

Tape #1
April 15.

SECOND CONVERSATION WITH DR. KENNETH CLARK

Dr. Clark, tell what you mean by the word 'Race' - what is the nature of this concept?

Well, the word 'race' is one of those ambiguous terms that man uses and it is difficult to define it with any degree of precision-- in fact, it seems to me that it is one of those terms in which its very ambiguity is the basis of controversy and confusion and conflict. I suspect that if we really knew exactly what this term meant, we would not have all the problems and the difficulties that we seem to have - -

May I say here, we have cases which give us objective points of reference. We have Indians, Chinese, Africans, West European Caucasians, where you need to see a big difference. We then have the laws of Virginia where gradually the definition has been narrowed down to -- over the years -- to a mathematical infinity, a small percentage -- presumed a percentage -- of Negro blood.

Yes, as far as I know, anthropologists and biologists have not been able to agree even among themselves, on a precise definition to this term 'race'. It is obvious, of course, that human beings do differ in many physical characteristics such as skin color, average height, hair texture, shape of head, and other observable and measurable characteristics. The term 'race' is usually associated with one of these more obvious characteristics such as skin color, and there have been attempts as you know, to classify human beings on the basis of the varying gradations of skin color or the amount of melanin in the skin. This particular factor seems associated with some other characteristics such as hair texture, but not always -- for

example, the Australian Aborigine -- the natives of Australia are very dark in skin color but do not have the same hair texture as the dark Africans, or some sub-Saharan Africans.

Don't the Africans differ a great deal in hair texture from one part of Africa and another - - -

In fact Africans differ in skin color a great deal. For example, Ethiopian Africans and -- Ethiopians are Africans, they are on the continent of Africa -- have hair texture that is not unlike the hair texture of Indians or Caucasians, but have gradations of skin color that match the skin color of sub-Saharan Africans who have a different hair texture. Egyptian Africans have gradations of skin color that over-lap the skin color of southern Europeans and with general hair texture --

Hair texture in parts of Continental Europe is very similar to hair texture of -- you say -- African - - -

That's right -- so human beings vary, there is no question about it, for the fact that groups of human beings vary in physical characteristics and there is some tendency for the variations in some characteristics to be accompanied by variations in other characteristics, but this is not always consistent.

Psychological difference -- this point you are talking about --

No, I am talking about physical difference because I do not think that the question or issue of race can be meaningfully discussed in terms of psychological or behavioral characteristics. I think that the issue of race, if we are seeking any kind of precise definition of race, must start with establishing some kind of consistency in physical characteristics or differences in physical characteristics -- and even here we see that we have problems and difficulties that the

laymen is not always sensitive to. I think if you ask the average person about race, he would be sure that the white man whom he knows is not only white in skin color, but these and these and these - other physical characteristics, and is not likely to entertain the possibility that you might find people who are white in skin color but with different hair texture or different eyes, or with different shapes of head, etc. --

Let me ask a question that cuts across this, but what about the change of physical measurements and other physical qualities on the American Continent within our time -- within say the Americans in 1776 -- all races have changed on coming to the American Continent.

Well, actually races -- Franz Bois has shown that groups from Europe tend to change their physical characteristics as they migrate to America, without inter-breeding -- without inter-breeding, just the changes in the geography - -

- - - Three inches taller, so the Americans have in fifty years, an inch taller - -

- - So you do seem to have some evidence to suggest modification in these physical characteristics in terms of changes in environment. You also have the fact that the groups of human beings have been inter-breeding for long periods of time, so you do not have -- or in terms of some of the authorities that I depended upon, when I was a graduate student in sense -- you cannot find very many places in the world where there has been intercommunication among human beings, examples of "pure races". Where you do find such examples, they are generally in places in the world that have been isolated from normal intercommunication, contacts with other peoples. For example, I think

maybe one of the best examples of pure racial types are the Australian Aborigines who were in a sense -- the evidence is they were isolated from the main streams of communication and contact and transportation with other peoples for centuries and centuries -- they were stone age people really -- the Negrotos seem to be pure types. But other groups of human beings seem to reflect a tremendous amount of intermingling that has been going on long periods of time, you see.

