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Why Africa? Towards a materialist understanding of racism and the African slave trade

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Towards a Materialist Understanding of Racism and the Slave Trade

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Two letters, written centuries apart, both concerning the morality of African slavery stand in remarkable opposition to each other. The first, a letter probably addressed to King Philip II of Portugal, took objection with Portuguese enslaver's moral justifications concerning the capture and sale of Africans. The unnamed author wrote in 1612:

> These acts of enslavement are together the cause of great scandal, and they are the source of very great sins on the part of the heathens and Moors of those places. Seeing that the Portuguese deal in the merchandise in every way they can, they also take up that life, robbing and tricking men, women, and children in order to sell them, and they search for other tricks with which to make their profits.[1]

The second, a letter written in 1823, addressed to a Portuguese-language newspaper in London, *Correio Brasiliense*, responded to anti-slavery arguments from the era. This author, much unlike the first, rationalized African slavery under the premise that Africans were created by God for the sole purpose of trans-Atlantic slavery:

> When the author of Nature drew from nothing the previous continent of Brazil, it seems through an act of His special Providence he also created just opposite Brazil in the interior of Africa men who were deliberately constructed to serve on this continent; men who in the heart of summer, when any European would want to envelop himself in snow, seek out the sun and gather about a fire to warm themselves.[2]

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[1] Robert Edgar Conrad, *Children of God's Fire: a Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 11. See, *Proposta a Sua Magestade sobre a escravaria das terras da Conquista de Portugal* Document 7, 3, 1, No. 8, Seçáo de Manuscritos, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janerio.

[2] Ibid, 429-30. See, Diario do Governo (Rio de Janerio), April 22, 1823.

What is most striking about these two letters is the shift of ideological terrain upon which the authors state their case. The first author argues from a position that does not take the institution of slavery for granted, placing moral burden on the slave merchant to prove the integrity of his trade. Arguing against such, the letter contains a scathing critique concerning the supposed grounds for enslaving Africans, observing that in many cases the basis for enslavement – religious conversion, war captivity, debt peonage – was not only unjust, but often outright falsified on the part of the merchant in service of acquiring more human capital.

And yet the second letter, written two centuries after, not only defends the institution of slavery, its author also argues that the entire continent of Africa was created for that very purpose. Hence, for our second author the ideological terrain upon which his argument was to be constructed had changed to a point where enslavement could not only be presented as morally permissible; but it was now also possible to frame the horrid condition as a natural state of affairs set in motion by a divine creator.

Examining both letters can help sharpen our understanding of the past insofar as the development of Atlantic ideologies is concerned. Indeed, many historians have taken up the challenge, attempting to understand better how such a grim practice – that of the trans-Atlantic slave trade – came about in an era that would simultaneously be characterized by strong advancements in the arena of human rights. But despite a massive amount of scholarship on the subject, notable gaps exist within our current understanding of Atlantic slavery.

What I'd like to do in the following pages is answer a simple historical question: *Why Africa?* Or, perhaps more pointedly: Why was the continent of Africa chosen as the prime source for the Atlantic slave trade? Common understandings of the subject posit that Africa was chosen as a site to source slaves because of its inhabitant's stark phenotypical differences to Europeans, thus: *African slavery was first justified because of European racism*. But upon even quick reflection on the historical record, this claim begins to stumble. As our first letter indicates, the moral substance to African slavery was not present in the fifteenth century, made clear in the author's closing remark:

> All the other provinces of Europe are shocked by us, saying that the Portuguese, who look upon themselves as pious and devoted, commit such extraordinary acts of injustice and inhumanity.[3]

The overtly racial basis for African slavery, like those expressed in the second letter, were not the preselected ideological positions for Europeans, rather they were developed over time in response to changing material circumstance. The following argument differs in that it approaches the question *Why Africa?* with a firm materialist approach, arguing that African slavery was put into motion not by nascent racial attitudes of Europeans, nor was it the result of distinct cultural differences or religious opposition between continents, but simply *because it was profitable to do so*.

My answer to the question might seem like a truism to some. And yet it might also outrage others with its close focus on the economic motives for slavery. So it is in the footsteps

[3] Conrad, *Children of God's Fire*, 15.

of historians like C. Vann Woodward that I follow, in which one dissects carefully "the great impersonal forces in history" that granted great riches to some at the cost of terrible suffering to others.[4] This historical thread should by no means diminish the quite real effects produced by the racist and barbarous delusions of European colonists. One needs only a cursory glance at the historical record to see the multitude of racism's evils, the cruelty of which need no elaboration here. Let me hasten to add then, that it is perhaps through the very process of unraveling the tangle of ideology and economy that one can elucidate the character of both while diminishing the significance of neither.

