



A HISTORY:  
THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF RACE AND RACISM

DISMANTLING RACISM PROJECT  
WESTERN STATES CENTER

# DEFINING ETHNICITY & NATIONALITY

(These terms are often confused with race)

**E**thnicity refers to particular groups of people that share some common ancestry, traditions, language, or dialect.

Before the world was made up of distinct nation-states or countries, certain pieces of land were associated with ethnic groups. Some examples are:

- Anglos and Saxons – England
- Maori – New Zealand
- Mayan – Southern Mexico/Central America
- Greeks – Greece
- Masai – the Great Rift Valley of East Africa
- Pueblo– New Mexico

As some countries were made up mostly one ethnic group, people began to conclude that *nationality* (the country which a person is a citizen of) was the same as *ethnicity*, i.e. a person from Denmark is a Dane or Danish. But more often the name of the country doesn't refer to the ethnic origins of its citizens. A person from Spain would be thought of as "Spanish", although their ethnicity could be Basque, Catalan, Gallego or Gitano. Many countries like Spain

are actually made up of diverse ethnic groups. The United States is a perfect example of this reality.

Many people like to make *ethnic* distinctions as well as *national* distinctions to hold on to their ethnic culture and identity.

- Italian-American – (Ethnicity is Italian and nationality is US American)
- Mexican-American
- Chinese-American – (Ethnicity is Chinese and nationality is US American)

Of course, ethnicity becomes more confusing in the process of immigration and assimilation. As an example, we know in the case of China there are many, many ethnicities and that diversity gets lost often in how people identify their ethnic identity to non-Chinese people here in the U.S. So although a Chinese-American's specific ethnicity may be Han, Manchu, Yi or another of the over 50 ethnicities in China, here in the United States those differences get subsumed as being "Chinese."

## WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED RACE?

**R**ace is a false classification of people that is not based on any real or accurate biological or scientific truth. In other words, the distinction we make between races, has nothing to do with scientific truth.

**R**ace is a political construction. A political construction is something created by people; that is not a natural development; is constructed or created for a political purpose.

**T**he concept of race was created as a classification of human beings with the purpose of giving power to white people and to legitimize the dominance of white people over non-white people.

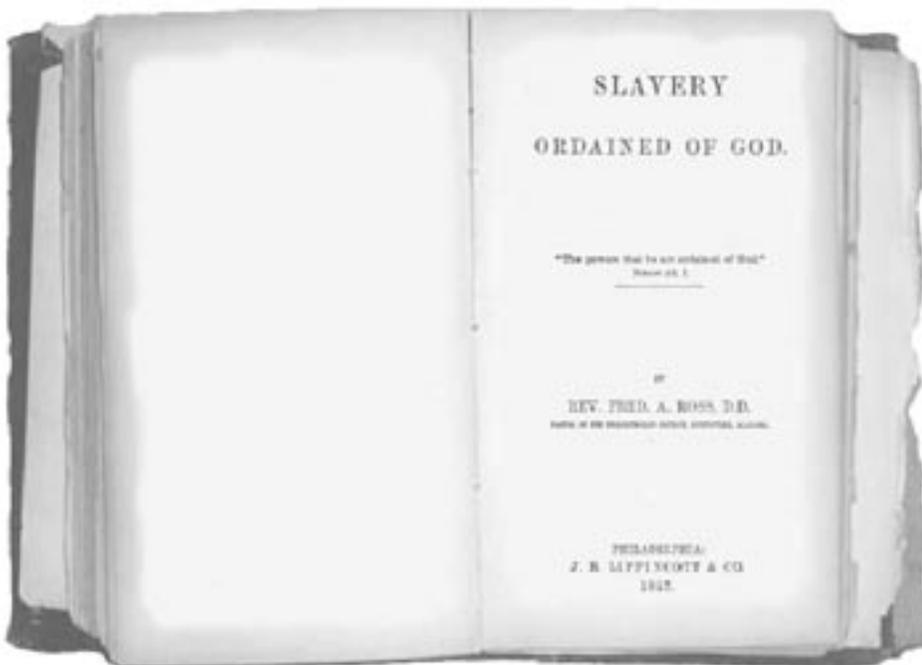
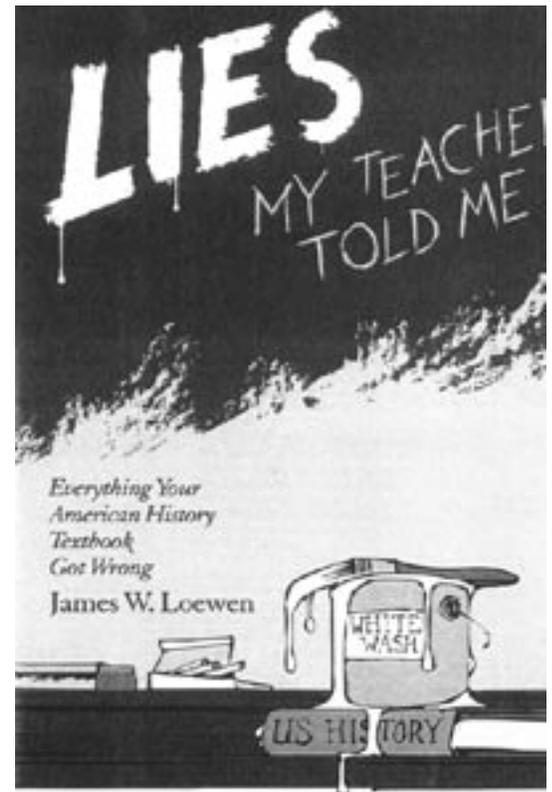


