

The Subconscious Shift to Negro Slavery

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What was the principal cause of the switch from White indentured servitude to Black slavery as the primary form of unfree labor in the colonial Chesapeake? And why didn't Indian slavery ever reach the same scale as Black slavery? There was no sudden decision that all Blacks in the Chesapeake would become slaves, but rather a long and gradual transition period that produced nearly this result. Slavery was the least expensive, and therefore most profitable, form of labor. Due to the abundance of land and scarcity of labor, unfree labor was the cheapest and easiest way to maintain a stable work force. However, the economic benefits were secondary aims; monetary motives cannot explain the shift from Whites to Blacks as the primary laborers. Instead, subconscious prejudice drove the colonists to enslave Africans, resulting in the profitable system of unfree labor that thrived in the colonial South for two hundred years. Many historians argue that the process was in fact reversed; they argue that economic ambition caused slavery, which caused racism. While these arguments have some validity, they fail to account for the racial shift in the work force. Had the colonists' motives been primarily economic, Whites and Blacks alike would have been enslaved. Prejudice was the principal cause of the shift in the unfree labor force. Historically, the English had fought wars against other nations and foreign people. Thus, their captives were usually physically, culturally, and spiritually different from them. Because these war captives usually became enslaved, the colonists instinctively connected slavery with physical and religious "otherness."¹ To the Whites, the Negroes' Black skin and pagan religion categorized them as foreigners, which in turn made them eligible for slavery.

One might also think that because Native Americans had dark skin and their own religious views, they would be considered foreigners as well. This is an important point; if slavery was caused by racism and religious discrimination, then why did the institution of Native Ameri-

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can slavery fade long before Black slavery did? In fact, why did it fade even before it arose in full? If racial and religious prejudice were the primary causes of slavery, then there must also be an explanation for why some non-White non-Christians remained free while the Blacks were enslaved. Native Americans were not spared such religious discrimination, but the discrimination affected them differently in two ways. First, Indians may have been left alone because they were partially assimilated into the White, Christian culture. Native Americans seemed more familiar religiously and, at times, linguistically than Blacks did. Second, many local Indian slaves were traded to the West Indies, often in exchange for Black slaves or non-local Indian slaves. Indians, not Blacks, were shipped away because they revolted or escaped more often than Blacks did. Thus, the differing levels of assimilation and of rebellious behavior between Native Americans and Blacks caused the two populations to be affected by the colonists' prejudice in different ways. Because colonists either sympathized with Native Americans or despised their rebellion, Blacks came to be the "different" people to whom the "foreign" standard applied most harshly. Due to the racial and cultural differences between Blacks and Whites, the colonists unconsciously equated Negroes with slavery. While Native Americans were sometimes thought of as slaves for the same reasons, the Whites' subconscious prejudice affected Native Americans differently from Blacks because the two non-White populations differed from each other, and not only from the Whites.

Economic Ambition: Things Happen Because of Money

Some historians argue that economic convenience was the principal cause of the shift from White indentured servitude to Black slavery. They argue that the scarcity of labor combined with the abundance of land called for a more drastic form of unfree labor than servitude. One colonist confirmed this theory, writing,

I doe not see how we can thrive until we get a stock of slaves...for our children's children will hardly see this great continent filled with people, soe that our servants will desire freedom to plant for themselves, and not stay but for verie great wages ²

While it is true that colonists could not "thrive" without slave labor, it is not true that slavery was inevitable given the situation, or that it was necessary to survive. Economic ambition drove colonists toward slav-

ery, which would provide a cheap, stable work force. Laborers bound to the master forever, not merely employed or indentured for a finite length of time, provided this stability. Servants' indentures eventually expired, and planters had to pay them well to make them stay. As a result of their high wages, the workers quickly had enough money to buy property for themselves, so planters lost their work forces. For example, so many former indentured servants were able to purchase land that they made up about a third of Virginia's landowners in 1666.³ Slaves, on the other hand, were bound for life. Moreover, their children were slaves as well, creating even more stability in the labor force.⁴ Planters then owned a self-perpetuating work force, which granted security in times of scarce labor. Slaves were also less expensive than indentured servants. A labor inventory from 1648 shows that a White servant indentured for six years was worth £1500 while a "Negro man" with no specific indenture time, most likely a slave, was worth £2000.⁵ If a planter could purchase three lifetimes of work for the same price as the services of four servants for six years each, he would surely choose the three slaves over 24 man-years of indentured servants' labor.

