



## Race and Coerced Labor Part II: Motivations and Justifications

*By Audra Diptee*

Slavery is over, but its legacy remains. Understanding how it lasted so long, especially with regard to economics, is essential for recognizing the enduring effects—still present today—of this inhumane, once legal system.



## Defining Characteristic 3:

*Slavery was motivated by economics but justified in religious and scientific terms.*

### Introduction

The third defining characteristic of the systems of slavery throughout the Americas highlights a contradiction. From the first two characteristics, we learned how the European empires and independent American states enslaved millions of people of African descent in a system of racial hierarchy and considered them to be property. Yet, Britain, France, Brazil, and the United States—proud supporters of freedom and liberty—all used and profited from slavery. How could they justify this hypocrisy? What really motivated their willingness to enslave other human beings? Because today's world sees access to equal rights as the ideal, it is difficult to understand a time when laws were put in place to ensure social inequality. (That's not a typo; *inequality* was the goal.) To grasp how human beings came to be legally defined as property, we have to make a distinction between *motivations* and *justifications*. The motivations for using enslaved labor are the reasons why people wanted to use it in the first place. The justifications are the beliefs that were used to institutionalize and sustain this form of labor exploitation.

### What were the motivations for using enslaved labor?

The use of enslaved labor in the Americas was about money. Its sole purpose was to generate wealth and profits for people at the top of the racial hierarchy. This came at the *expense of the freedom* of those people at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. In this period wealth was generated by producing goods that were to be sold at a higher price than it cost to produce them. One significant cost of production was labor. Forcing men, women, and children of African descent to work for no money meant more profits for those people of European descent at the top of the racial hierarchy. The enslaved were forced to work in various settings. For example, sugar, coffee, and cocoa plantations in the Caribbean all relied on forced labor. In the United States, they labored on tobacco and cotton plantations. In Brazil, they worked on plantations and also in the mining industry, while in Belize they were forced to work in lumbering and forestry. Enslaved people were also forced to work in urban or domestic settings throughout the Americas. Regardless of the kind of labor, the relationship between the enslaved person and the person for whom they worked was not employer-and-employee. It was extreme exploitation that legally defined the relationship as “owner” and “property.” The enslaved could not negotiate a fair wage or seek other employment opportunities. Only those who legally owned enslaved people had the power to determine their labor conditions. The owner's priority was to generate personal wealth, so they spent as little as possible on labor costs while requiring the enslaved to work as many hours as possible to maximize their profits. Even though slavery in the Americas was abolished in various places throughout the nineteenth century, today we can still see evidence of all the personal wealth it generated. Most of the profits made from the use of enslaved labor on sugar, coffee, and cocoa plantations in the Caribbean, for example, were sent back to countries in Europe. These funds were sometimes reinvested in other business ventures. Other times the funds were spent on maintaining lavish and comfortable lifestyles.

Below, the top photo shows the lavish Harewood House in Leeds, still celebrated today as one of the “Treasure Houses of England.” It was built in the mid-eighteenth century by members of the very wealthy Lascelles family, who had earned profits from exploiting enslaved labor on the sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Compare this image to the artist William Clark's 1823 painting below. This shows enslaved men, women, and children at work on a sugar plantation on the Caribbean island of Antigua. Consider how these images portray two extremes of wealth and poverty, yet were part of the same economic system.

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*Photo of Harewood House in Leeds, England. By Gunnar Larsson, CC BY-SA 3.0.*



*William Clark's 1823 painting "Cutting the sugar-cane." Public domain.*

### What were the justifications for using enslaved labor?

The motivations for using enslaved labor were economic—that part was simple. But the justifications for a labor system based on racialized social inequality were often explained in very different terms. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, enslavement tended to be justified in religious terms. Its proponents argued that slavery existed in the Bible, or that it was God's plan that Africans be enslaved.

It was not until the eighteenth century that ideas about race claimed to be scientific thought. But it's clear that these scientific arguments were built on racial biases. People claimed, in the name of science, that people of African descent lacked intelligence and had a natural need to submit to white authority. Some medical doctors even argued that freedom was damaging to the mental health of the enslaved. All of these claims lacked any credibility and have been disproven by scientific research.

### Conclusions

Slavery, of course, is illegal in these societies today.<sup>1</sup> Later in this course we will explore how it became criminalized. It is important to remember, however, that we still deal with the historical legacy of slavery in the present day. What are some ways in which the effects of slavery still linger on? How do the justifications for slavery, for example, continue on in racist ideas and language? In what ways are the economic circumstances of certain communities, rich or poor, a historical legacy of slavery? Knowing the historical relationship between racism and economic opportunities—and reflecting on its legacy in the twenty-first century—remains relevant today. A deeper and more accurate understanding of this troubling past allows for a better understanding of the present, and can help us develop solutions to the social problems and challenges we face today.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, slavery is illegal in all nations today, though it is still present, illegally, in many forms and in many places.

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