Well now, this is a scientific perspective -- lets talk perspective on the question. We have to relate this to the rule of thumb common sense "notion of physical difference as we find it in social collision.

That is another approach, that is a social - -

How do you relate these now.

Well, actually, they are not necessarily related, interestingly enough, -- I think what groups of human beings have done, was to use certain observable differences among human beings as a basis for establishing distinctions and differential status in hierarchy among human beings, but this has been done not only on the basis of "race" or color differences, they have been done on the basis of religious differences, they have been done on the basis of political differences, ideological differences -- and one of the most persistent ways in which human beings have established, not only distinctions but hostile distinctions among groups of human beings in terms of military power-- conquest and submission, you see. Now, in America, race has been defined primarily in terms of class and cast and status distinctions, so that a person is a Negro in America, if he is treated as a Negro.

This distinction then, you take as key, is that right?

Key to the use of the term 'race' in the American context.

In the American context -- This leads to a better question --

or at least an issue -- in Medieval Europe, the ~~big~~ blood sense of the difference between, say the aristocracy and the peasantry was an almost absolute distinction, in a blood sense -- more absolute probably in certain contacts in a blood sense, than in America now, between whites and Negroes.

The fact that hemophilia is an aristocratic disease in Europe, tending to reflect in breeding among those individuals -- I don't think there is any evidence of a blood distinction in race in America-- one reason because Negroes and whites have inter-mingled so much in America since slavery. There are very few pure Negroes in America.

Yes, but the reflection remains as a rule of thumb distinction,

To the extent that ~~the~~ very fair light-skinned Negroes tend to pass over into the white -- that is right, but actually even within the visible colored people of America, you have evidence of a great deal of mixture -- I mean Indian, white, and African or Negro, and you just can't call American Negroes a race, in any strict sense-- or if you are talking about race, in terms of pure biological stock. I mean, the American Negroes are mixtures of - - -

Lets take that -- what about just visibility as a factor -- just the difference in complexion.

Well, those who are visible, are visible -- are visible, obviously -- and those who are not visible -- a large proportion of Negroes who are defined as having had some Negro ancestry, who are not visibly Negroes, tend to go back into the white status group and live as white, be treated as white, marry as white and have children as white.

Dr. Clark, we have three perspectives then, don't we? We have whatever is a scientific concept of race --

Which is extremely difficult to

Whatever it is -- we have then, visibility, and then we have some definition -- which we can go into the Virginia statutes, of Virginia - -

Status.

Well, it is not put on status -- it is put on -- some infusion of Negro blood - - -

But that obviously makes no sense, except in terms of status and a statutory determination of status distinction, you see.

A status -- a statutory determination of status

little thing -- because the person who might be by any possible definition of status, outside a definition of status involved.

But the attempt on the part of the state or the instrument of government to fix the status of this individual, in terms of their definition of his race --

We have three perspectives -- what is the moral of this fact, I don't know what the moral is --

As I see it, race is used in America as one of the -- and a very convenient pretext by which a group of human beings who have power or believe they have power, seek to arrogate the power on to themselves and restrict the extent of power status for others, you see.

How is 'race' used in Africa -- concept?

I think the conflict between the Europeans and the Africans was one in which race as a visible, an historical "reality" became associated with a status reality, when the Europeans were in control and in power. In Africa, they subordinated the Africans to their control, in spite of the fact that they were a -- the Europeans were

a numerical minority. Now the Africans are insisting upon reverting or reversing this pattern -- or if not reversing it, changing it so they will assume the power and the control in their own land, you see -- and there is some evidence that some of the new African nations are not going to settle just for taking back control and power, but they are even suggesting some type of subordination of white--
? ?

I hadn't heard that, but what does bother me about Africa is the future in terms of South Africa, and what is likely to happen there if the South African picture continues to develop in the very negative way that it seems to be going -- within South Africa and between South Africa and a group of independent South African states to the north. This is the basis for a great deal of anxiety for those of us who even dare to think about it.

I don't want to think about it.

I don't want to think about it either, because - - -

Cutting back to WXXX W and their traditional superiority which is now making big trouble in the Congo, how much of the W feel themselves racially different from the subject tribe?

