The Insidious Hegemony:
Colonial Whiteness and the Birth of a White Republic

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What is race? The vagaries of the observation that the privilege of white skin is ubiquitous in American history notwithstanding, the question remains. Before the advent of widespread racial slavery in colonial Virginia, poor whites on the frontier felt resentment as they provided the barrier between the white gentry in the Tidewater and the native population of American Indians. Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy, English landowner, aligned himself with the anger felt by the less affluent white settlers toward both the native population and the government they perceived as unwilling to address their grievances concerning the indigenous threat. Through their anger, Bacon succeeded in drawing poor European settlers, some of the wealthy on the frontier, and blacks under the shared desire of eliminating the threat posed by Indians as well as rebelling against the complacency of the colonial elite. The rebellion instigated the colonial assembly’s passage of, among other things, the lifelong enslavement of “Indians taken in warr” in 1676. This gave legal recognition of the elevated social status of white Christian settlers over the native population, since Christians could not be enslaved under English law. Though the cultural notions from which prejudice toward non-white others grew developed a century or more before Bacon launched his rebellion, the period stretching from the late-seventeenth century to the dawn of the nineteenth century witnessed the insidious birth of whiteness in colonial America and the development of the ostensibly white republic of the United States.¹

Prior to English colonization of North America, to racial slavery, even to the knowledge that “some men were black,” Winthrop Jordan noted that “the concept of blackness was loaded

with intense meaning” for the citizens of England. Two centuries before Bacon’s Rebellion, the
*Oxford English Dictionary* defined black as “deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul …
Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful,
disastrous, sinister … Foul iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked …. Indicating disgrace,
censure, liability to punishment, etc.” The color white, by contrast, symbolized black’s antithesis.
As an English poet mused, “Everye white will have its blacke,/And every sweet its sowre.”
White represented cleanliness, pure spirit, and closeness to God. When the English first came in
contact with men and women of African descent prior to colonization in North America, the
people with darker skin seemed to be, as Jordan put it, “the very picture of perverse negation.”

The blight of blackness felt by the English exhibited closely related characterizations
designated for the poor in England. In other words, class stratifications existed in England, and
animus between the aristocracy and the poor and working class fermented a bigotry that would
lay the foundation of racial prejudice. With the age of discovery, the wealthy elite within English
society viewed the laboring and merchant classes as “masterless men” with no conviction to
accept the social hierarchy, and went about, as Jordan noted, “begging, robbing, and raping” in
order to fulfill “a barbarous or slavish desire to turn the penie.” As Don Jordan and Michael
Walsh pointed out, those of the white under classes—including “vagrant children,” “petty
criminals,” the Irish, and those “spirited away” by kidnappers who sought to make money on the
trade in colonial labor—provided the primary source of labor through their indentured servitude.
During the first century of English colonization of the New World, these white men, women and

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2 Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel
children worked side-by-side with black men, women, and children, as well as for black
landowners whose indentures had expired.\textsuperscript{3}

In the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion, these attitudes about race and class emerged. The
unity of white and black labor began to diminish as colonial governments sought to divide the
laboring class racially in order to maintain the balance of power within the colonies. As the
primary labor source in the southern colonies evolved from indentured servitude to racial slavery,
colonial whites began amalgamating traditional attitudes toward blackness with those of the
English poor. Black slaves came to be seen as lazy, licentious, ignorant, and full of “almost every
Kind of Vice.” Colonial governments passed laws to keep the two races of the laboring
underclass separate, including the outlawing of miscegenation in Virginia in 1691. As the
eighteenth century approached, the term “white” came to be used in order to differentiate
between the new racial groups within the colony, or, as Theodore Allen noted, the term “servant”
applied to bond-laborers of European descent and “slave” for those of African descent.\textsuperscript{4}

Despite the emergence of white skin privilege, there still existed a sizable white
underclass. Lower-class whites felt a sense of empowerment as the upper class used them to
police their chattel, both black and white, who might take it upon themselves to run away or
rebel. White colonists also sought to control and keep separate the blackness of slavery in order

\textsuperscript{3} Jordan, 42; Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, \textit{White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain’s
\textsuperscript{4} Jordan and Walsh, 212; Morgan, 320-321, 335; Theodore W. Allen, \textit{The Invention of the White
1997), 228.
to quell the anxiety of possible slave rebellion and promote the liberty of whiteness in colonial society in order to pacify any discontent felt among lower-class whites toward the upper class.\(^5\)

This whitening of colonial America fueled the wave of populism that swept through the colonies during the second half of the eighteenth century. As Virginian landowners, both large and small, found a common interest in economic prosperity that wholly benefited the upper class, and the shared privilege of white skin color, the populist movement gave rise to the liberating philosophy of republicanism favored first and foremost by the Virginian gentry. Those who owned slaves and had servants paralleled the tyranny exerted by King George III on them with the lack of freedom experienced by their own labor force. Those who did not own bond labor or land had to be satisfied with knowing that, as Allen noted, liberty was the “birthright of the poorest person in England” even though such a birthright provided no realistic opportunity of upward mobility except their social position over black slaves.\(^6\)

