

Take Home Exam #3
Age of Jackson

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What is race? What is its place in the age of Jacksonian America? Race in the early 19th century was just as marking as it is today, maybe more. Race meant different things to those involved in the political system of this era. White Americans from the North certainly had a different view of racism than Southern Blacks. But, Northern Whites and Southern Whites differed in views as well.

Race can hardly be mentioned without mentioning Slavery. Both exist in context to one another. Numerous articles and documents are demonstrative of the feelings of race during this time. Slaves (Blacks) are a born beneath the status of Whites; their “race” is only fit for servitude. The skin color version of Race has its roots deep in the history of slavery. This visual phenotype is used to immediately call out and know one’s place in society. Race designations made it easy to see those who were on the lower end of the “Chattel Principle”. This principle of “people as property” means specifically Black skinned people. “Race” for African-Americans, both in the North and in the South, meant Black. If a hierarchy existed in the Union as a whole, it would place Free-Blacks only slightly higher than Black Slaves. This general interpretation would mean Northern Blacks over Southern ones.

In Jacksonian American there were the Whites (meaning white men), and then there was everyone else. With the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny, God’s divine right shown on the Whites and everyone else was included in the divine shadow. This justification of land grabbing meant the Whites could expand the nation at the expense of everyone else. White men were heading west and the Mexicans and the Indians could get out of the way. The Blacks on the other hand, were to be taken along as slaves. This

replacing of the browns and reds of the American palette with black would culminate in the Northwest Ordinance barring slavery from the Northwest Territories, as well as the Missouri Compromise and a very literal line drawn in the sand. Seller's quotes southern proslavery expansion arguments as "Paternalism". These Paterfamilias Planters would move their "families" west.

Race in the North was equally important as it was in the neighboring south. However race in the south was immutable. Race in the North was slowly becoming a social constructive element. This meant that racism was relative, perceived and could change. David Roediger's book *The Wages of Whiteness* shows the emergence of *Herrenvolk Republicanism*. *Herrenvolk Republicanism* simply implies that regardless of any similarities between lower class (black and white) that at least by being white you can place yourself above the others (lower class freed Black men). Basically this white supremacy attitude of republicanism is simply: race trumps class.

Race used specifically in the North was a means of identification. More often used to establish what one was not rather than what one was. Black Americans in general and Black Slaves in particular became reference points for northern working class people. "White Slavery" and "wage slavery" were rallying cries for workers to unite in their struggle. This powerful metaphor became the symbolic reminder of what the working class whites did not want to become, or even be compared too. (At least by others, it was okay to use the "s-word" themselves, but coming from someone else it was offensive.)

Northern racism (towards Blacks) was not as tidy as it was in the South. The South's "Us" and "Them" attitude left little for interpretation of anything but skin color. Fair skinned Mulattos that lacked negroid features did well to claim "whiteness". In the

North, racism tidiness came into check when the first of the “traveling Minstrelsy’s” (Roediger) arrive. These traveling minstrel shows brought with them a change in perceived racism in the form of “Blackface Entertainment”. White performers would paint their faces black with burnt cork and perform parody sketches for the amusement of the crowd. This entertainment became increasingly popular with white working class citizens. Seller’s points out that “northern urban racism nationalized slavery by honing the blackface minstrel show into mid-century white America’s favorite entertainment” (Sellers 389).

Roediger explains that the need for such shows arose from the change in working class whites. “As with any new convert...they must make pornography out of their past life”. This new pornographic view of their past selves kept them from turning back to a lazy, unindustrious, pre-Market Revolution lifestyle. But, the Whites hated the fact that the Blacks still embodied that homey, pre-Revolution agrarian lifestyle. They both hated and envied this lifestyle and Blackface Shows became a way to explain this paradox. “Minstrelsy’s genius” says Roediger, “was... to be able to both display and reject the ‘natural self’, to be able to take on blackness convincingly and to take off blackness convincingly”.

The century wore on and the Whites had their place and the Blacks had theirs. Race was a tidy way to separate classes. Race also gave the working class the reference of what it did not want to become and ultimately something to rise against. But, at a time when being white was all that was needed to succeed, a new struggle would begin for a group of people that had yet to find their place in the hierarchy of American Racism. The

Irish arrive and find that they are not considered “white” by race standards, even though they are in skin color.

Many Irish arrived in the North from farming hamlets in their home country. They had little, if any, manufacturing or production experience to help them find jobs in this new urbanized section of America. Increasingly they found themselves taking on transportation jobs, domestic duties and any other jobs that the growing middle class saw as unfit for their own hand. This, although it was work, put the Irish in a comparative spot with that of the slaves. Menial, hard labor was the work of the Blacks, and now the Irish. Suddenly, if the Irish got jobs at all they were “black jobs”. In essence the Irish in the north found themselves Blacks in all accounts except pigment.

The Irish in the South found themselves in an even worse pickle. There ever thinking logical Southern Plantation economist realized that slaves were purchased for a price, and while not worth much as a human, they were worth as beasts of burden, and therefore had monetary value. Putting six or seven prime “field hands” to work in the mosquito infested, disease ridden areas of the south was essentially staking a thousand dollar bet hoping they would not become sick, or worse unproductive. The Irish conveniently eased the pocketbook troubles of such landowners. The Irish, who had little value in the South’s eyes as human, and even less value monetarily, would often be conscripted to dig ditches, clear swampland and any other form of business decidedly labeled too much of a chance for slaves that had been purchased.

This separation lasted for awhile, but then a strange thing started to happen; the Irish started becoming white. With the help of the Catholic Church and the infant Democratic Party, the Irish slowly started to find there place and claim their own

foothold in the *Herrenvolk Republic*. Roediger again explains that “Had the Irish tried to assert a right to work because they were Irish, rather than because they were white, they would have provoked a fierce backlash from native-born artisans” (148).

Entire books have been written on how the Irish became white, but the fact remains they were technically “white” when they got here. The main thing that kept them from being immediately accepted by their new brethren was their adherence to the pre-Market Revolution lifestyle that many of the Northern working class men wanted to return to. However, the Irish immigrant’s willingness to work and learn to manufacture and forget to farm and herd sheep, allowed him to be accepted in the fold.

Being White not only meant that one could find better employment in a growing competitive market, it also meant one could partake of that most White of pastimes: making life difficult (or sometimes short) for Blacks. Bricks were hurled at Black individuals with such frequency they became known as “Irish Confetti”.

Race is not a biological fact, it is perceived, can change, and even can be manipulated. This fluidity makes the study of race and its effects hard to quantify. What did it mean to be “white” or “black” in the Jacksonian America? The easy answer is that “white” was what one wanted to be and “black” was what one did not want to be. This perceived part of race is what kept the Irish from becoming immediately accepted into the White fold. The more perplexing question is that if all this Irish immigrants had been of southern Mediterranean descent and with a perceived darker skin tone, would they have ever “became white”?