I don't know whether they put it on the basis of race, they certainly put it on -- they look different, they are tall, thin --

They look different -- tall, thin, long think skull --

Thats right, and with physiognomy that is not unlike the European, in terms of sharp features, etc. thin lips, different from many of the other sub-Saharan Africans. Certainly there is a distinction that these people see between themselves and of Africans, but within Africa you have distinctions among the sub-Saharan Africans based upon tribes, tribal differences.

Sure. I was just thinking about an acut situation that I was reading about in the newspapers -- this race, according to the National Geographic Newsreels, is more different from its subject tribes. It is as different as you could find between any race, by measurements, this, that and the other, color -- and sense of superiority.

Which is not unique. There seems to be a ~~hmm~~ peculiar, human characteristic -- try to find some basis on which to justify a sense of superiority indifferent from other human beings. They are like the Germans, aren't they? psychologically --

Well, they were a master race.

-- Or the ancient Jews who saw themselves as a master race, a chosen people. I think it was Bertram Russell who said in his usual succinct way, you know -- that man will find or invent any pretext to justify his belief that he is superior to other men.

I am afraid that he is right. Getting on the matter of race -- back in African times, how much did the H , the king of D feel itself as racially distinct? In its slave raids?

Well, obviously, he didn't feel identification -- clearly not. You know, I have often said that I -- one thing that I wanted to thank S for, during the Congo crisis, was that he reminded me that slavery would not have been possible if Africans didn't sell their -- sell Africans -- and, well, I think your line of question- ing is opening up the realization that cruelty, oppression, blindness, insensitivity, ~~arbitrary~~ arbitrary use of power and the subjugation of other human beings, if not restricted to white Europeans, that this is unfortunately a pretty common human affliction.

A Negro friend of mine, back in the late thirties, looking back

on the Ethiopian war -- he said "I feel myself split in all directions about this war". The Ethiopians are slave holders and slave traders.

Of course. Well, look at Liberia. We talked a moment ago about not wanting to look at South Africa. Many of us really don't want to look at Liberia, or Haiti, or certain parts of India. No, you are quite right, Mr. Warren -- human injustice, insensitivity, cruelty and barbarity, seem unfortunately all too universal.

I don't want to nag at this, but you see, of course whay I am driving at.

I am disturbed at the ~~x~~ line of questioning because -- while it is true, and all too true -- like most truth, it is double-edged in the sense that it could also be a kind of a truth that could be used for rationalization for our own variety of cruelty, and this we would not want. I know you wouldn't want ~~it~~ it, and I certainly don't want it.

Lets try and keep it clean -- but look at these facts. If I read in a book by Lomax saying "The white man went to Africa to seize slaves" ---

Only it wasn't only the white man who profited from the slave trade, you are quite right.

- - To seize a slave - -

It wasn't the white man.

The white man didn't seize them, no. My point is -- lets keep it clean. Getting back to - - -

You mean, let us try to get to the difficult and the hard truth.

The difficult and the hard truth, you see, are the psychological and the historical facts.

But if you do that, where do you go from there?

I say -- lets try and find out.

Don't we constrict our perspective of truth, in order not to wallow in just the sense of hopelessness?

Do we really think that? I would say we would have to bring out all the facts, and then try to start again. If I read someone saying "The white man went to Africa and seized the slaves" -- this is so arrogant unhistorical.

Well, don't you listen to Malcolm X and Malajah Mohammed -- they say the white men are devils --

White men are devils.

- - - and that we can't have anything to do with them -- Negroes can't have anything to do with them because they will be contaminated by the inherent deviltry of whites, you see. Well, lets face it, let X have a following of a sort, now this is the kind of oversimplification that makes some kind of contact and appeal. This is the same kind of thing that the white races are saying to their compatriots and having -- mobilizing feelings and keeping people fighting to the death to keep their schools white, you see.

Alright -- now I would say that Malcolm X, minister Malcolm X should read Richard Burton's Visit to D -- an interesting and elaborate document.

Do you know what Mr. Malcolm would say to you -- this is written by a white man who perverts the truth and actually ---

Alright -- now if we are going to talk about a question or a statement, mind you, about Negro history -- doesn't the Negro have to take the burden of his history, the same as the white man does.

Put does the white man take the total burden of his history?

