

Slavery

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Abstract

The author offers a history of slavery, particularly with reference to American history.

Parole chiave: slavery; Usa

Like its close relative, racism, de facto slavery was very probably common in prehistoric times. However, because those times were pre-historic, there are no records to prove it. But Thorstein Veblen was plausibly right in arguing that the first slaves were women captured in battles, and thus the first instance of private property. (Essays in Our Changing Order /1898/)

"Civilization" first took hold in Egypt and Mesopotamia (today's Iraq); so did "history." It shows that slavery in Egypt was "a product of force," wrote Veblen, "making possible an unproductive ruling class; in the case of Egypt, the priesthood."

The birthplace of western civilization, ancient Greece, was also a slave society. Although slavery is one of the most abominable of all social crimes, it seems to have escaped the condemnation of no more than a very small minority of the citizens of the slaveholding nations or of their societies' admirers elsewhere: Neither Aristotle nor Jefferson -- like four of our first five presidents, a slave owner -- found Greece to be reprehensible; nor did many free Germans or many non-Germans (nor the US or UK governments: BREITMAN) express horror as numberless people were enslaved to work in German factories in the 1930s; nor, finally, does today's ongoing slave trade gain more than passing attention, and that from a few.

But our concern here is mostly with the U.S.A. Its relationship with slavery began when it was still a colony of the British.

From the time of Columbus, slaves were just another commodity; but by the 17th century the slave trade had become a major economic factor for Britain, and its colonies in the western hemisphere.

Also, by then, enslavement had received the full support of the Church, on the grounds that the merchant slavers were providing an opportunity for Africans to become Christians -- an "opportunity" denied most of them in the South. Their masters vigorously opposed slaves learning anything, least of all the attachment of Jesus to equality.

By the next century, the slave trade was controlled by Britain. Also by then, the gains from the slave trade and the plantations of the South had become the prime source of profits and economic strength; they provided the principal base for subsequent economic development in North America. In turn, that was a key element in the larger processes of the colonialism that provided the basis for the industrial capitalism in the 19th century.

Karl Marx put it this way: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment of the aboriginal population, the beginnings of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation." (Marx, Capital Vol. I, /1867/) The manner in which the slaves were treated, whether upon capture, on the deadly "middle passage" from Africa, or after arrival, was anything but "Christian." In order to maximize their profits, the traders typically overloaded the boats -- e.g., carrying 600 slaves instead of the maximum of 415 the ships were built to carry. The slaves were chained hands to feet, effectively unable to move freely for most of every day and night -- for months. The horrible realities of eating their few scraps of food, defecating, and sleeping that way for weeks are beyond our comprehension:

Once landed, the slaves' lives -- including those of children were dominated by hard work for 12-16 hours, whether under hot sun or freezing snow. Families were broken up and separated (even as infants); were whipped and raped; were treated as though not human. When one considers that the slaveowners were thus harming their own "investments," it is easy to infer that fear and hate were very much a constant in their thoughts. (W, Nordholdt, The People That Walk in Darkness; E. WILLIAMS, Capitalism and Slavery)

Withal, slavery as a sociopolitical -- let alone an ethical -- issue, was never a concern for more than a small minority of the white populations in either the North or the South, before or after the Civil War. (M. Marable, The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life.)

But what of the Underground Railroad? The Abolitionists? And wasn't the Civil War fought to end slavery? We consider those questions in turn.

The "Railroad" and its "conductors" were people; they did not of course involve locomotives. Beginning late in the 18th century, the "railroad's" black and white volunteers assisted escaping slaves toward freedom with a pattern of secret routes that went into and through 14 northern states. Its volunteers went South, to lead the

way and to provide food, shelter, and money to the escapees furnished, in part by northern supporters. Hiding by day, moving by night, it is estimated that about 50,000 escaped slaves ultimately gained freedom -- with deadly risks for all concerned. (H. Zinn, A People's History of the United States.)

