



## Scientific Racism and the “Colour Line”


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Skin colour is a visual marker of difference and has been employed to justify the enslavement of people and their exploitation to build the empires of the western world. Slave trade is an integral part of the story of ‘civilisation’ and conquest. Though the impact of racial discrimination unfolded in different ways in different parts of the world, the arguments utilised to deny their humanity and present the ‘coloured’ people of the world are very similar. This paper will analyse the development of Scientific and Biological Racism from the writings of Bernier, Linnaeus and the thinkers they influenced. It will also focus on the manner in which these arguments were used to justify the brutality of colonisation, slavery and social exclusion. The challenges to this superstructure of racial superiority through King Jr., Du Bois, Malcolm X will be studied. The Civil Rights Movement in America, the freedom movements in worldwide, and other struggles for equity, power and justice need to be seen in this light.

**Keywords:** color line, decolonisation, King Jr., Malcolm X, racism

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## 1. Introduction

In an effort to understand the world man has consistently resorted to classification and put things into ordered categories. This process serves to build new categories even as it simultaneously assigns "unknown cases to existing classifications" (Brennan, 201). Such standardising nomenclature assists in navigating biodiversity and creating a 'natural' view of the world that over time carries cultural weight. This raises the spectre of falsely presenting prejudice as scientific fact thereby stigmatising entire communities and races and forcing them to face negative social consequences. The advancement of knowledge since the Renaissance when men travelled to new lands and discovered new flora and fauna meant that it became increasingly difficult to make sense of the heterogenous data. Racial classification became one way of making sense of this plethora of information and subsequently presented social hierarchies as natural fact. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as European powers colonised the world, these systems of classifications and the underlining racial biases were employed to create seemingly unchallenged narratives of racial superiority that justified plantation slavery, genocide and exploitation of native populations.

## 2. Bernier's Classification

Bernier was a physician of Aga Danechmend Khan the Mughal court for 12 years. He supported the monogenetic view of history of mankind which stated that all mankind had one origin. This complemented the Asiatic migration theory about the origin of the Americas. He argued that physical characteristics like "skin colour, facial type and bodily shape" (Stuurman, 4) were scientific ways of classifying man. Of the four races the European and "all areas of high civilization" (including Indians) (Stuurman, 4) were the 'first' race. Though he never uses the word 'white,' he does say that they look like 'we' do. The 'us' and 'them' binary exists within the 'first' race: unlike the European, the South Asian and Middle Easterner has darkish skin colour due to exposure to the sun. In the latter categories the fair 'Mogol' and the 'Franguis' were superior to the brown Indians. This binary is laid bare when he talks about the 'petit jaune' 'white like' women with exquisite complexion of Lahore and Kashmir who were sold as courtesan slaves to Ottoman sultans.

Bernier was dismissive of the administrative and military acumen of the Mughals. His representation of 'Oriental despotism' in stark contrast to European efficient and prosperity was utilised by Montesquieu and others to justify colonisation of India. Similarly the native Americans are 'olivatres' whose face have slight variations from 'ours' and had migrated over a land bridge to the new world. However their peculiar customs, 'rude manners', nudity, a chaotic social and political structure meant that they were inferior to the European. The African negro with their, thick lips, oily skin and peculiar hair owed their blackness to genetic factors. He considered them 'natural slaves' since they had deficient mental capacity and could be 'ruled' by those with superior intellectual strength (aka the European) to 'excel in brute force'. He viewed the African as a 'savage' very 'like our ancestors' and thus as someone who lived in an earlier stage of social development and could therefore 'improve'. The objectification of Africans is closely intertwined with the language of slavery. His descriptions of African women emphasise their beauty and lush bodies which fetched high prices in slave markets of Europe. The Lapps were 'nasty creatures' and 'vile animals' with 'hideous bear-like faces' (Stuurman, 4).

