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Evolution of Racism towards the Black Community

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ABSTRACT

Racism is a systematic ideology/ a complex set of beliefs and practices on the presumed basis of biology that divides humanity into 'higher', and 'lower' tiers. Racism over the years, has seen many forms such as social actions, practises, political systems and beliefs, in which different races are ranked as inherently inferior or superior to one another. A typical pattern we can identify through the due course of history is that racism not only sustained a permanent group hierarchy, but deeply stigmatised those designated to be 'inferior'.

In this paper, I will aim to discuss about the evolution of racism towards the black community, how it evolved, and the sociological aspects associated with it. These discussions will be centred around the period of scientific racism in the 19th century, The Apartheid Regime, and systemic racism in current times.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of racism is relatively a modern one, its birth can be traced to the European Age of Imperialism, the subsequent growth of capitalism, and especially, The Atlantic Slave Trade. (Dennis, 2014). It was also a significant force behind racial segregation especially in the United States (in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and South Africa under the apartheid regime.

It is without doubt that one of the most racially marginalised sects of society are the community of darker skinned individuals, popularly termed as 'blacks', who have suffered a long history of discrimination and exploitation. The early beginnings of black oppression can be traced back to late August 1619, where '20 and odd' captive Africans, touched Port Comfort's soil which was a part of England's colony in Virginia. To satisfy the needs of rapidly growing North American colonies, European white settlers turned from indentured Europeans to a much cheaper, plentiful, and stronger source, which they found in Africans. Simultaneously, in South Africa, settlements were established by the Dutch East India Company at the Cape of Good

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Hope during the early 1600's. (History, 2019). These were seized by the British during the Napoleonic Wars, resulting in some areas being governed by the British and the Dutch. The region attracted ivory and slave traders who imported slaves for wheat farming and viticulture to serve the European settlements, and by the late 18th century, it saw a prominent rise in slave trading, in in return for goods, firearms, alcohol etc. These were 2 important events marked the **establishment of worldwide colonies, development of racism towards the black community, and eventually lead to the Civil war in North America, and the apartheid regime in South Africa.**

II. SETTLER'S COLONIALISM

Settler's colonialism is a type of imperialism that functions through the replacement of the indigenous population/community with the establishment of colonies in a particular area with an invasive settler society that over time, developing a distinctive identity and sovereignty. Creating such colonies helped in creating power for the colonizer, and asserting dominance over the indigenous population, which in this case were the blacks.

There were two distinctive models of colonialism which existed back then

1) **Formal Colonialism:** The physical expansion by one state and subsequent encroachment of that state onto another territory, for the purpose economic and political power, wealth, territory and domain. Formal colonialism thrives on theft of resources and labour exploitation of those who have been conquered. Examples of formal colonialism included the colonization of Africa and Asia by Europeans. Racism was a by-product of this first model of colonialism. (Jackson, 2009)

2) **Internal Colonialism:** The second model of colonialism is internal colonialism which BonillaSilva offers as a model of racism in the United States. Under this model, non-whites are colonial subjects of the whites. This framework of colonialism gives us an idea of how white supremacy and colonialism exist together in symbiosis and that the sustenance of an empire depends upon the creation of race and the maintenance of social hierarchy. This current model of colonialism still exists in places like the United States and can either be overt, or covert (systemic racism). (Jackson, 2009)

III. IDEOLOGIES AND SCIENTIFIC RACISM

The concept of racism towards the blacks throughout the history of humankind was not based on genetic characteristics; rather, it was a social process that drew upon phenotypic characteristics to order relationships in the social hierarchy. The failure to engage race as a

dynamic social process in social scientific research that uses genetics has resulted in erroneous conclusions about how genes contribute to racial inequality. This biased and malicious application of the scientific method to studying race as a characteristic of individuals because of certain prerequisite ideologies has historically been used to justify racism towards the blacks. These beliefs about the distinguishing characteristics of whites and blacks led to the establishment of various colonies across the globe by the whites, and then, the development of scientific racism and theories such as polygenism and eugenics.

Scientific racism was the pseudo-scientific belief that there was empirical evidence which existed, scientifically, to prove and justify racism. Scientific racism saw its birth in the early 17th century and grew massively and received credence throughout the 19th century. Early scientific racist theorists such as Thomas Jefferson were on a mission to prove the biological inequalities and disparities between the black race and the whites. He hypothesized that blackness could derive from the colour of the blood and concluded that it was inferior to whites in body and mind. (Finkelman, 2012).

