

## A VIEW OF RACISM 2016 AND AMERICA'S ORIGINAL SIN

*Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin*

THE ELECTION OF DONALD J. TRUMP as the forty-fifth president of the United States has reinvigorated the American left's interest in combating racism in a way not seen since perhaps the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Trump's campaign rhetoric full of dog whistles gave way to an administration constituted by troubling people enacting troubling policies. Some have seen this as a wake-up call, while others have seen it as the unfortunate but eminently foreseeable price of America's original sin. Whether or not one sees the current political moment as a troubling aberration or as the laying bare of America's racist underbelly, many have a sense of a renewed mission to eradicate or at least mitigate racism in this country.<sup>1</sup>

Many obstacles lie in the way of progress. This article draws attention to one: neither of the two main philosophical views about racism is fully up to the task of combating it. One view holds that racism is primarily a matter of institutional and social structures that perpetuate and enshrine racially disparate and oppressive policies and outcomes. The other holds that racism is primarily a matter of individuals' attitudes, such as beliefs about inferiority, hatred, and other forms of ill will. Both views appear congenial to the aim of combating racism. The first calls our attention to the sources of racism's most impactful harms, while the second is committed to the impermissibility of racist conduct and attitudes. But, as examination of the case of Attorney General Jeff Sessions shows, they both

- 1 It is important that the fight against racism not be characterized only as aiming at eradication. Racial realism, as described by Bell, for instance, holds that racism is a permanent feature of society ("Racial Realism"). The nature of the fight against racism, according to the racial realist, should not aim at eradication but rather mitigation. The goal is to "make life bearable in a society where blacks are a permanent, subordinate class," to "better appreciate and cope with racial subordination," and to recognize that "the fight itself has meaning ... that the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome" (377–78). The anti-racist mission here is to mitigate the harms racism inflicts on the oppressed, even while the goal of eradicating racism is deemed illusory.

fall short of providing proper guidance. We need to think differently about racism in order to effectively combat it.

There is a second reason to adopt a different account of racism. Both of the main philosophical views appear to suggest that justificatory appeals to the concept of race preceded the attitudes or structures that supposedly constitute racism. But this gets it backward. A careful reckoning with the past shows that the concept of race was invoked to justify racially disparate structures of domination and attitudes of superiority that were already in place. We want a view that properly attends to the unfolding of history.

In response, this article presents a third view of racism, one that adopts a genealogical as opposed to analytical approach. The main claims to be defended will be (1) that individuals' attitudes as well as institutional structures are essential to a proper account of racism and (2) that this account must be essentially historical, taking proper notice, in particular, of the application of the concept of race in relation to the oppressive structures, relations, and attitudes that have come to characterize racism as we know it. The account offered here posits a drive to dominate that works in concert with the fact that the powerful get to write history, including the justifications for social relations and the institutions that encode them. Three virtues of the account are (a) its ability to support the anti-racist mission, (b) its description of the moral psychology implicated in racism, both interpersonal and institutional, and (c) its aid in allowing us to make proper sense of what racism is by attending closely to the ways in which it has evolved throughout history.

## 1. TWO VIEWS OF RACISM

Two kinds of analysis of racism dominate the philosophical literature.<sup>2</sup> On the *political view*, racism is analyzed in terms of systematic oppression of one or more racial groups by a society's basic institutions.<sup>3</sup> For example, racism in

2 This is not to say that these two kinds of analysis exhaust the range of available views. Critical race theory, in particular, deserves mention as an important view. Yet it does not dominate the mainstream philosophical literature in the way these other two views do. Because this article seeks to intervene in that literature, it will take as its target the two kinds of view discussed in the text. But see Curry, "Will the Real CRT Please Stand Up?" for trenchant discussion of critical race theory's exclusion from the philosophical mainstream and the argument that this is connected to the very problem under consideration—namely, racism. And see note 27, below, for discussion of some connections between critical race theory and the third view argued for here.

3 Shelby, "Is Racism in the 'Heart'?" and "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism"; Mills, *The Racial Contract* and "'Heart' Attack."

housing is analyzed in terms of racially targeted injustices in the various institutions that make up the housing sector. These include entities such as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, mortgage lending and servicing institutions, and local government agencies that enact and enforce zoning and tax regulations. On this view, racism with respect to housing stems from unjust social relations perpetuated and enshrined by these various institutions. On the *moral view*, by contrast, racism is primarily a matter of individuals' attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Racism in housing is analyzed in terms of hatred, indifference, or disrespect toward people on the basis of their racial designation on the part of the individuals who play relevant roles in the housing market. For example, a region may be said to exhibit racist housing practices when its housing market is dominated by contract sellers who actively prey on home buyers of a particular racial designation out of malice or ill will. Because of their race, these home buyers are only offered predatory loans with deliberately unfair terms with the goal of swindling them as quickly as possible. On this second view, racism with respect to housing stems from the attitudes implicated in the conduct of particular individuals.

Each of these views has something going for it. The moral view has an easy time accounting for our condemnation of racism. If racism stems from objectionable attitudes, such as hatred and disrespect, then it cries out for moral censure. This appears to give this view a leg up on its rival. The moral significance of racism, on the political view, is not so straightforward. For one thing, it is not at all clear how to conceive of the (im)morality of institutions and their practices. For another, it is not clear how to properly account for the link between moral condemnation and moral responsibility in this context.

