

Naturalization of Slavery and Discrimination in the United States: An Analysis of the Roles of Protestantism, Capitalism and Social Darwinism in the Formation of Demeaning Black Stereotypes

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Abstract: After the first encounter between the Occident and the non-white, non-Christian subjects in the fifteenth century, the Western mind began to Otherize blacks through a deliberate exaggeration of their physical and sociocultural differences. This process of Otherization and inferiorization was reinforced by the West's employment of a stereotypical representational strategy which depicted the Negroid either as a noble child of nature or a demonic savage. In the pre-emancipation United States where the slave trade had turned into one of the most lucrative businesses of the day, these objectifying stereotypes were so preponderant that they battered down and almost vanished the real black presence. By demoting blacks to a subhuman status and portraying them as brutish, heathen and depraved, the dominant white society could easily justify the atrocious deeds perpetrated against blacks during the slavery era. Even after the emancipation, the extant demeaning stereotypes served as powerful instruments in the hands of white dominators to impose discrimination and segregation on the subalternized blacks. This paper analyzes the roles of Protestantism, Capitalism and Social Darwinism in the formation and perpetuation of demeaning black stereotypes, and tries to demonstrate how these major religious, economic and scientific trends of the day naturalized the institution of slavery and the pervasive discrimination against blacks.

Keywords: Stereotype, Slavery, Discrimination, Protestantism, Capitalism, Social Darwinism

1. Introduction

The Western enterprise of Otherization and subalternization has been at work since the first encounter of European expansionist colonizers with the inhabitants of Americas. From the very beginning, the ethnic and chromatic differences were essentialized in the hands of Western colonizers and thus gradually turned into a basis for hierarchical sociopolitical and moral rankings (Brown, 1993). The stereotypical representations justified the necessity and inevitability of colonial control by constantly reinforcing the superiority of the West over the inferiority of the Other. The result was an unvarying portrait of "a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (Said, as cited in Gandhi, 1998).

The same fixating agenda was adopted in the representation of blacks, at times bolstered by religious, economic and scientific discourses. Even though the United States never officially ruled colonies in Africa, Americans benefitted from the enterprise of colonization through the institution of slavery. The plundering of Africa, whether direct or indirect, necessitated a stereotypical representation of Africans as subordinate. As a consequence of the colonial process of inferiorization and subalternization, Americans generalized that the black Others were more different from whites than they were similar. Through the exaggeration of social, cultural, psychological and physical differences, white dominators could maintain their constructed images of blacks and apply epithets such as mysterious, dark and backward to peoples of African descent (Keim, 2009).

Such classification and labeling were in fact parts of the process of description-domination in which certain listed features were considered to constitute a generic and comprehensive description of the subaltern group. By emphasizing the differences of the subaltern group and changing them into absolute natural positions, the dominators established categories and subsequently hierarchical binarisms which could justify and legitimize their expansionist program and colonial rule (Brown, 1993).

This paper tries to shed light on the roles of the dominant religious, economic and scientific discourses, namely Protestantism, capitalism and Social Darwinism, in the formation and perpetuation of degrading black stereotypes in the pre- and post-emancipation United States. It also aims to demonstrate the mainstream American society's employment of the above-mentioned discourses to naturalize and justify the institution of slavery and the entrenched racism and discrimination against subalternized blacks.

2. Protestantism, the Black Stereotype and the Justification of Slavery

"It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants, – kept in a low condition," said a grave-looking gentleman in black, a clergyman, seated by the cabin door. "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be," the scripture says." (Stowe, 2009)

