Alden Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Notes on the Colonial Experience* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Less than a year after the foregoing essay first appeared in print, its contention that American slavery began in 1619 and was accompanied from the outset by racist underpinnings was challenged in the *New Left Review*. Written by my Columbia University colleague Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America" argued emphatically for a different interpretation of early Virginia's history and for a much later emergence of American racism. Although I do not find her reading of the evidence persuasive, she makes the most articulate case I have yet encountered for the arrival of American racism at the end of the colonial period rather than at the beginning. Her essay, moreover, raises some fundamental issues that had previously been slighted and brings to a new level of discourse the basic positions probed in my "Origins Debate." ("Slavery, Race and Ideology," it should be noted, was not a direct response to my essay; hers had been substantially written before mine appeared and was more a reflection of her own thoughts on the subject than a reaction to anyone else's, although she includes occasional criticism of other contributions to the debate, including a footnote reference to my own.)[1]

  Fields's basic argument is that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries white Virginians had not vet developed a "coherent ideology" of race and therefore did not perceive or treat Africans and their Afro-American descendants on such a basis. Rather, the ideology of race

> came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally un-derstandable historical reasons. . . . During the revolutionary era, people who favoured slavery and people who opposed it collaborated in identifying the racial incapacity of Afro-Americans as the explanation for enslavement. American racial ideology is AS original an invention of the Founders as is the United States itself. Those holding liberty to be inalienable and holding Afro-Americans as slaves wore bound to end by holding race to be a self-evident truth.

In support of this thesis, Fields advances three assumptions that presumably prove the absence of racism in early Virginia. She holds that (i) white servants generally fared almost as poorly as blacks, and some whites (Irish in America; vagabonds in England) were actually enslaved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; thus "race" could not have determined (mal)treatment, (a) .Africans and their descendants in Virginia before the i66os, even those who were de facto slaves, had an unusual number of "rights" compared to their antebellum descendants;

thus racial bias must have been wholly or nearly absent at the time. (3) The terminology of seventeenth-century colonial laws concerning Africans and Afro-Africans "makes clear that the point was not yet race."[2] Fields's analysis of seventeenth-century Virginia, I contend, misreads the evidence on all three of those assumptions and therefore fails to prove her point. On the first and second assumptions she homogenizes the plight of lower-class whites and blacks (slave and free); on the third she misunderstands the terminology of colonial laws. But her arguments are not to be dismissed lightly. Some readers, unaware of the article's factual shortcomings, find it persuasive; Fields has ardent adherents both in the United States and abroad. And even if she did not, the vigor and intellectual versatility of her argument deserve a respectful, point-by-point response.

I

The principal victims of early Virginia's labor system, Fields proposes, were not African slaves but white indentured servants, whose masters abused, cheated, beat, and maimed them, "even killed [them] with impunity." Although they were not actually enslaved by their countrymen, Fields argues, it was not from any qualms about the sanctity of English nationality or respect for pale pigmentation. As to nationality: "the law in Tudor England provided for the enslavement of vagabonds"; as to pigmentation, "the English considered no brutality too extreme in bringing to heel the supposedly savage and undoubtedly fair-skinned Irish"— witness Oliver Cromwell's consignment of Irish prisoners to slavery in the British West Indies. English servants in the colonies fared almost as badly. "The only [sic] degradation they were spared was perpetual enslavement along with their issue in perpetuity."[3]

   Up to a point, Fields is right: servants in early Virginia were often treated atrociously, and numerically they undoubtedly bore the brunt of the plantocracy's unfettered appetite for pliant labor. But she overstates both the severity of treatment and the existence of lifetime bondage for whites.

   Unlike slaves, servants had some legal protections, they were rarely killed with impunity, and their four- or five-year terms (seldom seven) held promise of full freedom in a relatively short time, no matter how harsh the treatment until then.[4] "Freedom dues," usually including a firearm, clothes, and sometimes land, awaited the former servant. For

many of England's unemployed, those were attractive terms. Maltreatment of indentured servants was neither universal nor notorious enough to seriously curtail immigration until the third quarter of the century, when better alternatives emerged for England's "surplus" laborers. In Virginia's exploitive society, indentured servants, though sometimes treated slavishly, were never slaves."[1]

Nor were any other Europeans enslaved, in the usual sense of the word, in Tudor England or British America. The "Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds" of 1547 did, until its repeal in 1549, permit county courts to assign "vagabonds and sturdy beggars" (i.e., those physically able to work), if they appeared incorrigible to the authorities, to be "slave[s] . . . for the space of two years." Only if a temporary slave ran away for more than two weeks was he or she assigned permanently to a master. Two years later Parliament repealed the vagabond law because even its very limited form of judicial bondage was unacceptable to the English public and members of the judiciary. Few if any "slaves" were created by the short-lived act of 1547, and it had no counterparts in later, or earlier, Tudor-Stuart England.[6] There were, of course, some slaves in England at the time: Africans or descendants of Africans, who were sufficiently numerous to evoke repeated royal efforts to banish them.[7]

