to a provision against Negroes 'Lifting hand against a white man', and that is how Ira Berlin characterizes the law. (*Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, New York 1974, p. 8.) But the index was prepared for a compilation published in 1823. The law itself, enacted in 1680, provides a penalty for 'any negroe or other slave [who] shall presume to lift up his hand in opposition against any christian.' William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, vol. 2, New York 1823, pp. 481, 602.

property rights of slaveholders and the need to discourage free people from fraternizing with slaves—called forth the law. And once practical needs of this sort are ritualized often enough either as conforming behaviour or as punishment for non-conforming behaviour, they acquire an ideological rationale that explains to those who take part in the ritual why it is both automatic and natural to do so.

During the heyday of the cotton empire in the nineteenth century, slavery continued to perform the service it had pioneered in colonial times: that of limiting the need for free citizens (which is to say white people) to exploit each other directly and thereby identifying class exploitation with racial exploitation. But it also did much more than that. The domination of plantation slavery over Southern society preserved the social space within which the white yeomanry—that is, the small farmers and artisans who accounted for about three-fourths of the white families in the slave South just before the Civil War—could enjoy economic independence and a large measure of local self-determination, insulated from the realm of capitalist market society. By doing so, slavery permitted and required the white majority to develop its own characteristic form of racial ideology.

The White Yeomanry

Two-thirds of the people of the Old South were free and white. Of these, most owned no slaves and the few who did used them mainly for hunting, fishing, general farming and household chores, not for growing cash crops like cotton and tobacco. They tended to live in the backcountry, in areas too hilly, rocky, sandy, infertile, chilly, or far from navigable water to be of interest to planters. In fact, many had seen their parents or grandparents driven from better land as the slave plantations expanded to the west.³³ For reasons of their own self-interest, slaveholding planters did not wish either to antagonize non-slaveholders in their backcountry sanctuaries (since the yeomen outnumbered and thus potentially outvoted them) or to interfere in their local communities. Schools, roads, railroads and other improvements in the backcountry would require the planters to tax themselves—something they did as little as possible. For their part, the yeomen were jealous of their local independence and self-determination. They did not want the state telling them to send their children to school, and many mistrusted railroads, with their land speculators and pirates and their locomotives that might set fields ablaze or run over children and livestock.³⁴

³³ Ulrich B. Phillips, 'The Origin and Growth of the Southern Black Belts', in Phillips, *The Slave Economy of the Old South: Selected Essays in Economic and Social History*, ed. Eugene D. Genovese, Baton Rouge, La. 1968.

³⁴ My discussion of the white non-slaveholders rests largely on the important work of Steven Hahn, including *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890*, New York 1983, esp. part 1; 'Common Right and Commonwealth: The Stock-Law Struggle and the Roots of Southern Populism', in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, New York 1982; and 'Hunting, Fishing, and Foraging: Common Rights and Class Relations in the Postbellum South', *Radical History Review* 26, 1982. Also see Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, eds.,

Within their local communities, the white non-slaveholders developed a way of life as different from that of the slaveowning planters as from that of farmers in those Northern states where capitalist agriculture already prevailed. They grew only enough cash crops (that is, cotton or tobacco, because rice and sugar were chiefly plantation crops) for home use or to pay for those few purchases that required cash. For the rest, they concentrated on food crops—grain, potatoes, vegetables—and livestock. A custom long defunct in the Northern states permitted anyone to graze livestock or to hunt and fish on any land, public or private, that was not fenced. Thus, even people who owned little or no land could still keep livestock. The non-slaveholders traded in local markets, not national and international ones, and usually on the basis of barter or ‘swap-work’. (‘Swap-work’ meant that someone might, for example, repair the roof of his neighbour’s barn, in exchange for the neighbour’s putting a new wheel on his wagon or making him a pair of boots.) Local stores sold mainly commodities that the community could not produce—for example, firearms and ammunition, molasses, and nails—since the community was largely self-sufficient in food, furniture, shoes and clothing. Nearly every household owned a spinning-wheel, with which home-grown cotton could be turned into yarn for making the family’s clothes. A network of indebtedness held the community together, at the same time that it started arguments and lawsuits: everybody owed something to somebody else. The local store did not even charge interest until a debt was over a year old. The law itself recognized the rules of basic justice that prevailed within the non-slaveholders’ communities. Most states of the lower South had a law known as the ‘homestead exemption’. Even if the head of a household went bankrupt, his creditors could not strip him of his house and its furnishings and land—enough to permit him to retain his social and economic independence.