No concept truly tantamount to the present day notion of race can be observed in the writings and attitudes of Greeks, Romans, and the early Christians. Greeks hierarchized the civilized and the barbarous, but these classifications do not seem to have been considered as hereditary. Romans had slaves from different colors and nationalities and also citizens of corresponding variety; so it is no exaggeration to say that no evidence has been detected to prove that dark skin color served as the criterion of discriminatory distinctions anywhere in the ancient world. Over time and as Catholic Europe expanded by dint of conquering and colonizing the marginal parts of the continent, attitudes of superiority to the indigenous populations of the conquered lands gradually surfaced, a stance that foreshadowed the spirit of dominance and supremacy that would mark the later invasion and infiltration of Europeans into Asia, Africa, and the Americas. However, no color-coded white-over-black racism was ascertained in the Middle Ages. Even many medieval Christians, drawing upon the scriptural testimony that the first non-Jewish person who embraced Christianity was an Ethiopian eunuch, extolled black converts as the living proof of the universality of their religious beliefs; in view of such an attitude, a positive image of blacks seems to have been instilled in the Western mind in the late Middle Ages. Therefore, the arguments that Europeans were heavily prejudiced against blacks before the commencement of the slave trade and that color-coded racism existed earlier than slavery seem to be fallacious (Fredrickson, 2002).

Nonetheless, the conversion of the last heathen Slavs of Eastern Europe and Russia signified that there were nearly no European populations accessible for enslavement under the pretext of religious mission (Fredrickson, 2002), so this time the missionary project determined to enchain and "save" the souls of the inhabitants of the "dark" continent. With the juggernaut of colonization gaining momentum, the biblical association of Satan with darkness functioned as an excuse in the Puritan mind for turning the native inhabitants of the colonized lands into scary enemies and in this way, provided a justification for the slave trade. Through imputing the blackness of Africans to the biblical curse of Ham or Canaan, the purchase and transport of African slaves could conveniently be justified in terms of religious sanction without resorting to an explicit racism. The Christian colonizers believed that black Africans were among the "beasts of the field" mentioned in Genesis 1 and argued that God had intended continents to serve as His "color line"; in their view, Christians were elected by God as the guardians of black slaves in order to bring them into the kingdom of civilization and enlighten them through Christianity (MacCann, 2001).

The racist discriminatory zeitgeist of Europe, confirmed and reproduced by the religious rhetoric, crossed the Atlantic and turned into a practical tool in the hands of the American slaveholders. For the majority of Americans, Protestant value system regulated the ethical norms of the society and everyday sociocultural practices. While some of the Founding Fathers had been Deists, believing in a "watchmaker" God who had created the whole world and then had left it to function through rational choice, it was Calvinism which exerted a great influence on the mindset of many Americans, especially in New England (Robbins, 2007). Though Calvinist thought emphasized the need for the promotion of a sense of brotherhood and unity, it did not maintain that all men were equal (Ronald Wallace, as cited in Stevenson, 1999). It assumed that the elect, i.e., the chosen elites of God, would achieve the bliss of salvation through grace rather than good actions, and that anyone who could not attain a conviction of personal conversion was inevitably doomed to damnation. The supposition that one could not find his way among the elect through mere personal attempts and the emphasis on the need to accept grace and salvation as coming straight from God gave rise to profound introspection and an acceptance of mankind's intrinsic unworthiness among the followers of Calvinism; a feeling which, at its best, could induce deep reflection and humility (Robbins, 2007).

Many New Divinity ministers such as Samuel Hopkins, Levi Hart and Jonathan Edwards, Jr., greatly influenced by the ideas and writings of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, believed that God had predetermined sin and sinfulness; and this meant that the almighty, all-knowing God manifested His benevolence when He preferred that sin exist. They contended that sin was a providential way of unfolding divine benevolence and was indubitably an advantage to the universe because it was employed by God as the occasion for good. To prove this assumption, they alluded to the selling of Joseph into slavery which turned into an opportunity for him to rise to power and the leadership of his people. Applying the oppositional design of God's overruling of sin to the slave trade and claiming that there was no absolute evil in the whole universe, the New Divinity ministers managed to construct an aura of inevitability around the institution of slavery. Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745-1801), for instance, believed that "God in his providence suffers some men to be enslaved ... from the beginning he intended that they should be enslaved, and made them with this intention" (as cited in Saillant, 1995); and Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803) maintained that "Although the slave traders have really meant and done that which is evil, yet God has designed it all for good, the good of which all this evil shall be the occasion" (as cited in Saillant, 1995).

