

American Slavery
by Professor Maria A. Brown

The twentieth-century Western mind is frozen by the horror of men selling and buying others as slaves and even more stunned at the irony of black men serving as agents for the enslavement of blacks by whites. Shocking though it is, this human barter was truly the most stark representation of what modernism and Western capitalist expansion meant to traditional people. In the new world, people became items of commerce, their talents, their labors, and their produce thrown into the market place, where their best hope was to bring a decent price. The racial wrong was lost on African merchants, who saw themselves as a selling people other than their own. The distinctions of tribe was more real to them than race, a concepts that was yet to be refined by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western rationalists.

(Nathan Huggins, *Black Odyssey*, 1977)

In 1607, when the English North American colonies were founded, it was assumed that no one had the intentions of establishing a system of slavery. Even in 1619 when a Dutch frigid arrived in Jamestown, Virginia and, upon its departure, left twenty-five Africans in the colonies, there is no evidence to indicate that the desire to create such an institution existed. However, by the end of the 17th century, such a system did evolve and became firmly entrenched in American life.

(Between 1619 and 1760 about 500,000 Africans arrived in the thirteen English colonies).

Ironically, it was in this society that Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder, could and did write the Enlightenment article of Faith, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men were created equal." It was in this society that there emerged an institution that would not only become an important element in the development of the economy, but would also draw a demarcation line for black and white races in America.

For some, slavery would play the most significant role in the development of racial attitudes that would become a part of traditional American thought and behavior. Thus, slavery stripped the African-American of his humanity while denying him access to the opportunities America had to offer. In this session, we're going to discuss the roots of American slavery and how that institution transformed the American society. But before we do this, perhaps we should briefly discuss or focus our attention on slavery prior to the 15th century in order to develop an understanding of how the concept of slavery took on an

inhumane quality with the coming of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Slaver trading prior to the 15th century was not a new social phenomena for either Africa or Europe. For centuries Africa had been involved in an overland trade across the Sahara desert to Roman Europe and the Middle East. However, this trade was occasional, not systematic. The pre Trans-Atlantic trade was designed to provide the trading nations of the Mediterranean with soldiers, household servants, and artisans and not mass agricultural labor.

The slave systems of the 15th century, as they evolved in the European New World, were radically new in character compared with the prior forms of slavery, yet they were assembled from apparently traditional ingredients. They became intensely commercial making Atlantic Slave Trade the pacemaker of global exchanges from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. Yet within the plantations money played a modest– even negligible–role. Slave grown tobacco, sugar and cotton facilitated the birth of an expansive new world of

consumption—one that was antithetical to slave rations and self-provision. The enterprises based on slave labor embodied and advanced forms of technical and economic organization. (The Making of New World Slavery, From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800, Robin Black Burn, 1997.)

In Africa slavery varied from community to community and was practiced on a small scale. In many African communities slavery involved personal service in a limited period of time. In some cases, the slaves owned slaves. Some slaves were chiefs of caravans. After a long period of service, a slave might marry, own property, swear an oath, be a competent witness, and become the heir of his master. Those who were captured became vassals. Vassals could become free men.

In Europe, slavery had existed for centuries as religions and nations enslaved each other. Hence, one could become a slave by being an infidel or an outsider, a victim of war, by voluntarily selling oneself into slavery, or by committing serious crimes. Although the rights of the slave in both Africa and Europe were restricted, the slave was still considered as a member of society,

a human being and received equal protection under the law.

More important, the status of the slave parent was not passed on to his children.

By the 15th century, the concept of slavery changes. With this century, slavery came to mean -at least within the view of the Europeans- that a slave was a human being who was owned as property by another human being, one who was subject to the complete domination of another. He had no rights; no will, no power, no privileges. More important, the slave's condition was perpetual; it was everlasting. His status was passed on to his children. The Europeans believed that it was natural for some men to be free and others to be slaves. This, they believed, had been sanctioned by God.

