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The Origin of Racism

How systemic racism protects wealth, preserves power, and benefits a small elite.



William Spivey Follow 9 min read · 21 hours ago

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A friend sent me a video titled "How Did Humans Invent Racism?" I found most of everything in it factual, though it credited America with having created racism, which I don't believe to be true. America has refined racism and put its own special twist on it, to the point where the entire economy depends on racism. This story will give America its proper due in its own section, but we did not invent racism.

Let's start with a definition of racism, which isn't an end unto itself but often a symptom or building block of something else. Here are a few things racism is:

- a belief that humanity can be divided into biological "races" with inherent traits, and
- a system of political, economic, and legal institutions that enforce inequality.
- a way to maintain a class system that benefits some at others' expense.

When analyzing racism, we should always examine:

- the cultural invention of biological race (no scientific basis),
- the role of institutional racism (e.g., apartheid, Jim Crow), and
- how racism has been used to justify segregation, exclusion, and violence.
- who profits from racism? There is always a financial endgame.

Racism doesn't have a single "start date," but it does have a clear historical arc. When scholars talk about "the beginning of racism," they're referring to when humans first started treating visible physical differences as a justification for hierarchy, exclusion, or domination. That development happened in layers, not all at once.

1. Ancient Roots (3000 BCE — 500 CE)

Racism did not begin with skin color. Early civilizations — Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Mesopotamian — built hierarchies based on:

- ethnicity and geography (“barbarian,” “foreigner”)
- lineage
- religion
- captivity status (enslaved vs. free)

These systems dehumanized outsiders, but they did not yet claim biological racial difference. They were forms of proto-racism: prejudice without the modern concept of “race.”

2. The Birth of Modern Racism (1400s–1600s)

This is the moment most historians identify as the true beginning of racism as we understand it today.

Why? European expansion.

When Portugal, Spain, England, and France began exploring Africa and the Americas, they needed ideological justification for:

- conquest
- enslavement
- resource extraction
- land seizure

To do this, they invented racial categories tied to physical traits — especially skin color.

Key developments

- 1450s–1500s: Early racialized justifications for African enslavement appear in Portuguese and Spanish writings.
- 1600s: English colonial laws begin defining Africans as a distinct, inheritable, enslaveable "race."
- Late 1600s: Virginia codifies slavery as a racial institution. This is the first fully racialized legal system in the Western world. Allow me to repeat myself: This is the first fully racialized legal system in the Western world.

This period marks the origin of race as a biological fiction used to justify domination.

The Thomas Jefferson Caste System. How He Ranked People by Race | by William Spivey | Oct, 2026 | Medium

3. Scientific Racism (1700s–1800s)

Enlightenment thinkers — Linnaeus, Blumenbach, Jefferson, Voltaire — classified humans into "races" and ranked them.

This era produced:

- white supremacy as a formal ideology
- racial pseudoscience
- the belief that race determines intelligence, morality, and capacity

This is where racism becomes systematic, global, and institutional.

4. Institutional Racism (1800s–1900s)

Racial hierarchy becomes embedded in:

- slavery
- colonial rule
- segregation
- apartheid
- immigration laws
- policing
- medical science

This is racism as a state system, not just a belief.

The American Twist

Racism in America did not emerge from ignorance or accident; it emerged from economics. Long before the republic had a name, the colonies had a business model. That model required a permanent labor force that could be exploited without limit, compensated without cost, and controlled without negotiation. Race was the technology that made that model possible. When European settlers arrived in the Americas, they encountered a problem familiar to every empire: how to extract maximum wealth from land they did not own and labor they did not want to perform.

Indigenous people resisted enslavement, fled, fought back, or died from disease. European indentured servants could only be bound for a term, and once free, they demanded land, wages, and political rights. The plantation economy needed a labor force that could be worked indefinitely, denied rights permanently, and replaced cheaply. African slavery solved that

economic problem, and racism provided the ideological justification. By defining Africans as a separate, inferior "race," colonial elites created a permanent underclass whose exploitation could be framed not as theft but as natural order. Racism was not a side effect of slavery; it was the operating system that made slavery profitable.

