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The West and the World

A History of Civilization

FROM 1400 TO THE PRESENT

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To Pearl

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Race and Racism

Color and Slavery

What is the state of racial relations in the United States today?

A recent national poll by the *New York Times* (1999) reveals some interesting cross-currents. Most Americans, black and white, think racial relations have improved in the last ten years.

But "even as the rawest forms of bigotry have receded they have often been replaced by remoteness and distrust in places of work, learning, and worship."[1] An example: 85 percent of whites said that they did not care if they lived in a neighborhood which was predominantly white or black, but two-thirds of the whites said that they thought that most whites prefer to live in white areas. More tellingly, 85 percent of whites said they actually live in an area with few black neighbors, the same percentage that claimed no preference.

From the perspective of the last fifty years, the era of integration, civil rights, equal opportunity, and affirmative action has had a marked impact. "When I first started practicing law [in 1949]," Jack Greenberg, retiring Director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund reminisced, "if I saw a black at an airport there was no question I knew who he was. It seemed there were only 25 blacks in the country who ever flew on commercial airplanes."[2] Today, African-Americans pre-

creating plantations "at home."

In general, the slave systems of the Latin America may have been harder on the slaves than those of British North America. Since the Iberians imported more slaves and continued the slave trade longer, the lives of slaves were often cheaper. The slaves of the southern United States were among the few to reproduce themselves; they were often able to maintain families; and to a certain degree they shared in the higher standard of living of the United States by 1800. Two qualifications must be kept in mind, however. The first is that slavery was always coercive and demoralizing. If there were fewer slave revolts in the United States than in the Caribbean and South America, it was because greater white power in the United States made revolt suicidal.

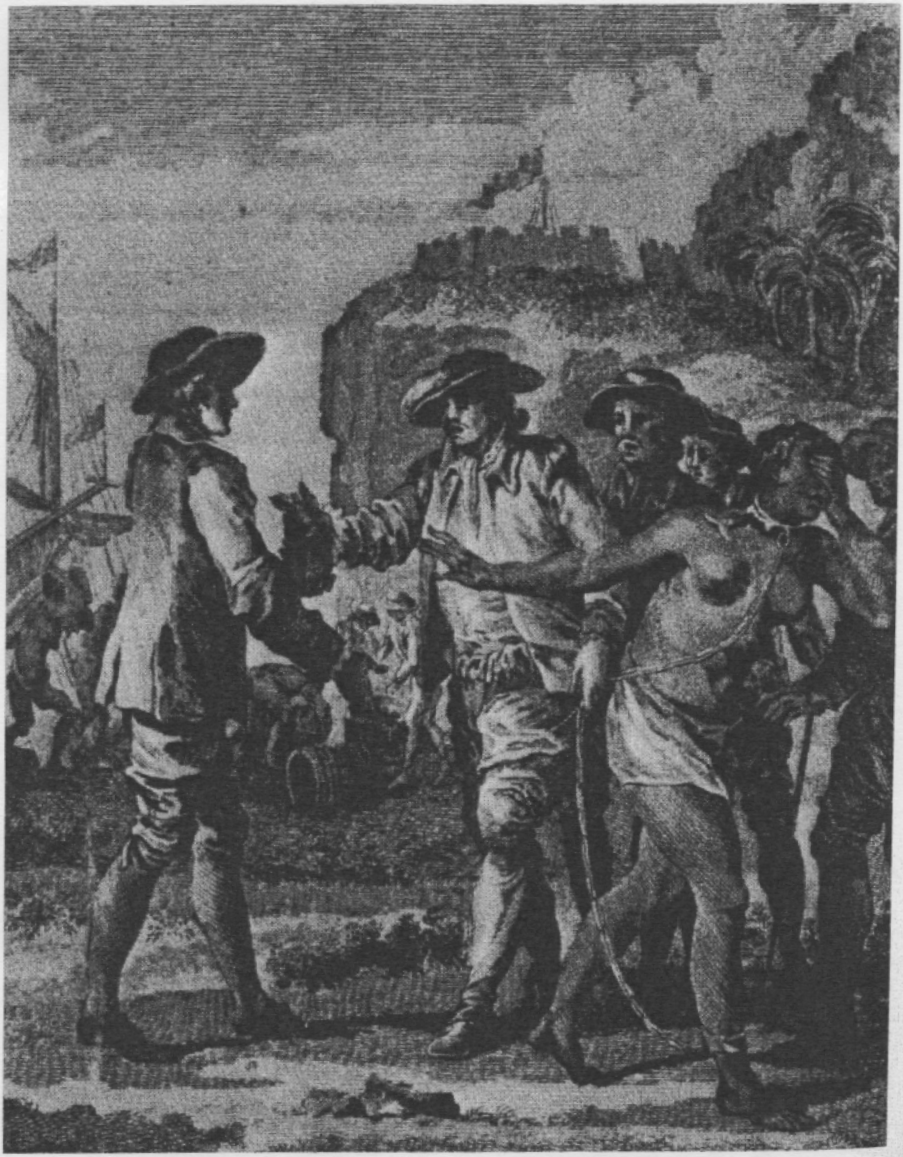
The second qualification, more important for the purpose of this chapter, is that the worst slave systems might not have been the most racist. While there is clearly a correlation between slavery and racism in general, there may not be a correlation between the brutality of the slave system and the highest degrees of racism. In short, it is possible that Latin American slavery was worse than British, but that British racism was worse than Latin American. We will look at two indicators for this judgment—manumission, the act of freeing slaves, and miscegenation, racial interbreeding, in both Latin and British societies in order to evaluate this possibility.

