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From One to Many Peoples : A New History of the USA

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The context as I understand it is that this is the School of International Studies, so you all should be interested in a global world. A kind of complete understanding of the human condition rather than a national one. Or even a regional one. So with that in mind toward a global understanding, I would like to introduce to you the idea of US history.

An ancient Chinese view says America is a country in a far-away place with strange birds and animals. That is fantastic. That is amazing because the national history centers the United States. The United States is the center of the world, if not the universe. Everything else does not matter ; it's just about the United States. But when you think about how other people might view the United States as that distant land with strange birds and animals, you think that is really interesting. Okay, I am a foreigner to that country, the United States. (My grandparents migrated to the US from Japan and Okinawa.) I am purporting to write the history of that nation as a foreigner, an outsider to that society. Even though I was born there, grew up there, and I speak their language and was educated at their schools, I was brainwashed into thinking like them mainly because of my language (English) and education. Still, I'm an outsider. White Americans still ask me where I come from as if I'm an alien. And that's what I want to talk about.

E pluribus unum : this is the model of the United States. You see it on the dollar bill. Have you looked at their money? You know what that means, right? In English, "Out of many, one." That's what it means. "Out of many, one." But in my title, I reverse that. "Out of one, many." The reason for this model of unity obviously is to create a nation and a people. But what it does not depict is the truth about the United States and its formations. And what I think is the historical reality is that the United States began as what we call a settler colony. Now, a settler colony . . . You know what a colony is, right? That is when a nation leaves its place, goes to another territory and takes that territory, and colonizes it with its people, its government, its forms, and so forth. A settler colony is when those people from that country, the colonizing power, forms a new nation. Examples of settler colonies are the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Those are settler colonies.

Now, as a settler colony, these are foreign people to America. In America, there were already people there – American Indians. And by the way, that's a false name, right? Because Columbus thought he had found India. The people therefore were Indians. Wrong name, but it stuck. Those native peoples then, American Indians, lived there in America. The settler colony from England took over and became the United States. They created borders between themselves and the Indians. They built a fence, a line, and they said this is our land and that's your land. You stay on that side and we stay on our side. When you come to our country, you are a foreigner, you are an alien in our country. So those foreigners said that we belong here. And those people who belonged there became foreigners. That's the story that I wanted to talk about.

So when the nation began, the United States began after its revolution from Great Britain and its independence, and formed nation, a new nation, right? And that new nation was conceived of as one people. John Jay,

who was a graduate of Columbia University where I teach today, and there is a hall there, a John Jay Hall, and a statue outside the hall. He was the first chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. He was also a co-author of the Federalist Papers, which lay the foundations for the republic's government. He said Americans are one people. Descendants from a common ancestor, speaking the same language, sharing the same culture and religion. One people. Now, you know that the word nation comes from "to be born." Nation. "To be born" means you are related by blood. Blood relations. The people of one nation are comprised of one race. That's the idea. This is a European Enlightenment idea in the 17th and 18th centuries. Nation, people, one race. So those who did not belong to the race are not part of that nation/people/race. So like I said, American Indians became aliens on their own land. That was the case with the United States right up to when the Indians became citizens of the United States, first in 1924.

That is an interesting concept. When the United States was still a colony in 1669, an African American man wanted to deed the land to his son. The Virginia Colony said that this Mr. Johnson is a Negro, and as a consequence, an alien. That is, African Americans were not citizens within the colony. And indeed, in the first Constitution of the nation, 1787, Article One specifies the people of these United States. "We the people" did not include African Americans. It said we are to enumerate or count all persons and three-fifths all "other" persons. What they were talking about was the representative government where the number of people would determine the number of representatives sent to Congress. So you needed to enumerate or count the people within the nation. And they said all persons meaning Europeans, and all "other" persons meaning African Americans. Three-fifths. They were not even one person. And, indeed, in 1854 the US Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott* that African Americans were never intended to be citizens of these United States. In fact, African Americans were property. Property. Possession. Sort of like the land. Only after the Civil War did African Americans gain their freedom and then they became counted as citizens within the United States. So the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments that outlaws slavery, that promises equality under the law, and gives African American men the right to vote happened in 1865, 1868, 1870. For most of the nation's history up to that point African Americans were not a part of the nation.

