

Unraveling Whiteness: How Racism Built America

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In 1857, Dred Scott took his case all the way to the Supreme Court to try to win freedom for himself and his family. His request was ultimately denied in a 7-2 decision on the grounds that he was not an American citizen, and had no right to be heard in court. This decision set an important precedent – Black people, enslaved or free, could never be U.S. citizens. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney stressed this point in his majority opinion, where he declared that Black people were “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect,” and that they would be better off enslaved.¹ Subsequent government policies and public affairs reflected this sentiment. The Dred Scott case is not unique; it is one of many events that elucidates the potency of white supremacy in the U.S., a country built on exclusion and white power.² White supremacy functions through and with capitalism; both were employed to create the terrible and pervasive system of racial slavery. The legacy and continuing effects of slavery have infiltrated public affairs, thought, and action in a myriad of ways, with Black intellectuals resisting every step of the way through Reconstruction, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and through contemporary struggles for racial and economic justice.

The suppression and exploitation of Black people have both shaped and advanced U.S. politics and economics. The very ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness inspired by John Locke in the Declaration of Independence hold a much more complex and even sinister meaning than may be understood in a cursory reading of them. In South Carolina, politician Lord

¹ *Dred Scott v. Sandford* 60 U.S. 393, 407 (1857), majority opinion

² David Roediger, *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (New York: Verso, 2010), xi.

Ashley and Locke drafted the Fundamental Constitutions. These documents planned for African slavery as the main source of economy and development in the colony.³ Ashley and Locke drew the inspiration for racialized African slavery from Barbados, where the racialized slave code had already been established. Locke's foundational role in the development of the U.S. and creation of U.S. racial slavery combined with his popular philosophical contributions about liberty and individualism offers insight to the ingraining of a white supremacist "freedom" in Americans.⁴ For Locke and the rest of the Founding Fathers he inspired, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are natural rights for white people, and white people only. Locke influenced poor white people with his emphasis on property as essential to the natural rights of a person; thus, poor white people had an interest in racial slavery that put them at the top of the racial hierarchy. They ensured that Black people would be firmly denied of legal rights. As the Fundamental Constitutions and later Constitution of the United States show, whites have been trying to dehumanize Black people from the very beginning of United States public policy and political thought.

Capitalism in the U.S. could not have developed without racial chattel slavery and an aggressively greedy investment in whiteness.⁵ In the transatlantic slave trade, white enslavers violently kidnapped African people and brought them to the U.S. to exploit them for free labor. Enslaved became code for Black, and white code for free.⁶ White supremacy in the U.S. rose with the formation of a capitalist, agricultural economy. Slavery and the legislation surrounding it helped to create white supremacist ideology by making and attaching benefits to whiteness. Cheryl Harris connects the investment in whiteness to property, asserting that they "share a

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *The Independent*, 1910.

⁶ Roediger, *How Race Survived US History*, 15.

common premise...of a right to exclude.”⁷ Whiteness is private property, and those who possess it have a tangible social, political, and economic advantage; if being white is access to the private property of the U.S. then being anything else is simply trespassing.⁸ The privatization of humanness has thus pervaded public policy and continued to try to edge Black people out. Black intellectuals have formulated strategies of resistance, which have shaped both public thought and white government policy response.

If white supremacy functions through capitalism, both must be dismantled for true racial and economic justice. Though this may be true, throughout history it has been the work of Black people for their communities that has brought about concrete change. In the era of chattel slavery, the resistance of enslaved and previously enslaved people was fundamental in achieving emancipation. Nat Turner demonstrates this in an account of his famous rebellion, in which he relates that his time not spent doing his enslaver’s work, was spent “...in prayer...in attempting to make paper, gunpowder, and many other experiments...”⁹ Turner’s actions – his prayer, his experimentation, his strategizing, in addition to his ultimate goal of becoming free through revolt– defy the notions that Black people are simply property and not spiritual, inventive, dynamic human beings.¹⁰ His revolt, though unsuccessful, is one in a myriad of acts of resistance spearheaded by enslaved people. Paul Robeson discusses the importance of music in this movement, writing that “...there is no question...of the contribution of the Negro folk songs...like “Go Down, Moses,” that inspired Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and Sojourner Truth to the fight

⁷ Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1714

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1738.

⁹ Nat Turner, “The Statement of Nat Turner,” 1831, in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 35.

¹⁰ See Quashie, Kevin. "Introduction: Why Quiet." In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, 1-10. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press.

for emancipation.”¹¹ Through music, prayer, thought, and ultimately revolt, enslaved people achieved emancipation by constantly – whether intentionally or not – asserting their humanity in the face of white monstrosity.

