1

Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

By 1700, the two European nations generally regarded as having the most advanced capitalist culture, England and the Netherlands, had moved further away than any country in Europe from subjecting their citizens to overtly forced labor.¹ Slave ships brought the occasional slave back to England and advertisements offering slaves for sale were seen in Liverpool and Bristol newspapers.² It is nevertheless inconceivable that London, Liverpool, Nantes, or Amsterdam could have received complete cargoes of Africans on slave ships to be sold in public markets, as Lisbon and Cadiz did throughout the eighteenth century.³ Yet these northern European cities were in countries with the harshest and most closed systems of exploiting enslaved non-Europeans in the Americas. Further, England and the Netherlands came to

³ The largest example of slaves consigned to England, significantly in the mid-seventeenth century, is an instruction from London merchants to a slave ship captain to bring fifteen or twenty 15-year-old Gambian slaves to London after a slaving voyage to Barbados (Letter dated Dec. 9, 1651, in Historical Manuscripts Commission, Thirteenth Report, The Manuscripts of the Duke of Portland, 2 vols. (London, 1893), 2:29.) TSTD contains six voyages beginning in England and carrying (or intending to carry) complete cargoes of slaves into Lisbon in the mid-eighteenth century. For French attitudes, much closer to the Anglo-Dutch than the Iberian model, see Sue Peabody, 'There are no slaves in France': The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime (New York, 1996), pp. 3–22. It should be noted, however, that slave ships from Africa supplied French galleys with slaves throughout the seventeenth century, some arriving at Marseilles and some in Northern France. On this see Clarence J. Munford, The Black Ordeal of Slavery and Slave Trading in the French West Indies, 1625–1715, 3 vols. (Lewiston, NY, 1991), 1:144, 165–6, 170.
2  

Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

dominate Europe’s relations with the rest of the world: the Dutch specializing in Asia, and the English in the Americas.

The contrast between Europe’s social institutions and values at home and their counterparts in European-controlled overseas territories became acute in the seventeenth century and forms the focus of the present work. The major issues are simply stated. First, why would Europeans revive slavery at the time of Columbian contact, when the institution had disappeared from large parts of Europe, and then, three centuries later, begin to suppress it? Second, why would that slavery be located almost exclusively in the Americas? Third, why would the slaves in this system be exclusively of non-European descent? The search for answers amounts to nothing less than an attempt to explain the shaping of the Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and beyond. The starting point, as we have seen, is the differences between western and non-western social institutions and value systems – especially as these relate to slavery.

The argument in this and succeeding chapters touches on large issues in western history, of which only part relate to contact among Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It was not just European power and resources that made overseas expansion possible but also the subcontinent’s odd (in relative global terms) social structures and values. Chapter 2 examines the genesis of these and their implications for European expansion and migration, both European free and African coerced. Yet, as this discussion hints, European behavior in the early modern Atlantic was not that of unbridled and profit-maximizing capitalists. An inquiry into deep-seated cultural attitudes on the part of both Europeans and non-Europeans provides just as much insight into the creation of the new Atlantic world as a simple search for the quest for profits. Chapters 3 and 4 assess the manifestation of these attitudes in relation to ethnicity and gender, respectively, the former defined as the way in which peoples identify themselves. Gender constructions differed markedly in Europe and Africa and these differences had a profound effect on who went (or in the African case got taken) to the Americas. Economic impulses operated within the cultural framework. Economics is given center stage in Chapter 3 as the focus switches to an examination of English dominance of the slave trade and, through that, much of the Atlantic.

Chapters 6 through 8 explore the realities of African power or, alternatively, the limits on what Europeans could do on the African coast. Just as economic motivations were heavily circumscribed by culture, so European aspirations were subject to the countervailing forces of non-Europeans. The Atlantic world of 1800 was as much a product of African as European influences and not just in the sense of Africans providing labor or alternative cultural inputs. Initially, at least, the economic and political power of African states was more important than these tangible factors. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the African-imposed limits on European expansion and the consequences of this for the slave trade and the Americas. After
Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

