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978-0-521-84102-3 - Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery

Seymour Drescher

Excerpt

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PART ONE

EXTENSION

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## I

## A Perennial Institution

In March 1844, an English traveler in Morocco presented himself to the governor of Magador. James Richardson announced that he was the agent of a “Society” for promoting “the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Every Part of the World.” His mission was to petition the Emperor of Morocco to join all men in all parts of the world in abolishing a traffic “contrary to the rights of Men and the Laws of God.” The governor replied that Richardson’s mission was “against our religion; I cannot entertain it, think of it or interfere with it in any way whatever.” The purchase and sale of slaves was authorized by the Prophet himself. If the governor were even to accept the petition, he told Richardson, the Sultan, he claimed, would order the governor’s “tongue to be cut from my mouth.” Moreover, recorded the Englishman, were the Moroccan Emperor to agree with the Society and abolish the traffic in slavery throughout his dominions, all the people would rise in revolt against him and the Emperor would be the first to have his head cut off. The governor, he concluded, “politely declined to receive the petition.”<sup>1</sup>

In March 1844, the governor of Magador was not alone in refusing to receive petitions requesting the abolition of the slave trade or slavery. In 1840, the U.S. House of Representatives, after years of vituperative debate, enacted a rule prohibiting that body “from receiving, much less considering, antislavery petitions.”<sup>2</sup> In 1842, the Moroccan ruler himself had dismissed a far more modest request from the British Consul-General. The British government requested information on any measures that the Sultan had taken toward the abolition of the African slave trade. The Sultan responded that the traffic was a “matter on which all sects and nations have agreed from the time of Adam” . . . . And, because “no sects and nations

<sup>1</sup> PRO Fo84 540 (Slave Trade) fols. 103–106.

<sup>2</sup> William W. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History*, 199–200. This “gag rule” endured until the end of the 1844 session.

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disagreed on the subject, its acceptability required ‘no more demonstration than the light of day.’”<sup>3</sup> Nor could anyone dream, when James Richardson was conversing with the governor of Magador, that precisely a century later there would be more slaves toiling in his own civilized continent than in all the plantation societies of the Americas.

No one in the first half of the nineteenth century would have challenged the Sultan on the antiquity of slavery. In the 1850s, American Southern writers and politicians could accurately avow that free labor societies were still a “little experiment” emanating . . . from “a corner of Western Europe” and, thus far, a “cruel failure.” As late as the 1790s, English abolitionists could still be dismissed in Parliament as quixotic dreamers for their effrontery in proposing to abolish trading in slaves along a large segment of the coast of Africa. One noble lord sarcastically dismissed the proponents of the prohibition as megalomaniac “emperors of the world” for imagining that sweeping lines of demarcation could be drawn on a map of the earth, prohibiting a trade as old as humanity.<sup>4</sup>

A few decades earlier this attitude was common even among enlightened reformers. Adam Smith cautioned his Scottish students not to mistake their society as exemplary in the matter of slavery. Their own small corner of the world was the only area from which slavery had slowly disappeared. Less than a millennium earlier, Europe itself had been a major supplier of slaves to the Muslim World. The men, women, and children who were led as captives across the Alps and the Mediterranean were then the most valuable commodities underdeveloped Europe could offer to Islamic Africa and Asia.

Modern scholarship has increasingly detailed the nuances, complexities, and variations of an institution in whose name communities acquired, maintained, and reproduced people deprived of the protections of kinship or legal status that were available to other members of the community. At the moment of acquisition, and often for the remainder of their lives, they were subordinate individuals with limited claims on the society in which they lived and died. Their bodies, their time, their service, and often their children were available to others, as sources of labor, pleasure, and management, or as objects of violence.

Historians have long recognized a large cluster of analogous institutions and relationships extending across the globe and over millennia as variations on a condition called slavery. The most crucial and frequently utilized aspect

<sup>3</sup> See Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>4</sup> On Southerners, see Russell B. Nye, *Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy 1830–1860* (1963), 304, 308, 309, quoted in Robert Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract* (1989), 343; and David Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery* (2000), 4. On the English dismissal of abolitionist pretensions at the end of the nineteenth century, see Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 268 n.13.

