



**Anti-Negro  
Prejudice**

**WHEN IT BEGAN,  
WHEN IT WILL END**

**by George Breitman**

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Labor Donated

# When Anti-Negro Prejudice Began

by George Breitman

IT IS now common knowledge even among conservative circles in the labor movement that race prejudice benefits the interests of the capitalist class and injures the interests of the working class. What is not well known — it still comes as a surprise to many Marxists — and should be made better known is the fact that race prejudice is a uniquely capitalist phenomenon, which either did not exist or had no perceptible influence in pre-capitalist society (that is, before the sixteenth century).

Hundreds of modern scholars have traced anti-Negro prejudice (to take the most important and prevalent type of race prejudice in the United States) back to the African slave trade and the slave system that was introduced into the Americas. Those who profited from the enslavement of the Negroes — the slave traders and merchant capitalists first of Europe and then of America, and the slaveholders — required a rationalization and a moral justification for an archaic social institution that obviously flouted the relatively enlightened principles proclaimed by capitalist society in its struggle against feudalism. Rationalizations always become available when powerful economic interests need them (that is how most politicians and preachers, editors and teachers earn

their living) and in this case the theory that Negroes are "inferior" followed close on the discovery that Negro slavery was exceptionally profitable.

This theory was embraced, fitted out with pseudo-scientific trappings and Biblical quotations, and trumpeted forth as a truth so self-evident that only madmen or subversives could doubt or deny it. Its influence on the minds of men was great at all levels of society, and undoubtedly aided the slaveholders in retarding the abolition of slavery. But with the growth of the productive forces, economic interests hostile to the slaveholders brought forth new theories and ideas, and challenged the supremacy of the slaveholders on all fronts, including ideology. The ensuing class struggles — between the capitalists, slaves, workers and farmers on one side and the slaveholders on the other — resulted in the destruction of the slave system.

But if anti-Negro prejudices and ideas arose out of the need to justify and maintain slavery, why didn't they wither away after slavery was abolished? In the first place, ideas, although they must reflect broad material interests before they can achieve wide circulation, can live lives of their



“Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate  
itself where labor with a black skin is branded.”

— — Karl Marx

own once they are set into motion, and can survive for a time after the disappearance of the conditions that produced them. (It is instructive to note, for example, that Lincoln did not free himself wholly of race prejudice and continued to believe in the "inferiority" of the Negro even while he was engaged in prosecuting the civil war that abolished the slave system — a striking illustration both of the tendency of ideas to lag behind events and of the primacy of material interest over ideology.)

This is a generalization, however and does not provide the main explanation for the survival of anti-Negro prejudice after the Civil War. For the striking thing about the Reconstruction period which followed the abolition of slavery was the speed with which old ideas and customs began to change and break up. In the course of a few short years millions of whites began to recover from the racist poisons to which they had been subjected from their birth, to regard Negroes as equals and to work together with them amicably, under the protection of the federal government, in the solution of joint problems. The obliteration of anti-Negro prejudice was started in the social revolution



that we know by the name of Reconstruction, and it would have been completed if Reconstruction had been permitted to develop further.

But Reconstruction was halted and then strangled — by the capitalists, acting now in alliance with the former slaveholders. No exploiting class lightly discards weapons that can help maintain its rule, and anti-Negro prejudice had already demonstrated its potency as a force to divide, disrupt and disorient oppressed classes in an exploitative society. After some vacillation and internal struggle that lasted through most of Reconstruction, the capitalist class decided it could make use of anti-Negro prejudice for its own purposes. The capitalists adopted it, nursed it, fed it, gave it new clothing, and infused it with a vigor and an influence it had never commanded before. Anti-Negro prejudice today operates in a different social setting and therefore in a somewhat different form than a century ago, but it was retained after slavery for essentially the same reason that it was introduced under the slave system that developed from the sixteenth century on — for its convenience as an instrument of exploitation; and for that same reason it will not be abandoned by the ruling class of any exploitative society in this country.

But why do we speak of the *introduction* of anti-Negro prejudice in the slave system whose spread coincided with the birth of capitalism? Wasn't there slavery long centuries before capitalism? Didn't race prejudice exist in the earlier slave societies? Why designate race prejudice as a uniquely capitalist phenomenon? A brief look at slavery of both the capitalist and pre-capitalist periods can lead us to the answers.

