

Introduction

This book will examine the interplay of various factors that influenced American perceptions of slavery and other forms of unfree, coerced or forced labour in the period after the emancipation of slaves within its own borders. It argues that while, undoubtedly, the shadow of antebellum chattel slavery loomed large in the American imagination, as influential was the model of imperial antislavery practised by European powers, especially after the United States itself developed an overseas empire in the 1890s. However, representations of slavery were not only a battleground on a geopolitical level. They were also used to work out the significance of competing scientific racial ideas, and also became a way for more radical thinkers to express their distaste for such ideas, while proposing new and more broad approaches to labour problems. Abolitionists were far from simplistic humanitarians and often their approach to the problem of slavery was a pragmatic one, designed as much to maintain control and hegemonic order as to give equal rights and opportunities to the world's poorest. This was especially the case when imagining the sexual enslavement of women, as gender and race intersected to provide a potent rhetoric intended to reinforce patriarchal dominance. This period, and especially the early twentieth century, does provide a significant evolution in the ways that slaves and slavery were described and the United States' participation in international efforts to stop the phenomenon of slavery, and also increased endeavours to stamp out coercive labour practices within its own borders, reflected a foregrounding of more radical voices of resistance to the imperial standard.

Four themes are crucial to understanding slavery in this period: how global and local American concerns intersected; how the definition of slavery evolved; how the United States used slavery to mould its post-Civil War identity; how popular culture provides the historian with a unique vision of the American imagination.

GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONCERNS

For the United States, conceptualising slavery in the late nineteenth century almost always included a reference to their own antebellum chattel slave past. The nature of slavery framed and offered a point of comparison to discussion about slavery and forced labour in all other contexts, whether in the post-emancipation US itself, in American colonies or in the world more broadly. Since 1865, the transatlantic slave system and especially the role of English-speaking North America has also been foregrounded by scholars of slavery, leaving many non-experts with the impression that it was the only form of slavery. School and university curriculums also reinforce the notion that transatlantic slavery is the foremost, if not only, example of its kind. Partly this is due to the important self-expression in recent years of the African diaspora, and also to the availability of resources to study this era. The visible legacy and scars left by the slave era on United States society and culture are also crucial here. In the period immediately after emancipation, the United States struggled, and partially failed, to take account of its slave past. By negating its horrors with the mythologizing and romanticising of the Jim Crow era, the pre-war abolitionist narrative of the importance and power of free labour was minimised, and the opportunity was lost to make more sweeping labour reforms. This manipulation of the story of domestic slavery naturally impacted on the ways that the United States acted in the world in regards to slavery encountered elsewhere.

A transatlantic abolitionist alliance existed in the early part of the nineteenth century and this affected the ways that people on both sides of the Atlantic conceptualised slavery. Britain came to define itself as an abolitionist nation in this period, with its values and self-perception underpinned by religious and economic motives for ending slavery, and thus defining itself as a modern nation. Once the transatlantic slave trade had been legally abolished in 1807, and slavery abolished in British territories in 1834, British abolitionists turned their attention elsewhere within the Atlantic world. As Maurice Brice has argued, the World's Anti-Slavery convention of 1840, held in London, had universal, international

aims, although almost all of the discussion focused on slavery in the Atlantic world.¹ Bric's work demonstrates that, although the fight against slavery was conceived as a global endeavour, it was US chattel slavery that drew the world's attention. Slavery in many locales was on the agenda at the World Convention, but it is the US context that dominated discussions then and so perhaps it is natural that scholars have since followed this lead and that the US itself found it so challenging to objectively consider slavery elsewhere. American abolitionists always had a problematic relationship with their Anglophone brothers and sisters, but shared the all-consuming goal of ending slavery within the United States. Other types of forced labour and coercive practices, wherever they existed, were rarely considered during this period, rather the chattel slavery of people of African descent was an all-consuming evil for abolitionists. When slavery was abolished after the American Civil War, the American abolition movement had little drive to reconvene and turn globally, as the British one did. Despite an interest in slavery and forced labour around the world, it was the transatlantic context which continued to draw British attention even after it had affected its own abolition in its colonial holdings. Richard Huzzey has shown that while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* created abolition fever among British readers, concerns over the aftermath of slavery in the Caribbean continued to occupy many in Britain. He sees the British and American conceptions of slavery and possibilities for its abolition as being distinct during the middle years of the nineteenth century.² I argue that this trend continued in the later period, with two separate traditions that are nonetheless of mutual influence.

