Did slavery cause racism?

**Viewpoint:** Yes. With the slave trade racism became rigidly defined in custom and law.

**Viewpoint:** No. Slavery followed from racism and reinforced existing perceptions of blacks’ racial inferiority. Racism both preexisted and survived slavery.

The color of Africans’ skin intrigued, frightened, and repelled Europeans. Exaggerating the physical and mental differences that allegedly separated blacks from whites, European writers conjectured that blacks had descended from apes or had emerged as the result of a biblical curse on the descendants of Canaan and Ham. With the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade toward the end of the seventeenth century, theories of black inferiority abounded. It was, after all, in the interest of slave traders and slave owners to propagate the myth that Africans were not human beings, or at least not fully human, a species different from the rest of humanity. Defined as brutish and bestial, heathen and savage, Africans seemed to Europeans as fit only for slavery.

It is not clear why Europeans fixated on the skin color of Africans. Perhaps they did so simply because the physical appearance of blacks was so markedly different from their own and, regarding themselves as superior beings, most Europeans associated a series of negative characteristics with blacks. This view of blacks preceded slavery and helped to justify it. At the same time, slavery deepened racism. The two seem to have existed in tandem.

During the eighteenth century some thinkers, notably Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, Baron de Montesquieu, Abbé Guillaume-Thomas-François de Raynal, and Adam Smith implicitly offered some hope for Africans by suggesting that environment rather than genetics determined the human personality. Scholars such as these suggested that one could remove the blacks from Africa, educate them in the customs of Western civilization, introduce them to the Christian faith, and they would become like white men. Abbé Raynal went so far as to assert that the longer Africans lived outside of Africa, the whiter their skin would become. Yet, despite the development of the environmentalist argument even thinkers sympathetic to blacks continued to believe them inferior to whites. Africans and Europeans may have been the products of a single creation, with only environment creating the variations that distinguished them, but from the European point of view, whites remained the standard and blacks the deviation.
Viewpoint:
Yes. With the slave trade racism became rigidly defined in custom and law.

In his classic study *Capitalism & Slavery* (1944), Eric Williams wrote:

Slavery in the Caribbean has been too narrowly identified with the Negro. A racial twist has thereby been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery. Unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow; Catholic, Protestant, and pagan... Here, then, is the origin of Negro slavery. The reason was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor.

Asserting that slavery caused racism, Williams surely overstated his thesis. Although the relation of slavery to race has generated considerable debate, it has also produced undue confusion and false dichotomies. Some scholars, such as Carl N. Degler, have maintained that existing racial prejudice led to the enslavement of Africans. Others, such as Williams, have suggested that racism was an outgrowth of slavery itself. The available evidence sustains neither conclusion in its pure form but rather supports a revised version that is, in important respects, an amalgam of both. The appropriate questions, perhaps, are instead how slavery and racism become so completely intertwined as to define social relations in the slaveholding colonies of the New World.

Williams was correct in ascertaining that the European colonists' initial demands for labor were "color-blind." He argued that planters in the English colonies, for example, actually preferred to engage the labor of poor, white servants than that of either natives or Africans. Indentures, convicts, political and religious nonconformists, kidnapped children, and bushwhacked adults swelled the ranks of servants flooding the British Caribbean and North American colonies. Williams estimated that between 1654 and 1685, 10,000 servants sailed from Bristol alone and that more than 250,000 persons, constituting 50 percent of all English immigrants, came as servants to the New World.

More recently, historian Edmund S. Morgan has confirmed Williams's essential conclusion, while extending his analysis far beyond Williams's original formulation. The excessively high mortality rates that prevailed in Virginia until the 1630s made labor a scarce and valuable commodity. For those who could afford to do so the opportunity to enlarge their labor supply proved an irresistible temptation. As Morgan showed, in the Chesapeake region wealth and status early became synonymous with the extensive use of bound, but not necessarily slave, labor. White indentured servitude was legal everywhere in colonial society. Most servants were young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Some were kidnapped or otherwise coerced, but most voluntarily entered into their contracts, hoping to begin life anew and, after a relatively few years of service, to become independent and acquire land.

