

The American Crucible

Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights

ROBIN BLACKBURN

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Stanley Engerman, University of Rochester

‘A magisterial history of transatlantic slavery.’

Ian Thomson, *Times Literary Supplement*

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SLAVERY, EMANCIPATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Robin Blackburn



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Robin Blackburn
London, January 2011

Year	Leading Regions	Number	Main Occupations
1550	Spanish America	7,000	domestic, artisan
1600	Brazil	130,000	domestic, sugar
1700	Caribbean	300,000	sugar, tobacco
1770	Caribbean and Brazil North America	2,340,000	sugar, coffee tobacco
1815	US, Caribbean, Brazil	3,000,000	sugar, cotton
1860	US, Brazil, Cuba	6,000,000	cotton, sugar
1870	Brazil, Cuba	2,000,000	sugar, coffee
1888		none	

£ millions	1720	1750-60	1796-1800	1820	1860
Slaves	0.8	1.8	2.4	3.5	1.0
Sugar	1.8	6.5	12.3	17.5	26.0
Gold	1.5	2.5	0.6	0.1	
Tobacco	0.4	1.0	1.0	1.3	2.5
Cotton	0.1	0.2	8.2	9.0	38.4
Coffee	0.1	2.8	8.3	9.2	10.1
Other	0.2	0.4	1.0	2.0	1.5
Total	4.9	15.2	33.2	42.5	79.5

SOURCES These are my own rough and ready estimates based on combining a variety of sources, chiefly Michael Mulhall, *Dictionary of Statistics*; Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El Ingenio*, Havana 1977, vol. 3; Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, 'The Economics of Slavery in the Antebellum South', in Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Reinterpretation of American Economic History*, New York 1971, pp. 342-61; Roberto Simonsen, *Historia Economica do Brasil*, Sao Paulo 1977.

Introduction: Slavery and the West

The conquest and colonization of the New World by the early modern European states was a decisive step in the global 'rise of the West'. The gold and silver which obsessed the conquistadors were just a beginning. America was vast and fertile, and its peoples had domesticated and developed a tempting array of foodstuffs and intoxicants. European traders and colonial officials were able to throw the rich produce of the American cornucopia into what was now – for the first time – a truly global balance of exchanges. Great toil was required to wrest precious metals from the earth, to construct fortified imperial lines of communication, and to cultivate and process such premium products as sugar and tobacco, cotton and indigo. The European conquerors and settlers soon learned how to reinforce and multiply their own efforts by introducing African captives, and using them to strengthen the empire and boost the output of the coveted export staples. These processes had their roots in Europe's own needs and desires, and in the emergence of a new political economy – a new type of state, a new class of merchant and a new type of producer and consumer. The Absolutist state and the early capitalist economy drove a process of imperial and commercial expansion which soon overstretched the labour power available to it. The introduction of millions of Africans, and their subjection to a hugely demanding regime of racialized slavery, was seized upon as the solution to the problem. Between 1500 and 1820 African migrants to the New World outnumbered European migrants by four to one.

The Atlantic slave trade and the slave systems it served met resistance from the captives and troubled a few observers, but aroused no public controversy until the last decades of the eighteenth century. During the first century or so after Cortés's arrival, the conquest and enslavement of native peoples, with its tens of millions of victims, constituted one of the great disasters of human history: the number of victims exceeded only by the total losses of the Second World War. The 'destruction of the Indies' eventually aroused widespread condemnation and, as we shall see in the first chapter, led the Spanish royal authorities to discourage the outright enslavement of the indigenous population. Unfortunately, around the same time, they also licensed a trade in African captives to the New World. At first the sorts of work to which the slaves were put were various. They were domestics, gardeners, masons, carpenters, peddlers, and hairdressers, and some eventually managed to purchase their manumission. But this 'traditional' Mediterranean pattern of slavery gradually gave way to a new type of enterprise, the plantation, which was based on a great intensification of slave work and slave subjection. This institution was to have a career of nearly three centuries during which it was responsible for an extraordinary boom in output, and eventually for great changes in the power and prosperity of the West in relation to the rest of the world.

The present work considers the entire history of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in the Americas, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, explaining why Europeans resorted to slavery and gave it a strongly racialized character. The book also explores the role of resistance and rebellion, abolitionism and class struggle, in the acts of emancipation which finally destroyed the New World slave systems from the 1780s to the 1880s. Slavery and abolition possess their own bibliographies, and are treated as almost separate fields of study. In previous books I have tried to close the gap. But the titles of those books – *The Making of New World Slavery* and *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* – show them

have a different focus. The temporal span of the present book is also much wider, since it includes the rise and fall of the new slave regimes of the nineteenth-century United States, Brazil and Cuba. The antebellum US South is sometimes taken to typify the slave order of the Americas but, despite some real parallels, it was very distinctive. The slave regimes were by-products, I will argue, of the rise of colonialism and capitalism, making it all the stranger that the ending of colonialism gave a further boost to slavery. The two leading slave powers of the nineteenth century, the United States and Brazil, had thrown off colonial rule and together with the anomalous colony of Cuba, gave the slave systems a new lease of life.