Strong belief in the value of social independence led the non-slaveholders to share with planters a contempt for both the hireling labourers of the North and the chattel slaves of the South; it also bred in them an egalitarian instinct that never gracefully accepted any white man’s aristocratic right to rule other white men—a right the planters never doubted with regard to the lower classes of whatever colour. The racial ideology of the yeomanry therefore could not possibly replicate that of the planters. Instead, it emerged as a byproduct of the practical, day-to-day business of the yeomen’s lives.

This is perhaps a good moment to say a few words about what ideology is and what it is not; because without an understanding of what

³⁴ (cont.)

Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies, Westport, Conn. 1981, and Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia*, Baton Rouge, La. 1977. J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860*, Baton Rouge, La. 1978, and Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860*, New York 1988, offer interpretations of the white yeomanry differing from Hahn’s, but much of their evidence tends rather to sustain it.

ideology is and does, how it arises and how it is sustained, there can be no genuinely historical understanding of race. Ideology is best understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day. It is the language of consciousness that suits the particular way in which people deal with their fellows. It is the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and re-create their collective being, in all the varied forms their collective being may assume: family, clan, tribe, nation, class, party, business enterprise, church, army, club, and so on. As such, ideologies are not delusions but real, as real as the social relations for which they stand.

Ideologies are real, but it does not follow that they are scientifically accurate, or that they provide an analysis of social relations that would make sense to anyone who does not take ritual part in those social relations. Some societies (including colonial New England) have explained troublesome relations between people as witchcraft and possession by the devil. The explanation makes sense to those whose daily lives produce and reproduce witchcraft, nor can any amount of rational 'evidence' disprove it. Witchcraft in such a society is as self-evident a natural fact as race is to Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*. To someone looking in from outside, however, explaining a miscarriage, a crop failure, a sudden illness, or a death by invoking witchcraft would seem absurd, just as explaining slavery by invoking race must seem absurd to anyone who does not ritually produce race day in and day out as Americans do. Ideologies do not need to be plausible, let alone persuasive, to outsiders. They do their job when they help insiders make sense of the things they do and see—ritually, repetitively—on a daily basis.

So much ideology is. Here is what it is not. It is not a material entity, a thing of any sort, that you can hand down like an old garment, pass on like a germ, spread like a rumour, or impose like a code of dress or etiquette. Nor is it a collection of disassociated beliefs—'attitudes' is the favoured jargon among American social scientists and the historians they have mesmerized—that you can extract from their context and measure by current or retrospective survey research. (Someday the reification of conduct and demeanour in 'attitudes' will seem as quaint and archaic as their reification in bodily 'humours'—phlegmatic, choleric, melancholic, sanguine—does now.) Nor is it a Frankenstein's monster that takes on a life of its own.

Ideology is not the same as propaganda. Someone who said, 'Anti-slavery ideology infiltrated the slave quarters through illicit abolitionist newspapers', would be talking rather about propaganda than about ideology. The slaves' anti-slavery ideology could not be smuggled to them in alien newsprint. People deduce and verify their ideology in daily life. The slaves' anti-slavery ideology had to arise from their lives in slavery and from their daily relations with slaveholders and other

members of slave society.³⁵ Frederick Douglass was not propounding a paradox but speaking the simple truth when he said that the first anti-slavery lecture he ever heard was delivered by his master in the course of explaining to his mistress why slaves must not be taught to read. By the same token, slaves who decided at the first shot of the Civil War—or even earlier, with Lincoln’s election—that emancipation was finally on the nation’s agenda were not responding to prevailing Northern propaganda (which, indeed, promised nothing of the kind at that time). It was their experience with slaveowners, not least the slaveowners’ hysterical equation of the Republican Party with abolition, that made slaves see Lincoln as the emancipator before he saw himself that way. And, I might add, it was the slaves’ acting on that foreknowledge that forced Lincoln to become the emancipator.