Now we are going to take some time to prove these points by looking at the history of the development of race and racism. The history of the construction of racism is very long so this is not a comprehensive history lesson. We will provide a broad overview of how various aspects of white society were involved in the construction of race and racism: religion, science, medicine, philosophy, government, etc. We will also be jumping around a bit in time, but will always try and make time periods clear.

# HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTS

## RELIGION AS A JUSTIFICATION FOR RACISM:

During the reformation (16th Century [1500s] & 17th Century [1600s]), a key question among Christian religious hierarchy was whether Blacks and “Indians” had souls and/or were human. In this time period, Europeans were exposed more frequently to Africans and the indigenous people of North and South America, and the church vacillated between opinions. The Catholic and the Protestant churches arrived at different answers to the question at different times, which created significant differences between the two systems of slavery. The Catholic Church was the first to admit Blacks and Indians had souls, which meant in many Catholic colonies it was against the law to kill a slave without reason. The Protestant-Calvinist Church wanted to separate and distinguish themselves from Catholicism, and therefore was much slower in recognizing the humanity of Africans and Indians.



*Slavery Ordained of God – 1857 – an example of many articles using religion to justify slavery*

With the increasing importance of slavery, religion was used as a means to justify racist divisions, classifying people of color as ‘pagan and soulless’. However, “As substantial numbers of people of color were converted to Christianity, and as religion itself lost much of its power as a legitimizing agent, justifications for the brutality of slavery changed.” The slave-based economy in the south necessitated a racist exploitative system, which led to the development of biological, zoological and botanical theories to ‘explain human difference and to justify slavery.’<sup>1</sup>



*“The Races of Man”* From Herbert W. Morris. *Present Conflict of Science with the Christian Religion; or, Modern Skepticism Met on Its Own Ground*. Philadelphia: P. W. Ziegler & Co. 1876.

# SOCIAL SCIENCE/PSEUDO-SCIENCE

## CONTEXT

In 19th Century (1800s) Europe, science and social sciences developed as never before. Associations of scientists were created, universities held conferences and debates, and dialogue between researchers increased dramatically. In England, in the early 1800s, the Ethnographic and Anthropological Societies were first established. Not only did the amount of “scholars and thinkers” multiply, they were increasingly in conversation with each other and focusing on similar themes, such as what happens when races meet and mix. Africa, Asia, Australia and the South Pacific were rapidly being colonized

as European Americans were engaged in their colonial expansion, which brought them into brutal contact with Native Americans. As a result of colonization, native people around the world were disappearing. The most extreme cases, found in Tasmania (an island south of Australia) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Tasmanians were literally wiped off the face of the earth, while the Maori population of New Zealand was reduced by more than half in a period of a few decades. Their extinction was in large part due to disease. European thinkers were fascinated by this, particularly due to the lack of understanding of the role of germs, viruses and bacteria.<sup>2</sup>

# SCIENCE AS A JUSTIFICATION FOR RACISM:

During the 19th century, Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species* (1859), his book documenting the process of evolution. Darwin believed in a natural order to the development of species; the weak die off and the strong survive. Although evolutionary theory is not racist, philosophers and social scientists, used Darwin's theory in pseudo-scientific ways to justify genocide and racism. This thinking was later called "Social Darwinism" and had brutal implications.

In 1838 JC Prichard, a famous anthropologist, lectured on the "Extinction of Human Races" He said it was obvious that "the savage races" could not be saved. It was the law of nature.<sup>3</sup>

In 1864, W. Winwood Reade, an esteemed member of both London's geographical and anthropological societies published his book called *Savage Africa*. He ended the book with a prediction on the future of the black race.