One response to these worries on behalf of the political view would be to deny the claim that racism is always immoral.<sup>5</sup> Instead, one might claim that racism is always morally significant.<sup>6</sup> When we identify racism, this is the beginning of the moral conversation, not the end. In the final analysis, we may not find anyone or anything that is deserving of moral condemnation. The thought here, expressed by some proponents of the political view, is that there may be people who innocently harbor racist beliefs or perpetuate racial injustice.<sup>7</sup>

The political view is not primarily concerned with individual morality, which

4 Garcia, "The Heart of Racism"; Blum, "Racism: What It Is and What It Isn't"; Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect."

5 Cf. Garcia, "The Heart of Racism"; Haslanger, "Oppressions"; Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect."

6 Shelby, "Is Racism in the 'Heart'?"

7 See discussion of the "benevolent" racist in Mills, "'Heart' Attack," and Shelby, "Is Racism in the 'Heart'?"

seems to be part of its attraction. This account of racism focuses squarely on the large-scale and pressing issues of entrenched, institutionalized racial bias and harm. In this way, it appears to place the scope and depth of the problem squarely in its analytical crosshairs. Racism touches our lives in many ways. It results in material harm for some and privilege for others. It also influences our attitudes and relationships, with respect to people and institutions, in ways that too often go unnoticed. By focusing on the social structures that contribute to material inequality and interpersonal bias, the political view appears to focus our attention on ways to effect widespread and impactful change, after which changes in hearts and minds may follow. Tackling the basic institutions that structure a racist society seems the best way to make a real and lasting impact in the fight against racism. Thus, there appears to be a pragmatic reason to prefer this account. Moreover, we ignore the racist structure of our institutions not only at the peril of those whose lives are made worse or cut short as a result, but also at the peril of an accurate sense of the way things work.<sup>8</sup>

It would be a mistake to think that the moral view does not also have something insightful to say about institutional racism. Some may claim that racism is always and only a matter of individual attitudes. But this seems obviously mistaken, and disingenuous. The moral view may analyze racism in terms of individual attitudes, but it need not stop there. It is compatible with recognizing the role that racist attitudes have played in the origination, development, and maintenance of the institutions that structure society. Institutional racism, on this view, results when the racist attitudes of individuals infect the social fabric.<sup>9</sup> Educational institutions, for instance, may be said to become racist when the ill will of individual actors within them leads to the adoption and maintenance of policies with unjust racial disparities. Once these policies are in place, they infect the attitudes of those who pass through the racist educational system. Students learn a whitewashed historical narrative that reflects the beliefs of those who designed it—for example, beliefs about the inferiority of indigenous people and enslaved African people. Internalizing this narrative, many of these students come to harbor these very same beliefs. Then they pass them on to the next generation. The foundations of institutional racism, conceived of as stemming from individual attitudes, are thus self-reinforcing. And institutions can be racist even when none of the individuals who currently make them up harbor objectionable attitudes, so long as the infection has become sufficiently entrenched in the institution's policies and practices. Thus, the moral view can be seen to offer a more sophisticated analysis than initially meets the eye.

8 This is one of the insights behind Curry's "necessary knowledge thesis" ("Race").

9 Garcia, "The Heart of Racism."

The political view, too, comes in a cruder and a more sophisticated version. It has become a commonplace belief that explicit racism is on the decline; people do not spout epithets and endorse overtly racist policies like they used to. There are those who think that people do not harbor racist attitudes anymore. But if the 2016 election and its aftermath taught us anything, it is that this is simply not true. There's nothing like a political victory to make one feel comfortable screaming in public what a short time ago was fit for the country club or chat room only. This is not anathema to the analytical framework of the political view. Those who analyze racism in terms of institutional oppression can make sense of "real racists" in terms of participation in and habituation to a racist society, undergirded by racist institutions. All of us, to some degree or another, come to hold racist attitudes—explicit, implicit, or both—because of the way we are shaped by our social context. It is precisely because of the racist institutions that shape our collective modes of thought that we come, as individuals, to harbor the very attitudes some have claimed are only features of the past.

As should be clear by now, the sophisticated versions of the moral and political views largely agree when it comes to the scope of racism. They differ, mainly, in terms of explanatory priority. This has consequences for how they envision effective change. According to the moral view, institutional racism is real, but it is ultimately explained by appeal to individuals' attitudes. Systemic change requires that we change hearts and minds. The political view, by contrast, holds that the racist structure of social institutions ultimately explains the racist beliefs and intentions of individuals. And eradicating or mitigating racism, on this view, is a matter of restructuring the scaffolding on which society is built. Only by changing racist policies and practices will we change the hearts and minds of individual racists.

Each of these views has its attractions. But they cannot both be correct. Thus, it may seem as if a firm grasp of what racism is and how to combat it requires choosing between them. But that is not the case. Careful consideration of an example drawn from the 2016 election and transition, as well as examination of the impression they give about the relationship between race and racism, suggests that neither view is satisfactory.