Furthermore, Blacks may have been more self-reliant and skilled at farming than Whites were. A Virginian wrote in 1683, "Blacks can make [tobacco] cheaper than Whites."⁶ If there was a lower cost to production ratio for Blacks than there was for Whites, then the landowners could increase their revenue by merely using Black slaves instead of White indentured servants. Robin Blackburn argues that European servants demanded food, clothing, and shelter from their employers, which was a large financial burden. In contrast, Africans born in Africa or the West Indies were less expensive to maintain because their upbringings made them more capable of building their own shelters and growing, collecting, hunting, or catching their own food.⁷ A Massachusetts colonist wrote to his brother-in-law in 1645, "[W]ee shall maynteyne 20 Moores [Negroes] cheaper than one English servant," possibly estimating based on Blacks' and Whites' relative self-sufficiency.⁸ Not until 1705 did the Virginia Court require that masters clothe, shelter, and feed their slaves competently, which increased a slave's cost to its master.⁹ Before then, it would have been legally possible to minimize costs by providing inadequate care to slaves. Even after 1705, there was no strict enforcement mechanism to uphold the law, so people could still manage to provide less than satisfactory necessities for their slaves.

Despite the economic advantages of Black slaves over White servants, monetary motives alone fail to account for the fundamental shift in the labor force from White to Black. The prejudices that caused the transition to Black slavery brought about a desired economic outcome. Plantation slavery was, to be sure, a highly profitable business model that greatly reduced costs by eliminating the requirement to pay laborers and reducing slaves' clothing, food, and sleep to the minimum necessary for them to be able to work.¹⁰ While this was not the case on every plantation, the production that resulted from slaves' brutal mistreatment allowed the South's economy to thrive. But who could have fathomed this model beforehand and promoted it so much that the aspiration to such a model caused the shift to slavery? Profits were a rational justification for keeping slavery, but they were not a primary cause of its adoption in the first place. Economic motives surely took part in setting in motion, and later justifying, the switch from servitude to slavery, but the ultimate causes of the shift towards Black slavery were deeply and subliminally rooted in cultural history.

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Racism: It's a Black Thing

The shift towards Black slavery was caused by racism against Blacks. The court verdict of *Re Negro John Punch* discriminated between Blacks and Whites, sentencing three runaway servants, one Black and two Whites, to vastly different punishments for the same offense. The Black man, John Punch, was condemned to slavery for life while the Whites only had one year added to their indentures, and there was no explanation provided for the difference in sentence length.¹¹ Because there was no stated rationale for the court's disproportionate verdict, one can infer that there was nothing to justify it beyond mere racial prejudice. There was racism, and at least on this occasion, racism directly caused slavery; because John Punch was Black, he was sentenced to a lifetime of bondage while the punishment for the two Whites was much less severe. *John Punch* was clearly a case in which a fully conscious decision to enslave a Black based on race occurred, but it is possible to infer that if there were public, *de facto*, decisions to enslave people based on race, then there must also have been numerous *de jure* enslavements that stemmed from racism. In addition, a Virginia slave

code from 1661 eliminates the possibility of White *de jure* slaves. The code mentions “Negroes who [we]re incapable of making satisfaction by addition of time” because they were already enslaved for life, but fails to mention any Whites that were already serving for life.¹² It is then plausible to conclude that there were Blacks, but not Whites, officially enslaved for life because the Whites mentioned in the law were assumed to be able to add time to their indentures, suggesting that they were servants, while some Negroes were not able to extend their service time, suggesting that they were slaves.

Religious Difference

Part of the Blacks’ “foreignness” to Whites was their religion. England’s past war captives had religiously differed from their captors; because these captives were enslaved, the English subconsciously connected slavery with people of pagan religions. The fact that Blacks were not Christian, but some Native Americans had converted or at least pretended to desire baptism, caused Blacks and Native Americans to be considered differently in the colonists’ eyes. Non-Christians were not only more associated with the historical traits of slaves, but could also be more effectively dominated by their masters. As the English Reverend William Gouge noted in his 1622 book, *Domesticall Duties*, “Masters had a more absolute power [over non-Christian servants] than others.”¹³ Because religious difference would justify harsher methods that rendered better economic results, enslaving non-Christians would have been more appealing to planters. In fact, the Old Testament seemed to condone enslaving people of other nations or religions, saying, “[S]laves are to come from the nations around you . . . [You] can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.”¹⁴ Social conventions and religious sources alike sanctioned the enslavement of pagans, which, for the most part, made both Blacks and Indians eligible for such treatment. Indians, however, had been exposed to English missionary activity for a longer period of time than had been the case with Negroes. Thus, some of the Native Americans would have converted to Christianity while the others would have had enough knowledge of it to feign an aspiration to become a follower. Because of this, colonists would have perceived fewer religious differences between themselves and the Native Americans, resulting in a less striking impression of “otherness.” In fact, one Indian slave was set free