As well as an ongoing concern with the Atlantic world, those thinking about slavery in the later nineteenth century also became increasingly focused on Africa and the diversity of its slavery. This had an important conceptual function because in the minds of both British and American readers, 'slavery' as a concept became something more than the chattel slavery found in the New World, and the 'slave trade' something more than the Atlantic Ocean crossing. The concept of Africans as protagonists and not merely victims of slavery was recognised by contemporaries and also grappled with by modern scholars and political leaders who

¹ Maurice Bric, 'Debating Slavery and Empire', in William Mulligan and Maurice Bric, eds., *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave, 2013), p. 61.

² Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 22.

acknowledge that reparations are a thorny issue when it is impossible to differentiate between the heirs of perpetrators and the heirs of victims. Patrick Manning's work has shown that slavery within Africa in this period was incredibly diverse and that outsiders struggled to grasp its complexity. He sees two separate systems at work with two very different demographic drivers: the East African and West African slave systems.³ This goes some way to explaining the early confusion and misunderstanding on the part of Americans about the East African slave system, and the desire of conservative American commentators to use global slavery to deflect attention from America's recent history of slavery.

British and American attention when examining slavery was not solely focused on the African continent. The British were increasingly becoming interested in the Ottoman Empire and their reporting of conditions of enslavement found there also caught the imagination of the American public. Yusuf Hakan Erdem has explored the ambivalence of British and American audiences who, on the one hand, railed against such backwards and cruel forms of oppression, but at the same time felt powerless to intervene because slavery was thought to be so embedded within Ottoman culture.⁴ The nature of slavery, especially its distinctive features such as the military slaves of the *devshirme* and the female slavery of the Harem fascinated Western readers, who deployed the Orientalist gaze in their assessment of the perpetrators and victims of the system. The plight of female slaves in the Ottoman Empire, prominent in American newspapers in the 1870s, prefigured, by a generation, the later 'white slavery' panic which operated on both sides of the Atlantic, in which campaigners, often with a conservative agenda to reinforce the patriarchy by restricting the movement and freedoms of single women, especially in urban areas, highlighted or over exaggerated the plight of white women trafficked to or within the United States for use as prostitutes. Therefore, slavery and forced labour was a fact of life for many people around the globe – the Americas, Africa and the Middle East and elsewhere – but it was also a global phenomenon in another way. Matthew Hopper argues that slavery in the Indian Ocean world, as well as the Atlantic world, cannot be considered closed systems; both were influenced by global economic trends and developments. To imagine that Indian Ocean slavery was isolated and unique, timeless and static or of a peculiar nature due to the

³ Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 45, 175.

⁴ Yusuf Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise 1800–1909* (Macmillan, 1996), p. 72.

ethnic and religious origin of its perpetrators, is to fall into the trap of listening too closely to the nineteenth century travellers who elucidated it for readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Instead, the demand for labour on the plantations supplying tropical products, which were increasingly sought after in an age of global markets, worked in similar ways on slave trades and slaveries around the world.⁵ However, this was also an era in which, increasingly, legal prohibition of the slave trade and slavery impacted on the ways that Americans imagined slaves and slave owners, as local, national and international law worked to fix, but ironically to make more malleable, the definition of slavery.