Once racial hierarchy became profitable, it became law. Virginia's slave codes of the late 1600s did not simply regulate labor. They created a caste system. They declared that African enslavement was inheritable, that Blackness itself was a legal condition, and that whiteness conferred privileges unavailable to anyone else. These laws did not reflect existing prejudice; they manufactured it. They turned economic exploitation into a racial identity, and then turned that identity into a political structure. This is what made America different from the Europeans who invented racism.

Poor whites, who had previously rebelled alongside Black laborers during events like Bacon's Rebellion, were given small but meaningful advantages: land access, militia membership, legal protections, and the psychological wage of superiority. This was the birth of systemic racism: a structure in which racial hierarchy served the economic interests of elites while convincing non-elite whites that their loyalty belonged upward rather than sideways.

By the time the United States declared independence, racism was already institutionalized. The Constitution protected slavery without naming it, embedding racial hierarchy into the nation's founding document. The Three-Fifths Compromise inflated the political power of slaveholding states, giving the planter class disproportionate influence over national policy. The Fugitive Slave Clause ensured that enslaved people could not escape the economic system that bound them. Racism was not merely tolerated; it was

engineered into the machinery of governance. Every institution- the courts, legislatures, militias, and churches- helped maintain the racial order because that order protected wealth. The plantation economy generated enormous profits for a small elite, and those elites used their political power to keep the system intact.

After the Civil War, the economic logic of racism did not disappear; it adapted. Slavery ended, but the need for cheap labor did not. Southern states replaced slavery with Black Codes, convict leasing, and sharecropping — systems that kept Black laborers tied to land they did not own and debt they could not escape. Convict leasing, in particular, was slavery by another name: Black men were arrested for trivial or fabricated offenses, leased to private companies, and worked to death under conditions worse than slavery because the state could always arrest more. Racism remained profitable, and profitability ensured its survival. The institutions that enforced racial hierarchy — courts, police, legislatures — were not malfunctioning; they were performing exactly as designed.

As the country industrialized, racism expanded beyond the South. Northern factories relied on segregated labor markets that paid Black workers less and excluded them from unions. Federal housing policy in the 20th century, especially redlining, locked Black families out of homeownership, the primary engine of middle-class wealth. The GI Bill, celebrated as a triumph of American opportunity, was administered locally in ways that excluded Black veterans from mortgages, education, and job training. These policies were not isolated acts of discrimination; they were systemic mechanisms that transferred wealth upward and outward — toward white families and away from Black ones. Racism became a national economic strategy, not a regional one.

The Housing Policies That Established the American Middle-Class | by William Spivey | Curated Newsletters | Medium

Institutional racism hardened further through criminal justice policy. The War on Drugs created a pipeline from Black neighborhoods to prisons, stripping communities of workers, voters, and fathers while generating billions for private prisons, police departments, and contractors. Mandatory minimums, stop-and-frisk, and broken-windows policing were framed as public safety measures. Still, they functioned as economic extraction: fines, fees, court costs, and labor performed inside prisons all flowed upward. Mass incarceration is not simply a social tragedy; it is an economic system that benefits a small percentage of people — contractors, corporations, and political actors who profit from punishment.

Systemic racism also shapes labor markets. Occupational segregation funnels Black workers into lower-paying jobs with fewer benefits and less stability. Wage gaps persist even when education and experience are equal. Hiring discrimination remains widespread. These patterns are not accidents; they are the predictable outcomes of centuries of policy designed to protect white wealth. When Black workers are paid less, white employers save more. When Black neighborhoods are denied investment, white neighborhoods receive it. When Black families are excluded from homeownership, white families accumulate generational wealth. Racism is not merely a belief system; it is an economic distribution system.

