

Questioning Slavery

James Walvin



QUESTIONING SLAVERY

By teasing apart the history of slavery into its major components, and by examining those themes that recent historians have brought to the fore, this book makes sense of what has become a confused and confusing historical debate.

Each chapter offers a guide to the most recent scholarship. The themes chosen—race, gender, resistance, domination and control—are those that currently engage the attention of the most innovative scholars in a range of disciplines. The comparative analysis on slavery throughout the English-speaking Americas gives new perspectives on the phenomenon.

Written in a clear and lively style, *Questioning Slavery* is an up-to-date guide to slavery, to black historical experience and to on-going historical debates.

James Walvin is Professor of History at the University of York. He is a leading authority on the history of slavery and has published extensively. His latest books include *Slaves and Slavery: The British Colonial Experience* (1992) and *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (1992).

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PREFACE

For the best part of three centuries the development and well-being of the English-speaking world (on both sides of the Atlantic) was inextricably linked to the rise and progress of black slavery. Research since World War II (but especially over the past generation) has confirmed the centrality of slavery in the development of the Atlantic system.¹ Yet it was not always so clearly or demonstrably the case. In the past twenty-five years, scholars of slavery have not only transformed our understanding of the minutiae of slavery itself, but have confirmed that the importance of slavery transcended the narrower confines of its own particular specialism. When I first began to work on slavery in the British West Indies in 1967, the corpus of relevant secondary literature was relatively thin. Now—in the mid-1990s—it is virtually impossible to keep abreast of current scholarship. The academic study of slavery has, in effect, shifted from the margins of scholarly interest (even of respectability) to become the focus of innovative and imaginative work at the very core of modern historical scholarship. It is not, however, always easy to make sense of that abundant scholarship, or to see the current directions in slave studies. Indeed, the *genre* of ‘slave studies’ is itself undergoing massive changes, spawning in its turn new subspecies of scholarly interests, most notably ‘Diaspora Studies’.² But if any simple conclusion has emerged from recent findings on slavery it is that slavery in the Americas was quite different from other forms of slavery (then or earlier). In addition, it is now clear that, for all their superficial similarities, there were enormous differences between the various American slave societies.

What this book seeks to do is, in effect, to pick a path through the scholarly thickets. It is concerned with those forms of slavery

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which developed in the English-speaking Americas (in the Caribbean and North America) but, inevitably, I have in places been greatly influenced by ideas and findings from other regions. It would, for example, be perverse to ignore the excellent work recently published on Brazil.³ Equally I cannot discount the influence of having read dozens of articles on various forms of slavery submitted to the journal I co-edit.⁴ That said, the focus of this book is simple enough: the English-speaking settlements of the Americas.

It is important to explain, from the start, what this book does *not* try to do. It is not a comprehensive history of slavery. For students interested in recent narrative accounts of slavery in the English-speaking world, three books spring to mind.⁵ Readers keen to locate slavery in its broader setting should address the remarkable work of Orlando Patterson.⁶ Similarly, anyone keen to study the intellectual problems of slavery should turn to the monumental writings of David Brion Davis.⁷ This book's aim, on the other hand, is altogether simpler.

In trying to make sense of a generation's scholarship, I have adopted a thematic approach. This inevitably involves a degree of artificial ordering and arrangement of the material. To slice up the confusions of the past (and the scholarly confusions of the present) into neatly packaged themes is, of course, to create artificial structures. The study of slavery is at once more confusing, more adversarial and disputative—indeed, more in doubt—than this book might sometimes suggest. Beneath the (sometimes) rather bland generalizations there occasionally bubbles an intellectual conflict. I have tried to approach the topic by asking questions of slavery in the hope that those questions will prompt replies. Each chapter tries to confront one of the main questions or problems which have attracted scholarly attention over the past twenty-five years or so. This is not, however, a historiographical book, but it has been shaped by my own reading of and engagement with the writings of other historians.

There is a tendency to imagine that slavery is necessarily black. Curiously, the massive scholarly output in recent years has served to compound the impression that slavery is best represented (and certainly best known) by the slave systems of the Americas. Of course, no serious historian would openly make such claims and would point, instead, to the ubiquity of slave cultures in greatly different periods and regions. But it is undoubtedly true that the

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bulk of recent slave scholarship has been concerned with black slavery.⁸ Moreover, the transformation of slave history into popular cultural format has also lent strength to the feeling that because slavery was black it was necessarily racial. As we shall see, this is not the case. It is also true that without slavery—without those Africans shipped into the Americas—the course of modern racial thinking would have been utterly different. We will then need to return to the complex question of slavery and race, not simply in its historical setting, but in the links forged between history and modern racism.

Naturally enough, what follows is very much my book. Most of the time it may reflect a broad consensus of opinion among contemporary slave historians. But I do not expect everyone to agree with all the questions I ask—or with the emergent answers. To that extent, the book is offered as part summary of, part contribution to, the continuing debate about the history of slavery in the English-speaking world.

