

In what ways did 'race' continue to be a divisive issue in the Southern States between 1865 and 1917?

Race and discrimination have been seen as unavoidable linked issues for a long time. Non-whites were regarded as being inferior to the white race not only in America but also all over the world; racial differences were “invoked by white Europeans and Americans and to no lesser extent by Asians and Africans”¹. This worldwide understanding of racial inferiority was mainly derived from other skin colour, different languages and a different understanding of culture. The ideological set of a biblical justified white supremacy, and a legal as well as pseudo-scientific proved inferiority of other ethnic groups, resulted in discrimination and even in enslavement of these “lower races”.²

In the West of America, the white elite race applied racial ideologies to subordinate and exterminate Native Americans and to justify the robbery of 86 million acres out of 138 million acres land.³ White Southerners adapted racial ideologies to rationalize the enslavement of African Americans for economic purposes and to excuse a society that considered African Americans as inhuman. Moreover, this society accepted the fact, that exploitation of involuntary labour power was the basis and vital aspect for their cotton-relied prosperity and social status. “Slave holding as a lifestyle”⁴ was similar applicable to the pre-war southern society as was segregation in the post-war era. The Civil War, which was fought “for democracy, for liberty and equality”⁵ and thus can be seen as “the war about slavery”⁶ did free African Americans from their slave bondage. Nevertheless, the war was not able to

¹ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780 –1914*, 2005, p. 403.

² C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780 –1914*, 2005, pp. 402-403.

³ V. Sanders, *Race Relations in the USA since 1900*, 2000, p. 12.

⁴ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780 –1914*, 2005, p. 405.

⁵ H. Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America*, 2001, p. 348.

⁶ H. Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America*, 2001, p. 315.

implement a lasting colour-blind democracy, economic opportunities and social justice for the large black minority in the South.

After the Civil War, the first federal political implementations were, on the one hand, designed to improve the freed men's situation and, on the other hand, to shape the new southern society. In 1865, the Freedmen's bureau was implemented to "ease the transition from slavery to freedom"⁷ and the 13th Amendment ensured the abolition of slavery and involuntary servitude in all states. Yet, the southern society did not regard the almost 4 Mio newly freed men as capable to govern themselves, to take the responsibility of living an autonomic life within society, nor to be able of any independent thinking. As a consequence, the white Southerners intended to keep "Negroes in their place" and counteracted to changes imposed by the North.⁸ The Black Codes were introduced to bypass the 13th Amendment so that slave-like conditions could be maintained. Although, the Codes varied from state to state, their main intention was to restrict freedom for African Americans. Tindall and Shi refer to the Black Codes as "intended to highlight the distinction" between the races.⁹

The next federal steps were the legal implementation of citizenship for all persons, ratified in the 14th Amendment in 1866, and the right to vote, granted in the 15th Amendment in 1870. These amendments as well as the Civil Rights acts offered the political basis for a non-racial democracy in the South. Nevertheless, Tindall and Shi point out, that the reasons of the North, especially for establishing the 15th Amendment, were not purely linked to improve the situation of African Americans'. The Republicans were also eager to gain African American votes.¹⁰ After the Civil War 700.000 African Americans were registered to vote, compared to 600.000

⁷ H. Brogan, The Penguin History of the United States of America, 2001, p. 353.

⁸ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 187.

⁹ G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, America: A narrative History, 2004, p. 572.

¹⁰ G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, America: A narrative History, 2004, p. 573.

eligible Whites in the South. These figures support the argument that Republicans could ensure their control of the Congress and the White House in expanding suffrage for African American who would most likely vote for their liberators.¹¹

However, the federal government, especially under the radical Republicans, ensured that the laws treat African Americans as full and equal citizens.¹² Consequently African American's "voted, formed political organizations and expressed themselves forcefully on issues important to them"¹³ – yet only for a short period of time. The southern society disregarded the laws, since they could not accept African American's uplift to citizens and since they "need not fear federal intervention"¹⁴ at all. Thus, African Americans were prevented from voting. Stuffed ballot boxes, hidden sites and imprisonment right before election day were common customs.¹⁵ Additionally Louisiana started the introduction of the "Grandfather clause", which protected the vote of many impoverished and illiterate Whites and excluded African Americans, who had not had the right to vote, or their lineal descendants, prior to 1867. The legal barrier to exclude the African Americans from voting was multifaceted and disenfranchisement movement was completed in 1910.¹⁶

