Whiteness, an ideology

A reader compiled and edited by Anita Lee

When the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no 'white' people there; nor, **according to the colonial records, would there be for another sixty years.**

Others living in the colony at that time were English; they had been English when they left England, and naturally they and their Virginia-born children were English, they were not 'white.'" "White identity had to be carefully taught, and it would be only after the passage of some six crucial decades" that the word "would appear as a synonym for European-American.

The Invention of the White Race   by Theodore W. Allen

Jeffrey B. Perry is an independent, working class scholar and author:

According to Theodore Allen, the knowledge, ideologies, norms, and practices of whiteness and the accompanying "white race" were invented in the U.S. as part of a system of racial oppression designed to solve a particular problem in colonial Virginia. Prior to that time, although Europeans recognized differences in the color of human skin, they did not categorize themselves as white. …The important element of his theory is that whiteness serves to preserve the position of a ruling white elite who benefit economically from the labor of other white people and people of color. Whiteness, as knowledge, ideology, norms, and practices, determines who qualifies as "white" and maintains a race and class hierarchy in which the group of people who qualify as white disproportionately control power and resources, and within that group of white people, a small minority of elite control most of the group's power and resources. Not all studies of whiteness describe it as a system designed to economically benefit a small elite, but most agree that racial oppression is a key element in whiteness and that, as a group, white people do benefit disproportionally from the race and class hierarchy maintained by whiteness.

Reflection question

How have you been personally impacted by white supremacy?

The Rebellion

As more bond laborers survived their tenure, the number of freemen increased. However, through a combination of factors, starting in the 1660s, land ownership evolved into increasingly large plantations for a smaller number of rich men. Many freemen lost their small holdings, or never received any, and were reduced to being tenant farmers or unemployed wanderers. They became increasingly discontent with the distribution of land and wealth in Virginia and resistance surfaced, most notably in the famous Bacon's Rebellion of 1673. Bond laborers both joined in and initiated their own resistance, protesting their current situation and their future prospects. So by the late 1660s, around the time when Virginia began to enact laws distinguishing between European and African bond laborers, the large landowners had become an elite group faced with an increasingly unruly populace of mostly European small land holders and artisans, freemen without land, again mostly European, and bond laborers, of whom one quarter were African descent. These large landowners required a large workforce to grow, harvest, and cure the tobacco which remained the basis of the Virginia economy. Faced with the problem of how to maintain social control, the small ruling elite searched for a way to defuse the potential for rebellion insofar as possible and to create a class that would support the elite and help suppress rebellion should it occur. To accomplish this they began to create a system of racial oppression that would divide the laborers into Black and white, with special privileges for the white. Further, "by a system of acts, the [Virginia] assembly did what it would to foster the contempt of white for blacks and Indians."

Reflection Questions

What were the early motives for promoting a race and class hierarchy?

What parallels do you see today?

Emerging Systems

Another approach to dividing the laboring classes was to prevent the ties of marriage and family in specific instances. At first the laws distinguished between bond and free status and appeared to be enacted in the interests of securing for the owner the labor of children who were born to bond laborers, which became increasingly important as lifetime bonds became more common and bondedness became hereditary. For example, a 1662 law stated that the free or bond status of a child would be figured according to the status of the mother, in complete contradiction of English common law. A 1664 law from Maryland that decreed that a free woman had to take the status of her bond husband, must have served as a strong deterrent to mixed marriages where the woman was free. But apparently mixed marriages persisted, among both free and bond women and men of all ethnicities. Later laws set out to specifically prevent relationships between those of European descent and those of African descent or Indians. In 1691 a law was enacted for the "prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue" due to intermarriage of Black, mulatto, or Indian men with "English or other white women." A white who married a Black, mulatto, or Indian would be banished, while the child of a free white woman and a Black man of any status would have to spend 30 years in servitude.

A system of racial oppression was emerging, one which depended on a distinction between white and black (or Indian) and was designed to prevent freemen working as tenant farmers and bond laborers from making common cause against the ruling elite, as had happened in Bacon's rebellion. Ties of family or the existence of children with indeterminate status as to whether they were white or black would have impeded the workings of the system of racial oppression. Note the use of "white" in these laws. Increasingly, "white" replaced "Christian" or "free" in laws regulating both bond and free men and women. This also indicates the emerging system of racial oppression, in which an unchanging quality determines ones social position, unlike a system in which, at least among the poor and working classes, one might pass from free to bond labor and back to free or might convert to Christianity.

Reflection Questions

Why do you think racism persists even today?

What can you do to combat white supremacy?

Who Can Be White?

Defining Whiteness through Immigration Policy

Immigration policy has determined who may enter the U.S. and whether those who enter can become citizens, affecting demographics, influencing who is seen as white, and indirectly providing economic benefits for white people. From the beginning, a major determining factor in who was allowed to become a naturalized citizen has been race. In 1790, the Federal government ruled that the right to become a naturalized citizen was reserved to "free white persons."

In writing of the import of the court cases which decided who could qualify as white, Haney Lopez writes:

To be [non-white] meant one was unfit for naturalization, while to be [white] defined one as suited for citizenship. This stark division necessarily also carried important connotations regarding, for example, agency, moral authority, intelligence, and belonging. To be unfit for naturalization--that is, to be non-White--implied a certain degeneracy of intellect, morals, self-restraint, and political values; to be suited for citizenship--to be White--suggested moral maturity, self-assurance, personal independence, and political sophistication.