## 2. THE PRAGMATIC AIM AND THE CASE OF JEFF SESSIONS

Though they offer distinct analyses of racism, the political view and the moral view are both closely connected to what we can call the *pragmatic aim*: the aim of eliminating, or at least mitigating, racism. This aim is apparently furthered by the political view's commitment to focusing on institutional and social struc-

tures, the elimination of which would effect widespread and materially beneficial changes in the lives of those who suffer most from racial oppression. As suggested above, this seems to be one major attraction of the political view. But the pragmatic aim is related also to the moral view in that it is justified by that view's commitment to the necessary immorality of racism.<sup>10</sup> To claim that racism is immoral is to claim that there are reasons to combat it. Thus, it seems fair to ask how the two familiar views of racism fare with respect to furthering the pragmatic aim. Do these views offer proper guidance to those who aim to combat racism?<sup>11</sup>

In short: no. And the battle over Senator Jeff Sessions's nomination and confirmation for the post of attorney general in the Trump administration can help us see why.

Many objected to Sessions's nomination on the grounds that he is racist and that the Department of Justice would, under his leadership, fail to combat, and likely exacerbate, the racism endemic to the American criminal justice system. But some opposed to his nomination argued that Sessions's own attitudes were beside the point; opposition to his nomination should focus on his record.<sup>12</sup> This would seem to comport well with the political view's focus on institutions. The call to focus on a public official's record is a call to focus on the institutional policies enacted during his tenure and, in this case, their consequences vis-à-vis racial justice. At the same time, however, it would appear to undermine the pragmatic aim of reforming racist institutions. Institutional change comes about through the actions of individuals, who are themselves moved by their attitudes.<sup>13</sup> Attending to what is in the heart and mind of the individual in charge is not a distraction from, but rather a key element of, any plan to effect institutional change.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the political view undermines efforts to combat structural injustice if it ignores the personal attitudes of certain key actors in the institutional structure. If the goal is to mitigate or eliminate racism in the criminal justice system, Sessions's attitudes are relevant to his qualifications for attorney general.

It may be objected that the political view does not really ignore individuals'

10 Garcia, "The Heart of Racism"; Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect." This commitment is not confined to proponents of the moral view; see Haslanger, "Oppressions: Racial and Other."

11 It bears repeating that, as mentioned in note 1, above, those who take racism to be a permanent feature of society may consistently aim to combat it.

12 Bouie, "Jeff Sessions Fights for Racist Outcomes. Who Cares What's in His Heart?"

13 The conceptual claims about institutions in the text, both here and *passim*, have been influenced by Searle's account of institutional facts (*The Construction of Social Reality*).

14 See Madva, "A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism," for a convincing argument for this claim, in the context of combating discrimination, based on empirical evidence from the social sciences.

attitudes. Rather, it calls our attention to the fact that institutions can be racist even if the individuals who run them do not harbor racial biases or other problematic attitudes.<sup>15</sup> It is true that the political view calls our attention to this fact and is correct to do so.<sup>16</sup> But this does not adequately address the complaint that *changing* institutional policy requires more attention to individual attitudes than the political view appears to give. The existence of a racist institution may not depend on the attitudes of the individuals involved in its present-day operations, but combating institutional racism does. It is exceedingly unlikely, if not impossible, for a racist institution to adopt and implement non-racist policies in the absence of leadership that is both attuned to the problem and motivated to do something about it.

Consider now the moral view. Does it fare any better in accounting for the Sessions controversy? It seems not. To begin with, the difficulties inherent in trying to determine the attitudes that reside in a person's heart may preclude coming to any firm conclusion about whether or not Sessions is racist. This difficulty was reflected in the confirmation process and its coverage by the press. But even if we were to set that aside, the moral view, too, faces the problem of undermining the pragmatic aim of combating racism. The trouble here is different from the one facing the political view. While the moral view calls for attending to the attitudes of individuals, it focuses too narrowly on those that constitute ill will, possibly manifested by indifference.<sup>17</sup> The worry about Sessions was not just that he might be actively opposed or indifferent to the interests of African Americans (among other groups), but also that his leadership would fail to bring about (and even forestall) changes in the criminal justice system necessary to combat the institutional racism already present.

Given the worry that Sessions's tenure in charge of the Department of Justice would perpetuate the racism already endemic to the criminal justice system, there is good reason to focus more widely than just on attitudes that constitute ill will or indifference. It takes more than lack of active antipathy toward or indifference to the plight of the oppressed to motivate effective change at the institu-

15 I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for this journal for raising the concerns addressed here in comments on an earlier version of this article.

16 It is also true, as noted above, that the sophisticated moral view also allows that racist institutions may be run by individuals with no objectionable attitudes. It insists, however, that such institutions must have been infected by racist attitudes at some earlier time.

