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Who needs the Negro?

Sometimes a topic is so vast, so overwhelming, that it is a little difficult to know where to start. Those interested in promoting a fairer university wanted me to explore possible implicit or unconscious biases, but I needed to understand the social and historical background for all of this, particularly with regard to race and ethnicity. I had my own experiences to draw upon, so I knew a little about how prejudice can operate, but, of course, religious prejudice in Northern Ireland, with its accompanying neighbourhood segregation, is one small part of something much bigger and I wanted to think more generally about issues to do with racial or ethnic prejudice.

It was difficult knowing how far back to go to understand the possible roots of implicit or unconscious biases to people from different ethnic backgrounds. I spent a long morning in the John Rylands library at Manchester thinking about all of this, with that smell of dust in the air, before even being able to request a book. I flicked through the library catalogue with titles like *Who Needs the Negro?* (see Wilhelm 1970). It reminded me how life had changed in the last 50 or so years, on the surface at least. I picked up *The Negro American*, buried deep in the library store room. The book seemed like a good place to start because it had a foreword by Lyndon B. Johnson who was then still President of the United States. This seemed to me to be a clear indication of how pressing the 'problem' of the Negro American then was. He starts the book by writing:

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> Nothing is of greater significance to the welfare and vitality of this nation than the movement to secure equal rights for Negro Americans. This Administration is dedicated to that movement. It is also dedicated to helping Negro Americans grasp the opportunities that equal rights make possible. (Johnson in Parsons and Clark 1965: v)

This book is a collection of papers by the American Society of Arts and Sciences that was especially put together for a White House conference, which Johnson specifically called 'to fulfil these rights'. This book documents the centuries of overt bigotry against the Negro. Of course, some people were suggesting that many types of overt bigotry had now gone, but it did not mean that prejudice more generally had been eradicated; rather it may now have been pushed down below the surface, and possibly even further down from the conscious mind into the unconscious mind. Some were saying that it was all now implicit rather than explicit but still exerting its nefarious influence, still influencing every possible choice, even in universities, the most rational and logical of institutions.

The Negro American is a major historical document, detailing the explicit history of bigotry that Black people have faced for centuries in the United States. John Hope Franklin offers a historical view on 'The two worlds of race' (1965: 47), in which he writes:

> For a century before the American Revolution the status of Negroes in the English colonies had become fixed at a low point that distinguished them from all other persons who had been held in temporary bondage. By the middle of the eighteenth century, laws governing Negroes denied to them certain basic rights that were conceded to others. They were permitted no independence of thought, no opportunity to improve their minds or their talents or to worship freely, no right to marry and enjoy the conventional family relationships, no right to own or dispose of property, and no protection against miscarriages of justice or cruel and unreasonable

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punishments. They were outside the pale of the laws that protected ordinary humans.

All of this work is perhaps best viewed through the various laws and regulations, explicitly and carefully formulated, which document how Black people were to be treated. For example, the South Carolina code of 1712 had special laws 'as may restrain the disorders, rapines, and inhumanity to which they [black people] are naturally prone and inclined . . .' (ibid.). Even when the founders of the United States commenced their armed revolt against England in an effort to secure their independence, the basic idea of the inferiority of the Negro in both intellectual and moral terms had become part of the common understanding of life, explicitly stated when necessary, but only explicitly stated as a formulation of what everybody already knew. General George Washington set out one order to recruiting officers detailing who should be enlisted into the revolutionary army. They were specifically ordered not to enlist 'any deserter from the ministerial army, nor any stroller, negro, or vagabond, or person suspected of being an enemy to the liberty of America nor any under eighteen years of age'. As Franklin (ibid.: 48) so sharply puts it: 'In classifying Negroes with the dregs of society, traitors, and children, Washington made it clear that Negroes, slave or free, were not to enjoy the high privilege of fighting for political independence.' Negroes were in the same category as deserters, tramps and traitors, not to be trusted, not to be relied upon and not to be allowed as compatriots in battle. It turns out that Washington later changed his policy, but presumably not necessarily his underlying opinion, when more than five thousand Negroes enlisted to fight the English. In modern terms, his policy may have changed, his explicit attitude may have changed a little, but his implicit attitude surely would never have been touched by the sheer necessity of having to increase the size of his army.

