

THE ROOTS OF RACISM

I. Ancient attitudes toward "color"

Prejudice against people who look different goes back to the beginning of recorded history. Although the color "black" was associated by the ancient Greeks and early Christians with the underworld and demons, scholars such as Frank Snowden, Jr. maintain that there was on the whole a favorable view of African people in antiquity, as can be seen in the poems of Homer and the practices of the early Christian Church which declared that God had created all people alike.¹

The oldest images of Black Africans in ancient Egypt show them well integrated into society. "Black as a color is valued positively in Egyptian culture, as the color of fertility (dark as the silt of the Nile)," writes Jan Nederveen Pieterse in his book *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*.

After the downfall of the ancient Roman Empire, the main rift dividing Europeans and other peoples was not race, but religion. Within a few centuries, Islam became the new imperial force and the main enemy of Christian Europe. By the time of the Crusades, the Arabic-speaking world of Islam was demonized by Europeans as barbaric, degenerate, and intrinsically different from the Christian West.

II. The Moorish "civilizing mission"

The terms "Moorish" and "Moors" referred to people who originated in Morocco. But it was used in a very imprecise sense and covered a wide variety of peoples, white, brown and black, from North Africa and the Middle East. They had been converted to the religion of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. They soon moved into Africa, China and India, and spread across the Middle East and Europe into the Iberian Peninsula (current day Spain and Portugal). They even crossed the Pyrenees into France. These largely Arabic – speaking people arrived in Europe in the early medieval period, what used to be called the "Dark Ages." They would dominate parts of the continent for 800 years.

Arab scholars took the lead in translating the works of the classical Greeks, and building upon the learning of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Jews, Chinese

Persians, Indians and Africans. They introduced this wisdom of the past and their own scientific and mathematical achievements into Europe. As early as the ninth century, Arab astronomers assumed that the world was round, and calculated its diameter and circumference with considerable accuracy. They developed the compass, quadrant and astrolabe, without which the European voyages of "discovery" could not have taken place. In Spain, the Moors improved agriculture, public health and sanitation, established libraries and built irrigation systems and beautiful cities like Seville and Grenada.

For hundreds of years, then, the Arabic Empire "civilized" a large part of the globe. Societies were created in which Muslims, Jews and Christians coexisted in a manner that was rarely equaled in subsequent years. Many Jews also spoke Arabic and fully participated in the intellectual flowering of the period. Some – like the Talmudic scholar Rabbi Moses Maimonides of Cordoba (Spain) – were valued advisers to Muslim rulers.

III. Slavery before Columbus

In one important respect Europe before the period of colonial expansion initiated by Columbus' voyages resembled what came after. It heavily depended on slave labor.

The figures for the numbers of people enslaved in ancient Greece are astonishing – perhaps three or four slaves for each free household, according to historian David Stannard.² Stannard estimates that between the first and second centuries A.D., nearly half the population of Italy were slaves, mostly captives taken in Rome's wars. People of all ethnicities were enslaved, with the majority being white.

In the early Middle Ages, many slaves were taken from the central European lands of the Slavs. William the Conqueror's population survey known as the Domesday Book reveals that in the eleventh century, one out of every ten people in Britain was enslaved. The Christian Church gradually came to oppose the enslavement of Christians, and conversion to Christianity became a possible route out of slavery.

Anyone who has visited the magnificent Mesquita (mosque) in the Spanish city of Cordoba, and seen evidence that the slaves who were building it were chained to the columns at night, knows that slavery should not be idealized in the years before Columbus. Yet it did differ fundamentally from the kind of

slavery introduced in the wake of European expansion. Slaves might have been regarded as infidels, or barbarians, who could be treated with great cruelty, but they were not seen as a class of essentially inferior beings.

Neither was slavery necessarily defined as something which would last forever and be handed down from one generation to the next. Prisoners of war who were enslaved were often made to perform domestic service for a set period of time. Often considered members of families with whom they lived, such captives could eventually get all the rights of freemen and even inherit family wealth. In short, slaves were not regarded automatically as chattels or commodities. They were not outcasts from the human race.

IV. 1492: Defeat of the Moors

In 1492, three momentous events occurred in Spain which all contributed to the rise of racism. The Moors were defeated by the Christians at Grenada, the Jews were expelled from Spain and Columbus reached the lands that were to be named the Caribbean after the Caribs, the first group of people in the "New World" to be demonized as cannibals, reduced to slavery and destroyed.

Aggression, terror and social insecurity were all magnified in the century following 1348, when the bubonic plague eliminated a third of the population of Europe, and famine and the Hundred Years War took a heavy toll of the survivors. European society was in chaotic upheaval.

As what was called the Christian "Reconquista" slowly took Spain back from the Moors, the Islamic control of significant portions of Europe was nearing its end. Christians from Europe - with Portugal taking the lead - were meanwhile establishing direct trading and diplomatic contacts with Africa. By the middle of the fifteenth century, Africans were being sent to Portugal, first as gifts to the ruler, Prince Henry, and then as slaves. The image of "Africa" in Europe would soon be transformed.