BRITISH VERSUS LATIN AMERICAN SLAVERY: RACISM AND MANUMISSION

Let us take a look at some of the evidence. For one thing, it seems pretty clear that bondage was a more permanent condition for the slave in the United States and British Caribbean islands than it was in Latin America. A much higher proportion of slaves in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies were given their freedom than in the British colonies. This attitude toward giving the slave freedom—manumission—is very important because it shows that the white colonizers need not view the Africans as permanently and incurably inferior.

In Brazil, settled by the Portuguese, and in Spanish America the law did not declare that a slave was necessarily a slave for his whole life or that his children were necessarily slaves—as was legally the case in the United States after the 1660s.

In Latin America there were a number of ways that slaves might attain freedom. They might purchase it by hiring themselves out on Sundays or one of the 85 holidays on the Catholic calendar. In Cuba or Mexico they had the right to have their purchase price declared, and could pay it in gradual installments. This became a widespread custom, especially in Cuba. A slave who was worth $600 could purchase freedom in 24 installments of $25 each. Each installment purchased one twenty-fourth of freedom, and the first payment allowed the slave to move from the master's house. Though the cost may have been considerably higher than the price of passage from Africa, slaves who were able to work for their freedom were not dif-



The caption of this eighteenth-century engraving reads: "An Englishman from Barbados sells his mistress." In the English colonies taking a black mistress was one thing, freeing her something else entirely.

ferent in principle from the white debtors of Europe who were forced to work as servants for a stated period.

The relationship between master and slave was almost contractual, based on a legal agreement—usually unwritten though not entered freely—between two parties. There were at least some cases of slaves paying everything but the last installment in order to avoid complete freedom and the taxes and military service that went along with it.

There were other ways for a Latin American slave to be freed. Thousands of slaves in Venezuela and Colombia were freed by Simon Bolivar when they enlisted in the army for the wars of independence. Similarly, many of the slaves who joined the armies of Brazil and Argentina were freed. Cuba periodically issued a degree that automatically freed slaves who escaped to its shores and embraced Christianity.

In most Latin American societies a slave who was unjustly punished could be freed by the judge. A Brazilian slave who had ten children could demand freedom legally. Other legal routes to freedom included denunciation of a brutal master, purchase by an African brotherhood, providing information in a criminal case, or discovering an especially large diamond or gold vein in the mines. The existence of *quilombos*—colonies of runaways—also offered the possibility of illegal escape from the slave system.

