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The African Slave Trade » BarbWire.com

by James Tennant on 21 September, 2017

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A standard tactic of Progressives (or Cultural Marxists, if you like) is to foster animosity between a designated “victim” subgroup and a target “victimizer”—an individual, institution or cultural norm whose existence impedes the establishment of the humanist utopia that is the hope of followers of the Religion of Progress.

Whether employing the pretense of justice for the proletariat or, in our own time, for the gay population, or for women, or Muslims, Progressives magnify or invent grievances in order to sow discord, then they proceed to extinguish the conflagration by crushing the victimizer in the name of “justice” or “equality”. By this process, more and more areas of life are forcibly conformed to the Progressive creed.

Race baiting is one means Progressives use to wage war on our free society. A pool of angry African-Americans is not only useful as a voting block but also to provide fodder in the battle to undermine our democracy—to discredit our justice system and hobble law enforcement, to defeat our ability to protect our borders, to convert our educational institutions into anti-American reprobate factories, even to invalidate our elections (“the President is a racist”).

The African Atlantic slave trade narrative is one weapon the Progressive employs in order to foment racial unrest.

It relates how the evil white man stole an innocent population out of its bucolic homeland and transported it across the sea to toil in sugar cane plantations and cotton fields, under inhumane conditions, all for economic gain. The failures and hardships of the contemporary black American are the persistent effects of this activity, we are told, and so, in the cause of justice, those of the white skin must be compelled to acknowledge their guilt, humble themselves, and make restitution for their race's crimes. Questions of personal culpability can be waived in this crusade because racism is inherent in a person's white skin, it is said. Enraged blacks and resentful whites are the intended product of this narrative, an ideal bedrock on which to construct the Progressive revolution.

The slave narrative is all the more effective as a propaganda cudgel because its historical suppositions are largely valid: millions of black Africans were kidnapped, brutalized and worked to death in horrendous environments to service the greed of whites. But, as with all Progressive narratives, designed as they are to induce societal instability rather than to beget enlightenment, the story is slyly selective of details.

To uncover the depth of human iniquity at work in the Atlantic slave trade, we have to journey back to the fifteenth century when a small European country began to explore the western coast of Africa.

When that first Portuguese *barca* rounded Cape Bojador in 1434 and steered south into strange waters, where treacherous shoals lay hidden and sea monsters lurked, the adventurers were not

hunting for slaves at all; they were after the gold of Guinea, the gold that Muslim trade terminals like Cueta, opposite Gibraltar, had been exporting from the African interior for centuries.

The quest for this golden land drove the explorers further on down the west coast of Africa, year by year: Arguin, Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Elmina, Benin, Calabar, Sao Tome, Loango, Luanda... By the end of the century, they had rounded the horn and reached Madagascar in East Africa where the Muslims and Hindus had a thriving trade.

Over those years, they found some gold, and also ivory, gum, beeswax, pepper and other valuable trading commodities. And they discovered a myriad of peoples, many having sophisticated political systems and industry. There were textiles—woven cotton and linen—that rivaled the Dutch and dyes superior to the European; copper, iron and steel industries that supplied axes, hoes and utensils; glass-makers whose technical virtuosity could compete with the Venetian; pottery and palm wine.

The Portuguese also discovered the practice of slavery to be ubiquitous in Africa.

Slavery had been a staple of African societies, indeed of all societies, from the beginning. Slaves built the pyramids and the Hammurabi laws included those governing slavery; Aristotle held the slave-master relationship to be natural and laudable; in Roman times, there were millions of slaves in Italy. When the Europeans discovered the New World, they would find slavery common among the indigenous communities there, too.

But while slavery had died out in Northern Europe around the twelfth century, it lingered in the Mediterranean world, fed by

Islamic invasions and the slave pipelines from Northwestern Africa and Egypt. The Sahara trade route, established by the Muslims after their conquest of North Africa, brought gold and slaves from the interior up through Timbuktu to the markets in Morocco, and from there into Italy, Greece and the Muslim lands. The re-introduction of classical thought into Europe during the Renaissance added a sanctioning philosophy for the practice of slavery.

