

An Interview with Theodore W. Allen

Jonathan Scott and Gregory Meyerson

(Editors' note: This interview was conducted via e-mail between March and June, 1998.)

Question: What's been your feeling about the reception of *The Invention of the White Race*?

T.A.: Volume One (published in 1994) received respectful reviews in, among other publications, *The American Historical Review*, *The Journal of American Ethnic History*, and *Contemporary Sociology*. *Choice*, the research library journal, gave a very positive though brief notice, and included it in its list of "Outstanding Academic Books, 1995." A friendly, though critical, treatment of Volume One appeared in the English journal *Ecumene*, written by a well-known Irish historian at the University of Ulster. I have spoken on the book before audiences at forums at two universities, each time at the invitation of the department of African-American studies. I was interviewed on two New York City talk-show programs regarding the first volume. I was understandably pleased to learn from a PBS "All Things Considered" broadcast earlier this year that a University of Massachusetts Women's Studies Professor links *Invention* with Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* as required reading in her course relating to racial and gender privilege. Sales of Volume One have been sufficient to warrant a second paperback printing.

It being now just four-and-a-half months since Volume Two was published, it is perhaps too early to assess its reception. A brief, but fair-minded, review by Martin H. Quitt appeared in the Winter 1998 issue of the venerable *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*. The book was given a long and favorable review by Jonathan Scott, of Wayne State University, in *Against the Current*. Brief favorable mentions of it have appeared in *Choice*, and in the Memphis, Tennessee *Tri-State Defender*. I should expect that journals that reviewed Volume One will also undertake to comment on Volume Two. I know personally two eminent historians in the field of early Anglo-American history who chose to wait until they could see both volumes before commenting; I look forward to their reviews.

But, relative to the attention that was accorded to the most extensive previous studies of the origin of racial oppression--Jordan's *White Over Black*, and Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*--my work has scarcely made the scene, although (or possibly because?) it fundamentally diverges from those established interpretations in major respects. It also appears that my work has gotten less notice than that given to such "whiteness-as-a-social-construct" authors as David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev. Perhaps it will eventually be concluded that this relative neglect was justified by the merits of the case. And, possibly my identification as an "independent scholar," without any visible

means of support from academic institutions, may count against *Invention* as a work worthy of major consideration.

In any case, whatever *Invention's* merits, "official society" will at best likely tend to hold at arm's length this or any other work directed at throwing off the incubus of "white" racial privilege that has historically paralyzed the will of "the common people" in their struggle against the "Titans" of capital (quotes from Frederic Jackson Turner). We have precedent, in this respect, in the "white-centric" attitude that greeted the appearance of DuBois' *Black Reconstruction*, the classic class-struggle interpretation of the history of the post-Civil War South.

QUESTION: How did you arrive at "social control" as a conceptual framework through which the origins of racial oppression could be analyzed and understood?

T.A.: A short answer is "doesn't everybody?" -- doesn't every "political scientist" understand that the first principle of "governance" is the maintenance of social control? My book is simply a study of the history of governance as constituted by the ruling class of colonizing powers, particularly, the English and Anglo-American plantation bourgeoisie. I offer the following summary argument of the matter.

In regard to those class societies that I have had a chance to study, in connection with research for *The Invention of the White Race*, and also those in regard to which I have merely relied upon studies made by other scholars, the following generalization seems justified:[1](#)

In such class societies there is the ruling class, that part of society which, having established its control of the organs of state power, and having maintained domination of the economy through successive generations and crises, is able to limit the options of social policy in such a way as to perpetuate its hegemony over the society as a whole.

Being itself economically non-productive, the ruling class is optimally a small numerical proportion of the society. Therefore, the maintenance of state power in the form of military forces and their attendant bureaucracy is an indispensable condition for the continued dominance of the ruling class.

Reliance on force alone, however, is ill-advised. Military forces, being economically unproductive,[2](#) must be compensated by deductions from the gross social resources; therefore, the greater the reliance on the military, the greater this unproductive outlay. Secondly, such reliance on military force for social control tends to political destabilization through military coups conducted with or without the connivance of other partisan factions.[3](#)

It is for these same reasons that the ruling class, in effect, commissions an intermediate buffer social control stratum, classically composed of self-employed small land-owners

or leaseholders, self-employed artisans, and members of the professions, who live in relative economic security, and in social subordination to the ruling class and normally in day-to-day contact with their social inferiors. This is a far less expensive bulwark of ruling-class power than mere military force.

Finally, at the bottom of the social pyramid are those devoid of productive wealth (except their ability to work), who constitute the majority of the population, and whose general condition of extreme dependency and insecurity is essential for the purposes of the ruling class.