Accompanying the drive for independence during the late eighteenth century was the continued animosity between the upper and lower classes of American whites, though buffered by the institutionalization of what Judge A. Leon Higginbotham called the “precept of inferiority” toward blacks. The consummate Virginian aristocrat Thomas Jefferson exhibited the widespread distrust and fear felt by the American gentry toward lower class whites when he wrote that the landless manifested “the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned,” and fear of black slaves continued to pacify the discontent felt by less-affluent whites toward the ruling class. The close proximity in which lower-class whites lived


\(^6\) Morgan, 369, 381-385; Allen, 248-249.
and worked with black slaves and freemen, particularly in the North, provided the means that
allowed for the furthered entrenchment of racist attitudes within the consciousness of the white
working class as the United States entered the nineteenth century.\(^7\)

From 1676 to the late-1700s, the culture of colonial whiteness generated anti-black
animosity that gave rise to both slavery and racism, and in effect allowed for the creation of the
hegemony of whiteness. As the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci noted, however, a
hegemony requires the “consent of subordinate groups” that exist on the lower rungs of the
social ladder. He suggested that, in order to receive consent, the ruling group must establish “a
worldview that appeals to a wide range of other groups within a society,” and that their interests,
both ideologically and economically, coincide. With the development of a worldview based on
common interests, the newly formed group developed into a “historical bloc” and allowed for
both “cultural and economic solidarity.” The dominant group within the bloc created its own
“spontaneous philosophy” to support its interests while allowing for the consent of others the
group wished to include, while maintaining the exclusion of those from which the bloc sought to
remain separate. The new philosophy was made up of rhetoric, “common sense,” and “folklore”
being made up of a group’s “popular religion” and its “entire system of beliefs,” all of which
were communicated through language. As the hegemonic culture gained power through consent

\(^7\) A. Leon Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American
Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xxv. Morgan, 384; David R.
Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class,
Revised Edition* (New York: Verso, 2007), 34-36; See also, Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The
Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press),
and its own dictation of interests, it continued to serve the “interest of ruling groups” within the bloc “at the expense of subordinate ones” without it.\(^8\)

The spontaneous philosophy indicated by Gramsci requires symbolism on which the basis of the philosophy rests. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined these symbols as “interworked systems of construable signs” that bring people together to create a culture by means of “webs of significance” through which people find common connection. Symbols aid in the construction of ideologies, the function of which Geertz explained, “is to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped.” These ideologies exhibit themselves as “cultural symbol-system[s]” when the rules of an institution that govern “behavior, thought, or feeling” become inadequate to maintain order within that institution. As a group begins to feel strain within due to challenges from without, those who seek to maintain influence create symbols both to keep the group together and preserve the group’s power structure.\(^9\)

In order for an ideology to take hold as a cultural system, it has to provoke a receptive response, and these, as Geertz called them, “response capacities” relate to the culture within which an ideology develops, with “psychophysical” elements setting “the context within which precise activity sequences are organized” by already established “cultural templates.” These psychophysical elements initiate powerful emotive connections established within a group of people and provide the basis for what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt called “cultural


innovations.” These innovations allow people to “cooperate in groups larger than the family” and provide advantage against competing groups. They are copied by those who identify with them, and, as Haidt noted, “cultural innovations can be driven by intelligent designers — people who are trying to solve a problem.” Those exhibiting similarities through cultural innovation empathize more strongly with one another, develop trusting relationships, and cooperate more readily.10

The symbol system, as Geertz would call it, of whiteness originated from the color of a white person’s skin. Haidt’s notion of cultural innovations or Gramsci’s spontaneous philosophy revealed itself through the practice of racism based on the ideology of white supremacy that grew out of already established cultural notions of whiteness’s superiority to the inferiority of blackness. These all contributed to the development of the hegemonic culture of whiteness during the colonial era of American history.

In the final analysis, Bacon’s Rebellion prompted Virginia’s colonial government to pass legislation that paved the way to the institutionalization of widespread racial slavery in 1676. As a result of racial slavery, wrote Edmund Morgan, less-affluent whites in Virginia “were allowed … to acquire social, psychological, and political advantages that turned the thrust of exploitation away from them and aligned them with” the wealthy planters who previously had been the “exploitors.” In Virginia there remained a leery suspicion of the poor, and poor whites were effectively shut out of the political process through the requirement of property ownership in

order to vote in much the same way that black slaves and freemen were barred from the franchise because of their skin color. The insidiousness of the constructed hegemony prompted those same disenfranchised white people to find satisfaction in their “birthright” of freedom given to them by their whiteness rather than living in a state of heritable, life-long servitude. Rather than the promise of property, they could pursue happiness. That privilege, however, required the willing consent of the poor and powerless whites.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Morgan, 344; Nell Irvin Painter, \textit{The History of White People} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 201; Allen, 248.