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of the condition is a communally recognized right by some individuals to possess, buy, sell, discipline, transport, liberate, or otherwise dispose of the bodies and behavior of other individuals. Within this definition would fall individuals who might be agents of supreme political power, such as eunuchs of an emperor's court. They might be incorporated into an elite band of warriors as the mainstay of imperial authority and military expansion. Their lives could be materially abundant or miserable. They might be pampered sexual servants of the wealthy. They might be short-term captives whose main value was as subjects of elaborate ritual sacrifice or as candidates for deadly medical experiments. They might be subject to rulers, corporate institutions, or individual members of a society. They might serve economic, military, sexual, reproductive, or religious ends. Such individuals were, at least initially, unprotected by ties to the community. Slaves were usually designated as outsiders, either by the fact of initial captivity, purchase, or inherited status.

Exit from the status of dependency might depend upon the choice of masters and be constrained by higher authority and communal sanctions. In small, relatively isolated societies, potential enslavability might be ascribed to almost any non-member.<sup>5</sup> Historians and social scientists may focus on any one of a number of criteria that were significant markers of the institution in their specific areas of interest. David Brion Davis, concerned with New World slavery, emphasizes the crucial status of slaves as chattel. Other scholars have highlighted aspects of slavery in which proprietary claims are less significant markers of the status. For comparative purposes, I will have occasion to look briefly at examples of bondage in which proprietary claims for coercive control of other individuals were absent. In the Soviet Gulag system, for example, lifetime servitude was not a component of submission to forced labor. Captives not condemned to death were allotted terms of imprisonment.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the range of relationships see, inter alia, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman: Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. chapter 2; Stanley L. Engerman, *Slavery, Emancipation and Freedom: Comparative Perspectives* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), part one, sec. III; *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977); Ehud F. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and *Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern*, Enrico dal Lago and Constantina Katsari, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Part I, 1–102.

<sup>6</sup> See Oleg V. Klevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 290–291. I include the Gulag as exemplary of the great expansion of coercion in the Eastern hemisphere during the second quarter of the twentieth century.

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Many historians of slavery have taken as their point of departure the distinction between *societies with slaves* and *slave societies* as crucial for understanding the emergence and evolution of slavery. These theoretical categories were developed over decades of research and interpretation into various types or stages of the institution. They have been applied to both its New and Old World variants. In this division of the institution, the phrase societies with slaves applied to societies where slaves were generally held in smaller aggregates, often in household units. The enslaved were marginal to the most value-adding economic activities. In societies with slaves, the distinction between slaves and other subordinate groups is portrayed as more porous and ambiguous than in slave societies. Slave societies are, therefore, deemed to have lower rates of exit from enslavement via individual manumission. In such societies, slaves would be less likely to be attached to households or to family units. The lower ratio of slaves to non-slaves would require less highly organized policing systems. And, in the more feminized domestic systems of slave societies, large-scale collective resistance would be less frequent.

In slave societies, the dominant social groups depended far more upon the wealth generated by slave labor. In their large-scale units of production, it was more difficult for enslaved individuals to achieve freedom, much less enter the slave-owning class. Above all, in slave societies, slavery became the normative model of social relationships at the center of economic production. For Moses Finley, who initially articulated the distinctive characteristics of slave societies, it was the dual *location* of slaves, at the centers of both production and power, that provided the key to understanding the emergence and maintenance of a slave society.<sup>7</sup> In Finley's initial perspective, apart from ancient Athens and Roman Italy, slave

