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THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF RACE....AND WHY IT MATTERS

ABSTRACT

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Historians have recently shown that race did not originate as a scientific classification, but was a folk idea that emerged when the leaders of the early American colonies deliberately made decisions to divide the working poor, reducing some to permanent slavery and providing freedom and privileges to others. These leaders used the physical differences within the population as the basis of division, calling the resulting groupings "races." From their origin races were considered socially unequal. The leaders sought to rationalize this inequality by attributing it to nature or to God. In the late 18th century the growing field of science was enlisted to confirm race groups and their inequality by the use of measurement techniques.