Capitalism, the social system that followed and replaced feudalism, owed its rise to world dominance in part to its revival or expansion of forms of exploitation originally developed

in the pre-feudal slave societies, and to its adaptation and integration of those forms into the framework of capitalist productive relations. As "the chief momenta of primitive accumulation" through which the early capitalists gathered together the capital necessary to establish and spread the new system, Marx listed "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins." The African slave trade and slavery produced fortunes that laid the foundations for the most important of the early industries of capitalism, which in turn served to revolutionize the economy of the whole world.

Thus we see, side by side, in clear operation of the laws of uneven and combined development, archaic pre-feudal forms and the most advanced social relations then possible in the post-feudal world. The former were of course in the service of the latter, at least during the first stages of their co-existence. This was not a mere repetition of the slavery of ancient times: one basic economic difference was that the slave system of the Americas produced commodities for the world capitalist market, and was therefore subordinate to and dependent on that market. There were other

differences, but here we confine ourselves to the one most relevant to the subject of this article — race relations in the early slave societies.

For the information that follows we are indebted to the writings of an anthropologist and of a sociologist: Ina Corinne Brown, *Socio-Economic Approach to Educational Problems*, 1942, chapter 2 (this government publication, the first volume in the National Survey of the Higher Education of Negroes sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education, is now out of print, but the same material is covered in her book, *Race Relations in a Democracy*, 1949, chapter 4); and Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race*, 1948, chapter 16.\* Dr. Cox's treatment is fuller; he also has been more influenced by Marx.

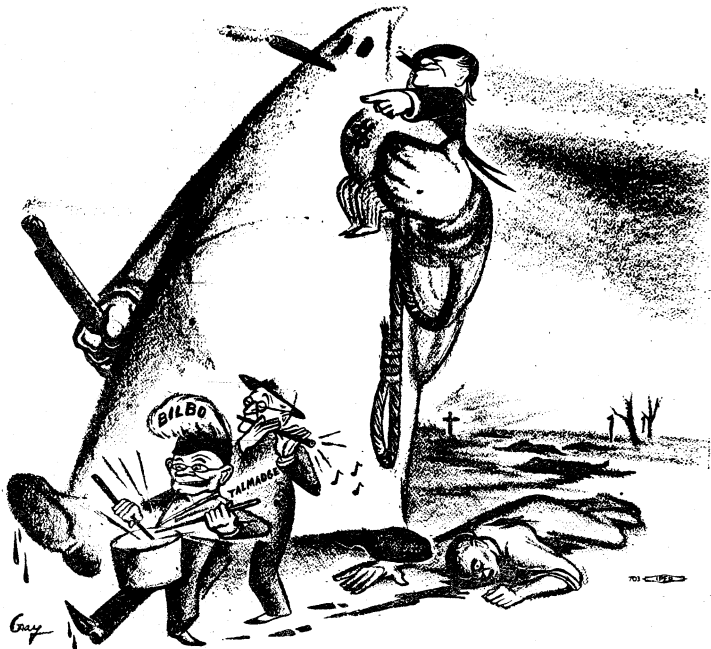
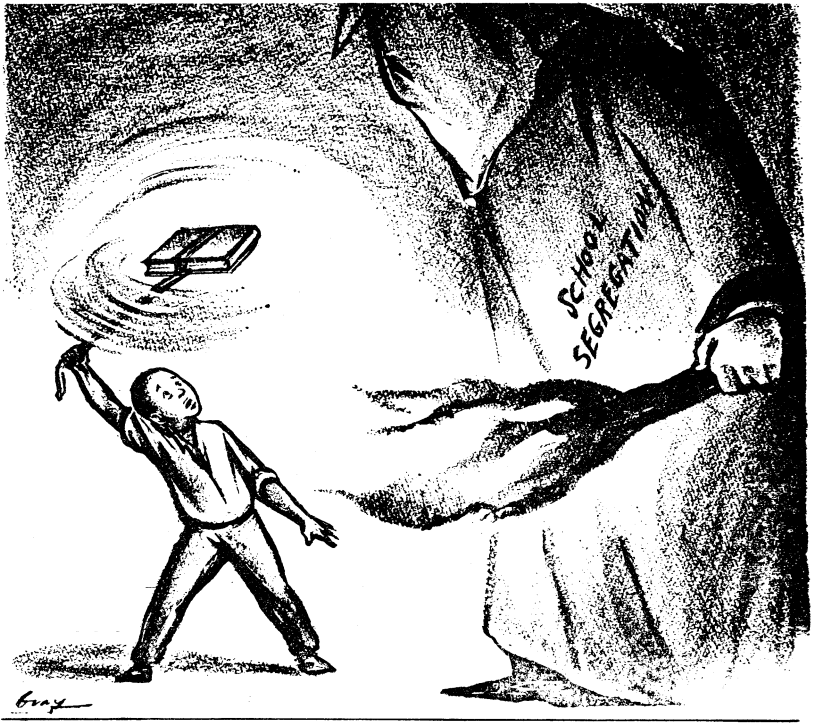
This is what they write about the ancient Egyptians:

So many persons assume that racial antipathy is a natural or instinctive reaction that it is important to emphasize the fact that race prejudice such as we know did not exist before the modern age. To be sure there was group antipathy which those who read history backwards take to be race prejudice, but actually this antipathy had little or nothing to do with color or the other physical differences by which races are distinguished. For example, the ancient Egyptians looked down upon the Negroes to the south of them. They enslaved these Negroes and spoke scornfully of them. Many writers, reading later racial attitudes into the situation, have seen in this scorn a color pre-

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\* Neither of these would claim they were the first to discover this historical information, and it may well be that other scholars unknown to us preceded them in writing about this field in recent years; all we know is that it first came to our attention through their books. Historical material often lies neg-

lected for long periods until current social and political needs reawaken interest in it. These writers were undoubtedly stimulated into a new and more purposeful interest in the subject by the growth of American Negro militancy and colonial independence struggles during the last 15-20 years.



judice. But the Egyptians were just as scornful of the Asiatic sand dwellers, or Troglodytes as Herodotus called them, and of their other neighbors who were as light or lighter than the Egyptians. The Egyptian artists caricature the wretched captives taken in the frequent wars, but they emphasize the hooked noses of the Hittites, the woolen garments of the Hebrews, and the peculiar dress of the Libyans quite as much as the color or the thick lips of the Negroes. That the Egyptians mixed freely with their southern neighbors, either in slavery or out of it, is evidenced by the fact that some of the Pharaohs were obviously Negroid and eventually Egypt was ruled by an Ethiopian dynasty. (Brown, 1942.)

There seems to be no basis for imputing racial antagonism to the Egyptians, Babylonians, or Persians. (Cox.)

#### On the Greeks:

One frequently finds mention of the scornful way in which Negro slaves were referred to in Greece and Rome, but the fact is that equally scornful remarks were made of the white slaves from the North and the East. There seems to be no evidence that color antipathy was involved, and of the total slave population the Negroes constituted only a minor element. (Brown, 1942.)

The slave population was enormous, but the slave and the master in Greece were commonly of the same race and there was no occasion to associate any given physical type with the slave status. An opponent of Athenian democracy complained that it was impossible in Athens to distinguish slaves and aliens from citizens because all classes dressed alike and lived in the same way. (Brown, 1949.)

. . . we do not find race prejudice even in the great Hellenistic empire which extended deeper into the territories of colored people than any other European empire up to the end of the fifteenth century.

The Hellenic Greeks had a cultural, not a racial, standard of belonging, so that their basic division of the peoples of the world were Greeks and barbarians — the barbarians having been all those persons who did not possess the

Greek culture, especially its language . . . the people of the Greek city-states, who founded colonies among the barbarians on the shores of the Black Sea and of the Mediterranean, welcomed those barbarians to the extent that they were able to participate in Greek culture, and intermarried freely with them. The Greeks knew that they had a superior culture to those of the barbarians, but they included Europeans, Africans, and Asiatics in the concept Hellas as these peoples acquired a working knowledge of the Greek culture.

The experience of the later Hellenistic empire of Alexander tended to be the direct contrary of modern racial antagonism. The narrow patriotism of the city-states was given up for a new cosmopolitanism. Every effort was made to assimilate the barbarians to Greek culture, and in the process a new Greco-Oriental culture with a Greco-Oriental ruling class came into being. Alexander himself took a Persian princess for his wife and encouraged his men to intermarry with the native population. In this empire there was an estate, not a racial, distinction between the rulers and the un-Hellenized natives. (Cox.)

#### On the Romans:

In Rome, as in Greece, the slaves did not differ in outward appearance from free men. R. H. Barrow in his study of the Roman slave says that "neither color nor clothing revealed his condition." Slaves of different nationalities intermarried. There was no color barrier. A woman might be despised as a wife because she came from a despised group or because she practiced barbaric rites but not because her skin was darker. Furthermore, as W. W. Buckland points out, "any citizen might conceivably become a slave; almost any slave might become a citizen." (Brown, 1949.)