The benefits of systemic racism accrue to a small percentage of people, but they shape the entire economy. The wealthiest Americans — those who own corporations, land, and financial assets — profit from low wages, high incarceration rates, and segregated housing markets. Racism keeps labor cheap, neighborhoods divided, and political coalitions fractured. It prevents

multiracial solidarity that could challenge concentrated wealth. In this way, racism is not simply a tool of prejudice; it is a tool of power. It keeps the economic elite secure while the working class remains divided.

Today, systemic racism persists not because individuals hold racist beliefs but because institutions continue to operate according to rules written centuries ago. Schools funded by property taxes reproduce housing segregation. Policing strategies target communities already burdened by economic inequality. Health disparities reflect environmental racism, food deserts, and unequal access to care. These systems do not require racist intent to produce racist outcomes; they only require inertia. The structure does the work even when individuals do not.

Racism in America began as an economic strategy, became a legal structure, evolved into a national system, and now functions as a self-perpetuating engine that protects wealth for a small percentage of people. It is not accidental, and it is not merely cultural. It is structural, profitable, and deeply embedded. To understand racism in America is to understand how power protects itself — and how the nation's economic foundations were built on a hierarchy that still shapes who benefits, who struggles, and who is allowed to belong.

Racism continues in America because the economic structure that created it has never been dismantled; it has only been updated, repackaged, and made more subtle. From the beginning, race was not simply prejudice but a financial strategy—a way to extract labor, accumulate wealth, and protect power for a small elite. That logic still shapes the country's institutions. Slavery built the early American economy, but more importantly, it built the habits of thought that made exploitation seem normal. Enslaved people generated enormous wealth for plantation owners, banks, insurers, shipping

companies, and northern manufacturers. When slavery ended, those institutions did not lose their appetite for profit; they found new ways to maintain the racial hierarchy that kept labor cheap and political coalitions divided. Sharecropping, convict leasing, and Jim Crow were not just social systems — they were economic engines designed to keep Black Americans poor, immobile, and available for exploitation. Racism persisted because it kept paying dividends.

As the country industrialized, racism adapted. Redlining locked Black families out of homeownership, ensuring that white families accumulated generational wealth while Black families were confined to neighborhoods starved of investment. The GI Bill, administered locally, gave white veterans access to mortgages and education while excluding Black veterans. These policies created the modern racial wealth gap, a structural imbalance that still shapes opportunity today. Racism became systemic not because individuals held hateful beliefs but because institutions — banks, schools, courts, police departments — operated according to rules written during eras when racial hierarchy was openly embraced. Those rules still produce unequal outcomes even when no one intends them.

The criminal justice system is one of the clearest examples of racism's economic function. Mass incarceration removes millions of people from the workforce, extracts labor inside prisons, and generates billions for private companies, contractors, and local governments. Fines, fees, and court costs operate as a regressive tax on poor communities, disproportionately Black ones. Policing strategies concentrate surveillance and punishment in neighborhoods already burdened by economic inequality, creating a cycle in which poverty produces policing and policing produces poverty. These systems do not require racist individuals to function; they only require institutions to continue operating as they always have.

Racism also persists because it protects the interests of a small percentage of people who benefit from concentrated wealth. When racial divisions keep workers distrustful of one another, multiracial coalitions capable of challenging economic inequality never fully form. Racism fractures the working class, ensuring that political energy is spent fighting sideways rather than upward. This dynamic is not accidental — it is the same logic elites used in the 17th century when they gave poor whites small privileges to prevent alliances with enslaved Africans. Today, racial resentment is still used to redirect anger away from economic power and toward scapegoats. As long as racial hierarchy keeps people divided, the wealthiest Americans remain secure.

Racism continues because it is profitable. After all, institutions still operate on foundations built during slavery and segregation, and because division protects the interests of those who benefit most from the current economic order. It is not simply a social problem or a moral failing; it is a structural feature of American capitalism. Until the economic incentives that sustain racial inequality are confronted directly, racism will remain embedded in the nation's systems, quietly doing the work it was designed to do — protecting wealth, preserving power, and ensuring that a small percentage of people continue to benefit at the expense of everyone else.