Viewing slaves, who had then become "enlightened" and "civilized" under the instruction of white Christian masters, as God's instruments to introduce the gospel among the African nations, the New Divinity ministers came up with an expatriationist proposal which suggested that making amends for the sin of slavery was possible only through returning freed slaves to their homeland, Africa. Though this proposal was made within the context of a strict perception of God's oppositional utilization of sin, their other writings on race implied that their religious faith and racism fed each other (Saillant, 1995). In effect, the New Divinity ministers did not propose their expatriationist proposal in order to object to the maltreatment of slaves; rather, they concentrated on slavery's threats to the Revolutionary cause. According to the New Divinity men, slaves had no reason to be patriotic; as a result, slavery and the slave trade were, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, Jr., "hurtful to the state which tolerates them" since "every slave is naturally an enemy to the state in which he is holden in slavery and wants nothing but an opportunity to assist in its overthrow. And an enemy within a state is much more dangerous than one without it" (as cited in Saillant, 1995).

Given the above descriptions, it is no surprise to note that churchmen, especially in the South, hardly ever raised their voices against laws which decreed black illiteracy (in spite of a traditional stress on Scripture reading) and which deprived blacks of basic sociopolitical rights, seldom asked for religious privileges for slaves beyond what slaveholders voluntarily provided, mostly refrained from performing marriage vows to slaves, and almost never called for limitations of property rights so as to prevent the breaking up of slave families through sales (Bailey, 1975). Instead, they inculcated in the slaves the conviction that they were not worthy of freedom, that it was God's providence that they were enslaved and put to work, that the devil was producing those wicked desires for liberty in their hearts, and that runaways would be excommunicated from the church. To most of the white ministers of the slavery days, the blessed slaves were those who were patient, faithful, hardworking, and above all, submissive and obedient (Blassingame, as cited in Mocombe, 2009). Practically speaking, religion, monopolized and exploited by white masters, was transformed into an intimidating vehicle to teach slaves to steer clear of "wishing evil upon those who prayed with them on Sunday but beat them on Monday" (Sernett, 1999).

In effect, Protestantism played a major role in creating an aura of sacrosanctity and supremacy around the conception Americans developed about themselves and their mission in the world. Calvinism and other American Protestant faiths had several characteristics in common. One was the belief that Protestant Christianity was the best source for the authorities and leaders to guide the Republic. Another was the assurance that regarded America as a blessed nation; like the individual chosen by God for salvation, the United States had a sacred mission to carry out in the world. This principle of Protestant Christianity's superiority was exactly what the political leaders of the United States employed throughout its early history to justify such deeds as the slave trade, Indian Removal, expansionist movement toward western territories, waging wars to annex Catholic Mexican lands, and discrimination against Irish Catholics (Robbins, 2007).

3. Capitalism, the Black Stereotype and the Justification of Slavery

Capitalism is a system of virtual slavery, serving the narrow interests of a comparative handful of "exploiters" ... who, driven by insatiable greed and power-lust, exist as parasites upon the labor of masses. (Reisman, 1998)

Racial differences made it easier to justify and rationalize Negro slavery, to exact the mechanical obedience of a plough-ox or a cart-horse, to demand that resignation and that complete moral and intellectual subjection which alone make slave labor possible. ... The features of the man [the Negro], his hair, color and dentifrice, his "subhuman" characteristics

so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest and best. (Williams, 1944)

The socioeconomic history of the United States is a rare case with regards to the fact that the development of all institutional characteristics of capitalism can be detected in it. The independence of the United States in 1776 earned freedom for Americans (or better to say, the white population of the country) who expediently decided to utilize their liberty to benefit themselves. Early after the independence, white Americans went for the establishment of private property through moving westward and appropriating the lands which had been for long inhabited by indigenous peoples. Gradually, calculations of profit and loss came to rule and exert influence on different aspects of the life in America; the consequence was the creation of a "dollar chasing" attitude among Americans which was steered merely by profit motive (Reisman, 1998). The same is true about the institution of slavery which originated by economic, and not racial, reasons: "it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor" (Williams, 1944).

