

the behavior came first and the name came later. We need to study both the manner in which behavior influences language and the effect language has on behavior.

The article is extremely interesting and thought provoking. I welcome the chance to read about the ways in which our language influences our thoughts and actions. I hope Forbes will continue working on the dilemma that language presents to us.

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Critique

In investigating the use of “Negro” and “black” to include persons of Native American ancestry, Jack D. Forbes brings together a large number of wide-ranging references on an elusive topic. The preliminary nature of Forbes’s study and the inevitably problematic status of the data make his work thus far more valuable in suggestive than definitive terms. For example, while the conclusions regarding practices in King Williams Parish, Virginia, in the early 18th century seem generally acceptable, a heavy dependence on given names such as *Robin* as clues to classification should probably be avoided (*Robin* is the diminutive of the common name *Robert*, and can be either masculine or feminine), but there is little question about the rather cavalier and arbitrary willingness of the power elite to impose names on their “inferiors,” names that reflect a complex mixture of assumptions, prejudices, and needs. This is simply to say that the critical reevaluation that Forbes calls for in closing is less difficult to engage in than the equally valuable empirical reevaluation.

Of particular interest in the Forbes study are the motives or reasons for the blurring of racial and ethnic distinctions that come about when Native Americans are classified variously as Negroes, blacks, mulattos, or slaves. The confusion can, of course, be a matter of ignorance, although this would finally seem to be the least interesting cause. The confusion can grow out of carelessness, as seems to have been the case in 17th century Virginia. Similarly, laziness and a penchant for the convenient solution can result in a blurring of vital distinctions, as in the use of the “Black Code” in 1850s Louisiana. Most crucially, however, the blurring of racial and ethnic distinctions can be quite conscious and insidious in intent—part of a systematic effort to deprive a specific group of civil rights, most especially

property rights and the right to own land, as in the case of the Caribs of St. Vincent in the 18th century. In short, the irresponsible handling of racial and ethnic classification—whether haphazard or calculated—becomes a tool of the repressive forces of the “dominant caste.” Scholars familiar with the development of various “alien land laws”—such as those designed to keep the Japanese out of California—can corroborate the close connections that have developed between racial categorizing and racist policies. Forbes’s article makes the various motives for the systematic subjugation of Native Americans clear, and particularly the implications of conscious manipulation of categories that define groups.

A number of other observations emerge from the article, some of specific interest and others of general interest to ethnic scholars. (1) The case of the Gingaskin Indians in Northampton County, Virginia, underscores not only the vigor with which white America pursued the takeover of Native American lands, but that even where the original owners had not been destroyed they could be *declared* “nearly extinct” and thus legally negligible—that is, declared to be nonexistent nonpersons. (2) We need to examine and reexamine the practices and habits of mind of colonialism, both in the past and in the present. It is clear from Forbes’s article that the definition and classification of ethnic minorities, so often taken for granted or left to chance or the uninformed, is both a product and a tool of any major movement of social, political, and economic significance, and that colonialism is a primary modern instance. (3) We must continue to take heed of the tangled fates of America’s ethnic peoples. That a Native American could be classified as a “Free Negro” or black, or that a person of African origin could be classified a Greek may, of course, strike us as ludicrous. But we should see that the fact of such manipulation nevertheless asks an analysis of the overlapping and interlocking lives of such widely disparate groups as the black, the Japanese, the Hispanic, and the Native American. (4) We must continue to scrutinize the nature and function of such “benign” phenomena as the census, if only because, as Forbes points out, the government has in the past been guilty of acknowledging only those Native Americans willing to remain interned on reservations.

Jack Forbes has written a suggestive article concerned with taxonomy, nomenclature, and semantics as they relate to the social, political, and economic disposition of Native Americans. The implications of his work should be pursued.

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