Those interested in New World slavery and abolition are fortunate in having two recent overall studies by outstanding scholars upon these topics: *Inhuman Bondage*, by David Brion Davis, and *Abolition* by Seymour Drescher.¹ Like others working in this field, I have a great debt to these two writers. So why the need for another book? The topic is certainly large and complex enough to warrant a variety of approaches.

I focus more attention than Drescher on the plantations, on the consumer capitalism that summoned them into existence and how their extraordinary growth precipitated crisis and provoked slave resistance and nurtured planter rebellion. Whereas I argue that a series of sharp clashes linked to war, revolution and class struggle set the scene for anti-slavery and emancipation in the Americas, Drescher believes that revolutionary excesses led anti-slavery astray, and emphasizes the reformist and parliamentary path to emancipation; however, I believe that he is right to depict a fateful link between abolitionism and the emergence of a new 'public opinion'.

David Brion Davis has written a brilliant study of *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975) which, rightly in my view, situates British abolitionism in the context of the Revolutionary age. In his recent book he has more on how slavery worked on the ground – on the plantations – than Drescher. However, Davis devotes less space than I do to slavery and anti-slavery in the Iberian world. Another difference in emphasis relates to the economic significance of slavery. I believe that the slave-based commerce of the Atlantic zone made a large contribution to industrialization, furnishing capital, markets and raw materials, tempting consumers with new drugs and stimulants, and adapting to the 'steam age' with remarkable facility. Davis offers a mixed verdict, as when he writes: 'the expansion of the slave plantation system ... contributed significantly to Europe's, and also America's economic growth. But economic historians have wholly disproved the narrower proposition that the slave trade or even the plantation system as a whole created a major share of the capital that financed the Industrial Revolution.'² In [Chapter 4](#) I offer evidence for reaching a stronger conclusion than this.

While Drescher has rightly resisted interpretations of abolition that reduce it to economic interest, I argue that abolitionist movements were intimately linked to the stresses and strains of the industrial revolution.

I shamelessly borrow from these authors where I believe that they have got it right, but my concern is with what was newly forged in the crucible of the Americas, whether it was more intensely racialized slavery or a reformulated 'rights of man'. My emphasis throughout is on how slavery and abolition in the Americas as a whole were linked to the overall evolution of society, culture and economy in and beyond the Atlantic world – to the functioning of the European monarchies, to the differences between Protestant and Catholic

Iberian and Anglo-Dutch colonialism, to the rise of capitalism, to the succession of revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic, to the colonial racial order and what followed, to industrialization and the logic of Great Power rivalry, and to the emergence of new social values and social rights in the African diaspora and in momentous national and class struggles. (I would have liked to offer a fuller account of the tremendous impact on Africa of the Atlantic slave trade, but that will have to remain a task for another time.)

For nearly 400 years, struggles over slavery were of the greatest importance in the Atlantic region and yet they take place, as it were, offstage. The award to Britain of the *asiento* – the right to supply slaves to South America – by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1714 was one of the rare occasions when it might seem that the Great Powers took some notice; but even this was misleading, since the main story at that time was the hugely larger – and minimally regulated – trade in slaves to the English and French colonies, and to Portuguese Brazil. In my view the emergence and growth of capitalism was very much part of the problem, and not, as some recent accounts would have it, part of the solution. The destruction of slavery, like its initial spread and growth, was a by-product of such central events in the Atlantic world as the American and French Revolutions, British industrialization, the Napoleonic Wars, the Spanish American revolutions, the US Civil War, the rise and fall of the Brazilian Empire, and Cuba's protracted struggle for independence.

The possibility of assessing the contribution of Atlantic history to world history has been greatly boosted by the advance of research and by debates over which models best explain the pattern of events, especially since it is only recently that research had established such basic information as the size of the Atlantic slave trade. There is still unevenness in the literature available on slavery and abolition in the different regions of the New World – but a wave of recent publications, many in Spanish, French and Portuguese, is beginning to change this and assisted me in broadening my account.

The advance of abolition has been central to national historiography in the Atlantic world and it has typically been couched in celebratory mode. Important protagonists of this history were often neglected, and the sometimes bitter fruits of emancipation were ignored. Descendants of slaves – among them W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James and Eric Williams – have made a major contribution to supplying a more balanced assessment. In *The American Crucible* I seek to evaluate the controversies their work has aroused. Because of the size and value of the slave systems, and because of conflicts over the future of slavery, the New World became a crucible of new nations, values, institutions and identities. The clashes generated by racial slavery, and the new complexities of commercial and industrial capitalism, gave birth to an age of revolutions and rival conceptions of modernity. While general histories have rightly studied the novel aspirations fostered by the American and French Revolutions, they have too often failed properly to register the contribution of Haiti and Spanish America – extending and re-working the doctrine of the 'rights of man and of the citizen'. African agency and the counterculture of the freed people helped to shape emancipation in major ways, in a pattern that crisscrossed the Atlantic. At the limit, as I hope to show, the new class struggles of the industrial-plantation order put in question the prevailing forms of racial domination and capital accumulation. Unfortunately the achievements of emancipation were limited, checked or even reversed by the weaknesses and divisions of the anti-slavery movement when they were put to the test of success. Racial oppression and inequality took new forms

However, such outcomes were contested, as we will see, and thus contributed to reshaping political programmes and the appeal to basic rights.