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One colleague in particular, Alan Forrest, deserves special mention for helping me with this book, for he has frequently gone out of his way to enable me to pursue the interests which have found their way into this study. Many of the ideas which follow were first aired in my teaching at the University of York. There, my students have, by turns, been critical and informative. Parts of the book were discussed in seminars and lectures at York, at Flinders University, Australia, at the University of Toronto, the Victorian Studies Association of Ontario, the University of Edinburgh and at meetings of the Association of Caribbean Historians in Jamaica and Puerto Rico. Above all else, however, it was in the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania that the book took its final shape. There, I was fortunate enough to hold a Barra Fellowship and was greatly helped by a group of wonderfully attentive librarians. I hope others do not take it amiss if I single out Phil Lapsansky for praise and thanks. He steered me towards sources and books I did not know about and generally acted as my mentor and guide—often above the call of duty. In Philadelphia, Rod McDonald was a patient host who made me feel at home. Once again Gad Heuman took time out from his own work to discuss my work. I am most grateful to the publisher's anonymous reviewer whose helpful remarks greatly improved this text. In this book, more than in others, I am very conscious of how much I am indebted to other historians working in the field.

JW, York

1

FORGING THE LINK

Europe, Africa and the Americas

The European invasion of the Americas, tentative and hesitant initially, had dramatic consequences for three continents: first, and most obvious, for the Americas and its various civilizations and native peoples; second, for Europe which soon developed a voracious appetite for the land, products and staples of the Americas; and third, for Africa which, in time, came to provide the workforce which broke open key areas of the Americas to profitable cultivation. Looking back, the association between black slavery and the Americas seems so natural, so much a part of the historical and economic development of the region, that the two seemed obvious partners. Quite the contrary, it was no such thing; but by, say, the mid-eighteenth century, when the European appetite for African slaves seemed insatiable, Africa seemed the natural place to recruit labour for the Americas.

When the Europeans launched their first invasion of the Americas, in the wake of Columbus, they encountered various local peoples and indigenous civilizations throughout the region: nomadic and agricultural Indian societies were scattered across the hemisphere. Three major civilizations—Mayan, Aztec and Incan—had control of, or access to, products which were much prized by the invading Europeans. One by one, their civilizations fell: many were put to the sword by ruthless invaders, more were weakened by disease and sickness transmitted unknowingly by the Europeans. It is, even now, hard to grasp what happened to the Indian peoples of the Americas. They died in their hundreds of thousands, first in the Caribbean, then in Central America and Peru, later in North and South America. In Mexico, the population is thought to have fallen by 95 per cent in seventy-five years; in Peru the population of 9,000,000 fell to 600,000 in a century. Time

and again, the story was repeated wherever Europeans (and Africans) made contact with local people.¹

The early contacts provided a grim foretaste of what was to come. In Hispaniola, one of the first European settlements, the local population collapsed from 4,000,000 to 100,000 by 1508. Cuba followed the same route. Indian peoples everywhere bemoaned their fate, capturing the stunned horror which overtook them in haunting words. Before the white men, said one Indian from the Yucatan,

There was then no sickness; they had no aching bones; they had then no high fevers: they had then no smallpox...At that time, the course of humanity was orderly. The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here.²

They fell, not to the gun or the sword (though there was plenty of violent killing), but to hidden and unknown microbes; to influenza, typhus, measles, chickenpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid, whooping cough, bubonic plague. But worst of all was smallpox, which spread from the Caribbean in 1518 throughout the hemisphere, sometimes advancing ahead of the white man. It killed whole communities, leaving survivors stunned, disfigured and utterly demoralized. Some scholars have calculated that up to 90,000,000 people died.³ A German missionary wrote, in 1619, that Indians 'die so easily that the bare look and smell of a Spaniard causes them to give up the ghost'.⁴

Nor was it just the Spaniards. The French and Portuguese took smallpox to Brazil, the English to Florida and New England, the French to the Indian tribes of Canada. By 1600 some twenty epidemics had surged through the native peoples of the Americas—leaving a mere ten per cent of the population surviving. And more was to come. To use the words of an Inca lament, night fell on the Indian peoples. Of course Europeans (and Africans) also suffered. But never on the same scale.

What was abundantly clear, from the early days of settlement, was that Indian peoples *en masse* would never be likely to help their conquerors in their new ventures of settlement and economic development. Some, of course, worked side by side with the invaders in shaping the initial settlements in towns and rural areas. But the decline of the Indian populations and the demoralization (and flight) of survivors ensured that there were rarely enough indigenous people to help Europeans with their local schemes. Nor

were there enough European settlers available for the back-breaking work of pioneering, frontier life. But there were other forms of labour, already in use in other parts of the world, which were to provide the missing pieces in the European equation. They had, in the Americas, other important assets—land, natural resources and potential—in an abundance which even they could scarcely imagine. They also had access to European capital and technical and managerial know-how. What they also needed, however, was labour to unlock the potential of the region.