Even Thomas Jefferson, who was strongly opposed to slavery (and according to Franklin, if he had been able to do so, he would have condemned it in the Declaration of Independence), in no way considered the Negro to be

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equal to the White race. In Jefferson's own words he did not want to:

> degrade a whole race of men from the work in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them . . . I advance it therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by the time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind.

So here we see something that we might call the 'benevolent paternalism' of the time: someone concerned for the rights of others while recognising their essential inferiority.

These were some of the views of the Negro established from the start of American society, prevalent in the War of Independence, prevalent in the development of the American state, and even when it was thought that Negroes should be educated and trained, they should be educated and trained in particular ways. Thus in 1794, the American Convention of Abolition Societies recommended that Negroes be instructed in 'those mechanic arts which keep them most constantly employed and, of course, which will less subject them to idleness and debauchery, and thus prepare them for becoming good citizens of the United States' (Franklin 1965: 50). Of course, contained within this recommendation are clear and explicit stereotypes that the Negro is inherently subject to 'idleness' and 'debauchery' and that education and training has to somehow lead them away from this natural state to which they are inclined.

Now presumably one might think that universities should offer an alternative perspective on all of this, that being the beacons of scholarship that they are, interested in learning, knowledge and truth, then they should perhaps have been telling a slightly different story. But this fundamental understanding of the Negro as somehow intellectually and morally inferior was enshrined not just in political doctrine, not just in judicial doctrine, but also in academic doctrine. Thus again according to Franklin (ibid.: 52):

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> In 1826, Dr Thomas Cooper said that he had not the slightest doubt that Negroes were an ‘inferior variety of the human species; and not capable of the same improvement as the whites’. Dr S. C. Cartwright of the University of Louisiana insisted that the capacities of the Negro adult for learning were equal to those of a white infant; and the Negro could properly perform certain psychological functions only when under the control of white men. Because of the Negro’s inferiority, liberty and republican institutions were not only unsuited to his temperament, but actually inimical to his well-being and happiness.

In other words, the great academies of the time were giving support to the view that the Negro capacity for learning was similar to that of a white infant, and that control over the Negro was not only not a negative thing, but was necessary for their own sake.

Indeed, before the American Civil War, it seems that the vast majority of American political leaders subscribed to this view. In October 1854, Abraham Lincoln enquired as to what those who were fighting against slavery should do about the Negroes:

> Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgement, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill founded, can not be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them equals. (See Franklin 1965: 53)

In many ways this is an extraordinary statement from a political leader who was seen as a champion of the Negro, and yet seemed to be reflecting what most Americans thought in the 1850s. And it turns out that this statement has been used by those wishing to argue for separation of the races more than a century after it was originally formulated. You can see a lot going on in the mind of Lincoln here, where his

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understanding of justice and his gut instinct seemed to be at odds, and his acute political antennae which tell him that most American citizens at that time would share his gut instinct.

If you want to understand unconscious attitudes to people from different ethnic backgrounds, then one might need to start with political and social thinking from just over a century and a half ago in the US and other great intellectual centres of modern thought. We need to start by reminding ourselves of what people were quite prepared to say openly and publicly for political effect and then to understand how these views may have burrowed underground in the meantime.

In the same volume, Paul B. Sheatsley reviews the evidence for White attitudes towards the Negro from a historical perspective. He begins by arguing that if we want to understand such attitudes towards the Negro in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, or even during the period after the First World War, we have to rely on largely impressionistic evidence (or presumably on political statements like those of Lincoln, who clearly understood the views and opinions of his target audience). He says that if we want to get a better perspective on these attitudes and how they change, then we really need to begin in the 1930s, when public opinion research really began in the US. What follows next is one of those shocks that you sometimes receive when you read historical documents.