## 3. Linnaean Taxonomy

The father of taxonomy Carl Linnaeus classified all life on Earth into three kingdoms of nature in *Systema Naturae* (1735): mineral, vegetable and man. Man was included in the animal kingdom and classified in the Class Quadrupeds/Mammals, Order Anthropomorpha/Primates. This comprised of the Genus humans (*Homo*), apes (*Simis*) and Sloths (*Bradypus*). According to Linnaeus the primary demarcation between humans and animals was *Nosce te ipsum* i.e. the ability to "know thyself". By the 1750s the binomial nomenclature system had named man as *Homo Sapiens*. Humans were divided into four variants (*Homo variat*): *Europaeus albus* (European white), *Ameriancus rubescens* (American reddish), *Asiaticus fuscus* (Asian tawny) and *Africanus niger* (African black). In *Critical Botanica* (1737) Linnaeus wrote:

[God] created one human, as the Holy Scripture teaches; but if the slightest trait [difference] was sufficient, there would easily stick out thousands of different species of man: they display, namely, white, red, black and grey hair; white, rosy, tawny and black faces; straight, stubby, crooked, flattened, and aquiline noses; among them we find giants and pygmies, fat and skinny people, erect, humpy, brittle, and lame people etc. etc. But who with a sane mind would be so frivolous as to call these distinct species?

Though Linnaeus did not label these as stable 'subspecies', he did divide them on geographical grounds. In the 1758 edition of *Systema Naturae* he added skin color and the humors or the four temperaments (sanguine: blood, choleric: yellow bile, melancholic: black bile, phlegmatic: phlegm) to this classification of humans and correlated them to the major moral attributes. Though he stated that skin color and body posture, the major features used for this classification, were accidental and a product of climate, nonetheless he suggested that they influenced the diverse temperaments of these *varietas* (Latin for variety). In fact, he associated the four races with varying medical dispositions, political leanings and psychological and cultural tendencies. These were further reflected in their behaviors, clothing and the forms of governments they practiced.

According to him while the European was "white, muscular and sanguine", he was light, wise and an inventor. The primary physical characteristics were yellow hair with blue eyes. They wore tight clothes and were governed by rites. The American was "red, choleric and straight" with "straight black hair, gaping nostrils, freckled face and beardless chin". He was "unyielding, cheerful, content and free" who painted "red lines" on his body. He was "governed by customary right". The Asian was "sallow, melancholic and stiff" with "blackish hair and dark eyes". He was "stern, haughty and greedy". He wore "loose garments" and was "governed by opinions". The African was "black, phlegmatic and lazy". He had "dark hair with twisting braids, silky skin, flat nose and swollen lips". The women had "elongated labia with profusely lactating breasts". The African was "sly sluggish and neglectful" and "anointed himself with fat". He was "governed by choice". Though he kept changing the order of listing of the four varieties the *Africanus* remained consistently at the bottom with a consistently negative description.

Seen in this light Linnaeus' dictum *Nosce te ipsum* seems to suggest that nature is the primary force in determining physical attributes. These geopolitical stereotypes can also be interpreted as a privileging of a 'superior' culture since they embody moral, ethical and physical superiority. This became the basis for scientific racism which would be utilized to disastrous effect in the colonization of the third world. Apologists for Linnaeus argue that to understand life on a global scale, Linnaeus segmented it based on the continents. Therefore, the blame for the use of this in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by philosophers and colonizers to justify the dehumanization of people cannot be laid on his door. Nonetheless the Eurocentrism of his classification laid the groundwork of the representation of the native as the "noble savage" thereby justifying slavery, colonialism and the genocide of native populations worldwide. The race biology behind Scientific racism can be seen in present day racism.

## 4. Impact of Scientific Racism

Darwinian classification is founded on the two criteria of "similarity *and* common descent for classification" (Hörandl, p 564). This follows the grouping and ranking of taxa according to Linnaean hierarchies. Similarly Blumenbach employed skull shape, skin colour and physiognomy foreground comparative anatomy. This creation of hierarchies wherein biological variations became the foundation, as stated earlier, of a racist discourse on slavery and colonisation. These markers of physical difference amongst native populations, as compared to the European, were seen as proof of moral inferiority and civilisational incapacity making them incapable of governing themselves and thus 'perfect slaves'. Scientific racism supplied the "natural" grounds that made enslavement, and the annihilation of a people and their culture, a rational and inevitable outcome of human interaction. The narrative that the colonial native was incompetent and predisposed to servitude was utilised to formulate laws that denied political rights and justified dispossession. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scientific racism also influenced supposedly neutral disciplines such as anthropology and psychology.

These ideas of Scientific and Biological Racism feed into the development of philosophical thought in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Though Roman and Greek civilisation was familiar with slavery it was different from later formulations of the institution. Slaves in these antiquarian civilisations were acquired as prisoners of war, to pay accrued debt, or were born into it. They had no rights and were viewed as property. However the ideological scaffolding built to justify colonisation and slavery from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards was fundamentally different: it emphasised the 'animalistic' or 'childlike' nature of the native to justify their enslavement and genocide. This ideology would go on to grant legitimacy to brutal colonial empires worldwide. It is still used to formulate arguments about removing the "scrouge" of illegal immigrants from the Western world.

