

African americans versus the social sciences



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American segregation was a bitter part of American history. Even worse, though, are the securing reasons for the need of segregation and the defense of the institution. I will be discussing the method in which segregation came into existence in America and how the populace advocated such a policy.

The issue of segregation in America deals mostly with the idea of superiority and inferiority between the black, or African, and white, or Caucasian, races. There is a long history on what eventually became legal segregation in the United States. I will begin by giving a short synopsis of that history.

Immediately after the Civil War many laws were enacted called black codes that clashed with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865. They were enacted to resume control over the social aspect of slavery that had been removed because of the outcome of the war.

Under slavery, control was best maintained by a large degree of physical contact and association. Under the strange new order the old methods were not always available or applicable, though the contacts and associations they produced did not all disappear at once. To the dominant whites it began to appear that the new order required a certain amount of compulsory separation of the races.

The answer to the "new order" was a separation of races in society. The black codes were intended to control the new black freedom by requiring certain practices. These practices would make sure that a black man had a job. If he did not have a job then he would be fined and if the fine could not be paid that black man would be sold into servitude to pay off his fine. Blacks

were refrained from working in certain skilled working environments and could not carry firearms or testify in court unless it was against another black. Poll taxes and the “grandfather” clause were ways in which states would try to arrest blacks from voting in elections. These black codes were very successful.

To say the idea of separating the races was a complete “white” idea would be false. Even blacks had somewhat an idea that if they were not around white people, they would not be beleaguered by the troubles. Another view was that whites believed blacks wanted to associate with them. The following excerpt is from a book about a mulatto man in the South speaking about his ideas of the whites. “What I resented was their impudent assumption that I wanted to mingle with them, their arrogant and conceited pretense that no matter how depraved and degenerate some of them might be, they, each and every one of them, was of a superior breed.”

Congressman Frank Clark gave a speech in Congress in 1908 speaking about segregation laws. He began by declaring his love for “that old Negro man.” The man who first took the Congressman outside after his birth.

The question raised by the amendment to segregate street cars in Washington, D. C. is purely a question of disposing of a situation in such a manner as will lessen the friction between the races. The adoption of that amendment will not discriminate against the Negro race, nor will it inure to the advantage of the white race alone. It will inure to the benefit of both races.”

The idea and support of segregation of the races was two fold and was supported by a minority population of both races.

Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1875 ensuring that all men are equal and will be given justice upon the law and the government. It was initially vetoed by President Andrew Jackson, but was overridden by Congress. In 1883, the United States Supreme Court will rule that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 is unconstitutional stating that State governments and not the Federal government should be the one to ensure equality among its citizens. This led for the formation of Jim Crow laws to be passed through many state governments.

Jim Crow laws were legal segregation laws that banned the integration of the races in certain establishments. Some states passed Jim Crow laws that segregated restaurants, busses, railroads, streetcars, theatres, and even hospital waiting rooms. This segregation ideal was also spread to schools, parks, and even cemeteries in a push to prohibit any contact between blacks and whites as equals. The President's Committee on Civil Rights (1950) gave a statement on their beliefs of the Jim Crow laws. They hoped for the Supreme Court to deliver a new verdict in the claims of the Civil Rights Acts. " No argument or rationalization can alter this basic fact: a law which forbids a group of American citizens to associate with other citizens in the ordinary course of daily living creates inequality by imposing a caste status on the minority group." Of course this statement would not occur until 1950 it still indicates the thought of inequality that I will touch upon later in this piece.

Now that I have established the method in which segregation laws came into being, let me now turn to how many of these laws were defended. It is interesting to see how many views and types of people can take on the same idea of segregation based on their different backgrounds and mores. I will begin first with legal and political defense and then I will shift towards defense of segregation bases on science and religion.

