
**RACIALIZED SLAVERY**

Slavery, or the state of bondage in which one person is chattel to another for the purpose of extracting labor, has existed since the beginning of recorded human history. Racialized slavery, or slavery based on a person’s perceived racial identity, emerged alongside the development of the concept of race. Historians have long been confounded by questions of race in the early modern world: how did early modern Europeans think about bodily difference? How did they employ visible physical and cultural differences to build the Atlantic system of race-based slavery? In conjunction with the expansion of trade and specifically the development of the Atlantic slave trade, race as a concept developed in the Western world between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries. Racialized slavery, a system of permanent servitude based solely on color, became a legalized practice in the early eighteenth century.

When the first twenty Africans arrived in the Jamestown colony in 1619 it is evident that their status as servant or slave was anything but clear. There is some reason to believe that the colonist viewed them as indentured servants to be held for a term of years and then freed. For a time the use of black African labor remained limited. Planters continued using European indentured servants, even when Africans began to steadily arrive in the colonies. However, by 1670 slave traders began to directly import African slaves to North America. The movement of slaves remained small for a time as the Royal African Company of England dominated the trade.

In 1697 the Royal African Company’s monopoly on the slave trade to North America ended. From that point forward the black population in North America began to rise as the
cost of slaves declined due to increased competition. By 1700 the slave population had reached 25,000 in British North America, with most living in the southern colonies. Within sixty years the slave population had exploded to approximately 250,000 and generally African slaves had replaced the use of white indentured servants.

Early in the seventeenth century the legal status of African slaves remained fluid. In some areas white indentured servants and black slaves worked together on comparatively equal terms. As the seventeenth century came to an end, a firm distinction appeared between blacks and whites. Increasingly a situation developed in which blacks would remain in bondage permanently and their children would also be slaves. The system was reinforced by the ever-increasing belief by whites regarding the inferiority of the black race.

At the start of the eighteenth century colonial assemblies began to pass what were known as “slave codes.” These codes granted masters nearly absolute authority over their slaves. The only factor that determined who was subject to the slave codes was color. Unlike the Spanish colonial governments where people of mixed race were granted a higher status than those of pure African ancestry, Anglo America failed to recognize such distinctions. These slave codes continued to evolve as the American colonies became the United States. Most southern states had various forms of slave codes, which regulated most aspects of slave life. Slaves were forbidden from holding property and could not leave their master’s property without permission. Nor could a slave be out after dark and the law forbade them from congregating with other slaves except for church. Additionally, slave codes prohibited slaves from defending themselves against white aggression. Whites were not supposed to teach slaves to read or write and slaves could not testify in court. With regard to the slave family, the slave codes failed to recognize that they existed. Slaves could not marry or divorce, and had no legal right to keep their children from being sold to another master. On the subject of
race, the codes were also clear and very rigid. They followed the one-drop rule, if an individual had one drop of black blood or African ancestry they were considered black. Often this could simply be the product of rumor, as there were cases of slaves appearing to be white who it was said had a single black great-grandparent. Whatever the case, by the antebellum period slavery in the southern United States was legally codified and fully based on a person’s perceived race.

Any review of recent scientific literature on race will confirm that scientists conclude that race is not an actual category of human biology, but rather a social construct whose meanings and uses have changed over time. Nevertheless, few people believe these findings and even fewer act as if race does not exist. Therefore one must look to the social sciences (history, philosophy, theology, etc.) for an explanation of how this concept developed and how it was tied to slavery.

According to some scholars, the roots of modern, western racism are based firmly in the Iberian Peninsula. They find the concept of race sprouting in the eleventh century and developing throughout the Enlightenment, this ideology came to fruition in the fifteenth century. Modern racism has tried to develop justification for the superiority of one group over another, and to base this superiority on biological, psychological and spiritual factors that may be permanent. Early “racial” views, such as those of the ancient Hebrews, the early Christians and the Greeks, either proposed a way for overcoming alleged inferiority by conversion to the superior group, as the Jews and Christians did, or by allowing for a process of assimilation, as the Greeks did for those they called “barbarians.”

The Muslims who dominated Iberia from the eighth to the fifteenth century shaped Spain and Portuguese ideas of race. Muslims, Jews and Christians of Iberian origin refined and sharpened language that suggested black inferiority. As these peoples traveled, traded
and enslaved those in sub-Saharan Africa, this concept of racial inferiority took shape. By the fifteenth century it was fully developed and accepted by many in the Muslim and Christian worlds. As the Spanish Christians began to regain control of the peninsula during the 1400s, racial thought began to include Jews. Large numbers of Jews had been forced to convert to Catholicism and two groups emerged: “Old Christians” and “New Christians”. Anyone who had a Jewish ancestor in the previous five generations was still a New Christian and faced restrictions that barred them from going to college, joining some religious orders and holding government jobs. The Inquisition was established in part to control the situation and keep Jews apart, regardless of what they believed. In its new form, modern racism developed two new and important characteristics. First, modern racism differed from Ancient racism in that minority or conquered groups had no way to leave the discriminated group. No longer were religious conversions allowed or any legal means available to become part of the dominant group. The second change comes about as a result of the Enlightenment through what David Hume referred to as the application of the experimental method to moral subjects, and produced the basic justification for modern racist theories with regard to people of color. This theory sees those non-European, dark peoples as inherently inferior. The theories offered first by the Spanish and Portuguese in the sixteenth century, mainly about Indians, and those offered in the seventeenth and eighteenth, mainly by the English, English-Americans, and the French about Africans, provides the basic structures of racist thought for the next centuries.