The legal roads to manumission, however, were probably not as important as the social approval that custom and the church gave to the act of freeing a slave. Even the culture of the slave owners held that manumission was a noble and generous act, a good thing to do. Happy occasions—the birth of a son, the marriage of a daughter, religious and national holidays, and family celebrations—were considered opportunities to ceremonially free one or a number of slaves in Latin America. It was considered appropriate and commendable for a slave child to be freed at baptism with the payment of a small fee ($25 in Cuba), and many slaves chose a godfather for their children with this hope in mind. While there were objections to manumission on everything from security to morality grounds (it encouraged theft and prostitution, some said), in general Latin Americans were far more favorably disposed to manumission than North Americans.

In the British colonies manumission was frequently viewed with alarm. Most of the British islands placed heavy taxes (often more than the value of the slave) on those slave owners who attempted it. In all cases a slave could not be freed without the owner's consent, and sometimes the consent of others was also required. In most of the British colonies (including the United States) a black or dark-skinned person of African descent was automatically assumed to be a slave. In some cases the slave was allowed to prove that he had been freed whereas he was presumed free in Latin American courts, and had to be proved a slave. Laws in Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina did not even allow the slave to establish a claim to freedom. According to the South Carolina law of 1740 "all negroes . . . mulattoes, or mestizos, who are or shall hereafter be in the province, and all their issue and offspring, born or to be born, shall be and they are hereby declared to be and remain

forever hereafter absolute slaves." Thus, when William Sanders, recently freed in Virginia, returned to South Carolina in 1756, he was arrested. "For evidence of his being a freeman," the warden of the workhouse wrote in the *South Carolina Gazette*,

> he produces a pass, signed David Stuard, August County, Va., August the 18th, 1755, for William Sanders, a freeman, to pass and repass, which is indorsed by several other magistrates in North Carolina which name of William Sanders he now assumes, and pretends he is the same identical person, and a freeman. But as there is great reason to suppose he is a slave, and escaped from some person in Virginia or thereabouts, any person that can claim their property in him within six months, may have him upon payment of charges to the warden of the workhouse.[33]

One wonders what proof would have been sufficient. Even those few freed slaves in the United States were often forced back into slavery. Virginia required a freed slave to leave the state in a year or be sold "for the benefit of the Literary Fund." In many states of the southern United States, a freed slave could be sold back into slavery for the failure to pay a debt or a fine. The laws of the British West Indies and of the United States offered no hope for the slave to purchase his or her freedom, and these laws assumed that slavery was perpetual. The only hope was manumission by the slave's owner, and though this occasionally occurred there were too many obstacles for it ever to become a widespread practice.

In the slave states of the United States by 1860 only about 6 percent of the black population was free. If we include the equal number of free African-Americans who lived in the northern states, only 10 percent of the black population was free. In startling comparison, at the time of Brazilian emancipation in 1888, about 75 percent of the black population was already free. This was largely the result of different attitudes toward manumission.

These different attitudes toward manumission are significant in two ways. They show that South Americans were more willing to allow black people freedom and independence, and also that South American societies became so populated with free blacks that it was impossible to identify the cultural condition of slavery with the biological condition of black skin. Spanish and Portuguese settlers often spoke of slavery as an unfortunate condition to which anyone might fall prey. They saw slavery as the mark of social, not racial, inferiority. They were able to distinguish between a person's color and culture. In that sense, Iberian slavery was the result of less racist attitudes, and it created a society where racism was less pronounced.

Again, we are speaking only of racism, not the brutality of slavery. It is quite possible that South American societies treated their slaves more brutally than North American societies did. The Iberian willingness to manumit slaves only tells us about their attitudes toward black people; it says nothing about their treatment of the slaves who were not freed. Some historians have argued, for instance, that the Spanish and Portuguese slaveholders frequently freed the sick and elderly slaves

The white head of a large Brazilian household typically presided over a racially mixed retinue of wives, children, dependents, and slaves in an extended family.

because they had become too expensive to keep. North American slaveholders were rarely that cruel—or that willing to have a free African population in their midst.

