

ORIGINS OF AMERICAN SLAVERY

PHILIP D. MORGAN

Slavery is often termed “the peculiar institution,” but it was hardly peculiar to the United States. Almost every society in the history of the world has experienced slavery at one time or another. The aborigines of Australia are about the only group that has so far not revealed a past mired in slavery—and perhaps the omission has more to do with the paucity of evidence than anything else. To explore American slavery in its full international context, then, is essentially to tell the history of the globe. That task is not possible in the available space, so this essay will explore some key antecedents of slavery in North America and attempt to show what is distinctive or unusual about its development. The aim is to strike a balance between identifying continuities in the institution of slavery over time, while also locating significant changes. The trick is to suggest preconditions, anticipations, and connections without implying that they were necessarily determinations.¹

Significant precursors to American slavery can be found in antiquity, which

produced two of only a handful of genuine slave societies in the history of the world. A slave society is one in which slaves played an important role and formed a significant proportion (say, over 20 percent) of the population. Classical Greece and Rome (or at least parts of those entities and for distinct periods of time) fit this definition and can be considered models for slavery’s expansion in the New World. In Rome in particular, bondage went hand in hand with imperial expansion, as large influxes of slaves from outlying areas were funneled into large-scale agriculture, into the *latifundia*, the plantations of southern Italy and Sicily. American slaveholders could point to a classical tradition of reconciling slavery with reason and universal law; ancient Rome provided important legal formulas and justifications for modern slavery. Parallels between ancient and New World slavery abound: from the dehumanizing device of addressing male slaves of any age as “boy” the use of branding and head-shaving as modes of humiliation, the comic inventiveness in naming slaves (a practice American masters continued simply by using classical names), the notion that slaves could possess a *peculium* (a partial and temporary capacity to enjoy a range of goods), the common pattern of making fugitive slaves wear a metal collar; to clothing domestic slaves in special liveries or uniforms. The *Life of Aesop*, a fictional slave biography from Roman Egypt in the first century C.E., is revelatory of the anxieties and fears that pervade any slave society, and some of the sexual tensions so well displayed are redolent of later American slavery. Yet, of course, ancient slavery was fundamentally different from modern slavery in being an equal opportunity condition—all ethnicities could be slaves—and in seeing slaves as primarily a social, not an economic, category. Ancient cultural mores were also distinctive: Greeks enslaved abandoned infants; Romans routinely tortured slaves to secure testimony; and even though the Stoics were prepared to acknowledge the humanity of the slave, neither they nor anyone else in the ancient world ever seriously questioned the place of slavery in society. Aristotle, after all, thought that some people were “slaves by nature,” that there were, in effect, *natural slaves*.²

Arabs and their Muslim allies were the first to make use of large numbers of sub-Saharan black Africans. They developed a long-distance slave trade, which began in the seventh century and lasted into the twentieth. It delivered many millions of Africans across the Sahara Desert, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf. Although over a much longer period of time and comprising far more females, the number of Africans exported via these trans-Saharan or Indian Ocean slave trades probably equaled, or even outmatched, those of its transatlan-

tic counterpart. The preexistence of these export trades facilitated Atlantic trade: systems of slave marketing were already in place. So numerous were black Africans at certain times and in certain places that they were able to launch massive slave revolts—in 869, for instance, in what is now southern Iraq, where the so-called *Zanj* (who came from the Swahili Coast and lands farther north) worked in large gangs draining marshlands. Although the Qur'an and Islamic Law were essentially color-blind, and Muslims enslaved many so-called "white" people, medieval Arabs came to associate the most degrading forms of labor with black slaves. The Arabic word for slave, *'abd*, came to mean a black slave. Many Arab writers had racial contempt for black people, and the racial stereotypes of the medieval Middle East were probably transmitted to the Iberian Peninsula.³