The colonization enterprise was an international system which intermingled political monopoly and the production and circulation of commodities (McMichael, 1991). In the eyes of profit-seeking colonizers, slaves were deemed as private property receiving the same amount of consideration as the livestock (Reisman, 1998); in this way, slave labor became the first form of expropriated social labor (James, as cited in McMichael, 1991). In the antebellum period, indentured servants were not coming to the country in sufficient quantities to fill in for those who had finished their terms of service; many of the indentured servants escaped before serving their terms and many others expected land or other privileges at the end of their contract. On the account of these problems, the profit-driven white Americans embarked on a search for a cheaper and more tractable labor: blacks. However, the white dominators, trying to conceal their economic interests, appealed to a set of disparaging stereotypes to justify and rationalize the institution of slavery (Williams, 1944).

According to Max Weber, the Protestant ethic represented a set of values, including rationality, hard work and economic gain as an indication of one's predestination, systematic and regular use of time, and a strict austerity in relation to carnal pleasures and goods, which step by step gave rise to the contemporary capitalist norms that comprised modern societies, particularly American capitalist society (2005). It was in fact the purposive-rationality of these Protestant ideas and customs, intermingled with the notions of race and nation, that defined, differentiated and eventually subjugated minorities in the society and engendered binarisms like predestined/damned and capitalists/laborers. Since predestination was one of the crucial tenets of Protestantism, and especially Calvinism, and since humans couldn't come to know at the end of the day who was saved and who was damned, assiduity in one's calling was greatly recommended. As a matter of fact, this spirit of rationalization was the most significant contribution of Protestantism to capitalism (Mocombe, 2009).

Over time, a sect of rich, white, Protestant men, who were themselves marginalized in the feudal social structure of Europe in the medieval period, established the bureaucratic means and structural practices of the American social structure. The *raison d'être* of this social system was the incessant accumulation of economic interest, capital and profit which finally moved toward the commodification of everything. In the modern American capitalist society, the racial class gendered Protestant values which defined and regulated the dominant social practices had an indelible influence on the way non-Protestant, non-white groups were interpellated by the mainstream white society and also affected the way these subalternized groups came to interpellate and view themselves in their interactions with the means of production and distribution of capital and economic gain; in other words, even the cultural struggle for distinction and recognition was intricately connected to the production and distribution of material goods (Mocombe, 2009).

The rationalization of the Protestant ethic was employed, or better to say exploited, by a group of rich, white, Protestant men who constantly elaborated on the notions of Christian brotherhood, human rights and the priority of the good of the many over the interests of the few. However, these seemingly virtuous and ethical ideas were recursively organized and reproduced in the secular, bourgeois, racial, gendered and capitalist oligarchy that was later to constitute and regulate the sociocultural practices of American society; that is, the concepts of predestination, responsibility, hard work, economic interest, etc. justified the domination of a group of people, who were supposedly predestined to prosper in their economic achievements and rate of profit, over those who were damned, and thus were naturally backward and poor. Indeed, the well-to-do, Protestant, white, male landowners who considered themselves to be the enlightened and progressive power elites of society institutionalized their religious, cultural and mercantile values into laws and practices such as capitalism, individualism, republicanism, systematic labor, slavery codes, miscegenation laws, etc., legitimized by pacts, agreements, and the Constitution of the United States (Mocombe, 2009). In other words, the sociopolitical elites of society had themselves a vested interest in the perpetuation of the hegemonic pattern of domination since they were mostly slave masters and landowners; as a result, they came to regulate social relations and the legal system in a way that depreciated blacks and limited their participation in the society (Greenfield, 2001). According to these legalized practices, the enslaved "damned" Africans, with their physical and behavioral differences, should not be regarded as

human as white Protestants given their alleged irrationalism, lasciviousness, savagery, negligence and deviant pigmentation, and so should naturally work for the white elites (Mocombe, 2009).

In this system, individual property rights were exalted to a position approved by divine authority and thus were deemed superior to all other rights, including human rights and the rights of native populations, bonded laborers, and slaves to live freely. In the late eighteenth century, this attitude led to the commodification of Africans who became the structurally differentiated black, non-Protestant, damned commodity, forced to toil as property for the "predestined" elites in order to augment their rate of profit and improve their economic situation. Influenced by the way they were stereotyped as soul-less, fierce and lecherous by the so-called pure, civilized and godly whites, Africans had to abide by their imposed sordid conditions in slavery, since their physical and cultural differences and their subsequent perpetual Otherness did not allow for their predestination or equality (Mocombe, 2009).