<sup>7</sup> See Moses Finley, "Slavery," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968); and *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking Press, 1980, expanded edition, 1998), (quotes on pp. 80–82); 79–82; for the extension of the dual model to the New World see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8–9. Many regions of Africa, where slaves represented a quarter to half of the population, would clearly qualify for what Finley called slave societies. Those most engaged in commercial agriculture had proportions of slaves that equaled or exceeded those of ancient Roman Italy or the lower antebellum southern United States. Muslim societies in North Africa and Asia, where slaves might account for less than 10 percent of the inhabitants, experienced no internal pressure to abolish the institution before the mid-nineteenth century. For the most recent and thorough discussion of comparative approaches to slave systems in world-historical context, see Enrico Dal Lago and Constantina Katsari, "The Study of Ancient and Modern Slave Systems: Setting an Agenda for Comparison," in *Slave Systems: Ancient and Modern*, Dal Lago and Katsari, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3–31. For a systematic comparative perspective on processes of individual and collective deliverance from slavery, see above all, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, "Processes of Exiting the Slave Systems: A Typology," *ibid.*, 233–264.

societies were confined to certain parts of the Americas in the four centuries after 1500.

The chronology of slavery's successive expansions and abolitions might point us in another direction. For those interested in the expansion and prohibitions of the institution from a global perspective, both slavery and the long-distance slave trade endured longest and most uninterruptedly in parts of the world with presumably less impact from slavery than those usually designated as slave societies. Whether located in areas usually designated as slave societies or societies with slaves, the institution was entrenched in the Old World far longer than in its modern New World variants. Slavery was widely diffused throughout Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean until the twentieth century. For a millennium after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, states within its former orbit sanctioned slavery. The eighteenth-century sources of Old World abolitionism would arise chiefly in areas that were distinguished by not being centers of an otherwise ubiquitous institution.

In other words, the heuristic value of the distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves may be more useful in examining relationships and behavior between zones of slavery than in accounting for the rise and fall of the institution itself. In every society with a system of slavery, one must devote equal attention to the processes of enslavement and reproduction as well as the ease of exit from the institution by way of flight or armed resistance. A system with extremely high rates of manumission logically prescribes a high demand for fresh captives with all of the corresponding mortality, morbidity, family disintegration, individual psychological trauma, material deprivation, and insecurity entailed in that process. So, what may appear as relatively mild bondage for the enslaved within any society may look more like a plunge into disorientation, deprivation, and degradation for recruits from without. In this work, slave systems will be approached primarily in terms of the degree to which they retarded or facilitated the growth or destruction of the institution or its components.

Historically, three aspects of slavery stand out as starting points in any intercontinental account of slavery and abolition. The first is slavery's obvious antiquity, ubiquity, and durability. Certain characteristics of the institution endured in most areas of the world. They persisted despite short-term shifts – demographic and economic crises, or political, cultural, and social upheavals. Another important characteristic of slavery was that it was remarkably transferable across time and space. Roman slave law left its imprint wherever the major Mediterranean civilizations spread. It would be reconstituted in the colonial Americas, South Africa, the Indian Ocean world, and Eurasia. It would be regenerated in zones of devastating warfare, in busy port cities, or in booming agricultural frontiers. During the first millennium of the Common Era, the institution of slavery was clearly a shared institution in all regions linked by cultural affiliation with the monotheistic

tradition and Roman civil law. Like Judaism, Christianity and Islam viewed slavery as immutable as marriage and human warfare. These traditions, in turn, drew upon older traditions inherited from Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. All of their successive heirs sanctioned enslavement arising from conflict, purchase, or birth. All sought to regulate and delimit its scope. All developed codes for recruitment, enforcement, and exit.

David Brion Davis has long since traced the network of beliefs and rationalizations about slavery inherited from the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. Aristotle furnished two millennia of statesmen and theologians with the philosophic justification of slavery. The Church fathers, especially St. Augustine, linked bondage to the inherited penalty for sin. What is most remarkable about the ancient world's surviving commentaries on slavery is their relative brevity and infrequency. Aristotle's is the only surviving ancient attempt at a formal justification of slavery. Whether or not human beings might be unjustly enslaved, there was only one condition on which Aristotle could imagine the institution's disappearance: masters could do without slaves when "each instrument could do its own work . . . as if a shuttle should weave of itself and a plectrum should do its own harp-playing."<sup>8</sup> Most commentaries were geared towards improving, mitigating, or even glorifying slavery. An outstanding example was the embedding or imbuing of religious doctrine with metaphors of slavery. Saint Paul and early Christian leaders drew upon Jewish and other Levantine traditions to designate themselves and their followers as slaves of God or Christ. Christians or Muslims could locate themselves in the same relationship of powerless subjection to the all-powerful deity as the slave to his owner. Because even highly positioned slaves were never exempt from both physical and symbolic degradation, reliance on the metaphor "bolstered the acceptability of slavery in the real world and increased the ammunition of those who wished to regard it as a natural human institution."<sup>9</sup>