In the following pages, I attempt to bridge the chasm between truism and affront upon the steady platform provided by careful historical analysis. I examine the developing Atlantic world-system throughout the past half millennium, taking particular focus on (1) the rise and fall of Atlantic empires, (2) the plantation system of agricultural production, and (3) the rise of the Atlantic working classes (and accompanying erasure of the American indigenous populations). I conclude with some observations regarding the formation of *race* as an ideological tool for exclusion; and a brief corrective for future historical inquiry that emphasizes the importance of subject-observer distance.

Empires & The New Atlantic

In presenting a causal account into the origins of African slavery, a summary concerning the development of empire and trade in the Atlantic helps provide a backbone to any historical examination of changing political-economic relations of the era. Further still, if we are to characterize Atlantic slavery as a phenomenon spanning the final years of the thirteenth century up until the late nineteenth (1492-1888), then its general contours changed greatly from beginning to end.

Upon encountering the American continents, the original divisions of labor took cruel advantage of the local indigenous populations, often with the acquisition of precious metals as a central focus.[5] At this time, the empires of the Atlantic – Spain, England, France, and Portugal – had great stake in the accumulation of wealth as a means to finance military conquest, a widespread means of trade domination at that time. Warfare in the age of Atlantic slavery, as the historian Charles Tilly has shown, was inexorably liked with the expansion of intercontinental trade. Moreover, the great influx of capital from the Americas would prove to be lucrative to the trade empires; so much so that within two decades of Columbus's first voyage, Spain had firmly established trading colonies in the Caribbean.[6] In light of such rapid economic drive, we can confidently say that the new world was immediately seized upon by the Atlantic empires as a

[4] C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, Commemorative ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9-11.

[5] The historian Robin Blackburn characterizes this epoch of Atlantic slave economic development as *baroque* given its focus on the primitive extraction of silver and gold. See, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights*, (London: Verso, 2011), 33-36. See also, his more focused treatment of this epoch, *The Making of New World Slavery: from the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 2010), 20-25.

[6] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*, (Cambridge, Mass. USA: B. Blackwell, 1990), 91-95.

site for capital accumulation. Put more concisely: the strong hand of political economy was the guiding hand of colonial development in the Americas; slavery – both indigenous and African – ultimately in service to such ends.

But the nascent trade outposts and first colonies did not first turn to Africa as a primary location to source slaves. And they most certainly did not have a codified system of slavery that clearly defined who was free and who was not. It is important here to assert that the system of chattel slavery that we are accustomed to in traditional (particularly Anglo-American) historic depictions of indentured labor was the product of centuries of development, and even still varied massively across continents. In short, the African slave trade was *built*. And it was a trade that required two sides.

Before the Spanish were foraying around the islands of the Caribbean in the late fifteenth and early fourteenth century (1450-1500), the Portuguese were beginning to establish a series of trading centers along the western flank of Africa. The outposts were not made with grand designs of a future African slave trade in mind, they were simply extensions of a trading empire that sought to maximize capital accumulation. These Portuguese dependencies – Madiera, Azores, and São Tomé, to name a few – were early experimentation in the development of what would become eventually become a thriving Atlantic plantation economy (subject matter of which I will return to later). Moreover, these initial sites of Atlantic commerce maintained several key characteristics that can help us pin down the origins of the African slave trade and ideologies that accompanied it.[7]

The opening Portuguese trade ventures into Africa were only possible because of careful political balance of power shared between the Portuguese traders and their local hosts. Initial mercantile relationships did not seek to create a mass slave export industry, but rather developed as time went on, morphing in keeping with the demands of the Atlantic economy. These first trade relationships mostly dealt in the exchange of precious metals and spices – seldom in slaves, and when slaves were traded the exchange was often internal, not trans-Atlantic.[8] At this time (1450-1550) the economic demand for trans-Atlantic slavery simply had not developed; thus it is unlikely that the first Portuguese traders in Africa knew what hideous turn their profession would take.

And across the Atlantic, principal Spanish and Portuguese settlements maintained the direct purpose of capital accumulation, not the xenophobic domination of differing populations. As follows, if we are to accept that the development of these new colonies followed the morbid logic of political economy – *not* ur-racial discrimination – then the creation of the African slave trade warrants a historical examination of the changing economic circumstances and imperatives of the era. Hence, our causal arrow begins not by examining prejudice, but rather the plantation.

