

THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF RACISM

By: Donald Bluestone

This will not be a scholarly address in the anaemic and emasculated sense of the word "scholarly". But it will be, I hope, historically sound in the sense Charles Austin Beard used when he described written history as an act of faith. For what I am about to say springs from a deep and profound faith in the American people and the people of the world--not all people, but most. It is a faith that is not a hollow or ritualized worship of symbols. It derives from the observance of struggle; from the dignity of men achieving greatness in resistance to oppression. There is no more adequate definition of humanity than resistance to inhumanity.

That human beings resist oppression is, to me, an axiom. It is a fundamental fact that does not admit of proof; that does not require verification. It is this that is the essence of humanity; that characterizes all men who are enslaved whether the form be chattel bondage or the sweatshop; whether the ideology be that of human property or freedom to starve.

Equally axiomatic to me is the fact that a human being becomes more human, more civilized, more exalted, if you will, in the process of resisting oppression. On the other hand his oppressor no matter how sophisticated, no matter how well educated, no matter how guileless his rhetoric--the oppressor degenerates into a brute--a non-human.

These are to me historical truths. Without these I would find the study of history to be an aimless and thankless task.

It may be objected that such a definition of humanity and inhumanity is unbecoming an intellectual. Some may argue that, after all, I have no means of establishing on grounds of evidence and logic, proof that an oppressor is less human

than the oppressed; that I have no scholarly grounds on which to verify my assumption that where there is oppression there is resistance to oppression. After all, the ethical neutralist will maintain, there is no reason why some men should starve if others are made happy by it; there is no logical evil about some being slaves while others profit from their bondage. Is not my humanitarian preconception a value judgement in itself no better nor worse than any other? To these questions I would answer as the late Professor Paul Baran did when asked similar questions by a Nazi student leader in Germany over three decades ago. Baran replied that, "a meaningful discussion of human affairs can only be conducted with humans; one wastes one's time talking to beasts about matters related to people".

I am not here tonight to prove that the Negro people resisted slavery. I accept this as an unalterable fact. To assume that the Negro did not resist slavery is to assert that the Negro was not human. And, conversely trying to prove that the Negro was not happy under slavery is almost tantamount to trying to prove that the Negro was human--an inverse form of racism.

To be sure, the assertion that the Negro was not human was a stock argument of the slaveholders themselves. Their argument was candid: the Negro was not human therefore he was fit to be enslaved. At the same time this argument justified the institution of slavery it also provided a basis upon which the antebellum slaveholders could appeal to their southern poor white neighbors. The poor whites of the South opposed the institution of slavery from the Seventeenth Century on. For the poor white, slavery was insurance that he would remain poor while a minority of slaveholders controlled the political power, the economy, the wealthy and the land of the South.

It is no surprise therefore that of the 130 antislavery groups that existed in the United States in 1827, 106 of them were composed of poor whites in the South; and this five years before William Lloyd Garrison formed the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Little wonder that the slaveholders turned to a positive defense of their institution in an attempt to rally the whites to the color of their skin against the North and the Negro.

Today some relics of the past still state the argument that the Negro is inferior. We find this in some history texts and on the political platforms. But these living antiques are in a small minority. American racism has become most sophisticated in the past three hundred years.

Racism is one of the basic components of the American way of Life. It has had one third of a millenium to develop and flourish. No other country in the world has had such a lengthy history of chauvinism. Even the Germans developed their form of racism in a relatively short period of time. But we have had centuries. And it is this legacy of which Negro slavery and its aftermath are a part. It is this tradition of defining colored people to be oppressed as non-humans that has justified so much of our past and our present.

Before the slave there was the Indian. The native inhabitants of America were, after all, non-white, non-Christian, non-Western and therefore non-human. And, as Mark Twain ironically declared, the righteous settlers of America in Thanksgiving to God fell first upon their knees and then upon the aborigines. Civilized men these settlers of America. The leaders of 17th century Massachusetts thought little of distributing blankets to the Indians--a benevolent gesture but for one thing--the blankets were saturated with small-pox germs and entire Indian tribes were wiped out in the ensuing epidemic.

How to justify this mass slaughter of countless Indians through this planned extermination? How to account for this final solution to the Indian problem? Very difficult to do if one accepted the Indians as fellow human beings. Very easy if one simply extracted their humanity. Why the Indians weren't human of course. The Indians were, and we may question the use of the word by these leaders of Massachusetts-- savages.

This was only the beginning of a systematic policy of genocide that did not end until the pitiful remnants of a once-proud people were herded into barren detention areas throughout the country. It did not stop when the U. S. government broke treaty after treaty with the Indians. It did not stop when the Cherokee Indians were forced out of Georgia. The Cherokees, some Americans (Few Americans) protested, were highly civilized. They had a written language, a highly developed settled agriculture a democratic form of government. But the Georgians were white and the Cherokees with the aid of federal troops ~~were~~ marched out of their lands in chains. It did not stop in California when the white settlers didn't even bother to sign treaties but simply expropriated the land of the Indians killing 50,000 of these non-white people between the years of 1849 and 1852.

