



**Universidad Sin Fronteras
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Class I: THE ROOTS OF RACISM

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Introduction (Ruben):

Welcome to the Freedom Summer 2013 Semester of the University Sin Fronteras. Today, we're going to look at the Roots of Racism. The next classes will be on July 3 (Beyond Civil Rights), July 10 (Decolonize the Globalized Economy), and July 16 (Building Southern Power). The USF began in 2010 when our first board wrote vision and mission statements. The first course was in 2012 in Atlanta. While we named the first semester Liberation Summer, we changed it to Freedom Summer when we joined others in the Southern Freedom Movement in an effort to regenerate the 1964 Freedom Summer struggle led by SNCC. We hope you will return for the Emancipation Autumn 2013 and Liberation Spring 2014 semesters. We currently have four campuses: Atlanta (the flagship, thanks to the support of Project South); San Juan, Puerto Rico; San Antonio; and Detroit. A few others may be joining us soon.

USF is a university without walls that operates with shared, collective knowledge. We follow the OLE methodology, meaning that all we do should expand or deepen ORGANIZATION, develop LIBERATORY LEADERSHIP, and practice EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION. We seek not only to learn but to develop analysis that will lead toward actions that are appropriate for the current historical context. Adjunct faculty frame the discussions, but we always have some

round-robin responses which allow each person to comment (or to pass). We prefer this to the more competitive system of raising hands so individuals can show what they know; we want to learn from everyone. It's not about right or wrong answers but about what knowledge we all bring to the table. We are seeking to awaken a certain inquiry rather than to answer all of the questions. We document this shared learning by designating one or more people in each class to take and edit notes. At the end of the class, each person writes for a page about their thoughts in reaction to a question. At the end of a semester, we use the combined lesson-plans, edited notes, and reflection papers to create a synthesis of what we learned.

The courses this summer will bring back the history of events of fifty years ago that are a focus of the Southern Freedom Movement—including the assassination of Medgar Evers, the March on Washington, and the bombing deaths of four girls in Birmingham—as we seek to create a living understanding of the Southern Freedom Movement for the twenty-first century. We also celebrated Juneteenth, in honor of the emancipation of enslaved people in 1865. This course will anchor those actions within southern and global history and develop new thoughts about who we are today, what has changed, and how all of this fits within the context of decolonization.

The Roots of Racism (Ruben):

After the Moors had occupied the Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) Peninsula for 500-700 years, King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile married to create a stronger military alliance. This enabled them to force the Moors in Granada to surrender in 1492. They then established a racist version of power, depicting the Moors as black and inferior and denying the African ancestry that would have been present in many Spanish and Portuguese families after so many centuries of interactions between Moors and Europeans.

For most of the 15th century (1400s), the Portuguese were the only Europeans with trading posts along the coast of Africa, from which they bought, exported, and sold enslaved Africans. With the support of Pope Nicholas V in the 1450s, the King of Portugal claimed that the Doctrine of Discovery granted him sovereignty over any land and people “discovered” (conquered) in his name. In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella signed an agreement with Christopher Columbus (from Italy) at Santa Fe (in Spain), which granted him a tenth of any riches he found while using the Doctrine of Discovery to conquer any land and people he could claim for them. Wherever the Conquistadores (conquerors) planted a cross, they believed they had the rights to declare all of the land, rivers, and people to be the possession of the King and to enslave any non-Christians. There was never any legitimate document/deed signed by the indigenous people to give Europeans the right to the land they took. In 1494, two years after Columbus had first claimed the Caribbean islands for the Spanish, Pope Alexander VI in the Treaty of Tordesillas divided the authority to colonize the world between Portugal and Spain.

These empires started the colonial experiment without any blueprint. For over 400 years, enslaved Africans were forcefully dispersed in the African Diaspora. In reaction to the circumstances they faced, they developed a plantation system that enabled them to exploit first gold and silver and then various market crops. The wealth from the Spanish Conquest led to the development of colonial capitalism and the financing of the art and scholarship of the Renaissance art and the Enlightenment.

The slave system established in different European colonies involved not only significant economic factors but also the development of a racist justification for denying slaves their freedom. The Spanish relied on the political concept of the God-given authority of a Supreme King. At one point, they defined “race” (actually a cultural creation rather than a biological category) as dividing people into thirty-nine different hierarchical categories

based on the supposed racial caste of their parents and the color of their skin. Even when some liberal rationalist thinkers in England and elsewhere opposed absolute monarchy, they used pseudo-scientific assertions to separate people into superior and inferior castes, developing anthropological categories of race. They claimed that because their bases for European/white supremacy were “scientific,” they had more legitimacy than those relying on religion.

