The curse of Columbus

Columbus: the bones and blood of racism

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The man himself seems to have been driven by an overweening personal ambition and a truly monstrous greed, as strange and violent in character as the ends he sought and the adventures he invited. His cautious biographer in the Encyclopaedia Britannica explains that the ‘discoverer’ of the Caribbean possessed a mind that was ‘lofty and imaginative, and so taut that his actions, thoughts and writings do at times suggest a man just this side of the edge of insanity’. But not, perhaps, so very far ‘this side’, while in behaviour this Cristóbal Colón, as he usually called himself (being in any case of dubious Genoese extraction), may stand in history as a worthy leader of the plunderers and tyrants who hastened to follow him across the seas. All this is well known, even while one need not be surprised that the five hundredth anniversary of his initial voyage should have become an occasion for rejoicing in some parts of the Americas. Here I want to look ‘behind Columbus’ at what our world today may more widely regard as his greatest achievement: his first opening of a ‘New World’ to be ‘developed’ by the merciless use of chattel slaves.

Chattel slavery has to be seen from the start as inseparable from the Columbus project, and certainly in Columbus’s own mind. He himself insisted that it was. ‘He raised crosses everywhere’, recalls his encyclopaedic biographer, ‘but he kept his eye on the material value of things even to the extent of seeing men ‘as goods for sale.’ He lost little time, moreover, in getting into the business of sending Caribbean

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captives back for sale in Spain. The dates on the calendar tell the essential story and deploy its ferocious implications. Aside from the enslavement of Caribbean peoples, the enslavement of imported Africans in the Caribbean, and soon elsewhere, was in full swing within a dozen years or so. The Spanish government's earliest proclamation of laws concerned with the export of enslaved captives to the other side of the ocean – mainly, at this date, to the island of Hispaniola (Haiti and San Domingo) – came as early as 1501, only nine years after Columbus's first voyage. Some of these earliest victims were white: but already how many were black – were African – may be glimpsed in a complaint of 1503 sent back to Spain by the governor of Hispaniola, Ovando. He told the Crown that fugitive 'Negro' slaves were teaching disobedience to the 'Indians', and could not be recaptured. It would, therefore, be wise for the Crown to desist from sending African captives: they would only add to troubles already great enough. But the Crown, naturally, did no such thing. Even by now, there was too much money at stake.

These early slaves, like others later on, proved incurably rebellious. Huge African revolts shook island after island, and the records are copiously eloquent on the incapacity of settlers and garrisons to put them down. Never mind, the project set moving by Columbus continued to prosper. In 1515, there came the first shipment of slave-grown West Indian sugar back to Spain, and three years later, another date to be remembered, the first cargo of captives from Africa to be shipped to the West Indies, not by way of Spain or Portugal (then under the same Crown), but directly from an African port of embarcation. With this, the long-enduring and hugely profitable 'triangular trade' had its inception: trade-goods from Europe to Africa for the purchase of captives from African merchants; purchased captives sold into enslavement across the ocean; and sugar (chiefly sugar) back to Europe. Such was the potent value of this trade that millions of African captives would be despatched along that via dolorosa, and centuries would pass before it could be stopped.

In this perspective, then, Columbus was the father of the slave trade to the Americas; and this trade, far more than any other consequence attached to his name, may be seen – it seems to me without the least manipulating of the evidence – as composing the true and enduring curse of Columbus. Should Columbus then be seen, as well, as the father of the racism which was to excuse or justify this massive work of enslavement? Was this racism of the slave trade in any case a new thing, or was it simply an elaboration of earlier justifications for medieval forms of bondage? When can one say, with some solidity of judgement, that racism in the modern sense – the plain and directly instrumental sense of crude exploitation – actually began? The argument here is that it began with the early consequences of Columbus.
Slavery was nothing new, of course, in Europe; far from it. In medieval Europe, it had long depended on supplies of captives from pre-Christian Slav lands and then from Muslim lands in northern Africa or further east; and, at least in Mediterranean Europe, a trade in captives was both permanent and pervasive. Papal prohibitions on the enslaving of Christians made little difference, and the Genoese were not the only Europeans in the business to shrug off excommunication for persisting in the trade of selling Christians. It remains that none of this slavery was chattel slavery, mass slavery, plantation slavery: rather did it take the form of what may perhaps be called ‘wageless labour’ – coerced, but in no way subject to any kind of ‘market law’. Slaves were bought and sold after their capture, and prices varied with the times; but a market in wages had still to come into existence. Demand was overwhelmingly for domestic labour of one kind or another and, in general, only the rich and privileged could afford to buy and maintain this labour. This was a slavery that could involve great pain and misery, but rather seldom was it a hopeless Calvary: the relatively high cost of slaves helped to limit the persecutions they were otherwise liable to suffer.