17 Garcia, "The Heart of Racism." For insightful discussion of the expressive significance of "emotional indifference" in the context of moral responsibility, see Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes," esp. 242–46. Smith's Wybrow case may not be a perfect fit for the present discussion, but her comments are suggestive of the claim that one may exhibit objectionable attitudes toward others simply by exhibiting indifference toward their interests.



tional level. It takes positive concern for effecting this change. Even supposing that we could somehow determine that Sessions did not harbor racial ill will, the pragmatic aim of combating racism calls for more in this context. Even on the moral view, many of the racial disparities in the criminal justice system count as racist—the institution has a long history of infection by the racist attitudes of individuals implicated in the setting and carrying out of policy.<sup>18</sup> Eliminating or at least mitigating this requires more than putting in charge someone without racial ill will; it requires putting in charge someone with attitudes that will motivate the necessary reforms. The moral view recommends looking into Sessions's heart, but not deep enough.<sup>19</sup>

At this point it may be objected that proper guidance in combating racism is not an appropriate criterion of adequacy for these analyses of what racism is; neither the political view nor the moral view need have this as a goal.<sup>20</sup> There is something to this objection. An analysis of racism need not be committed to combating it. Indeed, it may turn out that the correct analysis reveals that racism is ineradicable and that we cannot do anything to mitigate its effects. Nevertheless, the preceding considerations should be enough to motivate, at the very least, a hard look at the moral and political views by those who share the aim of combating racism.

### 3. RACE AND RACISM

The lesson from consideration of Sessions's nomination is that the analyses of racism offered by the political view and the moral view undermine the pragmatic aim because they do not take proper account of individuals' attitudes in the context of institutional racism. The political view does not pay proper attention to the attitudes of individuals; the moral view does not pay attention to the proper range of attitudes. Neither of these analyses provides an adequate account of how to combat institutional racism in this particular case. Especially in the context of the current political climate, marked by a reinvigorated commitment to the pragmatic aim, this gives us good reason to look for an alternative under-

18 For ease of exposition, we can refer to the various elements comprising the American criminal justice system as a single institution, and we can refer to the US attorney general, in his role as head of the Department of Justice, as the leader of this institution.

19 In fact, it is not enough that we consider attitudes of good and ill will. Effective institutional change requires not just motivation, but also know-how. As the point was put above, in connection with the political view, institutional leadership will be more likely to change institutional course when it is both *attuned* to the problem and *motivated* to do something about it. (I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.)

20 I owe this objection to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.



standing of racism. But that is not the only reason to abandon the two familiar views. They also fail to adequately highlight the historical relationship between race and racism.

The moral view analyzes racism in terms of attitudes that already appeal to race—for example, beliefs *about* or hatred *of* African Americans. The political view analyzes racism in terms of institutional oppression of a particular group of people *on the basis of* their racial designation. Whether or not they require it, the suggestion, in both cases, seems to be that we do not have racism until we have appeals to race. This gets it backward.<sup>21</sup> When we find racism, throughout time and across the globe, what we find is oppression that becomes racialized when the bodies of its victims are cited as justification. We see race invoked for the purpose of justifying domination of certain human beings by others.

This can be seen in historical discussions of the development of racism in the West.<sup>22</sup> The broad-strokes historical narrative is as follows. One result of Europeans' increased mercantile travel in the late Medieval and early Renaissance eras was greater awareness of different cultures and skin tones. They came into contact with societies and body types they had not known existed or had little previous contact with. A second consequence was, of course, the colonization, enslavement, or eradication of these people and their lands. Through increased exploration, the European elite not only acquired new knowledge of what the world was like, but also new means of exploiting people for their own material gain. This changed internal class relations in European society. It became more economically advantageous to exploit foreigners rather than the serfs of one's own country. And this exploitation came to be justified in racial terms. These people did not have rights to land, labor, or bodily integrity *because they were "black" (or "brown" or "red" or "yellow")*.

This historical narrative stands in opposition to the suggestion that we do not have racism until we have appeals to race. The analyses of racism offered by the moral and political views may be taken to suggest that the initial harmful treatment of Africans or indigenous Americans at the hands of European colonizers did not count as racism. It only came to be racist once these people were oppressed on the grounds of their perceived racial designations. The moral view gives the impression that racism resulted when the individuals engaged in the harmful treatment internalized the relevant racial designations and acquired attitudes of ill will that reflected them. The political view gives the impression that racism did not result until institutions reflected these racial designations in their

21 As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it: "race is the child of racism, not the father" (*Between the World and Me*, 7).

22 Mills, *The Racial Contract*; West, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism."

oppressive policies. This suggests that there was a moment when the oppression of these groups of people was profoundly transformed. It suggests that with the advent of race as a justifying factor, something new came on the scene. Harmful treatment of conquered peoples became exploitation and extermination of subhuman groups. But it seems more accurate to say that the availability of the notion of race allowed for a new way of justifying more of the same. The people being exterminated and enslaved were already regarded as subhuman, but there was not yet a need to recognize that this was the case, let alone offer a justification for it. That need came, among other things, from the readily apparent conflict between such treatment and the Enlightenment ideals of equality and freedom.

#### 4. A THIRD VIEW

We have good reason to look for a view that highlights the historical interplay between the concept of race and the attitudes, structures, and conduct that we recognize as racist. Let us begin with a closer look at a historical account of a clearly racist system of practices that involved both individual racist conduct and racist institutional policies: slavery in America. As Barbara J. Fields details, the driving forces behind the enslavement of Africans in America were economic.<sup>23</sup> Africans were not the first people exploited for their labor in the American colonies—poor English and Irish serfs were brought over as cheap labor from the beginning of the American colonial program. But African captives quickly became the most profitable source of labor. This was made easier because they were taken from their geographic, social, and political contexts and transported to a foreign one.

