

Where Did This Come From?

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The protests that erupted after the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor have taken the country by storm. The rapid spread of activist organizing is breathtaking to see; over the span of a few months no state in the country has been left untouched, and conversations now approach acts of racial violence as an institutional problem rather than a series of isolated incidents. Even six months ago, such widespread activism would have been unimaginable. What has changed? To begin to answer that, we must return to the nineteenth century and re-examine the institutions that have helped build the environment against which people have been fighting.

The articles I have gathered here highlight racism's endemic nature in American institutions, both public and private. I have selected pieces that provide a broad evidentiary base with which readers can consider how racism has shaped institutional practices, how those practices embedded racial prejudices into the fabric of the country's social and cultural environment, and how the threat of violence sanctioned racism while obstructing efforts to combat or mitigate racial discrimination. Racism, these articles argue, does not exist *despite* U.S. efforts to stop it. Instead, the United States exists as it does *because* of how racial prejudice and violence shaped the logic and function of American institutions. Racism, these articles show, is a foundational part of the structure of American governance.

The article by Emily Pope-Obeda considers the role of racial prejudice in legitimating state functions by considering the consolidation and expansion of federal deportation during the First Red Scare and how the Immigration Service used immigrants as physical targets to enforce antiradicalism. Her piece complements Edward Slavishak's examination of media reports of the Homestead strike in 1892, since Slavishak shows how the language about immigrants' bodies turned the ideological threat of labor activism into a physical presence. This helped make the Immigration Service's work more plausible and justifiable twenty-five years later. Both articles show how economic and government leaders used "alien" ethnic people as targets to suppress labor unrest.

Paul Kramer's article explores the intersection of political and economic interests through anti-Chinese prejudice and violence's influence on immigration policy by pursuing Chinese exclusion until commercial lobbyists convinced President Roosevelt that protecting U.S. economic interests required letting more "exempt" Chinese people in to maintain good diplomatic relations with China. Kramer's article also fits with the works by Boyd Cothran and Katherine M.B. Osburn in its focus on American empire, though Cothran and Osburn focus on imperial actions against Indigenous Americans. Cothran's discussion of the Modoc War and Osburn's examination of the Choctaw Nation highlight the role of racial prejudice in implementing federal restrictions on Indigenous sovereignty, justifying Indigenous dispossession, and reinforcing racial segregation through the threat and use of violence against Indigenous and African American "savagery."

Theresa Jach's article considers how recreating a system of forced African American agricultural labor led to the expansion and defense of convict labor against reform efforts in Texas. Her

exploration of legislators' and prison leaders' beliefs that African Americans had to be controlled in this way aligns well with Gregory Dorr's article about race and eugenics in medicine. Dorr discusses how science reinforced these assumptions and legitimated them with a veneer of "rational" objectivity. In shaping medical practice, racism became essential in structuring intellectual and professional efforts toward social betterment and national integrity through eugenic policies.

The article by Jonathan Coit examines how prejudicial assumptions of African American inferiority and savagery influenced both how the Chicago police interacted with rioters and how they and African American leaders interpreted the violence. By leaning on the image of respectability, African American leaders could frame violent action as an expression of manly resistance against racial discrimination and reject racist assumptions about African Americans' inherent brutality. Coit also shows how police activity exacerbated the violence during the Chicago race riot. This makes his piece a useful point of comparison for understanding how police's prejudices and acts of violence against people of color contributed to this summer's protests.

Racism and racial violence, as demonstrated by the articles in this collection, fundamentally shape how the United States enforces its social order. The present cultural turbulence is an encouraging sign that the United States is ready for a cultural and historical reckoning with the fact that the individual acts that killed Floyd, Arbery, and Taylor are symptoms of institutional problems with racism. I believe that knowing how racial prejudice and violence are endemic to American public and private institutions may help with this reckoning by showing how the inequalities that exist today, while structural and systemic, are not necessary, natural, or inescapable.

Selected JGAPE articles:

Coit, Jonathan S. "'Our Changed Attitude': Armed Defense and the New Negro in the 1919 Chicago Race Riot." 11.2 (Apr. 2012): 225-56.

Cothran, Boyd. "Enduring Legacy: U.S.-Indigenous Violence and the Making of American Innocence in the Gilded Age." 14.4 (October 2015): 562-73.

Dorr, Gregory Michael. "Defective or Disabled?: Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama." 5.4 (Oct. 2006): 359-92.

Jach, Theresa R. "Reform versus Reality in the Progressive Era Texas Prison." 4.1 (Jan. 2005): 53-67.

Kramer, Paul A. "Imperial Openings: Civilization, Exemption, and the Geopolitics of Mobility in the History of Chinese Exclusion, 1868-1910." 14.3 (July 2015): 317-47.

Osburn, Katherine M.B. "'Any Sane Person': Race, Rights, and Tribal Sovereignty in the Construction of the Dawes Rolls for the Choctaw Nation." 9.4 (Oct. 2010): 451-71.

Pope-Obeda, Emily. "Expelling the Foreign-Born Menace: Immigrant Dissent, the Early Deportation State, and the First American Red Scare." 18.1 (Jan. 2019): 32-55.

Slavishak, Edward. "Working-Class Muscle: Homestead and Bodily Disorder in the Gilded Age." 3.4 (Oct. 2004): 339-68.

About the author: Jae Tyler-Wolfe is a PhD student studying nineteenth-century US history at Kent State University. His primary interests include race, gender, and identity; visual and material culture; and the relationship between Native Americans and the state through the lens of military service.