That provides a rational basis for explaining the phenomenon of class oppression; but how can the social structure characteristic of racial oppression be explained in terms consistent with this theory of class rule? That simple question contains the alpha and omega of the struggle for a consistent theory of United States history. If white supremacism was brought to these shores as an inborn trait from England, the fundamental nature of the society established here, and the interpretation of its historical development, cannot be analyzed in terms of class differences.

How can racial oppression,⁴ with its implicit denial of the significance of social class distinctions, be explained in terms that conform to the simple class theory of bourgeois social control as schematized in the paragraphs above? That is the essence of the issue I sought to address in this work. My study of the historical record of the colonial period in Ireland as well as in Anglo-America led to the understanding of the invention of the "white" race--not as the outcome of some inherent pre-disposition, a "need to know they were white," as Jordan puts it--but as a bourgeois social control formation, inclusive not merely of the upper and the intermediate social classes, but of the very "white" workers who were themselves the subjects of class exploitation.

The essence of the analysis can be stated thus: Where the particular pattern of the establishment and conduct of a colonial economy resulted in a critical attenuation and weakening of the presumptive intermediate social stratum; or, as in the Anglo-American continental plantation colonies, where the colonial economy created a mass of non-essential labor that could not be absorbed into the ranks of a normal middle stratum, the ruling class resorted to *racial oppression*. Under this form of social organization, capitalist exploitation of labor is intensified, while the potential social control problem that might arise from the combined resistance of the propertyless classes is addressed by: 1) recruiting a strictly defined portion of the laboring classes into the intermediate social control stratum by conferring on them a system of anomalous privileges vis-a-vis all members of the excluded group; and, concomitantly, 2) by denying to all members of the excluded group, propertyless or otherwise, the normal social distinctions characteristic of class systems.⁵

Thus there was created an anomalous all-class social control formation, the Protestants as the "Protestant Ascendancy" in Ireland,⁶ and the "white race" in continental Anglo-America. This undeniable fact of life presents the greatest obstacle to "the ascendancy of

the working classes" [7](#) in the United States, and to the most basic premise of the theory of it.

QUESTION: Volumes One and Two of *Invention of the White Race* make a number of brief but provocative references to gender oppression. Could you expand on this? More precisely, what is the role of gender oppression in the maintenance of class rule through "white skin privilege" and the invention of the white race?

T.A.: In my references to the corrupting impact of male supremacy on social progress in general, I was guided by principles that were first enunciated by Mary Wollstonecraft two hundred years ago, and which have been a constant theme of feminism ever since. As a Marxist historian, I have merely highlighted, however briefly, aspects of the historical records of England and Anglo-America that illustrate how male supremacism was integrated in the general system of ruling-class social control. (I refer for instance to Volume One of *Invention*, pp. 24, 163, and 165; and to Volume Two, pp. 6-28, 128-35; and 250-51, together with accompanying substantial end-notes.)

The establishment of capitalism in English agriculture, with its mass expropriation of the English copyholder, and the start of English colonization in America, coincided with the triumph of the Reformation. But, for English women there was to be no Reformation in the Reformation; the "wrongs women immemorially wear" remained rooted in bedrock constitutional principles. A woman was not a legal person (except for purposes of public punishment). How, then did the ruling class maintain social control when it thus continued the degradation of half the population? It did so the old-fashioned way, namely, by the preservation of the age-old institution of male privilege on the patriarchal principle, which was held inviolate with respect to even the most poverty-stricken and dispossessed peasant or laborer. Every *man's* home was *his* castle, and on that basis he was enlisted in the role of buffer between the ruling class and the women. By this means, the mass of men, who were themselves impoverished by the rampaging effects of nascent English capitalism, were made partners of the very ruling class that had authored their catastrophic social degradation that they vainly struggled to prevent. Around 1618, Lord Chancellor Sir Francis Bacon, by way of a classical allusion, elucidated the connection between gender and class oppression. To forsake male privilege, he said, would be as "preposterous" as to suggest that slaves should govern free men. Therefore, he cautioned, before men became involved in attempts against their rulers they should understand that in so doing they would be undermining their privileges over "their" womenfolk.