So the Portuguese landing on those wind-swept shores of Northwestern Africa in 1482 did not initiate a new slaving enterprise, but rather tapped into an existing commerce that had operated from time immemorial, and created an alternative route to Mediterranean markets.

How did the Africans acquire the slaves they traded? The most common way was through warfare. Conflict was widespread as tribe strove to subjugate tribe. Also, the introduction of Islam generated great numbers of slaves because of that religion's mandate to war upon non-Muslim neighbors. Captives were invariably enslaved or killed (sometimes eaten).

Within many African nations, the people were little more than slaves themselves, subject to the whims of a tyrant who could kill or sell them as desired. Some slaves were expended through human sacrifice; upon the death of the great Ashanti king in 1824, at least one thousand were ritually murdered.

The justice system was another source of slaves. African courts tended to be harsh; death and enslavement were the standard penalties, even for trivial offenses. In 1576 Frei Garcia Simoes wrote of Angola that, "With the exception of leaders, almost all the natives here either are born in slavery or are reduced to that

condition.”

Kidnapping members of neighboring tribes, and even of neighbors, was common also. Many sold members of their own families. The protestations that “all men are created equal, in the image of God” that trickled weakly from churchmen in the West were incomprehensible to peoples whose belief systems saw slavery as a natural condition of life and in no way immoral.

At first the Atlantic trade dealt in gold, ivory, gum, pepper and timber. But with the success of labor-intensive farming ventures like sugar cane in Madeira and cotton in the Cape Verdes, European merchants were spurred to join in the slave trade. With the establishment of sugar plantations in Cuba and in the French and British Indies the trade really took off. The demand for laborers for her sugar and coffee plantations and for her gold mines saw Brazilian tobacco and cane brandy flooding into Angola and Guinea and slaves going the other way. Later, U.S. tobacco and cotton production competed for workers.

Initially, white indentured workers or Indians provided the labor for these enterprises but the former were expensive and in short supply, while neither could match the black African for physical strength and endurance.

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The Africans were anxious to provide the slaves. The nations of Senegambia sold 2,000,000 to the Europeans; the Ashanti and other tribes of the Gold Coast around Elmina 1,500,000; the Dahomey, Oyo and Adra of the Slave Coast 2,000,000; 2,000,000 from Benin and Calabar; 750,000 from Loango and the Angolan nations around the Congo River; 3,000,000 slaves from Luanda, mostly to service Brazil's sugar plantations.

By 1640 there were 300,000 African slaves in Spanish America. In 1700, British Jamaica's white population was 7,000 but there were 45,000 slaves working the sugar plantations. In 1817, half the Brazilian population of four million were slaves.

It wasn't until 1619 that the first African slaves were landed in what would become the U.S., a latecomer to the trade. In the 1730s, British ships carried 40,000 slaves to Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas. Demand exploded, especially for females, with the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

Africa ports also imported slaves to work their gold mines and plantations or to be traded with other tribes. Even that great Gold Coast fount of slaves, Elmina, was primarily an importer of slaves

until 1770. As with the Mediterranean trade, this internal slave trade benefited from the sea lanes provided by the Europeans but would still have occurred had the Europeans not been present.

White men quickly succumbed to malaria or yellow fever if they lingered in Africa. The hazardous environment was acknowledged by the British government in 1785 when it rejected a plan to send convicts to mosquito-infested Sierra Leone because it understood that an African posting would mean certain death for a white man (and so Australia was settled instead). This meant that, if the Africans refused to sell slaves, as the King of Benin did in 1530 and the King of Congo in 1555, then the Europeans could do nothing. The Atlantic slave trade venture was, of necessity, a partnership between the Africans and the Europeans.

Typically, slaves were bought in one of the markets in the interior and marched in long chains, *coffles*, by the African slavers to holding areas, *barracoons*, on the coast. The march could take months and commonly resulted in the death of one in five.