One can see the construction of this argument in the Locke's work. In his writings he supported human rights and the rise of democratic institutions. However his advocacy of entrepreneurial capitalism, colonialism and slavery reveal the inconsistencies in his approach to equality and inequity along racial lines. According to the Locke, man's original state of being, a "state of perfect freedom" was one where through his actions he could "dispose of possessions and persons as they see fit within the bounds of nature without asking leave of any man" (Locke, p 104, para 4). He rejected this suggestion of perfect equality since absence of an adjudicating higher authority would result in conflict. Therefore it was inevitable that every man "divest himself of his natural liberty" (Richardson, 103) wherein he could "join a community" (Richardson, 103) thereby securing his safety, comfort and property rights. The native American in his 'natural' uncivilised state was at an earlier stage of civilisational development, akin to the earlier Asian and European ones. He needed to voluntarily abandon this state and subordinate himself to the higher authority of the English to create a civil society under the tutelage of British imperialism and colonialism. Thus consent of the governed became a central tenet of civilisation and governance in the conception of the modern state. Since all people are born into society and never really consent to giving up their freedom, this raised issues of the nature of the form and constitution of governance. Locke resorted to the parent-child analogy to justify the "governance of benevolent elites" (Richardson, 106). He argued that since they were the "ablest" (Locke, 150) and used natural judgement and reason and "paternal affection and care" (Locke, 150) to "secure the property and interests" (Locke, 150) of people,

under their "care" (Locke, 150) they would be most successful in protecting people from disaster and create a stronger and more prosperous Commonwealth. This idea of the benevolent elites collided with Locke's belief that it was every Englishman's right and destiny to increase their wealth either through "conquest or commerce" (Richardson, 107). Therefore, he asserts that "private men's interests ought not thus be neglected or sacrificed to anything, but the manifest interest of the public" (Richardson, 107). This meant that any aggressor who threatened another's property rights surrendered his rights and consent. The captured person forfeited his life into slavery in the hands of the victor even unto death. Since white people were the 'victors', it locked native Americans, people of colour, especially Africans out of the free wage workforce and into hereditary chattel bondage. The idea of protection of private property created an entrenched exploitative social structure. Locke helped write and supported *The Fundamental Constitution of the Carolinas* (1668) which enshrined the sale of human labour, slavery and hereditary estates.

Kant believed that the four races were formed on the basis of skin colour. Locke's ideas are mirrored by Kant whose pragmatic racist anthropology assumes that people of colour are culturally "backward" which makes them incapable of living in a civil manner and thus advance socially. They are "lazy" since they work only to fulfil their needs and so only live in the "freedom of the savages" (25:1424) which is lawless and barbaric. He further argued that the coloured person lacked morality and innate talent. Furthermore their skin colour was a marker of inferior mental capabilities. He opposed inter racial mixing since and undesirable since it would lead to "interbreeds" who would "melt together". These individuals with 'racially inferior' characteristics would result in racial degradation of the white races without "proportionately raising the worse one". Thus the African, 'mullatoes' and other coloured races were excluded from his ideal citizen. The latter was a free moral person who consented to be governed by laws that established equality for all. He was also an active "civil personality" who participated in the formulation of public policies through the ballot. They had the power to restructure institutions in the face of evolving demands of justice. Since the native and people of colour were denied morality and freedom, they existed outside the ambit of this category.

they existed outside the ambit of this category. They are passive citizens who live in relations of dependence. Similarly Chales Mills in *Racial Contract* stated that the European once existed in a state of hypothetical savagery, a state theorised to explain the development of civilisation. In contrast the coloured native in an actual "wild and racialized place" (p 46-47) "barred" (p 43) from civilisation. Hegel argued that the Europeans were 'heroes' who had the right to colonise natives and spread the ideas of the Enlightenment to people living in 'savagery and unfreedom'. According to him Africa was outside history and had no history of its own.

In the articulation and philosophy of thinkers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century one finds the origins of the colour line that would become deeply entrenched in the American psyche. Writers and black activists organised themselves to highlight its existence and to erase it. This is a struggle that continues to this day.

