

Colonial Exploitation—A Matter of Perception

Part A.

Use the documents below as a resource in responding to statements at the end. Mark each statement true or false, and list evidence from the readings that supports your response.

The Rights of Englishmen: Virginia, 1705

And also be it enacted, by the authority aforesaid, and it is hereby enacted, That all masters and owners of servants, shall find and provide for their servants, wholesome and competent diet, clothing, and lodging, by the discretion of the county court; and shall not, at any time, give immoderate correction; neither shall, at any time, whip a Christian white servant naked, without an order from a justice of the peace: And if any, notwithstanding this act, shall presume to whip a Christian white servant naked, without such order, the person so offending, shall forfeit and pay for the same, forty shillings sterling, to the party injured: To be recovered, with costs, upon petition, without the formal process of an action. . . .¹

From W.W. Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia*, 1823.

Political Control in Massachusetts, 1721

Although the government of this province be nominally in the Crown, and the governor appointed by your Majesty, yet the unequal balance of their constitution having lodged too great a power in the assembly, this province is, and is always likely to continue in great disorder. They do not pay a due regard to your Majesty's instructions. They do not make a suitable provision for the maintenance of their governor, and on all occasions they affect too great an independence on their mother kingdom. . . . An act of assembly . . . has not a little contributed to the present disorders there, inasmuch as by the said act it is provided, that no person shall be capable of representing any town or borough where such person is not a freeholder and settled inhabitant; from whence it happens, that the assembly is generally filled with people of small fortunes and mean capacities, who are easily led into any measures that seem to enlarge their liberties and privileges.²

Board of Trade to the king

The Propriety of Colonial Subordination, a British View, 1726

It is plain that none of the English plantations in America can with any reason or good sense pretend to claim an absolute legislative power within themselves. They cannot be possessed of any rightful capacity to contradict or evade the true intent and force of any Act of Parliament wherewith the wisdom of Great Britain may think fit to affect them from time to time. In discoursing on their legislative powers (improperly so called in a dependent government) we are to consider them only as so many corporations at a distance, invested with an ability to make temporary by-laws for themselves agreeable, but no ways interfering with the legal prerogative of the Crown, or the true legislative power of the mother state.³

A Short Discourse on the Present State of the Colonies

¹ John M. Blum, et. al., *The National Experience*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 54.

² Oscar Handlin, *A History of the United States*, Vol. 1 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 153.

³ Oscar Handlin, *A History of the United States*, 151.

Another reason that the average lifespan was so short in Virginia is that—unlike New England—the colony included a large indentured servant class who were worked so hard by exploitative masters that it sent them to an early grave. About forty percent of those who immigrated to Virginia under indentures around the middle of the seventeenth century died before they had completed their four-year terms. Their masters were determined to get rich quick, and could see that driving servants mercilessly was the way to wealth. Back in England, centuries of tradition placed restraints on the length of the workweek and the intensity of labor that could be demanded from a bound servant, and selling servants against their will was forbidden. Traditional constraints did not operate on the other side of the ocean. On the isolated tobacco plantations there was no one to whom an overworked and abused young bondsman or bondswoman could appeal, and nothing to prevent them from being bought and sold like cattle. Masters pinched for other resources sometimes put up their servants as stakes in card games.⁴

And if any slave resists his master, or owner, or other person, by his or her order, correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction, it shall not be accounted a felony; but the master, owner, and every such other person so giving correction, shall be free and acquit of all punishment and accusation for the same, as if such accident had never happened; And also, if any negro, mulatto, or Indian, bond or free, shall at any time, lift his or her hand, in opposition against any Christian, not being negro, mulatto, or Indian, he or she so offending, shall, for every such offence, proved by the oath of the party, receive on his or her bare back, thirty lashes, well laid on, cognizable by a justice of the peace for that county wherein such offence shall be committed.⁵

Hening, *Laws of Virginia*, 1823

The aims of the Virginia Company would have been more easily attained if the English had been able to put the local Indians to work as the Spaniards had. They tried, but were unsuccessful. The English knew something of the unhappy fate of the native peoples under Spanish rule, and claimed that they would be far more kind and benevolent. Their basic objectives, however, were no less exploitative. They assumed that the natives of North America would hand over their gold and silver, as well as food, and could doubtless be induced to produce more in exchange for the blessings of Christianity. As an anonymous poet of the day put it:

The land full rich, the people easilie wonne,
Whose gaines shall be the knoweledge of our faith
And our such ritches as the country hath.

. . . What could not be gained through compulsion might have been obtained through inducement. The English had things the Indians wanted and vice versa. Iron pots, knives, and fishhooks could be traded for corn, meat, fish, and fur. Some friendly trade did take place in the early years. John Rolfe's famous 1614 marriage to Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, symbolized the possibility of peaceful coexistence and eventual blending of the races. Very few Englishmen followed Rolfe's example, however. The fact that Pocahontas died two years later of a white man's disease contracted while on a trip to England was a better symbol of what was to happen. The Spanish, on the other hand, although not without prejudice, frequently intermarried with

⁴ Stephan Thernstrom, *A History of the American People*, Vol. 1 (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 29.

⁵ Stephan Thernstrom, *A History of the American People*, Vol. 1, 67.

the natives, producing a large racially mixed *mestizo* element in the population. The English, by contrast, kept their distance despite the acute shortage of white women in the colony. They were aloof and imperious. Convinced of their moral as well as military superiority, they were unable to treat the natives with respect and understanding. Instead of asking, they demanded; if refused, they took anyway. When Powhatan sent them a message that struck them as "prowde and disdayneful," they launched a punitive expedition against a small tribe nearby, killing a dozen warriors and burning the village to the ground. After bringing the queen and her children back as captives, they thought better of it. The queen was put to the sword; the children they threw into the river, "shoteinge owtt their Braynes in the water."⁶

Braintree, 31 March, 1776

. . . I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the [servants] of your sex; regard us then as being placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.⁷

⁶ Stephan Thernstrom, *A History of the American People*, Vol. 1, 23-24.

⁷ Beth Milstein Kava and Jeanne Bodin, *We, the American Women*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1983), 38-39.

Respond *T* for true or *F* for false to the following statements. Be prepared to justify your decisions.

- _____ 1. The English assumed their own superiority over the Spanish.
- _____ 2. The British managed a better working relationship with the Native Americans than did the Spanish.
- _____ 3. Tradition accorded the same rights to all classes in England and the colonies.
- _____ 4. Indentured servants in Virginia had a legal status not accorded to African Americans.
- _____ 5. The laws of colonial America presumed that "all men are created equal."
- _____ 6. The British government viewed the thirteen American colonies as subordinate to the Crown.
- _____ 7. The American colonies assumed their right to all the privileges accorded to Englishmen in the mother country.
- _____ 8. From an Englishman's point of view, a little property does not an aristocrat make!
- _____ 9. Women enjoyed greater equality in colonial America than they do today.

Part B.

In your group, assume one of the following roles: an indentured servant, slave, Native American, colonial planter, member of the British Board of Trade, or Abigail Adams. Prepare for a Meeting of the Minds role playing activity by outlining your position on each of the following questions:

- a. How do you define *exploitation*?
- b. Whose authority do you personally feel bound to obey? Why?
- c. What one question would you like to ask another panelist to suggest evidence of his or her inconsistency or hypocrisy on this subject?