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Racial Relationships in The American Context: An Ideology

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The story of racial relationships throughout the American experience demonstrates pragmatic thinking, the Hegelian dialectic of historical movement. Luis Menand writes in "The Metaphysical Club," about the "disestablishmentarian impulse in American culture" (89), which entails constant change and progress (1).

The story of race is told in terms of conflict between white and black. For much of American history, the dominant white ideology considered blacks to be vastly inferior to whites. Further, proponents of slavery located this inferiority of blacks in religious and scientific arguments. For example, Thomas Virgil Peterson notes in Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South that the south always argued the inferiority of blacks was a deficiency attributed to "the curse of Ham." This is an Old Testament story in which Noah, angry at his son, Ham, for looking at him as he lay naked in his tent after over-drinking wine, decreed Ham's son Canaan "to be the slave of slaves." At the same time, a scientific approach was included in the slaveholders' arguments on racial differences. This was based on the theory of polygenism, which held that blacks originated from a separate creation. Menand notes that Louis Agassiz, a Swiss zoologist, built on this theory and argued that the Bible did not give the history of two separate creations; therefore, creation is only meant to describe the origin of the white race. Blacks were thought, by slavery's defenders such as James Henry Hammond and George Fitzhugh, to be "mud people." They rose up out of the mud of the newly created earth, rather than being the children of Adam and Eve (2). Consequently, the phrase "all men [are created equal]" used in the Constitution of the United States, refers only to the white species of men.

To this end, pro-slavery thinkers, such as George Fitzhugh, attempted to deflect a moral argument. That is to say, Fitzhugh held that because of the inferiority of blacks, the institution of slavery was good for them; it served as a protective means. Defending the institution of slavery, Fitzhugh wrote in "Cannibals All":

> Negro slaves of the South are the happiest and, in some sense, the freest people in the world…Negroes luxuriate in corporeal and mental repose. Their faces up-turned to the sun, they can sleep at any hour, and quiet sleep is the greatest of all human enjoyment…'Tis happiness itself, and results from contentment with the present and confident assurance of the future (29).

However, this argument that blacks were innately inferior was not successful against the abolitionist crusade, which challenged the notion that blacks should be considered perpetual servants. The rising conflicting force of abolitionism marks the pragmatic dialogue (which holds within it an anti-institutional spirit, and the spirit of change) with the conservative ideas of the past. Fredrickson notes in *The Black Image in The White Mind*, that pro-slavery, conservative whites, sought the preservation of order, stability, hierarchy, and the homogeneity of society. They saw the revolutionary abolitionists

who aimed at overthrowing this order and hierarchy as ensuring chaos and anarchy. In the absence of order, we, in Fitzhugh's words, "would run amok" (Qtd in Quarles, 82).

The abolitionists advocated racial equality, and equality entails that people have the same rights—with freedom being one of those rights—including the capacity to vote and engage in self-determination. A case in point may be found in Frederic Douglass, a runaway slave who was suffering under the institution of slavery and became one of the most influential figures in the abolitionist movement (3). The masthead for his publication, The North Star, summarizes his idea that "Right is of no sex-Truth is of no color-God is the father of us all, and we are all Brethren" (Conyers & Dawson 149). His call was for liberty and equality. In fact, Douglass sought inclusion in the society from which blacks had been barred. In this posture, he clearly represents an injured party confronting those responsible for the injury. He realizes that "the slave cannot 'right himself' any more than an infant can grapple with a giant." Therefore, the government had an affirmative role to play in remedying the effects of discrimination, and it had to play a role in helping and educating the freed blacks enter society on a level equal to the whites (Qtd in Walther, 73).

The 13th Amendment ended slavery: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as a punishment of a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted shall exist within the United States or anyplace subject to their jurisdiction…Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." Thus, slavery was abolished in the United States, and blacks became permanent members of American society. They had to advance their positions as (model) citizens in order to influence change in the stereotypical image of degraded blacks held by whites. Frederickson concludes that most white people felt that blacks were still inferior "especially in intelligence and in the temperamental basis of enterprise or initiative…[but] such differences and differentials are either permanent or subject to change only by a very slow process of development or evolution" (321).