Reflection Question

In the space below, draw or describe the very first image that comes to mind when you think of "an American." Don't filter your response, or try to correct it to reflect your beliefs, just go with your first impulse.

Walter Ashby Plecker and the Institutionalization of Race Policy

From *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*

Walter Ashby Plecker (2 April 1861 – August 2, 1947) was a physician and public health advocate who was the first registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, serving from 1912 to 1946. He was a leader of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, an identitarian organization founded in Richmond, Virginia in 1922. He drafted and lobbied for the passage of the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 by the Virginia legislature; it institutionalized the one-drop rule.

Early life and education

Plecker was born in Augusta County, the son of a returned Confederate veteran. Sent to Staunton as a boy, he graduated from Hoover Military Academy in 1880 and obtained a medical degree from the University of Maryland in 1885.[1] He was a devout Presbyterian, and throughout his life he supported the denomination's fundamentalist Southern branch, funding missionaries who believed like he later came to that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for racial intermixing.

Career

Plecker settled in Hampton, Virginia in 1892, and before his mother's death in 1915 (his black nanny closing her eyes), worked with women of all races and became known for his active interest in obstetrics and public health issues. Plecker educated midwives, invented a home incubator, and prescribed home remedies for infants. His efforts are credited with an almost 50% decline in birthing deaths for black mothers. Plecker became the public health officer for Elizabeth City County in 1902.

In 1912 Plecker became the first registrar of Virginia's newly created Bureau of Vital Statistics, a position he held until 1946. An avowed white supremacist and advocate of eugenics, he became a leader of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America in 1922. He wanted to prevent miscegenation, or marriage between races, and thought that a decreasing number of mulattoes, as classified in the census, meant that more of them were passing as white.

With the help of John Powell and Earnest Sevier Cox, Plecker drafted and the state legislature passed the "Racial Integrity Act of 1924". It recognized only two races, "white" and "colored" (black). It essentially incorporated the one-drop rule, classifying as "colored" any individual with any African ancestry. This went beyond existing law, which had classified persons as white who had one-sixteenth (equivalent to one great-great-grandparent) or less black ancestry. In 1967, the United States Supreme Court invalidated the law in Loving v. Virginia.

Plecker in particular resented Negroes who passed as Indians, and came to firmly believe that the state's Native Americans had been "mongrelized" with its African American population. In fact, since shortly after the Civil War, Native Americans from all over the country had been brought to the Hampton area to be educated with blacks, and some had married, although that Indian school had closed as racial discrimination against Indians and this eugenics movement grew. Plecker refused to recognize that many mixed-race Virginia Indians had maintained their culture and identity as Indians over the centuries despite economic assimilation. Plecker ordered state agencies to reclassify most citizens who claimed American Indian identity as "colored," although many Virginia Indians had continued in their tribal practices and communities. Church records, for instance, continued to identify them as Indians. Specifically, Plecker ordered state agencies to reclassify certain families whom he identified by surname, as he had decided they were trying to pass and evade segregation. This remained legal in the South until federal legislation in the 1960s.

In addition, Plecker lobbied the US Census Bureau to drop the category of "mulatto" in the 1930 and later censuses. This deprived mixed-race people of recognition of their identity and contributed to a binary culture of hypodescent, in which mixed-race persons were often classified as the group with lower social

status. Not until the 21st century did the census allow individuals to indicate more than one race or ethnic group in self-identification.

Death and Legacy

Plecker was hit by a car while crossing a Richmond street, and died on August 2, 1947, less than a year after his retirement. He is buried in Hollywood cemetery beside his wife, who died more than a decade earlier. They had no children, Plecker for years not seeking out friends, describing his hobbies as "books and birds," and even gaining a reputation for never smiling.

Plecker's racial polices continue to cause problems for descendants of what are now sometimes called the First Virginians. Members of eight Virginia-recognized tribes struggle to achieve federal recognition because they cannot prove their continuity of heritage through historic documentation, as federal laws require. Encountering European Americans first during the colonial period, the tribes had treaties mostly with the King of England rather than the United States government. Plecker's policies destroyed and altered records that individuals and families now need to show cultural continuity as Indians. In 2007, the House of Representatives passed a law to recognize the Virginia tribes at the Federal level, but the Senate has never yet passed it.

Quotes

- "Let us turn a deaf ear to those who would interpret Christian brotherhood as racial equality." (1925)
- the "sickening and saddest feature...the considerable number of degenerate white women giving birth to mulatto children" (1925)
- "...insanity, tendency to crime, and immorality are almost surely transmitted to their children, especially when both parents are of the same class. The worst forms of undesirables born amongst us are those whose parents are of different races."

Reflection Questions

What is Plecker's legacy today?

How do feel about all that you've read here?

Sources

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2. Jeffrey B. Perry, *Theodore W. Allen's The Invention of the White Race*, May 21, 2013 (Jeffrey B. Perry is the literary executor for Theodore W. Allen's papers.)

The Rebellion

3. Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, Volume II, The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America (2012 Verso Books Edition), Introduction

Emerging Systems

4. Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, Volume II, The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America (2012 Verso Books Edition)

Jim Crow Laws

5. Ian Haney-Lopez, *White by Law*, 1996

Walter Ashby Plecker and the Institutionalization of Race Policy

6. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Plecker

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