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Contaminating Civil Rights: Revitalizing the Pathologization of African Americans in Post World War II America

Christina Forst

In the 2008 presidential election, America saw a rarity: a serious African-American contender. Because of his race, the candidacy of Barack Obama caused some to feel uneasy, to the point where security detail was increased around Obama during his campaign stops. As much as Americans would like to pretend the race issue does not exist, the most recent presidential election proved that race has not been entirely removed from the nation's consciousness. It has been nearly fifty years since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 guaranteed freedom from discrimination based on race. However, a variety of factors has contributed to the tenacity of racism in the United States, including the pathologization of African Americans. It played a key role that is too frequently overlooked in favor of economic factors and cultural practices¹.

Some of the American public recognized the racial ironies and contradictions created by World War II but it would not be until 1954 that *Brown v. Board of Education* would ignite the Civil Rights movement. At its core, this movement threatened the comfort of very

¹ See Sundiata Cha-Jua, "The New Nadir: The Contemporary Black Racial Formation," *Black Scholar* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 38-58 and Larry D. Singells, "The Socio-Economic Causes of the Recent Urban Disorders: Some Empirical Evidence," *Land Economics* 47, no. 3 (August 1971).

traditional white American society, which was enjoying post war prosperity. Suddenly, that society was plummeted into discussions of race that many believed were threatening the social order. In order to combat this unsettling trend, the old idea of African Americans as inherently diseased or psychologically abnormal was revitalized. Unwilling to acknowledge any wrongdoing, white Americans reinvigorated the pathologization of African Americans. The idea that African Americans were inherently diseased and abnormal, the colloquial definition of pathologization, presented the solution to the problem of Black Civil Rights. If the African American race as a whole was diseased and mentally unsound, it therefore could not be trusted with equality and the right to make important decisions regarding the fate of the country. This scientific racism allowed anti-Civil Rights groups to allege that their racist philosophies were based in science and therefore devoid of any personal prejudice.

The pathologization of African Americans has been the subject of considerable scholarly study. In *Medical Apartheid* (2006), Harriet Washington delineates the exact medical experiments that were performed in order to make the case that African Americans were inherently inferior. Jonathan Metzel, in *The Protest Psychosis* (2010) reveals how mental illness was diagnosed in order to undermine the legitimacy of the Civil Rights movement. This paper demonstrates how the pathologization of the Black race negated the nominal racial progress achieved during World War II and undermined the social progress in the immediate postwar period. Although the military community was willing, or more accurately forced, to blur color lines following the war, white American society was not

prepared to give African Americans full rights. The theme of the diseased African American (the pathologization of African Americans) continued to undermine social progress in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and beyond.

This pathologization began with slavery. Plantation owners maintained that slavery was a positive good for all concerned, for slaves as well as masters. Blacks were too diseased to function independently, they could not take care of themselves, and their food and shelter was provided for them. Running away, some concluded, was therefore evidence of a different kind of disease, "a disease of the mind," specifically, "mental alienation...more curable" than others "as a general rule."² Slavery provided a means of containing these diseased individuals. This pathologization asserted that slaves were running away and causing trouble because they were not aware of what they were doing. They were not abandoning the opportunities given to them because of a natural desire for freedom but rather due to their "stupidness of mind and insensibility."³ Turning towards science gave owners of slaves an acceptable basis for their racism. If science, the ultimate rational approach, could find reasons for enslaving African Americans and could also explain away all forms of slave resistance, then what slave owners were doing was not wrong, but entirely justified.

² Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *Africans in America*, 1967, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3106t.html>> (15 Feb. 2011).

³ *Ibid.*

It had to be established that “Negroes and Whites were separate species.”⁴ The sizes of head and skull shapes, and other physical differences, were explored within the scientific community. Conclusions were drawn, via questionable techniques, that determined that whites and African Americans were physically different and therefore constituted entirely different species.⁵ As the dominant species, white slave owners were simply doing their natural duty to help those of the inferior African American race. This civilizing mission is a common theme throughout American racial history as “science played an important role in establishing the ‘fact’ that savages were racially inferior to members of civilized society.”⁶ Medical statistics supported these theories. The black community was riddled with diseases like tuberculosis, reinforcing claims that the race was inherently diseased. “White supremacists used [tuberculosis] as an argument for the interiority of the black race and maintained that in a matter of time the disease-ridden ‘Negro’ would lose the struggle for survival and become extinct.”⁷ African Americans no longer were presented as at greater risk for certain diseases but as doomed by them.