To put it concisely, a new ideology and a new method of life based on capitalism gave rise to slavery, which, as a method of production, was often very successful, providing both cheap merchandise and a substantial level of profit. What was of note regarding this new way of life was its uncompromising commitment to rational calculation, to the harnessing of nature and, above all, to the unending quest for the increase of the revenue. In situations such as those prevalent in the Americas where alternative forms of labor were few, resources profuse, and the markets for the produced goods in demand, the attractions of slavery were too irresistible to be neglected; to an entrepreneurial spirit, slavery made sense economically even though it might be socially regressive (Temperley, 1977). This capitalist outlook was enthusiastically embraced in the agricultural South of the United States where the slave labor, greatly needed for effort-intensive activities such as cotton and sugar production, was both the main capital investment and a lucrative ever-present product (Wright, 2003; McMichael, 1991).

4. Social Darwinism, the Black Stereotype and the Justification of Discrimination

... in human life, as in animal and plant life, everywhere and at all times, only a small and chosen minority can exist and flourish, while the enormous majority starve and perish miserably and more or less prematurely. (Ernst Haeckel, as cited in Simpson, 1959)

The Negro, it was almost universally agreed even among the most educated people, was definitely an inferior breed and situated at the very base of the evolutionary tree. (Digby Baltzell, as cited in Washington, 2001)

Before the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 which referred in its subtitle to "The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life", the association between color (and race) and the distribution of mental and physical characteristics had been for long a moot point among many Western thinkers. A great number of these thinkers firmly believed in the idea of European superiority and colored inferiority, a racist supposition which lacked a tenable scientific framework. However, Darwin's book gave scientific legitimacy and credence to the philosophical and political groundwork of ideas associated with racial hierarchical binarism of white and black (Dennis, 1995).

Though Darwin was in the first place concerned with the biological evolution of animal species and almost never dealt with the cultural or social implications of his theories, many nineteenth century thinkers like Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), the co-discoverer of the principle of natural selection, and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the coiner of the phrase "survival of the fittest", reasoned that Darwinist principles on biological evolution could be equally applied to human societies. Wallace believed that in the struggle to sustain life among tribes, those whose members exhibited an inclination to act collectively and showed prudence, self-discipline and a sense of ethics, would be privileged over tribes in which these features were less developed. In his opinion, the former would thrive, resulting in continual psychological and moral improvement, and ultimately, the whole world would comprise merely of one race, and the need for authority or prohibitive laws would disappear. This process that eventuated in utopia would also guarantee the extinction of indigenous "savage" populations such as New Zealand Maoris, Australian aborigines and American and Brazilian Indians, since Europeans, with their allegedly superior mental, moral and physical characteristics, their more disciplined organizations and their greater competence for existence and propagation, would take the upper hand "in the struggle for existence" and would "overrun North America and Australia, extinguishing native populations" just as "the more favoured varieties increase among animals and plants" (as cited in Paul, 2003).

Similar to Wallace, Spencer argued that human societies, presumably functioning according to natural selection, were dominated by rivalry and fitness, and developed in the course of time from an undifferentiated and primitive state into one of differentiation and advancement. Accordingly, he reasoned that racial conflict was the main factor conducive to social progress because it necessitated "a continuous over-running of the less powerful or less adapted by the more powerful or more adapted, a driving of inferior varieties into undesirable habitats, and occasionally, an extermination of inferior varieties" (as cited in Dennis, 1995). Such reading of Darwin's theories was finally translated by the Western advocates of

expansionism and colonialism to signify that there was an ultimate cosmic advantage in enslaving and brutalizing blacks (MacCann, 2001).

