

OPINION

On Whoopi Goldberg's Comments and the Origins of Racism

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I try to stay away from most hot-button cultural controversies, and that was my plan for the recent contretemps over Whoopi Goldberg's comments concerning the Holocaust on "The View." But there's been some great commentary on it, and I thought I would make a few observations as well.

If you missed Goldberg's comments, here is the gist: On Monday, while discussing the Tennessee school board that voted to remove Art Spiegelman's serialized graphic novel "Maus" from its eighth-grade curriculum, Goldberg claimed that the Holocaust "was not about race" and, in a subsequent appearance on "The Late Show With Stephen Colbert," said that "the Nazis were white people, and most of the people they were attacking were white people."

Writing for The Atlantic, my friend Adam Serwer argues that Goldberg's comments weren't an act of antisemitism as much as they were an instance of ignorance and American parochialism about race. "I regard her remarks not as malicious," he writes, "but as an ignorant projection of that American conception onto circumstances to which it does not apply."

What is true, Serwer says, is that "the Nazi Holocaust in Europe and slavery and Jim Crow in the United States are outgrowths of the same ideology — the belief that human beings can be delineated into categories that share immutable biological traits distinguishing them from one another and determining their potential and behavior." Nazi antisemitism may not have been based on a "color line" like the one that defined anti-Black racism in the United States, but it was based on a racial conception of humanity all the same.

From there, Serwer uses the work of the scholars Barbara and Karen Fields to give a succinct and compelling account of what race *is*:

"Race is not an idea but an ideology. It came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons," the Fieldses write, "and is subject to change for similar reasons." It is not necessary for race to be real for racism to be real. It is only necessary that people believe race to be real. When people act on fictions, those actions have repercussions even if the underlying belief is false — even if the people know that the underlying belief they are acting on is false.

I think this is right. I also think it's worth saying a little about the history and purpose of race, meaning its function in the modern world. For this, I'm going to draw from Cedric Robinson, a political theorist who wrote extensively (and influentially) on the historical development of race and racism. In his 1983 book, *"Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition,"* Robinson makes two claims that are relevant to our analysis.

The first concerns the development of capitalism in early modern Europe: "The bourgeoisie that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds."

Robinson continues:

The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate — to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the

racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism.

The second claim is related to the first. “The contrasts of wealth and power between labor, capital, and the middle classes had become too stark to sustain the continued maintenance of privileged classes at home and the support of the engines of capitalist domination abroad,” Robinson writes. “Race became largely the rationalization for the domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of non-‘Europeans’ (including Slavs and Jews).”

The basic point, in short, is that the ideology of race emerges out of a prior, feudal world of European “racialism,” in which exploited laborers were assigned a lower order of humanity. (The paradigmatic example, for Robinson, is the subjugation and colonization of Ireland by the English ruling classes.) Meant to make existing hierarchies and social organizations seem natural, this racialism takes on new shape, and attains new function, in the context of European encounters with Indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans by way of capital accumulation in the “New World.” There, it evolves into racism and an ideology of “race,” as skin color and phenotype replace religion and national origin as differences that can be weaponized for the sake of theft, exploitation and expropriation.

If race is so persistent a concept, if it’s so malleable and adaptable over time, it’s because it still serves its original purpose: to naturalize inequality and the domination of one group, or one class, over another. Exposure to the worst aspects of capitalist inequality — pollution, poverty, state violence and premature death — are still mediated by race and become fuel, in turn, for the continuing reproduction of racial thinking.

This is all quite a ways away from Whoopi Goldberg, but that is what this newsletter is for: to go on tangents and make a few points that don’t necessarily fit in the column. And, I should say, I’m not done thinking about the history of race and its relationship to capitalism. Consider this, then, a bit of brainstorming for something to come. Eventually.