Symposium: Racism in the Eighteenth Century

Introduction

At the second annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, three members gave brief presentations on eighteenth-century racial views. Professor Harry M. Bracken spoke on Bishop Berkeley’s racism, Professor David Fate Norton spoke on Hume’s view about non-whites, and Professor Leonora Cohen Rosenfield spoke on some eighteenth-century attitudes about American Indians. The points raised generated such interest that it was decided to devote the meeting of Section E in 1972 to the subject of racism in the eighteenth century, as well as to have a symposium on the matter. At the third annual meeting, during the discussion of some of the first papers to have been presented, the question was raised as to whether racism really existed at that time, and whether various authors discussed were properly being classified as racists. Some suggestions were made that twentieth-century standards were being applied anachronistically to an earlier situation that was quite different. In the discussion following the symposium the following exchange occurred in an effort to clarify what was meant by “racism” and how this differs from “ethnocentrism.” Professors Magnes Mörner and Winthrop Jordan were discussants at the symposium, and Professor Herbert Marcuse was the chairman of the session. Professor Richard Popkin was one of the speakers and the presiding officer.

Mörner: ... If I disagree somewhat with the term racism here, speaking about the eighteenth century, I do so on the basis of the experience of my work with Spanish American social history and because I would like to replace the term with “social racial prejudice and discrimination” ...

Jordan: ... I think I agree with Professor Mörner, sharing a certain unhappiness about the use of the term rac-
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ism. Some of us have sat here since 9:00 listening to papers coming from various angles on the problem of racism in the eighteenth century, and I am really troubled by the fact that we have not, that I have heard, had a definition of what is meant by racism. I think that one of the unfortunate results has been a tendency on the part of some of those giving papers to try to decide whether individual writers were racist or not. This seems to be unprofitable when one is talking about pervasive cultural attitudes. Take for instance the Abbé Grégoire; he was interested in freeing slaves. In some senses he was a real equalitarian, and yet when he set out to prove that Negroes were not inferior, what did he do? He gathered together a collection of writings by Negro writers and he published these as evidence that, here indeed, Negroes can perform intellectually. And he also wrote about the fact that there were important empires and cities in Africa, but if one examines that, it needed to be done at the time; fair enough, but is that racist, or is it not racist? I guess it is not a terribly profitable question, because one could argue that in making the proposition that he was making, he was asking Africans and the descendents of Africans in the New World to perform like Europeans, and it was not possible for him then, or, I suspect, for anyone then, to accept the possibility that there were different attributes of African culture which were valuable which the European culture lacked. I suspect that many of the people who have been talking today (and I'm a bit raising a question rather than trying to make a point at this juncture, because I hope many people will ask questions when I am through), I suspect that many people would say that racism is an ideology which grew up as a way of rationalizing the overseas exploration of Europe, and the exploitation of less technologically advanced peoples, which the Europeans undertook . . .

From the floor: I have a question: Have we really defined racism yet? Where does ethnocentrism end and racism begin? I want that cleared up—are they the same, do they go hand in hand?

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Professor Jordan: One of the reasons I don't use the term racism (I managed to write a long book without ever using it once) is that I think that it is terribly hard to define. I think that it is much easier to talk about racial attitudes, that is to say, the attitudes of one racial group toward another. Of course, how a racial group is defined is a matter of where the society is at a particular point in time. Ethnocentrism seems to me to be somewhat different from racism in that it applies internally to a group which is looking at itself, is essentially centered upon itself. If there are no objects to which that ethnocentrism becomes strongly attached, you can have an ethnocentric people without there being a racist one. If such an ethnocentric group, particularly one like the sixteenth-century English, who came into contact with a different-seeming people they were exploiting, there, I think, you would get a situation which is extremely likely to lead to racism. Putting together a good definition of racism right on the spot is not easy, and I don't think I've done it.

From the floor: Somebody once mentioned that racism didn't really come about until the eighteen forties. Philip Curtin, in his book on Africa, says that you have racism only when you have some systematized body of scientific knowledge, and try to use scientific facts to do something. It makes it seem like it was a matter of position.

Professor Popkin: On that definition you would have to say that it existed in the eighteenth century: the people had a systematic body of justification.

From the floor: There is a very good set of distinctions between ethnocentrism and ethnic attitudes as opposed to racial and racist attitudes that at least I have found useful, in Pierre Van den Berghe's Race and Racism. He draws a number of distinctions based not only on a tendency (as Professor Jordan was saying), of a group to see itself as a group, but on the ways in which a group, for instance an ethnic group, will have retained over a long period its sense of identity, its language, its set of social institutions and so on. Such a group may have no great problem of understanding other ethnic groups in the
society. I think the trouble is, though, that each generation has a different set of prejudices on ethnic groups, races, or whatever, and it is terribly hard for a historian to take these into consideration. But the distinction between ethnocentricity and racism ought to be made because otherwise you get to the point of saying that of every ethnic group that regards itself as different from other groups, or that regards any other group as inferior at all, that it is racist. Ethnocentricity may be present in any group, of any size, in the world.

Herbert Marcuse: May I suggest a very simplistic definition? I would say that racism is any "theory" which assumes that a race other than the dominant white race is, by this very fact, naturally inferior. It seems to me that there is a very important implication which has not been brought out. The group discriminated against cannot be equal in power to the dominant white group. If that would be the case, it would be very difficult to apply a racist theory. For example, it seems to me that to the degree China is becoming a world power, the inferiority traditionally attributed to the Chinese is losing its hold.

From the floor: Isn't the definition you gave also an ethnocentric definition?

Marcuse: I don't think so, because it does not contain the element of naturally inferior.

From the floor: What about the traditional Chinese attitude regarding those not Chinese, not Oriental, is it the same?

Marcuse: Well, then it is racism. There is absolutely no necessity that racism be a privilege of the white people.

From the floor: Those are the terms in which your definition is made.

Marcuse: Yes, it is the predominant form, I would say. Historically.

Professor Popkin: I would like to suggest that maybe one could define it from Von Humboldt's claim that no group is more noble than another; anyone holding the contrary, no matter what diversity he finds in groups, is holding that one group is more noble and then this view becomes the racist theory again. Von Humboldt was offering his thesis to counter the claims of the leading American ethnologist of the time, Dr. Samuel Morton, that because there were differences in cranial capacity between racial groups, therefore some were superior to others.