

# CLASS

- **Classism** – refer to racial strategies devised to hide and thereby to promote or to protect economic class interests.
- **Racism** – refer to racial strategies devised to hide feelings of racial shame either by diverting attention to the supposed racial flaws in others or by calling attention to oneself as racially superior.

# Colonial Virginia's Race Laws

- **1670** The Virginia assembly (consisting of some of the colony's most successful and powerful men) forbade free Negroes and Indians to own Christian (white) servants.
- **1676** The assembly made it legal to enslave Indians.
- **1680** White Christians were free to give “any negro or other slave” who dared to lift his hand in opposition to a Christian thirty lashes on the bare back.
- **1705** Masters were forbidden to give “whip a Christian white servant naked.” Nakedness was for brutes, the uncivil, the non-Christian.
  - All property - “horses, cattle, and hogs” – was confiscated from slaves and sold by church wardens for the benefit of poor whites.
  - **NOW**, the ruling elite of Virginia raised the legal status of lower-class whites relative to that of Negroes and Indians, whether free, servant, or slave

# Status of Poor Whites Raised

- 1705 – whites at the end of their indentureship were given corn, money, a gun, clothing, and - fifty acres of land.
  - Poll tax was also reduced
- So
  - poor whites: gained legal, political, emotional, social and financial status
  - This was all in relation to the concomitant degradation of Indians and Negroes.
- Even though the ruling class considered the lower-class whites “the scruff and scum of England” they gave them their blessing

# What prompted this action

- *Stereotypes of the poor expressed so often in England during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were often identical with the descriptions of blacks expressed in colonies dependent on slave labor, even to the extent of intimating the subhumanity of both:*
  - *The (white) poor were “the vile and brutish part of humanity”*
  - *The blacks “a brutish sort of people”*
- *To the un-poor Englishman – the poor bore many of the marks of an alien race.*
  - *This difference is much more like what we call class today.*
- *The “race” of the rising English industrial class pertained not to their color or physiognomy but to*
  - *Class status, sexual & social mores, manners.*
  - *Race superiority & right to rule = middle-class respectability & disposition*
    - *The poor could not belong to this new bourgeois class.*

# Alien whites?!?

- They worked side by side with people of color
- The difference may have only seemed skin deep
- The two despised groups saw themselves sharing the same predicament.
  - Common for servants and slaves to
    - Run away together
    - Steal hogs together
    - Get drunk together
    - It was not uncommon for them to make love together.

# Why were they elevated?

- The role of slavery in Virginia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- More profitable to have slaves than indentured servants.
  - Masters only needed to increase pain to get more work.
  - Masters passed laws so they could not be prosecuted if a death occurred.
- This required a new strategy for social control
  - The affinities between servants and slaves presented a danger.
  - The slave population grew and there had to be a way to divide the two
- They legislated white race privileges for a class of people the rich both despised and feared: ex-bondsmen.
- Before 1660 most workers on plantations were indentured servants.
  - Lived quite like the 18<sup>th</sup> century slaves.
  - They would run away and there was little threat of “rebellion.”
  - Bacon’s rebellion of 1676

# Why were they elevated? continued

- The elites strategy – don't let freemen of “disappointed hopes” join forces with slaves of “desperate hopes”...and rebellion
- So...**the sinister design of racism.**
  - To separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt.
- **Racial contempt** would function like a wall between poor whites and blacks protecting masters and their slave-produced wealth from both the lower class whites and slaves.
- Such laws engendered a psychological allegiance to the elite through **abuse**:
  - the right to abuse those below them and a constraint on the abuse meted out by those above them.

# White doesn't make Right

Poor whites did not, however, become economic equals with the elite.

Though the economic status of both groups rose, the gap between the wealthy and poor widened as a result of slave productivity.

Thus, the sense that poor whites now shared status and dignity with their social betters was largely illusory.

The new multi-class “white race” would emerge from the Virginia laws as one not biologically engineered but socially constructed.

The very definition of the white would now be legally bound to the inferior social status of the black.