The popularity of manumission in Latin American slave society may not always have been a tribute to their kindness. Since the slave trade continued well into the nineteenth century in Latin America, slaves were considerably cheaper than in the United States, which suspended the slave trade in 1808. That meant that Latin American slave owners could afford to work their slaves to death, buy more, and still free some of them. Even if that occurred, however, Latin American slavery still created a less racist society.

Let us return to the evidence. Perhaps the most striking feature for northern visitors to Latin American slave society was that black people were found everywhere. One English visitor to Brazil in the middle of the nineteenth century expressed his surprise this way:

> I have passed black ladies in silks and jewelry, with male slaves in livery behind them. Today one rode past in her carriage, accompanied by a liveried footman and a coachman. Several have white husbands. The

> first doctor of the city is a colored man; so is the President of the Province.[34]

Another visitor said that the African-Brazilian

> seemed to be the most intelligent person he met because every occupation, skilled and unskilled, was in the Negroes' hands. Even in Buenos Aires theirs was the hand that built the best churches. They were the field hands, and in many places the miners; they were the cooks, laundresses, the mammies, the concubines of the whites, the nurses about the houses, the coachmen, and the laborers on the wharves. But they were also the skilled artisans who built the houses, carved the saints in the churches, constructed the carriages, forged the beautiful ironwork one sees in Brazil, and played in the orchestras.[35]

Free Brazilians of African descent achieved positions of considerable prestige, and were recognized in their time and by the Brazilian history books since. Two of the leading political figures of the seventeenth century were mulattoes. João Fernandes Vieira (d. 1681) was a guerilla leader, military commander of a mulatto regiment that defeated the Dutch, and a provincial governor. Antonio Viera (1608–1697) was one of the Portuguese Empire's most gifted scholars and preachers, a Jesuit advisor to King João IV, and persuasive spokesmen for human rights. Brazilian mulattoes also included the country's first portrait painter (Manuel da Cunha, 1737–1809), the leading architect and sculptor (Antonio Francisco Lisboa, c. 1735–1814), and a number of important Brazilian writers, composers, and musicians. Such men were exceptions, especially in politics. One is reminded of the visitor who was told that wealth rather than color was the basis for political office. "But isn't the governor a mulatto?"[36] the visitor asked. "He was; but he isn't anymore," was the reply. "How can a governor be a mulatto?" But Brazilian culture was a richer blend of the African and Portuguese than was Brazilian politics. Brazilian religion, music, and dance retained distinct ties to Africa. Brazilian literature, as well, has always been written by descendants of Africa and Portugal, and many of the most heroic and human of Brazilian heroes and heroines in fiction and history are African.

The *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1844 recognized the gap between the treatment of Africans in the United States and Latin America. In Mexico "and in Central America, and in the vast regions still further south," the *Review* observed, "the negro is already a freeman—socially as well as politically, the equal of the white. Nine-tenths of the population there is made up of the colored races; the Generals, the Congressmen, the Presidents are men of mixed blood."[37]

Many North Americans recognized that their own prejudices against black people were greater in the United States than south of the border. Some like George Bancroft echoed the above quoted sentiments of the Review by arguing that the

Simon Bolivar (1783–1830) comes to the aid of a wounded black soldier in the Latin American struggle for independence.

acquisition of Texas would allow black people "to pass to social and political equality in the central regions of America, where the prejudices of race do not exist."