*"England and France will rule Africa. Africans will dig the ditches and water the deserts. It will be hard work and the Africans will probably become extinct. "We must learn to look at the result with composure. It illustrates the beneficent law of nature, that the weak must be devoured by the strong." 4*

It should be noted that there were many examples of this type of thinking. Prichard and Reade were all highly regarded thinkers. Around the world, native peoples in Africa, Asia and the Americas were dying and disappearing. The predominant scholars didn't

think this was due to the unlawful seizure of land, which undermined their lives, culture and means of survival, while spreading disease and death. This genocide was "justified" by the laws of nature, i.e. survival of the fittest. European and European American colonization of native land throughout the world in this period created the very real consequence of extermination. This provided motivation for allegedly "scientific research", which in turn provided exterminators with an alibi by declaring the extermination naturally inevitable.<sup>5</sup>

## PSEUDO-SCIENTIFIC ATTEMPTS TO CATEGORIZE THE RACES:

Throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, people used different terms to explain racial differences. The classification shown below was used for well over a hundred years. The classification lacks any obvious logic and defies scientific precepts. Two of the words - Mongoloid and Caucazoid have linguistic bases that refer to geographic areas. But the last word- Negroid - refers to color. "These were not based on genetic differences, but rather on European and European American stereotypes of cultural differences and (mis)measures of physiological characteristics."<sup>6</sup>

In 1866, Frederick Farrar lectured on the "Aptitude of Races" which he divided into 3 groups.<sup>7</sup>

- **Savage** (*All Africans, indigenous people, people of color with the exception of the Chinese*)
- **Semi-Civilized** (*e.g. Chinese – who were once civilized but now their society was in arrested development*)
- **Civilized** (*European, Aryan and Semitic peoples*)

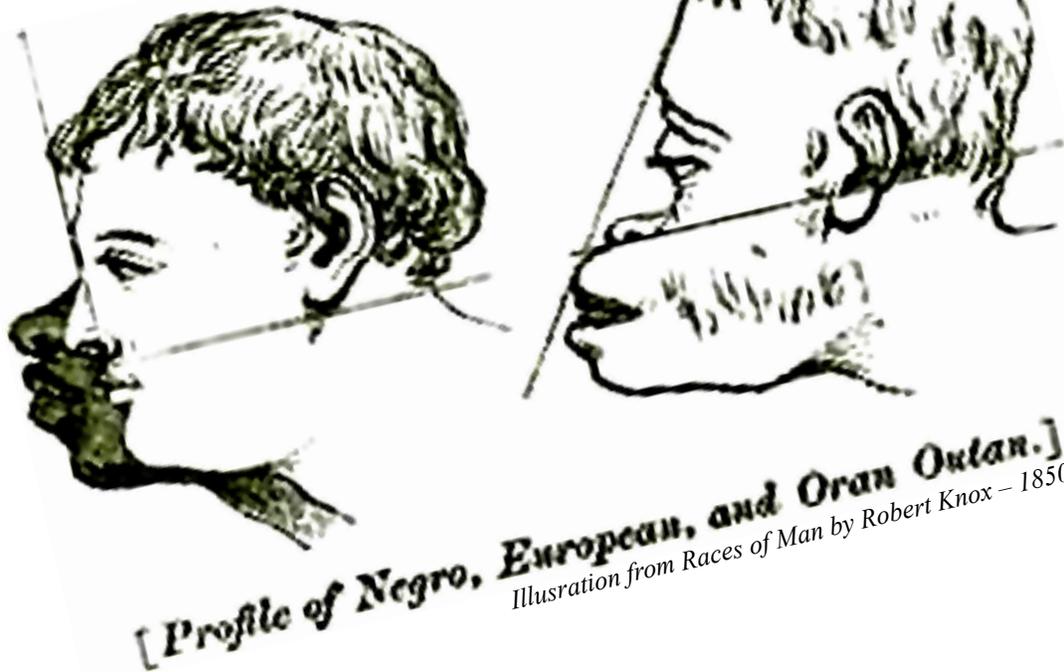
# MEDICINE

*The Races of Man: a Fragment.* By Robert Knox

In 1850, Robert Knox in *The Races of Man: A Fragment* took popular prejudices and formed them into “scientific conviction” that race and intelligence are linked and hereditary. Robert Knox was a famous English anatomist. Knox concluded that people of color were intellectually inferior, not because of brain size but rather because of brain texture and lack of nerve endings. Later it was found that his conclusion was based on the autopsy of only one man of color.

*All we know is that since the beginning of history, the dark races have been the slaves of those lighter skinned. What is that due to? 'I feel disposed to think that there must be a physical and consequentially, a psychological inferiority in the dark races generally.' This is perhaps not due to lack of size in the brain but rather a lack of quality in it.*<sup>8</sup>

Knox’s studies and others were taken very seriously, which can be seen as the origins of the 20th Century Eugenics movement.



# EUGENICS

Eugenics is an effort to breed better human beings by encouraging the reproduction of people with “good” genes and discouraging those with “bad” genes. Eugenicists effectively lobbied for social legislation to keep racial and ethnic groups separate, to restrict immigration from Asia, Africa and southern and eastern Europe, and to sterilize people considered “genetically unfit.”

Elements of the American eugenics movement were models for the Nazis, whose radical adaptation of eugenics culminated in the Holocaust.