The English Parliament encouraged emigration to the New World. Between 1500 and 1650, as Morgan pointed out, the population of England had increased from 3 million to 4.5 million. Poverty, famine, overcrowding, and unemployment, with all their attendant vices, were the result. The mass of idle poor threatened social peace. Efforts to cope with the problem increasingly imperiled the cherished rights and liberties on which Englishmen had long prided themselves. Thoughtful men in the government recognized an obvious solution: get the poor out of England. If dispatched to the New World, where there seemed limitless opportunities for work and boundless possibilities for upward social mobility, impoverished Englishmen could redeem themselves by enriching the mother country and spreading English influence abroad.

In *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (2000) David Eltis contended that other European powers could have imitated the English example and adopted some form of white bound labor to colonial needs. If Europeans adopted white servitude, then why not white slavery? "Although there is no evidence that Europeans ever considered instituting full chattel slavery of Europeans in their overseas settlements," Eltis wrote, "the striking paradox is that no sound economic reasons spoke against it." An analysis of relative costs demonstrates that by the seventeenth century European slaves were economically preferable either to European indentured servants or African slaves. According to Eltis, it would have been cheaper to transport slaves from Europe than from Africa. Since the population was rising in Europe during the era of the slave trade, the loss of millions of persons would have had a negligible demographic impact and might even have reduced social and political tensions, as Morgan determined that the emigration of indentured servants from England had done during the seventeenth century. The poor, vagabonds, convicts, dissenters, and prisoners of war, all of whom became indentured servants, could just as easily have been enslaved. More than one proslavery ideologue in the antebellum South had, after all, defended the principle of "slavery in the abstract," proposing the enslavement of all labor, white and black.
Reverend James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina, for example, rested the defense of slavery on three propositions that by the 1850s had obtained nearly universal currency in the South. First, slavery had always been the necessary foundation of social order as well as of material and moral progress. Second, the free labor system was itself a disguised and malignant form of wage slavery that would, in the end, beget only social tumult and human misery. Third, God had decreed slavery as the proper arrangement for a world haunted by sin, compelling masters and slaves alike to honor their obligations to each other and to him, and thereby to restrain the evil in human nature. Thornwell thus proposed the imposition of some form of personal servitude on all workers to spare them the anarchy of the market and afford them a sense of security and decency that current economic, social, and political regimes did not provide.

Race was not the basis of Thornwell’s defense of slavery. Although he regarded blacks as inferior to whites, Thornwell rejected the scientific racism that characterized blacks as the products of a separate creation. Scripture, he noted, did not endorse racial slavery but rather the principle of slavery in general, without regard to race. An anonymous writer in the Richmond Enquirer put the matter succinctly: “While it is far more obvious that negroes should be slaves than whites, for they are only fit to labor,
not to direct; yet the principle of slavery itself is right, and does not depend upon difference of complexion."

No economic obstacle existed to prevent the enslavement of Europeans. Eltis believes that cultural attitudes intervened. "In western Europe," he argues, "even the most degraded member of European society was spared enslavement. . . . Throughout Europe, the state could take the lives of individuals in Europe, but enslavement was no longer an alternative to death; rather it had become a fate worse than death and as such was reserved for non-Europeans." Morgan explained that with increased longevity in Virginia there arose a class of former servants who had completed the terms of their indentures but who could not now afford to purchase land of their own. Their presence frightened the planters. Virginia was inheriting the very political and social problems of the idle, unruly poor that it had once helped England to solve. The secretary of the colony, Nicholas Spencer, complained that Virginia was becoming "a sinke to drayen England of her filth and scum." William Berkeley, the royal governor, lamented, "How miserable that man is that Governes a People wher six parts of seaven at least are Poore Endebted Discontented and Armed."

