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Growing Up Racist

Review of “The Making of a Racist:

A Southerner Reflects on Family, History and the Slave Trade”

by Charles B. Dew

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The late Kenneth Clark, the eminent African-American social psychologist, once observed that the only White Americans he knew who felt almost as deeply about racism as Black Americans were White Southern liberals. This book, by Charles Dew, a prominent Williams College historian of the American south, is a case in point for Clark's claim.

My Santa Cruz colleague, Dominic Massaro, the book review editor, knew that this small volume would be of special significance to me. Indeed, Dew and I come from the same cohort of southern Whites who grew up in the segregated South of the 1930-1960 era. I can vouch for the pin-point accuracy of Dew's description of how racism permeated every corner of southern society of that period.

The book has two rather separate parts – each with its significance for psychology's study of racism. The opening chapters describe Dew's childhood immersion in racism growing up in St. Petersburg, Florida. Most of what he describes traces my childhood experiences closely. For instance, African-American servants introduced us both to how the Black world viewed their racist-restricted lives. The major difference between us was that I was raised in Richmond, Virginia in a home with Scottish immigrants who had a sharply jaundiced view of racial segregation. My immigrant mother and especially my immigrant grandmother who lived with us knew well how the English looked down and discriminated against Scots; and I believe that carried over to some identification with the plight of Black Southerners.

The psychological significance of this first part of Dew's volume is just how thoroughly racism establishes unyielding norms that saturate the culture and severely restrict the lives of White as well as Black Southerners. As research has repeatedly

shown, racist norms – shaped by slavery, a lost war, poverty, and segregation – are the basic explanation for the White South’s entrenched racism. Authoritarianism is one of the strongest correlates of outgroup prejudice at the individual level of analysis throughout the world. And it predicts anti-Black attitudes in the South as well. But overall the region’s Whites are not, as expected, more authoritarian than other White Americans (Pettigrew, 1958, 1959; Middleton, 1976).

Many egalitarian White Southerners go along with the racist norms not out of conviction but to avoid social ridicule and rejection. Dew remembers his egalitarian mother, I remember my egalitarian father – both of whom followed the South’s racist norms reluctantly. And we both recall the hostile reactions to our violation of the norms. I was routinely expelled from junior high school for objecting to racist remarks by teachers. Examples included implying African Americans were intellectually inferior to White Americans, and praising Hitler in the middle of World War II on the basis of “what he had done with the Jews. And Dew records his racist father’s stern reactions to his changed racial views once he had attended Williams College.

Authoritarianism is critical to understanding prejudice at the individual level of analysis, but it cannot adequately account for macro-level differences. Norms and other structural factors are required for a full understanding; and Dew provides a detailed account of just how such norms form racist thinking in a young boy growing up in the South of his time. His engagingly honest qualitative account of this process should be of special interest to developmental psychologists who specialize in this area.

The distinct second part of *The Making of a Racist* seeks to explain the origins of these tenacious norms. Here Dew reverts to the specialty for which he is deservedly

renowned in the history profession: the stark reality of human slavery in the pre-Civil War South. The author of the well-known volume, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge*, Dew displays his mastery of the gory subject in these final chapters. He does not spare the reader the unimaginable cruelty of slavery by concentrating on the slave market in my hometown – Richmond, Virginia. I was astonished to learn that the slave market was actually concentrated on the street where I grew up – Franklin Street. No one ever told me that. In fact, the subject of slavery to my memory was never raised in any class I ever took in Richmond’s public schools. And that is Dew’s point: denial of the past helps to sustain the racist norms he and I grew up with.

The brutality of slavery is documented by Dew’s review of letters between slave traders in Richmond and slave owners who were interested in selling or buying slaves. One after another, the letters coldly reveal the purely monetary interests of the writers. Routinely, families are broken up, the youngest of children sold apart from their parents, even the most loyal servants sold and sent to the deep South for “a good price.” Dew searches in vain for some expression – no matter how skimpy – of humanity, some sense that the owners and traders understood that they were dealing with human beings. The writers of these letters had clearly desensitized themselves from the results of their inhuman actions.

Many psychological processes are undoubtedly involved in this phenomenon. But it reminds me most of the present work in social psychology on *dehumanization*. Leyens and his colleagues (2000) experimentally demonstrated the phenomenon with the differential attribution of emotions to outgroups and ingroups. Racists view their ingroup as more “human” than outgroups. This European research distinguished “primary

emotions” (e.g., joy, guilt) from “secondary emotions” (e.g., hostility, jealousy). Primary emotions are instinctive responses. Thus, if threatened, we feel fear. Secondary emotions are experienced in response to other emotions. Primary emotions are shared with animals, but secondary emotions are thought to be uniquely “human.” This research shows how these particularly “human” emotions are less often ascribed to outgroups than to ingroups – precisely what those in the slave trade did.

Haslam (2006) notes two different types of dehumanization – both of which seem to be operating in Dew’s slave letters. He provides a systematic review of the recent proliferation of studies on dehumanization. He distinguishes between “animalistic” dehumanization that denies the rejected outgroup human attributes, and “mechanistic” dehumanization that simply views the outgroup as mere objects. Among racists, dehumanization becomes an everyday social phenomenon that is rooted in ordinary cognitive processes. And Dew shows that in his boyhood in Florida it was indeed “an everyday social phenomenon.”

Harris and Fiske (2006) go further to show differential neuroimaging responses to extreme outgroups. Using the stereotype content model (Fiske, Glick, & Xu, 2002), they show that the low-competence, low-warmth type is especially disparaged. And most slaves were viewed as fitting into this lowly caricature. The disgust elicited by this type of outgroup activates the left *insula* (related to disgust) as well as the *amygdala* (related to fear). It is this outgroup category that is most likely to endure dehumanization.

Some may view the dehumanization process as too extreme an indictment of the very prejudiced. But *The Making of a Racist* makes a strong historical case that such a

process is required to understand the responses to slavery prior to the Civil War and the continued unrelenting discrimination against Black Americans after the Civil War.

A final lesson for psychology from this modest book strikes a more positive note – namely, the “unmaking” of a racist. Just how did Dew overcome his early racist learning? He dates it to his undergraduate days at Williams College and the strong influence of a history professor. We professors would like to flatter ourselves on our positive influence on our students; but here is a true example of the process. Professor Robert Scott was not a Southerner, but he knew the South well and had a profound effect on the young Dew. But it seems certain that Dew’s early experience with his egalitarian mother and his learning experiences with the Black housekeeper, Illinois, laid the groundwork for his choosing a liberal northern college and his response to his influential professor.

In short, *The Making of a Racist* is not only a good read but carries several important implications for psychology and its study of prejudice and racism.

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