Black humanity in spite of white inhumanity drove public thought within enslaved Black communities toward resistance measures. Those kidnapped from Africa came from all different ethnic backgrounds, but once they arrived on U.S. soil they had their African origins in common. Enslaved people built off of their differing cultural practices to create a new slave culture. Sterling Stuckey argues that this unity among enslaved people of different African ethnicities formed the roots of Pan-African thought and Black Nationalism.¹² This unity and the momentum it built fueled efforts by enslaved people to free themselves.

Emancipation necessitated a transformation of the existing racial paradigm. An epistemological shift to include Black people as human beings would require restructuring of the legal, social, political, and economic framework of the U.S. Thus arose the question: “What...[to] do with the Negro?”¹³ Frederick Douglass answered this question in “What the Black Man Wants,” with “Do nothing with us.”¹⁴ This speech, given before the passing of the Reconstruction Amendments, demands recognition of Black humanity through suffrage and citizenship. Up until emancipation, whites engineered the governmental framework assuming that they would never have to stop enslaving Black people; when Black resistance made this impossible, policies and public thought surrounding race and rights had to change. Douglass

¹¹ Paul Robeson. “The Negro Artist Looks Ahead,” 1951, in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 328.

¹² Sterling Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹³ Frederick Douglass, excerpt from “What the Black Man Wants,” 1865, in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

declares that the ultimate injustice is the barring of Black people from these rights, especially when Black people fought for the Union in the Civil War, and contends that once these rights are granted, Black communities will be able to lift themselves up. He believes that given freedom, Black people will be able to change their material conditions.

Some abolitionists leveraged Black people's critical role in building U.S. economy to make progress in racial justice. Ida B. Wells employed this strategy in an appeal to end lynching in the South. Wells drew a necessary link between labor and capital, asserting that "If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain."¹⁵ She used this link to argue that the "Afro-American is...the backbone of the South" as it is only through their labor coupled with Northern capital, that the Southern economy could recover after the war.¹⁶ In emphasizing how Black people are critical contributors to the economy, and how it cannot function without their participation in capitalism and thus their subjugation, Wells enforced the idea that race comes prior to economy. Likewise, she cemented the struggle for civil rights and Black liberation as also a question of public affairs and that interactions with the government could transform material conditions for Black America. She proposed that the Black community use their position in the economy to bring an end to lynching by employing the boycott, emigration, and the press. Wells had little faith in the U.S. government to bring her justice, though she knew the country needed her, so she drew on the economic separation between her and whites as a tool to bring about the change she and the country need. She declared that the "...white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities."¹⁷

Wells's outlook on the economics question put her at odds with another leading Black

¹⁵ Ida B Wells-Barnett, "Self-Help," In *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases*, 1893.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

intellectual from the turn of the 20th Century, Booker T. Washington. Wells was cognizant of Washington's intentions and effectiveness, but like many of their contemporaries, was apprehensive of his methods. Washington remains one of the most important Black thinkers and, despite his controversial work, is acclaimed in both Black and white circles. His main goal was to build and enrich Black business and wealth; Wells knew that to disturb the white man's god was to invite violence, but Washington was cunning. His work served a strategic dual purpose -- he manipulated his words to engage white elites while simultaneously funding justice-seeking court cases, giving money elsewhere, and running the Tuskegee Institute.¹⁸ Washington stressed the importance of economic uplift in the struggle for racial equality. Both Washington and Wells saw U.S. governmental policy as violent, exclusionary, and exploitative, and worked to navigate the system and foster material improvement for Black people in the United States.

W. E. B. Du Bois, a foremost public intellectual and the first Black man to earn his doctorate from Harvard University diverged from Washington on the question of how to improve the conditions of Black people. He argued that the Black community needed to focus on securing the ballot rather than industrial schooling in order to achieve equality, and published "The Parting of the Ways," in which he contended that "America will never spell opportunity for black men; it spelled slavery for then in 1619 and it will spell the same thing in other letters in 1919."¹⁹ Du Bois was pessimistic that gaining skills, jobs, and wealth would counterbalance the racial injustice that Black Americans faced, and asserted that such solutions to the racial problem were unsustainable. There would be no roundabout way to combat racism, and economic justice for

¹⁸ Washington opened the Tuskegee Institute of industrial schooling to train Black youth to become business owners and leaders. For more see: Booker T. Washington, "The Awakening of the Negro," from *The Atlantic*, September 1896

¹⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois. "The Parting of the Ways" from *The Negro Problem from the Negro Point of View*, 523.

