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On April 12, 2000 the South Carolina State Senate passed a bill to remove the Confederate flag from the top of their statehouse after it had resided there for thirty-eight years, voting under economic pressure from a national tourism boycott led by the NAACP to move a modified version of the flag from the statehouse's top to its front (Brunner 2000). Seven years later, however, the issue of whether or not it is appropriate for government facilities, schools, or even individuals to display the Confederate flag is still highly contentious, with the flag's advocates defending it as a symbol of Southern heritage and its opponents decrying it as an emblem of racism. How can the same pattern of colors and shapes be read so radically differently by different groups of people? Here I will address that question in light of two analytical frameworks used by scholars of race to analyze and explicate racial issues - writer Jane Lazarre's framework of White Americans' denial of the realities of African American history, and sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's framework of "racial projects" that link representations of race with social structures to create sociohistorically situated racial categories.

In her memoir of her experiences as a white mother of black children, Lazarre describes a visit to the Richmond Museum of the Confederacy in order to view a visiting exhibit on slavery. Her visit culminated with the "[horrific] realization that in two months the slavery exhibits will have gone on to another city, leaving the historical deception and moral lie of the Museum of the Confederacy on its own again," an occurrence she compares to the hypothetical existence of a traveling exhibit on the Holocaust visiting a museum celebrating the military successes of Nazi Germany, "as if the two testimonials could exist, calmly and unconflictually, side by side" (1997, p.19). She views the existence of a museum of the Confederacy that does not incorporate a history of slavery as a "metaphor for American denial of the reality of slavery and of African American history as a central core of American history" (ibid.), and this idea of the South's celebration of the Confederacy as a

reflection of a denial of the reality or the brutality of slavery is useful in understanding many of the difficult to comprehend arguments put forward by the flag's supporters. For instance, in a brochure defending the presence of the Confederate flag in the Georgia state flag, the Georgia Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans contends that "no other Americans have suffered so much and made such sacrifices as our Southern ancestors on behalf of Southern independence" (Georgia Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, 2002), a statement that simultaneously denies the suffering of African Americans under the SCV's Southern ancestors and the fact that the ancestors in question did not even consider themselves to be "Americans." Similarly, the claim often championed by flag defenders that the Confederacy was formed to defend state's rights and not slavery is demonstrably false (Owens 2000), yet evidence of the importance of slavery to the Confederate cause is routinely dismissed with reminders that not all Southerners owned slaves, slavery existed in the North as well as the South, and even, at the most extreme, assertions that slaves were "better off than northern free laborers" (Pendergraft). The veracity of these first two statements does not erase the intertwined histories of slavery and the Confederacy or mitigate the intensity of suffering of African Americans under slavery, but flag supporters use these facts in their arguments seemingly believing that they can do both these things. It is difficult to understand such seemingly illogical thought processes without using Lazzarre's notion of the Confederacy's supporters' denial of the realities of slavery. This framework of denial, however, is only useful as a critique of many of the arguments put forward by the flag's supporters; it can not provide an in-depth analysis of both sides of the debate. Such an analysis requires a more academic perspective.

Such a perspective is provided by sociologists Omi and Winant in their treatise on the creation and transformation of racial categories, *Racial Formation in the United States*. In their analysis of race and racial issues, Omi and Winant introduce the concept of "racial projects" that are "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines." These projects result in "linkage[s] between structure and representation," which in turn are components of the "sociohistorical

process[es] by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” known as “racial formation” (1994, p.55-6). The controversy over the Confederate flag can be understood as a conflict between two opposing and mutually exclusive racial projects - the first intending to separate the history of the Confederacy from the institution of slavery, and second intending to make sure that the Confederacy and slavery remain forever linked in the American consciousness.

Supporters of the flag ascribe to the first racial project described above. This project attempts to link a representation of an idealized antebellum South and its associated ideals of independence and self-determination with social structures that can vary from monuments, museums, and school curricula honoring the Confederacy and Southern heritage to white supremacist organizations like the KKK. Since the ideals this racial project espouses - the independence and self-determination of the Confederacy - can be linked with social structures while bypassing the issue of slavery, it is not surprising that those who believe in this racial project do not see any contradiction in separating the Confederacy from slavery and racism.

Detractors of the flag support the second racial project described. This project attempts to link a representation of African Americans suffering under slavery, and continuing to suffer under a variety of forms of racism, with social structures that are diametrically opposed to those of their adversaries - namely monuments, museums, and school curricula honoring the difficult history of African Americans and minority rights organizations like the NAACP. Since this racial project’s central symbolism - the suffering of African Americans throughout American history - cannot be linked with social structures without including the history of slavery under the Confederacy, it is understandable why those who believe in this racial project cannot fathom representations of the Confederacy that do not include slavery.

Analyzing the debate over the Confederate flag as a conflict between two racial projects also explains the previously described, somewhat baffling tendency of flag supporters to defend their view on the basis of facts like the existence of slavery in the North. While to a flag opponent the fact that slavery existed in the North may seem irrelevant to the inappropriateness of the Confederate flag in public places, to a flag supporter the existence of slavery in the North is very relevant to the argument

because it can potentially break the ideological link between the Confederacy and slavery made by the second racial project described above. In other words, since the second racial project links an ideology of African Americans suffering under slavery with the Confederacy via, for example, history books and museums, if the validity of the history in those books and museums can be successfully challenged, so can the association between slavery and the Confederacy. Virtually all supporters of the Confederate flag support their position with historical snippets that do not actually deny the existence of slavery under the Confederacy, but instead attempt to undermine the “revisionist history” popularized by the second racial project by publicizing that, for example, the majority of Confederate soldiers were too poor to own slaves, or that there were black soldiers in the Confederate army (Partterson). The proliferation of these arguments can be understood as an attempt to break the ideological links of the second racial project while leaving those of the first intact, thereby firmly establishing that the Confederacy and slavery are not inextricably related.

The issue of the “true meaning” of the Confederate flag is a highly complex and contentious one that will likely never be fully resolved - after all, symbols have no “true” meaning other than what we ascribe to them (Hall 1997). We can begin to better understand the debate, however, through the use of analytical frameworks for thinking about race established by those who study race and racial issues as their careers. Jane Lazarre’s framework of White Americans’ denial of the realities of African American history is helpful for understanding anomalies such the existence of a museum that honors the Confederacy with no mention of its association with slavery. Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s framework of racial projects and racial formation is useful for analyzing each side’s attempts to make known the “true” meaning of the Confederate flag by linking differing ideological representations of the Confederacy with social structures that utilize the flag, and especially for understanding the somewhat puzzling tendency of flag supporters to argue that the Confederate flag can be separated from slavery by offering up historical facts that do not actually deny the importance of slavery to the Confederacy. By using these analytical frameworks, and the frameworks of other scholars of race, we can begin to understand complex racial issues and discuss them in a meaningful way.

References

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