Furthermore, the Civil Right act of 1875, which outlawed exclusion of African Americans from hotels, theatres, railroads and other public accommodations can be seen as a "dead letter". It was simply ignored by the Southerners and rather the so-called "Jim Crow" laws were enacted. Jim Crow laws determined the separation of the races and were practiced in the North and the South. In the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1896, the Supreme Court legalized segregation with the proclamation "separate but equal". Segregation laws were mainly designed to focus on racial

¹¹ V. Sanders, *Race Relations in the USA since 1900*, 2000, p. 18.

¹² G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, *America: A narrative History*, 2004, p. 568.

¹³ H. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, 2003, p. 199.

¹⁴ Eric Foner, 'The odds Against the Success of Reconstruction were Great' in E. Hoffmann a. J. Gjerde (eds), *Major Problems in American History Volume 1: to 1877*, 2002, p. 485.

¹⁵ J.S. Ezell, *The South since 1865*, 1978, pp. 176-179.

¹⁶ J.S. Ezell, *The South since 1865*, 1978, p. 183.

differences and distinctions. Franklin regards them as solely designed to maintain the division between the races and to ensure the survival of the imagined white supremacy.¹⁷

The Northern doctrine to legislate “one great society where race was irrelevant”¹⁸ was out of question after Reconstruction era ended in 1877. The compromise act implemented the White conservative “home-rule” again. In addition, it indicated the declining federal interest and unwillingness for longer pursuing racial equality in the South. The re-establishment of the conservative rule under the Bourbons, a planter merchant elite, resulted in efforts of harassment, violence and intimidation. Furthermore brutal lynchings and race riots were not only tolerated but even legalized by the government and thus gave evidence for a new South that started to resemble the old South.¹⁹

Other political issues, which contributed to the upholding of racial inequality, are the “weak presidencies” during the Reconstruction era and the relatively small black political voice. President Andrew Johnson denounced the 14th Amendment and as a consequence opposed the establishment of racial equality before the law. Ulysses Grant contributed to the upheld of White southern domination with his Amnesty act of 1872, which allowed former Confederates to vote. Rutherford Hayes’s basic approach of his “let ‘em alone policy” added to the steady decrease of the legal status of African Americans. In spite of this white leadership, African Americans had various strong leaders, such as Frederick Douglass, who played an important role “in the struggle for racial equality”²⁰ or Booker T. Washington, who focused on the enlargement of economic opportunities.²¹ Yet, the introduction of an entirely new

¹⁷ J. H. Franklin, *Race and History: selected Essays 1938-1988*, 1989, pp. 132-152.

¹⁸ J. H. Franklin, *Race and History: selected Essays 1938-1988*, 1989, p. 141.

¹⁹ G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, *America: A narrative History*, 2004, pp. 614-615.

²⁰ R. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America*, 1990, p. 212.

²¹ H. Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America*, 2001, p. 356.

social system brought also some disagreements within the black political voice, such as the dispute between De Bois and Washington. De Bois believed in legal and political equality as a basis for economic prosperity.²² In contrast, Washington firstly wanted African American's to enlarge their economic opportunities and improve their education.²³ However, both aimed to achieve "the ultimate goal of equality for blacks"²⁴ and to end the "continuation of white supremacy and discrimination"²⁵.

Having considered the political and legal isolation of African Americans it is also important to take a closer look at the racial divisions in the economy of the South. On the one hand, the end of slavery produced a labour shortage; on the other hand, the South was highly economic dependent on its labour intensive agriculture. Although, during the 1870s and 1880s an improvement of southern industry was experienced, the traditional interest and reliance in their cotton cultivation did barley alternate.²⁶

In Bayly's point of view these "economic needs determined the survival of slavery"²⁷ in form of "peonage" and "apprenticeship" to some extent. In addition, the newly freed slaves did not have much money or technical training, nor did they obtain the "40 acres and a mule" to provide for their own living. This economic dependence forced them to accept the white systems of "apprenticeship" punctuated in unfair labour agreements and cropsharing. Within the sharecropping system, African Americans as well as many poor Whites became tenants of white landlords. Tenants borrowed from their landlords to get started and had to pay debt charges as well as rent.²⁸ Consequently, the landlords obtained between one half and two third of their

²² V. Sanders, Race Relations in the USA since 1900, 2000, p. 31.