The United States took Eugenics and ran with it, making it part of mainstream society. By 1928, 376 separate college courses, which enrolled 20,000 students focused on Eugenics. And an analysis of high school text books from 1914 to 1948 indicates that the majority presented Eugenics as legitimate.<sup>9</sup>



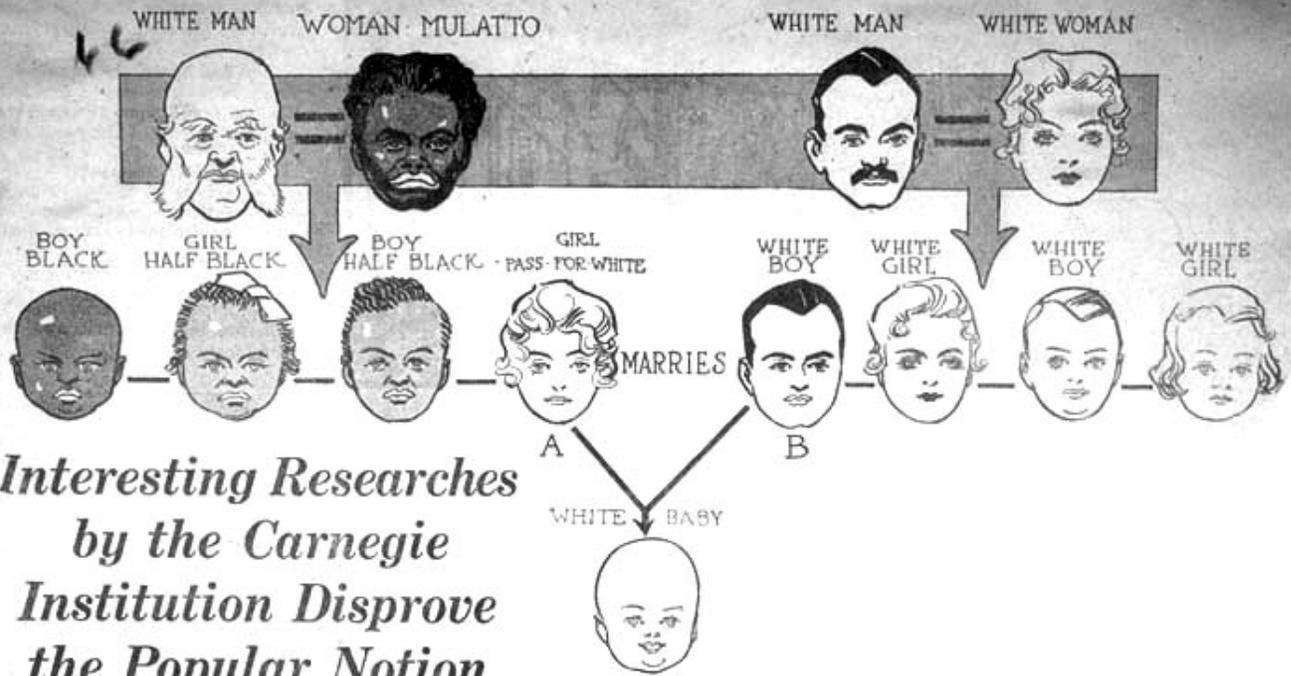
19th century magazine cover editorializing against Chinese immigration.

*Over 600 separate pieces of anti-Asian legislation were passed limiting Asians from citizenship.*

**I**mmigration: Between the 19th & 20th Centuries over 600 separate pieces of anti-Asian legislation were passed limiting Asians from citizenship. Non-citizens had almost no rights. Whites could kill Asians with impunity because they could not testify in court.<sup>10</sup>

**I**nter-racial marriage : Eugenics provided a new set of arguments to support existing restrictions on inter-racial marriage. By 1915, 28 states made a marriage between “negroes”, asians, “indians” latinos and a white person illegal. 6 states included such prohibitions in their constitutions. Virginia’s Racial

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*Interesting Researches  
by the Carnegie  
Institution Disprove  
the Popular Notion  
that a "Pass-for-White" Person Married to  
a Pure White May Have a Negro Child*