the epidemiological disaster that overtook aboriginal Americans, what happened in much of the Americas was the result of compromises between Africans and Europeans. Chapter 8 examines the consequences of African-European compromise in economic terms by taking a fresh look at slavery in the early English Caribbean and how it differed from slavery elsewhere. As in Chapter 5, the focus initially is on what made it possible to increase the level of exploitation and per capita output.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 evaluate the impact of the plantation system on the Atlantic world. How did groups of overseas Europeans and Africans come to see themselves, and what were the consequences of shifts in self-perception for the long-run viability of the system? Historians have put more stress on the economic consequences of slavery in the Americas than they have on the patterns of identity and cultural preconceptions that made it possible. The offshore Atlantic sugar complex notwithstanding, plantation slavery in the Americas and the slave trade that supported it had no precedents in Africa or Europe. Experience of the system was bound to affect more than the economic sphere. Chapter 9 returns to the identity issue taken up in Chapter 3 and charts the shifts in self-perceptions as a result of interaction among peoples of Africans and European descent around the Atlantic. Chapter 10 evaluates some impacts of European overseas expansion on Europe itself. While much of this reflects the preoccupations of the current historiography on the contributions of overseas lands to European economic development, this penultimate chapter nevertheless sees the more important impact on Europe (and of Europe on the Caribbean) as being on identity and values rather than on capital accumulation and income. Finally, a short concluding chapter draws out the longer-run implications of European expansion and establishes links with the emergence of the movement to abolish the slave trade and slavery in the late eighteenth century. The ultimate aim is to explore the slave-free paradox that suffused the early modern Atlantic world and in the process to increase our understanding of that world as it emerged in the nineteenth century.

The slave-free paradox began to emerge as Europeans reached the Atlantic islands and began to revive slavery. It strengthened in the aftermath of Columbian contact but developed fully only when the Dutch and English rose to preeminence. It was not apparent to those primarily responsible for creating and maintaining it. Indeed, if it had been, then the paradox would probably not have endured. However, some awareness was expressed in 1772 when a well-known commentator of the contemporary European scene, Arthur Young, stated that only 5 percent of the world’s population lived under conditions of freedom. All Africans, all Asians, and most of those in the Americas were, if not under slavery, at least unfree. Adam Smith had a similar view.

Leaving aside for the moment questions of definition of freedom and slavery, Young’s opinion is not to be dismissed as merely chauvinism or
Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

the class bias of a propertied Englishman. Similar assertions – expressed without Young’s obsessive precision – were common in popular eighteenth-century literature. Moreover, as late as the 1830s, newspapers in the southern United States could argue that “Slavery black or white is necessary” and that free labor was an unfortunate “little experiment made in a corner of western Europe” that “has been from the beginning, a cruel failure.” By the midnineteenth century, unlike in Young’s day, those living in the part of the world that Young considered free saw abolition of slavery everywhere as a major issue. Indeed the ending of slavery was a quintessentially western cause. People everywhere have normally tried to avoid or reject slave status for themselves, and non-western societies, especially Islamic, extensively debated issues of which persons are eligible for slavery. But the concept of abolition – the idea that a society should be free of slavery – evolved first in western Europe and the European Americas and even there only after 1750. Even Haiti was arguably a western phenomenon – the society that emerged from the revolution having more in common with Europe than with Africa. In non-western countries did abolition emerge independently as official state policy, and no non-western intellectual tradition showed signs of questioning slavery per se, as opposed to questioning the appropriateness of slavery for specific groups. There would be little basis for writing a non-western


6 Private property in land, nuclear family, absence of strong kinship structures – to mention just a few – though there is a strong tendency in the modern literature to stress the African contribution to the making of revolution as opposed to its consequences. See Carolyn E. Fick, The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below (Knoxville, 1990).

Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

counterpart to David Brion Davis’ 1966 book, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture. 8

But if slavery did not exist in the England of Young’s time, how long was it since it had disappeared and how extensive was the freedom that Young counterposed? Both slavery and servitude had been part of the social fabric of early medieval England, with just over 10 percent of the population classified as slaves in 1086. 9 Even as these institutions died, new forms of compulsion evolved. The Statute of Laborers (1350–1) forced all persons not in a recognised occupation to serve in husbandry and the only change before its repeal in the nineteenth century was the addition of a lower age limit of twelve in the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers. 10 A servant was normally bound to the master for a year, and indeed the transatlantic indentured servitude arrangement was a modification of this English institution. Like slave owners, masters habitually complained of servant insubordination but they nevertheless held large powers. Physical punishment was unexceptional and, more important, the law required that servants carry testimonials with them to new masters as evidence of good behaviour, a potential route to renewed servitude. If we accept Gregory King’s taxonomy, 40 percent of the English population lived in service to others, and those not fortunate enough to attain such status were vagrants. From 1572 the definition of a vagabond was simply “anyone refusing to work for reasonable wages.” 11 Vagrants were subject to compulsory labor on pain of whipping and imprisonment. 12


12 George Meriton, A Guide for constables, churchwardens, overseers of the poor ... (London, 1669). There is of course the issue familiar to students of slavery on the frequency with which these extreme measures were invoked. According to the widely read Josiah Child in London, vagrants could beg undisturbed for many months, and the whipping and expulsion of the poor from a parish was rarely carried out “not one justice of twenty (through pity or other cause) will do it....” A New Discourse of Trade (London, 1679), Chapter 2. Those meeting the legal definition of vagrants, and therefore liable to whipping and forcible relocation, probably comprised a small fraction of the mobile poor. The definition varied
6  

**Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World**

Two justices of the peace could force parish children into a household for an apprenticeship term. Men were likely to be press-ganged.\(^{13}\) In 1655, seventy-two prisoners from the Salisbury rising of the previous year were sold in Barbados without due process.\(^{14}\) In Scotland, colliers and collieries were sold together in the aftermath of a 1606 act generally credited with the reinstatement of serfdom. Valuations for the serfs were provided separately and with as full appreciation for the discounted present value of future labor as in sales of West Indian plantations with slaves. The system had a life-span similar to slavery in the British Americas. The first Emancipation Act passed in Westminster freed Scottish miners in 1775, not West Indian slaves, and the refusal of the masters to cooperate was such that further legislation was required in 1799.\(^{15}\) These anticipated the 1833 and 1838 acts aimed at the colonies by about as much as the 1606 act had preceded the establishment of chattel slavery in Barbados.

Yet despite Scottish serfdom, the legal powers of masters, press-gangs, and vagrancy laws, in the third quarter of the eighteenth century labor relations were much closer to modern conceptions of free labor than slavery. Moreover, even in Young’s time, western exceptionalism was not of recent origin and neither was it shared equally by all regions of western Europe. The observations of Smith and others would have had almost the same validity if they had been made three centuries earlier, at the time of the Columbian contact. There were certainly more slaves in southern Europe in 1492 than in 1772 – slaves even comprised one in ten of the population of Lisbon in the 1460s. However, north and northwestern Europe had been free of full chattel slavery since the Middle Ages. Indeed the incidence of chattel slavery

over time and place, not least because parish officials and justices of the peace had considerable latitude in interpreting the law (Paul A. Slack, “Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598–1664,” *Economic History Review*, 27 (1974):362–8). Moreover, recent research has not disturbed Dorothy Marshall’s assessment that “the number of persons moved was not large enough to have much effect on the mobility of labor. The number of removal orders obtained and enforced never seems to have exceeded a few tens of thousands per year for the whole 15,000 parishes and townships involved” [“The Old Poor Law, 1662–1795,” *Economic History Review*, 1 (1937):39].


\(^{14}\) Oxenbridge Foyle and Marcellus Rivers, *England’s Slavery, or Barbados Merchandise; Represented in a Petition to the High and Honourable Court of Parliament* (London, 1659), p. 3.

Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

everywhere in western Europe had declined irregularly since Roman times, but the pace of the decline had been greater in northern than in southern Europe. The so-called second servitude affected primarily eastern Europe, while the Scottish mining sector remained small. Indeed, while free labor in the modern sense scarcely existed before the nineteenth century, by 1800 the coercive element in the master-servant, employer-employee relationship had been in decline for a better part of a millennium.

From a twentieth-century global perspective, the western European case was simply anomalous. From the neolithic revolution (and perhaps before) to the Middle Ages, every society had had some slaves. Suddenly there was a culture, and the larger part of a subcontinent, that did not. Perhaps we should see the beginnings of abolition not after 1750 but in the failure to revive servitude or even slavery during the late-fourteenth-century labor shortages following the Black Death. Such shortages were not to be seen again until Europe began to occupy the Americas. By contrast, plague in the Americas less than two centuries later, this time among Amerindians, helped ensure plantation slavery for Africans.

Why did the trend in Europe away from coerced labor fail to continue when Europeans established transoceanic societies? Why was slavery not an option for the elite of northwestern Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century, yet was adopted without serious questioning in the larger Atlantic world (beginning with the Canaries) just a century later? It is striking that Young and his contemporaries appeared not fully aware of the severity of the slavery that had developed under those same western polities that countenanced shifts to freer labor. From a modern perspective, the western world had a particularly repressive form of slavery embedded in its evolution until just over a century ago (and much less than a century ago if we include the parts of Africa under colonial control). Thus, Europeans not only reaccepted slavery in the face of New World realities, they also gave the institution a new scale and intensity. Indeed, all the major slave societies in human history have been either European or under European control. Moses Finley singled out five in which slaves were sufficiently central to production and social structure to warrant the term slave society – Greek, Roman, Brazilian, Caribbean, and the Southern United States. Three of these emerged in the Americas in the aftermath of European overseas expansion, and the slavery they imposed involved exploitation more intense than had ever existed in the world. It is inconceivable that any societies in history – at least before 1800 – could have matched the output per slave of seventeenth-century Barbados or the nineteenth-century Southern United States.