In line with the historical narrative outlined in the previous section, the origins of the institution of chattel slavery in the American colonies had little if anything to do with race, and everything to do with the history of people, markets, and trade. The rationale of race may have been required for the institution of chattel slavery, where enslavement was a heritable condition, to come to fruition. But the factors that drove development of this institution were economic and political. It is more profitable to claim the offspring of one's property also as property, and it is easier to perpetually enslave a people who are not already a part of the development of the society and its defining notions. Part of the reason race was needed to justify slavery in America was that this budding country was founded on the notion of liberty and equality for all. This notion grew out of Enlightenment thinking, following long political struggles in Europe between

23 Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America."

the landed elite and the exploited serfs. Because enslaved Africans did not take part in these struggles, it was easier to leave them out of consideration when putting these ideals into practice.

When it came time to square the reality of everyday life in the American colonies with the aspirations of the revolutionary rhetoric espoused by the elites on this side of the Atlantic, something had to give. Those in power in the colonies needed a justification for treating one group of people in a manner that their professed principles deemed immoral. Their response was to exempt people of African descent from moral and political consideration—to dehumanize them. They appealed to race. The designation of the enslaved as “black” allowed the “white” people in power to distinguish between human beings on the basis of bodily appearance for the purposes of economic exploitation. Along with this came a moral and political hierarchy that purported to justify the institutionalized practice of chattel slavery. Thus was white supremacy born in the American colonies.

This is not to say that white supremacy has its exclusive origins in America. Other European colonial adventures also involved perceived and institutionalized racial hierarchies. And it is not to insist that the notion of English superiority over Africans was absent prior to the development of the institution of African slavery in the American colonies.<sup>24</sup> Nor is it to downplay the impact of white supremacy on the indigenous population in America, as well as in other colonized regions of the globe. But it is to claim that these various instances of white supremacy share an origin story. They featured the human drive to dominate coupled with a developing social hierarchy under the influence of Enlightenment notions of equal standing in the moral and political spheres. This combination was unstable. The claimed equal standing for all people threatened the developing economic, political, and moral hierarchy. The system and its inequities stood in need of justification. And that justification came to rest on readily apparent differences in what people looked like. It appealed to race.

This origin story supports a view of racism that differs from both the moral view and the political view in two key ways. First, the racialization of oppression—the birth of racism—derived neither primarily from individuals’ attitudes nor from social institutions. It came from both at once. The institution of slavery in America predated the racialized justifications of it that are now so familiar, and the same is true of antipathy toward enslaved people. Subjugated people, no matter their skin tone or continental origin, were believed to be infe-

24 See Vaughn, “The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” for an overview of the debate among historians regarding the question of which came first, racism or African slavery, in the colony of Virginia.

rior. Early American colonists worked English indentured servants to death and traded them as property. Even free English colonists who did not command servants or own slaves looked down upon those who lacked independence. Racism bloomed in America when these attitudes and practices came to be justified by appeal to what people looked like. The institution of slavery became racialized, not just in operation, but also rationalization. Second, just as a bloom is the most visible form of a flower that grows from seed to bud, attitudes and practices justified in racialized terms announce to the world the racism that has been present for some time. The notion of race does not as much change these practices, as it does clarify what they have been all along. Racism comes to full fruition when existing oppressive practices are reinterpreted in racialized terms in the service of justifying the exploits of those in power. This is a moment not of transformation but of revelation.

Two elements remain constant, both before and after the invocation of race: (1) the drive to dominate and (2) the dominion of the dominant. These are the very features that serve as key ingredients in the recipe for white supremacy suggested above. Colonial elites and their European counterparts responded to the perceived need to justify the institution of African slavery in the Americas by invoking a distinction between people. The designation of one as “black”—that is, not “white”—was made available as a means of justifying oppressive practices and attitudes at the heart of colonial American society. The belief that certain people were inferior had its origins in the observation that they were unfree. But when it came to be the belief that this was so *because they were “black”* it served to justify their subjugation at the hands of those who were superior—now, *because they were “white.”* The subjugation came first and the racialized justification second, but, in contrast to the impression given by the familiar moral and political views, it was racist long before it was readily recognizable as such.

This historical narrative suggests that we have good reason to prefer a view of racism that is (1) essentially historical and (2) pluralistic—that is, the key elements in the analysis of racism are both irreducible. Call it the *genealogical view*.

The genealogical view of racism denies an analytical approach that seeks to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be racist.<sup>25</sup> Instead, it aims to provide an account of what racism *is* by attending to what its *causes* were.