In January 1492, the Christian rulers King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella defeated the Moors at Grenada, their last stronghold. At first, the Christian monarchs promised that Moorish culture and institutions would be protected. But in 1502, the King and Queen ordered the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula. They could only stay if they converted to Christianity. Many of those who did convert were later charged with secretly remaining faithful to

Islam. Over the next century, more than a million people who traced their ancestry to North Africa and the Middle East were forced out of Spain.

V. 1492: Expulsion of the Jews

What the King and Queen of Castille did to the Moors had already been done to the Jews. On March 31, 1492 the Christian rulers decreed that Jews who refused to convert to Christianity should be expelled from Spain. As many as 200,000 people refused to convert and were ordered to leave by August 2nd, the day before Columbus' first voyage. The voyages of Columbus were largely financed by property confiscated from Spain's Jewish population.

Jews had lived in the Iberian Peninsula for 1000 years. They were among the oldest permanent settlers in the region. But in Christian parts of the Peninsula they were considered "infidels," and were not permitted to hold land, to engage so called "Christian trades" like masonry or carpentry, or join the trade guilds. Instead, they served the kings of Castille as tax collectors and money-lenders.

In order to fit into life more fully, thousands of Jews converted to Christianity (they were called "conversos") in the centuries before 1492. The "conversos" included the family of Bartolome de Las Casas, who later became a Catholic priest and the champion of the indigenous peoples or "Indians" in the "West Indies" (as the lands Columbus "discovered" were called). A particularly zealous "converso" became the head of the Spanish Inquisition in Seville. The Inquisition was authorized by the Pope in 1478 to act against "heretics" who were believed to be undermining the faith. Over 8,000 people, most of them "conversos" who were thought to be insincere in their embrace of Christianity, were burned to death by the Inquisition by the dawn of the next century

The "anti-Semitism" (hatred of Jews) which led to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and their torture and killing by the Inquisition was on the surface a matter of religious persecution. But there were also economic reasons for anti-Semitic outbursts that occurred from time to time around Europe. A key to understanding anti-Semitism and how it was manipulated in feudal Europe is the world "usury."

Usury refers to the practice of lending money for interest, something which we take for granted today. But during the medieval feudal period – before the economic system of capitalism emerged - the medieval Christian church maintained that usury was a sin. Because Jews did not see it as such, they came

to play a central role in medieval Europe as merchants, financial advisers and money-lenders to kings and emperors.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the development of capitalism, private individuals began producing goods for the market in order to get a profit. They needed capital to invest. As the economy changed, the ban on usury was finally abandoned by the Catholic Church, and the unique economic function that Jews had performed in Europe was brought to an end. A new Christian "bourgeoisie" (traders and businessmen who lived in the towns) came to see Jews as their leading economic rivals. Anti-Semitism was cultivated in order to eliminate economic competitors. Over the years, Jewish businessmen were reduced to the status of small money-lenders or pawnbrokers. In these roles they could easily be made the scapegoats for popular discontent and blamed for all social problems. Meanwhile, the records of who owed them money could be conveniently wiped out in riots and vicious "pogroms."

With the growth of capitalism, anti-Semitism emerges as a particular form of racism in Europe. There is no such thing as a Jewish "race," or any other pure "race" for that matter. But racial stereotypes spread with popular anti-Semitism. They drew upon the folk memory connecting Jews with usury and commercial dominance, and stoked fears of Jewish conspiracy and financial power.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century saw the expansion in Europe of industrial capitalism. Many people were driven from the land and forced to work in factories in towns. Anti-Semitism was used to shift the blame from those who were actually profiting from their suffering. Fascist regimes in the twentieth century used anti-Semitism to unite the "in group" (us) against the "out group" (them), blaming "bad" Jewish capital and an international "conspiracy" for homegrown economic problems.

Anti-Semitism and the sort of anti-Black racism that developed in the era of Columbus both rely for their power on prejudice, on stereotypes and the fanning of hostility and fears. But the two do not serve identical functions. Anti-Semitism is largely a scapegoating device used against a people regarded for more than a thousand years as outsiders, while racism dehumanizes a people in order to render them powerless and justify their exploitation.

V. 1492: Columbus' pursuit of "merchandise"

On April 17, 1492, less than a month after the Spanish edit expelling the Jews from Spain, Columbus (or Don Cristobal as he was known in Spain) signed a business deal with the King and Queen which detailed the pay he would receive for his voyage. The deal included the following provision:

" Item, that of all and every kind of merchandise, whether pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and other objects and merchandise whatsoever, of whatever kind, name and sort, which may be bought, bartered, discovered, acquired and obtained within the limits of the said Admiralty, Your Highnesses grant from now henceforth to the said Don Cristobal, and will that he may have and take for himself, the tenth part of the whole, after deducting all the expenses which may be incurred therein, so that of what shall remain clear and free he may have and take the tenth part for himself, and may do therewith as he pleases, the other nine parts being reserved for Your Highnesses..."³

In other words, Columbus would get to keep one-tenth of everything he "discovered" or "acquired." With this agreement, the inhabitants of the lands Columbus bumped into were as good as doomed.