In the 19 century American anthropologist and physician Samuel George Morton attempted to classify races based on their cranial capacity. His observations were that a larger skull denoted a larger brain, and hence, a higher intellectual capacity, and the converse for a smaller skull. Morton stated that his claims were centred around Craniometric details, that Caucasians had the largest brains (87 cubic inches), followed by Native Americans (82 inches), and Negroes had the smallest (78 inches). (Thomas, 2001). Morton's observations were at a period of time when the polygenist theory was widespread. Polygenism is a theory of human origin which posits the view that human races are of different genetic origins. Early thinkers such as Voltaire and David Hume had already laid the foundation for polygenist theories and believed that each race has diverse origins because they were racially different. In comparison to Caucasians, Voltaire felt that the blacks were different species as he stated "The negro race is a species of men different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds. The mucous membrane, or network, which nature has spread between the muscles and the skin, is white in us and black or copper-coloured in them." (Voltaire, 1733). Josiah C. Nott and George Gilddon adopted Morton's polygenist ideas in *Types of Mankind* where they assessed that "Blacks and whites were the product of separate acts of divine creation, and the reduced fertility in relations between the races indicated that the separately created races were, in scientific terms, separate and distinct species."

These theories played an important role in the basis and practise of slavery in places like the

United States and South Africa. The concept of miscegenation prompted many scientists such as Josiah Nott, Robert Knox and Samuel Morton write about how it prompted feebleness and impotence. Post the American civil war, physicians of the Southern Confederacy wrote extensively on why black freemen (ex-slaves) were becoming extinct, and even went up to the extent of saying that they actually benefitted from enslavement. White scientists in South Africa like Dudley Kidd believed that phenotypic and cultural differences between the blacks and whites were caused due to physiological differences in the brain. In his book *The Essential Kafir*, he described the black African population as “hopelessly deficient” yet “very shrewd.” (Dubow, 1995).

IV. THE APARTHEID REGIME AND THE JIM CROWE LAWS

The Apartheid System was a social system present in South Africa that upheld segregationist policies against the non-white citizens of South Africa. It allowed racial discrimination against Non-whites and mainly focused on the colour of the skin and facial features. The word ‘Apartheid’ means apartness in Afrikaans. It was marked by an oppressive, Baaskap-based political culture (white supremacy) that ensured that South Africa was governed politically, socially and economically by the white minority population of the country. According to this racial stratification scheme, white people had the highest status, followed by Asians and Coloreds, followed by black Africans.

Apartheid first began in South Africa when the Afrikaner National Party won the general election and came into power. The party consisted of an all-white population and started drafting/formulating policies which only benefitted them, and which were racially discriminating to the largely major population of blacks.

The first major apartheid legislation was the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, followed closely by the Immorality Reform Act of 1950, which made it illegal for most South African people to marry or seek sexual inter-racial relationships, resulting in 7 years of incarceration.

The Population Registration Act was introduced in 1950 which worked in close tandem with the marriage act and immorality amendment act, which provided a basis for the race classification of all South Africans. Criteria such as the skin colour, facial features, characteristics of the persons hair and eating habits were taken into consideration while classifying the population as Black, White and Coloured. In certain cases, the act separated families; parents could be categorized as white while their offspring were classified as coloured.

Coupled with this, The Group Areas Act was passed in 1950, which defined where one lived

on the grounds of ethnic status. Races allotted areas of their own, within which they had to stay. Due to these legislations, between 1960 and 1983, 3.5 million black Africans were removed from their homes and forced into segregated neighbourhoods resulting in some of the largest mass evictions in modern history. Much of these targeted removals were meant to limit the black population to ten designated 'tribal homelands,' also known as Bantustans, four of which were nominally autonomous nations. Separate laws were later implemented as part of the Bantu Authority Act of 1951, which established separate governance systems for blacks and whites.