The Supreme Court, in their ruling the unconstitutionality of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, caused the state governments to conceive the Jim Crows laws and make them legitimate. " The Supreme Court, asserting that the adjustment of social relations of individuals was beyond the power of Congress, declared the Civil Rights Act unconstitutional in 1883. Even though the law had seldom been enforced, its existence was a symbol of the nation's equalitarian aspirations, and its nullification by the Supreme Court." Abolitionists held the Civil Rights Act of 1975 as a symbol for prosperous times ahead, but its defeat only resulted in more negative legal decisions. There are others that also add to the legal and political aspect of segregation.

There have a been a few United States Supreme Court decisions that have supported the justification of segregation and slavery. One of the first decisions delivered by the Supreme Court was Prigg versus Pennsylvania, where in 1842, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court. The Fugitive Slave Act was a piece of legislation that allowed for the capture and return of runaway slaves. Once captured, the slave was put on trial and the judge was allowed to decide the status of the slave

without a trial jury. It is important to notice that the act was passed in 1793, but never challenged until 1842.

Another Supreme Court decision was the Dred Scott case in 1856. Dred Scott was a slave that was transported from a slave state into a free territory. When he was in the free territory he claimed that since he was in a free territory he was, in fact, a free man. The lawsuit filed went to the Supreme Court that decided that slaves were not citizens and that they could not file a federal lawsuit. The court also decided that Congress could not ban slavery in the United States territories or its states, because slavery had to be decided by the state themselves and not the Federal government. More importantly, this made Congress powerless to create such legislation against slavery, but allowed Southern states to go ahead and create laws that enforced slavery and segregation. This decision is important in that the Supreme Court decided that slaves, or blacks, were not citizens or even people. Also, provisions made by Congress about whether a state would be a free or slave state, such as the Missouri Compromise of 1820, were now void and unconstitutional because Congress did not have the power to pass such a decree.

The final case that I will describe is known as the “ separate but equal” case, Plessy versus Ferguson, in 1896. By 1896, Jim Crow laws had become a part of life in the South. Inflexible segregation laws had been passed and now practiced in all public and private facilities. “ The Supreme Court insisted in 1896 that all Jim Crow facilities be equal, but in practice the South, and the North also, ignored this dictum. And the Negro had no redress. His loss of political power destroyed his ability to influence public policy.” This decision

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caused the creation of the “separate but equal” facilities throughout the United States. Separate facilities were practiced in schools, in railroads, in restaurants, and theatres. In the South, in areas where interracial communities existed, states had to arrest its integration policies for newly developed patterns of segregation. Earlier in this paper, the President’s Committee on Civil Rights stated that segregation laws promoted inequality and a caste social system. The theme of segregation laws was white superiority. In the social system blacks were inferior and did not have equality to life, liberty, and property. Beittel writes that the “separate but equal” doctrine is used to perpetuate segregation to a rational idea:

Segregation must be distinguished from voluntary separation of a group since it is for the most part a one-sided program, enforced by one group against another. Segregation is enforced on one group by another to emphasize and attempt to make rational a belief in the superiority of one group and the inferiority of another. In the United States white supremacy and segregation are inseparably associated.

This stabilizes the idea that with segregation there is an inescapable acceptance of white supremacy. To have consent and to defend segregation, there must be a means to defend white supremacy.

This next section I will give some of the accounts of how people would defend segregation and thus defend white supremacy. I will investigate social scientific defense, general scientific defense and religious defense of segregation.

Franz Boas poses the following sociological question in *The Mind of Primitive Man*:

Have not most races had the same chances for development? Why, then, did the white race alone develop a civilization which is sweeping the whole world, and compared with which all other civilizations appear as feeble beginnings cut short in early childhood, or arrested and petrified at an early stage of development? Is it not, to say the least, probable that the race which attained the highest stage of civilization was the most gifted one, and that those races which have remained at the bottom of the scale were not capable of rising to higher levels?

He answers the question of race civilization development by looking to ancient civilizations of Europe and Africa. By using social Darwinist views, Boas established that European whites were more civilized while their African counterparts were less so. Taking this and putting it toward modern standards results in the belief that in a certain amount of time African blacks will become as civilized as European whites were five hundred to a thousand years ago.