The role of both slave revolt and natural rights doctrines in the destruction of slavery has given rise to new controversies. João Pedro Marques argues that abolitionism, especially British abolitionism, should be once again given the entire credit for ending New World slavery, and that the contribution of slave resistance and revolt was minimal and has been greatly exaggerated.³ In contrast to the account I offer in this book, Marques insists that the world of abolitionism and that of the Haitian Revolution ‘do not make part of the same series’ since the deliberate action of a parliamentary body is quite distinct from an elemental upsurge of revolt. (However, Marques does make an exception for the revival of British abolitionism in 1804, the year of Haiti’s founding). While Drescher and Marques do not agree on all points they share the view that Haiti made a largely negative contribution – it was a horror story – while British abolition was the real saviour of the enslaved.

The Haitian Revolution suppressed slavery three or four decades before the British managed to do so. Some recent authors have seen this as an early triumph for the idea of the ‘rights of man’ or even ‘human rights’.⁴ So long as anachronism is avoided I find merit in the idea. However, Samuel Moyn sounds a warning when he writes: ‘Of all the glaring confusion in the search for “precursors” of human rights, one must have pride of place. Far from being sources of appeal that transcended state and nation, the rights asserted in early modern revolutions and championed thereafter were central to the construction of state and nation and led nowhere beyond until very recently.’⁵ Exception made of the seven words of the concluding subordinate clause, I very much agree with this and supply many examples of state formation and nationalism frustrating or distorting abolition. I also insist that both slaves and abolitionists could be inspired by values not couched in terms of rights. But the historical record simply does not bear out the claim that struggles against slavery inspired by appeals to natural rights ‘led nowhere’. I will pursue this disagreement later in the book and will here simply register, firstly, that the controversy over the contribution of rights is a useful one (as is that over the role of slave revolt), and that Moyn himself may make an exception for anti-slavery, since in a review of Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights* he does concede that it might be ‘worth pondering in what ways the campaign to abolish slavery ... anticipated contemporary human rights movements.’⁶

While this is not a short book, it is shorter than either of its two predecessors yet covers twice the ground. I do not have space here for the detailed narrative of the *Making* or the *Overthrow*, but I do reconsider their conclusions in the light of fresh evidence and argument.

The larger the slave systems grew, the greater the scope and significance of their eventual overthrow. The first abolitionist victories closed particular territories to the slave traffic, or even banned slavery itself, but the surge of slave output continued and, down to 1860, the numbers of slaves and value of the crops produced by them continued to rise decade by decade, as can be seen in [Table 1](#). When Karl Marx described the momentum of accumulation as having the character of a juggernaut – the war-chariot of the Indian god of destruction ploughing over the bodies of his victims – the image captured the implacable advance of the slave-based Atlantic economy. Yet the Atlantic boom also itself provoked a ‘hydra-headed’ popular response. Organized anti-slavery drew strength from a diversity of sources – class struggle, slave resistance, a belief in the superiority of ‘free labour’, the Patriot ideal of civ

liberty and a new humanitarian doctrine. Nonetheless it is still necessary to ask why the revulsion from such extreme, large-scale, and officially sanctioned cruelty and exploitation was so belated and selective. The strongly racial character of New World slavery led anti-slavery movements to assert an ideal of human unity, yet the nations responsible for the great acts of emancipation soon abandoned the search for racial equality and allowed new forms of racial domination and colonialism. So the history of New World slavery throws up puzzles to explain – and, notwithstanding mixed results and incomplete achievements, the epic struggle against slavery still offers instruction and grounds for hope.

The rise of slavery in the New World was, to begin with, quite slow, with major growth taking place after 1700 on the basis of a model elaborated in the mid-seventeenth century. The slave population of the Americas reached its height as late as 1860.

The slave systems of the Americas exhibited several sorts of novelty. Europeans built slave systems overseas at a time when outright bondage was disappearing from Europe. Societies and polities claiming to embody a new spirit of virtue and liberty became the most successful practitioners of plantation slavery. Slaves became concentrated in plantations, in contrast to the varied pattern of traditional slavery. American slavery acquired a far stronger racial definition than Ancient or medieval slavery. How did consumer demand for exotic products acquire such scale and force as to require the construction of thousands of slave plantations? Why were planters so passionate about their ‘natural rights’, and what was their role in the growth of free trade? Why did it take so long for opposition to slavery to surface in public debate, and how was it linked to colonial rebellion? Is the recent emphasis on slave resistance and slave revolt in the advance of anti-slavery exaggerated? What were the limitations of emancipation from above? To what extent did the witness, representations and struggles of slaves and former slaves correct such problems? Why did anti-slavery so often require a revolutionary crisis – or the threat of revolution – to make real headway? In a world where plantation slavery helped to sustain industrialization, why was it so vulnerable in a new industrial order? Why did racism thrive in the epoch of emancipation? What did abolitionism contribute to the development of a doctrine of ‘human rights’, and what does it teach us about how effective such standards can be?