As the long-standing trans-Saharan slave trade reveals, slavery existed in sub-Saharan Africa long before the Atlantic slave trade. In some—perhaps most—places, slavery tended to be a minor institution, with the slave able to pass in time from alien to kin member; in others, most notably a number of Islamicized regimes, slavery was more central, with violence, economic exploitation, and lack of kinship rights more evident. In large part because Africa was underpopulated, a broad spectrum of dependent statuses, with slavery just one variant, existed and slaves played a wide range of roles from field workers to soldiers, from domestics to administrators. The ethnic fragmentation of sub-Saharan Africa meant that there were few states strong enough to prevent opportunistic African kings or merchants profiting from slave raiding. Those kingdoms that opposed exporting slaves did not have the means to stop the traffic. Lacking an overall religious or political unity, Africans could enslave other Africans because the concept of African-ness had no meaning. Accustomed to tropical climates, inured to agricultural labor, and reared in a harsh epidemiological environment, sub-Saharan Africans made productive slaves.⁴

As Europe's economy began to expand in the tenth and eleventh centuries, attention focused on the rich Mediterranean region. By the twelfth century, various Crusader states had been established at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Venetian and Genoese merchants pioneered the development of these conquered Arab sugar-producing regions and began supplying them with slaves. They first victimized the Slavic inhabitants of the Dalmatian Coast and then transported Circassians, Georgians, Armenians, and the like from the Black Sea region. At this time, the Latin word for people of Slavic descent, *sclavus*, became the origin of the word *slave* in English (and in French *esclave*, in Spanish *esclavo*, and in German *sklave*), and replaced the

nonethnic Latin term *servus*. In Europe in the Middle Ages, then, the slave population was predominantly "white." Sugar production gradually spread from the eastern Mediterranean, through Cyprus and Sicily, to Catalonia in the west; and the white slave trade followed in its wake. This trade mirrored the later transatlantic version, with its complex organization, permanent forts, and long-distance shipment by sea to multinational markets. When in 1453 the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople, Christian Europe was cut off from its major source of slaves. The only available alternative became sub-Saharan Africans.⁵

Two sources of African labor were then available. First, the Arab caravan trade across the Sahara, long in existence, gathered impetus to provide more black slaves to Libya and Tunisia and then to the western Mediterranean region. Second, Genoese capital and technology augmented Portuguese sea power, and from the 1440s onward the Portuguese began importing significant numbers of black African slaves into Lisbon via the Atlantic. Still, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, North African and Muslim slaves exceeded black slaves in Iberia. Nevertheless, by the early seventeenth century black slaves numbered about 15,000, or 15 percent of Lisbon's population. This influx of African slaves into Iberia owed much to a transfer of personnel and knowledge from the Black Sea–Mediterranean slave nexus to that of an emerging Atlantic system.⁶

Sugar production meanwhile was making its way westward in search of fresh lands. Thus by the late fifteenth century the Iberians began colonizing the Atlantic islands off their coasts, first using as slaves Guanche natives of the Canary Islands. The Spanish and Portuguese enslavement of the Berber-like Canary Islanders is a prelude to the later fate of Caribbean, Mexican, Central American, and Brazilian Indians. Furthermore, the Atlantic islands of Madeira and São Tomé became forerunners for the spread of racial slavery and sugar plantations in the New World. Admittedly, Madeira's slave forces were limited, its properties often small, and small farmers and sharecroppers supplied much of its cane. Nevertheless, by the end of the fifteenth century it was Europe's largest producer, and its model would be the one later followed by Brazilians, who soon became the Atlantic world's major suppliers of sugar, and who drew directly on the expertise of Atlantic Islanders. From the late fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century, São Tomé—situated in the Gulf of Guinea—imported more African slaves than Europe, the Americas, or the other Atlantic islands combined. Particularly in the universality of slave labor, São Tomé was the nearest approximation to an American prototype.⁷

As slavery underwent a resurgence in southern Europe, it gradually disappeared from the northwestern part of the continent. Economic changes help to explain this development, but perhaps more important were cultural constraints. Over the course of the Middle Ages, Christians often committed atrocities on each other, but increasingly they avoided enslaving one another. Apparently, a sense of unity had emerged in Christian Europe that effectively barred the enslavement of those deemed fellow Europeans. Christianity's long struggle with Islam no doubt played a major role in this development. That from 1500 to 1800 Muslims enslaved well more than a million western Europeans, many of whom were subsequently ransomed and celebrated as symbols of freedom, was a major element in the growing sense that Europeans should never be slaves. Nevertheless, these so-called free-labor nations would develop some of the harshest slave regimes in the Americas. As David Brion Davis puts it, "it is an astonishing paradox that the first nations in the world to free themselves of chattel slavery—such nations as England, France, Holland, and even the Scandinavian states—became leaders during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in supporting plantation colonies based on African slave labor." He likens this divide to a primitive Mason-Dixon line, "drawn somewhere in the Atlantic, separating free soil master-states from tainted slave soil dependencies."⁸