Nowhere in Christianity, from Byzantium to Britain, was there a diminution of the salvational value allotted to spiritual enslavement to Christ

<sup>8</sup> See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), ch. 3. On the rarity of extended analysis of ancient slavery, see Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 117–118. The quotation from Aristotle is from *The Politics of Aristotle* Ernest Barker, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153. The master-slave bond could signify a supremely loving relationship as well as a form of degradation. For Isaiah, slavery was biblically linked with his prophetic power: "This is my slave, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight. I have put my spirit upon him." Isaiah 42:1, quoted in Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 328. Slavery was a path to salvation. Christian bishops and Byzantine officials used the old Latin and Greek words *servus* or *doulos*, to refer to their exalted status in church and state. Although other terms, especially "prisoners" (*captives*) came to designate those who were newly enslaved as chattel in the traditional sense, there was no abandonment of the traditional terms from the honorific concept of slavery.

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or to worldly slavery as a penance with salvational potential. Well after 1500, visitors to Russia still recorded inhabitants as describing themselves as servants and slaves. Muscovite magnates claimed the exclusive right to be called the sovereign's slaves. At the same time, the very real degradations of enslavement were "God's scourge." Of course, alongside the narratives of glorious enslavement ran parallel narratives of glorious liberation and freedom. Eighteenth-century Italians or Britons, "redeemed" from Muslim corsairs, were celebrities in elaborate public rituals that reenacted their salvation from social death to their restored status as free Christians.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier Roman laws' formulaic acknowledgment of man's natural liberty were likewise linked to later messages of physical and spiritual liberation drawn from biblical narratives. The *Qur'an's* analogous proclamation of freedom as man's natural status could be matched by Christian scholastic declamations, linking Gospel texts with natural law theory to demonstrate Christ's "perfect law of liberty" and the "natural liberty by which men are naturally free and not slaves." These extrapolations of both sacred slavery and holy freedom were clearly compatible with the continuation of slavery as an institution even where slavery had virtually vanished as a real social relationship. Medieval writers seemed "blind to the implications of their own Christian psychology when they related to problems of servitude and religious freedom." Even the English Common Law left open the question of captive slavery long after there were no longer any legally identifiable bondsmen in England.<sup>11</sup>

Western Europeans began to shift the locus of their self-perceptions to the libertarian side of the equation by the end of the Middle Ages. Throughout much of western Europe, rural populations gradually and sometimes violently established their freedom from customary and heritable bondage. Early modern European legal traditions shifted property rights in both goods and labor to the individual, recognized as an independent contractual agent. Rural peasants, as well as elites, eliminated the positive valuation of slavery and grounded their claims to liberation in Christian teachings and general assertions of human dignity, liberty, and equality. When fifteenth-century

<sup>10</sup> Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 89; Richard Hellie, *Slavery in Russia 1450–1725* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), passion; Marshall T. Poe, "A People Born to Slavery": *Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 216–219; David A. Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Medieval England: From the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1995), 89; Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500–1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 176; Linda Colley, *Captives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 78–79.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Tierney, "Freedom and the Medieval Church," in *The Origins of Modern Freedom in the West*, R. W. Davis, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 94–95; and J. H. Baker, "Personal Liberty under the Common Law," in *ibid.*, 190.

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peasants in Catalonia mobilized to demand an end to the “bad customs” of bondage, their argument was grounded in a notion of Christian liberation. Christ’s sacrifice did not just free humanity from original sin, but restored it to its original liberty. Using the Roman law analogy, naturally free human beings had not been enslaved by original sin, but by the law of nations. In Spain, bondage had been the outcome of a Christian holy war. During the reconquest of Spain, rulers purportedly inflicted servitude upon resisting Muslim inhabitants to induce them to convert. What had been only a temporary stimulus had abusively become, according to the peasant thesis, a sustained violation of natural law and of the divine precept that bound human freedom to Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Catalanian peasants thus offered a historical and Christian gloss to the famous abstract principle of Roman law: man was free by nature and slavery was legitimized only by the laws of nations. In such narratives, elaborated by elite scribes and invoked by late medieval peasants, Christianity was dissociated from servility.