In the pattern-setting Anglo-American Chesapeake plantation colonies, Virginia and then Maryland (carved out of Virginia's side in 1634), the great majority of the people came as chattel bond-laborers. As chattels, alienable by sale or gift, the bond-laborers were denied the right to marry such as was a regular part of the course of passage to adulthood in England or in the realms of Asante or Dahomey. That revolution in relations of production entailed the abrogation of the male privilege for men thus employed; and the women bond-laborers were deprived of whatever benefit they might have had by the rule

of "coverture," against direct exploitation, sexual and otherwise, by their owners. But the gain made by the plantation bourgeoisie in terms of return on their capital by the transformation in the relations of production from wage labor and tenancy to chattel bondage in the early seventeenth century was offset by suspension of the male privilege system it entailed. This is seen in the demands for "freedom from their Slavery," and for the break-up of the large Tidewater plantations that drew the bond-laborers, and rank-and-file free men, into Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. On behalf of generations of "fornicators" whose backs had been bloodied, their bondage extended, and their children made "bastards," these demands intended the restoration of the right of laborers to marry and to have a (yes, patriarchal) family life. Here, in the course of Bacon's Rebellion, was demonstrated the connection between the weakening of the male privilege and the breakdown of ruling-class social control.

The invention of the white race at the beginning of the eighteenth century was the solution to the problem of the participation of the bond-laborers and the poor free in Bacon's Rebellion, namely, how to maintain social control while continuing to base the economy on chattel bond-labor. Since the great majority of the free men could not become employers or even secure long-term leaseholders, they were to be enlisted in the system of social control, not by a class interests, but by being "promoted" to the "white race." This arrangement was implemented by conferring on the poor European-Americans a set of white-skin privileges; privileges that did not require their promotion to the class of property owners. Such were the civil rights to possess arms, to plead and testify in legal proceedings, and to move about freely with the presumption of liberty. Thus, *rights* that were the birthright of every man in England, were passed off as *privileges* in America, but privileges that, by the principle of racial oppression, necessarily excluded any person, free or bond, of any perceptible degree of African ancestry (the "one-drop" rule).

Among these "white race" rights, was the right to marry. (The diminishing proportion of European-American bond-laborers, being bound for a limited term of years, had marriage as a prospective right.) This right, however was denied to the African-American hereditary bond-laborers who, in the eighteenth century, became the main labor force in the plantation colonies. The denial of "coverture" to African-American females, contributed to the creation of the *absolutely unique American form of male supremacism*, the white-male privilege of any European-American male to assume familiarity with any African-American woman or girl. Men of the employing classes have customarily always exercised this privilege with regard to women of the laboring classes. What the "white race" did that was unique was to confer that privilege on an entire set of laboring-class men over the women of another set of laboring people, and underwrote the privilege by making it a capital offense for any African-American man to raise his hand against any white man. This privilege was exercised not only with regard to African-American bond-laborers, but to free African-Americans, who lived under general writs of proscription of racial oppression.

This study has served to confirm for me a concept of strategic principles for the struggle for social justice.

Male supremacy, gender oppression, is the oldest, most pervasive, and most fundamental form of social oppression, being built as it is into the family form by the principles of patriarchy. Yet, its overthrow presents a more complicated strategic difficulty than is seen in any other form of social oppression. The reason lies in the presence of a gendarme, spy, and boss in every house, and that perhaps seven times out of ten that gendarme, spy or boss is a loved one.

For those in our country who are committed to ending all forms of social oppression and replacing it with forms of social organization that can succeed in making vital the inherent contradiction between the individual and the collective, the first main strategic blow must be aimed at the most vulnerable point at which a decisive blow can be struck, namely, white supremacism. This is the ineluctable conclusion to be drawn from a study of the great social crises--the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Populist Revolt of the 1890s, and the Great Depression of the 1930s. In every case the prospects for a stable broad front against capital has foundered on the shoals of white supremacism, most specifically on the corruption of the European-American workers by racial privilege. Being thereby encapsulated in the incubus of "white" identity, the historical significance of their class identity has been unrealized.

But the attack upon white supremacism must necessarily at the same time be an attack on white-male supremacy. Briefly, the reasons, *based on actual historic lessons*, are these: 1) The necessary maximum mobilization of women for the overthrow of male supremacism requires that it be "race-free"; and 2) In order for European-American workers to participate in their own class liberation, they must repudiate the system of white-skin privilege, including sexual privileges with regard to "not-white" women. To the extent that these principles are honored, any persisting attachment of men in general to patriarchal notions will surely be forced on the defensive.

QUESTION: In his Introduction to *The Wages of Whiteness*, in the section "Marxism and the White Problem," Roediger states:

It is certainly true that racism must be set in class and economic contexts. . . . Clearly, as Edmund Morgan and others have shown, labor control and land ownership provided the context for the emergence of strong white racial consciousness in early Virginia. Nonetheless the privileging of class over race is not always productive or meaningful. To set race within social formations is absolutely necessary but to reduce race to class is damaging."

