3) Which is more to blame for the African slave trade: capitalism or human nature?

The African slave trade was a brutal period in human history where the African people saw many injustices. It was a trade that separated many families and saw many people unnecessarily subjected to forced and unwelcomed labor. **Regarding the African slave trade, capitalism was more to blame than human nature itself, as it would seem that people had a tendency to view Africans as mere tools or products to be used for financial gain rather than as actual human beings.**

One example of the slave trade’s harsh nature can come from the accounts of Leo Africanus (who was born as Al-Hasan and later given another name). In one account, Leo Africanus describes the harsh actions of a king of Timbuktu with command of his army, stating, "They often skirmish with those who refuse to pay tribute and whomever they capture they sell as slaves" (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 69). With this account, Leo simply describes how the African king has shown more concern over his revenue than with people. While the king does not inherently appear to hate other groups of Africans, he has a goal of collecting tribute and so he and his men simply sold those who do not comply or impede that goal. In another account, Leo describes the kingdom of Borno, where the king there had wanted many horses, exchanging slaves for them. Leo reports they would, "sometimes give fifteen or twenty slaves for a horse" (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 70). Again, this example illustrates how slaves were nothing more than commercial products, as they equate the labor of 15 to 20 people to the value of a horse (and they purchased many horses in this manner). These accounts show us that African human life was easily disposable and sellable to anyone by consideration.

In another description of Africa by Leo Africanus, the king of Gao reportedly had "a large number of concubines and slaves" (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 70). In the king's case, the slaves are luxuries by consideration. It almost seems like the subjects of the kingdom were nothing but a tool for financial gain as well, as certain subjects like herdsmen and shepherds, "are continually burdened by heavy taxes; to the point that they scarcely have anything left on which to live" (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 70). Again, the king may not hate his subjects or see them as people to punish. The issue may be that people don’t see the negative externalities that their trade has caused. When people purchase or sell things, they often see the amount those things cost or earn them, but they don’t see the effects on bystanders. With capitalism, there are often external costs from a market activity that are imposed on non-participants. For example, when people use vehicles to get things done like deliver things or go to work, they benefit from it but they also pay for it in terms of pollution. Pollution is not something that people see directly and so it can be quite a problem.

In another source (this time by King Afonso’s account), King Afonso complains about the slave trade in a way that matches the modern concept of the tragedy of the commons phenomenon, an economic principle. He describes how this capitalistic venture has lead people to enslave others indiscriminately, stating, "the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives'' (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 77). While the king had no issues with the trade at first, hoping to build a prosperous kingdom, the continuance of the trade lead to many concerns, like depopulation. The king also grew concerned about his monopoly on slaves. In another complaint, King Afonso mentions branding and white men not being able to state where they purchased their slaves from (this implies that they were kidnapping people). The depopulation issue itself is best explained by an economic principle known as the tragedy of the commons, where goods that are rival in consumption, but non-excludable have a tendency to be depleted. One example of this is the endangerment of the cod population by fishermen who compete to catch as much as they can for their own self-interest. Fishermen would no doubt like a sustainable population of cod for future harvests, but conservation on the part of one boat becomes irrelevant as other boats would simply catch what the other left behind.

King Joao the Third, a Portuguese king, provides some justification for this slave trade by stating that the amount of people they take is negligible and has no financial effect. He states that, "I am told of the great size of Kongo and how it is so populated that it appears that not a single slave has left" (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 77). Despite some of his protests, King Joao seems to understand, telling Afonso, "If there is now to be no trade in the Kongo at all, and only one ship a year is to come there, this and more shall be as you desire" (The Human Record, Ch. 3, pg. 78). While he understands Afonso's concerns, King Joao still wants to keep this market open and thus tries to negotiate some terms for better trading, thus showing some humanity yet interest in capitalism at the same time.