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## American Slavery in Historical Perspective

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*Editor's Note: The New York Times' "1619 Project" has sparked renewed controversy about the history and continuing significance of slavery in the United States. As part of that conversation, FPRI is pleased to offer this essay by Senior Fellow Jeremy Black.*

All countries tend to consider their history in isolation, assuming a form of national exceptionalism. That approach indeed captures the specificities of particular circumstances as well as the tendency to adopt distinctive national

accounts to the past.

However, this approach is also misleading because meaning, let alone assessment, even judgment, are not free floating constructions but, rather, approaches that take on value in comparative contexts.

So it is with slavery and the slave trade. It is very easy to beat up on from the perspective of an individual state, but to do so can underplay the extent to which there is a comparative context. This is true both for Atlantic slavery and, indeed, for coercive labor as a whole. In the case of the latter, it may be all-too-easy to assume that slavery is a unique form that was/is readily defined. That assumption, however, is belied by the difficulties the League of Nations faced when it sought in 1926 to define slavery in order to act against it. In that case, differences over the extent to which both indentured labor and arranged marriages were forms of slavery immediately complicated the discussion. The League decided that neither was, but, far from that being obvious, it arose from the particular requirements of the imperial powers.

Therefore, far from presenting slavery as a unique form of coerced labor, it is more pertinent to see it as akin to, or, at least, part of a continuum with, other forms, such as serfdom, indentured labor, and convict work. All these were common across most of history, but tend to be downplayed in critical narratives due to the emphasis on slavery.

The same is true of two other elements that require consideration:

First the question, raised at the time, whether the nature of much work in the nineteenth century, for example in mill towns where workers were paid with tokens, was a form of slavery.

Second, comes the very different understanding of slavery, that of public slavery in which the very operation of the political and governmental system eliminates, or at least substantially constrains, the freedom and liberty of citizens. From that perspective, North Koreans today are slaves, as are all of those controlled by authoritarian societies.

These elements raise significant questions about the essential narrative of American slavery, and the attempt to offer any sense of distinctiveness. Moreover, broader social and economic trends take on significance. Thus, as far as the nineteenth-century erosion of slavery was concerned, a key element was that of large-scale urbanization and the corresponding move of people from the relative control of hierarchical rural society to the more fluid urban society. This arguably was more significant to living circumstances and conditions than any change in legislative provisions. The latter indeed could possibly lead only to the

exchange of the former control of slavery by a more informal control by social, economic, and political circumstances—as, to a considerable extent, happened in the American South until the mid-twentieth century.

Capitalism could act as a basic driver behind a more profound transition, as demonstrated by the “Great Migration” of African-Americans to northern and midwestern industrial cities during the two world wars. That move reflected a lack of control over labor as existed in authoritarian systems such as the Soviet Union, plus the opportunities created by economic activity. These led to a fresh process in the definition of Civil Rights for African-Americans. Differing forms of freedom/subjection were at stake because emancipation in 1865 had not settled the issue.

Similar developments marked other slave societies, notably in the two most important in the Americas, Brazil and Cuba. In each case, the formal state of slaves was intertwined with economic, social, and political developments. The most important contrast was between the United States and Cuba on the one hand and Brazil on the other. In the former case, conflict was important to emancipation, but in Brazil, slavery was ended without conflict. Instead, social, economic and political changes proved more important, notably the end of monarchy with the consequent alteration in political power, and the relative decline of the slave-sugar society of the northeast and the rise of southern provinces in which free labor was important. This change was linked to changing images in Brazilian society. Brazilians increasingly understood progress as making Brazil a European-type society, with freedom for workers requiring a rejection of the older forms of socio-ethnic distinction and control.

That the United States did not go in the same direction as Brazil was not inevitable. In terms of political structure, the United States was closer to Brazil than to Cuba, which was the colony of a European power, Spain. Both the United States and Brazil were federal systems. Brazil proved more successful, ending both slavery and imperial monarchy without a civil war, whereas the United States had its most traumatic conflict, more so, indeed, than those of the two world wars.

If the American Civil War (1861-5) was the product and proof of failure to resolve the slavery issue peacefully, then the why question becomes more significant. What about American society and politics made it impossible to dispense with slavery short of a war; leaving aside completely for a moment the continued subordinate situation of Freedmen after 1865 and, more particularly, after the end of Reconstruction in 1877.

That question invites us to address specificities and to move aside from broader cultural and social patterns of racist discrimination and ethnic control, since, as noted, the latter did not determine a given outcome. To use a very different case,

the slave work of Jews in labor camps in the 1940s was genocidal in the German case and not the Soviet one, which reflected the specifics of the ideological warfare of these two oppressive states rather than the commonality of authoritarianism. A similar contrast can be seen in slavery in Cambodia and North Korea in the late 1970s.

