

The Historical Development of Whiteness

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What follows is a short history of the development of whiteness: beginning with Europe’s internal colonialism against non-Christians, the beginning of Christianity as a racial category, and finally the establishment of whiteness as a legal category in the American colonies.

From the 8th century to the 15th century, the Catholic church in Europe gave legitimacy to the ruling class to conquer land, and expel or convert Muslim and Jews from conquered territory. You may have heard the terms Reconquista, the Crusades, or the Inquisition, which refer to specific periods of this.

After a severe persecution in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, religious Jews who hadn’t converted were expelled from [Spain](#) in the 1490s. Soon after, the doctrine of Limpieza de Sangre, or Purity of Blood, from the Catholic Church was born.

Limpieza de Sangre was the idea that only “Old Christians” or Christians that hadn’t been converted from Judaism or Islam, were pure of blood. People who could not prove that that had Christian ancestry were systematically discriminated against. The concept is important because it was **the first time that the concept of Christianity was officially racialized--that it was about ancestry, rather than belief system**. And that racialization came with a material hierarchy, the threat and reality violence and the promise of discrimination.

This racialization happened at this moment for a particular reason. This concept of “Old Christians” as a race came to be during the same period that the Catholic pope gave permission to Portugal and Spain to conquer and colonize all non-Christian land. It was under what was called the Doctrine of Discovery, and it became the basis of European colonization in the Americas. These idea systems and the violence that accompanied them are direct precursors to both *manifest destiny* and U.S. imperialism. **So from the very beginning, the concept of race was about power and control over land, wealth, and labor.**

At the same time the Spanish were beginning to colonize the Americas, the English were colonizing Northern Ireland: “The ancient Irish social system was systematically attacked, traditional songs and music forbidden, whole clans exterminated and the remainder brutalized. A ‘wild Irish’ reservation was even attempted. ...Bounties were

paid for the Irish heads brought in and later only the scalp or ears were required. A century later, in North America, Indian heads and scalps were brought in for bounty in the same manner.”¹ Notably, much of the English literature that exists about the Irish at this time described them as pagans and therefore “uncivilized savages”.

Some of the individual British soldiers that committed genocide against indigenous people here had actually practiced by colonizing the Irish. In one example, Walter Raleigh--who was the first English person granted permission by the Queen of England to set up a colony in the Americas in what would be called Roanoke--had risen to wealth and power by playing a key role in the suppression of Irish resistance to English colonization.

Together, the doctrine of discovery, the purity of blood doctrine, and rehearsed English ideas from the colonization of Ireland would be used to justify both the colonization and the slavery that the U.S. economy would be built on.

So when did the concept of a Christian race turned into the concept of whiteness in the U.S? In the course of human history, whiteness is a recent invention. It began to be written into law in the U.S. during the 1600s in relation to slavery.

Here’s what was happening during the time period:

- Massive cotton, tobacco and sugar plantations were the economic engines upon which the US economy was being built. As you read about in the piece on Slavery and Capitalism, these same plantations would eventually produce enough wealth and cheap raw material to fuel the industrial revolution. The entire Northern-based finance system would be built up based on its investment in the slave trade.
- But then, in the early 1600s, most of the labor in the south was carried out by indentured servants. Servitude was a condition shared by most poor colonists, including hundreds of Africans in the Virginia colony. The Africans had been forcibly removed from their homes, and taken across the brutal middle passage, but servitude was not determined by skin color or national origin, and it had an end date.
- Plantation owners were massively outnumbered by the poor people and indentured servants (which they are today too.)
- So, we have oppressive and dehumanizing conditions, people from Europe and Africa working in these conditions. They lived together, fought together, started

¹ This quote is from Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who used to be on Catalyst’s board, and is the author of “an Indigenous People’s History of the United States”.

families together. They were struggling to survive against a common enemy--the people who owned their labor. We know this partially because the ruling class started passing laws against English servants running away with Africans, and later against interracial marriage.

- At the same time, rebellions among indentured servants were breaking out and Africans were running away and starting “maroon” societies. Virginia records document ten servant revolts in the mid 1600’s alone. And as you can imagine, -- the masters really didn’t want people to know that servants were rebelling, they feared it would cause more rebellion. So we’re certain that there were many more cases of revolt.
- Then, around the 1660s, as economic conditions improved in England, fewer white indentured servants volunteered to come to the colonies, and there began to be a labor shortage. Plantation owners in Virginia rapidly started bringing more enslaved people from Africa.

This brings us to what has been called Bacon’s Rebellion. Nathaniel Bacon, a young wealthy Englishman, organized a thousand people--English and African people who were indentured servants or slaves, free workers and farmers--to try to kill or drive out all the indigenous people in Virginia, lower taxes, and stop the Governor from hiring all of his friends.

This is an important example of what we call contradictory resistance. All of these so-called rebels were contributing to the genocide against indigenous people. The indentured servants and enslaved people were also fighting for their freedom.

They burned down Jamestown, the colony’s capital. Colonial rulers had to call in the British army to subdue the rebellion. The rebel army held out for eight months before the Crown managed to defeat and disarm it.