Ideology, Propaganda and Dogma

To insist that ideology and propaganda are not the same is not to suppose that they are unrelated. The most successful propagandist is one who thoroughly understands the ideology of those to be propagandized. When propagandists for secession before the American Civil War emphasized the danger that the Northerners might encroach upon Southerners’ right of self-determination, they emphasized a theme that resonated as well with the world of non-slaveholders as with that of planters, even though the two worlds differed as night from day. ‘We will never be slaves’ was good secessionist propaganda. ‘We must never let them take our slaves’ would have been poor propaganda and the secessionists knew it; just as today ‘Strategic Defence Initiative’ makes a good advertisement for a weapons programme, whereas ‘Strategic Offensive Initiative’ or ‘First-Strike Initiative’ would not.

Neither is ideology the same as doctrine or dogma. Pro-slavery doctrine might well hold, for example, that any white person’s word must take precedence over any black person’s. But the push-and-shove reality of any planter’s business would tell him or her that some situations call for accepting a slave’s word over an overseer’s.³⁶ After all, overseers came and went, but slaves remained; and the object was to produce cotton or sugar or rice or tobacco, not to produce white supremacy. The perfect subordination of the slaves to the overseer, if coupled with poor production, would spell disaster for a planter. Thus, the ideology of a planter—that is, the vocabulary of day-to-day action and experience—must make room for contest and struggle (perhaps

³⁵ The slaves’ religion arose in the same way. In an astute and eloquent passage, Donald G. Mathews diagnoses the error of supposing that the slaves should or could have had a ‘correct’ version of Christianity transmitted to them by an outside agency. To argue that way, Mathews correctly insists, presupposes that the slave could ‘slough off his enslavement, ancestry, traditional ways of viewing the world, and sense of selfhood in order to think the oppressor’s thoughts after him. . . . The description of action in which the slave is expected to remain passive while receiving a discrete body of ideas and attitudes which exist apart from social and cultural conditions reveals one of the most mischievous and flawed assumptions which scholars make.’ *Religion in the Old South*, Chicago 1967, p. 187.

³⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, New York 1974, p. 16.

couched in paternalistic or racist language), even if doctrine specified an eternal hierarchy. Doctrine or dogma may be imposed, and they often are: dissenters can be excommunicated from a church or expelled from a party. But ideology is a distillate of experience. Where the experience is lacking, so is the ideology that only the missing experience could call into being. Planters in the Old South could have imposed their understanding of the world upon the non-slaveholders or the slaves only if they could have transformed the lives of the non-slaveholders and slaves into a replica of their own.

An ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies, even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down.³⁷ Many Christians still think of kneeling with folded hands as the appropriate posture for prayer, but few now know why; and the few who do know cannot, even if they choose, mean the same thing by it as was meant by those to whom the posture was part of an ideology still real in everyday social life. The social relations that once gave explicit meaning to that ritual gesture of the vassal's subordination to his lord are now as dead as a mackerel, and so, therefore, is the ideological vocabulary—including the posture of prayer—in which those social relations once lived.

The foregoing line of argument raises the question of how one group's understanding of reality, its ideology, appears to prevail over others when it comes to real and effective political power. Depending on who poses the question, it is the problem of social order, of converting power into authority, or of political hegemony. The most obvious answer—force—is not an answer. There is never ultimately enough force to go around, particularly since submission is hardly ever an end in itself. **If the slaveholders had produced white supremacy without producing cotton, their class would have perished in short order.** A colonial ruler does not just want the natives to bow down and render obeisance to their new sovereign. The natives must also grow food, pay taxes, go to work in mines and on estates, provide conscripts for the army, and help to hold the line against rival powers. For these activities to proceed, the natives must not just submit, they must cooperate. Even in those few cases in which submission *is* an end in itself, **force is never enough** in itself. Slaveholders, colonial rulers, prison guards and the Shah's police have all had occasion to discover that when nothing remains except force, nothing remains—period. **The rule of any group, the power of any state, rests on force** in the final analysis. Anyone who gives the least thought to the matter reaches that conclusion, and thinkers as different in other respects as Weber, Marx, Machiavelli and Madison would have no trouble agreeing on that. Rule always rests on force in the last analysis. **But a ruling group or a state that must rely on force in the first analysis as well is one living in a state of siege, rebellion, war or revolution.**