It was not true in 1844 that all South American blacks were free; some were still slaves. And it would be an exaggeration to say that no racial prejudice existed in the Iberian colonies: almost no whites were enslaved, and it was much more difficult for an African or Indian to become prosperous and accepted. With that qualification, however, the contrast holds. South American society was much more open for the descendants of Africans. Freedom was easier to attain, and it meant more once it was won. Prejudice was less, as was the discrimination in neighborhoods, schools, hotels, and public accommodations that became such a hallmark of racial experience in the United States. The lynch law and anti-Negro riots that became such a standard feature of the history of the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were absent from South American experience. In Latin American struggles for independence, blacks—free and slave—were recruited without prejudice. White dockworkers in Brazil worked for the abolition of slavery by refusing to work on slave ships at the same time that North American white workers rioted against Lincoln's draft law by attacking black families instead of Southern troops.

BRITISH VERSUS LATIN AMERICAN SLAVERY: RACISM AND MISCEGENATION

Why the difference? What accounts for the virulence of British, North American racism compared with the relatively mild prejudice in Latin America? The answers are many, and they have been hotly debated. We have already suggested a few. Perhaps the simple fact that British and other northern Europeans were so white skinned compared to the more olive-skinned Spanish and Portuguese was a factor. The patterns of settlement were also different. The Spanish and Portuguese conquerors came to the New World without their wives. Many, in fact, were not married. From the earliest years of the settlement they developed a permissive attitude toward interracial sex—miscegenation. The British settlers of North America, on the other hand, generally came with their wives and families. British wives were also often independent enough to insist that their slave-owning husbands keep their racial affairs private. Even when Iberian women came to the Americas to raise families, they came from a European culture where men and male values—machismo—were more clearly dominant. Iberian men in the Americas flaunted their black mistresses, recognized their black children, and often moved all of their families into the same large patriarchal home. While most states in the United States passed stiff laws against interracial sex, forcing men to be discreet, Latin American societies openly encouraged miscegenation as a proof of male potency and a way of life.

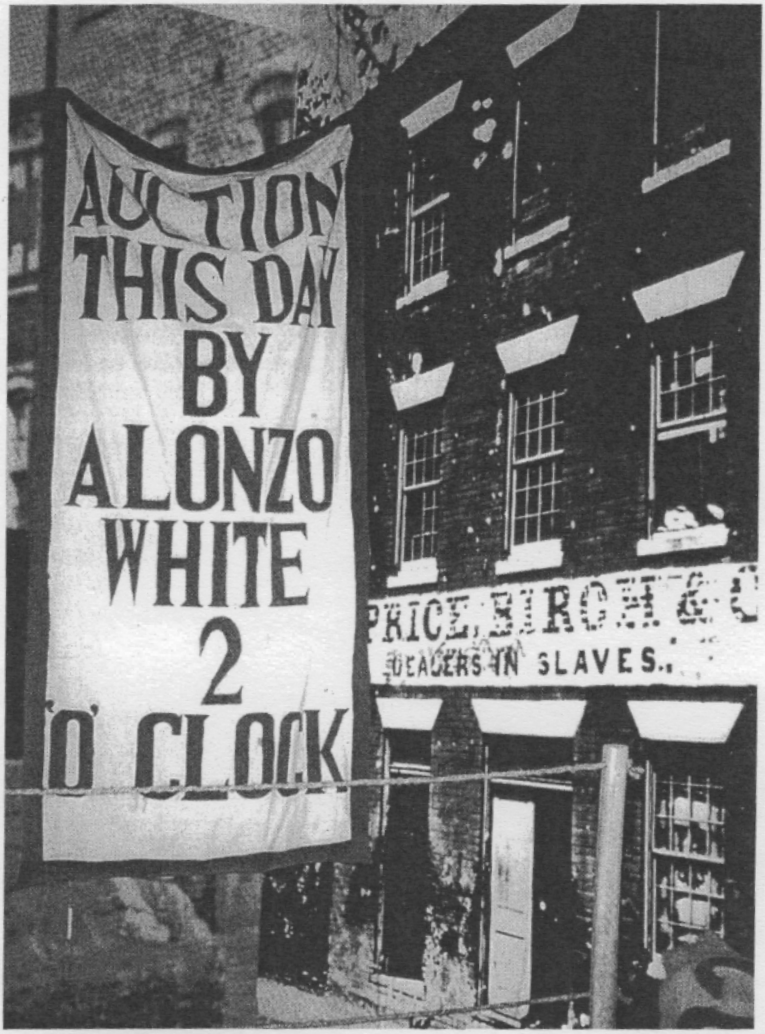
Miscegenation, like manumission, may have been popular in Latin America for less than noble reasons. But both practices created a population and a set of values