## **5. Racism in America and the Color line**

The early settlers to America came to this 'virgin land' anxious to secure their ownership of the land they had gained. Slaves were locked out of any prospect of this ownership and worked on plantations where their masters had absolute dominion over them. The American Revolution has contradictory strains: even as Washington and Jefferson championed the Lockean ideas of "rights of man" they were both slave owners who rejected the possibility of these rights to Black slaves. Samuel Johnson noted this dichotomy and asked: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of negros?" Race and colour has played a central role in the making of America. Liberal individualism and racial solidarity have marked the nation's history.

Locke's conception of civil society is founded on the unquestioning belief in white supremacy where the African is mere chattel without rights and humanity. This raises interesting questions about the nature of protest and civic engagement. Any civic action assumes the presence of legitimate external authority. A social structure grounded in white supremacy raises questions about the possibility of such an engagement. Consent of the governed is the cornerstone of Lockean philosophy in the relationship between the governed and the ruler to create a civil society.

Unlike native Americans, who Locke viewed as part of the lost tribe of Israel; the African 'negro' was subhuman and sub natural and could not be educated. Since the latter was barbaric and incapable of reasonable discourse, he could not participate in civil society, thereby justifying his exclusion, non-participation and exploitation. Locke's role in the legalization and codification of slavery and white supremacy was affirmed in the *Roberts vs City of Boston* (1850) which allowed the School Board of Boston for separate "instruction of colored children". Even after this legal precedent was overturned it reveals the racism embedded in institutions and social structures. The difficulty of resolving racism through laws is best exemplified by the fate of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in the Southern states. It banned racialized chattel slavery, nonetheless the South refused to enforce it or recognize Blacks as fully human and equal to the white population. It is noteworthy that even as attempts to erase the color line were underway, the effort was being sabotaged by national leadership. President Andrew Johnson opposed the Amendment argued that the "negro" was "less informed" about the institutions in the country as compared to the "intelligent, worthy and patriotic foreigners", and giving opportunities to the former would be discriminatory to the latter.

Similarly, Kant's suggestion that people of color could "work" themselves out from their status passive second class citizens to active citizenship is wrong. The Reconstruction promised the integration of slaves into the mainstream. However, the Black community was targeted with violence and lynchings which were exacerbated when the US Supreme Court refused to intervene in the name of "states' rights". The KKK established in 1865 began "armed guerilla warfare" (Du Bois 674). The 'grandfather clause', Jim Crow laws and convict leasing were used to deny Blacks the vote and lock them into involuntary servitude for minor crimes. The Tulsa race massacre between May 31 and June 1, 1921, is one of the worst acts of racial violence in America. In 18 hours, Greenwood District, the "Black Wall Street" was burnt to the ground by members of the KKK and white supremacists. It was predicated by fear of the intermingling of races and the threat that black economic success raised to the idea of white moral, political and economic superiority.

## 6. Resistance to the Color Line

The term color line, first used by Frederick Douglass, was popularized by Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He wrote that "that problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (p 9). It produces a double consciousness in the African American as he views himself through Black and white perspectives. According to Du Bois the Black man is invisible to white America and its institutions which are organized around ideas of entrenched racism. Even as the African American interacts with mainstream America, the experience is marked by segregation, discrimination, unequal access and the constant threat of violence. He is always cognizant of the fact that while his identity as an American grants him access to opportunities, his racial identity prevents him from experiencing them. The color line then is the defining feature of life for the African American. Du Bois was convinced that the American experience was fundamentally a racist one which precluded racial assimilation as a viable option for the progress of the African American. Both Douglass and Du Bois conceded that all African American experienced a racialized nation. Their approach to resolving these differed and reflect the diverse responses one finds even today. While Douglass insisted that integration was possible by internalizing America's core values of self-reliance, thrift and a focus on education, Du Bois rejected the notion. He dismissed Douglass' belief that a 'composite nationality' that was equitable and egalitarian could be constructed through a process of amalgamation. Du Bois critiqued this approach since it implied an uncritical acceptance of white value systems. It was race, with its associated significations, not economic status that bound the African American to an inferior status in social, political and legal life. In this he was in stark contrast to Booker T Washington's belief that economic prosperity would lead to greater integration of the African American into the nation's mainstream. He insisted that "was a capitalist institution that was hardly different from industrial capitalism" (Shaw, 30) He insisted that race was the 'primary descriptive' for the black man in America. In the literature of the time one can see this play out. During the Harlem Renaissance writers like Wright insisted that the economically successful man was an impossibility and lived in a constant servile status akin to the 'Uncle Tom' of old.