LEGAL PROHIBITION AND THE DEFINITION OF SLAVERY

The long history of slavery and abolition reveals the incredible diversity in the nature of slavery itself, but also in the ways that it was abolished in different contexts around the world. Abolition could be immediate, as in southern states of the United States, or gradual, as in some northern states, which, for example, began by freeing slaves of particular ages. Abolition was driven by a grass roots movement and resisted by slave-owning power brokers, as in the case of the transatlantic slave trade in Britain, or secured by the erosion of the control of slaves, who left their plantations and sought free labour employment of their own accord, as in the case of some regions of Brazil. A key factor in the abolitions of the nineteenth century onwards was the goal of legal prohibition. Sometimes this post-dated de facto freeing of slaves, but in many cases triggered it, imposing a change of practice on the ground. Legal prohibitions covered diverse jurisdictions, and were enacted on a local, regional, national or imperial basis. Seymour Drescher has surveyed many different abolition models in the Atlantic world region and has shown how political and economic change interplayed to cause legal prohibition of slavery or the slave trade. Crucially for this work, he also charts the importance in the nineteenth century of the expansion of antislavery thinking in the Atlantic world public sphere, showing that this impacted on the perceived potential for freedom understood by the enslaved.⁶ This book

⁵ Matthew Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalisation and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 6–7, 21, 35.

⁶ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: a History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 363.

argues that it also changed the meaning of the term ‘slavery’ itself, as the legal prohibition movement of the period solidified the definition of slavery at the very time when forced and coercive labour practices were diversifying and expanding.

Legal prohibition of slavery was a significant development because it marked not only the evolution of practice and definition within particular jurisdictions, but also represented a change on a transnational level. Jenny Martinez has argued that the campaigns to abolish the slave trade were the first international humanitarian campaigns that sought to develop a body of law that would function across national boundaries. She traces the ways in which nations around the Atlantic Ocean region collaborated, with greater or lesser success, to enforce antislavery law. The ostracisation of slave traders through this law-making process meant that by the middle of the nineteenth century, slave traders were perceived by many nations as *hostis humani generis* (enemies of mankind – the moral, economic and legal equivalents of pirates).⁷ However, while with hindsight we can see the development of an antislavery trajectory, the extent to which these laws affected the behaviour of individuals and nations undertaking slave trading practices is not always clear. And as Jean Allain’s work has pointed out, it was only much later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that international abolition law attempted a truly global, universal reach. Although in 1885, the British suggested at the Berlin conference that slavery was against the law of humanity, this declaration was not adopted as many other nations, for political reasons due to imperial competition, were loath to side with the British. However, Allain has shown that by the early twentieth century, the notion of a civilised nation dominated and nations seeking recognition of their sovereignty on a global scale had to prove they had achieved ‘civilisation’, including conforming to norms such as the forbidding of polygamy, suttee and slavery.⁸ Therefore, for the United States, emerging from a fratricidal civil war fought over the contentious issue of slavery, the attractiveness of imperial antislavery ideology was that it allowed for favourable comparisons with other antislavery powers such as Britain, and also gave the nation a veneer of ‘civilisation’ on the world stage. But nations merely publicly deploying this antislavery ideology did not always result in an improvement in conditions for the enslaved.

⁷ Jenny Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 13, 114.

⁸ Jean Allain, *The Law and Slavery* (Brill, 2015), pp. 88, 124.

Although the achievement of and reinforcement of legal prohibition was, and still is, an important aspect of antislavery work, it should not be taken as the final measure of success or indeed that it signifies no further need for abolition campaigning. Joel Quirk argues that legal prohibition often only served to push abusive labour practices geographically elsewhere or give it another name.⁹ This book builds on Quirk's point and suggests that because some practices continued to exist but no longer fell into the legal definition of what counted as slavery, actually this changed the very nature of what the term 'slavery' meant in public discourse, and it became much broader over time. Therefore, in popular literature, the legal definition of 'slavery' was not adhered to, but rather the term expanded to include a diverse range of practices. This evolution has important ramifications for the use of the term in the twenty-first-century context, as neo-abolitionists also include many labour practices and human relationships in the scope of 'modern slavery'.