The point is worth emphasis. Throughout the High Middle Ages (roughly, the tenth through the thirteenth centuries), in Goitein’s authoritative summary, slavery ‘was neither industrial nor agricultural. With the exception of the armies, which were largely composed of mercenaries who were legally slaves, it was not collective but individual. It was a personal service in the widest sense of the word, which, when the master served was of high rank or wealthy, carried with it great economic advantages as well as social prestige... In and out of bondage, the slave was a member of the family.’ No doubt there were exceptions, but I am not concerned with exceptions here; I am concerned with the general run of things. I have read quite a few accounts of plantation slavery in the Caribbean, most lately the horrible and revolting memoirs of Thomas Thistlewood; and I have found in them nothing that remotely resembles the domestic slavery of medieval times.

If that was the general situation in lands round the Mediterranean, it was just as true of tropical African lands further south. Absorbed into extended-family structures, slaves in Africa – and, here again, the records are copious and unequivocal – could expect with a fair confidence to accede to full family rights without long delay. They could marry into their owner’s families. They could inherit their owner’s wealth. They could make careers in the public service; and wherever slaves acquired military training, armaments, and corresponding disciplines or connexions, they could (and quite often did) seize state power, govern as kings, and even found dynasties of kings.

I am not here putting in a good word for slavery, any more than for
dynasties of kings. I am only emphasising the differences between modes of enslavement. Not surprisingly, these different modes gave rise to different ways of thinking about slaves: to different ideologies, as the schoolmen would say.

In Spain and Portugal, for example, there was also a large number of slaves before the New World was discovered by Columbus. But there were very few chattel slaves, and no sensible owner would have considered that his or her slaves were of a naturally and inherently inferior kind of human being. There was, in short, no ideology of instrumentalist racism. By the fifteenth century, most such slaves in Iberia were from North Africa. They lived hard lives, and yet, so far as the evidence goes, a good deal less hard than the ‘free workers’ who toiled alongside them. ‘Slaves – as all servants – of wealthy and powerful men were [in those times] better off materially, and before the courts, than were free labourers. If their work was not domestic’ – tied to the home, that is – ‘they might travel the country or live apart from their masters’; sometimes they could benefit, if they wished (and it is not at all clear that many would have wished), from early manumission. The point here, may I be allowed to insist, is that this was a servitude, however much otherwise to be deplored, which did not foster, because it did not have to foster, the ideology that slaves were slaves because they belonged to an inherently inferior humanity: to a humanity, as it was going to develop in the mentality of the slave trade, that could be ‘set apart’ as being barely human at all. To grasp the nature of the medieval relationship of bondage, as it appears generally to have been, one can usefully study the medieval iconography of slaves, including slaves from Africa. They are seen and shown as servants like other servants: but valuable servants, costly servants, even cherished servants. They were no more inherently inferior than they were easily expendable.

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Was there, then, no racism before the major onset of the Atlantic slave trade? It is a teased issue because the words in general use are vague, but overall the answer is in the negative. There was vast misunderstanding, gross abuse, bewildered superstition. But there was no racism in the instrumentalist sense in which the term is rightly used today. Broadly, in those days when the ‘known world’ was so very small and narrow, human deviation from the norm was believed to grow with physical distance (yet is it, really, so very different today?). Neighbours were entirely ‘normal’ and ‘non-deviant’, even if distrusted or disliked. Near-neighbours might also be fairly normal. But peoples far away began to become exceedingly strange until, as
imagined distance widened, they altogether ceased to be human like you and me. The locus classicus of this view of life is probably a passage in the histories of Herodotus (c.450 BC) where, he relates, ‘Aristeas, son of Cystrobius, a native of Marmora’ in nearby Asia Minor (Turkey today) ‘journeyed to the country of the Issedones’. These lived a long way off, but were still reasonably human. Yet ‘beyond the Issedones live the one-eyed Arismaspions’, clearly deviant in having only one eye apiece, ‘and beyond them the griffins who guard the gold’; and the griffins, whatever exactly they may have been, were obviously much more than deviant. So it was, in medieval times, that distant peoples were confidently reported as ‘having heads that grow beneath their shoulders’, or a single eye in the middle of their chests, or, if they were women – as the Florentine Malfante was reporting back from the central Sahara in 1447 – as being able to produce up to five children at a birth. In those times, when the Earth was so flat that you could risk falling off the edge, anything was possible.

Such beliefs seem to have been universal in one form or another, and they long persisted among peoples beyond the reach of the ‘known world’. Less than half a century ago, for instance (but the instances are many), the Lugbara of Uganda (numbering then some 200,000 souls) were found to believe in all good faith that people became hostile, strange, and ‘upside-down’ in the measure that they dwelt farther away or far from the Lugbara homeland. Of the most distant strangers known to the Lugbara, even if known only by hearsay, there were creatures who habitually walked on their heads or hands, and indulged in other habits which the Lugbara thought perverse and wicked. Distance multiplied deviation; and all this bespoke customary superstition, distrust of foreigners, various onslaughters of xenophobia and so on. But it did not bespeak racism.

