

Slavery in America reminds us: Trump is far from an aberration

Touré

The president's white supremacist ideas have been part of America since the beginning

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Imagine being teleported from the early days of slavery in 1619 to Donald Trump's America. Technological changes aside, I think the way we approach race would feel very familiar. Indeed, the president's white supremacy would seem entirely normal. That's because the roots of modern American racism were put down by those early European colonizers: the road to Trump begins in America's first years.

In 1619, more than 20 Africans were trafficked to the United States and arrived in Virginia against their will. They were destined to work for free to build European settlements in the new world. In subsequent years, as more Africans arrived and were put to work as slaves, it became clear that there needed to be boundaries put in place to protect the slave trade, so in 1705 Virginia instituted a law requiring non-slaveholding white people to man slave patrols and police escape routes.

With that legislation, poor white colonizers were given a social status above the black enslaved people and a clear reason to support the system of slavery. It gave them a chance to view themselves as allied with rich whites. What the rich actually did was to force the white poor to become a free police force protecting their property, but people love status so much that they will do anything to get it. This is exactly the sort of racist triangulation that helped Trump become president.

In modern America, the economic troubles of poor white people are largely the result of the rise of globalization and mechanization - they're losing their jobs to the poor in other countries as well as robots. The dual forces of automation and the off-shoring of jobs enriches wealthy business owners, while impoverishing traditional blue-collar workers.

Of course, Trump's winning thesis has been that the problems of poor white Americans do not stem from the rich who put profits before people, but immigrants who are supposedly stealing jobs and threatening the very life and soul of the country. Thus Trump manages to unite white Americans of different classes, whose economic interests are not aligned. He does so by using the oldest trick in the book: giving them a common enemy. When Trump's followers say build the wall, they're virtually policing the supposed lower caste on the orders of the upper class, just as they did in the early days.

During the era of slavery, newspapers frequently talked about white criminals as individual offenders while black lawbreakers were portrayed as representing the character of their entire race. Thus black mistakes were the result of pathology while white transgressions were a personal misstep. We see this exact same math playing out in modern America. In the 1980s, when America had a major crack addiction problem, black drug dealers and users were demonized as soulless, which led to politicians battling to see how tough on crime they could be. Now that we have an opioid addiction crisis sweeping through the white heartland, Washington DC is learning how to have empathy and compassion for drug addicts. As the addicts became whiter the penalties for drug abuse got less draconian. Interesting.

But the story of the earliest Africans in America doesn't end with them working in the fields and singing slave hollers that would form the basis of all of American music. The enslaved are not an inert pawn in this story. From the beginning black slaves were fighting back, running away, and revolting against slavery. In *Stamped From the Beginning*, Ibram Kendi writes: "From their arrival around 1619, African people had illegally resisted slavery ... In all of the 50 suspected or actual slave revolts reported in newspapers ... resisting Africans were nearly always cast as violent criminals, not people reacting to enslavers' regular brutality or pressing for the most basic human desire: freedom."

Now as then, the black resistance movement is strong and passionate, and too often the response to it is fear and demonization. When black people protest against the way they are treated, they are told they are criminal, illegally resisting and asking for change in the wrong way.

Think of the story of Colin Kaepernick. The NFL quarterback launched a peaceful, silent protest where he kneeled during the playing of the national anthem to draw attention to police brutality. He was met with widespread hostility, including repeated attacks from Trump, and he lost his NFL career. The league shut him out. Kaepernick's accusers said his protests were inappropriate, divisive and done at the wrong time and place. His message was ignored - and many shifted the debate to why he was protesting against the national anthem instead.

In America, black protest is never quite right. Black Americans are told they must protest in the right way. Don't be too loud, don't be too angry and definitely don't expect change anytime soon. So many people say some variation of "I'd support them but I don't like the way they protest". And yet the right way to protest is never offered.

Black people like Kaepernick are saying police brutality is a massive problem, please stop killing us, and many white NFL fans are saying shut up and entertain me. Thus we remain a nation divided along the racial lines drawn for us 400 years ago - we are the same racist country that we were in 1619. And that's why Trump is not an aberration: his ideas and his energy have been part of America since the beginning. He's an ugly part, but he's a part nonetheless.

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