

Sep. 24. Race, Culture, and War

Discussion # 7: Race as a Historical Category

Peter C. Perdue

[Discussion of Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; Landeg White, *Magomero*; John Dower, *War Without Mercy*]

Racism defies reason. Of all the ways human beings have devised to make each other miserable, racial oppression is surely the most mysterious. Why should an arbitrary biological marker of superficial differences in skin color or physiognomy become so often the main means by which people are classified into the privileged and the exploited? Class divisions based on relations to means of production are at least understandable, if not to be condoned, in economic terms: owners of capital in search of maximum profits will always try to beat down workers' wages and convince themselves that they don't deserve any more. Gender divisions are at least biologically relatively clear, and also have some basis in the division of labor between household and child rearing and the world of work, though of course these classifications are socially constructed, too. But racial categories are a completely political and historical construction which invokes pseudo-scientific biology to justify them. There are interesting analogies and differences between these three forms of power relations; they are, I think, the three basic categories that social historians concentrate on. A fourth form, the nation-state, has been, however, by far the dominant one for traditional historians for centuries. Most historians still organize their reading, research, and teaching by national orientation. The new wave of modern history has undercut this tendency somewhat, although it is still institutionally strong. Racial perspectives too often remain confined within national boundaries: this is true of nearly all the intensive American discussion of race. But we gain more useful insights from looking at interracial contacts across international frontiers.

The three works assigned for this week look at the question of interracial contact in three different national contexts: U.S. vs. Japan, the Southern U.S., and the British and African villagers. What they have in common is the attempt to examine this racial encounter from both sides, paying equal attention, if possible, to the subordinated and the powerful. Racism is always a relationship between two actors. Unless we take seriously the underlying beliefs of both sides in their encounter, we cannot get to the roots of the conflict. These three cases are especially polarized ones, too. Often in racial encounters there really seems to be no common ground whatsoever between the two parties. Some argue that radically polarized racism is a particular consequence of the Protestant Anglo-Saxon world. Latin American Iberian societies, for example, have far more mixed categories, than do English and American ones. (Is this true for Africa too? Can we compare English, Dutch, French, and Portuguese Africa on this basis? See work of Patricia Seed and Ramon Gutierrez on Latin America and racial categories.)

Not only are the two parties radically polarized, but the historians' sources are too. All too often, documentary sources survive only from the dominant, white powerholders. Lots of histories of imperialism in Africa and elsewhere have been written that look only at the relationship between the imperial powers: English vs. French, etc. They ignore the

reaction of the indigenous people who were the victims of domination. To recover the story of the subordinated Africans, the historian needs to be more imaginative about his sources. If only white missionary and adventurers' accounts survive, you need to read them in a different way. Notice how Landeg White can read through the accounts of Livingstone, et.al., comment on how much they misunderstood the local African situation, and give us a convincing picture of how the villagers and their chiefs saw the white intruders, even though we have no documents in their own words. For the twentieth century, oral histories can be very useful, too. This is the main basis for the second half of *Magomero*, combined with archival and other documentary sources.

But does the unreliability of oral sources fatally compromise their usefulness as historical sources? Oscar Handlin thinks so: he has made derogatory comments about the reliability of a gripping popular study of a black sharecropper's life based on his own oral autobiography. [Handlin: *Truth in History*; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life and Times of Nate Shaw*.]

For the American South in the nineteenth century, the situation is not quite so bad. There are written accounts by freed and escaped slaves, and oral histories taken down at the time. But the white slaveowners themselves also provide very insightful analyses of their own society, sometimes, and Genovese uses these skillfully. American slavery was a longer lasting, arguably more stable system than European imperialism in Africa. White and black cultures interpenetrated each other very intimately. Since the two groups were so closely tied, what each says about the other can be very revealing.

Or is it? Genovese pushes hard the idea that we must take seriously the planters' paternalism. They really had to believe that they were being benevolent to their slaves; almost none of them could justify slavery as naked exploitation. [Cecil Rhodes was much more blatant about it] The slaves found ways to use the masters' ideals against them. Their forms of resistance relied on invoking the paternalist ideology to limit the absolute power of the owners. They made gains, but within the system. Again in contrast to Latin America and the Caribbean, American slavery stands out for the rarity of major slave revolts. Genovese has attacked quite viciously Herbert Aptheker, a leading American Communist historian of slave revolts, for exaggerating the extent of class struggle in the South. Genovese is a Marxist, too, but in a Gramscian, not a crudely materialist, sense. "Hegemony", the control of the cultural and symbolic sphere, matters as much if not more than control of production.

But does Genovese overstate the solidarity of both whites and blacks? His picture is a static one, much more like the anthropologists' "ethnographic present" than a dynamic story of change. He does account for some variation, but not a great deal of regional difference. Like E.P. Thompson, he argues for the evolution of a common consciousness among the exploited, but unlike Thompson, he cannot point to many active, openly political resistance movements. But since hegemony is never total, resistance can take non-political forms. Is it fair to see shirking, laziness, holidays, and religion as forms of resistance? Genovese is much more respectful of religion as a major cultural force than Thompson, because he finds it to be the central way for slaves to define their collective identity autonomously from the master class.