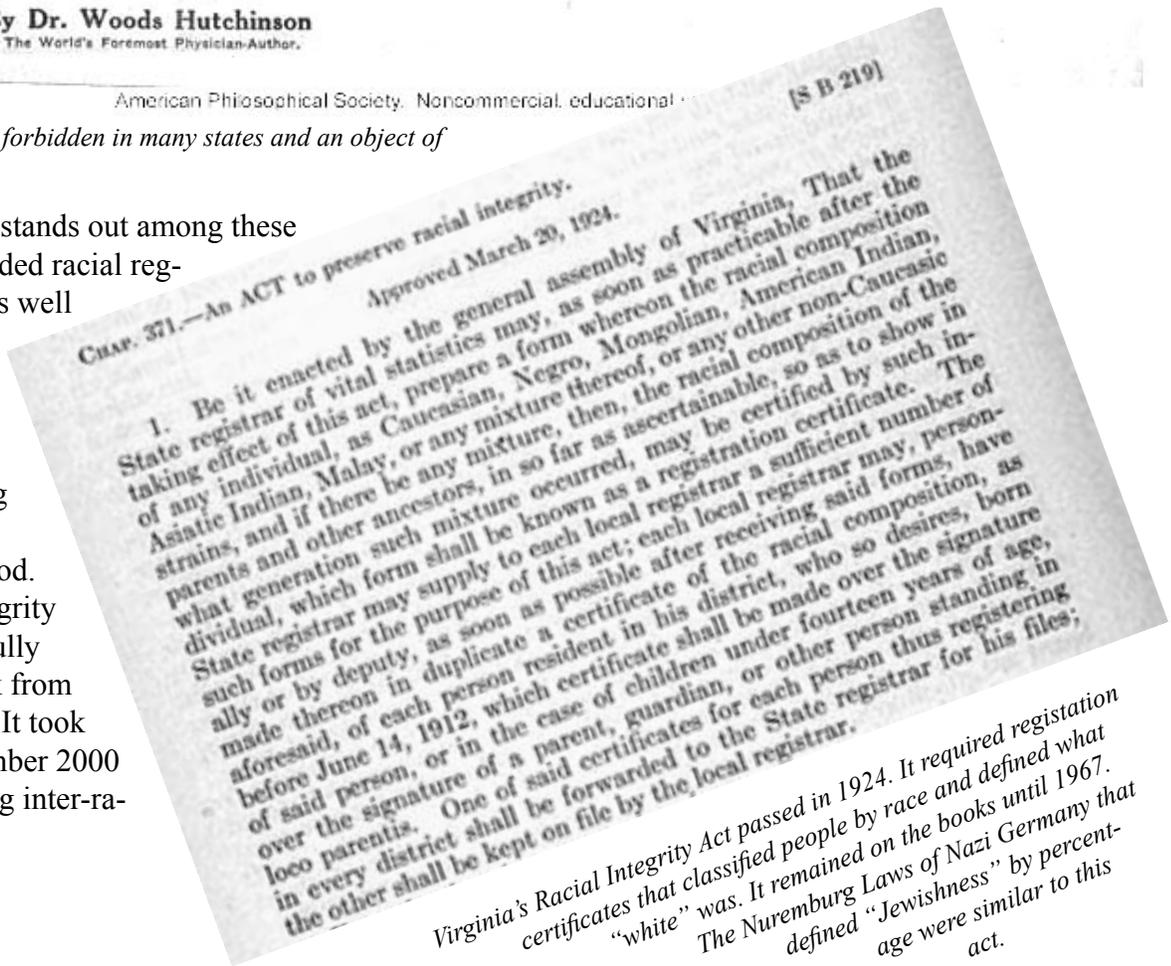
By Dr. Woods Hutchinson  
The World's Foremost Physician-Author.

American Philosophical Society. Noncommercial, educational

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Inter-racial Marriage was forbidden in many states and an object of scientific concern.

Integrity Act of 1924 stands out among these laws.<sup>11</sup> This law included racial registration certificates as well as defining what "white" was. Within ten years similar laws were found in Nazi Germany sorting citizens by their percentage of Jewish blood. Virginia's Racial Integrity Act was not successfully challenged and struck from the books until 1967. It took Alabama until November 2000 to strike a law banning inter-racial marriage.



Virginia's Racial Integrity Act passed in 1924. It required registration certificates that classified people by race and defined what "white" was. It remained on the books until 1967. The Nuremburg Laws of Nazi Germany that defined "Jewishness" by percentage were similar to this act.



Truman State University. Noncommercial, educational use only.

*Chart illustrated the rapid growth of eugenical sterilization in the early 20th century.*

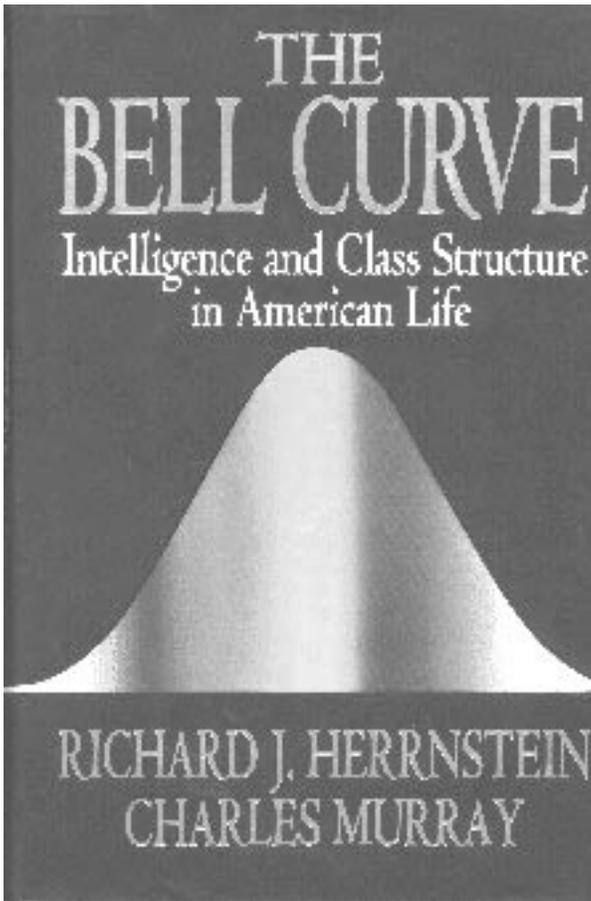
**S**terilization: Eugenics also promoted sterilization. A man by the name of Harry Laughlin promoted the model sterilization law in Virginia in 1914.