He goes on to claim that pointing out the economic dimension of racism is already done within the political mainstream, that the "race problem" is consistently reduced to one of class," or as he puts it elsewhere "race disappears into class." He gives media analysis of the Duke campaign as an example: "viewers were thus treated to the exotic notion that, when white workers react to unemployment by electing a white supremacist who

promises to gut welfare programs they are acting on class terms rather than as working-class racists."

It is implied that both Marxists and the media "[naturalize] whiteness and oversimplify race" (p. 5).

It seems pretty clear that he would object to your social control interpretation since he implies that focusing on the role of ruling classes in reproducing racism is conspiratorial and even condescending, positioning white workers as "dupes, even if virtuous ones." Both of you claim to be doing class analysis--you focus on racism as ruling class social control; he focuses on race as the form by which the American (white) working class makes itself, implying perhaps that if class and economic contexts were important for the "emergence" of racial consciousness, they're decidedly less important from that point on. How do you respond to this kind of analysis?

T.A.: I appreciate very much your question concerning Roediger's thesis. I have in my c-drive a file tagged "Roediger," a still uncompleted criticism of the of Roediger presentation of the "whiteness-as-a-social-construct" concept. I began it in anticipation of a projected forum in Boston to be arranged for the Fall of this year, but it now appears that it will not take place. I justified putting off the completion of that essay on grounds that there were more immediate demands on my time. In that meantime, I composed the Summary of Vols. 1 & 2. There, the first paragraph on page 4 ("Nevertheless, the thesis of 'race as a social construct' as it now stands...") indicates the course that my full and overt criticism of Roediger's work is to take. I hope that will serve for the moment, until I can get back and complete my critique of Roediger. (Having by now perhaps noted my tendency to go on and on, you will not be surprised to know that that draft article, before it is done, takes up the matter of Gutman's Eurocentric "making of the American working class" theme, with its assumption--explicitly shared by Roediger--that everything before 1820 was American labor's "pre-history" and its denial that slavery was capitalism; and that therefore the African-American bond-laborers were not "working class.")

I hope this will do for now for a response to your very perceptive question.

[Editors' Note (added 12-1-02): Mr. Allen's discussion of Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* appears in *Cultural Logic*, Vol. 4, no. 2.]

Question: What is your stand on affirmative action?

T.A.: My response to the first part of the question is in the form of the article, "In Defense of Affirmative Action in Employment," which appeared in a much shorter and less developed form in *Z Magazine* in 1995.

[Editor's note: See Allen's "In Defense of Affirmative Action in Employment" in this issue.]

Question: Some might say that affirmative action is compatible with new forms of racial oppression which would be similar in certain ways to your definition in *Invention* of national oppression--with the working classes racialized and superexploited, but now by an emergent multiracial bourgeoisie. The even larger question looming behind this on affirmative action is how you see the mechanisms of racial oppression as defined in *Invention* as changing in significant ways.

T.A. My first and last reaction to this question is to say that in this country the emergence of a multi-racial bourgeoisie (if it were possible) would be a consummation devoutly to be wished. It would mean the end of racial oppression, the historic system of ruling-class social control. That whole system of bourgeois social control in this country is dependent precisely on the denying African-Americans normal social mobility.

In *Invention* I have tried to explain the root source of this social anomaly, by showing that ruling-class social control over the anti-capital elements has been made effective primarily by the system of "racial" privileges conferred on laboring-class "whites":

The exclusion of *free* African-Americans from the intermediate stratum was a corollary of the establishment of "white" identity as a mark of social status. IF the presumption of liberty was to serve as a mark of social status for masses of European-Americans without real prospects of upward social mobility, and yet induce them to abandon their opposition to the plantocracy and enlist them actively, or at least passively, in keeping down the Negro bond-laborer...the presumption of liberty had to be denied to *free* African-Americans." (*The Invention of the White Race*, 2:249; emphasis added)

Times have changed but the principle of bourgeois rule in this country remains the same as it was first formulated in the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion. Sociologists Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro document the continuation to this very hour of that "racialization of state policy, [that] has impaired the ability of many black Americans to accumulate wealth and discouraged them from doing so..." (*Black Wealth, White Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 4). If, as you put it, a "multi-racial bourgeoisie," which I take to mean a "non-racial" bourgeoisie, actually did emerge, that transformation would inescapably entail the emergence of a "non-racial" laboring class because it would imply the end of the white-skin privilege system, the basic most prevalent and historic form of class collaborationism in this country.