Bacon's Rebellion (1676), the largest popular uprising in the British North American colonies before the American Revolution (1775-1783), made Governor Berkeley's fears a reality. Although the rebellion ultimately failed, it bred suspicion among the Virginia elite, ever alert to detect new rebels in their midst. As a result, Morgan indicated, Virginians began to purchase enslaved Africans in larger numbers. Slaves not only resolved the labor shortage, they could be denied rights that a subject of the English Crown could legally demand. No metropolitan government protected the rights and liberties of Africans, but there were limits beyond which the abridgement of English rights and liberties could not proceed. The continued abuse of the rights of Englishmen, Morgan speculates, might have resulted in the outbreak of another Bacon's Rebellion. More likely, such exploitation would have drawn protests from Parliament and the Crown and might have effected a prohibition on the continued importation of indentured servants. Virginians enslaved Africans, Morgan concluded, because they could not enslave Englishmen. Eltis made a related point:

If the [European] elite could kill Irish, Huguenots, Jews, prisoners of war, convicts, and many other marginalised groups, why could they not enslave them? The English considered those from the Celtic fringe different from themselves but, after the eleventh century at least, not different enough to enslave. For elite and non-elite alike enslavement remained a fate for which only non-Europeans were qualified.

Only with the decline of alternate forms of labor did slavery become more rigidly defined in custom and law. Racial prejudice had certainly facilitated the enslavement of Africans, and slavery augmented those extant racial biases. During the seventeenth century race was not the foremost consideration in determining the status of labor since most workers, white and black, were to some extent unfree. By the eighteenth century, however, as the number of white indentured servants diminished and the number of black slaves grew, it became the nearly universal presumption that whites were free and blacks were enslaved. It may thus in the end be impossible to disentangle the intricate relation between slavery and race. Historian Winthrop D. Jordan was probably more right than wrong to surmise that in the Americas, or at least in the British mainland colonies, racism and slavery emerged at the same time and evolved together. "Rather than slavery causing 'prejudice,' or vice versa," he wrote, "they seem rather to have generated each other," dual adjuncts to the appalling indignities visited upon blacks in the New World.

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Viewpoint:

No. Slavery followed from racism and reinforced existing perceptions of blacks' racial inferiority. Racism both preexisted and survived slavery.

Slavery bred racism. No people can systematically enslave another people of a different "race" for several hundred years without developing some form of racial animosity and prejudice. Yet, racism also preexisted slavery and survived it. Various and subtle influences had already conditioned Europeans to take a negative view of blacks long before they thought of enslaving them.

In his classic study of racial stereotypes, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (1968), Winthrop D. Jordan identified three distinct but related prejudices that conditioned English perceptions of Africans. First, the English noticed that Africans were black. Jordan, however, shows that this judgment was mistaken inasmuch as it simplified a more complex reality. Not all Africans had black skin. For the English, though, "blackness became so generally associated with Africa," Jor-

ANTIPODAL CONSTITUTIONS

Samuel A. Cartwright, a physician and proslavery advocate from Louisiana, asserted in an 1852 essay that Africans were physiologically suited for slavery.