Racial Assimilation of Former British and Iberian Colonies[1]

	Current percentage black	and mixed
British		
Bahamas	80	10
Barbados	75	17
Belize	46	30
Guyana	42	7
Jamaica	90	10
Trinidad and Tobago	43	17
United States	11	0[2]
Iberian		
Brazil	11	26+[3]
Costa Rica	3	40
Colombia	4	74
Cuba	12	15
Dominican Republic	12	60
Honduras	2	88
Mexico	1	70
Nicaragua	9	69
Panama	13	70

[1] Selected from warm Atlantic area with most African slaves.
[2] U.S. defines mixed as black.
[3] Brazil adds 62 percent "mixed and white."

The "Bronzing" of the Americas. The Mexican ideal of the "bronzing" of the New World population is much closer to reality in those countries that were colonized by the Iberians (Spanish and Portuguese) than in those countries colonized by the British. What are some reasons for this?



A respected British business

which made race almost meaningless. How could one talk of "pure" races or even of race when the vast majority of the population was neither black nor white, but shades of olive and brown? How could one speak of the natural abilities or inabilities of the Negro when they were neither slave nor free, but both, and when they were planters, writers, masons, and bureaucrats?

By at least the nineteenth century, the majority of African-Americans in most countries south of the United States were neither black nor slaves. It became

impossible to make generalizations even about the Negro. That was the very least that a racist had to be able to do. In the United States before the Civil War "Negro" meant slave. Neither the northern nor southern states wanted a population of free Africans. Southerners saw free blacks as deadly threats to the slave system: they believed that freed slaves incited slave rebellions, and the mere existence of prosperous or free blacks challenged the official racist doctrine that Africans were inherently inferior. Again, the Brazilian situation offers an interesting contrast. Brazilians not only used free blacks to capture runaway slaves, but Brazilian slave holders never developed the official North American doctrine of inherent African inferiority. Free blacks were banned from northern territories in the United States as well as from the southern slave states. Even the northern abolitionists who worked for the end of slavery often sought the disappearance of Negroes as well. They toyed with schemes to resettle the freed slaves in Africa, or like George Bancroft, they sought black emigration to Mexico or South America. The United States, North and South, was largely a society of two groups: black slaves and free whites. The North American hostility to miscegenation and manumission kept the descendants of Africans as black or visible as possible, and blacks were assumed to be slaves. This insistence on a two-caste society was so strong that even today North Americans classify any light-skinned person with a touch of African ancestry as a Negro. Even today in the United States people must be white or black and they are white only if their ancestry is all white. Blacks include, in common language and official census reports, not only "pure" Africans but anyone who is not "pure" white.

South American whites never insisted that there were only two races (excluding Indians); they did not relegate all people of mixed ancestry to the status of "the other" as if they were mongrel dogs. North Americans persisted in the belief (despite the evidence of their eyes) that there were only two racial types: pure whites and the others. South Americans recognized that there were many, and they encouraged the miscegenation which created many different racial categories between lily white and jet black.

Brazil, again, offers an interesting contrast to our way of thinking of race. In Brazil people are *pretos* (blacks) or *preto retino* (dark black) or *cabra* (dark) or *cabo verde* (dark with straight hair) or *escuro* (less dark) or *mulato escuro* (rich brown) or *mulato claro* (light brown) or *pardo* (lighter still) or *sarara* (light skinned with kinky hair) or *moreno* (light skin and straight hair) or *branco da Bahia* (native whites with slight African ancestry) or brunet whites or blond whites.

