Did the White South’s Acceptance of Pro-Slavery Ideology Make Jim Crow Segregation Inevitable?
Apologists for slavery once argued that this was, after all, a pleasant enough life, for the slaves were generally well treated, and need never worry about where their next meal was coming from, or who would provide for them in their old age\(^1\).

Robert Reid, a Southern Congressman of Georgia, stated famously in 1855 that “Slavery is a fixed evil”\(^2\), summarising one of the most common Southern attitudes in the 19\(^{th}\) century. However, it did not make the emancipation of slaves after the Civil War easier, as the freed Blacks were treated according to it. Southern Whites did not hide their dislike and their feeling of superiority towards the black population. William H. Roane, a member of the House of Delegates during the Virginia Debates of 1832, is a good example to illustrate this. He did not oppose slavery for ideological reasons, but because of his opposition of Blacks present in the country:

> I am not one of those who have ever revolted at the idea or practice of slavery, as many do…. I think slavery as much a correlative as cold is of heat. […] I no more believe that the flat-nosed, wooly-headed black native of the deserts of Africa, is equal to the straight-haired white man of Europe (in Degler, p. 25).

These arguments and attitudes have been used to make the Jim Crow segregation laws appear inevitable. Although this paper will not doubt the hostility towards Blacks and the feeling of black inferiority that was common within the white parts of the population through most of the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) century it will show that no event or law is inevitable. Attitudes can be changed and the change promoted. Therefore, this essay will demonstrate that suppression of Blacks and the “separate but equal” policy were not inevitable because of the White South’s acceptance of pro-slavery ideology, but because of their convenience. It was just easy for the white population to continue seeing Blacks as inferior, stupid and virtual slaves.

While the term for slaves was exchanged to “nigger”\(^3\), its meaning did not undergo an alteration.

As the black former slaves were afraid to show their not being inferior because they feared attacks and suppression, the whites could just ignore and use them. In addition, their huge numbers led the whites to refuse them equal rights. This had meant a shift of power and was connected with fears of black revenge and violence. These factors made it easy to suppress the black population, but the Jim Crow laws were surely not inevitable.

One of the main reasons to impose Jim Crow segregation laws upon the newly freed Blacks was a fear that the black minority, as mentioned above, could seek revenge for the years of suffering. To make things worse, the press fueled fears towards blacks by “printing propaganda stories about black crimes”\(^4\). Furthermore, the sheer number of new citizens and the possible loss of power for the white majority increased fears among the whites. “The emancipation of four million enslaved Americans forced the nation to confront fundamental issues of equality, citizenship, federalism, and rights, precipitating a radical restructuring of governance in the United States”\(^5\).

In addition, it was difficult for the former slaves to emancipate from their old masters for financial reasons, so many of them had to stay on their property to work. This work was badly paid and the cost for farming the landlord’s premises and buying the seeds was usually higher than the profit the crops yielded\(^6\), what led to an indebtedness of many black families. Furthermore, they started referring to their landlords as “Boss” or “Capt’n” (cf. Davis, Racial Etiquette, p. 1), though the meaning and sense of dependence concerning both versions did

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not change significantly from the former “master.” Police was keen on preventing the “workers” to leave the area without paying their debts (cf. Woodward, pp. 321-349). However, it was not possible to speak of “social equality”.

Probably the main reason for black suppression and segregation by whites is a feeling of “white superiority” (cf. Sandoval-Strausz, p. 31), widespread among the white population of the South. George Fitzhugh, a Southern pro-slavery writer, states that

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\ldots \text{in the last place, the negro race is inferior to the white race} \ldots \text{We presume the maddest abolitionist does not think the negro’s providence of habits and money-making capacity at all to compare to those of the whites. This defect of character would alone justify en slalying him} \ldots
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This attitude was underpinned by a large variety of stereotypes, describing blacks as stupid, dumb or lazy. Fitzhugh describes blacks as “children.” “He [the ‘negro’] is but a grown up child and must be governed as a child \ldots . The master occupies him the place of parent or guardian” (Fitzhugh, p. 89). A blending of black and white would cause a threat to the “racial purity of the superior white society” (Davis, Creating Jim Crow, p. 1). Due to this, the white majority tried to keep blacks separate and attempted to keep them away from secondary education or education at all. Black schools were not sufficiently funded or even built. Yet, surprisingly, the black literacy rate rose from seven per cent in 1965 to 77 per cent in 1920, which was a big success of the black community. However, towards the end of the 19th century the pseudo-science of “eugenics” came up which tried to prove the inferiority of the black race with scientific means.

In order to cope with their supression, the black population created an expression they called “the face,” meaning that they followed the racial etiquette with an expression of non-confrontation. W.E.B. DuBois called this a “double consciousness”. Eventually, this

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caused a “self-separation” among the blacks, founding own banks, churches, insurance companies, and schools wherever possible. “Buying black” was a principle that made life easier and more convenient for them (Davis, Surviving Jim Crow, p. 8).

All the reasons of the white “superior” population, whether related to fear and hate, economic reasons or simply to a feeling of “white superiority” (cf. Davis, Creating Jim Crow, p. 1) are surely no justification for suppression, nor do they justify calling segregation “inevitable.”

Interestingly, segregation was not expanded to the supply of energy or water. Logically, according to the usual segregation laws, blacks should not be supplied with enough energy or water. Yet in this case, a supply of blacks suited the whites better because of a fear of diseases. This is a suitable reason, but providing access to water and energy is a significant contradiction to the black being animal or childlike. It admits that blacks are a part of civilisation.

However, this example shows that segregation was not inevitable but an artificial construct by a white elite who wanted to keep their rights. Of course, this construct was inspired by a widespread acceptance of pro-slavery ideology, but it was far more driven by fears and a general feeling of supremacy. Especially this feeling made it easy for the Southern elite to impose segregation laws and stop thinking about possible alternatives or doubting their own attitudes after suffering a serious defeat in the Civil War.

“At the turn of the twentieth century, racial segregation was [still] a constitutional truism” and Martin Luther King still had to describe consequences of discrimination in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which he described the frustration of the moment

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Most of the Jim Crow laws have changed today, but many parts of the attitude towards blacks are still in use, in behaviour, law or discrimination. Still, more blacks than whites are sentenced to death; this could be interpreted as a continuation of the lynchings of the 19th century. Blacks, or African Americans, as they are called nowadays, are usually treated with more respect today, but the term *nigger* interestingly still remains one of the most used swear words of the American language.
Bibliography