It will not do to suppose that a powerful group captures the hearts and minds of the less powerful, (inducing them to 'internalize' the

³⁷ Some people imagine that ideology can indeed be handed down in the form of law. If that were so, then the law could do without courts, lawyers, judges, and juries.

ruling ideology (to borrow the spurious adjective-verb in which this artless evasion has so often been couched). To suppose that is to imagine ideology handed down like an old garment, passed on like a germ, spread like a rumour, or imposed like a dress code. Any of these would presuppose that an experience of social relations can be transmitted by the same means, which is impossible.

And yet, power does somehow become authority. A red light, or the upraised palm of a traffic policeman, brings people to a stop (at least in places where people tend to obey them) not by the exercise of power—neither a light nor a hand can stop a moving automobile—but by the exercise of authority. Why? Not, surely, because everyone shares a belief, an ‘attitude’, about the sanctity of the law, or holds the same conception of a citizen’s duty. Many citizens who would unhesitatingly stop for a red light, even at a deserted intersection at 2:00 a.m., would painstakingly calculate the relative cost and benefit of breaking laws against environmental pollution, insider-trading in securities, or failing to report income to the Internal Revenue Service, and then obey or violate the law according to how the calculation worked out.

It is not an abstract belief or attitude that brings people to stop at a red light. Rather, people discover the advantage of being able to take for granted what everyone else will do at a busy intersection. Or, to be more exact, they have grown up in a society that constantly ritualizes that discovery—by making people stop again and again for red lights—without each person having to make the discovery anew by ad hoc calculation at every intersection. Both parts are necessary: the demonstrable advantage of stopping and the constant re-enactment of the appropriate conduct, a re-enactment that removes the matter from the realm of calculation to that of routine. The ritual repetition of the appropriate social behaviour makes for the continuity of ideology, not the ‘handing down’ of the appropriate ‘attitudes’. There, too, lies the key to why people may suddenly appear to slough off an ideology to which they had appeared subservient. Ideology is not a set of attitudes that people can ‘have’ as they have a cold, and throw off the same way. Human beings live in human societies by negotiating a certain social terrain, whose map they keep alive in their minds by the collective, ritual repetition of the activities they must carry out in order to negotiate the terrain. If the terrain changes, so must their activities, and therefore so must the map.

Shaping the Terrain

Let me pursue a bit further this analogy of terrain. But imagine a physical landscape: trees here, a river there, mountains, valleys, quicksand, desert and so on. And imagine an observer at the altitude of an earth satellite, who for some reason can follow the paths of people over the terrain, but cannot see the details of the landscape. The observer sees people tunneling under, climbing over, jogging to left or right, moving with odd swimming motions, even disappearing unceremoniously into the quicksand. Given a modicum of training in the orthodox tradition of American history, he might conclude that people in this part of the landscape have ‘attitudes’ calling for one

kind of movement, while people in that part have ‘attitudes’ calling for another kind—all of these ‘attitudes’ possessing a ‘life of their own’. Given a modicum of wisdom, he would realize that the key to understanding the people’s movements is to analyse the terrain.

Therein, also, lies the key to understanding how one group acquires authority, imposes order, or achieves hegemony. Exercising rule means being able to shape the terrain. Suppose that the ruling group wants everyone in our landscape to move east, and therefore starts fires in the forests to the west. Mission accomplished: everybody moves east. Because they all share a conviction—an ‘attitude’—glorifying the virtues of easterly movement? Not necessarily. All that order, authority or hegemony requires is that the interest of the mass in not getting burned alive should intersect the interest of the rulers in moving everyone to the east. If easterly movement subsequently becomes part of the routine by which the masses organize their lives independently of the rulers so that such movement becomes part of a constantly repeated social routine, a vocabulary will soon enough explain to the masses—not analytically, but descriptively—what easterly movement means. And that vocabulary need not and cannot be a duplicate of the one spoken by the rulers.

Racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights; and, more important, a republic in which those doctrines seemed to represent accurately the world in which all but a minority lived. Only when the denial of liberty became an anomaly apparent even to the least observant and reflective members of Euro-American society did ideology systematically explain the anomaly. But slavery got along for a hundred years after its establishment without race as its ideological rationale. The reason is simple. Race explained why some people could rightly be denied what others took for granted: namely, liberty, supposedly a self-evident gift of nature’s God. But there was nothing to explain until most people could, in fact, take liberty for granted—as the indentured servants and disfranchised freedmen of colonial America could not. Nor was there anything calling for a radical explanation where everyone in society stood in a relation of inherited subordination to someone else: servant to master, serf to nobleman, vassal to overlord, overlord to king, king to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

It was not Afro-Americans, furthermore, who needed a racial explanation; it was not they who invented themselves as a race. Euro-Americans resolved the contradiction between slavery and liberty by defining Afro-Americans as a race; Afro-Americans resolved the contradiction more straightforwardly by calling for the abolition of slavery. From the era of the American, French and Haitian revolutions on, they claimed liberty as theirs by natural right.³⁸ They did not

³⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*, Baton Rouge, La. 1979; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 2nd ed., rev., New York 1963; Willie Lee Rose, ‘The Impact of the American Revolution on the Black Population’, in Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. William W. Freehling, New York 1982.

originate the large nineteenth-century literature purporting to prove their biological inferiority, nor, by and large, did they accept it. Vocabulary can be very deceptive. Both Afro- and Euro-Americans used the words that today denote race, but they did not understand those words the same way. Afro-Americans understood the reason for their enslavement to be, as Frederick Douglass put it, 'not *color*, but *crime*'.³⁹ Afro-Americans invented themselves, not as a race, but as a nation. They were not troubled, as modern scholars often are, by the use of racial vocabulary to express their sense of nationality. Afro-American soldiers who petitioned on behalf of 'These poor nation of colour' and 'we Poore Nation of a Colered rast [race]' saw nothing incongruous about the language.⁴⁰

Racial ideology in its radical American form is the ideology to be expected in a society in which enslavement stands as an exception to a radically defined liberty so commonplace that no great effort of imagination is required to take it for granted. It is the ideology proper to a 'free' society in which the enslaved descendants of Africans are an anomalous exception. There is no paradox; it makes good, common sense. Indeed, I dare go further. In the wake of the American Revolution, racial ideology assumed its greatest importance in the free, bourgeois society of the Northern states, where both slavery and the presence of Afro-Americans became increasingly minor exceptions.⁴¹ The paroxysm of racial violence that convulsed the South during the years after emancipation, and the ever more detailed legal codification of racial proscription, represent the nationalization of race, an ideology that described the bourgeois North much better than it did the slave South.

For those living within the maturing slave society of the South, racial ideology in its radical American form could not fully account for the social landscape. There, slavery was not a minor exception but the central organizing principle of society, allocating social space not just to slaveholders and slaves but to the free black population⁴² and the

³⁹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, New York 1969 (orig. ed. 1855), p. 90.

⁴⁰ Sargent Wm. White et al. to Dear President, 3 July 1866, document 333, and Capt. G.E. Stanford et al. to Mr. President and the Ceterry of War, 30 May 1866, document 341, in Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 2, *The Black Military Experience*, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 764, 780.

⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson is an excellent illustration of how such racial ideology could become chillingly systematic and loathsome racial doctrine in the hands of a first-rate Northern intellectual. Lewis P. Simpson perceptively and relentlessly probes Emerson's bigoted views about Afro-Americans (and, for that matter, his bigoted views about white Southerners) in *Mind and the American Civil War: A Meditation on Lost Causes*, Baton Rouge, La. 1989, esp. pp. 52–57, 65–69, 72–73.