Count Arthur de Gobineau, a French noble, tried to explain the reason why there is such a large interval between the civilizations of the Africans to that of the Europeans. He studied many of the civilizations that have been successful and concluded that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it." Civilizations that "preserve the blood" of Aryan's will continue to prosper,

but it is when the blood is tainted that a degeneration occurs and the quality of the blood and the civilization falters. A corollary to this idea is one presented by Sir Francis Galton in which he believed “ individual and racial characteristics” were found to be “ governed by the laws of heredity” resulting in “ inherited inferiority in one race and superiority in another.” The Negro is considered primitive and inferior by Galton and these characteristics are can only be genetically transferred to kin. There is not a possibility to associate the cultures of different races because there cannot be a change based on education or environment. Galton argues that racial culture and civilization cannot become better for the Negro because his mental capacity would not allow him to understand the culture and civilization of one better.

As one will see, these ideas are not uncommon. Many ideas have been established marking the African American as a savage animal that has yet to become civilized, yet to adapt to his surroundings, and must be held to these laws for his own good. Most of these ideas can be credited to the Europeans. It was they who gave Americans many of the ideas that represent the inferiority and degradation of Africans.

One of the most predominant sociological theories of Negro inferiority is called the race-climate hypothesis. This hypothesis stems from many theories of many different scientists. The hypothesis was developed to prove that evolution was the root of social inequality.

The hot and stultifying climate of tropical Africa, its dense and humid jungles, had halted Negro’s evolutionary development at primitive, generalized levels. The invigorating and exacting climate of the north temperate zone,

however, had stimulated the Caucasian's development into advanced specialized channels. The result was a fundamental difference in physical appearance, emotional stability, and mental capacity.

The climate of Africa caused its people to live primitively. The warmer weather than that of the north helped the Africans to live without a predominant shelter. Food was well provided by the environment. Clothing and shelter were also provided if it was really needed. The ability to survive was not much of a struggle. Organization of tribes was simple while intellectual and spiritual progress was passive. Negroes in Africa lived in an arrested development where impulsive instincts were predominate over rational thoughts. In Europe, though, was a wildly changing climate. Europeans had to use intelligence and logic to find ways in which to survive. Food was not as sparse and Europeans were forced to agrarian ways. Shelter for the Europeans had to be developed since the environment did not provide such a means.

Charles Woodruff used the race-climate hypothesis to verify the reason blacks were inferior in America to whites. Woodruff used logic that he acquired while serving as an army surgeon in the Philippines. He found that "whites had difficulty adjusting to the heat and humidity, and continued activity there often produced general debilitation. He noticed no such reaction among Negroes." Thus whites in America, where the climate is moderately temperate, show signs of energy, adaptiveness, and receptiveness. Blacks, on the other hand, are not able to adapt well to the climate. They evolved in tropical climates and were able to handle and work

positively in the climate of the Philippines. Woodruff predicted that blacks would probably be extinct soon.

Scientific racists convinced that evolution caused racial inequality looked to heredity to further prove their claims. Hereditary biological racists believe that the inferiority that blacks carry is innate; that they are born with the characteristics that make them inferior. One theory already stated was by Galton. Another was by a group of scientists that hypothesized that the mental development and traits of blacks were evolutionarily primitive and that no "ordinary environment can alter the salient mental and moral traits in any measurable degree from what they were predetermined to be through innate influences." Inherited traits could never be relinquished or mutated. This was popular with racists because it gave justification for segregating society. If they were apart then there would be no possibility of intimate relations between races. Racial heredity theory was not a big speculation but it was readily accepted by American laymen who were racist.