Answers to some of these questions were offered in my previous books, but they are re-examined here with the benefit of further research and with respect to the whole trajectory of slavery in the Americas. As noted above, my main aim will be to bring together the history of slavery and that of abolition, and to do so over the whole span of slavery in the Americas – 1492 to 1888. My conclusions will still be somewhat preliminary and provisional, but at least they will try to address the contradictory impulses and outcomes at work throughout the hemisphere and during both the colonial and the post-colonial periods. I hope to show that the answers require a willingness to scrutinize the history of capitalism and of the social forces which it unleashed. They also require attention to a wider Atlantic and world history. National histories have furnished too narrow a setting for resolving the most important questions with regard to slavery’s rise and fall, even though both shaped national identities in themselves. Twelve million captives were taken from Africa, and many millions of that continent’s inhabitants were dispossessed and slaughtered.

From the standpoint of Atlantic and world history, the principles underlying the construction of individual, national, imperial and racial identities should be probed rather

than taken for granted. Likewise, the forces making for a 'Great Confinement' of blacks in the Americas emanated from the rivalry of the Atlantic states and from an insatiable demand for exotic spices, drugs, dyes and foodstuffs that was the external consequence of a profound social transformation within Europe itself – the rise of capitalism. While what follows is the history of a peculiar social status, that history was not determined by events taking place wholly within the realm of status, but reflected economic and political imperatives and contradictions.

The slave regimes catered to consumerism and adapted steam-age technology. But American slavery was a modern adaptation of an ancient social institution which it will be convenient briefly to examine.

SLAVERY IN HUMAN HISTORY

If slavery has been ubiquitous in human history, fully fledged slave societies have been quite rare. Indeed Keith Hopkins, an Ancient historian, claims that there have only been five major slave societies known to history, each of which played their part in the history of the West: classical Greece, Ancient Rome, and the slave regimes of the colonial Caribbean, Brazil and the US South. In each of these cases, individually owned slaves were the labour force responsible for producing the bulk of the marketed surplus – of wheat, wine and olive oil in the Ancient world or of sugar, tobacco, cotton and coffee in the New World.⁷ If we consider agricultural output as a whole, then small producers were important, but the owners of medium- and large-scale slave estates, and their backers, controlled the major revenue flows and were hence able to act as the leaders of society.⁸ The singularity of the New World slave regimes is even greater, since they assigned slaves almost exclusively to menial occupations – as field workers, miners or domestics, while in the Ancient world slaves discharged many roles – most of the officials who administered the empire, the *familia Caesaris*, were slaves, and were many tutors. While the slaves in Ancient Greece and Rome were seen as captive strangers they came from many ethnic backgrounds, and were not deemed to be of a specific 'race' or colour.⁹

The earliest historical records give evidence that captives have been widely used as slaves. While many certainly carried out menial tasks, they did not constitute the main labour force and they were used in a great variety of ways, for example as soldiers if they were men, and as concubines if women. The slave status could be transitional, a way of gradually accommodating and assimilating captive strangers as subordinates. Such slavery was often associated with a slave trade, since the trafficking of the slave to some relatively distant place helped to produce the slave condition. Captive neighbours could run away, so they were ransomed, killed or trafficked. In his outstanding survey of slavery in human history, Orlando Patterson has identified a large number of societies where slavery was of structural importance because central to military organization or the bolstering of a powerful lineage. Taking account of the few dozen cases he cites we can add to Hopkins's list of major slave societies.¹⁰ Nevertheless by far the greater part of the slave societies listed by Patterson were either tributary to Graeco-Roman slavery, or were fostered by European empire and commerce, in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The exceptions include various Islamic states dominated by military slavery, and slave systems in Korea, the Celebes and among the Lo people in China. Islamic rulers acquired European or African slaves, supposedly confining

themselves to those who were infidels. There appear to have been the beginnings of slave plantations in Mesopotamia in the ninth century of the Christian calendar, but the great uprising of the Zanj seems to have put an end to this development.¹¹ While military slaves often played a key role in Islamic states – and individual slaves could rise to become Grand Viziers – there was no large-scale agricultural slavery. Islamic slave traders were meant not to enslave or traffic in fellow believers, a doctrine which the Christian world also adopted at the height of the early Islamic challenge to Christian Europe.¹²

Early hieroglyphs confirm the presence of slaves in the Ancient agrarian empire, sometimes attached to temples or palaces, but not as a principal labour force. The adoption of settled agriculture in fertile and well-watered areas made possible an alternative to outright enslavement in the shape of tribute, and tribute labour, extracted by an elite that could, as Michael Mann has explained, exploit a ‘caging’ effect.¹³ Agriculture led to a massive increase in population density, so these settled communities did not have the option of abandoning their houses, pots, and fields, and returning to a hunter-gatherer existence. They were vulnerable to domination and exploitation by military and priestly elites, but not to thoroughgoing slavery. Elites could control the grain stores, and exact tribute, without incurring the difficult security demands of maintaining large numbers in absolute bondage.