We have medical schools in abundance teaching the art of curing the ailments, and even the most insignificant sores, incident to the half-starved, oppressed pauper population of Europe—a population we have not got, never had and never can have, so long as we have negro slaves to work in the cane, cotton and rice fields, where the white man, from the physiological laws governing his economy, can not labor and live: but where the negro thrives, luxuriates and enjoys existence more than any laboring peasantry to be found on the continent of Europe; yet we have no schools or any chair in our numerous institutions of medical learning to teach the art of curing and preventing the diseases peculiar to our immense population of negro slaves, or to make them more efficient and valuable, docile and manageable, comfortable, happy and contented by still further improving their condition, which can only be done by studying their nature, and not by the North and South bandying epithets—not by the quackery which prescribes the same remedy, the liberty elixir, for all constitutions. The two races, the Anglo-Saxon and the negro, have antipodal constitutions. The former abounds with red blood, even penetrating the capillaries and the veins, flushing the face and illuminating the countenance; the skin white; lips thin; nose high; hair auburn, flaxen, red or black; beard thick and heavy; eyes brilliant; will strong and unconquerable; mind and muscles full of energy and activity. The latter, with molasses blood sluggishly circulating and scarcely penetrating the capillaries; skin ebony, and the mucous membranes and muscles partaking of the darker hue pervading the blood and the cutis; lips thick and protuberant; nose broad and flat; scalp covered with a coarse, crispy wool in thick naps; beard wanting or consisting of a few scattering woolly naps, in the "bucks," provincially so called; mind and body dull and slothful; will weak, wanting and subdued.


dan wrote, "that every African seemed a black man." The English were quick to attach an unwarranted pejorative significance to black skin. Blackness signified filth, immorality, sin, and evil. Whiteness, by contrast, represented cleanliness, goodness, virtue, and purity. As Jordan pointed out, before the sixteenth century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "black" meant "deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul. . . . Having dark and deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister. . . . Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked. . . . Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc." Despite some marked inconsistencies, medieval Christian thinkers also linked blackness to the same general set of associations and characteristics.

Second, the English thought the Africans were "uncivilized." Africans dressed, lived, fought, spoke, and even ate differently from the English. In any comparison with English ways, Africans were found wanting. Difference constituted inferiority. The second "fact" worthy of note about Africans after the color of their skin was that they were not English. Deviation from English norms and standards implied barbarism. Although they knew better, the English depicted Africans as savages, beasts, and cannibals. In making such comparisons, Jordan declared, "Englishmen unwittingly demonstrated how powerfully the African's different culture—for Englishmen, his 'savagery'—operated to make Negroes seem to Englishmen a radically different kind of men."

Few writers applied this racial ideology as thoroughly as did Edward Long, or less hastily drew out its implications. In The History of Jamaica; or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of the Island. . . (1774) Long popularized the notion that blacks were a separate species fit only for slavery. Instead of degrading human nature, Long maintained that the theory of black racial inferiority confirmed belief in a rational, creative, fecund, and perfect God. What better testimony to the omnipotence of God, Long asked, than a beautifully complete and coherent chain of being, a "series and progression from a lump of dirt to a perfect man?" Long failed to explain why one link in this continuum ought to be so loathsome, but he made no effort to conceal his disgust for the "bestial fleece," the "tumid nostrils," and the "fetid smell" that he thought characterized all blacks to a greater or lesser degree.

Long also concluded that blacks possessed no rational faculty or moral sense. Incapable of thought and virtue, they thus desired no more than food, drink, sex, and leisure and would pursue these amusements without restraint unless disciplined and coerced. Africans had made no progress for two thousand years, he asserted. They remained, in Long's estimation, "a brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious people." Apes, Long conjectured, could be trained to "perform a variety of menial domestic services" and the "mechanic arts" as well as any black.

African bestiality was nowhere more transparent, in Long's view, than in the possibility of
sexual relations between apes and black women. Apes coveted black women, Long wrote, “from a natural impulse of desire, such as inclines one animal towards another of the same species, or which had a conformity in the organs of generation.” With blacks, Long observed, sex was “libidinous and shameless.” Since both blacks and apes shared the “lasciviousness of disposition,” Long did not think that “an orang-outang husband would be any dishonour to an Hottentot female.” There was, indeed, Long asserted, every reason to believe that black women regularly admitted such animals to their embraces. Such a union, he reported, had occurred in England itself. Thus, he wrote, “how freely may it not operate in the more genial soil of Afric [sic], that parent of every thing that is monstrous in nature, where . . . the passions rage without controul; and the retired wilderness presents opportunity to gratify them without fear of detection!”