The ideals invoked by master classes have to pretend to universality. Hence the basic contradiction is inescapable: if a slave is merely property, he cannot be convicted of crimes; if he is human, why doesn't he have equal rights? Here's where the door is opened

to scientific racism: if you can justify "scientific" inferiority, you put slaves into an only partly human category. Thus they can be dominated, beaten, jailed, and lynched, but kept in inequality. Much the same has been said over and over about women, children, and many other non-European peoples for centuries. The poverty of these racial ideas is revealed by their incessant repetition in many contexts.

For a recent update, and implicit critique of Genovese's model of slavery, see Ira Berlin,

Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (Harvard

UP, 1998). In a way, Berlin is to Genovese as Perry is to EP Thompson. Where Genovese

stresses the unity of the slave experience, and tends to neglect temporal change and

regional variation, Berlin stresses the diversity of slavery in different parts of the South,

and argues [in Thompsonian terms], that race relations, like class relations, are

interactive, dynamic, and constantly changing. He divides his book into three [!] parts

chronologically and 4 separate regions [North, Tidewater, low country, and Mississippi],

for twelve chapters. The much greater complexity of Berlin's account threatens to lose

coherence, but it is unified by a focus on workplaces and economic roles: in effect, class

and production relations take precedence over race itself. There is, for example,

interesting discussion of "Atlantic creoles," the mixed race groups in between blacks and

whites who played key roles in facilitating the slave trade on both sides of the Atlantic.

So Berlin is more attentive to cultural mixing, fluidity, and opportunities for resistance

through religion, song, and sabotage: very much in the modern way of interest in

hybridity and change; Genovese is more static and structural, more concerned to address

older vulgar Marxist emphasis on rebellions and Africanist stress on the unity of black

culture, or a separate black nation.

The Pacific War demonstrated much of the same racial vocabulary in action. John Dower shows repeatedly how Americans demonized the Japanese, using extensive animal imagery, all for the purpose of justifying indiscriminate slaughter. Unlike the other two cases, Japan, too, was a highly literate, industrialized society, with an equally potent racial ideology. It is the conflict and contrast of these two ideologies that makes the

encounter so fascinating. Neither side really understood or respected the other; neither faced the contradictions of its own ideology, but their enemy easily exposed them. Japanese noticed that Americans claimed to fight for freedom and equal rights, but defended European empires and refused to grant equality to blacks. Americans ridiculed the contradictions of a Japan claiming to free all Asian from imperial rule by creating their own empire: the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. No one has exposed the underlying racial categorization in the Pacific War better than John Dower. If he is right, there was a major difference in conduct of the war in the Pacific from the war by Americans in Europe, because of the racial factor. (But a number of people have attacked him for claiming this - Ian Buruma in New York Review of Books). Unfortunately, recent developments in the U.S. - Japan relationship bear him out all too well. We do not discuss Japan the same way we discuss Germany these days. Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun*, a vicious racial interpretation of Japan, was a best seller. Now it runs on network TV.

Have we made any progress over the past century? Even though imperialism in the political sense has collapsed, has racial understanding improved, either between nations or within them? Can historians do anything to contribute to this agonizing debate? They certainly cannot ignore it any more.

Selected Bibliography: Race as a Historical Category

March, 1998

Bynum, Victoria, *Unruly women : the politics of social and sexual control in the old South* [Chapel Hill, 1992]

Dikotter, Frank, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Stanford, 1992 [NB especially links of racial thought to nationalism, and discussion of Chinese enthusiasm for eugenics in 20th century]

Elkins, Stanley, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* ((locus classicus of "the Sambo thesis"; comparisons of slavery with concentration camp and "total institutions" (1959)

Fabian, Johannes, *Language and Power* (British use of Swahili in Central Africa)

Fields, Barbara , "The Ideology of Race", *New Left Review*, 1990

Fogel, Robert, and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (new economic history analysis of profitability of slavery) (1974)

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth, *Within the plantation household : Black and White women of the Old South* [1988]

Frederickson, George, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, 2002). Comparisons of racial ideologies in historical perspective, especially Nazism, American slavery, and South African apartheid.

Gutierrez, Ramon, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Spanish and Indian relations)

Gutman, Herbert, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976)

Gutman, Herbert, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (1975)

Hine, Darlene Clark, ed., *The State of Afro-American History* (overview of the field)

Huggins, Nathan, *The Black Odyssey* (blacks in African perspective)

Kolchin, Peter, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (1987) (also comparative history; review by C. Vann Woodward, *New York Review of Books*, 11/19/87)

Kolchin, Peter, "American Historians and Antebellum Southern Slavery, 1959 - 1984, in William J. Cooper, ed., *A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald* (1985)

Levine, Laurence, *Many Thousands Gone*. A synthesis of scholarship on slavery in the South

Rathbone, Richard (History of West African slavery)

Stampp, Kenneth, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* ("Sambo thesis" and resistance) (1956)

White, Deborah, *Ar'n't I a woman? : female slaves in the plantation South* [Norton, 1985]