25 While I believe that this is the approach of those views I have labeled moral and political, an anonymous reviewer for this journal has helpfully drawn my attention to the fact that there are other ways of understanding what some instances of these views are trying to do. As opposed to articulating necessary and sufficient conditions on something being racist, they may, rather, be aiming to identify key or distinctive features of racism. In that case, it is my contention that the genealogical view has the advantage of highlighting the historical dimensions of racism and placing them at the center of its analysis. Doing so allows us also

Racism, on this view, is properly understood in terms of individual attitudes, social institutions, and conceptual ingenuity that were interwoven in various ways, at various times and places. The key claim of the genealogical view is that racist attitudes and racist social structures developed in tandem from attitudes and structures marked by the drive to dominate and the dominion of the dominant, and the racialized justifications merely announced what was already present. Pre-racial oppressive attitudes and institutions evolved into racialized ones by taking aim at victims conceptualized in terms of race. The roles of oppressor and oppressed were thus reinterpreted in racial terms. “White” people—which is to say, those in power—justified their oppression of “black” people on racial grounds. And these grounds were invented, or co-opted, to do just that.<sup>26</sup> But racialized justifications did not so much transform what they were applied to as much as they clarified it. The view is historical in that it calls our attention to the development of racism over the course of actual human history; it is essentially historical in that it claims that this historical development is inseparable from a proper understanding of the concept. It would be an obfuscation to claim that racism can be understood apart from grasping the way it developed over time.

The genealogical view further differs from the moral and political views in claiming that the essential analysans of those more familiar views are both required for an adequate understanding of what racism is. Whereas the moral view claims that the analytical buck stops, ultimately, with individual attitudes and the political view claims that it stops with basic social institutions, the genealogical view claims that neither of these elements is analytically primary to the other. Indeed, it claims that they are analytically inseparable.<sup>27</sup>

---

to better appreciate the psychological mechanisms implicated in the development of racist attitudes and institutions.

26 One view has it that the concept of race was invented as a justification for racist practices. Bernard Boxill (“Introduction”) argues, against this, that the concept of race was originally developed by Europeans in order to explain the differences in appearance and culture they discovered through increased global travel. Later on, he contends, this concept corrupted Europeans’ natural sympathy and gave rise to the racist practices that came to mark the colonial era. The view laid out in the text need not take a stand on the origins of the concept of race. It may have been invented by Europeans to justify their exploitation of non-European people, or it may have originally been invented to explain the differences between people and then coopted as a rationale for oppression. Either way, the account in the text stands: the concept of race was used as a justification for oppressive attitudes and practices in the face of Enlightenment ideals of equality and freedom.

27 There are some notable affinities between the genealogical view offered here and extant accounts that fall out of the philosophical mainstream (see note 2, above). It is worth briefly noting how the view offered here differs from these other views. West offers a genealogical account of racism (“A Genealogy of Modern Racism”), and both West’s account and that

According to the genealogical view, pre-racial oppressive social institutions, in part, explain the development of racialized attitudes, such as hatred of “black” people and beliefs about their inferiority. These attitudes were cultivated in order to justify various oppressive institutional practices, such as African slavery in the American colonies. And these same institutions, now justified in racial terms, served to inculcate racist attitudes through the perpetuation and support of ideologies. At the same time, pre-racialized attitudes toward the enslaved explained the development and maintenance of the oppressive institutions in need of justification. Slavery in the North American colonies was initially justified by outright antipathy toward the enslaved and the belief that, no matter their appearance or continental origin, they were inferior. All of this predated the development of justifications in terms of race and their internalization. But once racialized attitudes came on the scene, they explained the further development and maintenance of the racist institutions they were meant to justify. Even after the abolition of slavery, African Americans were oppressed by means of Jim Crow, followed by the “colorblind” racial injustices that characterize con-

---

offered by McWhorter (*Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy*) have Foucaultian elements shared by the genealogical view offered here—for example, all three views allow that ideologies have the power to shape individuals and institutions and stress the importance of history. The genealogical view offered here departs from these others in at least this way: it stresses the importance of individuals’ attitudes both with respect to their genetic contribution to the relevant oppressive institutional structures and with respect to their role in maintaining or evolving these structures. There is also an affinity between the genealogical view offered here and prominent accounts in the tradition of critical race theory. For example, the legal realism that inspires Bell’s racial realism stresses the importance of personal values to a proper understanding of legal decisions (“Racial Realism”). Thus, like the genealogical view offered here, racial realism is attuned to the complex interplay between personal attitudes and institutional structures. And there is shared interest in tracing the historical development and maintenance of racist oppression, seeking to account for the interplay between attitudes and structures over time. Finally, the genealogical view offered here shares some of the central tenets of critical race theory as laid out by Curry, such as a commitment to the social construction of the concept of race and its deployment to subordinate particular groups of people (“Will the Real CRT Please Stand Up?” 4–5). But the genealogical view offered in the text departs from views in the tradition of critical race theory in at least two key respects. First, it identifies a particular element of human psychology—the drive to dominate—as playing a central role in the development and maintenance of racism. Second, it is compatible with, but not committed to, claims about the permanence of racism. According to the genealogical view offered here, the question of racism’s permanence will turn, crucially, on the questions of whether the drive to dominate is a permanent feature of human psychology and whether race is a permanent object for its expression. Thus, the view offered here places a novel feature of our psychology at center stage in the discussion of racism’s past and future.

temporary America, especially in the criminal justice system.<sup>28</sup> The evolution of institutional racial oppression in America has been propelled forward, at least in part, by the racist attitudes of individuals. But the development of these attitudes is not properly explained without appeal to the institutional contexts that gave rise to them. Thus, the genealogical view weaves a historical narrative, to which both attitudes and institutions are essential. At the heart of this narrative are the psychological element of the drive to dominate and the social fact of the dominion of the dominant.