The last band of people who surrendered as a part of Bacon’s rebellion was a band of 400 African and European servants and enslaved people. They were persuaded to disarm because they were offered their freedom, but they were then handed back over to their masters, and the leaders of the revolt were killed.

This type of sustained, armed unity between African and English laborers had never been seen before, and the ruling class was scared. In order to prevent this type of unity, and to prevent another rebellion, the ruling elite of Virginia deliberately used divide and control strategies to divide the dangerous free people from the dangerous slaves.

They wrote a series of Slave Codes enacted from 1680 through 1705. The Slave Codes:

- Equated the terms “slave” and “Negro,” thus institutionalizing the world’s first system of racialized slavery.
- Legalized “chattel slavery” and severely restricted the rights of free Africans. Chattel slavery was a new condition, making it so that any child of an enslaved woman would be enslaved for a lifetime. This created monetary incentive for the widespread rape of enslaved women.
- Government seized all property that belonged to slaves, and distributed it to “the poor,” that is English servants.
- Denied Africans and indigenous people the right to vote, testify in court, serve on juries, or own property.
- Forbade sexual relations between Africans and Europeans (punished English women severely for having children by an African father)
- Criminalized learning to read

All of these were subject to ruthless punishment, often including disfigurement, disablement or death. We can trace a clear line from this moment to the Black Codes after the official end to slavery, all the way through to today’s prison and police systems.

At the same time, the codes also set out the “rights” of and restrictions for “servants.” At first, “servants” referred ambiguously to both Africans and English. But as “slave” became synonymous with “Negro,” “servant” came to mean “white,” the term, which replaced “English,” or “Christian” to refer to poor or indentured Europeans.

The Rights and Restrictions for White Servants:

- Stipulated that servants could challenge unjust behavior of their masters in court
- Entitled servants to specific “freedom dues,” paid in tobacco (the legal tender of the colony) when their term of servitude was over
- Granted servants a small plot of land in exchange for promising to “guard” the colonized frontiers, bringing them into the benefits of the genocide of indigenous people
- Poor white males were offered the first paid jobs in the colony— on the slave patrols – receiving bounties for every slave they caught. This was the first police force in the U.S.

All these “privileges” were specified as being available only to “white” people. And if any poor whites acted in solidarity with any Africans, they would be physically branded, and their privileges removed.

The privileges of whiteness were dependent on complicity with white supremacy. As Bill Fletcher said: *“What it means to become white is that you’re periodically engaged in suppressing the demonized populations...Put on a uniform and you too can have the uniform of a Rockefeller or a Ford, play it right and you may become a Rockefeller or a Ford. Race wound up becoming that uniform.”*

And that uniform was specifically created by colonial rulers to prevent oppressed people from different continents from uniting to confront their common oppressors. **Poor whites at this time traded class solidarity for whiteness and its accompanying privileges.**

Bacon’s Rebellion was the last known multiracial revolt of the oppressed during the colonial era because this strategy worked.

This moment has been constantly recreated, as generations of white folks have been asked to sell out people of color in big and small ways to get their own needs met.

Another example of this was when white landless people were offered land on the western frontier of the U.S. in exchange for killing indigenous people and defending against anti-colonial resistance. They were forced to make a choice between having a resource that their survival may have depended on, and killing people who are native to this land.

So “White” is a political term. But it’s important to understand also that “White” was originally a class term. **These privileges were irrelevant to colonial rulers. They didn’t need a plot of land, or a job catching slaves. They had power and wealth.** And they got to sit far away from the specific sites of violent racist oppression, while sending poor and working class white people to literally be the foot soldiers that carry out their agendas.

This is often still true today. From police to prison guards to the border patrol to the soldiers who carry out imperialism to help secure resources, wealth and power for the ruling class, people from poor and white working class communities are overrepresented.

In this way, whiteness is about a strange “coming together” between the ruling class and one section of the working class: white folks. Where poor and working class white folks are granted just enough dignity, just enough freedom, and just enough security to go along with our current social, political, and economic system, often at the cost of anti-colonial, Black liberation and other people of color-led movements.

While it’s not the primary reason we fight, there is also a cost to white people ourselves for participating in white supremacy and claiming its privileges.

What do you think are some of the things that white communities lose because of white supremacy?

There are so many spiritual and psychological answers to this question, but we want to lift up the real material cost for poor and working class white communities especially. Policies in this country that got pushed through with racist propaganda, often end up damaging the populations that they were trying to win over. Just a few historical examples of this include:

- The poll tax and literacy tests that were aimed at stopping Black people from voting after slavery ended also disenfranchised poor white people
- The cuts to the social safety net that have been pushed through using images like the “Black Welfare Queen” or the undeserving immigrant, while the majority of welfare users in this country are white.
- The drastic expansion of the police and prison state that was pushed through as a “law and order” response to the civil rights and Black Power movement has caught up many thousands of poor and working class white folks in its wake.

These are only a few of the reasons why we believe poor and working class white people should be at the center of white anti-racist movements, along with others who are marginalized by our current system.