The Plantation

Crucial in understanding the origins of the slave trade is a clear grasp of the purpose of slaves themselves and the economic underpinnings that warranted the massive scale of the

[7] Herbert S. Klein and Francisco Vidal, *Slavery in Brazil*, (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009), 5-11.
[8] Ibid, 13.

Atlantic slave trade. The aforementioned developments on the Atlantic islands of São Tomé and Cape Verde were key first steps in what would eventually become perhaps the most important division of labor in human history.

And yet, it is perhaps necessary to first answer the question of why slave labor was needed in the first place. A simple cost analysis is not sufficient. I find convincing the hypothesis advanced by historian Evsey D. Domar, who's influential essay, *The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis*, presents a historical framework for understanding the development of slave and free labor in different societies. Domar sees the emergence of slavery as a response to specific political-economic formations in which there was an abundance of *land* and a dearth of available non-coercive *labor*.[9]

What could be a better example of such circumstance as sixteenth-century Brazil? Land was in great abundance, but labor – especially European labor – was in short supply. Brazil, much like the initial Portuguese ventures into Africa, was not settled with advanced economic development plans beyond midway trading outposts in the path to Asia.[10] The plantation system in Brazil gained its substance throughout the sixteenth century, in which a number of important developments occurred pertaining to the African slave trade. First would be the outlaw of indigenous enslavement in 1570, which itself was never a sustainable source of labor. Second would be its relative explosion in terms of scale: by the end of the century Brazil would be the foremost producer of sugar in the world, aided by its abundance of natural resources (flat land, good soil, and lots of water). But perhaps most important was its relationship with Africa.[11]

The eastern edge of Brazil was one of the best sites to send slaves from Africa. Slave voyages from Angola to Brazil during this period had much lower rates of slave mortality, and were thus much more cost effective. Existing Portuguese developments on the western African coast – Luanda and São Tomé – also aided by provided staging grounds for the mass exportation of slaves.[12] As such, returning to Domar's formulation on the emergence of slavery, a synthesis of the land/labor model with period historical developments between Brazil and Africa can shed light on why economic momentum started to develop around the African slave trade and American plantation systems. In short, a strong hypothesis can be posited that characterizes the emergence slavery from a lack of free labor and abundance of land; Africa being the prime target to ameliorate the former, given the twin combinations of indigenous erasure and preexisting trans-Atlantic trade infrastructure.[13]

The rise of Dutch power in the Atlantic would mark a decisive shift in trajectory of the Atlantic slave trade. Seizure of Portuguese northeast Brazil in the mid-seventeenth century would give Dutch merchants a taste of the massive profit margins reaped by the previous overseers, a structure of capital accumulation the new masters were keen to retain and expand.

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[9] Evsey D Domar, "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis," *The Journal of Economic History* 30, no. 1 (1970): 18–32.

[10] Philip D Curtin, "Capitalism, feudalism, and sugar planting in Brazil" in *The rise and fall of the plantation complex: essays in Atlantic history*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46-57.

[11] Ibid, 51-2.

[12] Ibid, 53-5.

[13] This should not be taken as an iron law of slave-labor development, but rather a possible explanation for why such practices could emerge in the context of the developing capitalist world.

But to keep the plantation machine running and profitable, a reliable source of human capital was required. African slaves had played a major role in the northeast Brazilian plantation economy for over a century prior to Dutch control, and the Portuguese had developed a trans-Atlantic trade network that could upkeep an African slave population in which more died then were born.[14]

And so it followed that the Dutch would need to wrest control over the strategic Portuguese trade entrepôts on the western edge of Africa if they were to mirror the extreme profit margins of the Portuguese. Capturing a trade fortification on the African Coast, while not an easy task, was not as difficult as a full-scale territorial invasion. No European power was willing to maintain a permanent sizable force in Africa until the eighteenth century, and so the trade fortifications were the constant site of capture and re-capture by varying European powers, each seeking the advantage of a trade foothold in Africa.[15] The Dutch would start this pattern of conquest when they captured the Portuguese ports of Luanda and Elmina in 1641 and 1637.[16]