Spanish Americans think in equally rich racial terms. To the extent that Spanish Americans think of *negro* at all (or Portuguese of *nego*) it means black. No Latin American would think of calling an *escuro* or *pardo* a *negro*; *escuros* and *pardos* are obviously lighter.

This complex racial vocabulary south of the Rio Grande shows that Latin Americans are not color blind. Instead, they see much greater racial variety than North Americans do. Actually, their extreme sensitivity to racial differences

Racial stereotypes from anti-abolitionist cartoons

enables them to be less racist than the North American black versus white vision permits. White racism still exists in Mexico and Latin America, but many frankly recognize that most people are "mixed," and they find value in continuing the mixing. The Mexicans express this goal by calling themselves proudly "a bronze nation." They enthusiastically proclaim the destiny of Mexico to be the miscegenation of Africans, Europeans, and Indians—the "bronzing" of all peoples. Try to imagine the "bronze nation" as a cultural idea in the United States, despite all the talk of melting pots. Latin Americans have broken down racial barriers through miscegenation. Partly because they came as soldiers or conquerors without families, but also partly because they took so many Africans as slaves, they almost inevitably established societies which paid scant attention to race. It was never possible for people, the majority of whom considered themselves shades of brown, to work up fears of being overwhelmed by Africans. All but one of the slave states of the United States ended the slave trade before the federal prohibition in 1808. Brazilians continued the slave trade until 1851. By that time over half the Brazilians were black or brown. In the United States never more than 19 percent of the population was classified as Negro, and the percentage declined steadily from that high point of 1790. Brazilians may have been more committed to slavery, but the whites of the United States were more committed to racial separation.

FOR FURTHER READING

For general histories of slavery see William D. Phillips's *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* and David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* as well as his *Slavery and Human Progress*. M.I. Finley's *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* is a good introduction and his *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* is a demanding analysis. Frank M. Snowden, Jr., challenges many accepted

ideas with his *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*.

On the Atlantic slave trade, Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery* is a big global survey. Hugh Thomas's *The Slave Trade* is a big book full of colorful characters, mainly European. There is a brief overview and a useful collection of documents in David Northrup's *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Philip Curtin's *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* is an interesting overview. The African background is well presented in John Thornton's *Africa and the Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680*. Sydney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* places the history of slavery in the context of the history of sugar.

On Latin American slavery the best introduction is Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*. For the history of racism in Latin America, see Marvin Harris's *Patterns of Race in the Americas* and *The Idea of Race in Latin America*, edited by Richard Graham. For Portugal or Brazil one should begin with C.R. Boxer's thin *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825*, but then add A. J. R. Russell-Wood's *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil*. Other valuable current interpretations are *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555* by A.C. de C. M. Saunders and *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* by John Hemming. The older works of Lewis Hanke, Boxer, and Gilberto Freyre are still worth reading, as is Carl N. Degler's *Neither Black nor White*. For Spanish America specifically *The African Experience in Spanish America: 1502 to the Present Day* by Leslie B. Rout, Jr., is good.

On North American slavery and racism a good place to start might be the brief study of the origins of slavery in the British Caribbean and North America: Betty Wood's *The Origins of American Slavery*. Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* sets slavery (especially in the Caribbean) in a larger context. Winthrop D. Jordan's *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (or his larger *White Over Black*) argue against the economic interpretation of Williams and others. Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and his *The World the Slaveholders Made* are models of Marxist scholarship. The extremes of interpretation are Stanley Elkin's *Slavery* (as concentration camp) and Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross* (as reformatory). Herbert Gutman's *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* and his *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* criticize both optimistic and pessimistic extremes as does John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*. Other valuable titles are David Cohen and Jack Greene, eds., *Neither Slave nor Free*, John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*, and Peter Woods's *Black Majority*. Mark M. Smith provides a useful introduction for students on the debate about the economic profitability of slavery: *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South*.