In popular portrayals of the slave trade, “African” is presented as a homogeneous population with common allegiance (against the “whites”). But, in reality, the Dahomian slaver felt no more kinship for his Oyo captive, whose nation he was often at war, than would a European. The slave arrived at the coast exhausted, malnourished and often weakened by wounds inflicted by his escort.

In 1859 U.S. commodore Henry Wise wrote from Cabinda describing the chained gangs of slaves “driven by the lash from the interior to the barracoons” where exposure and disease rendered the soil “rich in the decaying remains” of their fellows. One hundred twenty-five captives, of six-hundred, had already died on the march,

he said. Now the remnant would suffer and die in the barracoons until the slaver ship should arrive.

Imagine the terror of the captives beholding the vast ocean for the first time. Many thought the white men had no homeland and spent their lives aboard ship; there were rumours that they wanted the Africans for food.

Sick, exhausted and terrified, the survivors would be sold to these pale-skinned strangers and ferried out to their fantastic seagoing vessels for the Atlantic voyage—the dreaded “middle passage”.

During the passage, the male slaves were chained in the cramped hold, the women and children left exposed on deck. Most traveled completely naked, their clothes having been appropriated by their original captors.

The slaver captains were often lawless, violent men, who treated their crewmen little better than the slaves. On

Dutch ships the average mortality rate for crews was 18%; for slaves 12%. Decease, malnutrition and physical abuse drove the losses. One in ten voyages saw the death of the captain, so many ships carried an extra.

In 1475 a Castilian vessel was captured by locals and the crew eaten. The African slavers were not racially prejudiced either—a captured white mariner could easily end up spending his days a eunuch in the court of a Muslim potentate.

The meagre pay, subsistence rations and extreme physical peril tended to draw the lowliest of specimens into a slaver crew. Such men held little empathy for their captives.

In the seventeenth century a voyage from Angola to Rio took about

fifty days; if the destination was Curacao, eighty days. Dysentery and smallpox were the greatest slave killers. The bodies were thrown to the sharks which learned to tail slaver vessels. One in eight perished on this leg of the journey.

Upon arrival at the destination port, the slaves would be cleaned up and given food to render them presentable to the buyers. The clients would check the slaves' teeth and tongue, prod the limbs and have them jump about to display their fitness much as one would in evaluating an animal. Like animals, they were branded by the new owners.

The life of a slave on the plantations was brutal and brief. Subject to physical abuse and neglect, disease and overwork, the life expectancy of a coffee picker or cane cutter in Brazil in the 1840s was about eight years. During the cane harvest slaves worked around the clock. Plantation owners found it more economical to work them to death and then import another batch from Africa rather than breed them.

Slaving was a heinous activity, but profitable. In 1665 the Company of Adventurers (which would become the Royal African Company) reported a £200,000 return on gold, £100,000 for slaves and £100,000 for other cargoes (ivory, wax, hides, woods, grain). But by the end of the seventeenth century, about sixty percent of the RAC's annual income came from the slave trade.

The slave trade was a boon to European manufacturers supplying the trading vessels, too. In 1739 the manufacturing port of Manchester had an export trade of £14,000; within twenty years it would pass £100,000, and then £300,000 by 1779. By 1750, eighty-five percent of English textiles were bound for Africa. Wine from

Portugal, Spain and France was popular with the Africans, also brandy from France, cane whiskey from Brazil, and rum from the U.S.

The African nations also benefited substantially from the trade. Cassava, whose cultivation enabled the African population boom in the seventeenth century, and later maize, were both introduced through the slave trade. Other foods, like oranges and coconuts came from the outside world too. European copper, brass and steel fed her manufacturing industries and its textiles clothed her people. The trade boosted African enterprising spirit, driving development.

But by the end of the seventeenth century, public attitude towards slavery was beginning to change in the West. In France, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau essayed against it.

