Relics of a racist era

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When I entered Yale in September 1962, I was the only student from the Mississippi Delta in my class. That year also marked James Meredith's integration at the University of Mississippi. The accompanying violence and media attention directed an endless series of questions toward me. In 1966, the year of my graduation, few noticed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s frustrating attempt to bring the civil rights movement north to Chicago. Within four years, the complexity of de facto segregation had replaced the moral clarity of the struggle to end legal segregation.

Little did I know that a recent visit to Yale would produce weighty observations. Sometimes you have to physically be at a place to see a connection. My studies under the mentorship of Robin Winks coalesced into a book which gave me a fresh pair of eyes. While walking by Calhoun College and Timothy Dwight College, I realized that their namesakes yield devastating clues about our country's racial challenges.

Calhoun College has been a lightning rod for criticism because of the pro-slavery, secessionist position of John C. Calhoun. Timothy Dwight College, named for a former president of Yale, however, bears no such stigma.

Yet the anti-slavery Timothy Dwight's 1769 opinion of free blacks had crucial implications for the destiny of African-Americans after emancipation and up to the present. Historians downplay Northern racial animosity. But, these antebellum derogatory views confined emancipated slaves to the South, fostered a separate, unassimilated black community and relegated African-Americans to the lowest status in the economy.

It is important to ask not only what antebellum Americans thought about slavery; we must also ask what they thought about free black people. Then we will understand why today's major American cities with large black populations and no (or minimal) history of slavery, legal segregation or sharecropping have similar racial issues to those which did have slavery, legal segregation and sharecropping.

In a sermon delivered in 1810, Timothy Dwight was scathing in his description of free blacks:

"[T]hese people … are, generally, neither able, nor inclined to make their freedom a blessing to themselves. … [T]hey are turned out into the world, in circumstances fitted to make them nuisances to society. … The hatred of labour … becomes habit. … They have no economy; and waste, of course, much of what they earn. They have little knowledge either of morals or religion. They are left, therefore, as miserable victims of sloth, prodigality, poverty, ignorance and vice."

For Dwight, the only possible avenue for black advance was absolute dependence on white charity and white tutelage. Was this charitable paternalism similar to plantation, government or philanthropic paternalism? Should we question whether the effects of allegedly benign Northern slavery and harsh plantation slavery were comparable?

In 1811, when the free black population of Connecticut was under 2 percent, Dwight wrote:

"Their vices are of the kinds, usually intended by the phrase 'low vice.' Uneducated to principles of morality, or to habits of industry and economy, they labour only to acquire the means of expense, and expend, only to gratify gross and vulgar appetite. Accordingly, many of them are thieves, liars, profane, drunkards, Sabbath-breakers, quarrelsome, idle. … [T]heir ruling passion seems to be a desire of being fashionable. … The difference between them, and the whites, who are nearest to them in circumstance, is entire. The whites are generally satisfied with being decent, with being dressed in such clothes, and living in such a manner, as they can afford."

White Americans were consistent. In 1789, Benjamin Franklin wanted “a branch of our national police force” to supervise free blacks who should be trained for jobs that “require but little skill.” In a nod to white flight, citizens of New Haven in the 1790s warned that free black migration would depreciate property values by 20 to 50 percent. Harriet Beecher Stowe exiled the heroes and heroines of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” to Africa; further, when asked to contribute to a school for free blacks, she refused and condescendingly wrote, “Will they ever learn to walk?” Powerful anti-slavery politician William Henry Seward remarked in 1866, “The North has nothing to do with negroes. I have no more concern for them than I have for the Hottentots; they are God’s poor; they always have been and always will be so everywhere. …” The New York Times (February 1865) wanted cotton production resumed with “White ingenuity” and “black labor” while, “The negro race … would exist side by side with the white for centuries being constantly elevated by it, individual [African-Americans] … rising to an equality with the superior race.” The white psyche allowed room for a black elite — eerily similar to W.E.B. Du Bois’s “talented tenth.”

What were the future implications of antebellum Northern attitudes? Blacks of the Great Migration were employed in the grittiest and lowest jobs. Deindustrialization has had its severest impact on vulnerable African-Americans in the last few decades. Residential and school segregation and a large black underclass are indelible features of American society.

Timothy Dwight would not be surprised. Both Calhoun and Dwight are very much part of our tragic racial legacy.

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