Let me point out what seem to me miscues in your suggestion that the establishment of a "multi-racial bourgeoisie" in the United States would be still "a form of racial oppression" that could be likened to the transition of British social control in Ireland in the second quarter of the nineteenth century from one of racial oppression to one of national oppression. The same British Protestant bourgeoisie did not become a "multi-" merger of Irish and British bourgeoisies. Rather, the essence of the transition was merely

the inclusion of the Catholic Irish bourgeoisies into the intermediate social control stratum in Ireland. This is discussed in *Invention*, Volume One, Chapters 4 and 5.

There is indeed a parallel in the fact that the social promotion of the Catholic Irish bourgeoisie and the socially upward mobility of a segment of the African-Americans since the 1960s were both made possible by mass revolt--the peasant uprisings in Ireland and the defiance of the state by civil rights revolt in the United States. But the promotion on the Catholic Irish bourgeoisie to the intermediate stratum (not the ruling class) in the British rule in Ireland, is not to be compared with the *individual* promotions of African-Americans, as important as the struggle for affirmative action is, not merely for the resistance to racial discrimination but for helping to bring and to keep to the fore the historic significance of the struggle against the system of racial oppression as the fundamental key to social progress in this country.

The difference of the two cases is explained by fundamental different problems of the maintenance of bourgeois social control. On the one hand, the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie could serve in that intermediate capacity *only because* of its Catholic identity, which alone enabled it to retain the requisite degree of authority over the Catholic laboring classes in those three southern provinces.

On the other hand, in the United States in the post-civil rights period African-Americans who have moved into some higher socio-economic quintile are under unrelenting pressure to dissociate themselves from their "black" identity, and, above all, the anti-discrimination struggle of their people. For instance, a 1991 poll of Black executives, mainly high officials in the *Fortune* 500 companies, showed that "African-American executives might have to make difficult value decisions between their 'black identity' and orientation and corporate acculturation" (Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, [New York, 1993], pp. 81-82).

The difference is illuminated by reflecting on the distinction between the British reaction to the liberation struggles of the Catholic Irish in Ulster, one one hand, and to that same struggle in the three southern provinces, on the other. In Ulster, Protestants were in the majority in town and in country. The Protestant workers and peasants in Ulster were impoverished, but even in their poverty they were assured their racial privileges vis-a-vis Catholics. In Ulster, then, the continued Protestant Ascendancy system of religio-racial oppression not only could be maintained by the British, it *had* to be maintained by the British to forestall a revisit of the rebellion of 1798, in which Ulster Protestants made common cause with Catholics in the struggle for Irish independence.

For elaboration on the historical contrast between the ruling-class abandonment of the system of racial oppression in the Catholic-majority provinces of Ireland, and the ruling-class option for the perpetuation of the system of racial oppression in the United States even after Emancipation, see "Anglo-America: Ulster Writ Large," Chapter 6, of Volume One of *Invention*, particularly, pp. 139-49.

Scott and Meyerson: Thanks very much for your time.

T.A.: My pleasure.

Notes

1 It is supported by evidence presented particularly in *The Invention of the White Race*, Chapters 2,3,4,5, and 6, and Appendix G of Volume One, and Chapters 2, 3, 6, 9,11, 12. and 13 of Volume Two.

2 And in some cases absolutely counter-productive. See, for example, *ibid.*, 2:31-32, "Social Control: Haiti (Hispaniola), Cuba and Puerto Rico."

3 Witness the retrograde economic consequences for Latin-American countries where "the military" has frequently exercised its "custodianship" of political affairs through military coups. However, despite the defects of this political tradition, it enjoys the support of "the Colossus of the North" as long as it furnishes the only means of guaranteeing uninterrupted payment of debt service to United States investment banks.

4 See the definition of racial oppression and the accompanying discussion in *The Invention of the White Race*, Volume One, Chapter 1, "The Anatomy of Racial Oppression."

5 See particularly *ibid.*, Chapters 1, 3. 5 and 8 of Volume One, and Chapters 9, 11, and 13 of Volume Two.

6 Religio-racial oppression was the system of social control that was instituted in Ireland with the Plantation Of Ulster in 1609 and which prevailed until it was succeeded (except in Ulster) by the system of national oppression, after the victory of "Catholic Emancipation" in 1829, and the subsequent defeat of the struggle for the Irish Repeal of the Union with Britain in 1843. (See *ibid.*, Volume One, Chapters 3, 4 and 5.)

7 A phrase used by Karl Marx in a letter sent to Abraham Lincoln on behalf of the International Workingmen's Association. (See *ibid.*, 1:143.)