Once the Civil War was over, whites were no longer able to keep Blacks down through slavery. They needed to enhance previous rationales of inferiority. The American eugenics movement began to take hold starting as early as 1907. In a line of thinking that would eventually inspire Hitler and contribute to the Nazis' extermination of the Jews during World War II, the American eugenics movement believed that anyone deemed unfit, usually by racial standards, should be medically prevented from reproducing. It was the medical white man's burden: in order to prevent humankind from deteriorating, he had to artificially control the gene pool.⁸ It was protecting that which was good, the white race, from the germs and diseases inherent in the African race. It was seen as a war against those who would not survive anyway, those who were genetically as well as socially weak.⁹ The Jim Crow South provided the legal excuse for segregation. As a series of laws that spanned the local and federal level, Jim Crow created a "restrictive, punitive system of widespread segregation".¹⁰ Segregation was sanctioned and upheld consistently: but the medical community during this time did not have as much influence because segregation was upheld as a legal standard. However, when war broke out in Europe in

⁸ Oren Harman, "On The Power Of Ideas." *Minerva: A Review of Science, Learning & Policy* 45, no. 2 (April 2007): America: History and Life with Full Text, EBSCOhost, 176.

⁹ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).

¹⁰ Catherine M. Lewis and J. Richard Lewis, eds., *Jim Crow America: A Documentary History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 43.

1939 and America subsequently entered into World War II, the securities of institutionalized segregation seemed to be eroding. Others, who rejected the theories of eugenics, hoped that the contributions of African Americans would make huge strides in eradicating racism.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, there was a national sentiment of revenge and patriotic duty. The United States was now an active participant in the war in Europe and in Asia and all citizens were expected to fulfill their obligations. African Americans answered the call of duty but once they began to fill the ranks, they began to face something with which they were intimately familiar in civilian life - segregation. President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act in 1940 preventing the two races from uniting in combat battalions. Roosevelt believed that racial integration would be impractical, and distracting to the job at hand.¹¹ The initial idea held by many African Americans during World War II that racially integrated units would “bomb the color line” was thus not realized.¹² While the famous example of the Tuskegee airmen is upheld as the story of African American men’s contributions to the war, the unit remained segregated. Moreover, most African American servicemen were relegated to positions deemed appropriate to an inferior status, such as cooks and busboys.

On the home front, results of the pathologization of African Americans was going unnoticed. Perhaps the

most egregious example is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. While the Tuskegee airmen were flying high in the hopes of challenging the racist ideal, syphilis was being studied in Black men. The clinical “trial” involved infecting men with the disease but leaving them untreated so that the disease’s symptoms could be tracked. These experiments were never performed on white men. Often, the consent for these experiments was gained through deceit. Clearly, although World War II was seen as a victory for the United States, African Americans did not reap the full benefits of their participation. The ultimate irony was the criticism leveled by American prosecutors during the Nuremberg Trials. Prosecutors called Nazi physicians who performed experiments on humans criminals deserving of the death penalty, while the American Medical Association stood by and let the Tuskegee syphilis experiments continue.¹³ In the mainstream medical community, the belief that African Americans harbored disease prevailed.

Although institutionalized racism continued in the United States, American troops had experienced an entirely different world overseas. They came into contact with new cultures and found that racism was not inherent in all societies. Also, the Nazi death camps revealed the consequences of racism taken to the extreme. African American troops hoped that their victory in Europe would mean victory over segregation at home. This expectation threatened the comfort of

¹³ Malcom Mills, “Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 102.

white society, eager to enjoy peace and post-war prosperity.

Nine years after the war ended, the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling challenged the American status quo significantly. The southern way of life was being threatened by ivory tower intellectuals. Those who needed to defend their way of life needed a rationale equally based on intellect rather than emotion. Because America is a country that is based on scientific thought and largely secular legislation, those wanting to prevent the advancement of African Americans turned to science to support their assertions of natural white supremacy. "Scientific arguments could be persuasive in the public forum," writes John P. Jackson, "because 'science' had, and has, a unique cultural authority in American society."¹⁴