²³ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 194.

²⁴ V. Sanders, Race Relations in the USA since 1900, 2000, p. 31

²⁵ V. Sanders, Race Relations in the USA since 1900, 2000, p. 35.

²⁶ R. Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America, 1990, p. 194.

²⁷ C.A. Bayly, The Birth of the Modern World 1780 –1914, 2005, p. 404.

²⁸ H. Brogan, The Penguin History of the United States of America, 2001, p. 365.

harvested crop. Over the decades the situation did not improve and African Americans as well as poor Whites were trapped in a cycle of debt. Ezell illustrates that in 1900, three fourth of the African Americans were still cropper or tenants.²⁹ In addition, Tindall and Shi point out that “people who did not own the land”³⁰ cultivated most of the southern farms. Furthermore, Bayly analysed that the living and life expectations of African Americans under slavery were even better than those of the post emancipation era.³¹ In this sense African Americans were held dependant and in a lower economic position. In 1875, roughly 5 % of the white population owned 40 % of the regions productive farmland.³² This distribution of land ownership maintained the higher economic status of many white Southerners.

Given this situation it can be reasoned that African Americans could not obtain economic freedom because they lacked the needed resources (i.e. land) to build an independent existence. The governmental response to this problem was the Southern Homestead Act in 1866, which made land available for distribution among African Americans'. Yet, most of the land was of poor quality and it was not enough to supply the African American demand.³³ Moreover, the land confiscated during the Civil War under the Confiscations Act of 1862, was reverted to the heirs of the Confederate owners.³⁴ Although, the historians Carroll and Noble take the view that African Americans “were not under the direct economic control of white leadership”³⁵ it has to be recognised that the privileged white access to land eased the maintaining of white economic superiority over African Americans.

Nevertheless, African Americans had also to bear the same harsh economic circumstances as wage labourers in the post war South. The increased

²⁹ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 189.

³⁰ G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, America: A narrative History, 2004, p. 611.

³¹ C.A. Bayly, The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914, 2005, p. 405.

³² M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 15.

³³ H. Brogan, The Penguin History of the United States of America, 2001, p. 359.

³⁴ H. Zinn, A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present, 2003, p. 197.

³⁵ P.N.Carroll a. D.W. Noble, The Free and the Unfree: A progressive History of the United States, 2001, p. 253.

industrialisation and the exploitation of the mineral wealth contributed to an economic growth. This again demanded a large and cheap labour force for which African Americans “constituted an important source”³⁶. Black Codes and unfair labour agreements, which were introduced to tie the employee to the employer, can be seen as almost as harsh as the former slave bondages. These labour agreements punished those who refused to contract, denied the new freed men to leave their employment and introduced severe fines for travelling without an employer’s permission.³⁷ The southern society saw African Americans as “incapable of doing skilled work or operating machines”³⁸. As a result they generally obtained “heavy, dirty and distasteful jobs” in industry.³⁹ They were excluded from certain industries, such as textiles, and prevented from competing with Whites on the labour market.

Thus, this economic dependence of African Americans and the decrease of their legal and social status in the South resulted in the “great migration”. The developed industrial cities of the North offered “greater freedom, excitement, and anonymity of city life”⁴⁰ and most important better economic opportunities. Between 1890 and 1920 New York City’s black population increased from 70.000 to 200.000.⁴¹ Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of African Americans stayed in the South. In 1900, about 90 % of the black population was still located in the South.⁴² The increase of African Americans in the cities of the North led to competitions for jobs and housing between the races and hence fuelled further racial tensions.

However, having considered the political and economic divisions it is important to analyse the social separation of the races as well. The white race saw African

³⁶ R. Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America, 1990, p. 198.

³⁷ H. Brogan, The Penguin History of the United States of America, 2001, p. 352.

³⁸ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 188.

³⁹ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 188.

⁴⁰ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 191.