It is important to understand here that these European trade castles were literally just that – coastal fortifications – the existence of which was entirely dependent on both enslaved African service labor (castle slaves) and the maintenance of cordial mercantile relationships with local African hosts. It is not as if the Europeans had unbroken control over the African Gold Coast, they absolutely did not; and their predicament should be described in the language of precariousness rather than domination. These entrepôts and their operative structure bespeak the purpose of the whole order itself: *trade*, downstream of which was the accumulation of capital and the means granted by such.[17] Had the purpose of Atlantic slavery instead been racial domination, it is hard to understand why Europeans would have put up with such an arrangement, let alone sail to African shores in the first place.[18]

The proceeding “sugar revolution" of the seventeenth century can largely be seen as an outgrowth of the maturing Brazilian slave-labor plantation model across the Caribbean and into North America. The Dutch, after the conquest of Brazil, would swiftly arrive in the French Caribbean selling African slaves, the know-how on sugar plantation operation techniques, and even offered their ships to transport the finished product back to Europe.[19] New technological developments in maritime trade and a more complex new-world division of labor also allowed for the plantation to model to spread and adapt to new circumstance more quickly. And following in the footsteps of the Portuguese, African slaves were sought out for their supposed

[14] Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa; Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 100-109.
[15] Ibid, 102-4. See also, Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade; a Census*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 226-21.
[16] Alfred Burdon Ellis, *A History of the Gold Coast of West Africa*, (London: Chapman and Hall, Ld, 1893), 41-47.
[17] Simon P. Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 36-53.
[18] The historian Herman L. Bennett has provided an excellent account into the fascinating trade relationship intricacies between the first Portuguese traders on the Gold coast and the African ruling class. The dynamic between the two would seem to run counter to common understandings of precolonial contact between Africans and Europeans. See, chapter "Histories" in *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 85-107.
[19] Curtin, "Trade Diasporas Overseas" in *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 101.

tropic resilience against the environment, a fiction, but one that helped generate economic imperatives for the expansion of the African slave trade.[20]

The Making of the Atlantic Working Classes

It is during this time that the material circumstance of much of Europe's working classes were changing in dramatic fashion. In England's agrarian regions, primitive accumulation of capital by a wealthy landowning elite created new imperatives that would fundamentally change the direction of economic development in the Atlantic.[21]

The way of life for much of the European peasantry would transform in keeping with English developments, albeit in different manners. The process of *enclosure* of public lands – the *commons* – in effort of increasing agricultural production was met with great protest from much of the English population. The peasantry was effectively erased as a new bourgeois class emerged. But not only that. This is also when the political consciousness of the European working classes began to articulate itself in force.[22] Historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have explored this history at length in their wonderful book *The Many-Headed Hydra*. They outline the "Curse of Labor" in the second chapter of the book:

> We argue that the many expropriations of the day – of the commons by enclosure and conquest, of time by the puritanical abolition of holidays, of the body by child stealing and the burning of women, and knowledge by the destruction of guilds and assaults of paganism – gave rise to new kinds of workers in a new kind of slavery, enforced directly by terror. We also suggest that the emergence of cooperation among workers, in new ways, and on a new scale, facilitated new forms of self-organization among them, which was alarming to the ruling class of the day.[23]

The Atlantic working classes from Africa, Europe, and America would all take part in this new division of labor, one that, as Linebaugh and Rediker note, was "enforced directly by terror". Thus the political-economic formations of the early Atlantic were built upon a punitive foundation, one that kept threats to capital in line. But the continental working classes would not bear equal share in the struggle.

The blunt truth is that it would be the European empires – and them alone – that colonized and then exploited the Atlantic world. This new balance of power created a fundamental partiality regarding political entitlement among the working classes. The English working classes, as historian Barbara J. Fields has outlined in her important essay *Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America*, "did not enter the ring alone", rather, they had the benefit of drawing from "company with the generations who had preceded them in the struggle; and the outcome of those earlier struggles established the terms and conditions of the latest

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[20] Curtin, "The sugar revolution," in *The rise and fall of the plantation complex*, 73-81.
[21] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2017), 113.
[22] See the great work of Peter Linebaugh for more on the political consciousness of the emergent working classes, "The Commodity and the Commons" in *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 46-68.
[23] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, "Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water" in *The Many-Headed Hydra: the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic, (Boston: Beacon Press,2000), 40.*

one."[24] We can likewise extend the same analytic base framework – with some variations – to the Portuguese, Spanish, and French working classes who populated the Americas. They also did not enter the ring alone.