This expansion is not a rhetorical manoeuvre, but rather reveals the reality of evolving types of slavery. Kevin Grant has conceptualised these as 'new slaveries', emerging because of international legal attempts to prohibit 'slavery' and because of European imperialism. I would add that American imperialism also facilitated the evolution of slavery on a global scale. Grant argues that these new slaveries differ from 'old slavery' in only one regard, their legality. The use of *corvée* and contract labour, with some labourers dislocated from their homes, moving long distances to work, as well as coercive practices designed to encourage the development of new staple crops, were all typical in imperial regions worldwide.¹⁰ Such labour situations did not go unchallenged by activists and in the popular press, but Grant argues that such moral panics as the Congo horror distorts our understanding of slavery in the period, because it suggests that the treatment of workers in the Congo was an isolated incident, whereas in truth it should be considered typical.¹¹

However, Grant's all-encompassing definition of slavery is a controversial one. Other scholars such as William Clarence-Smith see 'slavery' as something distinct from serfdom and other forms of tied labour. Clarence-Smith works on the Indian Ocean slave trade, and he argues that in that

⁹ Joel Quirk, *The Anti-Slavery Project from the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 7.

¹⁰ Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa 1884–1926* (Routledge, 2005), pp. 2, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

context, slavery existed alongside other coercive labour types. For example, in the pearl diving industry, free labourers worked alongside enslaved Africans and indebted Arabs, who were working off their debts. This was because of the differing nature of slave work in this region. Rather than agricultural work, many slaves were employed in maritime and urban roles, and these better lent themselves to a workforce with a range of statuses.¹² The workers themselves understood their differing position in relation to their masters, but in this book I am interested less in the conditions of enslavement experienced by the labourers, but rather how definitions of and perceptions of the work they undertook evolved over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I argue, as Grant does, that in this period there was a trend to expand the definitions of what counted as slavery, whether for reasons of antislavery activism or, as was often the case in the United States, more conservative goals to defend a particular region against an influx of migrants. It is to the theme of the identity of the United States, and how Americans perceived themselves as individuals, as communities and as a nation, that we now turn.

AMERICAN IDENTITY

Identifying particular labour relations as ‘slavery’ in the late-nineteenth-century United States, fulfilled the function of forming a bulwark against uncivilised people and practices in order to protect the nation. In the post-emancipation era, commentators in the United States were able to label others as slaves or slaveholders for ideological and economic gain, with little sense of irony given the nation’s own recent slave past. As the United States politically used antislavery imperialism to define its humanitarian ideological imperative on a global scale, Americans also labelled ‘others’ as slaves for more pragmatic reasons. The ambivalent relationship of the country to immigration grew more fraught in this period, especially with the hardening of scientific racial discourse. Migrants from China were the most obvious victims of this trend, considered by nativist labourers to be a threat to wages and their livelihoods, but also associated with the general racial and ideological degradation of labour. Calling Chinese migrants ‘slaves’ was not a radical humanitarian act, demanding their protection, but a conservative one, demanding their exclusion. As Najia Aarim-Heriot has identified, stereotyping of the community of Chinese

¹² William Clarence-Smith, ‘Overview’, in Clarence-Smith, ed., *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade of the Nineteenth Century* (Frank Cass, 1989), pp. 3, 7.

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labourers as an invasion – a ‘flood’ or ‘swarm’ – and individuals as ‘dishonest’ but ‘servile’, was an important trend in American popular culture, especially that local to the West Coast, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Identifying the Chinese migrants as ‘slaves’ and ‘enslavers’ served the same rhetorical function: to ‘other’ them and deny them access to American citizenship. This book argues that this urge to alienate the Chinese came simultaneously from a variety of sources, the newly popular newspaper press among them.

