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Edited by David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

DEPENDENCE, SERVILITY, AND COERCED
LABOR IN TIME AND SPACE

DAVID ELTIS AND STANLEY L. ENGERMAN

Slavery is generally regarded as the most extreme form of dependency and exploitation. This project attempts to cover types of dependency in addition to slavery, although it is clear from both the overall title and the program for the project's third volume that slavery gets considerably more attention than do other types of dependency. This reflects in part the modern preoccupation with individual freedom and equality before the law accorded by citizenship now acknowledged, at least as an ideal, just about everywhere in the modern world. Slavery may not be completely eradicated today, but it had lost irrevocably the ideological struggle perhaps as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, with only minor rearguard actions (in ideological terms, that is) in the antebellum South and less certainly in Hitler's Germany and the Soviet gulags. Such a circumstance – amazing in its rapidity and completeness from a worldwide historical perspective of human behavior and beliefs – is taken for granted today. The more complete the victory of the view that slavery should not exist nor should have ever existed, the more remote slavery itself appears, but at the same time the greater the modern fascination with the institution becomes. And the more remote it appears, the easier it is to treat slavery simply as an evil practiced by evil men, and the harder it is to understand it in human terms. At the very least, modern preoccupations with freedom and individual rights drive the fascination with slavery. This phenomenon, an outcome of the Enlightenment, shapes the form of the modern assault on slavery.

General explanations of the rise and fall of slavery have not fared well in recent years, as the great resources thrown into the study of slavery from primary sources have revealed the richness and complexity of the institution. As this suggests, such explanations tend to date from an era predating our present age of extensive empirical research, and for the most part focus on slavery – or rather separate slavery from other forms of dependency – counter to what we wish to do. Such explanations are quite good at describing how slavery functions but are weakest at accounting for first, its rise, second, its fall, and third, why at times nonslave dependency (for instance, serfdom) emerges as more important than chattel slavery.

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Most important of all, perhaps, they fail to explain the eligibility issue – in other words, why certain peoples are seen as qualifying for slavery (whereas others are not), and why this changes over time. This last issue has become of much greater interest in the last decade or so, as the realization spreads that all peoples in the world have been at some time in their history both slaves and owners of slaves, often at one and the same time. Having dismissed general theories, we will nevertheless mention three of them here as sometimes helpful. There is the general Marxist position, implicit in the work of those who followed Marx, if not Marx himself, who had little to say on the subject, which in broad terms takes the position that any ruling class would wish to impose slavlike conditions on the rest of society and is prevented from doing so only by resistance on the part of the potential slaves. This position is tempered by an argument – quite incorrect, in our view – that chattel slavery is not compatible with industrialization because, in crude terms, advanced capitalism needs consumers and skilled workers who respond to incentives. Thus, it is argued, slavery exists when conditions hobble the ability of people to resist enslavement and tends to disappear with the onset of industrialization. A second general position is that of Jack Goody, who accepts the overwhelming power element of the previous argument but interprets it in terms of states rather than classes. This has the advantage of recognizing that most peoples in history have not enslaved full members of their own society and have sought slaves from elsewhere. It also projects to the level of the state the explanation Adam Smith offered for slavery at the personal level, which was “man’s love to domineer.” Such an impulse would probably hold for both states and individuals even if using free rather than slave labor might lead to more profits. Based mainly on his study of African societies, Goody offers the general proposition that any time a state was significantly more powerful than its neighbors, one could expect the powerful state to use the weaker as a source of slaves. A third general explanation is the now well-known Nieboer-Domar hypothesis that focuses on the environment. It is a land-labor argument that elegantly lays out the social consequences of land abundance. In short, it holds that slavery will tend to emerge in such an environment because one cannot have free land (in other words, a frontier open for settlement), free workers willing to work for wages, and a nonworking land-owning class at the same time. Only two of these three elements can exist at once. Hence serfdom emerged in early modern Eastern Europe, and slavery emerged in the Americas. We find this persuasive, but there is nothing to account for why serfdom emerged and not slavery (and vice versa), why slavery never appeared in many land-abundant environments – especially hunter-gatherer societies – and why slavery disappeared in the Americas at least several generations before the closing of the land frontier on the two continents.