The answer to their labour problems had already been suggested in the earlier experience of plantation management, in the Mediterranean and Atlantic islands. Europeans first developed plantations for sugar cane cultivation in the eastern Mediterranean at the time of the Crusades. Slowly, these early sugar plantations moved westward, from Palestine to Cyprus—though always on a small scale—on to southern Spain and North Africa. European maritime expansion took settlement—and the plantation—on to the Atlantic islands of the Azores, Madeira, the Canaries and the Cape Verde islands, later still to Fernando Po and São Tomé. These islands were, in effect, stepping-stones between the old societies and economics of the Mediterranean and the New World of colonial settlement on the far side of the Atlantic. The most crucial spot was São Tomé, close to Africa, ideally suited to sugar cane production and close to supplies of African labour in the Kingdoms of Kongo and Benin.⁵

Though small-scale compared to the later history of plantations, the basic elements of plantation production were in place: colonial lands, settled by marauding and mercantile Europeans, alien labour, and European finance and expertise. It seemed natural enough to try these arrangements in the New World after 1492. Cane cultivation was tried unsuccessfully in the Caribbean in 1493, again in 1503, and more successfully (with labour from the Canaries) in 1517. But wherever cane was planted in the early sixteenth century—in Spanish settlements in Jamaica, Puerto Rico and coastal Mexico—the problem remained that of labour. The Portuguese had more luck.

In the mid-1540s, they transplanted sugar from Madeira to Brazil. Within twenty years, Brazilian production matched the tonnage from Madeira, and by 1580, Brazil produced 5000 tons. Fifty years later the output reached 20,000 tons.⁶ The Portuguese were able to make this dramatic progress thanks to their trading

connections in West Africa. European explorations in West Africa had revealed complex trading systems which involved the movement of a host of goods and products within Africa. Among those items of trade were slaves, normally prisoners of war sold and bartered as trade and removed from their native region. Some were shifted north, across the Sahara, for sale to North Africa. The total number was very small, however; no more perhaps than 5000 a year.⁷ Whatever the scale, when Europeans made their early maritime contacts with West Africa, they found slave systems in place which they could turn to their own advantage. Initially, however, West Africa offered other more lucrative prospects, most spectacularly gold. The thriving African gold industry used slave labour. Thus, both in the embryonic gold trade between Europeans and Africans, and in the development of the offshore São Tomé sugar industry, the Portuguese quickly involved themselves in trading in African slaves. When sugar plantations began to thrive in Brazil in the mid-sixteenth century, it seemed natural (easy, an extension of existing systems and, thanks to convenient currents and trade winds, navigationally direct) to ship slaves from West Africa to Brazil.

Early experiments in sugar cultivation in Brazil had used Amerindian slaves. But the Indians tended to die out in the face of diseases from Europe and Africa. Nor was the problem solved by simply bringing more Indians from the interior to the coast, for they too had no resistance to alien diseases. Slowly, but perceptibly, imported Africans began to fill their place. They, too, died in large numbers; but unlike the local Indians the Africans could be replaced by fresh imports from West Africa. Moreover, the Atlantic crossing to Brazil was relatively quick; the faster the crossing, the lower the on-board mortality rates. African slaves imported to Brazil were thus relatively cheap. So was Brazilian sugar. The abundance of suitable land offered economies of scale which enabled the Brazilian sugar industry to overtake quickly the volumes and costs of sugar from the Atlantic islands. Brazil soon attracted European capital, and the human/economic mould took shape. European money and skills, American land and African labour—together, on the plantation, they produced a commodity which Europeans consumed in ever-growing volumes. Here, then, was a form of tropical production and colonial investment which seemed to yield prosperity and well-being in all directions: to the Brazilian settlers, to the European

capitalists, to European mercantile interests and European consumers. But where was the profit, the well-being, for the local Indians and imported Africans? The example of Brazil—and of Brazilian sugar—was to dazzle Europeans in other parts of the Americas. And, from the first, European settlers appreciated the benefits of African imported labour.

Over a period of fifty years, there was a marked shift from using Indian to African labour in Brazilian sugar. As sugar yielded profits to the Portuguese planters, they invested their money in Africans and material improvements. In the 1550s and 1560s there were virtually no slaves in the sugar mills of north-east Brazil. Twenty years later, they formed a striking minority. But between 1600 and 1620, Africans began to dominate the labour force: these were years of relative international calm, good sugar prices in Europe and consequent expansion throughout the Brazilian sugar industry.