The indigenous populations of the Americas shared a similar predicament with African slaves, and historian Patrick Wolfe has pushed the boundaries of Barbara Fields's ring analogy a little further in his book *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*:

> Unlike the enslaved Africans in the Americas, Natives did not enter the ring alone. Their reinforcements were not oceans away. Nevertheless, their histories had equipped them with resources that were not tailored to the unequal confrontation that settlers' endless renewability set in train. Natives' finite local stock was no match for imperialism's global elasticity. Rather, they were reduced to relying on a shrinking pool of resources whose reproduction had been severely hampered by settler encroachments.[25]

Wolfe continues, making creative use of the concept of preaccumulation in regard to colonialism's edge:

> Eurocolonial society arrived in Native country *ex nihilio* (or perhaps *ex machina*) and ready-made, condensing the power and expansive violence of the long run. This prefondness, a plenitude that is relatively resistant to local determinations, is colonialism's primary competitive advantage. . . . When Europe was piecing together its imperialindustrial-capitalist hegemony, there was no prior Europe already riding on its back. Arriving in Native county, on the other hand, capitalism already contained its own global preaccumulations – including, Russian-doll-like, capitalism itself – along with strategic resources such as the enslavement of Africans.[26]

The European working classes and the indigenous population of the Americas would both retain means or occupy circumstance by which mass enslavement could be somewhat averted. The same was not true for Africans. Resistance against enslavement was much more difficult for those African slaves who found themselves in a foreign land with no clear means by which to free themselves except outright rebellion. And their continental kin would almost certainly occupy the same bottom rung of the social ladder, making resistance that much harder to mount. The European dominant classes understood this partiality – even if only implicitly – and would act upon it accordingly when they constructed the political-economic order of the era. They no doubt observed that horrible conditions under which the Atlantic plantation complex operated would always be met with resistance on the part of those who toiled in the fields, refineries, and storehouses of the cruel system. And so an economic equation in which resistance was least potent and profit highest was to be constructed. Africa was the solution of such equation.

With this treatment we can determine – almost by process of elimination – why Africa would continue to be the continent from which slaves were sourced. The flight of Muslims from the Iberian peninsula, the rise of the Ottomans and Turks in the east (which effectively closed off slave trade routes to eastern Europe), and the increasing universalism on the part of the Catholic

[24] Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race And Ideology In The Unites States Of America." New Left review 181, no. 181 (1990): 95–118.
[25] Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 21.
[26] Ibid, 22.

church in the sixteenth century set Europeans sights on Africa.[27] Coupled with an analysis of the plantation economic model, a political-economic understanding of *Why Africa?* begins to emerge. What is left, is the thorny question of race.

The Invention of Race

Previous sections have avoided explicitly identifying the role of racism in the development and maintenance of the African slave trade. Given the direction of my argument, this treatment is purposeful.

I am of the belief that any historical analysis regarding *racism*, or its more digestible twin *race*, must thoroughly seek to understand both the origins and substance of the phenomena before identifying a place within any causal account.[28] Otherwise, by misidentifying the object of study, historians drink from a poisoned well: the consequence being corrupt analysis. Hence, both those who see race as a tool of human differentiation with a coherent biological basis *and* those who believe racism to be an ever-present fault of human cognition are equally destined to produce erroneous historical accounts. In short, we must identify what race and racism *are*, and the precise historical circumstance they are *from*.

Much of my analysis draws from the invaluable work of historian Barbara J. Fields, who has gracefully dissected our current understandings of race and racism, taking a path counter to the work of many contemporary historians. In her seminal essay *Race and Ideology in American History*, Fields lays out the substance of racism quite clearly, by rooting its substance in that of ideology, observing:

> For the moment, let us notice a more obvious consequence of recognizing race to be an ideological and therefore historical product. What is historical must have a discernible, if not precisely datable, beginning. What is ideological cannot be a simple reflex of physical fact. The view that Africans constituted a race, therefore, must have arisen at a specific and ascertainable historical moment; and it cannot have sprung into being automatically at the moment when Europeans and Africans came into contact with each other.[29]

Note that Prof. Fields identifies the origin of race *not* when Europeans first encountered Africans, but at a later time. The passage continues, unraveling the threads of race further still:

> To treat race as an ideology, and to insist upon treating it in connection with surrounding ideologies, is to open up a vast realm of further complications. Ideologies offer a ready-made interpretation of the world, a sort of hand-me-down vocabulary with which to name the elements of every new experience. But their prime function is to make coherent – even if never scientifically accurate – sense of the social world.[30]

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[27] Klein, *Slavery in Brazil*, 14-5.