Third, the English condemned the Africans as unchristian. This “defective religious condition” was part of a much larger problem once the English discovered that the world was abounding with “heathen” peoples. The Africans’ “primitive” religions offered one more indication of their failure to approximate English norms; it was another symptom of their blackness and their barbarism. For an Englishman of the sixteenth century, Jordan asserted,

Christianity was interwoven into his conception of his own nationality, and he was therefore inclined to regard the Negroes’ lack of true religion as part of theirs. Being a Christian was not merely a matter of subscribing to certain doctrines; it was a quality inherent in oneself and in one’s society. It was interconnected with all the other attributes of normal and proper men: as one of the earliest English accounts distinguished Negroes from Englishmen, they were ‘a people of beastly living, without a God, lawe, religion, or common wealth; . . .’ In an important sense, then, heathenism was for Englishmen one inherent characteristic of savage men.

To be Christian, according to the English, was to be civilized.

Yet, the English did not attribute such deficiencies to blacks alone. They also regarded the Irish as wild, subhuman, uncivilized, dangerous brutes. In English eyes, the Irish were “more uncivil, more uncleanly, more barbarous and more brutish in their customs and demeanores [demeanor], then in any other part of the world that is known.” As Nicholas P. Canny has demonstrated in “The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America” (1983), the Indians were the New World equivalent of the “wilde Irish.” Poor whites fared little better, for the “giddy multitude” seemed to pose an additional threat to social order. The English fit Africans into these established stereotypes in a way that enabled them to make sense of peoples so apparently different that one might expect to find them on another planet. Africans and Europeans were “bound to one another without mingling,” wrote French writer Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America (1835). It “is equally difficult for them to separate completely or to unite. . . . The Negro transmits to his descendants at birth the external mark of his ignominy. The law can abolish servitude, but only God can obliterate its traces. . . . You can make the Negro free, but you cannot prevent him facing the European as a stranger.” For Tocqueville, the unavoidable and irrevocable certainty of black skin remained, forever intruding itself upon the European consciousness.

Most Englishmen and Europeans, and later the majority of white Americans, assumed that race is a fixed and observable physical reality. It is not. Race, instead, is an idea, an ideological construct, a historical phenomenon, not a biological fact. The reality upon which race purports to rest, the natural and permanent inequality of human beings, is utterly false. Biologically, there is only one race: the human race. The most striking attributes of racial appearance—color of skin, texture of hair, shape of nose, eyes, lips, and ears—can all be gradually transformed or radically altered by repeated instances of miscegenation (race mixing). Although not a biological fact, race is nonetheless real, for it embodies in thought actual social relations. Paradoxically, the reality of race lies in appearances and the meanings that human beings attach to them. What Europeans once defined as racial differences between themselves and Africans reveals less about who Africans were than it does about who Europeans thought that they were at a particular moment in history.

This racial ideology existed prior to the enslavement of Africans and did not emerge as a consequence of slavery. Yet, it was not without consequences. As Tocqueville reflected:

From the moment when Europeans took their slaves from a race different from their own, which many of them considered inferior to the other human races, and assimilation with whom they all regarded with horror, they assumed that slavery would be eternal, for there is no intermediate state that can be durable between the excessive inequality created by slavery and the complete equality which is the natural result of independence. The Europeans have vaguely sensed this truth but have not admitted it. In everything concerning the Negroes, either interest or pride or pity has dictated their behavior.

Tocqueville accurately predicted that racial animosity would intensify with the abolition of slav-
ery. Perhaps more remarkable, the modification or removal of the racial characteristics that had so absorbed the European imagination did nothing to eradicate slavery or even to alter the status of individual slaves. The variations in skin color that emerged as the result of miscegenation, blacks’ acquisition of learning and culture, and the conversion of slaves to Christianity did not effect emancipation. Race was an important element in New World slavery, but it proved not to be essential.

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