The Portuguese had long used Africans as slaves, at home and on their Atlantic islands. They knew their skills and benefits but, above all, were impressed by their experience of sugar work in Madeira and São Tome. It seemed natural enough for their contemporaries in Brazil—closer in sailing times than the maps suggest—to think of Africans as *the* natural workers for their northeastern sugar industry. Skilled sugar workers were among the first Africans working on plantations. But, as the Atlantic slave trade grew in the last decades of the sixteenth century, as more Africans arrived direct from Africa, growing numbers were to be found in the fields. More than that, it was perfectly clear that planters quickly came to value Africans much more highly than local Indians. Wherever we look in the Americas, planters paid Indians much less than what they paid for slaves. The formula was simple: Africans were a better investment than Indians. In the words of one commentator in Carolina in 1740 (but in a quote that rings true for other regions and times), ‘with them [Indians] one cannot accomplish as much as with Negroes’.⁸

This was clearly true in Brazil where prices of/wages for the two groups were always different. The African labourer was worth more, however we compute their relative value. More than that, recent calculations suggest that Africans produced more than the Indians (whose productivity was notoriously low). The simple truth remained that, although it seemed that

Portuguese planters paid more initially for their African slaves, they got a better return on their investment. Though Indians were valuable as a source of very cheap local labour in the early days of settlement and in the drift to sugar in Brazil, they were soon revealed to be much less valuable when the industry slipped into higher gear. In all this, the international market played its own crucial role. The development of the Atlantic slave trade needed outside economic agencies. Fortunately for planters, financial and maritime organizations were in place to support and make possible the movement of African slaves across the Atlantic. Compared to the mature Atlantic system of the eighteenth century, it looks simple, even rudimentary, though in outline it was recognizably similar. The Atlantic slave economy was conceived and nurtured by European capitalist interests, able and willing to marshal finance, expertise (and labour), and to move it relatively quickly from one part of the world to another. In the process Africans were quickly transmuted into the human commodity which was to shape the Atlantic economy for the best part of three centuries.

The Portuguese had pioneered the first major Atlantic slave trade systems, moving Africans to Europe, the Atlantic islands and then the Americas. Their effective monopoly had seen 40,000 Africans moved across the Atlantic. But when the Dutch conquered northern Brazil in 1630, they were in a position to put a colony and the maritime strength to take over from the Portuguese. The Dutch had some experience of the industry, for their ships and refineries (in Holland) had already tapped into the Portuguese sugar trade. Conquest consolidated that trade. The Dutch quickly moved into the old Portuguese empire around the world, acquiring all the economic benefits that flowed from that far-flung system of colonies and trading stations. In the Atlantic, they secured major entrées to West Africa, in northern Brazil and a string of West Indian islands. Most of these possessions were run by the two major Dutch trading companies: in the Atlantic, control fell to the West India Company whose prime aim was to squeeze out competitors, on both sides of the Atlantic, and to create, as far as possible, a Dutch monopoly.

With their own colony in Brazil after 1630, the Dutch company took a much keener interest in its African trading posts and in the necessary trade of supplying Africans to the sugar industry

in Brazil. Whatever doubts the Dutch may have had about the morality of buying and selling Africans, those doubts simply did not surface in the early papers of the West India Company: scruples were swept aside by the power of economic self-interest.⁹ Dutch traders to Africa had put down their first tentative roots in 1612, though the initial interest was in gold. Now, the Brazilian need for labour shifted their African concerns from natural products to human commodities. Gradually, the Dutch displaced the slave-trading Portuguese on the African coast by force of arms and through commercial deals with Africans. By 1641, the Dutch had completely usurped the Portuguese, removing them from their forts and trading posts. It was now their turn to contend with the piratical raids of other (northern) Europeans, themselves anxious to secure a share in the lucrative trade in black humanity.¹⁰ Thus, from the first, events in the New World were the key to what happened in Africa. But such a formula is, of course, far too simple. Though the labour demands of the Americas—in this case Brazil—prompted the search for African slaves, it was all made possible by that more broadly based economic change which saw the rapid emergence of powerful mercantile states in northern Europe, their wealth enhanced by trading links to the wider world.

The Dutch grip on Brazil was tenuous, and had been made possible by internal Iberian conflicts. Portuguese planters eventually rose against the Dutch, who lost control of Brazil by 1654. Not surprisingly, the Dutch importation of slaves had been small-scale, and riddled with uncertainty. In the era of Dutch control over northern Brazil, some 26,000 slaves were imported. Though dwarfed by the numbers that followed, the Dutch trade established the Dutch as the main players in the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, the loss of Brazil was not catastrophic for the Dutch because, at the point they lost control of Brazil, tempting commercial prospects revealed themselves further north, in the Caribbean. Though it was a longer, and therefore more costly, venture to ship Africans to the West Indies rather than to Brazil, the islands offered prospects which seemed boundless. Thwarted in Brazil, Dutch merchants turned their attention to Barbados.

The European settlement of the Caribbean was part of a much broader migration of people to the Americas, which saw the proliferation of European colonies planted throughout the hemisphere. Such colonies offered a relief from social pressures

at home, freedom on the far side of the Atlantic for persecuted minorities, and a beachhead, in the Americas, for further attacks on the fabled wealth unlocked particularly by the Spaniards. Early settlers had little intention of using imported labour—except their own. Europeans used their own labour in winning over the land to useful and profitable cultivation. However, the regions settled by the British, for example, were remarkably different one from another—from Massachusetts to Barbados—and some regions developed quite differently from their original intentions. Geography, climate and the emergence of particular, successful crops—all these and more were the determinants of the human and economic transformation of the British (and French) settlements.