Black people could only come comes once they were legally recognized beyond Jim Crow legislation as people with voting and human rights equivalent to the white population. Du Bois entered into conversation with Washington, and their intellectual debate drove forward discussions of solutions for the scourge of racism in the United States through World War I and the roaring twenties.

As Black thinkers grappled with the struggle for justice, the Great Depression brought about disastrous economic consequences for all workers. Black workers were disproportionately affected. The Depression's impact on workers, though varying in intensity for different groups, was universally detrimental and opened avenues for collaboration between Black and white workers. These avenues, however, were constrained by Black and white workers' diverging interests; unlike Black workers, white workers had no investment in racial justice. This continued to be a key roadblock to attaining economic justice for all workers through socialism. Abram Harris saw this problem in workers trying to unionize in 1930. He declared that there are two main obstacles to labor solidarity: the psychology of craft unionism and the psychology of race prejudice.²⁰ White workers' investment in whiteness and the exclusion of Black workers infiltrated any justice-minded work every time and derailed an opportunity for collaboration that would combat racial and economic exploitation.

Attempts by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to grapple with race in the struggle for economic justice were superficial and unsuccessful. The AFL recognized the problem of race and responded with lukewarm statements about wanting increased numbers of Black workers in unions and little concrete action to solve the problem.²¹ Abram Harris called for the AFL and

²⁰ "Black Workers in the Great Depression," 1930, in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 273.

²¹ *Ibid.*

white workers in general to try harder to address issues of race, though it was not an immediate concern to them.²² Angelo Herndon's angle in obtaining justice for workers of all races differed from that of Harris; he called for workers to set aside their differences, to "forget about the question whether those born with white skin are 'superior' and those born with black skin are 'inferior,' and unite under the common oppression and struggle for labor justice."²³ Herndon's activism appealed to all workers, though the government used it still to pit Black and white people against each other. When he rallied workers to come to the Commissioner's office in Atlanta to demonstrate the prevalence of starvation in the city, white workers were invited into the office and Black workers were shut out; both groups experienced the same inaction of the government, but were denied access to resources at different levels.

This treatment was a manifestation of structural racism that blocked Black workers from achieving economic stability more thoroughly than it blocked poor white workers. A history of consistent and pervasive racial injustice seriously hindered any economic progress from reaching Black communities. The New Deal, eulogized as a liberal and progressive solution to economic depression, did little for poor Black people. The National Recovery Administration, which promised to bring higher wages and employment, based wage rates on existing wage differentials between Black and white workers and led to increased costs of living, on top of making little effort to enforce the laws to explicitly combat racism.²⁴ The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was formed to aid farmers by paying them to reduce crop production and raise food prices. Less production meant fewer jobs for largely Black farmers, compounded by higher

²² Ibid.

²³ Angelo Herndon. "You Cannot Kill the Working Class." 1933, in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 282.

²⁴ Davis, John P, "A Black Inventory of the New Deal" in *The Crisis*, 1935, eds. Roy Wilkins, Vol. 42, No. 5. 141.

costs for food.²⁵ The Public Works Administration, designed to increase employment, made a marginal impact on Black communities. It created a quota system for employers that required negligible percentage of jobs set aside for Black workers, and did not account for employer discrimination.²⁶ None of these programs were drafted with the goal of defeating a violent legacy of racism, so none of them were successful in bringing about economic justice for all. The period from the Civil War through World War II was full of struggles for racial and economic justice, but white supremacy halted any attempts for radical public reform of policy or thought.

Public thought and policy have been produced and reproduced by an American tradition of white supremacy. This is not a new concept; Black people have been dealing with this reality for centuries, yet white memories of the history of the United States often leave this out. The onus for ending capitalism based upon white supremacy lies firmly on the shoulders of white America. Recognition and acceptance of this responsibility is key to the success of radical change in public affairs. White politicians, public figures, and civilians must look to the work that Black thinkers have done and are doing, and reflect on what whites must do to dismantle white supremacy. Revolution and justice cannot come unless white people divest from whiteness, and divest from the subjugation of Black people. Whiteness is the problem that has plagued the U.S. throughout history – from slavery, to Reconstruction, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and to the present – and continues to stall social progress in the US. Dred Scott took his injustice to the Supreme Court and lost, but a critical evaluation of United States history through the lens of Black intellectuals is a vital first step to undoing centuries of injustice.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

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