Q: So you mentioned Native Americans and African Americans. I've heard that there were a lot of white slaves taken from Ireland. Are the Irish white people?

A: That's a very good question. Because whiteness is an invented social category and whiteness changed over time. So there were a lot of European indentures. And in fact, there were more European indentures than African slaves in the early colony in Virginia. And indentured servants were treated just as harshly as slaves, as property. For example, I forgot the percentage of indentures who actually died on the passage across the Atlantic because of foul conditions onboard the ship. A lot of indentured women were raped by their masters. And indentures suffered physical abuse.

So harsh treatment was uniform across racial lines among African slaves and European indentures. But those European indentures were for a limited period of time. Four to seven years after which they gained their freedom. They were in fact counted as potential citizens even as indentures. So the US Constitution included them within the definition of all persons even though they might have been bound and not free.

Now that's a very interesting question because in 1675 in Virginia colony, whites and blacks joined together against the central or colonial power. They rose up in what is called Bacon's Rebellion. What the rebels wanted was land. The land of course belonged to native peoples. But they wanted to expand, to get more land so they could farm and become tobacco producers. After Bacon's Rebellion was put down in 1676, the colonial gov-

ernment said that land or property can only be held by white people, not blacks. And what that did was to separate whites from blacks to prevent them from joining together as a common oppressed class, a group of people.

So it is important to remember that race is not constant, and that it requires power to impose. That is that people create races, people create genders. I'm talking about men and women. The definition of men and women are created. They are human inventions. And then they are imposed. There are laws against crossing, against mixing, against blurring those boundaries. And there is a reason for that. The reason is control. Human beings, regardless, can choose to violate those borders. And we have routinely done that. That capacity to violate borders gives us reason for optimism because humans can fight the power.

Wait, am I confusing? All right. In 1787 the Constitution, three-fifth of all "other" persons. In 1790 the first US Census in fact counted white people including indentures as persons, and African Americans were called "others." That's from the first Census in terms of representation as specified in Article One of the Constitution. In 1790, the Congress passed the Naturalization Act. You know what naturalization is? Naturalization is a very interesting term. It recalls nature, what is natural. Natural is God given, or by design. It's the physical law. But naturalization is a human act. A conversion of a foreigner to a citizen. Naturalization. That's the process where a foreigner becomes a citizen. The 1790 Naturalization Act says only "free white persons" can gain naturalization. That is, to be a citizen an immigrant had to be a free white person. Freedom or a condition of class or class status and whiteness, which is a variable category that expanded over time were the requirements for US citizenship through naturalization. Since 1790 and because of the Naturalization Act, Asians were considered "aliens ineligible to citizenship" right down to 1952. I remember my grandfather after 1952 becoming a citizen even though he had lived in an American territory for over 50 years before that. He only could become a citizen in 1952.

Okay, so what I'm arguing is that the nation began as one people. And that oneness was predicated upon whiteness, which was defined differently throughout the nation's history but remained constant as a privileged category. In *Dred Scott*, chief justice Roger Taney declared that white people were the "citizen race" and all "others" or non-whites stood outside that category. The "citizen race." That's pretty clear, right? What that means is that the United States consists of one, not many people. But when African Americans, when American Indians, when Asians became citizens of the United States, it was an American revolution. It was revolutionary because it changed the nature of the nation and its people. It just changed it from one to many. Now you think today that the United States is multicultural, diverse, and so forth, right? The myth is that the nation was always like that. But it's not true. The US began as one people and hundreds of years later it became many. And it became many because people, whites and non-whites, fought for inclusion within that category of citizens. They fought for that. Struggled. Died for that right to become citizens. And once they became citizens, they changed the nature of that nation totally. It was a revolution. The American Revolution just simply continued British or settler hegemony in North America. It was not a real revolution. It was a continuation of the original settler colony.