⁴² During the 1850s, the state of Georgia levied a property tax of \$0.39 on each slave but a poll tax of \$5.00 on each free black person. (For white people, the poll tax was \$0.25 and applied to men only.) Annual road duty was required of slavemen and white men aged sixteen to forty-five, but of free black men and women aged fifteen to sixty. (Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia*, Chapel Hill, N.C. 1987, pp. 41, 93.) In July 1981, a white citizen of Lynchburg, Virginia, complained to Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, about the 'large number of Free Negroes in this City,' branding them at once a 'degraded and worse than useless race' and a 'class who . . . is more than useless'. (John Lenaham to

non-slaveholding white majority as well. Inequality was not a necessary evil to be tolerated only in the instance of uncivilized Negroes, nor was its necessity commonly derived from biological science. (In the South, the heyday of scientific racism—as of scientific sexism—came after, not during, slavery.)⁴² Inequality was ordained by God, not by science, and was applicable not only to relations between slaveholders and slaves, but also to relations between men and women and between the planter elite and the non-slaveholding majority. Democracy and majority rule did not rank high in the aspirations of the planter class.⁴⁴ In fact, the organic intellectuals of the planter class (who rivalled Engels in well-aimed propaganda denouncing the suffering of workers under industrial capitalism) regretted that the white labouring poor of their own society could not be brought under the benevolent regime of slavery—called by tactful euphemisms like ‘warranteeism without the ethnical qualification’ and ‘slavery in the abstract’. It would not do, after all, to tell an armed and enfranchised white majority that they, too, would be better off as slaves.⁴⁵

⁴² (cont.)

Hon. Jeff. Davis, 15 July 1861, document 299, in Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, series 1, volume 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, Cambridge 1985, p. 760.) In the eyes of that Virginian and of state and county law in Georgia, slaves and free people of African descent were not the same ‘race’ and neither biology nor ancestry nor prejudice of colour had anything to do with it. By word and deed, white citizens in slave society proved that they, unlike many scholars, were not fooled by the language of race into mistaking its substance.

⁴³ Josiah C. Nott provoked a hostile reaction from other pro-slavery Southerners when he expounded a scientific theory of racism that seemed to contradict scripture. See Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860*, Baton Rouge, La. 1981, pp. 206–38; Gould, *The Mismeasure of man*, pp. 69–72. On the nature of white Southerners’ arguments for women’s subordination during and after slavery, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, ‘The Conservatism of Slaveholding Women: A Comparative Perspective’, Porter L. Fortune Chancellor’s Symposium on Southern History, University of Mississippi, 11–13 October 1989.

⁴⁴ For example, John C. Calhoun’s doctrine of the ‘concurrent majority’ was explicitly designed to frustrate the will of an anti-slavery majority, should one ever gain control of the United States government, by guaranteeing the slaveholding minority a veto no matter how large the numerical majority arrayed against it. See Calhoun’s ‘A Disquisition on Government’, ed. Richard K. Crallé, in *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 1, New York 1968. Many historians, following the lead of George Fredrickson, characterize the slave South as a ‘herrenvolk democracy’. It is a specious concept that fails to take account of the ways in which slavery curtailed the political rights of the non-slaveholding white majority, the supposed herrenvolk. An obvious example is the overrepresentation of slaveholders secured by the three-fifths provision of the United States Constitution (replicated in the constitution of the Confederacy). Another example is the requirement for the posting of bond—ranging from \$1000 to \$500,000—that replaced property qualifications for county officers in the plantation districts, ensuring that humble citizens could hold office only under the patronage of their betters. See Steven Hahn, ‘Capitalists All!’, review of James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*, in *Reviews in American History* 11, June 1983.

⁴⁵ Eugene D. Genovese developed this argument long ago in his essay about George Fitzhugh, ‘The Logical Outcome of the Slaveholders’ Philosophy’, in Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*, New York 1969. A number of historians at first dismissed the argument on the grounds that Fitzhugh was a one-of-a-kind aberration—a charge occasionally repeated even today; for example, George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*, Urbana, Ill. 1989, p. 291n. Subsequent work has demonstrated that, although Fitzhugh was indeed one of a

Race Today

The pro-slavery intellectuals' reticence in stating that conclusion publicly and forthrightly goes far to explain why the United States to this day has failed to develop a thorough, consistent and honest **political conservatism**. The only historical ground that might have nourished such a tradition—namely, the slave society of the South—was contaminated by the need to humour the democratic aspirations of a propertied, enfranchised, and armed white majority. Few self-styled conservative politicians in the United States today dare argue on principle (at least in public) that hereditary inequality and subordination should be the lot of the majority. Instead, those prepared to defend inequality do so on the basis of a bastard free-market liberalism, with racial, ethnic or sexual determinism tacked on as an inconsistent afterthought.