[28] Barbara J. Fields has written about this subject at great length, including the distinction between *race* and *racism*. See, Barbara J. Fields, "Of Rogues and Geldings," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (2003): 1397–1405.

[29] Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in C. Vann Woodward, J. Morgan, Kousser, and James M. McPherson, *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 151.

[30] Ibid, 153.

Accordingly, we can understand race as an ideological construct, one that makes available a language that aides in the interpretation of social reality. With such framework as our analytic foundation, it becomes clear that race serves a specific purpose, a role that can be better defined by examining its historic origins.

Historian Jean-Frédéric Schaub has shed light on this subject in his new book *Race is About Politics*. As the title indicates, Schaub sees the race as an inherently political construct, pertaining specifically to social exclusion. Schaub writes of two central operations that race performs:

> Identifying individuals' specific features in terms of which groups they belong to and then asserting that those traits are transmitted from generation to generation.[31]

Following Schaub's analysis, we can pin down more accurately the role that racial ideology in the African slave trade. The structure provided in *Race is About Politics* is also similar to the work of Adolph Reed Jr., who has identified race as an *ideology of ascriptive difference*. These are mechanisms of hierarchy that, in his words, "sort populations into categories of classification that are in principle set off from one another by clear, uncrossable boundaries."[32]

Here I posit a synthesis of the frameworks provided by both Fields, Schaub, and Reed; one that pertains specifically to the practical circumstances in which African slavery developed in Atlantic world:

> *Race* is an ideological construction, a fictive categorical distinction produced by *racism*, that ascriptivley sorted populations into differing groups based off of ancestry; and in the context of the Atlantic world, offered the slave-holding elite with a vocabulary and structure to justify a political-economic formation underpinned by the mass enslavement of Africans. Its origins are not time immemorial, but rather a response to elementary moral considerations against social exclusion.

The above synthesis grounds both the *origin* and *substance* of racial ideology in the realm of historical circumstance, not pseudobiology nor ontology. Insofar as my broader argumentation is concerned, I place the origin of the ideology as a response to moral challenges of the era. Thus racism was not an initial western reflex triggered by encounters with Africans, but rather a response to period ethical considerations.[33] Following this logic, it is worth pointing out that a medieval society – in which indentured labor was not considered anachronistic – would have had little use for racial ideology; a need arises when slavery itself comes into question. This means that its birth required two elements: hierarchical domination – in this case the extremes of the Atlantic slave trade – *and* a widespread belief in some form of universal suffrage or common

[31] Jean-Frédéric Schaub, *Race Is About Politics: Lessons from History*, (Princeton University Press, 2019), 156.
[32] Adolph Reed, Jr, "Unraveling the Relation of Race and Class in American Politics," *Political Power and Social Theory* 15 (2002): 271.
[33] Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," 152.

condition of man. Hence, racial ideology would have little use in pre-capitalist society, and can certainly be discounted as the driving engine of trans-Atlantic slavery.[34]

The unique political and economic nexus of the nascent Euro-colonized Americas would provide fertile ground for racism to flourish. The "Creole Pioneers" that Benedict Anderson examined brilliantly in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* were, in some sense, acting upon a similar impetus that the Atlantic racists would as they sought to solidify their new order.[35] Both nationalism and racism provided a strong ideological tonic with which the common turbulences of the era could be subdued. Without these divisive tools, the dominant classes would have found themselves atop a political order burning from the ground up – a glimmer of which could be seen when Nathaniel Bacon, joined by a motley crew of European indentured servants and enslaved Africans, set Jamestown alight.[36]

The motive becomes clear if we return more carefully to the two letters concerning Atlantic slavery we began with. Our first letter – its ideological position against slavery notwithstanding – makes no reference whatsoever to the racial inferiority of Africans; and also when discussing the various rationalizations of slave traders never brings up racial attitudes on their part – their justifications, while certainly spurious, were not racial in nature, rather they concerned debt peonage, war capture, and religious conversion. This letter was written at a time (1612) when the massive plantations of the new world were beginning to require increasing numbers of slaves to upkeep their immense levels of production, an equation that could not be satisfied by American indigenous labor alone. A new source was needed, along with justifications to satisfy the moral concerns of the era.[37]

Our second letter (1823), sent to a newspaper in effort to advocate a pro-slavery argument, contains much different ideological baggage. The author puts forth an argument dripping with extant racism:

