

# A BRIEF HISTORY

Main source: *Racial Domination, Racial Progress* by Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer

The racial categories that we're familiar with developed only two hundred years ago, primarily by England and Spain. Otherwise cut off from the rest of the world, England kept on invading Ireland, labeling the people as savages—in fact, the cruel saying “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” first circulated in England as “the only good Irishman is a dead Irishman.”

A little less than two thousand miles away from England, Spain, loyal to the Catholic Church, was offering the Jewish and Muslim people under their rule three choices: “leave, convert, or die.” While many Jews and Muslims converted to Catholicism to escape persecution, church leaders questioned their sincerity, leading to the 1478 Spanish Inquisition, during which “interest in *religious purity* morphed into an obsession with *blood purity*.”

In both England and Spain during this time, **nationalism** (the creation of “a ‘people’” within “artificially created borders”) and **capitalism** (“social relationships in the countryside [transforming] into relationships based on the exploitation of agricultural labor for sake of profits”) began to rise.

To satisfy Europe's growing sense of nationalism and hunger for capitalism, the **Age of Discovery** began—“or, from the standpoint of the indigenous people of Africa and the Americas, the ‘Age of Terrorism.’” When Christopher Columbus “discovered America”—aka happened upon an island in the Bahamas that was already inhabited—the Americas were populated by approximately 50 to 100 million indigenous people.

With Christopher Columbus's lead, the Spanish colonized the Americas; the English followed a century later. **Colonialism** “occurs when a foreign power invades a territory and establishes enduring systems of exploitation and domination over that territory's indigenous populations.” From 1600 to 1900, 90 to 99 percent of America's indigenous peoples died “as a direct result of European colonization.”

With the rise of nationalism, capitalism, and European discovery of the “New World”—which, again, was only “new” from a European perspective—a different worldview was desired to make sense of it all. Through colonialism, “race” became a key element of that worldview.

To further their capitalist interests in the “New World,” the English needed a labor force.

So, indentured servitude started. Indentured servants were often kidnapped. They included

# OF WHITENESS

Irish, impoverished English, indigenous, and African people. (Note how the English and Irish are identified as people from two separate nations, whereas indigenous and African people, all from different nations, are considered as two monoliths.)

Indentured servitude evolved into chattel slavery. Among all other indentured servants, why were Black people singled out to be enslaved? It couldn't be Native Americans, because their numbers were reducing rapidly, they could escape their captors more easily since they were familiar with the land, and they were already relied upon as trappers in the lucrative fur trade business. It couldn't be the "savage Irish" because, upon escaping, Irish slaves could "blend in" with their English captors.

Africans, however, "could not blend in." Furthermore, Africans were not accustomed

to the American landscape, making escape from captivity more difficult; they were also immune to Old World diseases, unlike Natives, and many were already farmers. "Africans soon came to be seen as 'the perfect slaves'" and originally *not* strictly because of their Blackness.

Thus, Whiteness and Blackness were born: "twins birthed from the same womb, that of slavery." The White race began to be formed "out of a heterogenous and motley collection of Europeans who had never before perceived that they had anything in common."

Whiteness remains the dominant category today—other races are compared and contrasted relative to it. Whiteness positions itself against ideas of, among others, Blackness, Indigenousness, Asianness, and Hispanic-ness. This is why people of color, rather than White people, will frequently be identified by their race. Whiteness has become the norm.

## WHAT IS RACE?

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- Race is a symbolic category based on *phenotype* (such as height, hair texture, eye color, and skin tone) and *ancestry* (including tribal, regional, and national affiliations). Race is not natural: it's a well-founded fiction, a social construction rather than a biological truth.
- In the United States, the current racial taxonomy has five major groups: 1) Native American and Alaskan Native; 2) Asians and Pacific

Islanders; 3) African Americans (Blacks); 4) Hispanics; and 5) Whites.

- ▶ Is there a biological basis for this taxonomy? *No*. In fact, there is “8.6 times more genetic variation *within* traditionally defined racial groups than *between* them.” Furthermore, “people might speak different languages, uphold different traditions, worship different deities, enjoy different kinds of food,” or even fight among themselves, yet they are still homogenized under one racial category.
- ▶ This taxonomy has changed dramatically and continues to change over time.



### NOTE TO THE READER

**The Four Dimensions of Racism:** Our racial reality today can be described in four dimensions (according to trainings by Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation). As you read the stories in this book, think about which of these dimensions are being described.

- **Internalized racism:** “The private racial beliefs held by individuals.”
  - ▶ These can be both conscious and unconscious, held toward oneself or toward others.
- **Interpersonal racism:** “How we act upon our racial beliefs when we interact with others.”
- **Institutional racism:** “Racial inequities within institutions and systems of power.”
  - ▶ Example: “School systems that provide unequal opportunities for people of different races.”
- **Systemic racism:** “Racial bias across institutions and society.”
  - ▶ Example: “The racial wealth gap reflects the cumulative effects of racial inequities.”