Other roots of the depiction of Chinese as slaves and enslavers are revealed by Carter Wilson, who states that the orthodox view of modernity in the United States claims that the old planter class died and the middle class wanted to modernise labour relations. This orthodox view also asserted that, prior to the middle of the twentieth century, it was the white masses who disenfranchised the ethnic other. Wilson challenges this, saying that the white working class was not powerful enough to do that, but rather the planter class survived, reorganised African American labour, and led the nascent industrialisation which expanded the boundaries of slavery-life practices within the United States.¹³ Politicians of both political parties, still struggling with the aftermath of chattel slavery within the United States itself, feared the arrival of Chinese bonded labourers would exacerbate racial tensions and might cause race wars.¹⁴ Therefore, they were very keen that the nation be seen, at an international level, as a place that did not tolerate slavery of any type within its borders, but only if that coincided with populist aims of limiting labour competition. Coerced and bonded labour among the African American population was tacitly permitted, provided the public outcry about such practices did not become too loud.

The most significant developments in this period that changed the United States’ perception of itself was the acquisition of overseas territories. As seen in Aarim-Heriot’s work, racism arising from the working and political classes defined the citizenship of the United States as racially limited because powerful nations were racially homogenous. Eric Love has shown how that idea was also transmitted to discussions about the role of natives in imperial contexts, arguing that identifying the ethnic colonial other as a slaveholder reiterated the idea that they might never be properly incorporated into the American body politic. Such views,

¹³ Carter Wilson, *Racism from Slavery to Advanced Capitalism* (Sage, 1996), pp. 79, 94.

¹⁴ Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans and Racial Anxiety in the US 1848–82* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 10, 37.

building on the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, held that any expansionism should be undertaken for the benefit of white Americans, and not to improve the lives of native peoples.¹⁵ Michael Cullinane shows how such ideas moved from universities to the halls of political power, when during the election of 1900 anti-imperialism and liberty became key themes.¹⁶ I argue that even conservative anti-imperialist campaigners used slavery and antislavery to reinforce their position, so that within a generation, even Americans typically hostile to abolition had been able to assimilate antislavery values at the heart of their political identity. This produced an unusual coalition of anti-imperialists that included radical voices such as Frederick Douglass, alongside white supremacists such as Ben Tillman. Anti-imperialists were a significant voice within American politics until World War I, when their unity was challenged by geopolitical demands.¹⁷

The imperial adventure was also conflicting for the United States because it was unsure how to assimilate a settler colonial community into its sense of self, especially in places such as Hawaii and Alaska where natives who were ethnic others also lived. Settler colonial communities often defined themselves as civilised and modern in juxtaposition with the natives and, as Walter Hixson has shown, however much the natives mimicked white society, they were unable to achieve recognition and assimilation.¹⁸ The settler colonial community, as in European imperial contexts, made use of labour situations that were not always clearly distinct from slavery, such as, for example, in the Hawaiian sugar plantations employing Chinese and Japanese contract labourers. Another pragmatic rhetorical positioning by settler colonialists, for example in the Philippines, made use of accusations of slavery amongst natives to justify military intervention in a particular region, similar to tactics deployed and honed over decades of warfare against the Native Americans of the continental United States. As Michael Salman has shown, slavery was central to the relationship between American conquerors and Filipino natives. Slavery was legally abolished in the Philippines in 1903, but ending the practice in actuality took many more years, and Salman argues that pro-imperialists in the United States used the protracted ending of slavery and slavery-like practices as evidence

¹⁵ Eric Love, *Race over Empire: Race and Imperialism 1865–1900* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. xvi, 18.

¹⁶ Michael Patrick Cullinane, *Liberty and American Anti-imperialism* (Palgrave, 2012), p. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 179.

¹⁸ Walter Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: a History* (Palgrave, 2013), p. 146.