### 5. OBJECTIONS

Let us now consider two objections to the genealogical view, both of which amount to the charge that it does not offer a proper analysis of racism.<sup>29</sup> The first objection is that the genealogical view does not provide the proper tools to identify instances of racism because it does not offer a necessary condition on something's being racist. Racist attitudes and institutions might arise in some other ways than they actually have; even if history had been different, racism might still exist. The second objection is that the genealogical view does not appear to offer clear answers to questions we want answered by an analysis of a concept like racism. For instance, it does not tell us exactly when an attitude or institution comes to be racist.

These objections do not appear to apply to the moral or political views. The moral view suggests that a necessary condition on racism, whether personal or institutional, is the presence of attitudes of ill will toward people on account of their racial designation. And it tells us that personal or institutional conduct becomes racist at the point when these attitudes infect it. The political view suggests that a necessary condition on racism is the presence of institutional structures that enshrine and perpetuate unjust social relations with disparate racial impact. And it tells us that conduct or policies become racist when appropriately influenced by institutions that target groups or individuals for harmful treatment on the basis of their racial designations. The above objections suggest criteria of adequacy for a satisfactory account of racism, and the two familiar views appear to pass with flying colors.

How should the proponent of the genealogical view reply? One strategy would be to articulate ways in which the view, despite appearances, really does satisfy the suggested criteria for adequacy. But the best response is to insist that

<sup>28</sup> Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

<sup>29</sup> I owe these to correspondence with Jorge L. A. Garcia on a different version of some of these ideas.



these objections address the wrong questions. The request for a necessary condition on the existence of racism rests on counterfactual aspirations. It asks: if things had gone differently, would such and such still count as racist? The essential historicity of the genealogical view is antithetical to this approach. Rather than ask what would be the case if things had been thus and so, the genealogical view focuses on the question: how did things come to be as they are? There is value in unearthing the actual unfolding of history and analyzing racism as we find it.

One might think that this is to miss the point. The counterfactual aspirations behind the request for a necessary condition need not supplant historical inquiry. They may rather supplement it in service of the pragmatic aim of mitigating and eradicating racism. If we have a clear means of identifying racism, however it might arise, then we will be in a better position to nip it in the bud as novel forms creep into existence.

This brings us to the second objection. It would seem that the pragmatic aim requires being able to identify when a given attitude, conduct, policy, or institution comes to be racist. But that is not so. The genealogical view has help to give in identifying, and perhaps even preventing, new and novel instances of racism, even though it eschews a precise answer to the question when a given individual or institution comes to be racist. For one thing, the view highlights the central role of the drive to dominate in the development of racist people and institutions. Where we find this drive operating in a context in which it either targets or is likely to target individuals or groups on the basis of a racial designation, we have reason to suspect racism is in the offing. Moreover, the view highlights the dominion of the dominant as also playing an important role. Thus, increasingly entrenched dominance of one racial group over another, whether interpersonal or institutional, is a red flag. And the historical focus of the genealogical view provides us with blueprints for the rise of new forms of racism based on past patterns. It prompts us to learn history's lessons.

## 6. MAKING SENSE OF 2016

Let us now to return to the case of Sessions's nomination to the post of attorney general. Some of the genealogical view's virtues will become clearer through investigation of how it fares better than the two familiar views in making sense of this case.

Recall the lessons learned from considering the moral and political views in relation to the Sessions case. In light of the pragmatic aim, the moral view appeared to focus too narrowly on attitudes constitutive of ill will. When it

comes to examining the attitudes of a nominee to head up an institution with racially disparate harmful effects, it will not do to make sure he does not harbor ill will toward members of disadvantaged racial groups. Change in the policies and procedures of the institution—here, the American criminal justice system—requires attitudes that spur active pursuit of positive change in the treatment of disadvantaged groups. The political view appeared to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on matters at the level of institutional policy and public record. Effective change in these areas, however, requires action by individuals, especially those in charge of relevant policy decisions. An institution already on course to make racially disparate negative impacts will not steer a different course if its captain is not motivated and prepared to change tack.

Now consider how the genealogical view fares in its treatment of the Sessions case. To begin with, it is not subject to either of the above difficulties. Unlike the political view, the genealogical view does not privilege institutional structures in its analysis of racism. Thus, it does not call our attention to these structures at the expense of investigating also the attitudes of individuals, especially those in positions of power and capable of steering the institution's course. Indeed, the genealogical view would justify special concern about the attitudes of these individuals, as they would be the ones in positions of dominance.

Unlike the moral view, the genealogical view does not focus narrowly on attitudes constitutive of ill will. The key psychological ingredient in the genealogical view is the drive to dominate, and myriad attitudes may serve to refocus this drive in order to promote what amounts to racist conduct or policy.<sup>30</sup> Yet this drive and (at least some of) these attitudes are not themselves constitutive of ill will. The desire for profit is an instructive example. This desire is not in itself constitutive of ill will, but it can be a significant part of the explanation of why a given individual or institution comes to oppress people on the basis of their racial designation. We saw this in the above historical narrative of African slavery in the colonies. And it has been implicated in the development of the "prison-industrial-complex" in the context of the US criminal justice system in its present form.<sup>31</sup> The basic idea, in both cases, is that the drive to dominate comes to focus on a particular racial category because this is profitable. The resulting institutional structures are then reinterpreted in order to justify these practices in racialized terms. Just as slavery before it, criminality has come to be justified by appeal to a person's skin color—"black" men are "superpredators."

