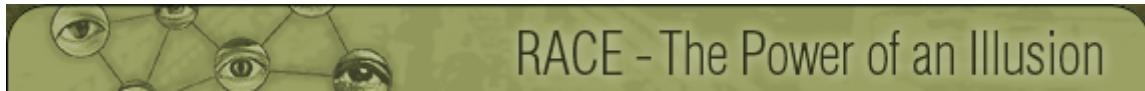




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RACE - The Power of an Illusion

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Background Readings

Africans, Slavery, and Race

Was it inevitable that Africans would be imported to the Americas to become slaves? Did European views about racial inferiority contribute to the fact of New World African slavery?

Although today we might think that racial attitudes have always existed, and that they influenced or contributed to the emergence of the transatlantic African slave trade, the reverse is, in fact, true. Modern ideas about race, racial difference and inferiority emerged to explain the societies that arose in the New World as a result of slavery.

Different Colonies, Different Societies

The earliest European colonizers of the Americas, the Spanish, did not develop significant slave societies in its colonies. Columbus tried to grow sugar for profit, forcing indigenous people on the island of Hispaniola to work his fields, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Cortés and Pizarro's conquest of the Aztec and Incan empires in the early 16th century, however, gave the Spanish an alternative source of wealth. The Spanish assumed control of these large Central and South American empires' systems for tribute. Using existing arrangements for indigenous corvée labor, they extracted gold and silver from established mines, filling the coffers of a quickly emerging global Spanish empire and providing specie and currency for its trade and economy.

The Europeans who followed found no similar natural wealth in the regions they settled - the Portuguese in Brazil, then later, the Dutch, French and British on the coasts (including what is now Louisiana) and in the islands of the Caribbean. Instead, continuing Columbus' lead, they tried to establish colonies to produce agricultural goods to sell and trade, again using indigenous peoples as a workforce. These attempts failed because natives were not familiar with European farming methods and because they escaped and fled into territories they knew well. Portuguese outposts on the western coast of Africa, established as way stations for their fleets to travel into the Indian Ocean and further east, provided an alternative supply of labor. African slaves - initially captured in intertribal warfare but later directly for sale in what became a lucrative slave trade - were sold and shipped to the Americas to be the workforce for European colonial enterprises. This African enslavement was driven, not out of a sense of racial inferiority, but to satisfy labor needs. Although initially not profitable, the value of the African slaves themselves as well as the emergence of new European tastes - and a market - for American-produced luxuries such as chocolate and tobacco, eventually resulted in an enormous and profitable system of trans-Atlantic trade. European ships carried supplies to African slave ports. From there, cargoes of recently captured slaves were shipped to the Americas from Africa, where those who survived the horrific journey were sold as chattel. Plantations, part of a new form and system of agricultural production, purchased these slaves in large numbers to work fields that grew rice, indigo, cacao, tobacco, and sugar for the return trade back to Europe. Slaves became such a large part of the population and their work such a large part of the economy in these colonies that historians now call them as "slave societies." "Race," as it developed in these colonial slave societies was different from how it developed in the United States.

Colonial America

The situation was different in the British colonies that became the United States. The New England colonies were established as places for followers of Protestant dissenters to live and practice their religious faith. The Chesapeake colonies, Virginia and Maryland, established in the early 17th century, and later the Carolinas, were settlement colonies where land was initially given to colonists in exchange for their efforts to cultivate and work it. Those colonists who fared well in the harsh conditions could accumulate enough land to require additional labor to work their holdings. After unsuccessful attempts to use native groups as workers, wealthy colonists imported indentured servants from Britain - an available supply of workers because of population growth. In the first century of Virginia's existence, 100,000 of the 130,000 British arrivals to the colony were indentures. Beginning in the 1620s, colonists also began to import slaves, although most were from the Americas and not directly from Africa. While slaves were present in these British colonies, the larger presence of European settlers and servants meant that their societies and economies were mixed, or what historians, "societies with slaves."