> It tells much about white attitudes towards the Negro that, during the seven years from 1935 to 1942, only four questions bearing even indirectly on the subject seem to have been asked by the national public opinion polls of that time. Three of these questions, dealing with opinions about the 'lynching bill' then before Congress in 1937, are practically irrelevant because the results simply show that most Americans thought people should not be lynched and the question itself said nothing about race. (Sheatsley 1965: 303)

It is, of course, extraordinary from a contemporary perspective to think about race and lynching as two concepts that

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somehow naturally fit together, so that you might 'indirectly' have to draw on one to provide some insight into the other. But what does this survey of public opinion polls show? It shows that from the 1930s on through to the publication date of the book in 1965 that there is a general softening of attitudes. When White participants were asked questions such as: 'If a Negro with the same income and education as you moved into your block, would it make any difference to you?' and 'Generally speaking, do you think there should be separate sections for Negroes on streetcars and buses?', there was a significant change in the response to these sorts of questions in that period.

Between 1942 and 1963 there did seem to be a genuine shift in attitudes; thus in 1942 only 35% of White Americans would have felt comfortable with a Negro neighbour, by 1963 it was 64% (the trend was even more marked for Southern Whites: only 12% would have found it acceptable in 1942 and by 1963 it was 51%). In terms of whether it was acceptable for a Negro to get onto a bus with you, in 1942 42% of American Whites found this acceptable but this had risen to 78% by December 1963. In the case of Southern Whites, only 4% would have found it acceptable in 1942 whereas this had risen to 51% by December 1963. As Sheatsley (1965: 308) succinctly writes: 'By the end of 1963, both forms of integration had achieved majority approval.'

In Gallup polls between the 1950s and 1960s one of the questions asked was 'Do you think the day will ever come in the South when whites and Negroes will be going to the same schools, eating in the same restaurants, and generally sharing the same public accommodations?' In the 1950s apparently only a small proportion of White people answered 'yes' to this question, but by 1963 the proportion had risen to nearly 80%. What these public opinion surveys suggest is that White attitudes were softening. But were they? Or were people merely picking up on the political zeitgeist and the cultural notion that the times really were 'a-changin'', and that it was no longer quite so acceptable to espouse openly racialist views about intellectual and moral inferiority or to express one's beliefs about the role of segregation as somehow operating in everyone's interest? After all, these questions are

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fairly explicit and attitudes could be read immediately and directly from them. But the big question is how did implicit attitudes change during this time, where the implicit attitude is the great hidden component of the attitude, which might well exert a major influence on so many different aspects of everyday behaviour. What happened to that during these decades of change? And what is the legacy of all this? After all, the 1940s and 1950s are part of the lives of people alive today (or their parents' or grandparents' immediate history). And then we might like to enquire about what was happening in the UK at the same time – a country whose views of ethnicity were shaped by its colonial past, whose experience of dealing with people from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent and the Far East and South Africa were often in the context of colonial governance, and presumed superiority. How were attitudes formed here and how were they modified over time? And how did people cope with the notion that as the twentieth century progressed it became less and less acceptable to hold certain views and to espouse certain opinions? Did integration and education change everything, or just some things, like what people were prepared to say in public to the opinion pollsters and to the enquiring social scientists, maybe to the electorate, or to public audiences everywhere, and maybe, just maybe, even to themselves?

- It seems extraordinary today that George Washington ordered recruiting officers to avoid recruiting Negroes into the revolutionary army, categorizing them with the dregs of society (including deserters, tramps and suspected enemies).
- Thomas Jefferson clearly viewed the Negro as inferior to Whites 'in the endowment both of body and mind'.
- Dr S. C. Cartwright of the University of Louisiana wrote that the capacity of the adult Negro for learning was equivalent to that of a White infant.
- Some researchers have suggested that if you want to see how White attitudes to Negroes changed in the years before and during the Second World War, then you need to infer these attitudes from people's expressed opinions of the 'lynching bill'.

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- Between 1942 and 1963 there seemed to be a significant shift in White attitudes towards Negroes. By December 1963, 78% of White Americans thought that it was now acceptable for a Negro to get onto a bus with them; this was still only 51% for Southern Whites.
- Some social scientists maintain that attitudes did genuinely change in this 20-year period; others say that all that happened was that people learned not to express such openly racist views.
- You might indeed suggest that unconscious attitudes changed little during this period, but you would need better data to be so bold.

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