In 1754 in the U.S. the annual meeting of the Society of Friends condemned slavery on religious principle. Quaker pressure ultimately resulted in the introduction of a bill against the slave trade in the House of Representatives of Massachusetts in 1767, although it failed to pass. Later, Jefferson wanted the condemnation of slavery to be reflected in the Declaration of Independence but lost out to opposition from the southern states. With the growing slave populations, the fear of revolution led some states to place duties on their importation.

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In England, Daniel Defoe and Alexander Pope were among the writers and pamphleteers denouncing the trade. John Wesley's influential *Thoughts Upon Slavery* of 1774 and William Paley's *Moral Philosophy* of 1785, which became a standard text in universities, brought public cognizance. As William Cowper wrote in 1781 "Canst thou, and honour'd with a Christian name, Buy what is woman-born, and feel no shame?" Atrocities like the widely publicized *Zong* incident of that same year, where the captain of the Liverpool slaver threw one hundred thirty-three slaves overboard for insurance purposes, excited public condemnation.

Although public perception was changing, progress had yet to be made in the political arena when, in 1787, the tireless abolitionist campaigner Thomas Clarkson met with the then twenty-seven year old fellow evangelical, William Wilberforce, and convinced him to lead the crusade for abolition in Parliament. In subsequent years, Wilberforce and his allies would introduce bill after bill only to have each defeated.

One trump in the slavers' political hand was the indisputable fact that the African nations wanted the slave trade to continue. The

claim that, "It will destroy the sugar/tobacco/coffee commerce, not to mention banking, sail making, baking, and the million other enterprises riding on the trade," was compelling to the majority of statesmen too.

Other justifications like, "If we don't transport the slaves, other nations will" or "Britain will lose control of the seas if we release our sailors and mothball our ships" or "The slaves are better being slaves in the New World than in Africa", were convincing to those desiring to be convinced. Then there were the stock ripostes utilized by those defending repugnant moral positions like, "You (Wilberforce and Pitt) have no slaves so your opinion is illegitimate" and "You religious people think you understand human nature better than the rest of us." In short, if you were pro-slavery you had plenty of ammunition with which to fight.

In 1807, when an abolition bill finally passed (114-15 in the Commons and 41-20 in the Lords), the members of the House of Commons rose and applauded an exhausted Wilberforce. Twenty years had passed since Clarkson had convinced him to take on the mission of the abolitionists.

What is astonishing is that, in a contest pitting the moral impulse of Christianity against the economic interests of the nation, the former had prevailed.

The turn of Britain, the mistress of the seas and trade, compelled other nations to follow suit. Some, like the Netherlands and Germany had little direct interest in the trade by that time and some, like Mexico, had few slaves anyway. Others, like Portugal and Spain, wanted to appease Britain for political purposes.

But it was one thing to make laws, another to enforce them. The

British West African Squadron vessels were wholly inadequate in terms of quality and quantity for its mission. Slavers kept flags for several nations on board in case they encountered a patrolling warship; when Spain and Portugal abolished the trade in 1820, for instance, Cuban and Brazilian slavers simply switched to the Stars and Stripes. The government officials in the New World, who had a financial stake in the trade, turned a blind eye to the activities of rich traders, and the local courts were paid off or intimidated.

International political intrigue worked against abolition too. The Cubans were sure that the British were using abolition as a pretense to ruin their sugar economy whereas Spain was worried that Cuba would secede from the mother country if it did not support the trade. Meanwhile, the Southern U.S. wanted to annex Cuba to protect the slave trade but Britain resisted growing U.S. power.

The U.S., in turn, was wary of British imperialism and denied them the right to board suspected slavers, crippling law enforcement efforts (the war of 1812 was caused, in part, by British search-and-seize actions). Likewise, Brazil resented Britain's moral posturing and accused Portugal of selling out to their traditional enemies. By that time, the Portuguese had been using slaves for more than three hundred years, so the practice was deeply ingrained in the culture. In the end, the governments of Spain and Portugal paid lip service to the treaty in order to placate Britain while allowing the Cubans and Brazilians to do whatever they wished.