Physical traits were also a subject of the black race's inferiority. White characteristics have been, along with other speculation, used as the standard in which all other traits are looked to. Measuring physical inequality was much easier for scientific racists than discovering mental or moral inequality. "The head is somewhat smaller than in whites if in addition the thicker scalp and thicker skull of the male Negro are considered, then the probable size of the brain of the Negro appears decidedly to a disadvantage." This disadvantage must come from the assumption that there is a direct correlation between size of the brain and the mental capacity of the brain. The Negro brain is smaller than the white brain, thus

Negroes are less intellectual than that of whites. The underdeveloped brain causes a “ lack of self-control, an absence of subjectivity, and an incapacity for ethical and esthetic judgement. Among persons so affected sudden ‘ sexual excitement, anger, or vexation’ could cause a loss of self-control and a disregard for custom and good taste.” The size of the smaller Negro brain shows how inferior Negroes are.

The deficiencies of the Negro brain can be blamed because “ its physical growth” is “ halted abruptly at puberty.” Puberty is the moment in which the Negro body and brain cease to develop. It seems odd to consider that the brain will stop developing at such an early period in ones life, preventing further enlargement and development of the intellectual properties of the brain. At this stage the brain possesses the process of perception, memory, and motor responses. It is after puberty where critical thinking, comprehension of complex situations and “ ability to appreciate logical, aesthetic and moral situations” occur. But even though mental processes could no longer be developed, the Negro had sexual and animal instincts that developed and were not harmed.

A Negro’s inferiority does not reveal itself just in his low intelligence and deficient brain size. His outward physical features also establish his inferiority through racist ideas reinforced by Darwinism. “ The anatomy of the Negro exhibits a much closer approach to the anthropoid apes than does any other race.” Here is another theory that demonstrates how blacks are less civilized and developed than any other race. These “ scientists” tried to prove the theory by relating each of the Negro’s physical traits to those of apes. They determined that the hair of blacks relates closely to that of apes.

The mucous membranes in the mouth; gums, tongue, and lips, closely resembled that of apes. Black skin pigmentation was, of course, used to establish a closer comparison between the two. Cobb also recognized the distinct characteristics of the sexual organs of blacks of both sexes as more like apes than any other race. The arms and legs of blacks were longer and slimmer than white's indicating a similarity to apes. Blacks were physically shorter than whites as well.

Scientific racists acquired all kinds of "scientific" evidence to make an understanding of black inferiority. The point though was to establish a line in which segregation and discrimination could be seen as proper and legitimate. Unsophisticated Americans accepted most of the theories stated here without protest. Mostly because they wanted to believe such scientific reasoning would make segregation appropriate and legal. "The scientists wanted only segregation, and a benevolent segregation at that" the scientists established Negro inferiority and urged "that whites and Negroes be socially segregated in order to remain biologically segregated." Extreme racists were still not happy and they felt that American policy against immigration and blacks was misguided. In order to retrieve more popularity for their movement, scientists turned to intellectual-historical racism as a source of exploring topics and evidence not yet discovered.

To get more popularity for the movement, James Sayers tried to encourage the white population to appreciate their own race and despise any mixing of races. "His purpose was to inspire the whites to greater appreciation of their racial heritage and thereby block the impending amalgamation of the races."

By seizing the prevalent culture and ideas of the unsophisticated white Americans, Sayers was able to legitimize the Jim Crow laws of segregation.

Politicians also used this movement to develop Jim Crow legislation through their own racist motives. They accepted and promoted the ideas and evidence provided by biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians.

“ It was not that Southern politicians needed any support from learned circles to sustain their own doctrines, but they found that such intellectual endorsement of their own racist theories facilitated acceptance of their views and policies.” Southern politicians used the opinions of scientists to help with the approval of legislation of Jim Crow laws. The approval also helped in legislating immigration which was one of the major concerns of racists and isolationist Americans who wanted to segregate from the rest of the world.

Disfranchisement was applied to America to reconcile North and South differences after the war. Disfranchisement developed literacy tests, poll tax, property qualifications, grandfather clauses, and the good character clause.

“ In part disfranchisement was also presented as a progressive reform, the sure means of purging Southern elections of the corruption that disgraced them.” Disfranchisement was pretty successful in restraining blacks from voting. This process also proceeded to cause violent cases on and before election days.