⁴¹ V. Sanders, Race Relations in the USA since 1900, 2000, pp. 36-38.

⁴² M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 39.

Americans as “lowly beings in the human family”⁴³ and more and more as “carriers of dirt and disease”⁴⁴. As a consequence, segregation of the races grew in popularity. During the Reconstruction era only “few elements of race separation, chiefly in churches and in schools”⁴⁵ were experienced. Between 1887 and World War I separation of the races began to be omnipresent in all levels of social life.⁴⁶ Jim Crow Cars in the public transport system, the establishment of Jim Crow entrances, segregated restaurants and cemeteries provided a physical distance between the races. According to Woodward, the dominant white race “required a certain amount of compulsory separation”⁴⁷ to underpin their superiority. It can be argued that the white race distinguished their social status in humiliating another ethnic group.

A severe impact of segregation can be found in the strongly limited education system provided for African Americans. Although under the rule of the Radical Republicans the first state school system in most of the South was established, African Americans did not have the same opportunities as Whites.⁴⁸ The major problems were connected to the inadequate resources of the black schools. While white students received five to twelve times the funds allocated to black students, African Americans were educated in classrooms counting 100 pupils, lacking schoolbooks as well as suitable facilities.⁴⁹ Despite these difficulties, Ezell points out that within black communities a rise of literacy from almost zero to 56 % was noticed in 1900.⁵⁰ Carroll and Noble support Ezell’s view and declared that post war education for African Americans brought in so far enlightenment, as a restoration “to

⁴³ C.A. Bayly, The Birth of the Modern World 1780 –1914, 2005, p. 409.

⁴⁴ P.N.Carroll a. D.W. Noble, The Free and the Unfree: A progressive History of the United States, 2001, p. 254.

⁴⁵ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, pp. 184-185.

⁴⁶ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 185.

⁴⁷ C.V. Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 1974, pp. 23.

⁴⁸ G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, America: A narrative History, 2004, p. 587.

⁴⁹ M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 38.

⁵⁰ J.S. Ezell, The South since 1865, 1978, p. 196.

their pre-Civil War dependence⁵¹ was not possible anymore. In contrast to these views, it has to be acknowledged that in 1920, 80 % of all African American public school children were enrolled only for the first four grades.⁵² This cannot be seen as a sufficient basis to improve African Americans expectations of life or economic opportunities.

Nevertheless, African American's political leader Booker T. Washington supported the segregation system in an economic point of view. The Jim Crow system introduced segregated businesses. Hence it opened up further income opportunities for African Americans such as retail shops, which provided services for Blacks.⁵³ Washington advised African Americans to stress these new economic opportunities rather than demand social equality. Furthermore, the National Negro Business league, established by Washington, promoted the growth of black owned businesses and encouraged African Americans to buy land whenever possible.⁵⁴ However, an insisting on these racial distinctions, punctuated in segregation, can be seen as an aspect that demonstrates the continuation of race as a divisive issue in the South.

A further argument to show the continuation of 'races' in the South was the increased violence against African Americans. Violence began immediately after the Civil War and reached its peak during the late 1860s and early 1870s with the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia and the White Brotherhood. These brotherhoods shared the "unity of purpose and common tactics" to restore the white supremacy and "racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life"⁵⁵. The Ku Klux Klan was organized in 1866 to frighten Freedmen and also Republicans. By 1867, whipping, burning, murdering, beating and lynching were the threatening methods of

⁵¹ P.N.Carroll a. D.W. Noble, The Free and the Unfree: A progressive History of the United States, 2001, p. 253.

⁵² M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 38.

⁵³ G.B. Tindall a. D.E. Shi, America: A narrative History, 2004, p. 619.