White racism was from the start a vehicle for classism; its primary goal was not to elevate a race but to denigrate a class. White racism was thus a means to an end, and the end was the defense of Virginia's class structure and the further subjugation of the poor of all “racial” colors.

# The distinctions continued

- At the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century many legal similarities between the two (slave/servant) continued – labor and economic.
- By 1723:
  - Free negroes had lost the right to “vote, the right to bear arms, and the right to bear witness.”
- By 1825 – free white laborers refused to work next to free Negroes and either emigrated to the West or festered in extraordinary poverty because their pride of race would not permit them to associate with members of the reviled class.

# W.E.B. Du Bois

- He never lost sight of the fact that the true significance of slavery in the U.S. pertained to labor.
- The poor white could not conceive of himself as a laborer because of labor's association with Negro toil. Rather the poor white, if he aspired at all, aspired to become a planter and own "niggers."
- ...it fed his vanity because it associated (him) with the masters.
  - But as one noted: *"For twenty years I do not recollect ever to have seen or heard these non-slaveholding whites referred to by the Southern gentlemen as constituting any part of what they call the South."*
- Their race Made them think of themselves as planters and aristocrats, while their actual economic and social condition was dire.
  - Only 25% of poor whites were literate.

# White classism

- The extraordinary rule: black = 3/5 human
  - This degraded the persons with African ancestry.
  - And, in practice disenfranchised virtually all white southerners by increasing the political presence of masters with slaves.
- Note: by 1860, 8000 slaveholders ruled the South – 7% of the total white population owned  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all the slaves in the country.
- This 7% controlled five million whites who were too poor to own slaves, through a white class contempt that Thandeka calls **white classism**.

# White (Class) Shame

- By the time of the Civil War, poor whites were indeed white supremacists who extolled their own merit in racial rather than class terms.
  - **Lower-class white shame**
- Some sort of social Schizophrenia
  - **Those at the top** had illusions of being as grand as the aristocrats.
    - In dress and manner...but they could not be that.
  - **The common man** embraced the idea that he was an aristocrat – identifying with the planter class through a glowing sense of participation in the common brotherhood of white men.
    - **Come what might, he would always be a white man**

# White (Class) Shame - continued

- Having shifted focus from class issues to racial feelings, the common white man, in effect, had been robbed by his own racial “brothers.”
  - Such racial assaults by those who ostensibly love one most can produce feelings of white shame, masked as white pride.
- ...this are injuries to the self that impaired the development of a mature adult sense of self.
  - The white adult becomes a man-child with a purely personal, puerile attitude
    - Someone who craved the affirmation and support his flawed environment had not provided.
  - **A narcissistic injury** – displays of grandiosity coupled with feelings of low self-esteem that came, in part, from the social fact that he was a man without economic status and thus was neither admired nor respected by his class superiors.
    - this Grandiosity is hedonistic & romantic...and leads to the continuum of anger - rage – violence.

# White shame...The “grandiosity” ...

- ...of this split self...is a hyper-individualism “
  - Full of the chip-on-the-shoulder; swagger & brad of a boy
  - A self – of which in essence was the boast, voiced or not, on the part of every southerner that he would knock the hell out of whoever dared to cross him.
  - **The corollary to this is – violence**
    - Making the South the home of *lynching*.
- The violence is, in part a product of shame brought on by the “common man’s” own failed, racial environment.
  - Remember the “constructed racial identity” of the poor white is not a result of an act of love and respect by the white elite – rather a game of social control.
  - The absence of genuine respect – produces feelings of shame.
- To hide the injury – filled with contempt for others, feeling of superiority, & an incessant need to protect an already destroyed sense of self...from being destroyed again.

# Another piece to consider

- There is the – white association of intimate, sentient, emotive, body-based feelings with the meaning of being a Negro.
  - Begins in infancy – baby suckled by a black mammy.
  - Old grey-haired black men are the white boy's storytellers and among the most important heroes and mentors of his boyhood
  - Until puberty, they are the closest friends
- Negro entered into white man as profoundly as white man entered into Negro
  - Subtly influencing every gesture, word, emotion, idea, & attitude.