This paradox illumines the unpredictability of events in the Americas. No European nation embarked on New World ventures with the intention of enslaving anyone. They had no blueprint, but rather proceeded haphazardly and pragmatically. Their first resort was to forced Indian labor (the *encomienda*, or a semi-feudal system of tributary labor), as the Tainos found to their cost on Hispaniola. To make up for the rapid decline of these earliest Indian laborers, over the course of the sixteenth century Spanish conquistadors first raided islands such as the Bahamas and then shipped more than fifty thousand Indian slaves from Central America to Panama, Peru, and the Caribbean. Similarly, from roughly the 1530s to the 1580s, the Portuguese in Brazil relied on Indian slave labor to produce sugar. Early South Carolina resorted to Indian slaves who, in the first decade of the eighteenth century, comprised one-third of the colony's slave labor force. From 1670 to 1715 an active Indian slave trade saw as many as fifty thousand Indians from the Carolinas and Florida sold to the West Indies and to the northern mainland colonies. There were basic problems, nevertheless, with using Indians as slaves: First, Indians regarded any kind of agriculture as work fit only for women. Second, European opinion was decidedly ambivalent about enslaving Indians, as the famous debate in Spain in 1548 between Juan Ginés Sep-

úlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas revealed. Most important, Indians were remarkably susceptible to Old World diseases. Indian slaves were not able to survive long enough to be profitable. Suffering catastrophic losses, Indian labor literally wasted away. On Hispaniola, the Taino Indians, numbering perhaps five hundred thousand precontact, were almost extinct a half century later; in central Mexico perhaps fifteen million Indians in 1500 fell to just 1.5 million a century later. The scale of the disaster is staggering.⁹

Consequently, Europeans faced a huge labor shortage. The Ottoman Turkish Empire blocked access to Black Sea or Baltic captives. European nations no longer enslaved Christian prisoners of war. Some dreamers talked of enslaving the poor, or other marginal groups, but the practical and principled problems of reviving European slavery were considerable. Another expedient was the transportation of convicts, but their numbers were never sufficient. Temporary bondage—indentured servitude—was the most obvious and most widely used other option, particularly in the early years. But servants, if they survived, eventually became free, and in any case the majority of servants would not travel to the areas where most labor was needed. Thus, almost by default, African slaves proved by far the best available labor supply. Consequently, from 1500 to 1820 almost nine million African slaves left for the New World, compared to fewer than three million whites. In terms of migration, the New World was more black than white.¹⁰

Slavery's center of gravity did not, however, immediately shift to the western shores of the Atlantic. Not until 1700 did Africa earn more from the export of its slaves than it did from precious metals and spices. In addition, not until the late seventeenth century did black slaves in the New World outnumber white slaves in the Old World (then located primarily in the Islamic Middle East, North Africa, and Russia). White slaves in the Maghrib became so numerous that they mounted serious rebellions—in 1763 in Algiers four thousand Christian slaves rose and killed their guards, making it "perhaps the largest slave revolt in the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds between the end of the Roman Empire and St. Domingue rebellion."¹¹

If the sheer availability of African slaves and the lack of available alternatives is the primary explanation for the development of racial slavery in the New World, did racism have nothing to do with it? Did antiblack racism or protoracism point particularly to African slaves to supply the immense labor demands of the New World? Or did racism intensify only after long-term interaction with black slaves had occurred? Was it there from the beginning or was it a consequence? This is a complicated subject and space will not permit a full accounting here. Ancient Greco-Roman art and writing offer