The Model Eugenical Sterilization law proposed the sterilization of the “socially inadequate” - people supported in institutions or “maintained wholly or in part by public expense.” The law encompassed the “feeble minded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed and dependent” including “orphans, tramps, the homeless and paupers.” By 1914, 12 states passed sterilization laws.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, Eugenics in its conception and implementation involved an intersection of oppressions: sexism, classism, and abelism, but what constitutes the most successful and widespread eugenics program in

the history of the United States (and the most unknown) targeted Puerto Rican women.

The US Government, the medical community, and local government of Puerto Rico sterilized 1/3 of Puerto Rican women from the 1930s to 1965. This was done by a massive campaign of public mis-education and promotion, manipulation, and subsidizing the operation. Part of this was the result of racist and ignorant fears about over population as well as US industries wanting to encourage the development of a cheap workforce of Puerto Rican women freed from childcare for employment.<sup>13</sup> This is an incredibly sad story which is also incredibly well documented. Note, Puerto Rican women, particularly in government housing projects, were also the guinea pigs for testing the contraceptive pill in 1956. These pills were 20 times stronger than pills on the market by the 1980s.



## CURRENT PSEUDO-SCIENCE

Current day pseudo-science continues to be popular and influence policy-makers - It is important to point out in this history lesson that similar racist “scholarship” is unfortunately alive and well today.

Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein in *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. - 1990s Bestseller. In the *Bell Curve* they say:

- The high rates of poverty that afflict certain segments of the population are determined more by intelligence than by socioeconomic background.
- They call the poor the Cognitive Underclass
- They argue that the expanding inequities of our society, wealth distribution, success in school, access to good jobs are biologically determined.
- The *Bell Curve* naturalizes and excuses these inequities and turns them into the inescapable symptoms of biological class fate. Associating “cognitive underclass” with every form of “frowned upon” social behavior from crime to teenage motherhood.<sup>14</sup>

*The Bell Curve* provided pseudo-scientific cover for attacks on the poor and on people of color by declaring that poverty and other social inequities were biologically determined.

## DEPEND ON NORPLANT



### 5-Year Family Planning



-for the Convenience of a busy mother who wants to SPACE her children.

## POLICY IMPACT

- Charles Murray worked for the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, which supplied many of Mayor Gulliani’s policies.
- This thinking justifies harsh welfare reform policies, the criminalization of poverty - 2 million people are in jail in the U.S. (1/4 of the world’s 8 million total)
- Argues that poverty is caused by genetic inferiority.
- Restricts immigration, particularly of people of color.
- Conservatives pushing welfare reform are pushing welfare mothers to be temporarily sterilized with Norplant.

*Norplant*, a temporary sterilization drug, employed racist stereotyping in their advertising – adopting the conservative message that welfare mothers should be temporarily sterilized.