Thomas Dixon, a minister, wrote many novels based on what he saw around him. In 1905 he wrote *The Clansman*, it “ acquainted the American public with ideas of historical and intellectual racism” and was the basis for the motion picture entitled *The Birth of a Nation*. The novel constructed the idea

that blacks are immoral and corrupt beasts that needed to be taken care of by any means be it segregation laws, slaughtering them, or sending them back to Africa.

All historical devices used by racists came down to one conclusion: the role of blacks in American history was a negative impact upon the greatness of America and the white race. These historical racists viewed slavery as something that was positive for blacks. " When viewed in this light, slavery was neither a convenience for whites, an exploitation of Negroes, nor even a tyranny born of necessity." Slavery was, instead, a positive good that helped blacks live in American society and took them away from the savagery that existed in their home land of Africa. It presented slave owners the good feeling of giving blacks the ability to give in to their primitive and savage instincts.

Historical racists used means in which to prove historically the inferiority of the black race. They used white ethnocentrism to get whites to appreciate their race and cause racism. Politicians used intellectual ideology to produce legitimate legislation for immigration and segregation. Disfranchisement was used to stop blacks from voting in the South. Historical novels were written portraying blacks as savages that needed to be civilized into the American culture. Slavery was claimed to be useful and positive in civilizing blacks and establishing the role of blacks in American history as an inferior being compared to all others.

Religious racism was also instituted to ensure that even under God, blacks were inferior to all other beings. The scientific racism that has been

established was, for awhile, never obliterated by any churches in America. It can be assumed that the churches in America supported the expressions stated by scientists. Churches ignored the concepts that were established by scientists to prove inferiority of blacks.

When churches did finally establish a position, it did not support the equality of blacks. The first concept of segregation supported by churches was given by Reverend William Montgomery Brown who declared that the races should not mix. " The object of racial policy, he said, is the maintenance of racial purity among whites. Amalgamation must be avoided at all costs because it thwarts God's plan the white man was protected by a law of nature, ' a deeply-rooted, God-implanted instinct' of racial prejudice" God created the races different for the purpose of white superiority. Sexual mingling between the races would make a mockery of His creation. Reverend Brown believed segregation was a good thing but he did not feel it was necessary to create legislative laws to do so, because to believe that the races were equal would be a sin.

It was believed by many religious racists that the inequality that was present was by the will of God. The beauty of this idea for racists was that there was no real confirmation of it. God ordained the distinction of certain races to be superior and others inferior. Racists believed that God had created whites as the soul supreme being on earth. " God has created in order that they may fulfill separate and distinct missions in the cultivation and civilization of the world." Such a vague interpretation was accepted as clear evidence of black inferiority. It was believed that the way in which current situations had developed in America was a clear sign of the intentions of God. God had

predestined the role of races when he created them. Other religionists needed clearer evidence of biblical authority of racial inequality.

They tried finding biblical authority by using the story that black inferiority was a result of a curse provided by God towards blacks. God placed the curse through Noah towards the descendants of Ham. The marks of this curse were, of course, black skin, physical inferiority, and mental incapacity. There was no escape of this curse. God's rapture and displeasure of them resulted in the inferiority and inequality of the race. Blacks no longer had the hope or divine right to be worthy of living in a white man's civilization.

And yet, these two ideas still have not elaborated on the role of God in creating inequality of the races. They did not answer questions that were asked of other races beyond white and black. Fundamental religion was its own proof. These ideas influenced popular opinion and were accepted as truths based on biblical authority and natural order.

Others, like Congressman William Lankford, believed that the inequality of the races and white superiority came from the moment God created man. God created man in his own image; " a part of God himself; a Caucasian, a white man, and God gave that first white man dominion over all things, and told him to reach to the bottom of the sea and up to the highest skies and understand and know the mysteries of all time and space, and that first man, a white man, went forth to solve, understand, conquer, and know the universe in which he had been placed." Lankford's idea was accepted with the notion of black skin being a curse. But they did not accept that the curse was from descendants of Noah and thus Adam, the very first white man.