Thus comparative anthropology reveals slaveholding to have been quite common in human societies, and more rarely to have been of structural importance to the ruling group. The Murdoch world sample of 800 societies showed slavery to be present in only 3 per cent of hunter-gatherer communities, 17 per cent of those with incipient agriculture, 34 per cent of those mainly devoted to fishing, 43 per cent of those practising systematic agriculture and 70 per cent of those engaged in pastoralism.¹⁴ While there is a certain correlation between the presence of slaves and economic development, this is often because slaves were a type of ‘consumption good’, albeit as domestics, and not because they were vital to systems of production outside the home. The gang slavery of the Roman estate or American plantation was distinctive and unusual, though echoed in some prisons in the Americas, or on some colonial plantations in Africa and Asia, after formal slavery had been declared illegal. Since slaves are potentially a means of production and actually economic property, it is not surprising that their numbers swell in highly commercialized societies – furnishing one clue as to why large-scale slavery marks the ‘rise of the West’.

HUMAN UNITY AND SOCIAL DIVISION

But the slave trade, as we have seen, did not only have a purely economic logic. Wherever there was great political fragmentation and warfare there would be a problem of what to do with captives, enslavement being one possibility. However, supervising and controlling the captive was always difficult. Slave trades not only made escape difficult or impossible, they also removed actual and potential enemies and could be seen as more merciful than slaughter. The ransoming of captives seems to have been quite common but the society of origin would have to offer something of value in exchange for the prisoner, and to compensate for the fact that the prisoners’ return would very likely strengthen a hostile neighbour. Of course, such calculations did not apply so strongly where there were cultural ties to the defeated. Aristotle urged that a civilized Greek would treat a defeated enemy with generosity. But he was thinking of fellow Greeks here, not barbarians. Likewise Leviticus

urges that harsh bondage should not be imposed on fellow children of Israel, but should be reserved for outsiders.

Gabriel Herman sees a progressive softening of manners in the Greek evolution from the Homeric 'age of the heroes' to the later 'age of the citizen'. Aggression was tamed as the citizen was invited to resolve differences by resort to the law, and sources of antagonism were cathartically 'acted out' in sporting contests or in dramatic performance. Yet the pacification achieved by the emergence of a state of laws and 'civilization' was accompanied by a more sharply defined slavery: 'In the case of Ancient Greece this transition also involved certain unique social and technological advances such as the introduction of coinage and writing and the institution of chattel slavery and the phalanx ...'¹⁵ In Rome as well as Greece enslavement is portrayed as a humane alternative to the slaughtering of captives, though since the demand for slaves created its own supply – slave-raiding wars and expeditions – the argument was self-serving. We should also be careful not to attribute the more attractive features of the Greek polis simply to the supposed ability of slaves to free the citizen from toil. There were many non-slaveholding citizens in the Greek city states and they helped to sustain the 'democratic' features of those states.¹⁶

Moses Finley described the slave in Ancient society as 'an outsider', while Patterson defined the slave as 'naturally alienated' and dishonoured.¹⁷ In societies where kinship determined identity and honour, the slave was without kin or family – except as a permanent subordinate 'boy' or 'girl' within their master's household. They themselves might cherish family ties, but slave status meant that this had no meaning for the master, who would break up slave families if he found it necessary, or even just convenient. Refusing to recognize the slaves' family ties also allowed for their more intense exploitation, or for their sale. The slave was a 'speaking tool' and a piece of property, an economic asset and beast of burden masquerading as a human being.¹⁸

Slaves and enemy captives would be feared as 'others' liable to strike out at their captors if the opportunity arose. Fear of the slaves' unruly violence helped to unite all the free population against them, including those who did not own slaves. However, while the other could be thought of as dangerous and barbaric, this arose from awareness of a basic likeness. The slave was a threat not because they were intrinsically alien and different, but for the opposite reason. The enslaved person occupied the same ecological niche, was in competition for the same resources, and could be a sexual mate or rival. Ideologies and cosmologies of enslavement did their best to obfuscate these realities.

Anthony Pagden observes: 'The Hellenistic Greeks who bequeathed to modern Europe the concept of a single human species and the term with which to describe it – *anthropos*, Man – also bequeathed to us the first term capable of making a distinction within that species. The term was *barbaros*, "barbarian". And a barbarian was, before anything else, one who was "babbling", one who spoke not Greek but only "barbar"'.¹⁹ The Greeks thought that the Persians or Egyptians were enslaved to their ruler. Aristotle developed the argument that some were 'natural slaves', a category that embraced those incapable of reasoning, who consequently led a life of pure sensation. Peter Garnsey explains: 'Aristotle "discovered" a body of people who would do nicely as "natural slaves". Slaves in Greece were mainly barbarians ... Aristotle decided to designate them "natural slaves". This was ... a popular choice if Aristotle is to be believed. The Greeks, he says point-blank, prefer to use the term

“slaves” only of barbarians.’²⁰

In advancing his ‘natural slaves’ argument, Aristotle allows that others might question his conclusion. Beyond just a rhetorical device, this allusion to a critic might refer to Alcidas, who asserted around 370 BC that: ‘God made all men free; Nature made none a slave’.²¹ But there may have been implicit limits to this claim (e.g. it only referred to Greeks), and in any case Alcidas was a follower of the sophist philosopher Georgias, who delighted in paradox (‘Nothing exists and if it did we could not know it’).