The genealogical view not only avoids the apparent pitfalls of the moral and

30 The characterization in the text of the drive to dominate has been influenced by Katsafanas, "Nietzsche's Philosophical Psychology."

31 Davis, *Abolition Democracy*.

political views, it also makes better sense of the widespread alarm over Sessions's nomination to the post of attorney general. This largely had to do with history, both his personal history and the history of the institution he was being nominated to lead. Sessions's record as an elected and appointed official—US attorney for Alabama, Alabama attorney general, and US senator from Alabama—provided what many found to be ample grounds for concern about racism.<sup>32</sup> They were concerned about his personal attitudes regarding African Americans and about how he would steer federal policy with respect to their treatment by elements of the criminal justice system (e.g., oversight of local and state police). These concerns were especially pointed in the context of his nomination as US attorney general because this would put him in charge of an institution that has been well documented as a tool for racial oppression.<sup>33</sup> It would be difficult to sympathetically understand the extent of concern over his nomination without an adequate grasp of the history of this institution in America. Here the essential historicity of the genealogical view shows itself to be a real advantage. It can make sense of the level of concern about Sessions's nomination by highlighting not only the history of the American criminal justice system, but also the role Sessions has played in this history during his time in public office.

#### 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Trump's electoral victory has reinvigorated anti-racism movements on the left. But the familiar moral and political views do not provide adequate analyses of racism, and they fall short of providing proper guidance for the anti-racist project. We should look to a view that focuses on racism's lineage and avoids the monistic focus on a single, ultimate analytical factor—attitudes or institutions—in favor of a pluralistic focus that recognizes the historical interplay between them. This is what the genealogical view seeks to do. It is thus able to capture the messy reality of racism and put us in a position to more effectively combat it.<sup>34</sup>

*Sam Houston State University*  
*bmy@shsu.edu*

32 Serwer, "What Jeff Sessions's Role in Prosecuting the Klan Reveals about His Civil-Rights Record."

33 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

34 Several anonymous reviewers deserve thanks for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I thank Jorge L. A. Garcia for comments on an earlier version of some of these ideas and, especially, for encouraging me to pursue them further. My debt to his own work on racism is, I hope, evident. Special thanks are due to David Wright for many helpful conversations on these ideas throughout all stages of their development.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-blindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012.
- Bell, Derrick. "Racial Realism." *Connecticut Law Review* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 363–79.
- Blum, Lawrence. "Racism: What It Is and What It Isn't." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21, no. 3 (May 2002): 203–18.
- Bouie, Jamelle. "Jeff Sessions Fights for Racist Outcomes. Who Cares What's in His Heart?" *Slate*, January 11, 2017. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2017/01/jeff\\_sessions\\_fights\\_for\\_racist\\_outcomes\\_who\\_care\\_what\\_s\\_in\\_his\\_heart.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2017/01/jeff_sessions_fights_for_racist_outcomes_who_care_what_s_in_his_heart.html).
- Boxill, Bernard. "Introduction." In *Race and Racism*, edited by Bernard Boxill, 1–42. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015.
- Curry, Tommy J. "Race." In *Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, vol. 2, edited by Richard A. Couto, 550–59. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010.
- . "Will the Real CRT Please Stand Up? The Dangers of Philosophical Contributions to CRT." *The Crit* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1–47.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.
- Fields, Barbara J. "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America." *New Left Review* I, no. 181 (May–June 1990): 95–118.
- Garcia, Jorge L. A. "The Heart of Racism." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (March 1996): 5–46.
- Glasgow, Joshua. "Racism as Disrespect." *Ethics* 120, no. 1 (October 2009): 64–93.
- Haslanger, Sally. "Oppressions: Racial and Other." In *Racism in Mind*, edited by Michael P. Levine and Tamas Pataki, 97–123. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Katsafanas, Paul. "Nietzsche's Philosophical Psychology." In *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, edited by John Richardson and Ken Gemes, 727–55. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Madva, Alex. "A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimplified Psychology Misleads Social Policy." *Ergo* 3, no. 27 (2016): 701–28.
- McWhorter, Ladelle. *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Mills, Charles W. "'Heart' Attack: A Critique of Jorge Garcia's Volitional Conception of Racism." *Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 1 (March 2003): 29–62.

- . *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1995.
- Serwer, Adam. "What Jeff Sessions's Role in Prosecuting the Klan Reveals about His Civil-Rights Record." *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 9, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/sessions-klk-case/512600>.
- Shelby, Tommie. "Is Racism in the 'Heart'?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 411–20.
- . "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism." *Du Bois Review* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 57–74.
- Smith, Angela. "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life." *Ethics* 115, no. 2 (January 2005): 236–71.
- Vaughn, Alden T. "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 3 (July 1989): 311–54.
- West, Cornel. "A Genealogy of Modern Racism." In *Race Critical Theories*, edited by Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg, 90–112. Malden: Blackwell, 2002.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.