That was a truly heroic chapter in our history, both for those who escaped and those who helped them. But the volunteers and conductors who helped were few in number: the peak estimate is for 3,000 in 1850. Congress showed what it thought of their principles and their courage when, in 1850, it passed the Fugitive Slave Act: Anyone caught helping a runaway slave was subject to a crippling fine and six months in prison. Slaves were, after all, property.

The Abolitionists undertook few physical risks, but they too were admirable. It was a small group and to be part of it before the Civil war was very unpopular. It is pertinent in that regard to remember that the early 1960s civil rights struggles and the resistance to U.S. intervention in Vietnam were also carried on by small and initially very unpopular groups until the late 1960s.

In all of those cases -- as the 60s ended for civil rights and Vietnam and as the Civil War began for slavery -- a significant element of public opinion had at last begun to "change sides": so much so in the case of the Civil War that it came to be and is still cited as a war to end slavery.

But there are many reasons for understanding that the Civil War was not fought to end slavery -- most persuasively the words of President Lincoln to Horace Greeley, Editor of the New York Tribune, August, 1862:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could free it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do it. (quoted in Zinn.)

A month later Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. It gave the South four months to stop rebelling and threatened to emancipate their slaves if they continued to fight, while, however, promising to leave slavery untouched in states that came over to the North; indeed, still in 1863, the slave states occupied by northern troops -- Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and parts of Virginia and Louisiana -- were able to retain their slaves. Zinn quotes the reaction of the London Spectator: "The principle is not that a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States."

The war proceeded, always more violently, always more tragically for all concerned, with numberless shattered families and over 600,000 dead soldiers -- equal to more than 5 million today. Our total dead from World Wars I plus II were also about 600,000 (for a population more many times larger).

After the war ended, a turbulent period ensued: northern troops occupied the South, the slaves were freed, and for a "brief period..., southern Negroes voted, elected blacks to state legislatures and to Congress, /and/ introduced free and racially mixed public education in the South": (Zinn) It seemed as though a new era had opened.

It had, but it closed shut violently a decade later, with the "Compromise of 1877." Setting the Underground Railroaders and Abolitionists aside, there were two main viewpoints among the white people of the North: 1) For the men who were to be drafted to fight the war, very few wished to fight: those who could afford it bought their way out of the draft, and many of the others joined bloody riots to avoid duty -- including riots against northern blacks; 2) however, the rich and the powerful did want the war, for "the Union" was necessary to retain the markets and enormous resource-rich territory for the rapidly industrializing U.S.A.

In that infamous "Compromise," Congress agreed to allow the South to govern itself as it chose, thus bringing "reconstruction" to a halt and undoing it: that is, it assured U.S. governmental indifference regarding the physical and social treatment of the freed slaves in exchange for unlimited access for northern capital to invest in and control the South's vast mineral and forest resources, its railroads, and the like. (C.V. Woodward, Reunion and Reaction.)

Thus unleashed, the South set about to diminish the social, economic, and political conditions of black people down to their prewar levels -- or worse: There had been no KKK before the war, then there was; nor, compared to post-1877, had lynchings been common. When enslaved, blacks, although badly treated, were assets, and to some extent protected; but after 1877, as sharecroppers. they were were of no concern, except as targets:

... the white South after Reconstruction... transformed lynching into a festival of racist violence.... Between 1880 and 1930, the number of black men, women, and children who died in ten Southern states "at the hands of persons unknown" almost certainly exceeded 2,500... /3,400 by 1945/ During that half century, a black person was murdered by a white mob nearly every week in every year. (Lewis, D.L. "Lynching: An American Pastime," in New York Review of Books, Nov.21, 20

The always increasing thousands of "poor white trash" who were sharecroppers and, later, heavily exploited textile factory workers, were free to take their rage and frustration out on blacks, and did, with neither remorse nor interference. Thus, as the northern economy resumed its feeding off the South, the South turned its energies toward institutionalized racism -- with very little or no interference, until the 1960s.

(D.Dowd, "A Comparative Analysis of Economic Development in the American West and South," Journal of Economic History, Dec. 1956)

In seeking to understand the nature and ongoing consequences of slavery and racism to the USA, therefore, it is important to identify the role of the North in its existence and functioning.