Catalonian peasant claims for freedom grounded in natural and Christian liberty constituted no direct assault on the institution of slavery itself. The peasants’ argument was embedded in the specific history of the Christian reconquest of Iberia. The conquest narrative actually sustained the idea of slavery as appropriate for infidels. Servitude was the consequence, not of sin in general, but of specific unbelief. For peasants, as well as for crusading warriors, the premise of a frontier with mutually enslaving enemies legitimized slavery and rationalized its reproduction through a “just war” conquest. The peasants made their bid in terms of inclusion with fellow believers in the status of liberty. Their lords acknowledged that their servile exactions were “bad customs,” and finally accepted the premise that their Christian peasants were not slaves.

The general thrust of western European institutional and ideological development before 1500 was toward the recognition of the peasantry as part of the community of freemen. “Rustics, no matter how contemptible in the eyes of the elite could not be regarded consistently as alien in the same sense of infidels” or heretics. In this struggle to redefine the boundaries of servitude, the antagonists had neither motive nor need to proceed to more universal arguments. Their mutual narrative assented to the consensual premise that some are free and others slaves.<sup>13</sup>

Further to the north, in England, a similar consensus among native born inhabitants held that “contract lay at the heart of the relationship between

<sup>12</sup> Paul Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 191–192.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Freedman, *Servitude*, 217; Compare with Charles Verlinden, “Orthodoxie et esclavage au bas moyen age,” *Melanges Eugène Tisserant* V (2) (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1964), 427–456.

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the late medieval English servant and his or her employer.” All service fell along a spectrum of constraint from slavery and serfdom to free agency. Within the contract, freedom could still entail penal sanctions. Bond servants were subject to the authority of the lord and could be punished for failure to fulfill services to which they had freely assented.<sup>14</sup>

The rash of fifteenth-century English statutes enacted to curtail wage levels, decrease labor mobility, and enforce contracts against employees may have made the end of serfdom a mixed blessing for the workers in the short run. Masters could invoke public sanction for non-fulfillment of service from the Statute of Labourers in 1349 to the repeal of the Masters and Servants Act in 1875.<sup>15</sup> “Unfree” labor, however, was not a form of slavery. Both slavery and serfdom in England were vacated, rather than abolished. The fact that slaves could no longer be identified in England by the end of the sixteenth century was to be more significant for the ending of Western slavery than the fact that masters continued to constrain freemen to labor.<sup>16</sup>

This overview of Mediterranean Islam and Western Christianity at the beginning of the era of European transoceanic exploration and expansion reveals already differentiated zones with regard to slavery. The general premise, on both sides of the religious line, was that the followers of Christ and Muhammed did not enslave their own believers. That principle, developed at an earlier point in Islamic law, had become roughly articulated through nearly a millennium of frontier conflict across and around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. However, the religious frontier remained a porous one. The normative guidelines for the recruitment, maintenance, and manumission of slaves were frequently disobeyed.

In areas of Muslim rule, the principle of holy war (*jihād*) beyond the Islamicized line and non-enslavement within the line of Islamic domination both delimited and encouraged enslavement. Beyond the frontier of Dar al-Islam, non-Muslims were fair game for enslavement. Fulfillment of the Qur’anic admonition to open paths to manumission ensured a steady demand for fresh captives. On the other side of the religious line, analogous and similarly unevenly obeyed inhibitions had developed within

<sup>14</sup> See Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). At the point of contract, servant and master stood in a position of voluntary assent. P. J. P. Goldberg, “What was a Servant,” in *Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages* (Boydell Press), 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor*, and Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> For a similar disappearance of slaves, except on galleys, in France before the mid-seventeenth century, see Sue Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France*”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 1.