Hannah Arendt observed that the traditional Roman view was similar to the Greek: ‘The human being or *homo* in the original meaning of the word indicates someone outside the range of the law and the body politic of the citizens, as for instance a slave’.²² Late Roman justifications of slavery by the Stoics broke at least with Aristotle’s approach, if not with his pessimistic view of mankind. For them, being a slave was a matter of fate and even the most worthy might find themselves exposed to it. The condition of the slave might be wretched but each should adjust to the role in life that fortune assigned them. Virtue lay in discharging one’s role well, whether it be high or low. The early Christian approach was similar, but with the added considerations that all men were sinners, slavery was the punishment for sin, and slaves were lucky – they were expiating their sin in this world and would have better to look forward to hereafter.²³ In the later Roman Empire the numbers of field slaves declined, but there were still many slave domestics and assistants. The master could motivate the slave by holding out the prospect of eventual manumission. The act of emancipation could be likened to a minor’s coming of age, and would still leave the freedman or woman with continuing obligations to the master, who would remain as some mixture of patron, landlord and employer. The social relations of enslavement remained so pervasive in late Antiquity that they were used to express essential spiritual truths. For St Augustine there was an opposition between bad slavery – which had its origin in sin – and good slavery, which was the faith that bound the believer to the Lord. While Christians saw themselves as slaves to Christ, the quotidian reality of slavery as subordination to a fellow human remained. The Emperor Justinian’s sixth-century Code summarized the legal principles of chattel slavery, furnishing a helpful reference point for slaveholders in the New World. But Justinian did not endorse the concept of ‘natural slavery’ nor associate the slave status with any ethnic group. Rather the fallen state of all mankind lessened the stigma of slavery.²⁴

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF CRUELTY

The belated modern rejection of colonial slavery began by questioning its utility, and repudiating its cruelty, in the second half of the eighteenth century. Slave-traders were despised, slave owners sometimes feared, and slave labour itself seen as limited and rigid. Such criticisms were combined with a new perception that slavery was cruel and inhumane.

In the Graeco-Roman world cruelty was, for the most part, projected externally. The Scythians, for example, were thought a particularly barbarous people and were held to practise cannibalism. The Roman games, later adopted in Greece, offered a spectacle of savagery and allowed the crowd, if it wished, to re-enact enslavement by pardoning the defeated. Ancient writers conveyed cruelty using such terms as *crudeliter* – those who are crude or raw – or *saevo*, echoed in the term savage. Any hint of slave insubordination was suppressed with great ferocity (though the term *ferocitas* would be

applied to the victims, not the perpetrators). There were repeated slave revolts, but even the most famous – that of Spartacus – did not aim at a complete end to slavery. Perhaps the nearest the Ancient world came to a programme of general emancipation was the revolt of Aristonicus in the Greek kingdom of Pergamon in 132–129 BC. The kernel of this revolt was resistance to Roman rule, but it articulated a utopian vision which attracted support from both slave and free.

Seneca, the Stoic philosopher and servant of the Emperor Nero, was the author of one of the very few Ancient texts that recognized that the civilized could also be violent – for example when they made a spectacle of killing in the Roman games. Seneca also frowned on the abuse of slaves, but his attitude remained paternalist. He cited disapprovingly the Roman saying ‘so many slaves, so many enemies’, urging that masters would do better to treat their slaves kindly. Seneca’s criticism of the abuse of captives and slaves was to be rediscovered in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when it encouraged a new response to cruelty, seen as not exclusively a property of barbarians and heretics but also as an excess of civilized power itself.²⁵ Events in the New World were to feed this concern.

The later Stoics and early Christian fathers also deplored delight in violence, though Christian accounts of persecution came to stress their providential character. Echoing a tenet of Jewish faith, they held that the Lord sent tribulations to chastise or test his followers. The persecutions suffered by the early Christians were seen as a punishment just as their fortitude was seen as a proof of their righteousness. The individual slave was urged not to bemoan his misery but rather to see it as the price of sin.

The ‘religions of the book’ – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – all had a conception of human unity but were also riven by dualism between the ‘chosen’, the ‘elect’ and the ‘faithful’, on the one hand, and the unbelievers, the ungodly and the damned, on the other. While the latter were exposed to enslavement, they could be encouraged to believe that being a slave would actually promote their ultimate salvation. The idea of human unity was accompanied by the idea of the fallen condition of man, and of the original sin which condemned man to toil and woman to be the help-meet of man and to suffer the pain of childbirth.