by the Virginia Assembly in 1662 because “he sp[oke] perfectly the English tongue and desir[ed] baptism.”¹⁵ That Indian was assimilated into White culture and therefore seemed less foreign, which made him exempt from the norm that applied to non-White pagans. Because this Native American, a foreigner to English culture, was freed from slavery, general racial differences appear not to have been the primary motive to enslave. That in turn suggests that Indians and Blacks were not necessarily treated the same way just because they were both of non-European race. Religious discrimination in tandem with racism led to the subconscious selection of Blacks as the overwhelming majority of slaves. Based on their understanding of the Bible, the Whites may have sympathized with that particular Indian’s desire to be baptized, becoming reluctant to enslave a Christian brother. The majority of Negroes, on the other hand, neither spoke fluent English nor heeded the Christian faith in the 17th-century Chesapeake. Consequently, because Africans had not been raised Christian and were foreign in skin color, language, manners, and customs, they were easier targets for enslavement. Further proof that religion was a primary factor in the determination of slavery is a 1705 law that requires all non-Christian immigrants, with few exceptions, to become slaves for life.¹⁶ Only non-Christians “in amity with her Majesty” or people who were free in predominantly Christian nations were exempted, which suggests that the ‘civilized’ non-Christians were accepted while the ‘uncivilized heathens’ were slave material.

Indians Exempted

Furthermore, it was only racism against Blacks, not racial prejudice in general, that caused the shift from White indentured servitude to Black slavery. Indians were not treated the same as Blacks. While both groups on the surface seemed completely foreign to the English, Black slavery endured but Native American slavery did not. What factors important to the Whites exempted Native Americans from the consequences Negroes suffered? It is not that the colonists were not racist against the Indians, but rather that their racism resulted in fear, which sometimes led them to react even more harshly to Indians than they did to Blacks. On the other hand, in some cases they were not racist, seeing in the Indians elements of their own culture with which they sympathized.

First, the Indians' threat to both the colonists' safety and social stability deterred Whites from enslaving them. Some Indians that failed to sell in 1627 were turned over to the colony and eventually hanged because they had stolen goods, attempted murder, and tried to run away.¹⁷ This is proof of the hell-raising and mischief some Native Americans caused, which in turn resulted in a stereotype that spread elsewhere. Due to the Indians' rumored menace and the conflicts they posed to the stability of colonial society, racism alone was not enough to cause them to become enslaved on a large scale. If Native Americans were only going to cause trouble for the colonies, why enslave them? Blacks, on the other hand, were less able to rise up against leadership at first; Negro slave insurrections were planned and some took place, but at least in Virginia during the early years, most were impeded or quickly quelled. Insiders betrayed both the 1663 Gloucester County conspiracy and a 1710 plot in exchange for their freedom. Leaders of the Northern Neck slave revolt of 1687 were executed. Only the Stono Rebellion of 1739 had some success. Even as late as 1800, a rebellion near Richmond was quickly stifled. Nat Turner's 1831 revolt was the first victorious slave revolt in Virginia.¹⁸ The results of racism played out in Blacks' fates because they were unable to successfully rebel while Native Americans stirred up enough trouble to discourage Whites from enslaving them.

The fact that Native Americans belonged to tribes caused White colonists to respect them as members of a separate nation rather than as individuals in the way that the colonists perceived the Blacks. Colonists tried to avoid enslaving members of amiable tribes, which demonstrated this respect. As a result, the colonists often enslaved those friendly tribes' enemies, who would then attack to retrieve their kin. Subsequently, colonists shipped their Native American slaves to the West Indies in exchange for Blacks, who had no one to set them free and were therefore less dangerous.¹⁹ Individuals did not command the sort of respect that a cohesive community inspired. A tribe of Native Americans, however, was a more daunting foe, and at the same time one that evoked a feeling of familiarity and even admiration. Indian tribes resembled separate nations, and the Whites may have identified with or respected this Native American quality of autonomy. On the other hand, because colonists had to live with their Negroes, they formed closer contacts, forcing them to view the Negro as a single person rather than as one of many tribesmen. Thus, because Blacks

lacked the Indians' strong sense of community, and therefore the Whites' subconscious esteem, Blacks could be viewed and dominated as individuals rather than as a group.²⁰ And this domination, of course, eventually led to the domination of the entire race.