The threat of racial integration was gaining traction in American society. In response, Stuart Omer Landry published *The Cult of Equality*, a book seeking to stem the rising tide of "equalitarians." Landry emphasized the sexual promiscuity of African Americans and their resultant high rates of syphilis.¹⁵ Landry argued that this immoral disease, coupled with illegitimate birth rates, proved that the black race was incapable of surviving on its own. He also cited many other symptoms of Blacks' medical inferiority, such as "superstition" and the "lack of sense of time."¹⁶ Landry was countering the Civil Rights Movement charge that all

individuals are equal. Ironically, he accused the equalitarian movement of perverting “science to their equality ends.”¹⁷ Landry’s work was largely overlooked. However, this in itself would prove to be somewhat beneficial for their agenda. Landry and his supporters argued that equalitarians wanted society to ignore his book so that the fallacies of their own assertions would not be exposed. This sense of conspiracy would carry through to the *Brown v. Board* case, providing an early resource for segregationists.

White segregationists were concerned for their own race. Some among them viewed African Americans as an entirely different species and held that the recent integration “can result only in a parasitic deterioration of white culture....”¹⁸ Frantic to preserve what they were determined to consider the master race, segregationists insisted that the chemistry of the black body was entirely different than that of the white body. The former had an increased predisposition to disease, as described by the Governor of Alabama’s 1965 report entitled “The Biology of the Race Problem.” Governor George Wallace believed in the superior quality of the white gene pool and made his statements unapologetically. Integration contaminated that gene pool, something that was incredibly offensive to him. Even the recognition that there were healthy, intelligent Blacks did not cause Wallace to adjust his argument because, after all, “a few intelligent Negroes do not

¹⁷ John P. Jackson, *Science for Segregation: Race, Law, and the Case against Brown v. Board of Education (Critical America)* (New York: NYU Press, 2005): 70.

¹⁸ Carleton Putnam, *Race and Reason: A Yankee View* (Washington D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1961) <<http://wpww-thefolk.com/literature/raceandreason.pdf>>.

make a race.”¹⁹ The systematic approach to utterly discredit African Americans had begun in earnest.

First to be scrutinized was intelligence. African Americans wanted to gain their Civil Rights on the grounds that they were perfectly capable and of sound mind. If science could prove that African Americans were less intelligent than their white counterparts, then the inferiority argument would be on solid ground. Since races with smaller-brains were deemed to be “almost wholly incapable of progress, even under the guidance of higher races,”²⁰ extensive research began to set out to prove the differences in the structure of white and black brains. These alleged differences would provide the foundation for later medical racism. It was determined that a white individual’s brain was heavier than the brain of an African American. Blacks were also declared to be lacking certain formative processes as well possessing frontal lobe differences (the portion of the brain that controls behavior).²¹ This research undermined the credibility of those pushing for civil rights in America, since it held that African Americans could not handle the responsibilities that come with equal rights; their brains were simply not capable of sufficiently sophisticated understanding. This created a kind of victimolo-

gy allegation widely shared among the medical community. Proving that African Americans were not as intelligent called for a reinvigorating of the white man's burden. Since this race could not take care of itself, its members needed to be provided and cared for, as wards of the state.

Although the direct link between smaller brains and psychosis was not elaborated in medical studies, the spike in institutionalizing African American psychological patients provides proof of a societal connection. The grounds for committing these individuals were hazy. Circumstances surrounding the insanity diagnosis were ignored, causing many misdiagnoses: "If the clinician fails to take into account the special environmental circumstances, he will misjudge normal behavior as pathological. He may label realistic anger as neurotic hostility."²² But in treatment and care, patients were racially divided. Those committed to white asylums had access to exercise, easy work details, and leisure time. Black asylums were characterized by "hard physical labor and custodial care," which did not benefit the individuals' mental state.²³ While white mental patients were believed to have some hope of treatment, African Americans were generally seen as beyond help and suitable only for physical labor. Stereotyped as bodies without feelings,

²² Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen, *Racism and Psychiatry*. (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991). In Vanessa Jackson. "Separate but Unequal: The Legacy of Racially Segregated Psychiatric Hospital." Pat Deegan and CommonGround.

<http://www.patdeegan.com/sites/default/files/files/separate_and_unequal.pdf>, 8.