Still, other white supremacist groups viewed blacks as beasts that were capable of vengeful retribution; therefore, they had to be controlled. As a result, the New South in-vented Jim Crow, a revival of slavery under different name. A number of laws in the southern states mandated segregation (4). With the triumph of social Darwinism and its advocation of survival of the fittest in the south, the prevailing view of the newly freed blacks was that they would either die in competition with the superior race (white) be-cause of their inability to cope with the ecological, economic, and political environments, or reach their "natural level," which was still below that of whites. However, applying their understanding (or misunderstanding) of Darwinian evolution, southern "Negrophobes, Glenda Gilmore notes, saw blacks as "brute" creatures and held that in the evolutionary struggle they would degenerate. Consequently, white violence against blacks could be defended as predestined biological law and order. Glenda Gilmore in *Gender and Jim Crow*, emphasizes this idea of black degeneracy (demonizing black men and portraying them as sexual predators) was thus used as a justification for lynching.

Black intellectuals reacted in two opposing ways to this context. Booker T. Washington saw blacks as being tossed into a new world upon emancipation, unprepared for the responsibilities and obligations they would assume. He advised his fellow blacks to out-flank the racism of Jim Crow and urged them to live with it because they had to adapt to harsh realities. He also urged them to learn a trade or mechanical skills, which would benefit society, thereby making themselves indispensable. The white man would thus gradually voluntarily surrender his prejudices and accept blacks as fellow citizens. He saw the road to equality and inclusion into white society from an economic perspective, and the means to that end was vocational training. He reflected the social Darwinist ide-ology prominent at the time by emphasizing self-reliance as a way to achieve parity with whites, famously saying, "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (240).

Unlike Washington, Dubois saw this context of segregation and racism as offensive and something that had to be denounced and stopped immediately. Dubois argued that Washington was surrendering to the whites and ignoring the strivings of blacks for political and civic equality. To him, Washington's program permitted a status of continued inferiority and subservience to whites and servilely accepted oppression:

> What has it returned?…The disenfranchisement of the Negro; The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro; the steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for higher training of Negro…Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No. (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 113)

Dubois believed that equality and liberty must be taken, not given. In 1909, he was named the editor of the NAACP's magazine, "The Crisis," and he worked arduously to undermine Jim Crow legislation. He protested fervently against segregation and wrote in the editorial page a statement that echoes that of Douglas in *The North Star*: "The Crisis will stand for the rights of all men, irrespective of color or race, for the highest ideals of American democracy" (*The Crisis* 322). In "Souls of Black Folk," he explains how it feels to be a problem: "An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body… [this twoness made him] an out-cast and a stranger in mine own house" (8). His formula for the advancement of blacks was education in liberal arts and the development of a vanguard of black intellectuals who would gain leverage for the rest: "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth" (189). Thus, education in liberal arts was needed to create leadership for the black movement. The blacks needed a leader to propel them to over-come the oppression of white society and thus advance the cause of equality for black people. He writes, "the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany re-pression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate" (12).

To conclude, this cultural dialogue created another leader, Martin Luther King Jr., who was capable of advancing the goal of a better American society, one who could extend the promise of America to all Americans. He saw the entire racial conflict as not a "war between the white and the Negro, but a conflict between justice and injustice" (*Papers of Martin Luther King*, 136). His civil disobedience drew the attention of society to the progressive tasks of confronting racism and realizing social integration. King wrote in his *Letters from Birmingham Jail* that "oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come" (22). His nonviolent protests culminated in the passage of the landmark federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Clearly, black and white people in the United States belong to a common brotherhood. They are the product of a common historical process of progress and amalgamation.

End notes

1- Menand strongly refers to the notion of open-endedness of American society, where a person is not confined to reproduce the values, customs, and practices of the past, but instead is able to choose one's own path.

2- Due to this alleged biological inferiority of blacks, Agassiz wrote to Samuel Gridley Howe, whom Lincoln in 1863 appointed to a commission that would deal with policies regarding the newly freed

blacks, telling him that the interbreeding of races would lower the quality of life. As a result, Howe concluded that blacks should be politically equal but not socially; interbreeding should not be tolerated.

3-William Lloyd Garrison was the first American to call for the abolition of slavery. But his opposition came from the perspective of a free white man who had never experi-enced slavery, whereas Douglass was born into slavery and lived it. Therefore, Douglass' voice is extraordinarily authentic.

4- In 1896, the Supreme Court found in the Plessey v. Ferguson decision that racial seg-regation was constitutional: separate but equal. In practice, they were hardly equal be-cause there was no federal enforcement that made it possible. Blacks were made politi-cally equal, but not socially equal. Harlan said, "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not that it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage" (Bayor, 350). Henry W. Grady said, "The supremacy of the white race of the South must be maintained forever. What God hath separated, let no man join together" (Myrdal, 1354). Princeton, when Woodrow Wilson attended it, re-fused to admit blacks to the school because it was thought that the higher education of blacks was unwarranted. Still, blacks were considered inferior to whites.

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