In Barbados, pioneer settlers broke open the land to smallscale cultivation, using indentured labour from Britain. But Brazil already provided powerful evidence that Africans were much more useful. For a start, they seemed more durable: more resistant to the ailments which afflicted and killed so many European settlers. In fact, they had different immunities and, though they too died in horrifying numbers, Africans seemed to be a better long-term economic bet. Even when they died prematurely, they could be readily replaced; quickly, cheaply and with little fuss. The same improved vessels which carried the bigger cargoes of sugar back to Europe, could carry larger cargoes of Africans across the Atlantic. Thus the haphazard, almost accidental, trickle of slaves to Brazil became something quite different. In the process, morality was simply relegated or ignored; cast aside by a burgeoning demand which disregarded any human sensibilities in pursuit of profit.

Barbadian settlers borrowed money from Dutch financiers, reinvesting their early profits in further agricultural expansion. Initially they grew tobacco, lured by the profits already being made in London. In its early days of settlement, Barbados was described as a colony ‘wholly built on smoke’.¹¹ But as profits in London fell, and as British politicians began to favour Virginians, Barbados lost faith in tobacco. There was a consequent switch to cotton, later to indigo, but these too led to disappointment. But in all these experiments, Barbadian planters used white indentured ‘servants’. Indeed, a majority of whites settling in the island in the 1630s and 1640s were in this category, contracted to labour for up to seven years in return for their passage and keep.

From the first, however, planters complained of never being able to get enough labour. Once in the island, these servants were bartered and auctioned, swapped and inherited, much like other inanimate personal objects. They were also tied to their workplace, unable to move without written permission. They had certain rights, however, and their employers took trouble to distinguish them from black slaves.¹²

Africans took their place alongside the early white settlers in Barbados (free and indentured). Black settlers were in a small minority—perhaps 800 in the 1630s. Slavery for imported Africans was not formally sanctioned until 1636, but from the first the English settlers ‘categorised the Negroes and Indians who worked for them as heathen brutes and very quickly treated them as chattels’.¹³ From the beginning, blacks were slaves for life—and bequeathed their bondage to their offspring. The blacks’ fate (their role, treatment and status) was to change utterly with the coming of sugar.

Brazil produced 80 per cent of the cane sugar for Europe up to the 1640s; but war, and the defeat of the Dutch, switched attention (most notably of Dutch investors) to other prospective regions. Barbados was ideal. The Dutch could provide money, technical experience (and machinery), and the maritime capacity for importing Africans and exporting produce. By 1650, Barbados was thought to be the richest place in the Americas.¹⁴

The adventurous and the imaginative—the lucky—made fortunes from the expansive industry. Gradually, the original smallholdings gave way to larger plantations; by 1651 they exported 3750 tons of sugar. Eighteen years later it had risen to 9525 tons. All appropriate land was devoured in the rush to produce sugar, and the sugar planters established for themselves a reputation which lived on long after the heyday of sugar: that of wealthy men whose lifestyle was enviably lavish, and whose homes were adorned with the most precious artefacts money could buy.¹⁵ They formed a tight political class, able to advance their interests at home and in London. And they built their fortunes on the backs of their African slaves.

As demand for labour increased, the cost of indentured white servants rose (in the 1640s and 1650s). But, at the same time, the cost of African slaves fell. Naturally enough, planters turned to Africa, not Britain, for its growing labour force. Between 1640 and 1700, some 134,500 Africans were shipped to Barbados. But

the number of whites began to fall, from 23,000 in 1655 to 17,528 in 1712.¹⁶ The face of the island began to change. By 1670 there were 900 plantations, and perhaps as many as 400 windmills (for grinding the sugar cane). And all were worked by African slaves. The success of Barbados—itsself made possible by the earlier Dutch experience in Brazil—was contagious. When, in 1655, the British took Jamaica from the Spaniards, the example of Barbados was naturally uppermost in the minds of the early settlers. For a start, large numbers of the British army of conquest in Jamaica were from Barbados; they knew that sugar was the obvious way to quick prosperity. There was land in abundance in Jamaica, lavishly distributed to the men of the conquering army. They also needed labour, and few doubted that that meant slaves. Africans were poured into Jamaica, just as they had been a few years earlier into Barbados. Between 1640 and 1700, about 85,100 were shipped into Jamaica. Altogether, more than 250,000 Africans were landed in the British islands by 1700.¹⁷ The rise in importation matched the growth in sugar production: the more Africans arrived, the more sugar was exported. In time, however, not all slaves worked in sugar. Africans and their local-born descendants took up a range of occupations in the maturing economies of the West Indies. And, as the economies developed, their crops diversified. But until the end of slavery in the Caribbean, it was sugar, above all else, which was the engine behind the islands' development. In its turn, sugar was made possible by Africans.