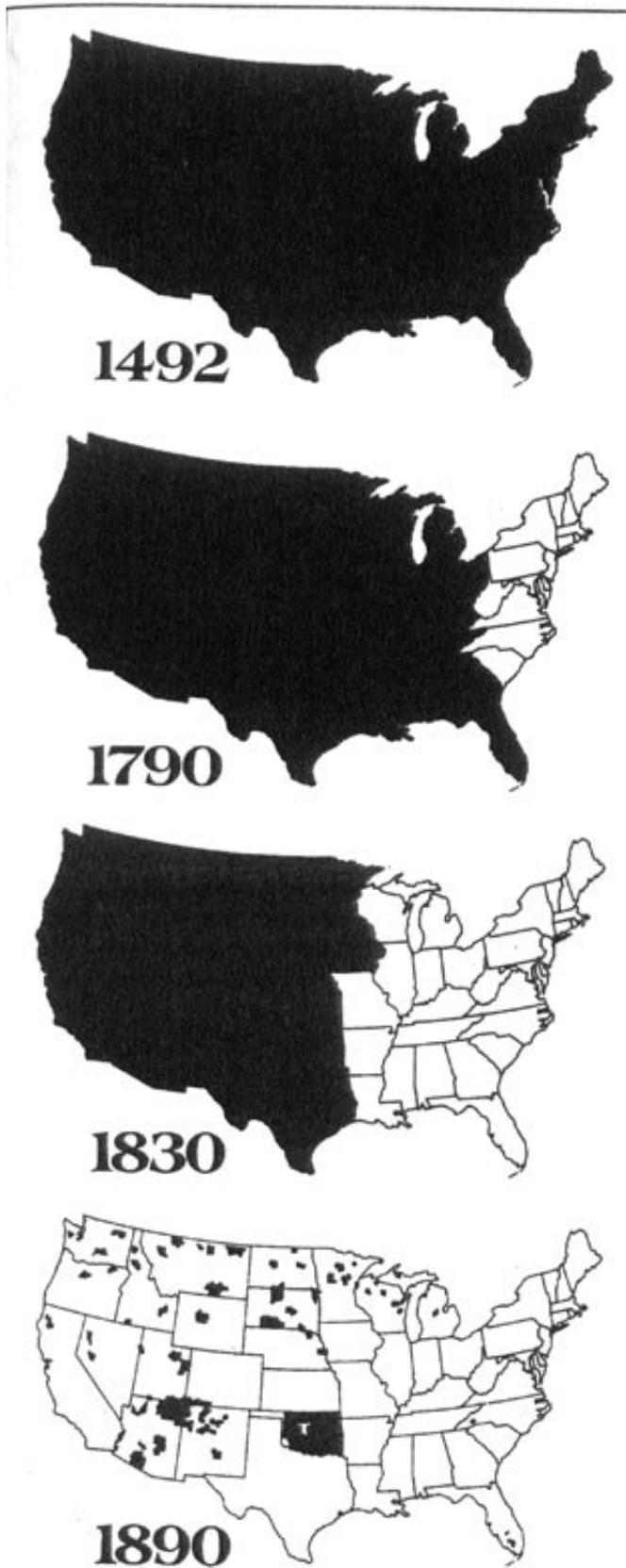
# THIS THING CALLED WHITE

The term white emerged as a classification of people during the 1700s in the British colonies of North America. Europeans were immigrating to “the New World” for many reasons, some seeking prosperity while many people were escaping persecution, particularly religious and ethnic conflict. As Europeans arrived in America, groups such as Germans, Dutch, English, French etc. were brought into close proximity, most of them for the first time.

*“Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.”*

In the colonies, the European settlers in power were under considerable stress, attempting to maintain control of their African Slaves and their white indentured servants, while trying to protect themselves from the perceived threat from Native Americans. At this time, poor white indentured servants were building alliances and relationships with African slaves due to their similar state of oppression.

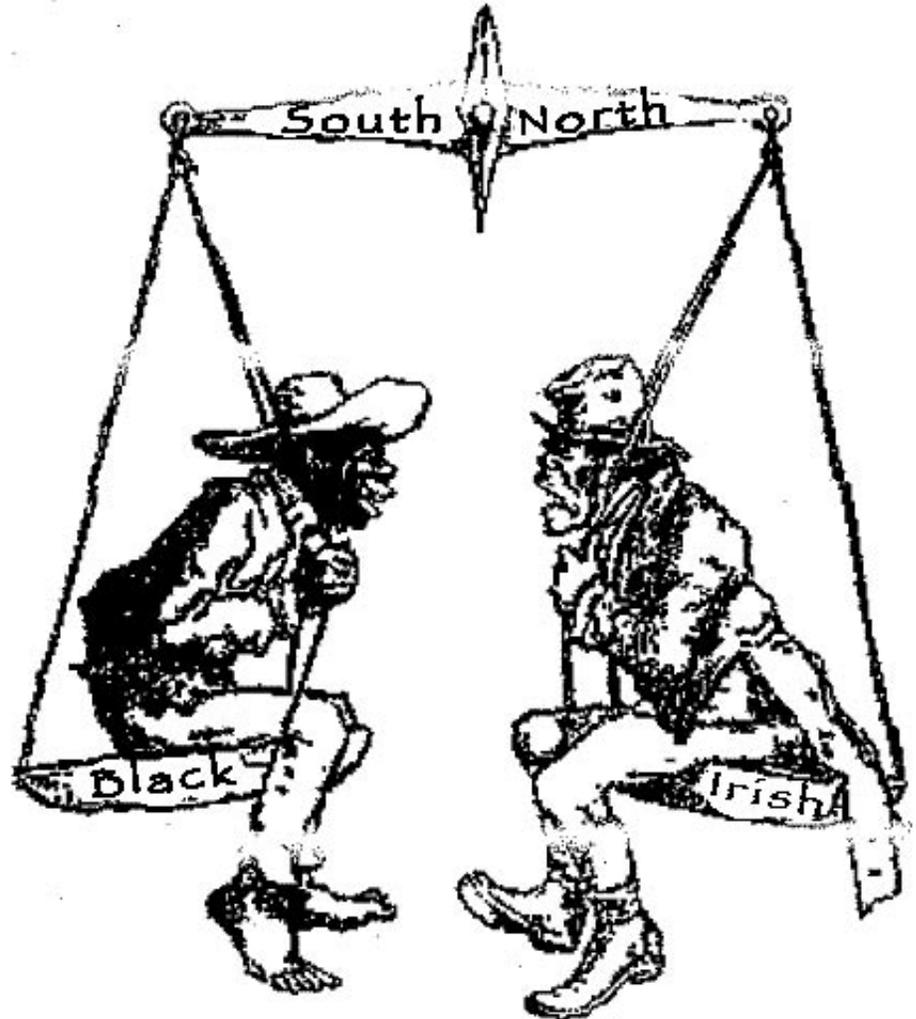
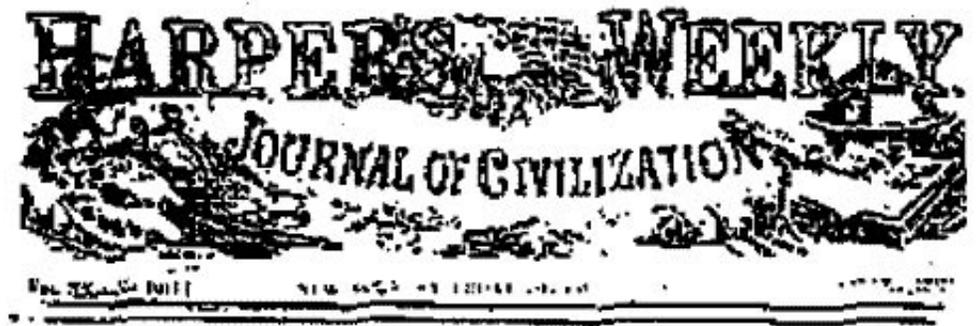
The term white was defined as anyone without a drop on African or Indian blood. The category white was created as a political construct that was used as an organizing tool to unite Europeans in order to consolidate strength, increasing their ability to maintain control and dominance over the Native Americans and African slaves, which in many places outnumbered Europeans. “Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.”<sup>16</sup>