The transition from beliefs such as this to all that superstructure of instrumentalist justification of mass enslavement, of racist enslavement, which began with the Columbian voyages was an often complex and contradictory process in the European mind. But it can first be seen at work in the case of the Portuguese, if only because their active involvement in mass enslavement, plantation enslavement, came at least half a century, or even longer, before that of other European peoples (in some degree with the exception of the Spanish). Beginning with the import of a few hundred trans-Saharan captives (mostly Berbers of the desert) in the 1440s, they found a home market which rapidly demanded more. These early African captives were sold on the open Iberian market for the most part as domestic servants who would also, if they revealed a talent for learning and literacy, serve as clerks and trusted commercial agents. Their small numbers of the fifteenth century were merely added to the much larger number
already in the country and in Spain; and their arrival called for no
rethinking of Portuguese attitudes to the status and condition of
slavery.

But all this changed after 1500 and following years, and so did much
else. The Earth would soon cease to be flat, the stars no longer hang
fixed immutably in space, and even the sun would stop revolving and
stand still, until much that yesterday had seemed sacred and un-
questionable was due to be thrust aside, forgotten or derided. Ferocious
times lay ahead such as even the Middle Ages, with its racks
andthumbscrews, had not envisaged; and whole continents would feel
their impact and bleed from their destructions. This is the context of
that elusive ideological transition to the mentalities of the slave trade
and plantation slavery. It is reported, for example, that the first
auction of African captives imported into Portugal in the 1440s ‘was
interrupted by the common folk, who were enraged at seeing the
separation of families of slaves’. All such attitudes were rapidly swept
away, and every humanist reaction was engulfed in a rising tide of
greed. On all this the records are unrelievably grim. Of the Portuguese
who were looting India, wrote in 1545 the Christian missionary who
was to become St Francis Xavier, ‘there is here a power which I may
call irresistibile, to thrust men into the abyss where, besides the
seductions of gain and the easy chance of plunder, their appetites for
gain will be sharpened by having tasted it’.

The New World, beginning with the Caribbean, already lay in the
pain of that abyss by 1545, and there were men in Europe, peering
over its edge into what they saw below, who were shocked into
protest. Merchants in Portugal and Spain – and, afterwards, mer-
chants elsewhere as well, above all in England and France – had now
to deal with the pricks of an uneasy conscience at the consequences of
their booming trade in chattel slaves. The polemics of the time are
clear on that; but they are also clear that ideological balm was quickly
found and applied. And in this process, in this ‘transition’, one may
see how and where the bedevilments of racism now began.

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The arguments used to justify the mass reduction of captured Africans
to the sub-human status of chattel enslavement show a clear trajectory
of moral degradation. These arguments began in the Most Catholic
Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal as presenting a means of spreading
Christianity, of giving the means of Salvation to pagans otherwise
condemned, ineluctably, to the fires of Hell. It could not be long, of
course, before this kind of evangelism was lost in the verbiage of
hypocritical claptrap; and this claptrap was to echo down the years
until it reached its deafening chorus in the writings of Liverpool and
Bristol merchants of the 1770s. But it was meagre stuff at the best, and almost from the start it was seen that something more was needed if the slave trade were not to be threatened by abolition.

These captives, it was therefore soon being said, were fitted for enslavement because they lacked the capacities to know and use freedom: they belonged in truth to an inferior sort of humanity; in short, they were ‘primitives’ whom it was practically a mercy to baptise and enslave. Even before the middle of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese royal chronicler, Zurara, was able to assure the court in Lisbon that West Africans then being imported were ‘sinful, bestial, and, because of that, naturally servile’. And with this application of the idea that ‘distance widens deviation from the norm’, there appeared and rapidly flourished all that farrago of disgusting nonsense that was to take shape as the ideology of racism, whether in high-minded academic ‘explanations’ or the yobbery of saloon-bar gossip.

No doubt this ideology of justification for doing to blacks what Christianity and law alike forbade Europeans to do to whites came in many ingenuities and subtleties of gloss. There is no need in these columns to enlarge upon them. The point here is that the ideology of this justification grew and developed in the measure that the overseas slave trade from Africa became enlarged from a trickle to a flood. After that, moreover, it was enlarged again when the overseas slave trade, in itself the product of a proto-colonial relationship between Europe and Africa, was transformed into the imperialism of the nineteenth century. Racism had been useful to the justification of mass enslavement. It was to be still more useful to the justification of invading and dispossessing Africans in their own lands, Africans at home, at a time when invading and dispossessing Europeans in their own lands, Europeans at home, was stridently deplored as an act of barbarism. Everyone knows this now, even if they seldom like to admit to knowing it, and there is again no need for me to insist upon the point. But I would like to look a little further into those crucial years when the ‘racism’ of superstition, of ‘deviance’, became transformed into the racism – without inverted commas – of hard cash.