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Instead of dwelling further on these general theories, we would like, at least at this stage of the project, to note the different forms of forced dependency that have existed, as well as some common patterns in the institution of slavery and how these have changed over time. If we are to gain any insight into slavery, however, it must be assessed as part of a continuum of dependency typically seen as occupying the opposite pole from free labor and separated from it by such institutions as indentured servitude, convict labor, debt peonage, and serfdom, to mention just a few of the intervening categories. Institutionalized dependency and servitude had been accepted without question in Western and non-Western cultures alike, from the dawn of recorded history until the modern historical era, and they have formed one of the basic institutions that have appeared in almost every culture. Earlier discussions of dependency, and more specifically slavery, where they occurred, were couched in terms of how individual slaves should be treated, who should be a slave, and how one could fall into or lose slave status, but not whether the institution itself should exist. Moreover, however firmly the modern mind sees free labor as the antithesis to slavery, free labor arguably did not exist at all until the nineteenth century in the sense of the master-servant contract being enshrined in civil rather than criminal law. For example, free labor emerged first in the United States. As late as 1875 in England, a worker who refused to comply with the terms of his contract was viewed as stealing from the employer. Indeed, when the post-emancipation British West Indies colonial authorities introduced what the Colonial Office in London regarded as a harsh labor code, it was pointed out that the new code was basically adapted from the British Master and Servant Act. More recently, Kevin Bales has estimated that 27 million slaves lived in the late-twentieth-century world. It is possible to question the definition he uses – it appears to cover a range of dependency relations rather than chattel slavery *per se* – but even accepting it for the moment, 27 million constitutes far less than 1 percent of today's global population. Two and a half centuries ago (as Arthur Young, among others, pointed out), a definition of “unfree status” similar to that employed by Bales would have encompassed a majority share of the mid-eighteenth-century's working population, whereas a definition of free labor in the modern sense would have covered few, if any, waged workers in 1750 or in any preceding era. Broadly, then, institutionalized coercive relationships, whether for profit or for some more overtly social purpose, were normal before the nineteenth century and have diminished rather dramatically since.

Perhaps the first step is to recognize changes in the way societies have defined the various forms of dependency. Thus, as already hinted, even the nature of free labor has changed substantially within the confines of the period to which volume three of the present project is devoted – waged

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labor in seventeenth-century England (and even in mid-nineteenth-century America) being taken as a sign that an individual could not possibly be a full citizen. Among the more overt forms of dependency and coerced labor, convict labor (in the sense of those guilty of offenses being required to labor) by the state has increased dramatically since the early modern period. Prior to this, and in many non-Western environments long afterward, those guilty of crimes against the community might be physically chastised or expelled. Punishment had few implications for labor. In Western societies, physical chastisement came to be supplemented by, or in some instances replaced with, incarceration, and expulsion became systematized into transportation. In both cases, however, convicts were frequently expected to labor as well. The Siberian case is well known. Exile was stipulated as early as 1582, but the forced labor of exiles is an eighteenth-century phenomenon, with, in the British case, a rapid switch from colonial North America to the antipodes as the place of exile. The most striking example is perhaps Australia, where shortly before the ending of transportation in the 1850s, convicts brought halfway around the world formed a similar proportion of the total population as had slaves in South Carolina less than a century earlier, and a far greater proportion than was ever the case in Siberia. They were also responsible for much of the infrastructure that accelerated the economic development of Australia. Despite this, the exaction of labor was never the major reason for the creation of convicts in the first place, or even, after conviction, for the existence of schemes that used the labor of those convicted, such as workhouses, prison gangs, galleys, soviet gulags, and transportation to distant colonies. Indeed, the history of coerced labor in the context of the history of the community's or state's need to punish transgressors seems a story of lost economic opportunity. One possible reason for this is that few schemes to harness the labor of convicts appeared to have warranted the expenditures they incurred – at least within the norms that most societies regarded as acceptable for the treatment of convicts. If convicts had been treated like African slaves, then there might have been different economic consequences.

In classical times, prisoners of war were probably the major source of slaves, especially in the early expansionary days of the Roman Empire, as was also the case more recently in Africa and the indigenous Americas. Historically, capture in war has always been a justification of slavery. If a victor has the power to end a person's life, then presumably the victor also has the power to inflict social death, or slavery, as opposed to biological death. A typical pattern at the conclusion of a battle was to inflict the latter on adult males and the former (slavery) on women and children. Such behavior is observed in the struggles between core states in Western Europe and the peoples that spearheaded the great migration prior to the fall of the Roman Empire and on down to the early Middle Ages. It was