A similar story was repeated in other parts of the Americas. But, as in the Caribbean, the intrusion of black slavery was by no means inevitable or, at the time, predictable. In North America, European invaders were displacing indigenous Indians by settlement and by consequent agricultural changes.¹⁸ From the first, it was clear that working the land was the only really viable form of settlement. And that created a demand for labour which the pioneers could not satisfy. Food cultivation, especially tobacco in the Chesapeake region and rice in South Carolina, demanded more and more hands. Local Indians were tried and—in common with much of the Americas—were found wanting. Indians were used as slaves throughout the colonies, but always in small numbers and always to poor economic effect. The men disclaimed agricultural labour (dismissing it as women's work). But the real problem of managing Indian slaves

was illness and disease, as they died out in enormous numbers, and survivors were generally enfeebled and demoralized. Time and again, they proved themselves inadequate for European needs. Much more reliable were indentured Europeans—mainly from Ireland and Scotland—many of whom were already proving their worth in the Caribbean. Criminals, prisoners, volunteers, political refugees, all (and more) swelled the ranks of indentured labourers crossing the Atlantic.¹⁹ Most found their way into agriculture (the majority were young men), notably in the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake. Between 1630 and 1680, about 75,000 Britons migrated to the region and somewhere between a half and three-quarters were indentured servants.²⁰ Among those who survived, few remained on the land when their period of service expired: they migrated elsewhere or sought other work. By the 1680s, it proved ever-more difficult to acquire new indentured servants. Even poor Irish *women* proved reluctant.²¹ Planters needed other sources.

The obvious answer was the African slave. Obvious, because Africans were already there, in small numbers, working alongside free and unfree white people. Obvious, too, in that Africans had, for years, been imported throughout the Americas, notably into Brazil. In 1660 there were perhaps no more than 1700 blacks in the whole Chesapeake region, which had increased to 4000 in 1680 (the new arrivals coming mainly from the West Indies). By 1695, a further 3000 black people joined their ranks. In the last five years of the century another 3000 Africans were purchased for labour in the burgeoning tobacco industry. As late as 1690, blacks formed only 15 per cent of Virginia's population. But the numbers increased as tobacco expanded, though the local plantations rarely matched the size of their sugar counterparts in the Caribbean: slaves imported into Maryland and Virginia between 1700 and 1740 numbered 54,000.²² The end result was not merely the augmenting of the local labour force, but the opening up of a chasm between black and white. Previously, the small bands of blacks had worked side by side with whites. Now, black slaves formed the bulk of the unfree population. Indentured white labour declined in importance, in proportion to the rise of local black slavery. Chesapeake planters, for so long insistent that the best field hands were indentured whites, became ever keener—later enthusiastic—for black slaves.

The cause of their changed loyalties lay, not so much in the respective labour of the two groups, but in the price they cost the planters. White servants became more costly and slaves relatively cheaper. It was, however, more complicated than that. The *supply* of white labour became more and more difficult. Europeans were unhappy, thanks to the stories which filtered back across the Atlantic, at the prospects of taking up an indenture. African slaves, of course, had no such option or choice. Gradually there emerged a different kind of tobacco plantation—quite unlike the initial farms—where white families employed outside white overseers to supervise the slaves who undertook most of the field work. A class and caste system emerged which characterized the region throughout the eighteenth century, where all hinged on a subservient black labouring class, separated from their white superiors in almost every respect: in the nature of their work, and in the way they were treated (face to face and by the law).²³ Slaves were forced into that separate sphere which was to contain them, for all practical purposes, until the coming of freedom in the mid-nineteenth century.

The human face of the region began to change. In 1680 only 7 per cent of Virginia's population was black; by 1750 it had risen to 44 per cent. In the words of the local planter, William Byrd II in 1736, 'They import so many Negroes hither, that I fear this Colony will some time or other be confirmed by the name of New Guinea.'²⁴

Supplies of Africans were guaranteed by the emergence of British naval superiority from the late seventeenth century. Gradually the British became *the* Atlantic slave traders. The Dutch, the major pioneers in the Atlantic slave trade, were pushed aside first by military defeat and later by British maritime success. The ships of the Royal African Company (founded in 1672) began to supply the labour which Europe could not supply. The power of the British Navy was part cause, part function of emergent British power. In the Atlantic (but also in other parts of the world) it was the crucial determinant in the course and pattern of settlement and trade. Britain had begun to rule the waves—with all the economic benefits that flowed from such domination. The Africans themselves had also started to change. In the early years, Africans in North America had poor survival prospects and little chance of a healthy life. By the early eighteenth century, however, many more were surviving to become healthy adults and were

producing children of their own. Thus the planters who bought slaves also bought their future offspring. This was a formula which planters in many of the West Indian islands (where conditions were much harsher and the disease environment more dangerous) did not enjoy. In this, however, even the West Indians realized the utility of encouraging healthy, settled and fertile slave families. But this appreciation of slave life was rooted in practical utility, not sentiment.

