

Colonial America: Building a Racial Foundation

I. The period of transition

The seventeenth century was a critical transition period in the development of European racism. The roots of racism had been laid down in the conquest of the New World. But the dehumanizing images of brutal and backward Indians put forward to justify Spanish colonization had not yet hardened into racial ideology with its categories of superiority and inferiority.

European philosophers were still debating the merits of "civilization" versus the "state of nature." The Christian clergy were pondering the possibility of dark skin color being the mark of the Biblical Ham's curse, with Africans as his descendants. But the great African empires of Mali and Songhay were still of too recent memory to attribute to all Africans an innate inferiority.

There was, therefore, nothing fixed about the position of Black people when the English began their settlement drive in what became the American colonies. During the period of European exploration, people of African descent had entered the "New World" not only as slaves, but as "conquistadors" (as Spanish explorers and colonizers were called). They took part in Pizarro's expedition in Peru and were with Cortes when he marched into Mexico, Menendez when he penetrated Florida, and Balboa when he beheld the Pacific Ocean. Estevanico was a Black explorer who led Spain into the territories of New Mexico and Arizona.

When the British began to plant their colonies in North America, the legal meaning of "slave" was unclear and there was no legal distinction between Black people and everyone else. Africans came as captives to Virginia in 1619, but some also came as free immigrants who owned land and for a brief period had all the "rights" of pioneers. People of all "races" were being enslaved in the mid 1630s. It was not always clear whether slavery was for life or for shorter periods.

The 1641 Body of Liberties in Massachusetts Bay Colony attempted to clarify the situation. It stated that slavery was only for "strangers" and then as punishment for crime or captivity in war.

However, before the end of the seventeenth century people of color and those considered "white" would be treated very differently in the colonies. The need for huge supplies of labor to establish English domination over land where other

people were already living, the techniques of dehumanization and dispossession which Britain had already pioneered in Ireland, and the desire to maximize profits combined to shape America as a white man's country, built with Black labor.

II. The British in Ireland

By the time the British were settling North America, the conquest of Ireland was already some 500 years old. Demeaning views of the Irish – considered by the British to be a "wicked race" that could only be "subdued by force" – were well established. ¹

Michael Stevenson has described "the systematic devastation of the Irish" by British colonists under the first Queen Elizabeth. It included "the routine burning of crops and villages, the regular killing of women and children and cutting off of heads, as well as the willingness to pay bounties for them." ² Techniques used against the Irish by the English leader Oliver Cromwell in the mid seventeenth century would be immediately transferred across the Atlantic. The English in Ireland promoted taking the heads or scalps of Irish leaders. They raided villages and withheld subsistence to starve people into submission and push them off their land. Methods of warfare later cited as proof of Indian "savagery" were introduced into the American colonies by British settlers, some of whom had traveled to North America by way of Britain's Irish "plantations."

Stereotypes were also recycled. In the words of Nicholas Canny, "the same indictments being brought against the Indians, and later against the blacks, in the New World...had been brought against the Irish....Both Indians and blacks, like the Irish, were accused of being idle, dirty and licentious" [lacking morals]. ³

People were dehumanized not because of "race" in the biological sense, but because they were in the way, or to force them to serve the needs of the colonizer. The heart of the issue was not simple prejudice against a people depicted as "idle" or "dirty," but relationships of power and submission. "Race" was defined and mobilized to justify colonial domination.

The historian David Brion Davis has summed up where "race" serving the interests of power has led the United States:

"If American expansion required the forcible dispossession of the Indian, the American economy was long dependent on a system of coerced labor which

began with the violent seizure of native Africans and which led to a militant society dedicated to the preservation of white supremacy and terrorized by the fear of racial war." ⁴

This is not a picture that finds a home in textbooks or co-exists easily with our founding myths. But this history is fundamental to the nation we became. To recognize it is to take an important step in the fight against racism today.

III. The British in America

By the early seventeenth century, the various European powers contending for domination over New World territory were developing legal structures to justify their actions. They generally agreed that only uninhabited land could be called "Crown land" and taken over outright. Inhabited land belonged to the indigenous people, who could be encouraged to sell it or part with it during treaty negotiations. Force of arms should not be used against native inhabitants, except in a "just war" – if citizens of the Crown had been attacked, or if the indigenous people refused to allow missionaries to try to convert them to Christianity or refused to trade with representatives of the Crown. If the colonists were forced to fight a "just war," then taking land could be considered valid compensation.

The historian David Stannard has documented the colonial military campaigns which, without "just" cause, practically exterminated Powhatan's people near Jamestown, Virginia. In Massachusetts, the Puritans behaved as if the slaughter of native peoples was part of their divine mission to "subdue the howling wilderness." In 1636, they unleashed the ruthless Pequot War, first attacking the Narragansett on Block Island, because they were suspected of involvement in the death of a settler, John Oldham. The fact that the chief had vowed to find those responsible was no deterrent. The colonists, led by Captain John Endicott, then turned on the Pequot, who had nothing to do with Oldham's death, but eventually paid for it with up to 700 of their own.

The renown Puritan clergyman Cotton Mather later gave thanks that "in a little more than one hour, five or six hundred of these barbarians were dismissed from a world that was burdened with them." ⁵ The handful of Pequot survivors were shipped to the West Indies to be sold for slaves. The ship captain who had carried them into slavery brought back to Boston "what he had received in exchange: some cotton, some salt, some tobacco, 'and Negroes, etc.'" ⁶ The

history of the conquest of the New World was continuing as it had begun: with genocide and slavery.