caricatures of black Africans, although their relative scarcity is perhaps most telling. Medieval images of Africans ranged from the black magis to agents of the Devil. In various settings—in medieval Europe, where peasants were often depicted as “black” because of working in the sun and in close proximity to dirt, or in modern Russia, where noblemen even claimed that Russian serfs had black bones—blackness and debasement had a long connection. In Western culture the color black evokes a highly negative symbolism, conjuring up images of death and sin. Although these pejorative associations existed, European ambivalence toward sub-Saharan Africans seems the dominant response. Medieval Europeans did not, for example, automatically associate the biblical Ham with Africa; Asia was often identified with Ham, and his “Curse” was also used to justify European serfdom and the enslavement of Slavs. Nevertheless, however it happened, slavery became indelibly linked with people of African descent in the Western Hemisphere. The dishonor, humiliation, and bestialization that were universally associated with chattel slavery merged with blackness in the New World. The racial factor became one of the most distinctive features of slavery in the New World.¹²

New World slavery’s other most distinctive aspect was its highly commercial character. Though it is true that plantations—that is, large agricultural enterprises, managed for profit, producing a crop for export, with a hierarchically stratified labor organization—existed outside the New World, they reached their apogee there. The economies of scale, the expansion in unit size, the almost exclusive use of black slaves, a highly regimented and modified labor force, and a system of close management all raised profit levels significantly. Such a productive system placed enormous demands on its laborers. As early as the 1630s a visitor to a Jesuit-owned sugar plantation in Brazil vividly describes the unbearable horror of what had transpired: “People the color of the very night, working briskly and moaning at the same time without a moment of peace or rest, whoever sees all the confused and noisy machinery and apparatus of this Babylon, even if they have seen Mt. Etna and Vesuvius will say that this indeed is the image of Hell.”¹³

Variations over time and space existed within New World slavery. Three stand out. First, although all New World regions imported more African men than women (thereby in part explaining the harshness of New World slavery because of the policing problems associated with large gangs of men), over time, the gender ratio among New World slaves became increasingly balanced. In that regard, the North American slave population is most notable because, as its number of slave women increased the most rapidly, it became one of the few self-reproducing slave populations in world history.

This early and rapid natural increase explains why North America received such a small percentage of the overall transatlantic slave trade—about 5 percent. Second, North America was also distinctive in being much less tolerant of racial intermixture than Latin America or the Caribbean. Once again demography—particularly the ratio of white men to white women (more balanced in North America than in Latin America and the Caribbean), and the availability of black women—was a crucial part of the explanation, but also important were the role of the church and cultural mores, based as much in Old World patterns of racial coexistence or segregation. The Spanish had mixed with Muslims for centuries; the English had created a Pale in their settlement of Ireland. Only in North America did the extremely arbitrary concept of “Negro”—denoting anyone with allegedly visible African ancestry—assume such a marked stigma. Third, the chances of gaining freedom varied from one society to the next. Except for the period surrounding the American Revolution, the North American colonies, and later the states, imposed the severest restrictions on the chances of a slave becoming free. Again, demography—the proportions of whites and blacks in the population—has some explanatory power, as do economic and cultural forces.¹⁴

North American slavery itself was hardly of a piece. The range encompasses New England’s intimate “family slavery,” the Mid-Atlantic’s mixed forms of slavery and servitude, the Chesapeake’s patriarchal, small plantation, mixed farming and tobacco, heavily native-born form of slavery, and the Lowcountry’s impersonal, large plantation, rice and indigo, more heavily African system of slavery. In addition, various borderland forms existed: from a fluid world of interracial alliances in the Lower Mississippi Valley to a flexible one of fugitives and ex-slaves in Spanish Florida to one in which Indian slaves were transformed from symbols of alliance into commodities of exchange in French Canada.¹⁵

Racial slavery played an intrinsic and indispensable part in New World settlement. The institution was no abnormality, no aberration, no marginal feature; rather, its development is the grim and irrepressible theme governing the development of the Western Hemisphere. The truly distinctive features of North American (and to varying degrees, New World) slavery were its racial bedrock and its thoroughly commercial character. Increasingly, the stark polarity between freedom and bondage became glaringly evident, for the debasement of slaves liberated others to take control of their destiny and to dream of liberty and equality. This profound contradiction lay at the heart of the United States, a country conceived in freedom but based on slavery. The American dream always had its dark underside. Yet the dreamers would

eventually try to rid themselves of the nightmare—with considerable prodding from the victims, it might be added. Unlike other previous forms of slavery, the New World version did not decline over a long period, but came to a rather abrupt end. The age of emancipation lasted a little more than one hundred years: beginning in 1776 with the first antislavery society in Philadelphia, through the monumental Haitian Revolution of 1792, and ending with Brazilian emancipation in 1888. An institution that had been accepted for thousands of years disappeared in about a century. One last watershed, therefore, is the unprecedented novelty and speed of the abolitionist moment.¹⁵