Social Darwinists held that in comparison with the Western civilization, other races had evolved less far, as in Africa, or had developed into degeneracy, as in the East (Childs, 2000). Though the new "scientific" findings were used as a justification to enact discriminating sociopolitical rules against all non-European races, it was Africans who became the easy butt of the social implications of Darwin's theories. After the first encounter between Europeans and the negroid in the fifteenth century, whites came to stereotype non-whites either as children in an idyllic wilderness, inadequate to rule themselves and in dire need of European authority and administration, or as aggressive brutes and cannibals who must be held in check by the inhibitions of an enlightening civilization (Fredrickson, 2002). In the nineteenth century, the popularity of Darwin's theories additionally reinforced the extant demeaning stereotypes; the new trend of scientific racism was so strong that in the 1860s many believed that blacks were in fact the "missing link" (what became known as "Zip" at that time) between man and the lesser species (Churchill, 2010).

The physiological speculations regarding Negroes were also ubiquitous after the publication of Darwin's groundbreaking theories. There was the prevalent idea that the size and surface crevices of blacks' skulls were greatly different from those of Europeans. Physiologists in the second half of the nineteenth century argued that blacks had pointed ears, big mouths, voracious appetites, and such thick epidermis on their hands and legs that they were insensitive to pain. They also assumed that blacks' bodies matured only to the level of adult sexuality while their minds ceased developing at puberty, a hypothesis which served to explain the alleged blacks' promiscuity (MacCann, 2001).

As apologists for dog-eat-dog capitalism and unfettered economic competition found in Darwinism a scientific justification for their laissez-faire policies (Paul, 2003), the beneficiaries of colonialism also took the most advantage of the dominant scientific trend of the day. In effect, the moral justification for colonialism was based on a discourse of racial and social superiority: if a country had not reached an advanced level of industrialization, it implied a social and cultural retardation and an inferiority on the part of the country's people. On the basis of this rhetoric, it then became the moral responsibility of the developed nations to enlighten, civilize and humanize the so-called primitive peoples (Childs, 2000). Since morality was ostensibly a consequential factor in this "noble" mission, it was argued that colonization would ultimately increase the level of morality and the number of moral men. In this way, the war of conquest became an inseparable part of the evolutionary process and exploitation was euphemistically called education (Paul, 2003).

Claiming that blacks had no qualification to effectively administer a government and were consequently best suited for slavery, many interpreted the institution of slavery within the context of Social Darwinism and reasoned that since slavery allowed superior groups the opportunity to build and develop more sophisticated cultures, it eventually promoted the cause of humanity (Jones, 2010; Dennis, 1995). As a seemingly scientific justification against the anti-slavery movement, they postulated the notion of black retrogression which contented that whites were inherently disciplined and creative while blacks were born imitative and savage; held in captivity, blacks' imitativeness had made them copy whites' "civilized" conventions and behaviors; however, once freed from the inhibitions whites had imposed on them, they would inevitably return to their innate savagery (McClymer, 2009). This pernicious racist theory was best captured in the following sentences by the editor of the *Charleston News and Courier* in 1898: "Everybody knows that when freed from the compelling influence of the white man he reverts by a law of nature to the natural barbarism in which he was created in the jungles of Africa" (as cited in Washington, 2001). With such an overwhelming hegemonic discourse, it is no surprise to note that racist discrimination was easily rationalized, confirmed and reproduced in the post-emancipation United States.

5. Conclusion

The qualities that mark a subaltern group as deviant and in need of white control are labile (Brown, 1993). In the slavery era and even after the emancipation, blacks were mostly represented by different degrading images which justified the sociopolitical misdeeds practiced against blacks in the United States and provided whites with "the comforting shock of unfavorable contrast to the social 'realities'" (Redding, 1964). The diverse discourses of Protestantism, capitalism and Social Darwinism were employed by white dominators to produce different black stereotypes which sounded to the mainstream American society as logical classification. These stereotypical representations gradually turned into moral hierarchies and colluded to legitimize social hierarchies of domination. As sociologists of deviance and critics of ideology maintain, the process of stereotyping and labeling is a form of social control which not only describes but also constitutes the social reality (Brown, 1993). In the (re)production of demeaning black stereotypes, Protestantism, capitalism and Social Darwinism shared an uncompromising emphasis on the "differences" of the black Other. These white-dominated white-oriented discourses represented the black Other's culture as backward and degenerate, and thus in dire need of

white America's redress. In this way, the prevalent racism and discrimination were depicted to be the inevitable outcome of "natural" differences between whites and blacks.

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