Quite apart from the fact that slavery was also practiced in the North until the late 1820s, perhaps most revealing is the role of slave trade in the economy of New England. The South used and abused the slaves once arrived and sold, but the slave trade that made it possible was centered in New England. Here is WEBER's ironic comment on the sacred home of U.S. Puritanism and freedom:

The slave-trade was never a "nice" occupation or an altogether unexceptionable investment -- "balanced on the edge of the permissible." But even though it may have been distasteful to one and another of its New England men of affairs, and though there always was a suspicion of moral obliquity attached to the slave-trade, yet it had the good fortune to be drawn into the service of the greater good. In conjunction with its running-mate, the rum-trade, it laid the foundations of some very reputable fortunes at that focus of commercial enterprise that presently became the center of American culture, and so gave rise to some of the country's Best People. At least so they say.

Perhaps also it was, in some part, in this early pursuit of gain in this moral penumbra that American business enterprise learned how not to let its right hand know what its left hand is doing; and there is always something to be done that is best done with the left hand. (Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise.)

Since then, the "moral penumbra" has enlarged beyond measure, and "American business enterprise" and our government have become magicians with that "left hand" -- at home and abroad.

Whether in the deep past or the present, what became the USA was a slave society for more than half of its existence; the consequences of that for our nation's economic and noneconomic evolution cannot be measured with precision, but in both respects they were decisive.

Slavery normally implies and requires, and especially did so in the USA, a slavery-dominated society as much as a society dominating slaves. In turn, this meant that whatever business considerations were needed for the continuation of the slave-cum-cotton system of the U.S. South, they were immeasurably reinforced by the social and political imperatives for maintaining a slave society.

Slavery was the functional core, of our always richer and more productive agricultural economy before the Civil War, going back to colonial times. It was therefore also the

functional core of the always strengthening trading and financial centers of the North. From the early colonial era into the early national decades, the always accelerating trade and finance of the northern (and, later, western) cities were critically dependent upon the growth of unfinished exports from and finished imports to the South, as was the steady development of land and sea transportation. For the entire economy, until mid-19th century, the "growth point" (as economists put it) was the agricultural South, and its "growth point" was slavery. And everyone knew it. (W. Cash, The Mind of the South.)

"Everyone" also knew that the slaveholding South usually controlled the entire government of the USA from 1789 to 1860: the White House 70 percent of those years, with similar or greater percentages for Congress and the Supreme Court. Those most concerned and disturbed by this were the rising industrialists of the North. They needed an interventionist State for protective tariffs, subsidized railroads (2/3 of whose construction costs were paid for by the government), and profitable access to mines and forests. (K. Phillips, Wealth and Democracy, A Political History of the American Rich.)

Therefore, if the positive side of the slave South's role was to continue -- that is, its contribution to economic growth and development -- it also became essential to reduce its political power, even if, as Lincoln made clear, that required freeing the slaves. Even if, but only if.

The negative side is the mirror image of the positive: our people learned to see black people as "others" or, worse, not as people at all: more exactly, they were officially counted as 2/3 of a person for the voting purposes of their owners. The taking of the first steps of enslaving Africans and killing or mistreating "Indians" allowed the rest to follow easily.

But "the rest" did not end with the dehumanization of others; nor did it end with racism. It went on to the dehumanization of one's self.

In learning to ignore or overlook what we as a people were doing to others, we learned to do something of the same regarding what was being done to ourselves, and in all corners of our lives: economic, social, cultural, political, military and environmental. Abiding in or, worse, taking satisfaction in the seeing of others as less than human, we lost our ability to note that we too were becoming less than human, mindless and heartless victims of militarism, of nationalism, of exploitation, of consumerism and of mountainous debt -- easily manipulated by fear and hate and attitudes of superiority, greed and selfishness.

None of that is due entirely to slavery and the racism it depended upon and fed; of course not. But all were accomplished more easily because of them.

"Those whom the Gods would destroy, they first make mad."