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also prevalent in struggles between most premodern polities everywhere in the world. The first effect of the emergence of large states and empires – whether in China, Mesoamerica, or the aforementioned case of Rome, where state structures allowed the control of men as well as of women and children – was that men, too, became slaves. Yet in the European world, treatment of prisoners of war changed rather decisively around the twelfth century, as relative equality of power between European states (and also between Islamic and Christian powers) and the attendant fear that the defeated power might be the victor in the next conflict meant that gradually more and more prisoners of war came to be exchanged or ransomed. Yet when Western European nations ended enslavement of one another, they still carried on extensive warfare resulting in large-scale deaths, rape, and pillaging. Whatever the reason, there is almost no evidence of prisoners of war being enslaved in the European Atlantic world during the era of American slavery, and indeed, no indication of servitude of any length being exacted by the victors in the many intra-European wars of the era (except, perhaps, for Dutch prisoners being put to work draining the English fens in the seventeenth century for the duration of hostilities). The major exception was prisoners of civil wars and those on the Celtic fringe that resisted the expansionary impulses of the core states of Western Europe, they were sent in large numbers to American plantations, at least in the seventeenth century, but always as servants with fixed terms rather than as chattel slaves, and with offspring who were free.

Debt bondage was a form of servitude based upon an initial agreement to borrow funds and continued until the time, if ever, the debt was repaid. The debt was payable by the family of the borrower if the latter was unable to repay while alive. Lenders were accused of extending too much credit or charging an excessively high interest rate so that repayment was never possible. The borrower would therefore become bound for very long periods, perhaps for life. Debt bondage was a system of coercion sometimes associated with the post-chattel-slavery era, as manifested in nineteenth-century India, but it was practiced widely and in some cases earlier in other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as in Latin America, Africa, and China.

Serfdom has a history going back to at least ancient Greece and formed the basis of agricultural production and rural social structure alike in Western European medieval countries. The classic explanations of its rise, in what might be called its first resurgence in the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire, allow for some peasant agency. The feudal contract provided some protection from marauding invaders for those working the land in return for feudal obligations to the lord, who provided the security. From the late fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, serfdom went through a second renaissance in Eastern Europe and, on a much smaller scale, in

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Scotland after seemingly heading toward insignificance in the West. Both the scale and the intensity (that is, the restrictions applied to the peasant) increased in the east through to the eighteenth century, as the Russian and Prussian states extended the area under their control eastward. By late in that century, there were probably more serfs in Europe, including Russia, than ever before. Expansion also meant that the term “serf” came to cover a much wider range of servile relationships than earlier. Serfdom may have disappeared in Scandinavia, England, and the Netherlands, but in most parts of Western Europe, including Germany and France, peasants still owed residual obligations to landholders. Indeed, in Germany, such obligations acted as a major restraint on German migration to both east and west, as German peasants had to compensate their lords before they could legally migrate. Peasant support for the early stages of the French Revolution is testimony enough to the significance of similar obligations west of the Rhine.

The new “full” serfdom that developed in Eastern Europe from the sixteenth century varied somewhat from its Western predecessor. Although primarily a means of ensuring that landholders would have a supply of labor, and the state a pool of potential soldiers, a new form of serfdom also showed up, stripped of its military aspects, in mines in Scotland, Germany, and even in the lead mines of Elizabethan England. In the Scottish case, valuations of the collieries reflected the number, age, and sex of the serf workforce in a way familiar to those who have studied probate records or deeds in plantation regions in the Americas. In addition, the second serfdom showed much less evidence of the contractual (implicit or otherwise) basis for serf status that historians have seen in its Dark Ages predecessor. The new lands acquired by an expanding Russian state were taken from indigenous, mainly Turkic, peoples and remained highly insecure. Hundreds of thousands of Russians and other Slavic peoples fell victim to slave raids and died in servitude in Islamic and Christian Middle Eastern regions, as indeed the origin of the term “slave” suggests. Nevertheless, there is little sense of a contractual relationship between the peasant on the one hand and the state, or the local *pomeschiki* class in Russian history, on the other. The expansion of serfdom occurred overwhelmingly at the initiative of an expanding militaristic state. Equally important, some Eastern serfs came to have fewer ties with the land in law, in the sense that both state and seigniorial peasants in Russia could be forcibly moved to new lands in a way that would not have been imaginable in medieval Western Europe, and which was redolent of chattel-slave status. Under such circumstances – given the heritability of serf status – drawing a legal or behavioral line between serf and slave status becomes difficult.