They justified the curse by stating that there was not any biblical reference that blacks descended from Noah or Adam.

Extremists of religious racism felt that blacks were not even humans and that God created only white civilization. Charles Carroll was one of spokesman of these extreme anti-Negro groups who used religion to promote his hate and preference of segregation and inequality. " God had created the Negro not as man, as Homo sapiens, but as an ape, the highest apes to be sure, but an ape nevertheless. Adam (man), he declared, had been created in the white image of God as the final act, the crowning glory, of creation." Carroll claimed that blacks were pre-human animals while other races: American Indians, Mongolians, and Malayans, who were also inhuman animals, developed as the offspring of man's " unholy mating with apes (Negroes). Carroll was such an extremist that he tried rearranging the whole history of the Bible to make his ideas more convincing. He claims the role of the serpent in the Garden of Eden was actually a black man who tempted Eve. He believes the interpretation in the Bible was misinterpreted throughout the years. He asserted that this misinterpretation answers many questions including how the " serpent" spoke to Eve. " Responsibility for the fall of man, however, was only the first of Negro's sins." Cain's wife was black and amalgamation of man and beast resulted in God's intervention at Sodom and Gomorrah and then the Flood. " At the time of the Flood, Noah and his family were the only pure whites left on earth, so God determined to eliminate the hordes of soulless mongrels and give man a new opportunity. Among the beasts on the Ark, however, were a pair of Negroes, and amalgamation commenced soon after the Flood." God's final intervention

was to send Jesus to redeem the world of amalgamation. Carroll most likely only carried his thoughts to other radicals and extremists, but it is possible that American racist laymen also accepted these ideals as fact. It may also be a possible ideology of the Ku Klux Klan who used Christian religion as a fundamental element of their group. They could use the idea of a white loving God and a black hating God as a suggestion for white superiority and black inferiority. In terms of religious racism, there is plenty of information provided to swerve the belief of slavery as a “ positive good”, segregation as the will of God, and inequality as a work of God during Creation.

As I have provided, there are many ideas and beliefs in which the laws of segregation and inequality were favored. I have traced the path of the creation of segregation through the black codes and the Jim Crow laws throughout the states. I have also determined that the defense of segregation came through many different points. The United States Supreme Court made many influential decisions that resulted in defending the motives of segregation and thus inequality of the races. Social racism was used to promote white superiority by stating that the black race has evolved more slowly, that their apparent flaws are hereditary and cannot be escaped, and that the black race is actually a savage animal. Scientific racism established the idea the certain traits of the black race were inferior to the white race. Scientists adopted the idea that blacks were mentally incompetent because of their smaller skulls. They also believed that blacks were animals because they resembled neoteric apes. Religious racists tried to find a Biblical authority to prove white superiority and hence black inferiority. They claimed that the inequality that was present in society was the will of God and should

not be tampered with. Extremists pointed out that God did not want the mixing of the races and intervened on world through punishment. They also claimed that blacks were animals and that sexual relations with man (whites) was a great sin. Another point extremists stated was the idea that a black man was the one who tempted Eve and thus brought the fall of man.

It shall be noted that these ideas were used to promote racist ideology and not technically for the cause they were trying to perceive. I feel that those arguing the standpoint of religion were not trying to please God more than they were trying to please the racist people. Scientists seemed asinine in their work finding the inferiority of blacks through smaller skulls and brains rather than the capacity in which that brain can hold. The United States Supreme Court is much harder to determine. Their place is to proceed by upholding the Constitution of the United States. Of course racial feelings could be involved in their decisions but it can be clearly seen that they are upholding the Constitution whether they believed segregation was right or not. These ideas can and have been fought against with great success. One of the great fighters against black mental deficiency was W. E. B. DuBois, who wrote at great lengths about intelligent and intellectual black people. African Americans have become a staple of this country. There are business leaders, religious leaders, teachers, administrators, and statesmen who have helped this country become great and will continue to do so endlessly.

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