²³ Ibid, 13.

many suffered abuses at the hands of those entrusted with their care. Sandy Stewart provided a first hand account of her time spent in Central State Hospital. She recalls rapes of women by male staff and chillingly remembers staff choking patients with wet towels.²⁴ These atrocities, combined with the fact that the medical staff was often all white, meant there was no hope for African American patients to receive proper psychological care. Because their psychosis was deemed inherent, they were rented out as day laborers and did menial work for their hospital. This trend of increasing psychosis diagnoses among African Americans was also meant to undermine the Civil Rights Movement. Not only did it seem to prove that Black Americans were biologically inferior, it indicated that they were also more predisposed to harbor diseases that limited their mental capacity.

In 1969, the editors of *Institutional Racism in America* provocatively called the American healthcare system overtly racist. Black mortality rates were higher than those of whites, a significant 6.5 years.²⁵ The study concluded that advances in medical technology were not benefiting African Americans. The lack of black physicians was also called into question. With-

out any representation by their peers, the interests of African Americans would not be championed in the medical community. White Americans were healthier not due to inherent superiority but due to the “combination of historical tradition, lack of federal willingness to aggressively document compliance to federal law, and local willingness to operate [segregated] hospitals” which resulted in the racist leaning of hospital services.²⁶

The effort to disenfranchise the African American community while simultaneously preserving the integrity of the white race was one entrenched and hard to combat. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the only legislation that could upset the status quo. The passing of this act made racism officially taboo. However, this did not mean that it dissipated. The pathologization of African Americans simply went underground after 1964. In the 1970s, adherents found their leader in William Shockley, a Nobel laureate and strict segregationist. Shockley called into question the factual basis of the integration ideals. He championed eugenics as a means of preventing the unfit from procreating. Shockley seemed to thrive on the controversy his research created which benefited segregationists since the publicity got their message to the public. Arthur Jensen would follow Shockley; Jensen’s research was largely based on IQ difference and he claimed that the difference in these scores was “genetic in nature and impervious to environmental

²⁶ Ibid, 111.

modification.”²⁷ The last of these theories floated by segregationists was less based on science and more cultural in nature. They claimed that Europeans, and later Americans, were able to extract themselves from the bonds of poverty or tyranny entirely on their own. African Americans, they argued, had to rely on others for their liberation. According to segregationists, this was interfering with the natural order.²⁸ By the 1970s, the effort to prove medical racism was correct continued to diminish within the scientific community. No longer in the majority, the democratic process could not support those in favor of segregation and scientists investigated the role of bias in previous studies.

World War II provided unprecedented opportunities for African Americans. The call to arms led many to assume that their wartime experience of “all hands on deck” would translate into post-war civilian life. However, white American society was not ready to accept anything so drastic clinging to its familiar, albeit racist ways. Unable to justify these changes on social grounds - after all service member had worked for democracy - medical science became the rationale of choice for racism. White American society found its justification in opposing the Civil Rights movement. A race inherently diseased with such terrible afflictions could not be trusted to maintain its own rights, let alone be trusted with making decisions affecting the white majority: “the lower races broke into the modern world as mere ‘survivals’ from the past, mentally

incapable of shouldering the burdens of complex civilization” and hastening this process would only serve to solve “the race problem.”²⁹

To some medical researchers, the Civil Rights movement was not a call for a merited liberation of Black Americans but only the rantings of diseased individuals that had to be suppressed. Although advances would be made by the Civil Rights movement, echos of the pathologization of African Americans remain today. It took the United States over two hundred years to elect a black president and even then, his credentials are called into question. A few in the medical community are still asserting the inferiority of African Americans. A 2003 study attempted to verify IQ differences between African American and White subjects. The author attempts to explain “race-difference science,” citing other current studies as evidence.³⁰ Race-based limitations on access to medicine and health care continue to affect African American detrimentally, even through equal access and treatment are supposedly assured.³¹ While movement towards a color-blind society continues, remnants of

²⁹ John S. Haller, *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859 - 1900*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), ix.

³⁰ Sean Thomas, “Are Whites Cleverer Than Blacks,” *The Spectator* (May 24, 2003). <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3724/is_200305/ai_n9238342/pg_5/?tag=content;coll> (accessed 28 February 28 2011).

³¹ Dai D., “Black Residential Segregation, Disparities in Spatial Access to Health Care Facilities, and Late-Stage Breast Cancer Diagnosis in Metropolitan Detroit,” *Health Place* (13 July 2010) <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20630792>> (accessed 9 March 2011).

pathologization survive. It must be eradicated in order to move American society forward into the next step in race relations.

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