> African slaves are generally rude, soft, and lascivious. Only the goad of slavery can rouse them from the profound inactivity in which they live. Free from that goading, they will return to their natural apathy.[38]

What changed in this period was not the openness by which Europeans express their racism, nor was there a dramatic shift in cultural “attitudes" in the Atlantic; rather, there was a fundamental rearrangement of the material circumstance of everyday life. These new circumstances would engage in a slow epistemic advance – influencing in the most subtle of ways – the ideologies of the era, providing a robust buttress to the new divisions of labor that relied so heavily on African chattel slavery. The Atlantic ideologies may have been rife with internal contradiction; and indeed it only takes a cursory glance to reveal the inconsistencies; but

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[34] I have been influenced quite heavily by the writings of David Byron Davis, whose work explores the confluence of morality and enslavement – the problem – throughout history (with a modern-period focus). See his magisterial work, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[35] Benedict Anderson, "Creole Pioneers" in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), 47-65.
[36] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: the Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, (New York: Norton, 1975), 328-44.
[37] Conrad, *Children of God’s Fire*, 11.
[38] Ibid, 429.

what is important is not their logical consistency – a quality human beings often lack – it is their *function*.[39]

Consequently, any causal account that places racism as the ignition mechanism to the African slave trade will begin to struggle when confronted by the historical record. Racial ideology provided a skeleton key to the Atlantic slaveholding elite that allowed them to maintain contradictory enlightenment beliefs in the face of their own hideous treatment of Africans. The slave trade – not initial reflexes against phenotypical difference – gave it substance. Thus historians that look to racism as principle cause of African slavery weave histories that tell us much more about their own ideological predispositions then that of their subjects; an error that results from not adequately distancing the present from past.

So our question – *Why Africa?* – is best answered by taking a careful examination of the political-economic circumstances of the era. The violent maritime trade struggles of empire, the rise of plantation economies in the new world, the creation of the European working classes, and erasure of American indigenous populations all contributed – like variables in a mathematics equation – to the morbid calculus that turned towards Africa as the primary site to source human slaves.

Reading From Present to Past

The direction of historical reflection is backwards: it starts from the perspective of the present and then proceeds in retrograde to events past. This is a task easier said then done; and one that is quite easily tarnished by our own predispositions and ideological reservations. I would argue that existing historiography on race and slavery in the Atlantic suffers from a blind spot regarding the separation precisely between present and past. An error that is ideological in nature; and thus incredibly difficult for the detached observer to overcome.

And yet, I first pivot to ask: what makes these histories – those that forefront racism as the driving engine of Atlantic history – seem so convincing? Two key operations are at play here. First is the ideological propensity of racism to make itself appear as an real biological part of human life. Second is the difficulty with which one separates the perspectives of the present from those of people past. Both manipulations hinder our understanding of the practical circumstances in which past subjects navigated and understood the world around them, presenting our own hermeneutics as if they were inbuilt lenses through which we have always seen the world. Race, for those who participate in ideological amphitheater of the present, seems very real. But our seemingly reflexive tendency to "see color" is a tragic artifact, or "trace", to borrow from the work of Patrick Wolfe, resulting from centuries of political exclusion.[40] It is not a primordial flaw in human cognition, rather its ideological inertia comes from a constant

[39] To follow a different historical path, the work of Zine Magubane details quite convincingly the importance of figurative language and colonial imagery in the development of hierarchical mechanisms. See, "Capitalism, Female Embodiment, and the Transformation of Commodification into Sexuality" in *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Class, and Gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 14-39.
[40] Wolfe, *Traces of History*, 4-6.

refreshment process conducted in the many arenas of everyday life.[41] Thus we find these histories convincing precisely because of their inability to adequately separate present from past, not despite it.

One consequence of inadequate separation is the shrinking of gaps in our historical sieve to the point that any past method of ascriptive differentiation becomes *racial* in character: an upshot of the seductive and near-imperceptible ability of ideology to compress and transform the past into a more digestible narrative that fits seamlessly with our interpretation of the present. This same genus of trickery is at work when we try to grapple with the awkward detail that a nineteenth-century countryside French peasant would probably not have know what "France" was;[42] and why Aristotle remarked on the "incredibility" of spherical earth theories in the face of its seemingly flat character.[43]

