The Root of the Problem: Jamestown gave birth to a contradiction—a democracy that was committed to slavery

By Orlando Patterson

Less than a dozen years after the founding of Jamestown, about 20 Africans from what is now Angola were sold to settlers of the fledgling colony. They found themselves in a raw, chaotic frontier society in which the English settlers were still trying to figure out the best way to survive and turn a profit.

In this unsettled, formative phase, the Africans worked side by side with white indentured servants whose physical hardships and treatment were largely similar to their own. Too much has been made of the fact that manumission, the formal emancipation from slavery, was open to the most resourceful of them, that a few of the manumitted prospered and that blacks and laboring whites interacted on intimate terms. This was typical of nearly all new multiethnic settlements in the Americas. The colony’s élite remained committed to indentured white servitude as the backbone of the labor force until at least the middle of the 17th century because indentures were cheaper than African slaves. And since the élite viewed their indentured servants as lazy “salvages”—the very scum of English society not above cannibalism during periods of need and the women little better than prostitutes—it is hardly surprising that no one was especially bothered by the occasional mixed unions.

By the 1660s, the labor equation changed: increased supplies made it cheaper to buy African slaves than white indentures, and the former were also considered less rebellious. The turn toward black slavery did not reduce the inflow of white immigrants, as happened in the sugar islands. Instead, a large white population developed of small and even midsize farmers who relied on their own or nonslave white labor. As the black population grew and increasingly became the labor force of élite whites, both attitudes and laws changed. By 1662 the children of all slave women were declared slaves in perpetuity. Five years later, Christianity ceased to be an obstacle to enslavement, and by 1669 a master could legitimately kill his slave while inflicting punishment. At the same time, the distinction between slave status and indentured servitude was more sharply defined.

But there were two peculiar features of Jamestown's, and more broadly Virginia’s, transition to a fully functioning slave society that were to have fateful consequences for black Americans. One was the presumption, by the end of the 17th century, that a black person was a slave. The second was the hostility toward manumission and freed blacks generally, leading to laws requiring freed persons to leave the colony. In all the other slave societies of the hemisphere, including those of the French and British, manumission was not uncommon and resulted in the growth of significant freed nonwhite populations, some of them quite prosperous. Why did Virginia move away from this pattern, especially after its early similarity to other emerging slave regimes?

One reason was the distinctive demographic pattern that began to take shape by the last quarter of the 17th century. Virginia and the other Southern states were the only large-scale slave regimes in which white settlers, committed to the creation of a new social order, remained in the majority and thus had no incentive to create alliances with free blacks or mixed populations. The second reason is offered by Yale historian Edmund Morgan in his celebrated study of Virginia: the élite, fearful of an insurrectionary union of white servants and slaves, actively promoted racism and a racially exclusive popular democracy as a way of dividing and ruling black and white workers. By glorifying whiteness and restricting the electorate to whites, a bond of racial solidarity emerged between all classes of whites predicated on the permanent exclusion of blacks.

So emerged one of the great contradictions in the growth of American democracy. The region with the most vibrant democracy, and the largest electorate, was deeply committed to large-scale slavery and the strong conviction that there was no inconsistency between liberty and slavery. For black Americans the consequences were tragic and lasting. Jamestown's creation instilled in the broader culture the belief that African Americans, even though they were among the earliest arrivals, did not belong to the body politic and were to be permanently excluded from all basic rights of citizenship.

The great achievement of the civil rights revolution was the dismantling of what the inheritors of Jamestown had instituted. Today a black woman fills one of the most powerful political offices after the presidency, and a black man holds serious promise of becoming the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party. Whatever the persisting problems of black Americans—many of which, like a fragile family life and the lack of inheritance, also originated in slavery—it is now incontestable that they belong to America as America belongs to them. In this, America stands far above all other multiethnic Western nations. Nonetheless, it cannot, and should never, be forgotten that the racial tragedy that began in Jamestown took more than 350 years to overcome.