Two Biblical stories were thought to furnish specific justification for enslavement. Because of his foolishness and immoderation Esau, son of Isaac, was set under the authority of Jacob, his wise younger brother. Likewise Noah condemns his grandson Canaan to be a slave to his brethren because Ham, Canaan’s father, has insulted Noah. Christians liked the story of Esau being placed under the rule of Jacob because it showed that the older sometimes needed to be subordinated to the younger. The Jews might be the first-born, but they no longer had the virtue needed to inherit, which had passed to the Christians. Noah’s curse was often applied to all the ‘sons of Ham’.²⁶ These stories had a ‘just so’ logic that seemed to condone the idea of the derogation or enslavement of an entire descent group. This was not the same as modern racism, but in the early modern period such narratives could be mapped onto attitudes toward Jews and Africans, both of whom were seen as a species of natural slave.

In the Ancient Christian Church there was a redeeming aspect to the slave status, since Christians themselves chose to be ‘slaves of Christ’. The early Christian Church had a special appeal to freedmen and women, that is, former slaves. In the conditions of the later empire such a condition was no bar to citizenship or dignity.²⁷ Thus the ideological legacy of the Ancient world was a mixed and contradictory one: it recognized a common human identity

but compromised it by essential dualisms; it justified slavery as a necessary expiation in a sinful world, but also cherished emancipation.

During the European high Middle Ages, say from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, slavery steadily dwindled in north-western Europe while even in the Mediterranean Christian lands it survived on a mostly small, domestic scale. *Servus* – the Roman word for slave – persisted in the milder concept of ‘servant’, while the word ‘slave’ echoed the ‘slav’ ethnicity of most medieval slaves. If this development might appear benign, it was unfortunately accompanied by strident assertions of religious and cultural uniformity and a persecution of heretics, witches, Jews and lepers which was to cost the lives of tens of thousands.²⁸ The advent of the Reformation, and the subsequent cycle of religious wars, saw a ratcheting up of religious intolerance. These developments were ominous for those deemed heathens and savages who stood in the path of European expansion – or could be enlisted to strengthen it.

The conquest of the New World was so destructive – with tens of millions perishing through disease, overwork and dislocation – that it alarmed the Spanish king. A few brave friars warned that the greed of the Spanish colonists was depopulating his newly discovered lands, and giving rise to the heretical doctrine that the New World natives were not real men at all. Charles V eventually promulgated ‘New Laws’ in 1542 which sought to restrain the rapacity of the colonists, and to ban the enslavement of indigenous peoples. The first chapter considers these arguments and analyses the ‘baroque’ reorganization of Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth century. While royal protection was extended to the native population, slavery remained legitimate for persistent rebels and for Africans who had been legitimately purchased from the Portuguese. So, despite the worries of some clerics, there was no general rejection of slavery or the slave trade. The royal revenues were swelled by the sale of the *asiento*, that is, the right to introduce a specified number of African captives for sale as slaves in the Americas. So long as these slaves were introduced to the true faith, either on the African coast or upon arrival in the Americas, this was deemed legitimate bondage. While the ceremony of conversion could be a mockery, some clerics – notably Alonso Sandoval and Pedro Claver in early seventeenth-century Cartagena – took it very seriously, baptizing tens of thousands, employing native interpreters and repeatedly running the personal risk of entering the pestilential holds of the slave ships.²⁹

The violence of the Spanish conquest was great, so great that it shocked the Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas into a new way of looking at cruelty, as we will see. However, New World slavery was to remain unchallenged by philosophers and theologians down to the 1760s, as David Brion Davis argued in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1965). One of the central aims of the present work is to explore and explain why and how the legitimacy of slavery was belatedly questioned and rejected.

SLAVERY’S NEW WORLD CLIMAX

By the mid-nineteenth century there were some 6 million slaves in the Americas, a number that probably equals, if not exceeds, the slave population of Roman Italy at the height of the empire, around 100 BC to 100 AD. While Ancient slavery was present in the imperial metropolis, the slavery of the Americas developed on the colonial periphery, though eventually most of those colonies were to throw off metropolitan control. The slavery of the New World underpinned an oceanic commerce, and the resulting Atlantic boom for a while

dominated European commercial exchanges. Struggles to control the profits of slavery loomed large in eighteenth-century colonial warfare and colonial rebellion, eventually giving openings to slave resistance and fostering the emergence of the anti-slavery idea.

Slaves were present in the New World from the early decades of European colonization to the late 1880s. The slave plantations, worked by gang labour, powered the rise of the slave systems of the Americas and became hubs of Atlantic commerce. Altogether, some 12 million captives were purchased by European traders on the African coast. Nearly 2 million perished during or immediately after the 'Middle Passage' on the tightly-packed slave ships. Ten million Africans survived to be sold into slavery in the New World between 1500 and 1860. Because of heavy mortality on the plantations, slave numbers in the Caribbean and Brazil were only maintained and increased by a continual stream of new arrivals. In North America a lower death rate and higher birth rate led to a slave population that, by the 1750s or 1760s, was growing even without the new arrivals (reasons for this will be suggested in [Chapter 3](#)).

