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

Seymour Drescher

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Abolition

A History of Slavery and Antislavery

In one form or another, slavery has existed throughout the world for millennia. It helped to change the world, and the world transformed the institution. In the 1450s, when Europeans from the small corner of the globe least enmeshed in the institution first interacted with peoples of other continents, they created, in the Americas, the most dynamic, productive, and exploitative system of coerced labor in human history. Three centuries later, these same intercontinental actions produced a movement that successfully challenged the institution at the peak of its dynamism. Within another century, a new surge of European expansion constructed Old World empires under the banner of antislavery. However, twentieth-century Europe itself was inundated by a new system of slavery, larger and more deadly than its earlier system of New World slavery. This book examines these dramatic expansions and contractions of the institution of slavery and the impact of violence, economics, and civil society on the ebb and flow of slavery and antislavery during the last five centuries.

Seymour Drescher is University Professor of History and Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. He has taught at Harvard University and was Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Dr. Drescher has also been a Fulbright Scholar, an NEH Fellow, and a Guggenheim Fellow, and he was both a Fellow and the inaugural Secretary of the European Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Among his many works on slavery and abolition are *Capitalism and Antislavery* (1986); *From Slavery to Freedom* (1999); and *The Mighty Experiment* (2002), which was awarded the Frederick Douglass Book Prize by the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition in 2003. He has also co-edited a number of books, including *A Historical Guide to World Slavery* (1998) and *Slavery* (2001).

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To Abiona, Samuel, and Jesse

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Preface

As an institution of global proportions, slavery's fortunes rose and fell over the course of half a millennium. This book examines the intercontinental interaction of violence, economics, and civil society in accounting for the ebb and flow of slavery and antislavery. For thousands of years before the mid-fifteenth century, varieties of slavery existed throughout the world. It thrived in its economically and culturally developed regions.¹ The institution was considered indispensable for the continued functioning of the highest forms of political or religious existence. It set limits on how a social order could be imagined.

Beyond the organization of society, enslavement was often conceived as the model for the hierarchical structure of the physical universe and the divine order. From this perspective, in a duly arranged cosmos, the institution was ultimately beneficial to both the enslaved and their masters. Whatever moral scruples or rationalizations might be attached to one or another of its dimensions, slavery seemed to be part of the natural order. It was as deeply embedded in human relations as warfare and destitution.

By the sixteenth century, however, some northwestern Europeans began to recognize an anomaly in their own evolution. Jurists in the kingdoms of England and France noted that slavery had disappeared from their realms. They claimed that no native-born residents were subject to that status. Although slavery might be recognized elsewhere as one of the normal facts of social relations, their own laws had ceased to sanction it. A "freedom principle" was now operative, for both their own native-born residents and even foreign slaves who reached their legal jurisdictions ceased to be slaves.²

¹ For a lucid overview of these themes see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), Part One, and Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 2.

² For some summaries of the "freedom principle," see Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York:

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The jurists of this freedom principle necessarily viewed their emancipatory enclave as a peculiar institution. Beyond their own “free air” or “free soil,” slavery remained a recognized legal status. There was no question that if the subjects of their realms entered zones of enslavement, they might still be reduced to the status of chattel.

For more than three centuries after 1450, Europeans, Asians, and Africans helped to sustain and expand slavery. Western Europeans did so far beyond their own borders. By 1750, some of their imperial extensions were demographically dominated by slaves to a degree unprecedented anywhere on earth. Their colonies were sites of systematic exploitation unparalleled in their productivity and rates of expansion.

At the end of the eighteenth century, this robust transoceanic system entered a new era of challenge, spearheaded by the emergence of another northwestern formation – organized antislavery. On both sides of the Atlantic, residents of the world’s most dynamic and efficient labor systems were also among those most committed to the extension and consolidation of the freedom principle. In the course of little more than a century, between the 1770s and the 1880s, that vast transoceanic extension of slavery created after 1450 was dismantled. The transatlantic slave trade that had once loaded more than 100,000 Africans per year was abolished. By the 1880s, the institution of slavery was abolished throughout the New World.

Then, in a second wave of European expansion from the 1880s to the 1930s, imperial dominion operated under the banner of antislavery, not slavery. By the early twentieth century, the institution’s former quasi-universal status as a normal element of human existence had been revisioned as an institution fated for inexorable extinction. A world without slaves was now a casually accepted premise of human progress.

That was hardly the end of the story, however, during the second quarter of the twentieth century, slavery dramatically reappeared on the very continent that had prided itself as humanity’s engine of emancipation against a “crime against humanity.” For a brief moment, Europe housed the largest single slave empire in five centuries of modern history.

Viewing these centuries of slavery, this book poses a number of questions. How did societies with the least involvement in slavery “at home” manage to create overseas extensions with the highest percentages of human chattel in the history of the world? How did new civil and political formations within and beyond Europe turn the tide of human affairs against that slave system at the very peak of its performance? How did a second age of empire-building

Oxford University Press, 1996); and Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), ch. 1, 2. For recent overviews of the *long durée* of slavery see *Women and Slavery*, 2 vols., Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller, eds. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007–2008); and *Slave Systems Ancient and Modern*, Enrico dal Lago and Constantina Katsari, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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in the Old World construct a more ambiguous emancipation strategy under the banner of imperial antislavery? And, how did antislavery's vanguard continent reconstruct slavery in the twentieth century?

The examination of any complex process over so vast a period of world history produces a pervasive awareness of any single historian's limitations. In this project, I have had to wander far beyond the line of my comfort zone and the major areas of my own previous research. It is nearly impossible to master the cascade of scholarship that has inundated the fields of slavery and abolition during the past half century of historiography.³ I have been compelled to rely, as never before, on colleagues quite close to home. For their generous comments and caveats, I offer my deepest thanks to many members of that close-knit collective that is our History Department: Reid Andrews; William Chase; Alejandro de la Fuente; Christian Gerlach; Van Beck Hall and Patrick Manning, who read portions of this study in their areas of expertise. My dean, John Cooper, generously provided me with that invaluable ingredient at a critical moment – free time. My secretary, Patty Landon, efficiently moved the manuscript through the inevitable stages of fine tuning. A number of our graduate research students offered me substantial research and bibliographical assistance: Karsten Voss, Delmarshae Sledge, Bayete Henderson, and Jacob Pollock. Margaret Rencewicz helped to compile the index.

The footprints of those who aided this study are abundantly evident in the footnotes. I must, however, single out two individuals. As he invariably has done since the first draft of my first venture into the history of slavery, my dear friend and critic, Stanley Engerman of the University of Rochester, read the entire manuscript in its initial (and rough) draft. He was generously seconded by Frank Smith of Cambridge University Press on the final version of the manuscript.

Because I speak so frequently of fifty-year segments of historical change in this study, it seems appropriate to note that its publication marks half a century of scholarship. I take this opportunity to recall the departed who determined my trajectory toward and within the writing of history: Hans Kohn at the City College of New York; and George L. Mosse at the University of Wisconsin. Nor can I omit, among the living, David Brion Davis of Yale University, with whom I have remained in continuous dialogue for four decades.

Finally, I thank Ruth, as, and for, always.

³ I have attended less to East Asian slavery in this study of the global rhythms of slavery and antislavery. China, Korea, and Japan all exhibited their own variants of the institution. For the most part, their institutions followed internal cycles, independent of developments beyond the region. Where I did find congruences, I attempted to incorporate them into this account.