Conclusion

The argument that racial and religious discrimination caused the shift from White indentured servitude to Black slavery gives a reason other than greed for slavery, but it also sparks another debate: what were the effects of slavery? Proximately, the most prominent effect was economic efficiency. For two hundred years—half of American history—the colonial and then national economy were in large part propelled by Southern agriculture. Ultimately, slavery caused the Civil War. Its most important legacy, however, is racism that has yet to subside. Slavery and the racism it engendered both entailed social, economic, and political subordination. Slavery was oppressive and dehumanizing. So how does one go about ending it? If the two major causes of Black slavery were racial and religious prejudices, and if the next most driving factor was economic ambition, then one could seek to eliminate those causes in order to stop the cycle. Alternatively, one could simply argue that slavery is morally repugnant on its face. The former approach would involve fostering religious and racial tolerance, essentially trying to rewire the human brain not to make judgment about others. The latter, the abolitionist argument from morality, would try to evoke empathy, relying on human virtue to solve a problem that human judgment and greed created. It would seem, however, that neither method is sufficient to truly abolish slavery, a persistent condition still hidden all around the world today. Can we, then, effectively change the mindset that so easily judges and subjugates others? Can we enforce international law that defines slavery as a crime against humanity? Can human greed be subdued enough to allow people to realize that enslavement cannot be justified by economic profit? Is there hope? If the answer to these questions is no, then slavery's effects must be permanent; but if not, then we must find a way to reverse them. An understanding of the causes that gave rise to slavery can help us find ways to end it. ●

Notes

1. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1968), 55.
2. Emanuel Downing to John Winthrop, Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1645, quoted in Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800* (New York: Verso, 1997), 238. In 1776, Adam Smith more clearly states the economic implications of free land in the colonies: Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York, 1937), 532.
3. Blackburn, 320.
4. [Sale of a Negro Girl], quoted in Jordan, 75.
5. [Inventory of Labor, 1648], reprinted in Jordan, 76.
6. Colonel [Nicholas] Spencer to Board of Trade, Virginia, 1683, quoted in Anthony S. Parent, Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Williamsburg, Va.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 60.
7. Blackburn, 320. For a comprehensive discussion of similar circumstances in South Carolina and in West Africa and the West Indies, see Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 120-24. Blacks applied their knowledge of wild plants and herbs, fish and fishing, weaving, and canoeing to provide for themselves and to aid their masters. For the benefits of a general Caribbean “seasoning” or African upbringing, see pages 26-7, 43, 46, 56, and 59-61.
8. Downing.
9. [Virginia slave code, 1705], reprinted in Kirsten Fischer and Eric Hinderaker, eds., *Colonial American History* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Inc., 2002), 134.
10. For an article that praises the cotton plantation as a business, see Frederick Law Olmsted’s “Observations on the South”, 1852-1854, reprinted in Paul Escott et al., eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South: Volume I: The Old South* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1990), 256-59. It is interesting to note that Olmsted, who visited a plantation in order to write the article, was horrified by

what he saw, but his editor, who had not witnessed what Olmsted had, made him write the article glorifying the plantation. It is not hard to see the economic advantages of slavery. Separating those advantages from the inhumanity and actually using them to justify the brutality is the difficult part, but it was done—with great success.

11. “[Re Negro John Punch,] 9th of July, 1640,” reprinted in Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 22.

12. [Virginia slave code, 1661], reprinted in Fischer, 130.

13. William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (London: William Bladen, 1622), quoted in Jordan, *White Over Black*, 56.

14. Lev. 25: 44, 46, New International Version. The colonists seemed to ignore other verses condemning slavery, such as Exodus 21:16 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10, and failed to heed verses that gave guidelines for treatment of slaves, such as Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1. By all means, this is not to deny that the Bible contains many verses explaining slaves’ duty to obey their masters, acceptable corporal punishment of slaves, and selling one’s own daughter into sex slavery, but it is vital to read within the context of the time period when applying principles to contemporary life.

15. [Order of the Virginia Assembly, 1662], quoted in Jordan, 94.

16. [Virginia slave code, 1705], reprinted in Fischer, 134.

17. Jordan, 90.

18. Mary Miley Theobald, “Slave Conspiracies in Colonial Virginia,” *Colonial Williamsburg*, Winter 2005-2006, <http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter05-06/conspiracy.cfm> (accessed February 23, 2009).

19. Jordan, 89-90. The colonists were still reluctant to trade away Indian slaves in order to avoid conflict with local tribes and protect their deerskin trade. For more information, see Wood, *Black Majority*, 38-39.

20. *Ibid*, 90.