Summation: Racism started early during the first phase of colonialism. The implementation of capitalism is a form of colonialism that still exists today. To the degree that race exists in capitalist societies, it is an invisible form of colonialism that still controls and limits some and privileges others.

U. S. Roots of Racism (Emery)

In planning this class, we realized how colonized our sense of history is. The British version of colonization which most of us learned left out the dominant, longer role of Spain. In this country, the main events were the attempted genocide of the native people and chattel slavery, both of which allowed the growth of the United States and its empire. Even though the legacy of slavery and the genocide is with us, we don't know all of the details of what actually transpired.

The key historical eras for the rooting of racism in the United States on the handout show how racism was an unseen cause of injustice from the first days of the Transatlantic slave trade to the recent neoliberal global recolonization. While the image of “roots” helps us consider ties to the past, it can leave out the ways in which tree roots can transform what grows. Whether in a biological plant or a system of racism and white supremacy, the rooting happens again and again at key historical moments. There is a general assumption in this country that people who were enslaved were just taken and told to do grunt work when really they were often selected for their skill sets. People wanted workers from Angola, for example, because they knew how to plant rice for the South Carolinians or how to use timbering skills in the western and southern expansions.

For each period, there was an interaction between the specific ways racism oppressed and exploited people and the ways in which those people resisted those attacks on their rights and freedom and sometimes made gains. Slaveowners needed to develop means of social control, even though they had no a clear plan; they tweaked the practices as they went along. The scientific experiments were complicated, as were the torture tools the white power structure developed. Reconstruction included some actions that were quite revolutionary, but in the end, the people who gained from them were betrayed. Jim Crow (legalized racial segregation) developed at the same time as the rise of corporate capitalism, creating new U. S. colonies, and then creating neo-colonialism. For the period of the expansion of neoliberal capitalism expansion (the 1970s on), youth culture has played a significant role in countering the establishment, with hip hop being only one example. Currently, we are experiencing neoliberal reorganization and global re-colonization. More than neo-colonialism, which was more consistent, it is actual colonialism building on lessons from all of the periods of colonialism and with many forms of state oppression and surveillance.

We don't have enough time to play the audio interviews with people who were once enslaved, which would have showed how colonized our memory can be of our own history and more so for that of other peoples. I realized all of a sudden the extent to which I have envisioned them as faceless. Hearing the tapes helped me think about them as individual people. All they had in common was having been enslaved and the dehumanization they had experienced. (To learn more about these issues, see *Remembering Slavery* and its included cassette tape, as well as *Africans in the Americas* and *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights*

Reader.)

Statements after discussions in pairs on our understanding of the roots of racism:

The use of labels such as “illegal” and “alien” keep some people down. In El Salvador, some use the term “indio” (“Indian”) to categorize someone as being inferior.

Haiti also has that sense of different groups being better than others.

The experiences in Africa may have been different from those in America. There were oppression and class privileges, particularly in South Africa. The children of an enslaved woman and her white “master” were distinguished by their lighter skin.

Africans have fought against slavery and considered it wrong, but we also practiced a form of slavery that benefited a few. People taken from their community suffered.

Race is embedded in our culture in so many ways.

It’s heartbreaking to connect the history of how colonialism uses differences between people to elevate some and hide the injustices, reinforcing and creating colorism, and recruiting patriarchy to support the false promises of colonialism.

Racism is like Darwinism on a mass scale, with everyone trying to elevate themselves above others by picking out pseudo-differences between you and others. Excluding a group of people can make those included feel powerful. Racism doesn’t stop with discrimination against blacks; there is also anti-redneck prejudice. What are the roots of revolution?

There have been centuries of people being told that they are less than or not human. They can turn off the switch but not the light. Where did all that power come from and how did it use concepts of God?

What holds it together? People have used markers of race to gain access to minerals and other valuable products. With thirty-nine castes, there would have been enough in-fighting to help the people at the top.

We questioned the combination of power and greed. Why wasn’t power enough?

What is the impact of the distinction between respecting someone’s power out of fear rather than respecting the person as a human being?

There were key moments with particular patterns of reactions, but there were always some people who were resisting the racism and some who were pushing it forward.

What was it about each moment, what combination of psychological and emotional forces that determined which way someone went? How did the knowledge of the colonized become coopted so the colonizers could claim it was their knowledge and ideas? We may need to remember that we sometimes trip over roots.