Although it was permanent servitude, slavery in the 17th century Chesapeake was not like slavery as it later developed and in some ways, was difficult to distinguish from indentured servitude. In an era where few laws defined slavery, slaves enjoyed limited rights including the ability to work land for themselves, to own property, including other slaves, and to marry. Children of slaves did not inherit their parents' bondage. Although it was not generally the case, slaves could earn or save enough money to purchase their own freedom. While indentured servants worked under temporary, as opposed to permanent, terms of service, the life expectancy in the early decades of the Chesapeake colonies was so low that almost two-thirds did not survive to the end of their contracts. Indentured servants often worked with slaves under the same conditions - one reason why there was occasional intermarriage between the two groups, European and African.

How Did Race Develop in This Context?

The harsh conditions and low life expectancy of colonists in Virginia eventually changed as settlers became more familiar with its climate and their environment. Increased survival and a continued influx of colonists brought population growth and an increasing demand for land, which became more scarce and further removed from access to roads and water transportation, both vital for agricultural commerce. Landholdings in Virginia expanded from the Tidewater region of fertile lands and easily navigable rivers into the less fertile lands of the Piedmont foothills and beyond, where they collided with the territorial interests of native groups. An emerging planter class of colonists who had succeeded in accumulating land and money shared few and fewer interests with newly arrived immigrants, more and more of them indentured workers who survived long enough to want to claim land for themselves, and many of whom continued to share interests and concerns with African slaves and freedmen.

The volatility of the tensions grew as the colony grew and decades passed, exploding in 1676 in what became known as Bacon's Rebellion. Initially a conflict between William Berkeley, the governor of Virginia, and Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy settler in the Virginia upcountry, over land and Indian relations in the western part of the colony, the rebellion sparked concerns about class and race when Bacon went east to Jamestown, the colonial capital. Arrested, then pardoned by Berkeley, Bacon returned with a small army and promised to grant freedom to slaves and indentured servants who rallied to his cause - as did Berkeley, less successfully. His followers seized and set fire to Jamestown and temporarily gained control of the colony. The rebellion itself proved short-lived when Bacon died suddenly a month later and many of his followers were executed, but its larger implications remained. Beyond Bacon's specific issues, the coalition between poor whites and African slaves and freedmen in his rebellion produced a larger concern that such a coalition might remain a continuing source of further revolts and class uprisings.

Such concerns, however, were mitigated by intervening circumstances. In the years following Bacon's Rebellion, the distinction between indentured servitude and slavery grew into a pronounced difference. Indenture became less attractive as a source of labor because servants now lived long enough to claim land - as the rebellion had demonstrated violently - and improved economic conditions in Britain reduced the supply of workers willing to come to America and increased the price of their contracts. Africans continued to be readily available, and because many were not Christian, they could be enslaved and regulated in a manner that indentures could not. Virginia enacted a series of laws, constituting a formal slave code that removed many of the rights slaves had previously enjoyed and added further restrictions to slavery including anti-miscegenation statutes. Previously one of several labor sources, slaves became Virginia's primary workforce for its plantations, and slavery an integral institution within its society.

With the hardening of slavery came the emergence of race. Previously, people's appearance and origins had not mattered as much before socially, particularly among the working class. The physical distinctiveness of African slaves - now absent similar European indentured servants - however, not only marked their newly created subordinate position within Virginian society, it became the justification and reason for that position. Virginia's example, in turn, became a model that other British colonies with slaves, when they were created, followed with a mutually reinforcing dynamic. "Race" explained why Africans were slaves, while slavery's degradation supplied the evidence for their inferiority. When Thomas Jefferson observed almost a century

later that Africans were slaves, the apparent naturalness of their position had erased the actual social history that had produced it.

John Cheng is a historian who teaches at George Mason University. This background reading is an original summary of key scholarly articles, many of which are listed in our Resources.

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