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When, in 1603, King James VI of Scotland and I of England followed Elizabeth to the throne of what was not yet Britain (insofar, that is, as ‘Britain’ has ever become a cultural reality), it could not be said that the English were a racist people. As it happened, they were not even a particularly superstitious people in the sense that superstition feeds racism: after the 1540s, the Reformation had increasingly seen to that. They were going to become a racist people in the fullest ‘hard cash’
meaning of the term, but that was going to take some time to happen. The case of Othello, surely one of Shakespeare’s finest plays, is there to suggest some of the complexities along this route of transition. Written in 1603 or 1604, just when the Elizabethan age was passing away, Othello was played to London audiences for whom the slave trade in captives seized in Africa – to the extent that those audiences could have been aware of the trade – was the work and monopoly of England’s mortal enemies of Spain and Portugal (the latter being then part of the Spanish realm). It was not a trade in which English venturers can have wished to have any but a marginal or purely piratical part. But times were changing.

England would become expansionist, would carve out colonies in the Caribbean, would embark upon the slave trade, would eventually become the greatest slaving power of all. And for all this, the necessary mental transitions were already under way. This is what we see and hear in Othello. The play itself, as C.L.R. James used rightly to insist, is in no substance a racist play, and to see it as such is to have misunderstood the motives of the drama, motives concerned above all with careerism, distrust of foreigners, and sexual jealousy: the ‘classic’ motives, in short, of the Elizabethan theatre when dramatising the frailties of humankind. Yet the motives of racism have already edged their way into the scenario. Othello is the mighty general of the armies of the Republic of Venice, and entrusted by the rulers of Venice with the defence of their interests and empire in the Mediterranean Sea. Even the traitorous Iago has to admit ‘the Moor – howbeit that I endure him not – is of a constant loving noble nature’. And when Iago dies as a despised traitor, Othello meets – at least in the Elizabethan view – a most honourable death. But the Moor’s features and physique are nonetheless made to serve Iago’s purpose. Racism is on the way and, in England, will begin to flourish within less than half a century.

A.C. de C.M. Saunders is entirely right when he says in his most useful book (to which I would like to draw attention here) that ‘the introduction of black slaves into Portugal marks a turning point in the history of slavery’. It marks this turning point not because that introduction, in itself, brought anything new to the scene. It does so because it led directly, and within a handful of years, to the massive export of captives from Africa for chattel enslavement in the Americas. And this was made possible, in turn, because Christopher Columbus had ‘discovered America’. That is why this ‘history of slavery’ is, no less, the history of modern imperialism, for without the slave trade, the ‘conquests’ across the Atlantic must soon have withered for lack of the labour to exploit them. Without mass enslavement, in short, there would have been no trans-Atlantic European empires save for the initial looting and sacking of material
wealth. The track followed by the maturity of capitalism would have been a different one, and very conceivably a less ruthless and destructive one.

Anyone who cares to toil through the archives of the partition of Africa, and its consequences after 1900, when that partition was made more or less complete, will soon find reason to ponder on all this. For the partition of Africa and other such activities in the history of modern imperialism all lead back to the birth of an instrumentalist racism. The dead hand of Columbus, clutching in its icy grasp the 'certainties' of white superiority in one guise or another, and therefore the destinies of black subjection, is there to shake its ghastly warning as surely as did Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's triumphal feasting, and evoke Macbeth's response:

Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold . . .

And yet, we know with what malignant power the bones and blood of this racism could operate. Calling up this Banquo's ghost at the festivities in celebration of Columbus may be tactless, even in poor taste. Yet I have the hope that some awareness of the curse that Columbus laboured to lay upon mankind may occur at this time, and induce – what shall I say – a certain sobriety, even a sense of shame.

References
3 All this is made clear from an analysis of the relative costs of purchase and maintenance of slaves in medieval times, an aspect of 'labour history' that is much in need of detailed synthesis. We find, for instance, that in medieval Cairo, according to Goitein (op. cit.) working from contemporary documents, 'In and out of bondage, the slave was a member of the family' (p145), while 'the acquisition of a male slave was a great affair, on which a man was congratulated almost as if a son had been born to him. No wonder, for a slave fulfilled tasks similar to those of a son' (p132).
6 Saunders, op. cit., p35.
7 Ibid., p39, relying largely on Zurara's contemporary chronicle and other contemporary sources.