It did not stop with the Civil War. The red men still presented an obstacle. They existed. An observer in 1864 wrote, "in going over the battlefield the next day I did not see a body of a man, woman or child but was scalped, and in many instances the bodies were mutilated in the most horrible manner..." "No wounded fell into our hands and all the dead were scalped," boasted another brave warrior. He added, "the women and children were huddled together and our fire was concentrated on them." Accounts of an Indian massacre of white settlers in the West? Not at all!

These descriptions were written by Lieutenant James D. Connor and Lieutenant Cramer of the New Mexico Volunteers. They were describing an attack on a quiet Cheyenne village in Colorado. On that one autumn day in 1864 five to six hundred Indian men, women and children were slaughtered by troops of the U. S. Army. A unique action? Not at all. A year earlier Brigadier General James H. Carleton, Commander of the U. S. Army's New Mexico Department issued an order to his troops (August 3, 1863) to "kill every male Navajo and Apache you can find."

It did not stop. At the so-called "Battle" of Wounded knee, Sioux women and children were lined up along a ditch and slaughtered en masse, a technique later to be perfected by the S. S.. And on and on and on. When the white man arrived on these shores there were over one million Indians. By 1880 and the end of the Indian wars there were less than 240,000 Indians left. Extermination was thorough if not complete. The rest could not be accomplished by the military alone. Unable to exterminate the Indian people by troops alone the American Leaders tried to accomplish this by new tactics. Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Francis A. Walker declared, "there is no question of national dignity, be it remembered, involved in the treatment of savages by a civilized power. With wild men, as with wild beasts, the question whether in a given situation one shall fight, coax or run is a question of what is easiest and safest". Reservations and Congressional appropriation of Indian lands were the next tactic used. The form of this was the Allotment Act of 1877 which managed in the space of one year to remove more than 17,000,000 acres of land from the hands of the Indians.

How could all of this come to pass? The reason was simple. The Indians were not human. They were things--they were blocks--impediments to be removed. They were redskins. They were only good when they were dead. The rationale began to wear in.

Little wonder that the Indians welcomed escaping Negro slaves into their midst. Both fled from a common oppressor. Both were, in the eyes of official America, non-humans. Andrew Jackson saw to it that this coalition be broken up and led a military expedition to crush the Seminole Indians of Florida who were aiding fugitive slaves.

The Negro slaves were defined as non-men from the very beginning. For the American whites the slave was property--he was chattel to be bought and sold. He was an investment that had to bring a decent return. He was anything but a man and he was black. Even in the United States Constitution he was defined as 3/5 of a person.

But American racism had to refine and take shape. Slavery institutionalized racism; it codified racism; it sanctioned racism; it protected racism. By 1857 the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court was able to pronounce a majority opinion that the Negro people were "a subordinate and inferior class of beings, who had been subjected by the dominant race, and whether emancipated or not, yet remained subject to their authority, and had no rights or privileges but such as those who hold the power and the government might choose to grant them..."

Two hundred years of Negro slavery. Two hundred years of binding an entire group of men as property; as non-men. Two hundred years of holding men as things. The chauvinism that resulted was not confined to the slaveholders. It infected every segment of American Life. In the free North countless discriminatory laws existed. Even the abolitionists were guilty practicing severe discrimination against Negroes. And again the dehumanization effected not the group that was subject to the oppression but rather the group that oppressed.

Sophisticated historians question the view of the slaveholder as a brutal man.

After all Simon Legree was a fictional man. The overseers were human, say these historians and so were the planters. There were good and there were bad. What these people forget is that the brutality of a system which defines a man as object can make a brute of the most well intentioned upholder of the system. The most well-educated slaveowner was an oppressor in fact. The sweetest overseer had to function as a brute (even if he didn't beat his wife--after all even Adolf Hitler, so we think, made love to Eva Braun). And all Americans who did not oppose the system shared in some way in its continuance. So disemboweled has American historiography become that it is seldom pointed out that slavery was, after all, sanctioned nationally; that most white Americans even during the Civil War saw little wrong with enslaving their fellow men.

By the middle of the Nineteenth Century America had a headstart on chauvinism that would keep it in the lead over any competitors. The extermination of the Indian and the enslavement of the Negro provided the basis for a continuum.

Most Americans thought nothing of thousands of Chinese arriving in their ports with contracts that virtually enslaved them so that the antislavery Governor of California Leland Stanford, and his colleagues could build the Central Pacific Railroad. Time was of the essence. Time was money. Time was land. And the faster the road was built across the country the more profitable the return. How many thousand of Chinese perished in the chain gang building of the transcontinental railroad nobody knows. And perhaps the fact that nobody knows is in itself significant. Nobody counted. Nobody cared. And when the railroad was completed on Chinese blood, no Chinese took part in the jubilant celebrations in the California state capital, in 1869.