The realization that resistance has occurred throughout the history is intriguing.

Those at the top consciously promoted some of the racist ideas.

The push-back against white supremacy and racism has been something that has evolved in response to the movements to affect the people with power, including the pseudo-scientific assertions.

It’s interesting to think about racial supremacy and ideology predating colonialism and imperialism through the concept of monarchy and how the ideology of white supremacy became a cornerstone of global colonialism. Jim Crow was a big innovator in the knowledge of social control. Germans and South Africans learned from the South’s Jim Crow.

Now the American companies in Latin America mess up the land to make a profit and then send things to the United States, but there is also increased border security.

The U. S. spends so much money to keep people from Mexico out but not those from Canada; it’s a case of the right (European) vs. the wrong immigrants. Ferdinand and Isabella moved forward because of their desire for gold. Some turn specific groups

into an “other” to make money off of them. There have been cycles of oppression, with corporations exploiting everyone. New forms of slavery were created when the other forms are outlawed. Prisoners are victims of a new Jim Crow. There has always been a new form. It’s a cycle that keeps happening.

The economic roots are key to the xenophobia and racism. Why were Ferdinand and Isabella so greedy? Like the mob in New York wanting to control the laundry business. What drives people to want to dominate others? There are theories about scarcity leading to a division between an assumption that there are too many people needing to share and the globalist theory calling for everyone to share. Even some Buddhists fight others. One of the victims of racism is a syndrome of abuse that allows racism to fit in other situations. When Robinson Crusoe met an indigenous person, he immediately named him, showing his power over him. .

The cycles of racism include the victims pushing back in ways that lead to evolutionary changes, with racism being used to justify power grabs. It is happening today in different forms.

Racism began when some people were able to be more secure than others by gaining access to all of the resources. Slavery disconnected Africans from what made them comfortable and able to revolt; they became broken in spirit. When some slaves were freed, they stayed on the farms because that is what they knew. Some farm towns today are populated by a certain race as the results of colonialism. They still accept dependency and the old stereotypes.

I’ve never been with a group this diverse in all of the workshops I have led. We are doing what we need to do right now. Reading the Bible from a social justice angle shows the existence of slavery. Violence on TV is like that in the Old Testament, but without racism, the victims in the Old Testament weren’t dehumanized. They could go home and celebrate their own culture. Ferdinand and Isabella benefited from a society with unequal positions, a situation supported by their religion. Every time someone had a different idea, someone added another category and it seemed to make sense. Race has power and allows colonialism to thrive. We don’t learn the history of other people. I might know about the victimization here. An African woman visiting Louisiana saw Africa in the Lower Ninth Ward. The resistance is greater because I am in a room with people from other countries, all of whom have been victimized.

Ruben: This intersectionality reminds us that racism is over 500 years old. How can we dismantle racism?

Comparison of the United States and South Africa (Emery):

Decolonization is more than just the transfer of power from the colonizer to the colonized. On the opposite side of the handout, you can see some of the similarities and differences between decolonization in the liberation movements in the Jim Crow South and that in Apartheid South Africa. They unfolded over different times but with some overlap. The laws supporting Jim Crow segregation were reformed through new laws and court cases that did not involve any changes in the basic political system. There was a very different ending in South Africa, which experienced a major transformation, a radical change in the political party that took state power. They rewrote the old racist constitution, using more progressive ideas. That did not happen in the United States where the Constitution is presented as a sacred document that should never be changed. Both developed liberation struggles and included a wide background of class backgrounds and divisions over strategy. They knew what needed to end but not what should come next. Both were connected and sometimes dominated by universalists, anti-capitalists, internationalists, and other liberation

struggles around the world. But neither movement led to a true transfer of power, to economic liberation from capitalism, or to a significant paradigm shift.

Ruben:

There are certain bedrocks of racism that have to be dismantled. First is the incorrect idea that race is an unchangeable biological category that can be proven through science instead of something created in a bourgeois context. Second is the assumption that human interactions and the activities of white supremacy and racism are primarily behavioral issues, meaning educating the racists can lead to change through social engineering. Third is the assertion that it is the superstructure (education, health, etc.) rather than the structure of the state that supports or provokes racism. Another mistaken assumption is that if we change the structure, race will take care of itself. How do we debunk each of these, including organized religion's interpretations? If we decolonize, what would racial healing place look like? How many families go through heart-wrenching experiences because of patriarchy, domination, and similar forces? The historical trauma of children has occurred at each stage and place. What does all of that do to us as human beings? Racism is a disease that has kept us from being healed. We have to decolonize the interior as well as the exterior and then discuss how to heal.