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Written by William Spivey

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Melanie Hilda 🌹 💦 ⭐ her/she
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I find it important to understand how racism developed through ideas and systems, not just individual prejudice. It reminds me that history still shapes how societies treat people today. ⭐ ⭐ ⭐

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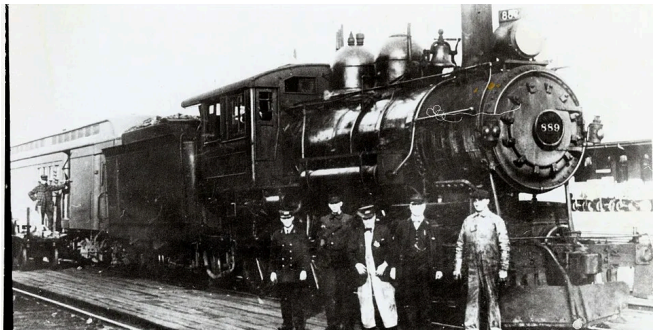
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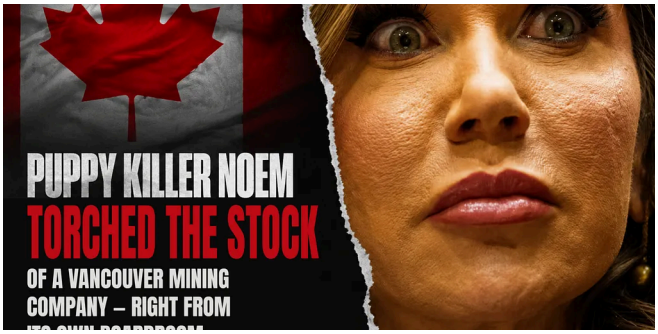
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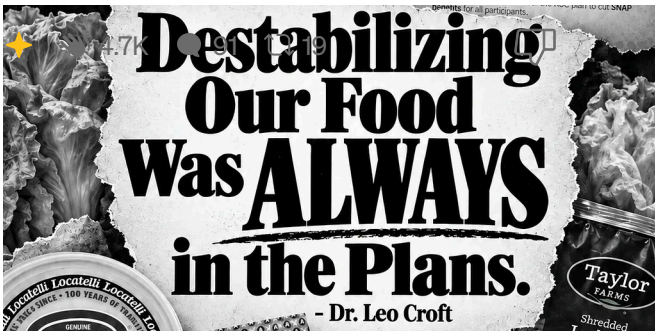
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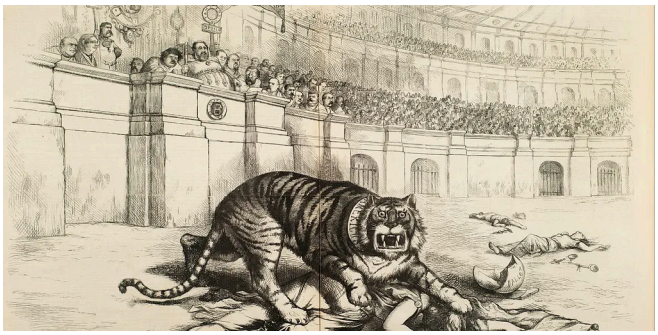
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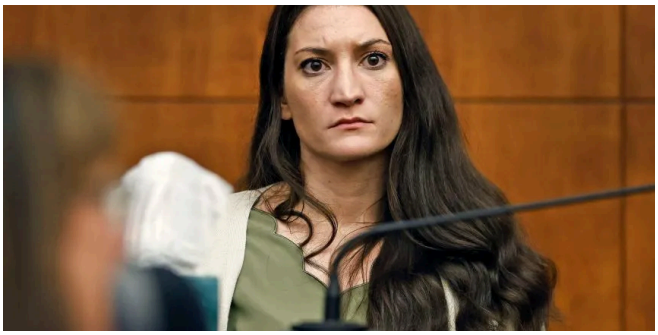


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