

Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*,

“Debating the Past: The Origins of Slavery”

THE debate among historians over how and why white Americans created a system of slave labor in the seventeenth century—and how and why only African Americans should be slaves—has been an unusually lively one. At its center is a debate over whether slavery was a result of white racism, or whether racism was a result of slavery.

In 1950, Oscar and Mary Handlin published an influential article comparing slavery to other systems of “unfreedom” in the colonies. What separated slavery from other conditions of servitude, they argued, was that it was restricted to people of African descent, that it was permanent, and that it passed from one generation to the next. The unique characteristics of slavery, the Handlins argued, were part of an effort by colonial legislatures to increase the available labor force. White laborers needed an incentive to come to America; black laborers, forcibly imported from Africa, did not. The distinction between the conditions of white workers and the conditions of black workers was, therefore, based on legal and economic motives, not on racism.

Winthrop Jordan was one of a number of historians who later challenged the Handlins' thesis and argued that white racism, more than economic interests, produced African slavery. In *White Over Black* (1968) and other works, Jordan argued that Europeans had long viewed people of color as inferior beings. Those attitudes mi-

grated with white Europeans to the New World, and white racism shaped the treatment of Africans in America from the beginning. Even without the economic incentives the Handlins described, in other words, whites would have been likely to oppress blacks in the New World.

Peter Wood's *Black Majority* (1974), a study of seventeenth-century South Carolina, was one of a number of works that moved the debate back toward social and economic conditions. Wood demonstrated that blacks and whites often worked together on relatively equal terms in the early years of settlement. But as rice cultivation expanded, it became more difficult to find white laborers willing to do the arduous work. The increase in the forcible importation of African slaves was a response to this growing demand for labor. It was also a response to fears among whites that without slavery it would be difficult to control a labor force brought to America against its will. Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975) argued similarly that the southern labor system was at first relatively flexible and later grew more rigid. In colonial Virginia, he claimed, white settlers did not at first intend to create a system of permanent bond age. But as the tobacco economy grew and created a high demand for cheap labor, white landowners began to feel uneasy about their reliance on a large group of dependent white workers. Such workers were difficult to recruit and control. Slavery, therefore, was less a

result of racism than of the desire for whites to find a reliable and stable labor force.

Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery* (1996) argues particularly strenuously that while race was a factor in making the enslavement of Africans easier for whites to justify to themselves, the real reasons for the emergence of slavery were hardheaded economic decisions by ambitious entrepreneurs who realized very early that a slave-labor system in the labor intensive agricultural world of the American South and the Caribbean was more profitable than a free-labor system.

Slavery served the interests of a powerful combination of groups: planters, merchants, industrialists, and consumers. The most important reason for the creation and continuation of the system, therefore, was not racism but the pursuit of profit. Slavery was not, Blackburn concludes, an antiquated remnant of an older world. It was a recognizably modern labor system that served the needs of an emerging market economy.

UNDERSTAND, ANALYZE, & EVALUATE

1. What do historians say is the relationship between racism and slavery?
2. What are the economic arguments put forward by historians to explain the system of slave labor that developed in America? Do these arguments account fully for the development of slavery?



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