Napoleon abolished the trade in 1815 but the French people, as a matter of national pride, remained hostile to British attempts to enforce the ban. In 1820, with the *H.M.S. Tartar* closing on her, the French slaver *La Jeune Estelle* threw her slaves overboard.

Predictably, French opinion blamed Britain for the tragedy.

In 1840, King Gezo of Dahomey expressed the typical attitude of the African nations towards abolition: "The slave trade has been the ruling principle of my people. It is the source of their glory and wealth..." Other episodes confirm the mindset of the African peoples: The settlement of freed blacks the British had established at Sierra Leone in 1787 quickly disintegrated and some of the ex-slaves confounded their sponsors by taking up with the local slavers themselves. By 1809 Mary Faber, a Sierra Leone freed slave, was buying slaves in Sangha while her husband Paul set up shop in Cuba to negotiate their sale. Abolitionist Granville Sharp rescued the slave Henry Demane from a slaver ship, only to see him take up slave dealing himself. Mungo Park, traveling in Senegambia during 1807, the year of the abolition, observed that, "labor is universally performed by slaves." John Hughes, an English businessman, visited Portuguese Guinea in 1828 and remarked, "I believe that every native African...would indulge in the slave trade if allowed to do so."

Some African Muslims were of the opinion that the Christian God's purported denouncement of slavery was merely a ploy intended to deny the legitimacy of Islam, since Allah supported the practice.

Little wonder that an exasperated member rose in the British House of Commons to bewail the futility of efforts to convince the Africans to "contribute to, or even acquiesce in, the destruction of a trade not inconsistent with their prejudices, their laws, or their notions of morality or religion."

The years following abolition were probably grimmer for the slaves than when the trade was legal. Ships sometimes travelled half-

provisioned to disguise they were slavers, cutting the rations of crew and slaves. Slaves were thrown overboard when rations ran low or if a patrol vessel approached. Sometimes slavers were forced to land their captives far from the market and herd them overland in grueling marches because their destination ports were reported to be patrolled.

The Africans reverted to the traditional practice of killing excess war captures in lieu of shipping them overseas. In 1843 the King of the Bambara discovered that he could not sell his eight hundred captives because of the naval patrol, so he ordered them beheaded. In 1846 the King of Lagos, finding that the slaver vessels could not get through the patrol to buy his slaves, killed all two thousand rather than incur the expense of feeding them.

But then things started to turn in the favor of the abolitionists.

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In 1833, slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire and the West Indie plantation owners were paid off. Unable to overcome corrupt governments in the New World, Britain turned to buying off the African rulers too and, where that failed, to dispatch the navy to destroy their barracoons.

Seeking British support during the U.S. Civil War, the northern states were finally willing to allow British warships to board suspected slavers. Then, in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery, aligning the country with British policy.

The increasing cooperation between nations saw the naval patrol beefed up and modernized.

In locales where slaves vastly outnumbered whites, there was a heightened fear of slave revolutions, especially since the successful revolt in Saint-Domingue in 1791. This led to voluntary reforms and manumissions in places like Brazil, which undermined the slaving culture, and to public pressure against the importation of more Africans. Brazil declared independence from Portugal in 1830 and, at the urging of their monarch Dom Pedro, agreed to end their slave

trade if Britain recognized the new country.

Finally, in 1867, wearied by constant slave revolts and dogged by the increasingly effective patrol, the Cuban trade collapsed. Its slave population had been depleted by cholera, and its coffee farms ravaged by hurricanes.

The Atlantic slave trade was dead.

Usually, abolition of slavery proper followed closely abolition of the trade. Venezuela abolished the trade in 1811, and abolished slavery in 1821; Colombia in 1812 and 1821, respectively; Mexico 1824 and 1829. Portugal, the nation that began the Atlantic slave trade, was the last European nation to abolish slavery, in 1869. The last hold-outs, Cuba and Brazil, abolished slavery in 1886 and 1888, putting an end to this black period in Western history.