Slaves transformed another region of North America in the last years of the seventeenth century. The 'lower South' of South Carolina and Georgia was settled fifty years later than the Chesapeake and the newly founded economy struggled, linked at first to the West Indies (whence much of its early produce was shipped). In return, slaves from the islands were brought into the region. All that changed in the 1690s with the introduction of rice. In 1698 some 12,000 lb were exported. By 1730 it had risen to 18,000,000 lb, and 83,000,000 lb by 1770. Rice was to South Carolina what tobacco was to the Chesapeake. There were other crops in the region, of course; notably indigo and naval stores. But rice (also grown in Georgia by the mid-eighteenth century) was the transforming economic activity. From the first, slaves dominated the agricultural work, in large measure because the first settlers had come from the West Indies, and had brought their slaves with them. Right up to independence from Britain in 1776, slaves were in a majority in South Carolina. Slavery quickly proved itself as the most obvious and viable of institutions, brushing aside any local moral objections (in Georgia, for example) in the rush to make profitable returns from luxuriant land, but with no obvious supply of large-scale labour other than enslaved blacks.

Rice plantations, clawed from a hostile terrain by servile gangs working in unpleasant and often dangerous conditions, reminded many contemporaries of life in the Caribbean. The work was harsh, the climate was similar and the labour force was an image of Africa. As the rice economy thrived, centred around the elegant city of Charleston (the fourth-largest city in British America), slaves were poured in by the boatload. Rice quickly established itself as a major export crop (mainly to Britain), the fourth most valuable export from British America, after tobacco, sugar and wheat.²⁵ In the 1720s, 600 slaves a year were landed in South Carolina. That increased to 2000 a year in the following decade.

By 1740 there were almost 40,000 slaves in the colony and slavery had seeped into every corner of the colony. Though there were major slave-holdings—big plantations with very large slave gangs—two-thirds of slave owners owned only a very small number; four or even fewer.²⁶

Rice cultivation needed complex systems of cultivation and irrigation and was from the first much better organized on a large-scale basis. Tobacco had, initially, been grown on smallholdings; rice needed big, labour-intensive arrangements. As the local planters prospered, their holdings—of land and slaves—got bigger, their wealth grew and they tended to retreat to their fashionable houses in Charleston, much as Caribbean planters went ‘home’ to England. But, unlike slaves in the Caribbean, slaves in South Carolina worked a task system, given specific jobs or quotas to fill. Sugar slaves worked in large gang-based operations. This meant, at one level, that Carolinian slaves had, from the first, a degree of liberty to organize their time, work and leisure in ways not common in the West Indies. But slave owners elsewhere in North America distrusted the task system. It seemed to undermine the strict control and discipline which they felt they needed in order to keep the whole system in its place.²⁷

For all the importance of the rice slaves of the lower South, they only ever constituted a small proportion (perhaps 17 per cent) of the overall population of North America. The fact that 61 per cent (144, 872) of North American slaves lived in Maryland and Virginia provides a clue to the respective economic importance of the two regions. It was tobacco above all else which wagged the enslaved dog. It was normally the nature of local work—i.e. the crop produced, and the topography in which that crop thrived—which, more than anything else, determined the nature of the slaves’ experience. All the objective social data of slave life (from birth and death statistics onwards) varied enormously between different slave communities. And it is clear enough that those figures were determined by the kind of work the slaves undertook. It was most risky to work in sugar; more dangerous in rice than tobacco. And these differences were reflected through the social experiences of slaves across the Americas. Slaves were also treated differently from one place to another. Quite apart from the personal quirks—one master’s cruelties versus another’s more humane approach—it was the *structure* of local slavery which shaped the slaves’ lives. In sugar

and rice, where slave gangs lived in effectively self-contained communities and where they saw whites less frequently, the relationship between black and white differed from that on smaller holdings, where they often worked together and lived cheek by jowl. Though this may seem merely a cosmetic issue, in fact it had enormous consequences for the ways in which slave communities evolved. Those living and working close to the whites quickly absorbed the habits of their owners—their languages, their styles, even their way of child-rearing. But slaves who were left to their own devices, living at some distance in ‘African’ villages, were less easily acculturated to local white society. Of course such cultural changes were not simply one-way—i.e. of whites influencing blacks. There developed a complex process of cultural change, as settlers from Africa and Europe accommodated themselves to each other’s company and to the company of local peoples.

In communities where black outnumbered white, where most slaves lived and worked remote from the whites, contemporaries saw in the Americas a vision of Africa itself. More than that, the slaves were accorded a different treatment and status. By 1700, let’s say, they were no longer merely black labourers, enduring the penalties and disadvantages, the restrictions and punishments which had been the lot of indentured labour (indeed of labour in general). Now they were sharply isolated in social and legal terms. And, unlike all others in the Americas, they were distinguished above all else by the immutable marks of race. But what role did race play in bringing the whole system into being? Were Africans enslaved *because* of their colour and ethnicity? Or were those indisputable features seized upon by proponents of slavery to justify a system which, at its inception and throughout its development, seemed out of kilter with the changes in the Western world? Slavery emerged in the Americas at a time when forms of bondage had disappeared, or were under attack, in Europe itself. There seems little evidence that, in establishing slavery in the Americas, Europeans were simply continuing, in exile, what they knew at home. And, in any case, why should slavery come to be the fate of the African—and not others?