In the mid to late fifteenth century, as chronic warfare, disease, famine and social unrest combined to keep the population of all of Europe at no more than seventy million, scholars estimate that the population in North and South America was one hundred million or more. Between eight and twelve million people – who would soon be called "Indians" - were believed to live north of present-day Mexico. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, containing 350,000 people, had five times the population of either London or Seville.

The island which today is divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic had an estimated eight million people when Columbus landed there and called it Hispaniola. By 1518, fewer than 20,000 of the native inhabitants were left alive, and virtually no one was left by 1535.

When Columbus first saw a group of the indigenous inhabitants called Tainos (or Lukayos) on October 12, 1492, he reached in a way that gave no hint of what was to come. He wrote in his journal that they impressed him as "a very handsome race...their eyes were large and very beautiful, not black, but the color of the inhabitants of the Canaries....they were straight limbed without exception."

Columbus later was to write to Queen Isabella in these terms:

"They are a very loving race and without covetousness and suitable to any use and I declare to your Highnesses that there is not a better country nor a better people in the world. They love their neighbors as they do themselves and their speech is the softest in the world being always accompanied by smiles." ⁴

They were, he reported, ripe for conversion to Christianity, having no religion themselves.

How can we understand the imminent extermination of this "loving race" of potential Christians? During his second trip to the New World In 1495, he made two decisions that would lead to genocide. His greed for gold led him to order that each Taino 14 years of age or older had to produce a "hawk's bell" full of gold every three months. Those who failed to meet this quota in a land where there was in fact little gold to be found had their limbs cut off and bled to death or were torn apart by trained attack dogs. Methods of overt terror were employed to convince the Tainos that the Spanish meant business.

During the same year, increasingly frustrated by his failure to find large quantities of gold, Columbus rounded up more than a thousand peaceful and unarmed Tainos and sent 500 of them to be sold in Spain as slaves. He called them "a most profitable merchandise" and wrote to the Queen in 1496 that "we can send from here in the name of the Holy Trinity all the slaves and Brazil wood which could be sold. We can sell 4,000 slaves who will be worth, at least 20 million." ⁵

He hoped to overcome Queen Isabella's religious scruples against enslaving human beings by arguing that "the savage and cannibalistic Caribs should be exchanged as slaves against livestock, etc., to be provided by merchants in Spain." By enslaving Caribs, he wrote, Spain could save their souls and save the gentle Tainos from being preyed on by these fierce neighbors.

There are several problems with this rationale. Columbus had actually shipped Tainos known as Lukayos to Spain for sale as slaves, not those people he called Caribs. Furthermore, there was in fact on great distinction between the neighbors – scholars have written that they were indistinguishable from each other. But because the Caribs, unlike the Lukayos, fought back when they encountered Columbus during his first voyage by shooting arrows at his ships, they were demonized as savage cannibals.

There is in fact no firm evidence that the Caribs did practice cannibalism. But attributing cannibalism to the Caribs served Columbus' purpose. It opened the way for a form of mass slavery which could be profitable – he was looking for a way to enlarge his ten percent share of the plunder – and justified on the grounds that enslavement could benefit both the colonizers and those who were not fully human.

VI. The African slave trade

Fifty years before Columbus' conquest, African captives seized by the Portuguese were already being sold at auction. Shortly before he crossed the Atlantic, Columbus sailed on a Portuguese ship to the African coast of Guinea, where he saw gold and enslaved Africans waiting to be loaded on board.

By 1510, as indigenous "Indians" were dying out, King Ferdinand passed a decree permitting a shipment of 250 Africans to be sent to the New World. Bartolome de Las Casas had at first welcomed the African slave trade. His father and uncle had accompanied Columbus on his second voyage, and he had gone to the West Indies in 1502 as a settler to share in the spoils. In 1510, he became the first priest to be ordained in the New World. Appalled at the cruelty he saw around him, he soon became the defender of the indigenous people. He thought the African slave trade would be a way of saving the Tainos from extinction.

But he soon realized that enslaving Africans was as evil as enslaving Tainos, and he raised his voice against the practice. By then it was too late. The New World plantation system had become wholly dependent on African slave labor. African slaves who toiled in the sugar cane fields were seen as mere commodities to be bought and sold. A racist ideology was rapidly evolving which justified their enslavement on the grounds that they were "heathens" (not Christians), and that the color of their skin was a badge of "natural inferiority."

In the centuries to come, people of European descent would invent the doctrine of "white supremacy," justify it with the discoveries of "science," and reap rich economic rewards.

¹ Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: the Ancient View of Blacks* (Harvard University Press, 1983).

² David Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 180.

³ John Noble Wilford, *The Mysterious History of Columbus* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 96.

⁴ Columbus' writings are quoted in Jan Carew, "Columbus and the origins of racism in the Americas: Part One," *Race & Class*, Spring 1988.

⁵ Quoted in Jan Crew, "Columbus and the origins of racism in the Americas, Part Two," *Race & Class*, July-September 1988, p. 49.

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