

# Slavery and the roots of racism

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Dave Stockton introduces the first in a series of articles on the history of the slave trade and its abolition. In this article he explains the roots of slavery and the racist ideology that was used to justify it

March and April 2007 will see the launch of a series of events to commemorate the bi-centenary of the abolition of the slave trade within the British Empire. Museums in English cities involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Bristol, Liverpool and London, will hold exhibitions. Special lessons will take place in schools. The London Mayor will unveil a memorial. £16m from the National Lottery Fund will be spent on these celebrations.

Indeed it is high time that slave trade's real scale is told to the population. Unfortunately it will be presented as a story where the slaves are the suffering of victims and the liberators the good Christian (white) men and women who campaigned for it.

What will not be stressed is the role played by the slaves as actors in their own liberation, in uprisings and, in the case of Haiti, a revolution. The fact that these uprisings and the real mass movement in England, France, America for Abolition, were both essential will not be acknowledged. These mass movements involved freed slaves like Olaudah Equiano, who played important roles. They involved women and radical artisans as well as landowners like William Wilberforce or Thomas Clarkson.

The official celebrations will also fail to stress that slavery was an essential part of the birth of modern capitalism. Production of tropical and sub-tropical commodities like tobacco, coffee, sugar and cotton required a mass labour force in the new West Indian and American colonies, recently acquired by Britain and France. It was not possible to persuade European free labour to cross the Atlantic. The answer lay in compulsory transfer. The high levels of exploitation of slave labour in the colonies allowed for a massive accumulation of capital and its transfer to the home countries.

Slaves were captured in the interior of Africa and then marched to the coast for sale. They waited in large forts called factories till ships were ready to depart. Those who survived often fell victim to diseases and suffered malnutrition and dehydration on the one to two month voyages. About 13 per cent perished on the voyage. It has been estimated that a total of 2.5 million Africans died during these voyages. as a result of being packed into tight, unsanitary spaces in the ships holds. The horrors of the Middle Passage are movingly described by Olaudah Equiano, describing his passage to the Americas as a young child.

"The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us... This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs[latrines], into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

Perhaps double the number who perished during the voyage died in first months after arrival in camps designed to "break them in". Then came the horrors of the plantation itself. As well as twelve hour days under the tropical sun, which whites blithely claimed Africans were designed by Nature to endure, slave families suffered such high infant mortality rates that the population of Caribbean and Brazilian sugar plantations in the eighteenth century could not be sustained without constant new supplies from Africa. Large scale rape of slave women took place by white overseers and plantation owners.

The people who benefited directly from slavery were the great merchants of the City of London, Bristol and Liverpool, the great landowners who built their fine classical mansions from immense fortunes made from their plantations in the West Indies.

The merchants and landowners were far from unaware of the inhumanity with which their slaves were treated. As a consequence they had to dehumanise the slaves: to put them in a category where the ideals of freedom, justice, that they proclaimed in the British, American and French Revolutions, simply did not apply to the slaves. Their journalists, pamphleteers, and philosophers obligingly produced a racist ideology to justify such wholesale mistreatment of fellow human beings.

How widely this racist ideology spread can be seen by the fact it was not just used by plantation owners but argued in books by many of the leading figures of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote:

"The Negroes of Africa have received from nature no intelligence that rises above the foolish. The difference between the two races is thus a substantial one: it appears to be just as great in respect to the faculties of the mind as in colour"

Even the leaders of the democratic revolution in America, men like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves apiece.

The abject misery and poverty that the slaves found themselves in led to massive revolts and struggles to end this terrible chapter in human history.

### **Key Dates**

1562 First English slaving expedition by Sir John Hawkins

1673 First slave revolt on Jamaica

1760 Great slave uprising in Jamaica: 'Tacky's Rebellion' takes six months to put down

1772 slavery declared illegal in England, Wales & Ireland

1781 Over 100 enslaved Africans thrown overboard from the slave ship Zong, a fact only revealed because of the cost (£30 per head) to the London insurer

1787 Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded: Granville Sharp as president of a mostly Quaker committee

1789 Olaudah Equiano publishes *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* a powerful first hand description of slavery. Equiano becomes a tireless campaigner for Abolition.

1791-1804 Haitian Revolution. Slave revolt succeeds and independent state founded

1794 French Revolutionary Convention abolishes slavery in French colonies and grants citizenship to all men (sic) "regardless of colour".

1796 William Wilberforce Bill defeated in House of Commons by four votes

1807 25 March - Slave Trade Abolition Bill passed in the British Parliament

1816 Major slave uprising in Barbados led by Bussa, brutally suppressed

1823 Major slave uprising in Demerara (British Guiana) led by Quamina and Jack Gladstone; defeated and reign of terror ensued

1831 Nat Turner's insurrection, Virginia.

1831-2 Major Slave Revolt ("Baptist War" led by Samuel Sharpe, a deacon) in Jamaica involves 60,000 slaves

1833 Abolition of Slavery British Empire Bill passed, with effect from 1834 but providing for up to six year transition and with #20M voted as compensation to slave owners

1838 1st August - enslaved men, women and children in British Empire became free

1848 Emancipation by the French of their slaves

1863 Abraham Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation freeing the Southern Slaves.

1888 Slavery abolished in Brazil

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