**The roots of racism ALEX TAYLOR,** November 22, 2002 |

**Slavery in the Ancient World**

Prior to the rise of capitalism, racism as a systematic form of oppression did not exist. For example, ancient Greek and Roman societies had no concept of race or racial oppression.

These weren't liberated societies. They were built on the backs of slaves. And these societies created an ideology to justify slavery. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle put it in his book *Politics,* "Some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter, slavery is both appropriate and right."

However, because slavery in ancient Greece and Rome was not racially based, these societies had no corresponding ideology of racial inferiority or oppression. In fact, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Early Christian societies had a favorable image of Blacks and of African societies.

"The ancients did accept the institution of slavery as a fact of life; they made ethnocentric judgments of other societies; they had narcissistic canons of physical beauty," writes Howard University professor Frank Snowden in his book *Before Color Prejudice*. "Yet nothing comparable to the virulent color prejudice of modern time existed in the ancient world.

**The Rise of Capitalism**

RACISM ORIGINATED with the modern slave trade. Just as the slaveholders of ancient Greece and Rome created an ideology that their barbaric slave system was "natural," so did the modern slave-owning class.

There was one important difference. According to them, slavery was "natural" because of race. Africans were not human beings, and therefore, they were born to be slaves. As historian Eric Williams writes in his book *Capitalism and Slavery,* "Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery."

Again, history bears this out. If racism had existed prior to the slave trade, then Africans would have been the first group of people to be enslaved. But, in the early years of colonial America, slavery was not racially based. Initially, the colonists attempted to enslave Native Americans. They also imported thousands of white indentured servants. White servants were treated like slaves. They were bought, sold, put up as stakes in card games and raped, beaten and killed with impunity.

OVER TIME, the slaveholding class gradually came to the conclusion that racism was in its interest and that it must be deeply embedded in all of society's institutions.

As Williams summarized this process: "Here then, is the origin of Negro slavery. The reason was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor…This was not a theory, it was a practical conclusion deduced from the personal experience of the planter. He would have gone to the moon, if necessary, for labor. Africa was nearer than the moon."

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BUT THE most important reason that the planter class created a racially based slave system was not economic, but political--the age-old strategy of divide and rule……….

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| Hypotheses for Origins of Racism | Strengths to this argument | Weaknesses of this argument |
| “Scientific” |  |  |
| Political  |  |  |
| Religious  |  |  |
| Economic  |  |  |