Bibliography

- Blackburn, Robin. *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800*. London, 1997. Covers all the European slave systems in the Americas and connects them to the advent of modernity.
- Brooks, James F. *Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*. Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002. Reveals the importance of slavery and slave-raiding to the intercultural exchange networks that emerged in the early American Southwest.
- Carretta, Vincent, ed. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*. Lexington, Ky., 1996. Features such black voices as Britton Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, Benjamin Banneker, and Venture Smith.
- Conrad, Robert Edgar, comp. *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*. Princeton, N.J., 1983. An excellent sourcebook for the American slave society that received the most Africans.
- Davis, David Brion. *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery*. Cambridge, Mass., 2003. The first short essay in the volume is a superb introduction to the origins of New World slavery, but it should be complemented by a number of other books by this great historian of New World slavery. I particularly recommend his *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of New World Slavery*. New York, 2006.
- Davis, Robert C. *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500–1800*. Basingstoke, Eng., 2003. A useful reminder that slavery arose and flourished in the Mediterranean world at the same time as across the Atlantic. Explores the dimensions of white slavery and slave life.
- Drescher, Seymour and Stanley I. Engerman, eds. *A Historical Guide to World Slavery*. New York, 1998. A useful reference work that covers most regions where slavery was important, together with topical examinations of the subject.
- Eltis, David. *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*. Cambridge, Eng., 2000. A stimulating exploration of the paradox that the northern European countries

most renowned for their commitment to individual freedom created the harshest systems of slavery in the New World.

- et al., eds. *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*. Cambridge, Eng., 1999. Contains information on 27,233 transatlantic slaving expeditions. An expanded, online version (with information on 35,000 voyages) should be available by 2008.
- Finkleman, Paul and Joseph C. Miller, eds. *Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*. 2 vols. New York, 1998. Another useful reference work that covers similar ground to the volume edited by Drescher and Engerman, but is more comprehensive in nature.
- Finley, M. I. *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. Reprint. Harmondsworth, Eng., 1983, 1980. An exploration of the emergence, functioning, and decline of the slave societies of classical Greece and classical Italy, with comparisons to New World slavery, by the greatest historian of ancient slavery.
- Fredrickson, George M. *Racism: A Short History*. Princeton, N.J., 2002. An authoritative introduction to the subject.
- Handler, Jerome S. and Michael L. Tuitt Jr. “The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record.” <<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>>. Contains about one thousand pictorial images of slavery in Africa and the Americas, arranged thematically.
- Kolchin, Peter. *American Slavery, 1619–1877*. New York, 1993. A good general account by a historian alert to comparative history.
- Lewis, Bernard. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*. New York, 1990. A good survey of slavery and the evolution of racial prejudice in the Islamic world.
- Miers, Suzanne and Igor Kopytoff, eds. *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*. Madison, Wis., 1977. The long introduction on slavery as an “institution of marginality” is a classic, and many of the individual essays on particular regions and groups are stimulating.
- Miller, Joseph C., ed. *Slavery and Slaving in World History: A Bibliography, 1900–1996*. 2 vols. Armonk, N.Y., 1999. The most comprehensive work of its kind. Annual updates are available in the journal *Slavery & Abolition*. The entire bibliography is being prepared for Internet access as a searchable database by the Virginia Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia.
- Morgan, Philip D. “African Americans,” in Daniel Vickers, ed., *A Companion to Colonial America*. Malden, Mass., 2003, 138–71. A concise, up-to-date survey of the black experience in early America, with an extensive bibliography.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Mass., 1982. The best general survey of slave systems in sixty-six societies, written by a sociologist.
- Phillips, William D., Jr. *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade*. Minneapolis, 1985. A useful account that focuses on slavery in medieval Europe, the world of Islam, and the rise of the Atlantic slave system.