Well, I am told I should, anyway -- I think a little bit of it anyway.

Don't even write objective scholars such as Beard, Charles Beard -- write about the Civil War in ways that are more palatable to the conscience - - -

Lets take the Civil War. Lets go back a little bit -- what do you think of Lincoln?

What do I think of Lincoln.?

Yes, how do you feel about Lincoln -- in the March on Washington, they went up to Lincoln's Monument -- now, how do you feel about that? Lets go deeper --

Oh, gracious -- I can only answer personally -- what do I think of Lincoln? I think that Lincoln was a very tortured, troubled man, whose greatness was in the honesty in which he -- not only faced his conflicts, his difficulties, but also thought the most practical accommodations of them --

What were his difficulties and problems?

I think they were man levels -- no man could be as great as he without deep personal difficulties and problems, - -

On the side, what do you think they were -- psychological profile -- how would you --

Frankly, I am not a Lincoln scholar, but just off the top of my head, I think that one of the deep disturbances of Mr. Lincoln might have been his background -- the very thing that we now in our history books, might have been ~~his~~^a source of deep feelings of inferiority and anxiety on the part of this man -- that he did come from rather ~~humb~~ humble, obscure, ambiguous background---

And he had a faint vision of aristocratic ancestry on one side, too.

That's right, but I think that was more compensatory -- what was real for Mr. Lincoln was the humble and -- you know -- questionable background, and also I think -- this is something that human beings rarely bring into consciousness or into parlor discussions, the role of physical appearance -- attractiveness or ugliness in a person's self image. Obviously, Mr. Lincoln was not an attractive person except in retrospect, you see --

He was terribly strong, though -- physically.

Tall. - -

He could pick up a barrel of whiskey and put it on the counter-- lets put it strong.

Alright. This Mr. Lincoln -- if you exclude the power which came with his office -- was certainly not the kind of man that women would flock to, something of that sort, he was homely -- and probably in his own inner recess is exaggerated the negative in him, you see--

He was a man who was excessed in his own small scale, you see, from the beginning -- a man of great physical power, and a man with a sensible sense of mission -- mission being undefined. Aren't those things that would appeal to women?

I don't know, and as I said, we were purely speculating, guessing-- I think that the kind of domestic problems that Mr. Lincoln had, were not only to be understood in terms of the problems of his ---

He was a bad wife picker, anyway.

That's right, he was a clearly bad wife picker and he was a sufferer in this regard, but the other thing that I would like to come to about Lincoln is beyond the personal ---

Lets get to race.

Race -- unquestionably Mr. Lincoln was afflicted by the American

What country has?

I don't know, we are not talking about the other countries.

No -- taking things in political historical --

Suppose he had said as Garrison said -- the Constitution is covered with dirt, you know -- to hell with it, no Union -- blow it up -- but freedom. How do you get freedom outside of the mission of union? What kind of problem does this present - - -

Believe me, I am not arguing against --

This is not arguing - -

No -- when I said arguing, I didn't mean in the terms of controversy or such -- but I am not struggling primarily in terms of an either/or approach to Mr. Lincoln or a veification or vilification of him -- I am saying that this man is one of our best examples of an inexcusable turmoil, conflict, confusion within thinking Americans. I think -- the thing that fascinates me, that I think one of the best contemporary example of this symptom that Lincoln, I thought, personified is in Mr. Fulbright -- you see.

Right, he the round robin - -

I was talking about Fulbright to my class today -- we were talk about moral dilemmas, and I said "I see Fulbright as one of the first examples of the contemporary version of the American ~~tragedy~~ tragedy. Here is a brilliant man, penetratingly insights of mind, an insightful man -- who has also the courage to make the kind of statement that he recently made about the need to re-examine our fixed positions in foreign policy -- our need to ventilate our myths -- and to look at them and get the kind of intellectual flexibility that is consistent with future effectiveness -- and he could say this about foreign policy, you see. And anybody who could say that about foreign policy,

could not possibly be blind about the same imperatives in terms of American racism -- but he shackled -- in one sphere, he is not tied to the lowest common denominator of his constituents -- in another sphere, he is. I say that this could only lead to terrible inner conflict and turmoils.

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continued on tape #2