Q: President Obama was badly defeated several days ago. I'm specifically interested in Southern culture. I was in Georgia and one thing that impressed me when Obama was elected president of the United States was the fact that many southern states that composed the old Civil War Confederacy, all the southern states were opposed to his being elected as president. Do you think southern people are basically even today rather sensitive about skin color? I understand that the South has been changed a lot, but at the same time when some new

power, when a movement heading for the future arises, some strong power that tries to stop it or that tries to draw it back arises. So the progress of the South seems to be very contradictory. Heading for the future but at the same time the power of the past is very, very strong. I'm a literature major and I have read a lot of Faulkner and southern writers. Do you think even today that sort of contradictory movement still persists in the South? I'm sorry my question is not directly connected to your talk.

A : I think it is a very interesting and connected question, but it's also complicated. And let me just answer it this way. There are regional distinctions within the United States. And the regional differences at least regarding race involves the history of race within that particular region. So what I mean is like the US South, the biggest racial binary is black and white. And the reason is historical ; in some states in fact black people outnumber white people. So demographically they mattered a great deal. Economically African Americans mattered a great deal, too, because labor was principally derived from them, not exclusively but largely. There is also a legacy of the war, the Civil War, which some saw as a kind of northern conspiracy against southern populism or agrarianism. Many whites in the South felt put upon by the North's capitalist, industrial might. So there is a kind of defensiveness also in that regard. But it's also interesting to know that throughout US history, I think, there is a conflict between unity and diversity. This idea of one people versus many. That is fairly constant throughout US history. And the reason is because many people feel that diversity harms, threatens the nation. In fact I mentioned John Jay. When John Jay made that declaration about one people, one ancestor, one culture, the title of his article was "Concerning Foreign Dangers." In other words, he saw diversity as a threat to national unity, and he didn't mean African Americans. He meant French. Jay believed that foreign influences would divide and destroy the nation. That was the idea.

So what I'm saying is that diversity and unity has been a pretty recurrent theme throughout US history right down to this present day. And I believe that those ideas involve power and the relations of power, whether it is political, economic, or social or as we say cultural. All of those exert power. And I think that history, meaning a unitary history, a history of one people out of many, that kind of history is important for making the citizens safe for democracy. Make people safe for democracy is taught in schools. We read that in our history books over and over again. Like Japan is one people, right? One people. One people! Never mind the diversity of class, of gender, of ethnicity. No, one people. There is a powerful kind of draw for that. And the power is the power of the nation state, trying to impose its will on its people. The philosopher Louis Althusser writes about that, how the state and its apparatuses like schools, religion, and so forth influence our consciousness, how we think of ourselves. So we think of ourselves as Japanese, we think of ourselves in a particular way. Like Americans must think in a particular way. And if you deviate from those norms, you become threats to the stability of the nation. Unsafe.

I remember very distinctly, after 9/11, when the United States experienced these murderous attacks at three major targets, I was in New York City where the Twin Towers collapsed. We could see the smoke from Columbia rising from that wreckage. Thousands of people died in that attack. And right immediately after, there was a kind of consensus that people had to unite together to support one another, meaning you cannot say these are not terrorist attacks. You could not say that these were attacks because the United States is an imperialistic, capitalist nation, spreading all over the globe, and maybe that's why people were upset with us. You couldn't say that. You couldn't say that then. You would be called a terrorist and put in prison without any charges against you. It was simply for national security.

In any case, what I'm arguing is that the nation tries to inculcate in people a particular consciousness and that consciousness is expressed in our language and our ideologies. This is discourse—language and ideology.

That's what discourse is, okay? Language and ideology. Me speaking English expresses a particular ideology. So the question about the South does not only apply to the South, by the way. You know the feeling about Obama. He was not even born in America some say. He was born in Hawai`i and Hawai`i is not part of the United States. His father was Kenyan. He cannot be a real American. We are going to impeach him, some Republicans in Congress have said. This new Congress that's coming after Republican control of the House and Senate is considering ways to impeach the President. Anyway, that testifies, I think, to the strength of the central narrative of one people. I think so.