These maps show the amount of land that Native Americans controlled over the passage of time – detailing the massive scale of expropriation justified by “Manifest Destiny.”

**W**hite is an artificial construct because the definition of white changes due to time and geography.

- Not everybody has been considered white at the same time. Irish, Jews, Italians for example went through a process of becoming white. This was a process of assimilation that required certain cultural losses in order to gain white privilege and power.
- Some people who may have been considered white where they once lived (South America for example) when they moved to the U.S. were then considered latino by white society.
- But just because race and whiteness are constructed, doesn't mean that it doesn't fundamentally affect our world in real ways.



*For a large part of the 19th century, the Irish were not considered white. In the process of assimilation, the majority of Irish adopted pro-slavery, anti-black political positions.*

## THE TERM PEOPLE OF COLOR

**P**eople of color' is not a term that refers to a real biological or scientific distinction between people. People of color in the U.S. share the common experience of being targeted and oppressed by racism. Unfortunately, one of the ways racism operates is to keep people of color divided. Many people only think about their specific ethnic or racial group when discussing oppression or the need to build political power. By using the term people of color, we begin to push people to think more broadly. We need to build relationships with other groups of color. The term people of color has movement-building potential.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice by Paul Kivel - (page 127) New Society Publishers, Philadelphia and British Columbia; 1996
- 2 Exterminate All the Brutes: One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide by Sven Lindqvist - (Chapter 4) The New Press, New York; 1996
- 3 Ibid. Ch. 4
- 4 Ibid. Ch. 4
- 5 Ibid. Ch. 4
- 6 Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice by Paul Kivel - (page 18) New Society Publishers, Philadelphia and British Columbia; 1996
- 7 Exterminate All the Brutes by Sven Lindqvist - (Chapter 4) The New Press, New York; 1996
- 8 Ibid. Chapter 4
- 9 <http://vector.cshl.org/eugenics/> - website for Image Archive for the American Eugenics Movement managed by DNA LEARNING CENTER, COLD SPRING HARBOR LABORATORY, 1 Bungtown Road, Cold Spring Harbor, New York 11724
- 10 Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice by Paul Kivel - (page 133) New Society Publishers, Philadelphia and British Columbia; 1996
- 11 <http://vector.cshl.org/eugenics/> - website for Image Archive for the American Eugenics Movement managed by DNA LEARNING CENTER, COLD SPRING HARBOR LABORATORY, 1 Bungtown Road, Cold Spring Harbor, New York 11724
- 12 <http://vector.cshl.org/eugenics/> - website for Image Archive for the American Eugenics Movement managed by DNA LEARNING CENTER, COLD SPRING HARBOR LABORATORY, 1 Bungtown Road, Cold Spring Harbor, New York 11724
- 13 <http://clem.mscd.edu/~princer/puertorico.htm> a website that holds an article by Sara Hoerlein called "Female Sterilization in Puerto Rico."
- 14 The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence, and the future of America - Edited by Steven Fraser -- Basic Books, New York; 1995
- 15 Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice by Paul Kivel - (page 142) New Society Publishers, Philadelphia and British Columbia; 1996
- 16 Ibid. (page 17)

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