Scholars have also determined that religion played a key role in Western Europeans’ ideas on race. Both Americans and Europeans saw notions of racial division in the Bible, debating whether Jesus was white or black, whether Moses provided a precedent for miscegenation by marrying an Ethiopian woman, whether Adam was white, black, or red, and
other such topics. Initial encounters among early modern Europeans, Africans, and the inhabitants of the New World served to reinforce the Biblical notion of common human descent among European Christians. European commentators almost universally accepted the notion of monogenesis, the idea that all human beings descended from Adam. Despite this firm attachment to the principle of the unity of mankind, some Biblical interpretations pointed to a definite hierarchy among men. Of particular note was the supposed “Curse of Ham” or “Curse of Canaan,” a remarkable reading of a passage of Genesis in which Noah supposedly cursed the descendants of his son Ham to be the servants of his son Japhet. By and large, southern white Protestants claimed biblical sanction for slavery. They wanted to have their Bible and their slaves so they turned to the Curse of Ham/Canaan, Noah’s utterance that the children of Ham/Canaan (blacks) would serve the children of Japheth (whites).

When investigating white attitudes about race during the centuries of American slavery, scholars have frequently written of change over time, but the suggested chronologies have shown a good deal of variety. For some, due to their reading of English cultural prejudices, American racism dated from the arrival of the first black people in the English colonies in the seventeenth century. For others, slavery only became consciously based on “racial” ideology in the era of the American Revolution. Still others, making connections between intensive Abolitionist pressure against slavery from the 1830s onward and apparent increase in defensive slaveholder references to black biological inferiority, see explicit racialized slavery as a phenomenon of the antebellum period.

Numerous theoretical and ideologically approaches have been used by scholars who have sought to date the racialization of American slavery. From studies using psychology, sociology, economics, and cultural history to those based on Marxist or Weberian ideologies, scholars provide varied explanations about the origins “race” in America. Often some
scholars have used multiple disciplines together to further their research. A leading scholar of American attitudes about race, Winthrop Jordan, took what might be called a psycho-cultural approach in his research. He argued that English culture had for centuries been predisposed to weight “blackness” with negative associations (dirty, evil, sinister, fearful, deadly) and he felt that this cultural tradition, together with the “shock” of contact with Africans, led English colonist to see black people as natural slaves. Thus, from the beginning, American slavery was based on the idea of race.

Another historian, Edmund S. Morgan took a broad socio-economic approach. He saw the development of slavery as an institution based on race taking place as a planned class reaction by the Virginia elite following Bacon’s Rebellion. The rebellion had uncovered perilous divisions between the elite landowners and white laborers. In turn, the landowners embraced a policy of emphasizing the privileges of freedom for the white laboring class, while fixing enslaved black people at the bottom of the property based social structure.

Also taking a socio-economic approach, Ira Berlin tackles slavery from the perspective of a labor historian. Berlin sees race as being more than just socially constructed, for him it is also “historically constructed,” and reconstructed in the varying circumstances of labor struggle during centuries of slavery. For Berlin, the cotton revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represented a major period in the increasing pressure on slaves. He suggests that Southern whites solidified their image of blacks in these years. According to Berlin, slaveholders had in some earlier periods accepted a common humanity with African slaves, yet during the nineteenth century race was more rigidly defined thus confining blacks to a place of perpetual inferiority.

Historian Barbara J. Fields, a Marxist scholar, has much in common with the broad socio-economic approach but, because of her explicit interest in theorizing class and the
interconnections between race and class, her work has been important in bringing about more theoretical accuracy in writing about race and slavery. Fields suggests that psycho-cultural writers incorrectly see racism, not as a social construction, but rather as an ancient, wide-ranging force which is inherent in all societies. She argues that racism arises out of class interests, is a historical product, and has a debatable beginning. Fields maintains race is an ideology that develops to legitimize patterns of class interests and grew out of a unique bourgeoisie relationship and interests that unfolded during the American Revolutionary.

George M. Fredrickson has reservations with Marxist determinism and about a singular class analysis. He asserts that class alone cannot continuously explain racism. Rather, following the ideas of sociologist Max Weber, he combines class with the concept of a sense of “ethnic status,” representing group traditions and identities which, although produced by particular historical experiences, do not necessarily reflect current economic class interests.

Fredrickson suggests that, in investigating the links between American slavery and racism, we should distinguish between “societal” or implicit racism and explicit/rationalized or biological racism. He does not suggest that, in the first years of the colonial era, whites immediately responded to blacks with ideas of inbuilt racism. Rather, he contends that while societal racism developed from the late seventeenth century, it was only from the 1830s that explicit biological racism emerged. This resulted from the unique circumstances of the abolitionist attack on slavery and with pseudo-scientific researches into race, along with class-conscious elite initiatives. Slaveholders consciously exploited new biological ideas in order to appeal to white tribalism. In Frederickson’s view, this new racism formed the basis for a highly aggressive white worldview, with planter interests promoting the notion of the “master race.” Black slavery served the interests of all whites by shielding them from drudgery and
servitude. Supposedly, slavery then joined all whites together in a sense of being members of a “herrenvolk democracy” (democracy for the “master race”).

Researchers have been attentive to questions concerning the development of biological racism and the nature of racialized slavery. Some historians imply a basic continuity in biological racism, while others see various discontinuities. Critics of psycho-cultural historians suggest a delay in the onset of biological racism since they generally see racism as arising through a period of exploitation. Nonetheless, it may be that what actually happened did not fit with either the idea of an ancient racism or with the notion of delayed racism. It could be that for socio-economic rather than for psycho-cultural reasons there was a continuous patter of biological racism among white Americans. Also it could be that there was from the beginning a pattern of whites seeing black people in a range of differing ways. Whatever the cause, by the nineteenth century American slavery had become racialized slavery in the minds of the people and the legal codes which governed the practice.

See Also – indentured servitude; race; racism

Bibliography:


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