Neither were many, if any, Irish prisoners of war consigned to true slavery in the West Indies. The records are frustratingly incomplete on the fate of the thirty or so survivors of the Drogheda Massacre (most of the city's inhabitants were slaughtered on the spot) and other prisoners who were shipped to Barbados; they may have served out their lives in servitude, or they may have been freed after many years of harsh labor. According to Michael Craton, arguably the foremost authority on early Caribbean colonization, "The unfortunate Irish captives and perhaps some Barbadoed criminals were servants for life without indentures. But even in their case servitude did not survive them, to be inherited by their children. . . . There is absolutely no evidence that whites were ever true slaves in this sense [of absolute, inheritable property] in the English colonies."[8]

While Fields's version of white labor exaggerates its similarity to slavery, her picture of Virginia's Africans errs in the other direction. Some blacks in the British colonies, Fields acknowledges, were "eventually" enslaved, because they *could* be: Africans and Afro-West Indians did not share the English lower classes' hard-earned legal and customary protections against enslavement, and the forced migration of Africans would not be affected by adverse publicity in Africa. But, she contends, American "slavery got along for a hundred years after its establishment [which she dates from the post-Bacon's Rebellion years] without race as its ideological rationale." Even the few in bondage before the enactment of slave laws, according to Fields, were relatively well off, because "African slaves during the years between 1619 and 1661 enjoyed rights that, in the nineteenth century, not even free black people could claim."[9] By the middle of the

eighteenth century, though, white Americans got used to seeing blacks at the bottoip of the socioeconomic heap and began to assume that they were *naturally* inferior beings. As Fields reconstructs the evolutionary sequence, by the eve of the Revolution white Americans had to justify to themselves and to a candid world the enslavement of one-fifth of the incipient nation's population. "Race" was the answer.[lo]

This picture of Africans in seventeenth-century Virginia minimizes unjustifiably their plight. Fields is surely right that they came unwillingly and that no adverse publicity about their status could undermine the slave trade, but she underestimates the timing and prevalence of enslavement for most Africans and their descendants. The evidence, sparse and sometimes ambiguous though it is, leaves little doubt that slavery was prevalent and that slaves enjoyed no "rights." Some masters in the seventeenth century, as in the antebellum era, granted privileges to some slaves; some were granted outright freedom. Neither circumstance undermines the prevalence of slavery nor the absolute rights of the masters.[11]

That racism accompanied slavery in seventeenth-century Virginia is harder to demonstrate, but the language of the laws is evidence for the existence of such an ideology rather than against it. Fields simply mis-reads the language of Chesapeake laws, especially Maryland's statute against "ffreeborne English women" marrying "Negro Slaves" "to the disgrace of our Nation" (1664) and Virginia's law against "any negroe or other slave" lifting a hand in opposition "against any Christian" (1680). *"Race"* she contends, "does not explain" those statutes.[12] Of course race does not *wholly* explain the laws—a society's (at least a legislature's) immediate practical need is almost always the impetus for legislation—but the racial element in the laws she quotes is palpable, even though it is couched in the ambiguous language of the day.

This point is worth pursuing because Fields is not the only reader misled by seventeenth-century rhetoric. At first glance her claim that race is not at issue in the laws seems reasonable: the Maryland law specified "English women" rather than "white women" and "our Nation" rather than "our race," and the Virginia law read "Christian" instead of "white." But numerous examples from contemporaneous statutes and other documents demonstrate that "English nation," "Christians," and "whites" were virtually synonymous, as were, on the other hand, "negroes," "blacks," and "Africans." In the Maryland law quoted earlier, "English women" clearly included women of any European nationality living within the English colony, just as the Virginia legislature's call in 1629 for a muster of inhabitants "as well *Englishe* as Negroes" unquestionably sought information on everyone, regardless of nationality; in the language of the time, every person was either "English" or "Negro." Similarly, the Virginia decree of 1670 that "noe negroe or Indian though baptised and enjoyned

their owne ffreedome shall be capable o{ anv . . . purchase of Christians, but vet [are] not debarred from buying any of their owne nation" had a clear racial basis: no African or Indian could buy a European, regardless of the latter's baptismal status, but Indians could buv Indians, regardless of tribal affiliation; Negroes similarly could buv Negroes from whatever African nation. Surely the legislature did not intend that Yorubas could buy only Yorubas or Cherokees only Cherokees. "Nation" in this case effectively meant "race," and "Christian" meant "white" or Euro-American—as in William Berkeley's estimate of 1671 that Virginia had "two thousand *black slaves,* six thousand *Christian servants."* The language of the time did not show "society in the act of inventing race," as Fields proposes; rather, I contend, it showed society inventing a vocabulary to express its racial ideology.

In sum, Barbara Fields's keenly argued thesis that racism emerged in the Revolutionary era is invalid, I believe, because it depends on a mistaken view of seventeenth-century Virginia. Especially misrepresented are the distinct circumstances of white and black labor and the character of white Virginians' racial beliefs and policies. Of course I agree with her observation diat "shared colour and nationality set no automatic limit to oppression"; most of the world's atrocities—including slavery— did not depend on those criteria. Slavery could exist without racism, racism without slavery.[1]4 But the issue in the "origins" debate is the interaction of a particular form of slavery and a particular form of racism at one historic place and time. I believe that in early British America the institution and the ideology formed a fateful, unholy alliance.