Furthermore, he rejected the Kantian belief of the Black American's inferiority since the latter's geographical displacement rendered the phenotypical similarity with the African as superficial and an example of antiblack racism. His rejection of Douglass' and Washington's approach should be viewed in light of his belief that the desire to integrate with the mainstream raised the prospect of the African American undermining his own capability and talent. In other words, he celebrated black distinctness.

Malcom X and King's approach reflect responses to these ideas. The former's ideology was based on a resurgent black nationalism which reacted against integration and assimilation. He brought the issue of black-on-black violence to the foreground. Black rage and a refusal to engage with illusionary 'enemies' are a feature of his speeches and writings. He articulated an anti-colonial geopolitical discourse to highlight the connections between power and knowledge. He argued that this influenced questions of identity, representation and difference. Malcolm X's post-colonial approach undermined all narratives of white racial superiority and culture. He was influenced by Marcus Garvey's concepts of African nationality and African personality to posit the idea of the African American independent of the white American. He insisted that the racial experiences of black American were integrally connected to the actions and beliefs of white America. Unlike King he rejected the notion that equality could be achieved through peaceful means. He wrote that he had "no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people and penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight" (Tyner, 30). Malcolm X connected the oppression and exploitation of racialized peoples to the control of land, and also to the psychological dimensions of racist ideologies. He insisted that the racialized experience of the African American was not simple an issue of civil rights. His exploitation and subservient social status were similar to that of other marginalized groups worldwide. He had to align himself with such groups to take on the global industrial capitalist system. This could only be achieved through a violent engagement. In "Message to the Grassroots" (1963) he wrote:

There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution. The only revolution that is nonviolent is the Negro revolution. The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the Negro revolution. It is the only revolution in which the goal is a desegregated lunch counter, a desegregated theatre, a desegregated park, and a desegregated public toilet. There is no revolution. Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.

He argued that the color line and segregation were predicated on the oppression of minorities by denying them ownership to land and resources. Both were means of exerting control and determine the outcome of the lives of the marginalized groups in the world. The only means of achieving selfhood as individuals and a group was through black nationalism wherein control of the politics and the politician resided with the community.

Martin Luther King Jr. played an important role in the Montgomery to Memphis years in the Civil Rights Movement. His words and actions proclaimed, often using religious terminology, the desire to end segregation. One finds 'voice merging' in his speeches and writings wherein he 'borrows', without acknowledging the same, from white liberal preachers. This distinct feature of black oral culture, along with the Black social gospel tradition and philosophical personalism is found in his words. In *Where Do We Go from Here*, he insisted on the need for a "revolution in values" (138) which would change "our" (138) souls and lives dramatically. King argued that since laws existed within the political and cultural milieu, the domain of reason within which they were formulated was also influenced by the biases of racism. Therefore, the legitimacy of these laws and their motivations, driven by a desire to maintain racial power, had to be studied in order to create a reasonable political discourse. A color blind political and legal would be unable to address the discourse of racial discrimination and exploitation and instead perpetuate it. He insisted that the experiential knowledge of racism was essential to 'reforming' US laws and address racial subordination. He non-violent use of the conventions of the gospel tradition allowed for the convergence of interests of Blacks and liberal whites so that the inhumanity of Jim Crow white biological superiority, and anti-miscegenation laws and segregation could be foregrounded.

His vision of the beloved community was based on the belief that the peaceful Civil Rights Movement would alter the political beliefs and consequently the collective life of all Americans. The latter would result in the "redistribution of economic and political power" (Brandon, 16) which in turn needed to be reflected in an amended Bill of Rights which guaranteed social and economic rights to all. Contrary to Malcom X's move towards a violent face-off between the races, King insisted that ethical appeals and non-violent coercive appeals would lead to greater change. The power of personal counter narratives of the impact of racial discrimination would make it a 'moral issue' and prevent white society from fleeing it and change it.

## 7. Conclusion

The trajectory from Linnaean "varieties" to modern forms of racial and caste hierarchy shows how scientific techniques of classification can be repurposed into instruments of domination. The colonial state's need for legible populations and the scientific community's hunger for generalizable taxonomies combined in ways that naturalized social inequality. King, Du Bois, and Malcolm X challenged these formulations and developed strategies to resist and reimagine social life.

Racial discrimination and the experience of the color line cannot be removed only through a 'verbal ideology'. It requires an engagement with institutions and political action. Locke's ideology privileging possessive individualism at the expense of social justice needs to be questioned. The Civil Rights Movement is one way of interacting with it. In literature of the time novelists like Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston also tackled the issue.

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