Some of the founding scholars in the study of slavery were content to see in African slavery a form of labour which was climatically suited to toil in the tropical and subtropical regions of the Americas.²⁸ Few, however, would seriously make that case

today. After all, as we have seen, the initial, pioneering work in a number of regions was undertaken by white, not black, labourers. Early planters in both Barbados and Virginia were happy to develop their holdings with white indentured labour. The fact that they switched, in a short space of time, to servile African labour tells us little about physical suitability of black or white; rather it tells us about the changing costs and availability of black and white labour.

The English, it is true, had traditionally viewed the African as less than an equal human being (though that was true of their attitudes to many others). Blackness was a defining characteristic; a colour which had powerful cultural associations familiar to all sorts and conditions of white people. Black was dirty, sinful, impure; white meant beauty, virtue, cleanliness. Africans were also 'uncivilized' in most ways which Europeans recognized, though this too was not peculiar to Africans and could, at one level, simply be a way of defining outsiders.²⁹ They were above all 'pagan', believers (if they believed in anything) in 'superstitions' which bore little resemblance to religions recognized by Europeans. Again, this was hardly unique to Africa. The Indians and Chinese, for example, fell into this category, as did ever more people encountered by the Europeans as they encroached on distant regions and societies.

English-speakers thus brought to their encounters with Africans a host of cultural attitudes which served to shape their subsequent relationships. Yet the problem is much more complex than many historians have allowed. How do we know, for instance, that the attitudes of an intellectual élite (those who wrote and read about the issues of race, of foreign peoples and their cultures) were shared by ordinary folk—by the rough-and-ready venturers who formed the bedrock of white colonial society in the Americas? The very great majority of white emigrants were poor, rural people with little to offer but their own brute strength. What sort of intellectual baggage did *they* carry into the Americas? What attitudes did *they* bring to bear when they encountered Africans for the first time? There is a lot of evidence to show that relations, in the short term, were more equitable than we might expect (not least because our expectations have been shaped to a marked degree by the later history of slavery, and by the violence and bitterness of black-white relations).

For a start, black and white worked side by side. Small groups

of workers toiled together in the fields, scrabbling together some form of viable habitat and agriculture from a fertile but resistant wilderness. Black and white might (and often were) at opposite ends of the same saw. In frontier societies, there was little room for the social (and racial) niceties which emerged in a more complex community. Men (and, to a lesser extent, women) needed each other in simple, physical terms; they needed to be able to rely on each other merely to survive. There was a crude sense of camaraderie in frontier life which flowed from the stark needs of human survival. Faced by hostile native people, surrounded by an unforgiving and often unyielding natural habitat, pioneers—black and white—leaned on each other; not, perhaps, from a shared sense of equality or humanity, but in order to survive.

There was a world of difference, as Philip Morgan has shown, between black-white relations ('race relations', for want of a better phrase) in a slave-owning society and a slave society. The former, where slave owning was common but not predominant, the latter where slave owning was the overwhelming and preeminent form of social relationship.³⁰ Nor was the physical treatment of Africans, in those early days of pioneering settlement, noticeably worse than other labouring people. Both at home and in the colonies, the labouring sort were accustomed to physical maltreatment, crude conditions and corporal punishment; labourers and apprentices, wives and children received their own share of blows as a matter of course and as part of a disciplining process which assumed that corporal punishment was an important tool in keeping inferiors in place. For most people, life was nasty, brutish and short.

But the key to relations between black and white in the English-speaking world was not simply this cultural legacy of seeing black as deeply, and perhaps immutably, inferior, or that labouring people were traditionally maltreated, but the fact that Africans had—and *for some time past*—already been enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic as chattel for the economic benefit of white settlers. English-speakers settled in the Americas knowing that Africans were slaves already.

More than a century before the English settled their own colonies in the Americas, the Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch had been turning to Africa for labour. Indeed it was imported African ailments as much as European diseases which blighted the native peoples of the Americas so much in the first years of encounter.

And in the key economic developments in the Americas—i.e the first sugar plantations in northeastern Brazil—imported Africans had been crucial. Thus, when English settlers made their first tentative foothold in Barbados and the eastern Caribbean, they turned to the Dutch for help; the same people who had perfected the links between imported African labour and the lucrative production of sugar in the Americas. If any single fact sealed the fate of millions of Africans, it was the rise of the sugar industry. As European taste was transformed—edged towards sweetness in many things—the Africans became indispensable. Their fate was sealed as slaves. Few, however, could have predicted the enormity of what was to follow. The subsequent enforced migration of Africans from their homelands into the Americas was on a scale never seen before.