If the resurgence of serfdom in the east changed the nature of serfdom, completely new forms of coercive relationships appeared in northwestern Europe. The aforementioned master-servant contract, as it evolved in

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the aftermath of the Great Plague, recognized the right of the master to physically chastise the servant and charge the servant with theft in the event that the latter did not meet the terms of the contract. From the broad global perspective, what is extraordinary about such a relationship is the voluntary nature of the initial contract and the fact that it could be renewed at least once a year. Rural fairs in northwestern Europe became not just markets for surplus produce but, late in each year, nascent markets for labor as well. In the global history of dependency and coercive labor, this was a watershed in the evolution of agency on the part of those without property or without kin. The evolution of the master-servant relationship has received very little attention, at least from the comparative perspective. Equally unique in global terms was the system it spawned for facilitating large-scale transoceanic travel. As it evolved in England, the master-servant contract provided the initial basis for the re-peopling of the Americas, and much later, the first large-scale movement of Asian peoples to the semitropical Americas. In its first manifestation, it came to be called indentured servitude; in its second, contract labor. In both cases, there was a largely voluntary contract in which individual workers gave up several years of their working lives in return for the cost of passage. During the period of the contract, there were clear analogies with slavery in that the contract could be sold and severe restrictions placed on the rights of the worker to move or to avoid the obligations incurred. Once more, the full weight of the criminal law was applied against the servant for noncompliance, but not against the master. The length of the term of labor required appears to have varied closely with key variables such as the age and skill level of the laborer and the distance (and thus the cost) of the migrant's passage.

Major change occurred within the slavery category over the centuries preceding its abolition. There are, arguably, three aspects of slave societies that at a preliminary view are to be found across cultures, although the incidence and distribution of these forms do seem to vary in a systematic fashion. As with attempts at definition, these may seem vague and indefinite, but they help provide some analytical grounding for an important issue. First, and perhaps most common from a transglobal perspective, was slavery as a system of augmenting and sustaining the survival of the group as a social entity, whether based on some conception of kinship or set of religious beliefs. Such slavery is more likely to be "open," that is, to provide for eventual entry into full membership of society through a process of "a gradual reduction in marginality" of either the slave or, more likely, the descendants of the slave (though the stigma of slave origins could survive for many generations). Slavery of this type could be associated with large state structures, as in many Islamic polities, or in smaller societies on either side of the shift to settled agriculture, as in the indigenous Americas and pre-nineteenth-century Africa.

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A second type of slavery was, as a system, directly organized by the state to achieve communal goals – perhaps the maintenance of public works, as in irrigation systems, fortifications, or the clearing of salt deposits to permit agriculture, or to provide soldiers for offensive or defensive purposes. Examples could be found in most phases of Chinese history (referred to sometimes as “Oriental despotism”), in fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Korea, and in Ancient Egypt. Both the Janissaries of the Ottoman Empire and the *genizaros* of Spanish New Mexico would also qualify.¹ A third type is as a system for extracting high levels of output from labor for profit of private individuals. Although the state was not directly involved as an owner (though in the early modern period, Atlantic European navies did ship some slaves across the Atlantic, and European armies bought African slaves for military purposes – galley oarsmen as well as the regular army), the state normally had to provide the legal structure for the enforcement of ownership rights of slaveholders and, ultimately, the armed force that sustained the private use of slaves. There are probably no occupations that have been performed by nonslaves that have not also been performed by slaves, yet historically, some activities have clearly had a larger slave component than others. Concentration of slaves in particular tasks may be attributed broadly to the ability of nonslaves to avoid activities that were particularly unpleasant. For two centuries after the mid-seventeenth century, field labor on plantations in the Americas was evidently one such activity. In some societies in the classical era, the focus on production did not preclude the eventual entry of some slaves into mainstream society. We can probably all think of cases that fit none of these three categories – the tribute slaves that came into the Aztec Empire from the north, many of whom ended up as sacrificial victims, to provide one example.² Yet some broad categorization is useful to get an analytical grasp on an institution as ubiquitous as slavery – few peoples on the globe have not at some point in their history been slaves and owners of slaves, often at the same time.

Given these changing conceptions of dependency, it is somewhat tricky to evaluate the relative importance of the different forms of dependency and coercion over time. Even without such a consideration, the different types do on occasion occur together. Thus, the bulk of European convicts sent overseas before 1800 were in fact sold in the same manner as indentured servants to private owners, with only a longer term of service separating them from their nonconvict counterparts. But as social observers from

¹ James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), pp. 121–42.

² The historiography on slavery in the Aztec Empire is extremely thin, but see Robert D. Shadow and Maria J. Rodriguez, “Historical Panorama of Anthropological Perspectives on Aztec Slavery,” in Barbro Dahlgren and Ma De Los Dolores Soto de Arechavaleta (eds.), *Arqueología del Norte y del Occidente de México: Homenaje al Doctor J. Charles Kelley* (Mexico City, 1995), pp. 299–323.