And so we seem, given the new histories of race and capitalism, to run the risk of turning this historical discourse into a strange game, the name of which quickly becomes how far back in history racism can be found. Shapes in the clouds become real flying objects: what was a post-enlightenment phenomenon now becomes medieval, and then what was medieval becomes most certainly a product of antiquity or even prior still. All the while the unconscious slight-of-hand trick is missed: racism has undergone a subtle substance conversion from an ideology into a trans-historical ontology, now practically a preselected attitudinal component of Europeans present from time immemorial; and a treatment somewhat akin to Edward Said's rather troublesome concept of *latent* Orientalism, a prejudice ostensibly ever-present within the European mind.[44]

I would only add then, that the fact that contemporary debates over the origins of *Race* have provided causal accounts with massively differing chronologies – literally centuries apart – should provide us a clear signal that the theoretical ground upon which we conduct historical analysis is dodgy.[45] It is dodgy in a double sense: that it is of low quality – not adequate for

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[41] I am deeply indebted to the work of Karen and Barbara Fields, who's masterful work *Racecraft*, has guided my thoughts on the subject. The last two essays within, concerning the work of Emile Durkheim, have provided a mainstay to my understanding on the propagation of, and linkages between race, rationale, and ritual. See, "Witchcraft and Racecraft: Invisible Ontology in Its Sensible Manifestations" and "Individuality and the Intellectuals: An Imaginary Conversation Between Emile Durkheim and W.E.B DuBois", in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 193-260.

[42] I hesitate to characterize this phenomenon as "presentism" in light of the specificity of the ideological construction at hand. See, Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen the Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1976). And for an interesting mention of the *race* subject, see the work of Robert Mandrou, *Introduction to Modern France, 1500-1640: an Essay in Historical Psychology*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), 77-82.

[43] Aristotle, "On the Heavens," Book II, Chapter 14, in *The Works of Aristotle*, (Oxford University Press), 297-298.

[44] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 102. See also, for a response and bracing corrective, the great essay by Vivek Chibber, "Orientalism and its Afterlives," *Catalyst* Vol 3, No. 1 (Spring 2019), 10-33.

[45] I provide three examples: Jean-Frédéric Schaub's aforementioned *Race is About Politics*, which places the origins of racial ideology squarely on the Iberian peninsula the fourteenth-century; Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* which, as the title implies, argues that the origins of race are earlier still in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries; and lastly, Benjamin Issac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, which traces the intellectual origins back further still. See, Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*

historical foundation; and that it, like a false premise, is exceedingly dangerous. This is not an exaggeration. The stakes are high: racism is real, and it continues to operate in the most pernicious of ways; and without proper ideological elucidation it cannot be overcome.

But nevertheless, it remains extremely tempting to read the woes of our present condition far back into the circumstance of our historical subjects. Thus, a well-trained historian takes their own predicament for granted, looking backwards for shadows on the wall that were never really there. Ideology guides the hand when historical connections become too tenuous to make, drawing lines and connecting dots within the archive that are only significant from the perspective of the present. This is not to say that closeness always taints the historical account: an overly distant analysis can slip into the trap of losing all tethered consideration for what ultimately were the real – and often painful – experiences of past human beings.

The historian Carlo Ginzburg has written at length about the critical importance of balancing such endeavors in his book *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, of which two short passages are included below. The first, at the start of the book, touches on the importance of separation:

> It seems to me that defamiliarization may be a useful antidote to the risk we all run of taking reality (ourselves included) for granted.[46]

And the second, in the final chapter, reflects upon the balance between creating distance and maintaining *proximity* to subject:

> "Out of sight, out of mind," as the English say; as the Italians say, "*Fratelli, coltelli*" – where there are brothers, there are knives. . . . Too great a distance gives rise to indifference; too great proximity may awaken compassion, or provoke murderous rivalry.[47]

Do not misunderstand me here: I am not claiming that ideology itself has no place in the archive, nor am I arguing that the ideological presence of racism or any other pernicious ascriptive differentiation mechanism is in any way insignificant. Rather, I am arguing that historians should seek to examine their own position within history more critically, emphasizing the need for analytic distance between historian and subject. I have attempted to do so here: writing a history that is chiefly concerned with the practical circumstances of the developing Atlantic world. A treatment of history that "passes everything through a sieve of doubt" is, to quote the historian Shlomo Sand, "the necessary condition for a more reliable history."[48] But until then, the tool that historians use to gaze into the past will more resemble a mirror than telescope; and so much more distorted history will be.

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). See also, Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. (Princeton University Press, 2013).

[46] Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 22.

[47] Ibid, 160.

[48] Shlomo Sand, "Retreating from National Time" in *Twilight of History* (London: Verso, 2017), 236.

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