Between roughly 1500 and 1860 the plantation and mining slaves of the Americas toiled extraordinarily long hours to meet European consumers' craving for exotic luxuries. And in order to be able to purchase tobacco, sugar, cotton and coffee, salaried and waged workers subjected themselves to an 'industrious revolution' that, as we will see in [Chapter 4](#), greatly boosted European productivity.

The New World slave regimes came to share some common features, and reflected some conscious borrowing and emulation. Yet at the same time the motive for resort to enslavement, and the pattern of race and slavery, varied. The different Atlantic powers were locked in mortal combat, leading them to search out productive advantages and seek effective ways of mobilizing their populations. While the Spanish were the first to introduce large numbers of enslaved Africans, they did not employ them, as others were to do, as the producers of an export staple.

Western Europe had a common Latin Christian heritage but was split by the Reformation. It was divided into a plurality of more or less independent kingdoms, principalities, duchies and city states. Towns had considerable privileges and autonomy, even when they acknowledged the ultimate sovereignty of a monarch or emperor. This fragmentation was more conducive to trade than the structures of the great land empires. But this trade grew slowly. The rise of Islam and the fall of Byzantium limited the scope of the Mediterranean trades. The late medieval long-distance trade catered to the luxury tastes of a small elite of great lords and rich merchants. There were still sumptuary laws that prescribed the appropriate clothing of the different ranks of noble, cleric and commoner. But in parts of north-west Europe there were also the germs of a new social pattern based on cash, commodification and rising agricultural productivity. Long-distance trade was no longer solely dedicated to transporting tiny quantities of highly priced luxuries. The English exported woollen cloth and the Dutch built capacious trading vessels which transported such necessities as wheat and textiles from one part of Europe to another. A commercial society based on rent, wages and fees also widened demand for the 'new draperies' (brightly dyed cloth), for tobacco, and for a multitude of confections using sugar and spice. While the social elite could set a certain standard, the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries witnessed a burgeoning demand for popular luxuries and a new middle-class culture of consumption. The conquest and colonization of the New World, and new patterns of long-distance trade, a

central to this story.

Each of the states that participated in Atlantic development from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries helped to shape the practice of colonization and enslavement, and adapted it to contemporary conditions. Likewise each state sought to channel Atlantic commerce. The Portuguese brought spices from the East, and the Spanish fleet the gold and silver of the New World. The seventeenth century saw a rising quantity of plantation goods produced by African slaves in the New World. The European domination of oceanic commerce was based on galleons and caravels whose edge over rivals stemmed from superior naval gunnery and navigation. Whereas only two or three galleons a year returned from the East with spices, the transatlantic plantation commerce soon required many hundreds of ships, and the European states who wished to police the trade had to build fleets of warships ('ships of the line').

Part I contrasts the role of slaves in the construction of the Spanish Empire with the escalating incarceration of slaves in plantations in, first, Brazil and, then, the colonies of the British and the French. An institution that had been marginal but ubiquitous in Mediterranean Europe became central to plantation agriculture in the Americas.

The supposedly sharp distinction between slavery and freedom in the modern world should not be projected back on late medieval Europe or the early modern period, where forms of personal dependence were still widespread and where there were only small pockets of slavery. The Spanish employed indigenous tribute labourers in the American silver mines, while the English and French colonies were at first worked by European indentured servants or *engagés*, who were bound to work for those who purchased their contracts for a term of years. However, as the New World slave systems developed, these other forms of labour were often marginalized and the forced labour of enslaved Africans came into sharper focus. Two crucial institutions – the ocean-going sailing ship and the integrated, commodity-producing tropical or sub-tropical estate – made possible a seemingly limitless expansion. At first merchants and planters improvised, but soon rival colonial states entered the picture to channel and tax the resulting trades.

While **Part I** outlines the logic behind the growth of plantation colonies, **Part II** explores the consequences of the eighteenth-century Atlantic boom in slave produce. This boom prompted a challenge to European colonial mercantilism and the associated privileges and monarchies of the Old World. The slave-holding planters aspired to a proud independence. The eighteenth-century boom in plantation trades also proved conducive to the spread of industrial production. New textile and metal manufacturers drew on plantation supplies and found outlets in Africa and the New World. After 1776 an 'age of revolution' and industrialization once again reshaped the slave order and set up new strains and conflicts. The colonial elites were divided, and wider layers of the population brought into political life. European control of the Americas began to be dismantled, and – for the first time in an organized and public fashion – slavery was put in question. While the colonial rebels suspended the slave trade, the local representatives of the metropolis urged the slaves and rebel masters to run away.

The first mass abolitionist movement emerged in Britain in the 1780s in a context defined by colonial defeat, acts of slave witness, criticism of 'Old Corruption' (that of the Hanoverian oligarchy with its stake in colonial slavery), and the first combinations and conflicts of a new industrial order. While the emergence of popular and campaigning abolitionism was ver-

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