But the eradication of slavery in the Western world did not end African slavery. One great irony is that, when the Africans were forced to return to legitimate trade after abolition, they utilized slave labor. The slaves who would have been shipped out to harvest the white man's cane in Cuba, or his coffee in Brazil, or pick his cotton in Mississippi, or dig gold in Minas Gerais were now toiling in their black masters' palm oil plantation in Calabar or in the Ashanti kola nut farms or the gold mines of Mali. They had to cultivate the rice fields of Senegambia instead of those of Georgia.

And, of course, the northern slave trade to the Mediterranean continued as it had for over a millennium and the internal trade remained undisturbed. In the 1850s the conquering Arab armies reached the Congo, linking western trade routes to Zanzibar on the east coast. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States did not abolish slavery until 1963.

Even today, slavery is present in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Nigeria and many other nations that featured in the Atlantic slave trade. In the continuing wars and lingering traditions, the vulnerable are left toiling in the diamond mines of Central Africa and the construction sites of Ghana. Large numbers of children are pressed into forced labor and sex slaves are plentiful.

Opposite the Cape Verde Islands, in Mauritania, where the Portuguese first bartered for slaves, the government still struggles to eradicate, what is, the traditional institute of slavery.

And now we can return to the Progressive narrative of the white man's crimes against the black.

Without subscribing to Progressive ideology—that all white Americans are racists through biological inheritance—we can acknowledge that our European ancestors willfully enslaved and brutalized millions of black Africans. But we cannot condemn “whiteness”, as the Progressives would have us do, as if Caucasians had a particular affinity to such cruelty over and above other races.

Knowledge of the role black Africans played in enslaving their own should go some way in inoculating the public against Progressive hate memes for, even in our new era of Progressive jurisprudence, where the innocent are pronounced guilty on account of the crimes of their fathers, the black race stands convicted also.

The black race activist who feels justified in her contempt for whites because of their role in slavery should temper her condemnation lest she incur Voltaire's rebuke: “People who traffic in their own children are more condemnable than the buyer...” Given the history

of slavery in Africa, it is more likely the activist is the ancestor of a slave owner than the white person she is berating.

In her identification with the black slave, she might consider that, had circumstances been other, the slave would have had no scruple about consigning a fellow African to an identical fate. Neither would he have hesitated to enslave a white if it were in his power to do so.

When she holds America in contempt and romanticizes about her stolen African culture, she is identifying with a worldview that offered no moral objections to the selling of her ancestors and which fought bitterly to maintain the right to continue doing so.

If she accuses the modern white American of living off the proceeds accrued through the suffering of black slaves—which is undeniable—then so too does the contemporary black American (and African, for that matter).

Finally, those who condemn Christians for their collaboration in the slave trade must be confronted with the fact that, while the community supporting African slavery included all religions—Christian, Muslim, Hindu, pantheist, humanist—the opposing community was almost exclusively composed of Christians. It is ironic that, in protest over the history of African-American exploitation, icons like Malcolm X took up a religion that had no qualms about enslaving their forefathers against one that provided the means to their freedom. Malcolm X, as a Muslim, could not denounce black slavery, but only the enslavement of fellow Muslims.

The very indignity of modern anti-Christians towards the slave trading is a product of their Christian environment as is the African

revulsion towards the practice a result of Christianity's incursion into African culture. The call of black revolutionaries for the carving out of a black nation in America free from the "white man's" law and religion must, in order to achieve the authenticity these men seek, involve the reestablishment of slavery.

Everyone should learn about the story of the African slave trade, yes. But they should learn the whole story, including those bits Progressive agitators suppress: how the abominable practice was common in the African nations long before the arrival of the Europeans and continued there, without interruption, after the Europeans withdrew, and that the battle against slavery was undertaken by "white" Christians in the teeth of bitter resistance by the Africans. The Africans were kidnapped and sold into slavery, yes, but not by whites.

If we all acknowledge that no creed or race was blameless concerning the evil that was African slavery, the venom of the Progressive agitator can be drawn and his politics of division defeated.

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