Group responses:

Some people from places that were segregated until quite recently have a hard time changing their views. How do we expose the older generations to new experiences? They need the opportunities to think about this in different ways. My mom wouldn't come to something like this. Capitalism is a central problem that is inherently racist and classist.

The structures in place have separated us. I grew up in Iowa and went to a school with only one black family, so this is outside of my realm of understanding. I don't have the answers. People don't talk at all about race in the mainstream culture. I don't know how to cure rationally. Start by naming justice, what was wrong. What does justice mean today?

When you're looking at a process of reflection and dismantling, the process has to be tied to justice so injustice will not recur. Otherwise, it keeps sprouting up in different forms, like putting a new name on an old business. It will take a long time to get to the point where we'll really heal. The healing will have different meaning to different people. What does July 4 mean to European Americans, as opposed to Native Americans? The healing requires experiencing pain.

The collective process is important. Divide and conquer needs to end. We need to recognize our victories. Without massive global exploitation, the order we live in today wouldn't exist. The free land and stolen land are at the heart of the modern identity. We need to acknowledge that a crime was committed that requires accountability and restorative justice. It can't just be what are you going to do for me and you can't set the tone and act as if you are doing me a favor. The punishment needs to involve changes to basic structures. Some people oppose revolt and call for making nice because both sides fear what might happen. We need some kind of agreement between the captive and the captor. Look at the stakes back in the days of slavery when they could lose their lives if they resisted. It's too easy to buy into the oppressive order.

One issue is who's framing the narrative. Each generation in my family has its own stories. My mom's sense of social justice leads her to say you've got to move your head out of the lion's mouth before you start talking. My generation says the lion has

no teeth. And the younger generation goes even further. But we should still respect elders like one relative who believes it would be too painful to watch “The Help.” We also don’t see the extent of the pain and the mental illness in the young people. Power reorganizes to stay in power. How will they do that now? What will be the impact of the Supreme Court’s decisions removing protection for the right to vote and then recognizing some gay marriages? How do we deal with generational issues? Decolonization has to have several aspects with the generations working together rather than in serial order.

It can’t be that we can hand things off to the next group. What would justice look like and what would it cost? How can we threaten while making people feel safe? A bomb here would help them a lot. It comes down to thinking of every person as human.

What do I owe to create this justice space?

How do we flip and use different tools for justice? What are the roles for religion, the state, and the economy in this process? If colonialism is about competition, how do we structure resources to share? How do we preserve memory and culture?

Unifying against a common enemy brings people together. Europeans have used war to break up the internal divisions. The slave trade ended some of the earlier divisions in Europe. People stop being abusive to each other by turning the abuse onto someone else. The distribution of resources and power means that someone in power fears most being checked by someone with more power.

To start healing, people need to talk so they can realize what has been going on. They need to hear from people who have experienced racism. It needs to be demystified.

If you’re not aware of what they have been experiencing, you can’t change.

There’s an agreement between the captive and the captor that is made unconsciously in the moment. We need to bring that to light.

To see ourselves as social change agents, we have to think more as “we” than as “I.” Some people don’t act because they don’t realize what is going on. We need to focus on interdependency and develop a holistic approach with more than treatment and promotion.

There is a value in telling and uncovering stories. What stories should I teach my four-year-old son? How can we relate the truth without being oppressive?

Decolonizing needs to happen on the individual, personal level. My mother taught us what it means to be a black woman.

Since racism involves erasing the reality of many people, we may need to learn from the Truth Commissions in South Africa how to make visible everyone’s realities, pain, strengths, and wisdom.

One-page reflection: How do we dismantle racism, decolonize, and have healing for historical trauma?

This summation of the main points made at the class on June 2x, 2013 is selective, to some extent organized by topic rather than in the order in which they were stated, and often paraphrased. I encourage anyone who was present to suggest additions or corrections.

How do we dismantle racism, decolonize, and have healing for historical trauma?

The need to have multiple activities and groupings, with each individual and group contributing what seems most right and capable for them, but still some sense of common purpose and ability to be allied. Maybe regional, national, and global versions of thinking ourselves as part of a village without a sense of hierarchy. Create more and more non-competitive activities to move beyond that sense of hierarchy, but also develop ways to take the power from the corporations and the most powerful capitalists. [Add more later.]