To Jeffrey Amherst, the British general who gave his name to a town in western Massachusetts, genocide was a principled policy option. Speaking about the rumors of native unrest in 1762, Amherst announced:

"Upon the first Hostilities they May be Guilty of, they Must not only Expect the Severest Retaliation, but an Entire Destruction of their Nations, for I am firmly resolved, Whenever they give me an Occasion to Extirpate them Roots and Branch." ⁷ He then ordered that small pox be sent to wipe out the "disaffected tribes."

IV. Who was "white" and free?

The word "white" was first introduced in the Americas to distinguish European settlers and traders from native peoples. In the first half of the seventeenth century, it was not clear who it referred to. Did the English, for instance, view the Irish brought to the colonies to work as indentured servants as fellow "whites"? What about their status as members of a "wicked race"? Should their treatment be fundamentally different from the way Black people were treated?

What was clear in the early years of settlement was that it was very difficult to attract and hold a substantial labor force. Once it became obvious that the native peoples could not be successfully enslaved – it was too easy for them to be rescued or to escape – other forms of forced labor were sought. At a time of severe economic stress in England, Ireland and the German states, with workhouses and prisons crammed full, labor recruiters would round up Europeans to be sent to America as indentured servants. In order to pay for the trip, people agreed to work for a certain length of time – usually four to seven years depending on the colony, after which they would be given up to fifty acres of land and declared "free."

The need for labor was so huge that it could not be met through voluntary migration. Many Europeans were simply kidnapped and forced onto ships bound for the American colonies. Prisoners of war and convicts were shipped over and children, vagrants and beggars were rounded up and sold as indentured servants to merchants. In Virginia, indentured servants were known as "white slaves," although they were technically freemen and some indentured

servants were Black. Conditions of employment and punishments were harsh. For instance, being absent from church could lead to a sentence of one year's enslavement. For running away the term of servitude would be made much longer.

David Roediger in this important work *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) has described the seventeenth century as a period in which "in certain places and at certain times...the 'lower sorts' of whites appear to have been pleasantly lacking in racial consciousness." There was considerable social mixing among white and Black indentured servants and slaves before 1680. The transition to an openly racist society, in which the color line was sharply drawn at the bottom of society, had not yet been made.

But it was not long in coming. The motive was one which had fueled the earlier stage of the European conquest of the Americas – the need to extract wealth from the colonial adventure. The plantation system in the West Indies proved that enormous profits could be made from slave labor. By the seventeenth century, the African slave trade was the way to quick wealth for merchants in Portugal, Holland, France and England. The North American colonies had an insatiable need for labor – why not supply it with a work force which would not be easily able to blend into the crowd? Which would have no pre-existing ties with indigenous peoples and hence nowhere to run? And one which could be bought for life, and one just for the period of five to seven years?

These economic arguments proved persuasive at a time when the swiftly expanding capitalist system was in search of new sources of raw materials and markets to maximize profits. Sugar and tobacco production would serve the interests of southern plantation owners and merchants in New England and England engaged in the slave trade. And of course slavery could always be justified on religious grounds. Bringing Africans as slaves to North America was a way of saving their souls and introducing them to the benefits of "civilization."

V. Towards a racial social order

In the 1660s, Virginia and Maryland passed the first in a series of laws which would eventually create fully color-coded societies built by slave labor. These laws are detailed by A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. in his important work, *In the Matter of Color*, which describes the various legal approaches to slavery taken in Massachusetts, New York, South Carolina, Georgia and Pennsylvania. These

early statutes making a distinction between "negro slaves" and "Christian servants" imply that slavery is perpetual. In 1667, a Virginia law declared that "baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage." From then on, skin color – and not heathenism – would be used to justify slavery. In 1662, all imported non Christians were made slaves and, in Higginbotham's words, "slavery was placed squarely on a racial foundation."⁸

By this time, a slave code had been compiled in Virginia. This model legislation of 1680 prevented Black people from moving around freely, from carrying arms, or raising a hand against any Christian. Subsequent codes severely penalized interracial relationships, provided that the child of a slave would also be enslaved, limited a master's right to free his slaves and drew a firm line dividing servants and slaves.

As the institution of slavery was defined in law, so, gradually, was the color "white." In the process, white and Black people were driven far apart. White servants ("Christians") were legally given rights to a certain standard of treatment. A naked white Christian, for instance, could not be publicly whipped. Black persons were meanwhile reduced to the status of non persons, who could be killed without any penalty to the white perpetrator. Any slave who ran away or who was found violating any provision of the codes could be viciously punished. Slaves were simply chattel, or property. They had been written out of the human race.

¹ Bill Rolston, "The training ground: Irish conquest and decolonisation," *Race & Class*, April-June 1993.

² Michael Stevenson, "Columbus and the war on the indigenous peoples," *Race & Class*, January-March 1992.

³ Nicholas Canny, "The ideology of English colonisation: from Ireland to America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 30, 1973, quoted in Bill Rolston, p. 17.

⁴ David Brion Davis, *From Homicide to Slavery, Studies in American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 46.

⁵ David Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), quoting from Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, p. 114.

⁶ David Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 115.

⁷ Quoted in Milan Rai, "Columbus in Ireland," *Race & Class*, April-June 1993, p. 32.

⁸ A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 37.