Although slavery was abolished from America in 1865 as the Thirteenth Amendment by the Congress, In 1877, a deal to obtain Southern support for the upcoming presidential election (corrupt bargaining) concluded in the government removing the last of the armed troops from the South, thereby resulting in White Democrats taking control in the Southern States. These Southern, White, Democratic Redeemer states legislated the Jim Crow rules, legally segregating Black citizens from the white population. Jim Crow's laws were a form of totalitarian rule aimed explicitly at one ethnic group. (Christopher, 2019)

Between 1890 and 1910, ten of the eleven former confederate states, starting with Mississippi, adopted new constitutions or provisions that effectively oppressed the majority of Black citizens by a combination of poll fees, literacy and understanding tests, and residency and record keeping provisions. (Perman, 2001). "Within a decade of disfranchisement, the white supremacy campaign had erased the image of the black middle class from the minds of white North Carolinians." (Pildes, 2000) Colleges, public libraries for black citizens, if they existed at all were underfunded and often stocked with second-hand books and other facilities. These services were not introduced for African Americans in the South until the first decade of the 20th century.

As a part of the Jim Crow Laws, the 1912 presidential election was sharply aligned with the concerns of African Americans. Many of the black people also remained in the South, where they had been legally excluded, because they did not vote at all. Although poll taxes and literacy standards prevented many disadvantaged or illiterate Americans from voting, these stipulations also had loopholes that exempted European Americans from compliance with the requirements.

What happened in South Africa during the apartheid regime, and the Jim Crow laws of the Southern Confederacy, are strikingly similar in the context that they both aimed to suppress the black community due to their interests. While in the United States, slavery was abolished, yet the blacks were continued to be oppressed, racism was overtly practised in South Africa. Both

these States tried to follow racist ideologies in the form of provisions and laws, and furthermore, found a means to justify them.

V. ANALYSIS

The cases of scientific racism and apartheid illuminate two very important sociological concepts which are- “How because of a certain set of ideologies a social fact was manipulated into being portrayed as a genetic one, for the sake of justification of racism”, and “How social stratification worked closely in tandem with racism towards the black community.”

To discuss these questions in detail, let us understand the distinction between a social fact and a genetic fact. A genetic fact is something which is biologically verified and only influences individual characteristics. By no way does it exercise external constraint and place a group of people under a certain category such as ‘weak’ / ‘strong’ or ‘beautiful’/‘ugly’. According to sociologist Emile Durkheim a social fact is defined as “A way of acting, feeling, or thinking, whether fixed or not, which is capable of exerting constraint over an individual.” For a category of facts to be termed social, they must consist of manners of acting, thinking and coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him. (Durkheim, 1964)

The period of scientific racism saw various racial theories which were imposed upon the black community. These were external to them and were endowed with a coercive and compelling power with which they were used as a means of unjust discrimination by the white community. They were enforced by a social cause, i.e., in this case a sense of hatred and disgust towards the blacks and a strong sense of global domination and control over their colonies in the form of unfair legislations, slavery etc.

Colonists across the globe held that society was homogenous and that their “plantations”, were to be a godly community of Europe. In their eyes, the African heathen, blacks, and negroes were looked upon as aliens in their land who were unfortunately here to stay. W.D. Jordan in his book ‘White over Black’ has described the several ways in which British colonialists distanced and defined themselves in constant opposition to the black population. The English attributed five characteristics to the blacks which were blackness, heathenism, savagery, beastliness and voluptuousness. (Arkel & Ross, 1982). The black skin was seen to be monstrous and was considered as a sign of depravity and possession by the devil. Since the blacks did not abide by the rules of morality, they were in thrall to their passions and lived like animals. (Arkel & Ross, 1982) As the feeling of hatred and disgust grew towards the black community, we saw several theories come up in the 19th century (as discussed in scientific racism) which had support from the scientific community back then. In this way, what once kicked off as an

ideology, slowly started getting manipulated, and finding its way into the realm of science.

A key takeaway from the scientific racism study is that racism is not a genetic variable, nor a neatly measurable, individual-level genetic concept that can be statistically manipulated. It is rather, a cumulation of ideologies that are imparted to people across generations. It is for this very reason, that sociologist Emile Durkheim calls racism as a ‘social fact’.

Now, another important question which arises is how racism brought about a change in the social hierarchy in society.

Social Stratification is a system by which society categorizes people and ranks them in a hierarchy. It is a characteristic of society, and not of individual differences. A society’s cultural beliefs are the origin of how people are classified and define/normalise these to be held fair. Beliefs or ideologies are what make the systems of social stratification work. Social stratification systems are of two types, open and closed. Open social stratification systems are based on meritocracy and allow movement amongst its tiers, whereas in closed systems, it is extremely difficult for the minority, which has been subjected to continuous oppression and discrimination, to take up higher positions in society.