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Aristotle to Marx and Foucault have noted, there can be no doubt that in addition to changes within a given form, major shifts have taken place in the relative importance of different forms. As already suggested, recent interpretations stress that free labor as we understand it today did not exist prior to the nineteenth century. But even understood in seventeenth-century terms, it had neither a long history nor a very wide currency outside relatively small enclaves in Western Europe. For convicts and perhaps prisoners of war, significant numbers could not be expected before the creation of a state system and bureaucracy to maintain them and administer their activities. Galleys in the Mediterranean drew on this form of labor (as well as on nonconvict slaves) from antiquity to the eighteenth century, but it is unlikely that convicts ever formed more than a tiny share of either the labor force or, more broadly, the unfree, even in societies with sophisticated state structures. The same is true of indentured servitude and contract labor, which did not appear at all until the seventeenth century and thereafter never accounted for anything approaching majority status in any society. Serfdom, by contrast, was usually widespread if it existed at all, especially if we define it in the broadest possible way to include all relationships where individuals gained access to land to produce their own commodities in exchange for varying circumscriptions of personal actions and the acknowledgment of obligations to others.

The chronology of the initial appearance of the three systems discussed in this chapter broadly follows the order in which they were described. Slavery dedicated to augmenting the numbers and sustaining the identity of societies or religions is usually associated with Islam, sub-Saharan Africa, or the indigenous Americas, but it now seems to have application for many parts of the premodern world. As that world is also largely pre-orthographic, historical evidence of it tends to come from oral tradition or from those post-orthographic societies with which the premodern society interacted. This means essentially that evidence of such slavery is scarce in the years before Chinese and European expansion, but there seems little reason to doubt that it existed and, indeed, may well have been universal in post-neolithic societies. More broadly, an argument might be made that the basic social structure in such environments was not class but kinship, and that slavery was a normal component of kinship structures. This is not to suggest that slavery then was widespread. Too many slaves would be likely to overwhelm the absorptive function of the institution and threaten collective identities – as indeed happened in several indigenous American societies in the aftermath of the demographic calamity triggered by Old World contact. A slave in the two later types of slave systems described earlier was usually without any rights in law and passed on his or her status to any offspring. In kin-based societies, by contrast, slaves or their descendants might gradually receive back certain rights as they

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demonstrated acceptance of kinship identity through their behavior. As there is no clear dividing line between slave and nonslave, assessments of the extent of such slavery must necessarily be fragile. Nevertheless, in the absence of severe demographic stress, people without rights at any given point in time must have formed a very small proportion of the populations of kin-based societies. From another perspective, however, one that counts as servile all those who were not full members of the kin group and were therefore in part dependents of those who were full members, then we might say that the servile would often, perhaps normally, account for the majority of the population.

Systems of slavery dedicated to the extraction of labor, whether for public projects or for the production of export crops organized for the benefit of private individuals, are normally associated with stratified societies that have moved some distance beyond the agricultural revolution. When these appear, it is possible to think in terms of “slave societies” instead of “societies with slaves,” to use Moses Finley’s well-known designations. It is also probable that slavery of this type was what the major social science modelers of slavery, both Marx and Engels, Nieboer, and Domar, had in mind. Indeed, this form of slavery is what most people have in mind when they think of the subject at all, especially those who have used the term “slavery” to draw attention to abusive or exploitative labor situations from early times to the present day. Many Caribbean islands had more than three quarters of their populations as chattel slaves with no prospect of change of status prior to the abolitionist era. Brazil probably approached a point where half of its population was enslaved at several points prior to the early nineteenth century. Yet because of the absolute nature of the definition of slavery in these societies, and the rarity of any intermediary category between slavery and freedom, the proportion of the population that had full rights was actually quite high from the global historical perspective adopted here, and high, too, compared to the share of free people – using here modern definitions of freedom – that existed in the countries of Western Europe that owned these islands. Though the share of slaves in Rome, Greece, and the slave Americas was much higher than was ever the case in kin-based societies that used slavery as a way of augmenting their numbers and sustaining their identities, there have been relatively few “slave societies” in history. They appeared relatively late in human social evolution, and though they have had a very high profile in recorded history – being associated usually with imperial systems and “human progress” to borrow David Brion Davis’s ironic association – they probably never accounted for anything like the majority of slaves on the globe at any point in history. Thus, most slaves in history have experienced their servitude in what are today termed premodern social environments. It also seems highly probable that the number of slaves in the Americas has always lagged behind the number of serfs in the Old World.