



## Racialisation and Racism - Pre 20<sup>th</sup> Century

It is imperative to analyse British colonialism and Empire in order to understand racial attitudes and racism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Although there may be apparent 'visual' differences between so-called racial groups, such as in skin colour, there is a significant consensus that 'race' is not biological, but is a social construction. This is backed up by the finding that, genetically, there is greater biological difference *within* so-called racial groups than between them. By calling race a 'social construction' it means that there is nothing *essential* to 'race' – there is no objective criterion by which one can differentiate between different races. Thus, sociology comes to the fore in studying race as academics have turned attention towards examining the social processes that both construct the meaning of 'race', and reproduce this construction. In the United Kingdom, sociologists have given considerable importance to the study of colonialism in showing how 'race' and the racial category 'black' were constructed through British contact with the colonial 'other'. In other words, upon establishing trade connections and colonising countries (especially across Africa) from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the British came into contact with people they perceived as different to themselves; they used 'race' to distinguish themselves as 'white' against the colonial subjects as 'black'.

As will be seen through this course, however, racialisation – putting someone into a racial group – is never just about describing someone's colour. Racialisation also involves making assumptions about people on the basis of what their racial membership is. Sociologists such as Du Bois (in the US) and Robert Miles (in the UK) have thus highlighted how increasing attention needs to be paid toward the construction of racial groups, rather than taking such groups as objective 'givens' as many historical and political studies tend to do. Thus, when the British Empire racialised colonial subjects as 'black', they weren't just saying these people were of a different skin tone, but also made assumptions about them as a whole. These assumptions ranged from the stereotyping of Africans as savages, primitive, and uncivilized, towards the more religiously motivated belief that they suffered the biblical 'Curse of Ham'. The Curse of Ham refers to the curse put upon Ham's son in the book of Genesis, who is given the fate of being an eternal slave for his father's sin of immodesty. Sociological studies have shown that a common theme in the British Empire was the endorsing of the views that Africans were descendants of Ham, arguing that their darker skin



tone showed their tainted animal-like souls – this allowed them to justify the enslavement of Africans. This religiously powered view of 'blackness' as evil also led to common artistic depictions of the devil and demons as black people.

More can be read about the actions of British Empire, and their involvement in the slave trade here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/23/british-empire-crimes-ignore-atrocities>

Moving into the Victorian period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, there occurred a significant development in race and racism in Britain. With the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1807 (made official in 1838), along with members of the African elite sending their children to schools in Britain, there was a growing population of black people in the UK with high educational qualifications, working in professional occupations as doctors, lawyers, and clergymen. This created a situation whereby professional black people living in Britain would be accepted as 'respectable' citizens if they agreed to assimilate with the Victorian elite in terms of mannerisms, dress, and speech. This partial acceptance of black people can be seen in the cases of famous individuals like Dido Bell (Britain's 'first black aristocrat') and Samuel Coleridge Taylor (a famous classical music composer), who both achieved a degree of notoriety – although they still faced racism in their everyday lives. For a case study of this, you can read more about the life of Dido Bell here:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/07/06/dido-belle-britains-first-black-aristocrat/>

However, these gentler attitudes towards black people in Britain soon became more and more vicious. Thus, black intellectuals visiting the UK from the US, most famously Fredrick Douglass, commented that the UK's racism had become as bad as that seen in the US. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>, going into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there grew a fear toward the improving status of black people in British society, and multiple mechanisms were put into place such that white skin became a prerequisite to join the British middle and upper



classes. This reality has led to the sociological research on 'intersectionality' – appreciating the various aspects underlying someone's identity including race, class, and gender.

Sociology focuses on how these aspects of identity are not mutually exclusive but often feed into, and interact with one another. Particularly with race and class, what we can see in the Victorian period (and some sociologists say this still continues) is that there were attempts to separate the identity of 'middle/upper class' from black identity.

Underlying these Victorian anti-black attitudes was a continuation of colonial understanding (although slavery was abolished, Britain was still ruling colonies) of blackness and black people, which positioned them as lower and sub-human compared to whiteness. Children's Magazines repeatedly depicted African people as animal-like, theatre performers would wear black-faces and act stupid to reinforce the idea of Africans as unintelligent, and schools would teach that the Empire was a civilizing project for primitive others. Further the decline of economic profit from particular British colonies (across the West Indies) was blamed on the poor intelligence of black people rather than the reality that it was caused by extreme weather conditions and lack of British foresight.

### **Task**

1. How did Britain's involvement in colonialism shape understandings of 'race'?
2. Why did British schools teach Empire as a 'good' project? Do you think schools still do this, and why/why not?
3. Why are Empire and colonialism both important topics for the study of race and racism?