The South African system of apartheid for instance maintained a legally enforced separation between black people and white people. It denied them basic amenities such as citizenship, owning land, and participating in decision making. This brought about changes in power, wealth, prestige and education amongst the two communities, thereby creating a social hierarchy which allowed no movement between its tiers. The Jim Crowe laws of the southern confederacy, created the same situation in the United States, prior to the American civil war.

Another interesting point to note here is the striking similarities between the apartheid legislations and the Jim Crowe laws in the United States.

There has certainly been resistance towards racism from the black community with several movements arising in the early 20th century. These movements are what are known as ‘social currents’ in sociology and are defined as “spur-of-the-moment feelings that power a community, to resist conventional social facts.” This was seen in the form of resistance towards the apartheid movement, and several other leaders in the United States, like Martin Luther King Jr, who fought for the equality of blacks. The key difference between a social current and a social fact is the degree to which it is crystallized in society. A social current is strong but short-lived whereas a “social fact” is secure and solidified through time and change. A social current can solidify into a social fact. A great example of this is the example of South Africa, wherein the racism policies introduced by The African National Congress were completely replaced

post 1990. It is in fact morally wrong, and a punishable offence, to adopt and follow racist policies in most countries now.

VI. RACISM TOWARDS THE BLACKS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Discrimination and racism till this date has still not seen its erasure from our culture due to the sole reason of it being a social fact across generations. It is close to impossible to completely erase racist ideologies, and mindsets by passing countless laws and legislations. Although racism towards the black community is not blatant as before, it takes its form through systemic/disguised racism where in blacks continue to be oppressed in areas such as employment, education etc.

In a study conducted by The National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States in 2006, researchers found that racial segregation, and the academic gap between the blacks and whites were interlinked. To reach this conclusion the racial composition of several high schools, the characteristics of their surrounding neighbourhood, and the family background characteristics of black and white students were taken into consideration. Results indicated that racial segregation has had a largely negative effect on black students' relative test scores. This mainly pertains to schools in which a largely black population are enrolled. These tend to have a much lower quality of infrastructure as opposed to a well-developed school in a metropolitan area. These results indicate that segregation had a substantial negative impact on the relative test scores of black students. If a city is largely integrated, the difference in relative SAT scores between blacks and whites tends to be one quarter lower (about 45 points) than in a city where races are completely divided in different communities. This scenario can be compared to Annette Lareau's work '*Unequal Childhoods: Race, Class, and Family Life*', where her study is centred around two schools. Lower Richmond is located in a working-class neighbourhood with more than half the enrolment being from the black community. The area around the school is unsafe due to frequent robberies, and the extensive traffic around. The school itself suffers from extensive problems such as lack of teachers and students 'slipping through the cracks' with a very limited budget and minimal parental participation. Swan school on the other hand is a suburban elementary school with sprawling buildings, active funding and professional teachers. Its children largely come from professional, white families and the surrounding environment is a safe space.

Pew Research Center in 2016, conducted a study where a group of people were asked to answer the question whether "The average black person is ['worse off than,' 'about as well of as,' or 'better off than'] the average white person in terms of income and overall financial stability.

Only 49 percent of the respondents in the study were reportedly aware that, around the time of the survey, the median adjusted household income for whites was \$28,000 greater than for blacks. The median net worth of white U.S. households was roughly 13 times greater than the median net worth for black households, and blacks were slightly more than two and a half times as likely as whites to live in poverty (Pew Research Center, 2016). Another example, where empirical evidence demonstrates that people of colour are treated less fairly than whites within the U.S. criminal justice system, the study reported above found that only 50 percent of white adults reportedly believe that “blacks are treated less fairly than whites. . . in dealing with the police” and only 43 percent reportedly believe that “blacks are treated less fairly. . . in the courts” (Smith, 2020) for further reference see (Pew Research Center, 2016:5).

Racism hence actively contributes to the promotion of a group’s status, such as the scenario with white privilege. While most white people are aware of the fact that non-white people are at a disadvantage due to the colour of their skin, very few of them are willing to acknowledge the benefits/privilege they receive simply because of the colour of their skin. The failure to recognise this is a great example of a dominant group’s systemic racism. The world is going through major change again as recent events such as the cold-blooded murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have sparked The Black lives matter movement.

As mentioned before, it is pointless passing countless laws and legislations, as racism will see its end only when the mindsets of people change. It is essential to cement anti-blackness into our common conscience and bring an end to the errors of the past and the present that have caused so much suffering to so many people.

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