In this civilization also we do not find racial antagonism, for the norm of superiority in the Roman system remained a cultural-class attribute. The basic distinction was Roman citizenship, and gradually this was extended to all free-born persons in the municipalities of the empire. Slaves came from every province, and there was no racial distinction among them. (Cox.)





There is really no need to go on quoting. The same general picture is true of all the societies, slave and non-slave, from the Roman empire down to the discovery of America — in the barbarian invasions into Europe, which led to enslavement of whites, in the reign of the Moslems, in the era of political domination by the Catholic Church. There were divisions, discriminations and antagonisms of class, cultural, political and religious character, but none along race or color lines, at least none that have left any serious trace in the historical materials now available. As late as the middle of the fifteenth century, when the West African slave trade to

Portugal first began, the rationalization for the enslavement of Negroes was not that they were Negro but that they were not Christian. Those who became Christians were freed, intermarried with the Portuguese and were accepted as equals in Portugal. Afterward, of course, when the slave trade became a big business, the readiness of a slave to convert to Christianity no longer sufficed to gain his emancipation.

Why did race prejudice develop in the capitalist era when it did not under the earlier slave systems? Without thinking we have in any way exhausted the subject, we make the fol-

lowing suggestion: In previous times the slaves were usually of the same color as their masters; both whites and Negroes were masters and slaves; in the European countries the Negroes formed a minority of the slave population. The invidious connotations of slavery were attached to all slaves, white and Negro. If under these conditions the notion of Negro "inferiority" occurred to anyone, it would have seemed ridiculous on the face of it; at any rate, it could never have received any social acceptance.

But slavery in the Americas became confined exclusively to Negroes.\* The Negro was distinguished by his color, and the invidious connotations of slavery could easily be transferred to that; it was inevitable that the theory of Negro "inferiority" and then anti-Negro prejudice should be created, that they should be extended to other non-white people who offered the possibility of exploitation, and that they should be spread around the globe.

Thus anti-Negro prejudice was not born until after capitalism had come into the world. There are differences of opinion as to the approximate birthdate. M. F. Ashley Montagu, discussing the "modern conception of

'race,' says: "Neither in the ancient world nor in the world up to the latter part of the eighteenth century did there exist any notion corresponding to it . . . A study of the cultures and literatures of mankind, both ancient and recent, shows us that the conception of natural or biological races of mankind differing from one another mentally as well as physically, is an idea which was not born until the latter part of the eighteenth century," or around the French Revolution. (*Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race.*)

Cox says that if he had to put his finger on the year which marked the beginning of race relations, he would select 1493-94 — when the Pope granted to Catholic Spain and Portugal jurisdictional control over, and the right to exploit, all of the (predominantly non-white) heathen people of the world and their resources. He sees "nascent race prejudice" with the beginning of the slave trade: "Although this peculiar kind of exploitation was then in its incipency, it had already achieved its significant characteristics." However, he finds that "racial antagonism attained full maturity" only in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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\* Slavery was not confined to Negroes at the beginning. Before the Negro slave on the plantations, there was the Indian slave and the white indentured servant. But Negro slave labor proved cheaper and was more plentiful than either of these, and eventually they were abandoned. The most satisfactory study of this question is in the excellent book by Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 1944. Williams writes: "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. As compared with Indian and white

labor, Negro slavery was eminently superior . . . The features of the man, his hair, color and dentifrice, his 'sub-human' characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest and best. 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, nearer too than the more populous countries of India and China. But their turn was to come."

Whichever century one chooses, the point is this: Anti-Negro prejudice was originated to justify and preserve a slave-labor system that operated in the interests of capitalism in its pre-industrialist stages, and it was retained in slightly modified form by industrial capitalism after slavery became an obstacle to the further development of capitalism and had to be abolished. Few things in the world are more distinctly stamped with the mark of capitalism.

The implications of this fact are so plain that it is no wonder it has received so little attention in the schools and press of a country dominated by capitalists and their apologists. Anti-Negro prejudice arose out of the needs of capitalism, it is a product of capitalism, it belongs to capitalism, and

it will die when capitalism dies.

We who are going to participate in the replacement of capitalism by socialism, and who have good reason to be curious about the first stages of socialism because we will be living in them, need have no fear about the possibility of any extended lag with respect to race prejudice. Unlike the capitalist system that dominated this country after the Civil War, the socialist society will be free of all exploitative features; it will have no conceivable use for race prejudice, and it will consciously seek to eradicate it along with all the other props of the old system. That is why race prejudice will wither away when capitalism dies — just as surely as the leaf withers when the tree dies, and not much later.

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