With the 15th century begins new eras in the history of world civilization, modernism and the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. For a period of approximately 400 years, Africans were brought out of their homeland, stripped of most of their cultural identity to fill the labor needs of the colonies in the New World. It is estimated that about ten to eleven million African victims were subject to the atrocities of the peculiar institution

and as many, perhaps, lost their lives in the middle passage across Atlantic. Even before the English arrived on the Chesapeake in 1607, it is estimated that several hundred thousand slaves had been transported to the West Indies and South America by Spain and Portugal. Before the trade was outlawed in the 19th century, more slaves crossed the Atlantic than Europeans. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was designed to furnish labor on New World plantations. However, demands for slaves did not intensify in the New World until the creation of the large plantation system.

Between 1630 and 1680 most Caribbean possessions of the English, French, Dutch and Spanish were transformed into large sugar colonies. The result of this transformation was the result that the demand for labor increases. As the shortage of slaves supply increased, the slave then becomes a profit-making enterprise for the Europeans. The profitability of the trade had an impact on European diplomatic relations as European countries began to compete against each other for control of the trade. Forts were established along the west coast of Africa. Before the trade reached its intensity in the 17th century,

Portugal had already begun building slaving forts. The first of these forts was Elmina built in 1481 on the Gold Coast. One and one-half century later, this fort was captured by the Dutch. A primary fort was established along the Guinea coast by the Swedes and between 1652 and 1664, this fort passed through the hands of the Danes, the English and the Dutch. Hence, obtaining the rights to the trade on the African coast and monopolies for supplying European plantations in the New World with quotas became the major political issue of European diplomacy in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was the Dutch who were the primary victors in the 17th century conflict. In fact, most slaves crossed the Atlantic on Dutch ships.

In the North American colonies, the demand for slave labor was not significant until the latter part of the 17th century. The North American land holders, after learning of the success of the plantation system and

In 1663, the English broke into the profitable trade when Charles II granted a charter to the Royal Adventurers, which was a joint stock company headed by the Duke of York (who, by the way, just happened to be the cousin of Charles.) This company

was followed by the Royal African Company which had been chartered to compete with the Dutch and the French as well as supply slaves to the English colonies in North America. Between 1663 and 1703 Africans crossed the Atlantic with the brand "DY" burned into their bodies. During this time the Royal African Company established a monopoly over the trade. However, in 1680 the British parliament broke up the monopoly at the demand of individual business interests who wanted to participate in the trade. The trade grew tremendously. In 1680, 5,000 to 6,000 slaves were taken from Africa on English ships annually. In the first ten years of the no longer monopolized English trade, the number of slaves increased to above 20,000 slaves annually. And during the 18th century England emerged as the foremost slave-trading nation in Europe.

The African slave trade was one of the most significant phenomena in the history of the modern world because it involved the largest forced migration in the history of the world. The acquisition of some twelve to fifteen million captives on the coast of Africa between 1500s and 1870s helped to make possible the construction of one of the largest system of slavery

in human history. The Atlantic slave trade itself was to become remarkable for its businesslike methods as well its scale and destructiveness. Over a million and a half captives died during the Middle passage between Africa and the New World: an unknown, but large, number died prior to embarkation; and once in the New World between a tenth and a fifth of the slaves died within a year. Those who survived found their life drastically organized to secure from them as much labor as possible. The slave met their own subsistence needs in one or two days' work a week, working the remainder of the time for their owners—a rate of exploitation or surplus extraction with few parallels even among other slave systems. In most parts of the Americas overwork, malnutrition and disease took a grim toll, and the slave labor force has to be replenished by more slave purchases. Thus slavery helped to strengthen the colonial apparatus, build colonial empires of European nations and in generating the wealth that would later produce the Industrial Revolution. (The Making of New World Slavery, From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800, Robin Black Burn, 1997.)

A cultural diffusion and infusion took place when Africans were brought to the New World. As the African was Europeanized, so too was the European Africanized. In other words, the creolization process was taking place in that when Africans and Europeans came together in this new land, the culture of the two merged. To some extent we have the beginning of a brand new people and certainly the laying of the foundation of American culture.

What did the Europeans think of the Africans with whom they had developed a partnership? As a general rule, the Europeans thought that the Africans were inferior. But then, the Europeans saw all non-Europeans as inferior. They also thought that other Europeans were inferior. Was race an influencing factor? Perhaps it was to some extent, but there is some question as to whether or not race was the key factor. In the case of the trade, the Europeans knew that the Africans were not inferior to them and this was because Africans were the sellers, Europeans were the buyers and on the coast of Africa, Africans dominated the trade. They had the choice to sell.