⁵⁴ M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Eric Fomer, 'The odds Against the Success of Reconstruction were Great' in E. Hoffmann a. J. Gjerde (eds), Major Problems in American History Volume 1: to 1877, 2002, p. 481.

the KKK.⁵⁶ This form of the Ku Klux Klan was more or less spread in the southern area, whereas the re-established KKK in 1915 would become a nation wide organization with similar strength in the North.⁵⁷

Furthermore the period between 1890 and 1920 can be seen as the era of lynchings. According to Morrison, 226 mob murders, 155 of them of African Americans, were counted in 1892.⁵⁸ In average about 188 lynchings a year were recorded during the 1890s.⁵⁹ Due to the absence of enforced law and also due to the fact that lynching of African Americans was not regarded as a crime it was common practice in the South. These forms of violence against African Americans maintained the clear line between the races.⁶⁰ Furthermore, these violent attacks were accompanied by racial hostility and hatred within the social interaction in daily life; for instance, many Whites refused to shake hand with African Americans. In addition, African Americans were seldom addressed with "Mister" but simple spoken at in using the forename, "boy" or "uncle".⁶¹

However, an African American counteraction to these forms of violence and segregation was the establishment of an own social life within the boundaries of their race. One of the places, where African Americans could experience social interaction to some extent, was their church. After 1865, an explosive growth of churches gave African Americans the possibility to meet and develop leadership aside segregation and discrimination.⁶² Apart from their religious social life, African Americans expressed their feelings in their music and found some freedom within blues and

⁵⁶ H. Zinn, A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present, 2003, p. 203.

⁵⁷ P.N.Carroll a. D.W. Noble, The Free and the Unfree: A progressive History of the United States, 2001, p. 295.

⁵⁸ S.E. Morrison, The Oxford History of the American People: Vol. 3, 1869 through the Death of J.F. Kennedy, 1963, 1994, pp. 109-110.

⁵⁹ R. Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America, 1990, p. 214.

⁶⁰ J. H. Franklin, Race and History: selected Essays 1938-1988, 1989, pp. 141- 152.

⁶¹ M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 38.

⁶² M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 7.

jazz.⁶³ Many African Americans hoped that the international conflict, World War I, would create more open mindedness concerning racial issues and eliminate racial discriminations. Therefore 2.3 Mio African American registered for the draft and 367.000 were enrolled in the armed forces. Yet, these hopes were destroyed in the Red Summer of 1919, which brought another wave of racist violence directed against homecoming black soldiers.⁶⁴

After the End of the Civil War until the beginning of 20th Century a prejudiced Southern view concerning their former slaves existed. The South was defeated in the war but “her resources for racial oppression were by no means exhausted”⁶⁵. “African Americans were so intellectually inferior, so morally irresponsible, so spiritually unclean”⁶⁶ that Southerners did not want to share citizenship with them. This was reflected in the political life of the South. The northern government, especially under the rule of the radical Republicans, made significant legal steps towards a colour-blind democracy between 1865 and 1917. Nevertheless, the southern society either disregarded these laws or counteracted. In this sense the white southern elite was “prepared to sacrifice their lives to preserve slavery”⁶⁷ or at least to maintain racial distinctions. Furthermore, between 1865 and 1917, a sharp economic and social line existed between the Whites and the Blacks of the South. In an economic point of view, African Americans were in a highly dependent position. Neither land nor financial help was provided for the newly freed men. Therefore they had to accept the low status of cropsharer or wage labourer. In both occupations African Americans were inferior to white citizens and had barely enough to live.

⁶³ M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 14.

⁶⁴ M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 39.

⁶⁵ H. Brogan, The Penguin History of the United States of America, 2001, p. 351.

⁶⁶ P.N.Carroll a. D.W. Noble, The Free and the Unfree: A progressive History of the United States, 2001, p. 281.

⁶⁷ M. Manning a. M. Leith, A photographic History of the African American struggle, 2002, p. 14.

Furthermore, segregation and violence against African Americans complicated their lives in the South. In enacting the Jim Crow system and tolerating violence such as lynchings, Southerners were not willing to grant African American equality or human rights. Hence, African Americans were “chained to white society and its political economy”⁶⁸ that aimed to uphold and intensify the differences between Blacks and Whites. In conclusion, the large African American minority in the South as well as the small Indian, Hispanic and Chinese minorities faced a white majority in America, which was eager to ensure their superiority in an economic, political and social point of view.⁶⁹ Therefore race has been a divisive issue not only until 1917 but also far into the 20th century and even beyond.

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⁶⁸ R. Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America, 1990, p. 110.

⁶⁹ V. Sanders, Race Relations in the USA since 1900, 2000, p. 22.

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