Meanwhile, many **well-intentioned believers in truth** and justice **succumb to biological determinism**, the armour of the enemy, when they see around them the ugly signs that racism continues to thrive in our world. Weary of the struggle, they **throw up their hands and declare that racism**, if not genetically programmed, is nonetheless an idea so old and entrenched that it **has 'taken on a life of its own'**. They thereby come much closer than they realize to the views of those they ostensibly oppose. Although it is now frowned upon to attribute biological disability to those designated to be a race, it is eminently fashionable to attribute biological disability—or its functional equivalent—to those demonstrated to be racists. Either way, Africans and their descendants become a special category set apart by biology: in the one instance their own, in the other that of their persecutors.

But race is neither biology nor an idea absorbed into biology by Lamarckian inheritance. It is ideology, and ideologies do not have lives of their own. Nor can they be handed down or inherited: a doctrine can be, or a name, or a piece of property, but not an ideology. If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have inherited it from our forebears of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today. David Brion Davis had the courage and honesty to argue the disturbing thesis that, during the era of the American Revolution, those who opposed slavery were complicit with those who favoured it in settling on race as its explanation. We must be courageous and honest enough to admit something similar about our own time and our own actions.

Those who create and re-create race today are not just the mob that killed a young Afro-American man on a street in Brooklyn or the

⁴⁵ (cont.)

kind in some respects, he was no aberration in considering slave society morally superior to capitalist society ('free trade' in his terminology) regardless of the slaves' nationality or descent. See Drew Gilpin Faust, 'The Peculiar South Revisited: White Society, Culture, and Politics in the Antebellum Period, 1800–1860', in *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*, ed. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, Baton Rouge, La. 1987, esp. pp. 102–105; Simpson, *Mind and the American Civil War*, pp. 30–32.

people who join the Klan and the White Order. They are also those academic writers whose invocation of self propelling 'attitudes' and tragic flaws assigns Africans and their descendants to a special category, placing them in a world exclusively theirs and outside history—a form of intellectual apartheid no less ugly or oppressive, despite its righteous (not to say self-righteous) trappings, than that practised by the bio- and theo-racists; and for which the victims, like slaves of old, are expected to be grateful. They are the academic 'liberals' and 'progressives' in whose version of race the neutral shibboleths *difference* and *diversity* replace words like *slavery*, *injustice*, *oppression* and *exploitation*, diverting attention from the anything-but-neutral history these words denote. They are also the Supreme Court and spokesmen for affirmative action, unable to promote or even define justice except by enhancing the authority and prestige of race; which they will continue to do forever so long as the most radical goal of the political opposition remains the reallocation of unemployment, poverty and injustice rather than their abolition.

The creators and re-creators of race include as well a young woman who chuckled appreciatively when her four-year-old boy, upon being asked whether a young friend whose exploit he was recounting was black, answered: 'No; he's brown.' The young woman's benevolent laughter was for the innocence of youth, too soon corrupted. But for all its benevolence, her laughter hastened the corruption whose inevitability she laments, for it taught the little boy that his empirical description was cute but inappropriate. It enacted for him, in a way that hand-me-down stereotypes never could, the truth that physical description follows race, not the other way around. Of just such small, innocuous and constantly repeated rituals, often undertaken with the best of motives, is race reborn every day. Evil may result as well from good as from ill intentions. That is the fallibility and tragedy of human history—or, to use a different vocabulary, its dialectic.

Nothing handed down from the past could keep race alive if we did not constantly reinvent and re-ritualize it to fit our own terrain. If race lives on today, it can do so only because we continue to create and re-create it in our social life, continue to verify it, and thus continue to need a social vocabulary that will allow us to make sense, not of what our ancestors did then, but of what we ourselves choose to do now.*

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