8  Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

European exceptionalism thus extended beyond the slave-free dichotomy noted by Young and Smith in that the slavery European migrants imposed had a large economic element that made it totally different from the slavery that had ever existed in non-European societies. But if there were no slave plantations in the pre-contact Americas and Africa, neither were there many counterparts in the European Americas to the open systems of slavery that existed in parts of Africa, the indigenous Americas, and the Middle East. Peoples of African descent (the only peoples brought across the Atlantic as slaves) had small chance of non-slave status and even smaller again of full membership in European settler societies.

In Europe, on the other hand, the entrenchment of certain individual freedoms was such that there were frequently doubts about the legal status of those few enslaved peoples brought to Europe from the slave Americas. The slavery that evolved in the Americas in the three centuries between Columbus and Arthur Young was imposed by the countries that occupied the “free” global enslave to which the latter drew attention. It evolved during the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment – shifts in European thought that helped the rights of the individual against group or state to evolve into recognizably modern form. In summary, at the end of the fifteenth century slavery did not exist on most western European soil. At the end of the eighteenth century it still did not exist in western Europe but it had greatly intensified and expanded in those parts of the non-European world that Europeans had come to dominate. Europe was exceptional in the individual rights that it accorded its citizens and in the intensity of its slavery, which, of course, it reserved for non-citizens.

In the early years after Columbian contact it was by no means clear that a paradox of this scale and type would develop. Tables 1-1 and 1-2 chart the growing differences between Europeans in Europe and Europeans overseas. In Table 1-1 the African arrivals in column 1 and the European departures in column 3 provide a rough sum of migration into each national jurisdiction in the Americas, whereas the sum of columns 2 and 3 gives the numbers carried on board the ships of each major national carrier. Table 1-2 reduces some of the raw estimates in Table 1-1 – specifically the number of slaves

\[\text{References}\]


18 For the drawing of a similar contrast focussing particularly on Britain, see Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery, pp. 12–24.

19 Column 1 shows African arrivals in the Americas, column 3 shows European departures. Almost all European migrants went to the areas of the Americas where their country held sovereignty. If column 3 is adjusted for deaths in transit – probably no more than 5 percent of those embarking in Europe at this time on average – then the sum of columns 1 and 3 yields total immigration into each national jurisdiction in the Americas.
## Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

### Table 1-1. European-Directed Transatlantic Migration, 1500–1760, by European Nation and Continent of Origin (in thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Africans arriving in American regions claimed by each nation</th>
<th>Africans leaving Africa on ships of each nation</th>
<th>Europeans leaving each nation for Americas (net)</th>
<th>Africans and Europeans leaving for Americas (Col. 2 + Col. 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Before 1580</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) 1580–1640</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain*</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal*</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>1144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) 1640–1700</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>1331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) 1700–1760</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>1082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain***</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>1286</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>1658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2483</td>
<td>2775</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>3666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) 1500–1760</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain*</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal*</td>
<td>1127</td>
<td>1691</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>2214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands**</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain***</td>
<td>1252</td>
<td>1662</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>2408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3770</td>
<td>4380</td>
<td>2067</td>
<td>6447</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes to Table 1-1:** *Spain and Portugal are treated as separate countries despite the crowns of the two countries being united between 1580 and 1640. **Includes Dutch Brazil. ***Includes migrants from Germany and Africans carried on British American vessels. Sources for Table 1-1 (number refers to row, letter refers to column): 1A, 2A: Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wis., 1969), p. 116.
Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

7A: Curtin, Census, 119.
14A: Postma, Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 21, 300.

1B, 2B: Curtin, Census, 116 plus 20% voyage mortality. Spain/Portugal breakdown is a guess.
5B, 6B: 5A+6A plus 20 percent voyage mortality. Spain/Portugal breakdown is a guess.
7B: Hakluyt, Principal Navigations, 7:95–6 indicates some early French slaving activity in Africa, but the French Americas contained few slaves and no record of French slave trading to the Iberian Americas has surfaced.
8B: Postma, Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 21.
9B, 12B through 21B: Eltis, Behrendt, and Richardson, “Volume of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”

11B: Spanish were reported buying slaves in Cacheo, 1678–83 (T70/10, 1: T70/16, 50), though this may have been for Spanish markets. No records of Spanish ships selling in the Americas at this time has survived. An allowance of 150 a year is assigned to allow for such activity.
8C, 14C, 20C: Lucassen, Dutch Long Distance Migration, 22–3 less 20 percent returns.
9C: Gemory, “Emigration from the British Isles,” multiplied by 2 to allow for pre-1630 emigration.
17C: 5C multiplied by ratio of Americas silver production, 1700–1760/1580–1640. For latter see Artman, American Bullion, 20.
18C: Magalhães-Godinho, “L’émigration portugaise,” 255 estimates gross emigration. These estimates are divided by two to allow for net movements to Atlantic Islands and Goa.
27C: Galenson, White Servitude, 216–18 plus 5 percent voyage mortality.