In considering the impact of the trade on Africa, we find that the continent was affected in a number of ways.

- The trade was responsible for the depopulation of vast areas of land.
- The trade was responsible for chronic wars and the disruption of African states.
- The trade diverted attention from peaceful development of politics, the arts and culture through the preoccupation of slave wars and wanton destruction.
- The trade also reinforced prejudice and beliefs that the institution of slavery was the proper condition for the black race.
- And of course, some societies were completely destroyed by the trade. Others were built for the purpose of the slave trade and still other African communities were never seriously involved in the trade.

When Europeans made contact with Africa, it is true that their views were contrasting, however, it was also true that

Europeans supposed no natural inferiority in the African, no inherit failure to develop and mature, and yet myths were created about Africa and the Africans that reinforced the idea of the African inferiority. These myths took shape on the decks of the slaving ships and reinforced by the trade and by the institution of slavery. Racial contempt crept in when the free had to justify their material interest who in turn scorned those who were forced to accept an unnatural condition that gave the appearance of a natural inferiority. Consequently, the following myths:

1. Africans were naturally child-like in character and adjusted easily to the most unsatisfactory social conditions which they accepted readily and even happily.

2. Only the poorer stock of Africa was enslaved. The more intelligent members of the African communities raided were able to elude the slavers' net.

3. Because Africans were brought from all parts of Africa, spoke diverse languages, represented different cultures and customs and were separated from tribe members in the New World -thus

losing their tribal identity- there was no possibility of them establishing a common understanding or behavior.

4. Even if Africans had been given the opportunity to maintain their own customs and traditions. The cultures of Africa were so inferior, so savage that the apparent superiority of the European customs of their masters caused the Africans to give up their own traditions.

5. The Africans were a people without a past.

By the 1640s to the 1660s, the status of the reluctant immigrant in the American colonies was clearly defined. He was property. In 1641, Massachusetts, though it did not establish slavery in the New England colonies, sanctioned involuntary servitude. In the same year, Virginia became the first to condemn blacks to perpetual slavery and subsequently stipulated that the condition of the slave would be inherited by his children.

Between 1662 and 1702 similar laws were passed in the colonies of Maryland, Massachusetts, and South Carolina. These laws were known as slave codes. Between 1682 and 1739 additional slave laws were adopted by the colonies. These codes were designed to regulate and control the mobility of the slave.

In most colonies, the slave could not appeal or testify in civil or criminal cases involving whites. He could not participate in the trading or the buying or selling of goods. He was prohibited from lifting a hand against a white person even in self-defense. In some colonies, the slave was denied religious and educational instruction for he might use such knowledge in an attempt to attain freedom. Often, at the hands of his owner, the slave would suffer public ridicule, maiming and possibly even death for stealing or attempting to run away. Naturally, slaves were forbidden from carrying firearms or participating in military exercises.

The laws sanctioning slavery in the slave codes relegated the slave to the bottom of a color-class caste system in colonial America. By the mid-19th century, blacks, totally separated from society, were doomed to a color-caste that perpetually denied them both human and civil rights. Slave codes, laws, court decisions, and religious beliefs sanctioning slavery gave validity to the formation of a racially stratified society. They reinforced colonial notions held about those of African descent. Accordingly, the colonist viewed the slave as a savage, a descendant of a

primitive race who lacked self-direction and a sense of will. Adhering to the Elizabethan concept of the colors black and white, colonists associated the blackness of the slaves' skin with all that was evil and degrading. At the same time they maintained that they were God's Chosen People because of the whiteness of their skin. It is fair to conclude that the blackness of the slaves' skin served as a frightening contrast for the colonist in that it reminded them of all of the things they were not supposed to be. As the demand for labor increased and the influx of African immigrants became greater, the fear the colonists had of the slaves intensified, as blacks became an economic and social menace. Given the alleged inferiority of the slave and the belief that he could only be driven by force and could never be accepted as an equal, the colonists rationalized that social as well as physical distance had to be maintained and proceeded to take every precaution to classify and separate the races thereby creating an American version of apartheid.

References:

The Making of New World Slavery, From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800, Robin Black Burn, 1997.