Control over people is a common element, but its nature varied and varies. In the case of the American South, this control was identified with a white identity focused on states' rights. Although many who fought for the South did not own slaves, the states' rights they sought to defend were defined in part in terms of the defense of slavery. In this, self-interest, regional identity, a sense of imperiled masculinity and religious conviction all played a role. Indeed, Richard, Second Lord Lyons, the British envoy, noted in December 1859: "The orthodox notion seems to be that slavery is a divine institution."

In the decades before the Civil War, Southern advocates of slavery, such as future President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, saw it as a way to guarantee a labor force in the West that would bring prosperity, by making irrigated agriculture feasible, and thus overcoming the constraints of geography, as well as providing the security of continuous white-dominated settlement, thus lessening the power of the Native Americans. Slavery also played a role in Southern interest in the United States gaining Cuba from Spain.

More than one factor was involved in emancipation, and this should remind us to be wary of single interpretations in history. That Cuba remained a slave society until Spain abolished it in 1886 reflected the range of circumstances. There was Black "agency" in Cuba in the shape of the Ten Years War of 1868-78. This saw partial abolition in rebel areas, encouraging the move for gradual abolition in the island as a whole. Yet, the independence struggle that led to this partial abolition failed, and Spain regained control. The key decision arose from the Liberal governments that dominated Spain from 1874. One also should not discount the political momentum that developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Portugal, the colonial power in Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea, the Cape Verde Islands, Madeira, and the Azores, embraced emancipation in 1861, followed, in 1863, by the Dutch, who still had a large plantation economy in Surinam, as well as islands in the Caribbean, and a developing empire in the East Indies.

The range of states that abolished slavery is a reminder of the range of states that had taken part in it. At the same time, however, this was only a portion of the slave world. Indeed, the tendency, in Western public debate, to focus on the trajectory of Atlantic slavery leads to a serious misunderstanding of its prevalence. Slavery had far deeper roots than the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which only began from the early sixteenth century. Leaving aside the situation elsewhere, for example slavery in China, Japan, Korea, pre-Columbian America, and New Zealand, all of which saw slavery, this was the case in Africa, Europe,

and the Islamic world. The prevalence of slavery in these cultures, and, in contrast, the relatively brief period subsequent to this, underlines the centrality of slavery in world history. Slavery provided labor and was also used as punishment and debt-exchange. Christian Europe became less of a slave society in the medieval period, but slavery certainly continued, as did serfdom, a system of forced labor based on hereditary bondage to the land, but with a contractualism that was not present for slavery.

In the Islamic world, slavery even more important. In large part, this reflected the extent to which slave armies were used as slaves in government. The extensive sexual economy made possible by polygamy also increased the need for slaves. Only non-Muslims could be enslaved, although slaves who converted to Islam kept their servile status. The demands of the Islamic world for slaves were the basic driver in the pre-Columbian international slave trade and continued to be significant into the twentieth century. Scholars are well aware of this, but public attention to this phenomenon, both in the West and in the non-West, is minimal. Africa had long provided slaves for Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies, but this process received renewed emphasis under the expanding Islamic states. Arab slave traders benefited from the expansion of Islam south of the Sahara, which encouraged the development of trans-Saharan trade routes along which slaves were moved. Warfare in sub-Saharan Africa was a major source of these states.

The responsibility of sub-Saharan Africans as opposed to outside elements for slavery remains a matter of intense debate. Economic opportunity encouraged slavery, but so did warfare. The relative weakness of European influence in the region until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant that they could not command a supply of slaves, although that element tends to be underplayed today. An appreciation of the context complicates ideas of reparations or apologies. The idea is inherently problematic because of the notion of hereditary guilt, which modern societies tend to reject. There is also the naivety of sorting out victims and villains over that period of time. Should the Africans who sold other Africans pay compensation? What is the position of people of “mixed race?” Even the notion of generalized African victimhood is problematic, given the strength of some of the African states that sold slaves, for example Dahomey in the eighteenth century. The complications are myriad.

The mechanics of the slave trade are themselves instructive, as seen through the example of largest market in the eighteenth century, Brazil. Plantation goods exported from Brazil—sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton—ensured that there were over one million slaves there by 1800. This economy was shaped by a crucial partnership between Europeans and élite Africans, with Luso-African

families, who spanned the Portuguese world of the Angolan coast and the African world of the interior, also having links into the plantation-owning families of north-east Brazil.

Alongside slaves from Africa, mostly Angola, there was slave raiding at the expense of the indigenous population. Indeed, in addressing the issue of compensation, it is unclear how far the claims of Native Americans should also be considered, and notably in Brazil and the United States. That is yet another issue that has so far received insufficient attention.

Ultimately, politics drives the public discussion, and ongoing culture wars encourage ahistoricism. The contrast between demands for compensation directed against the West, principally the United States and Britain, and the far less attention devoted to the same against non-Western countries is striking. Moreover, there is an unwillingness to confront the current state of slavery. Bitter and frequent warfare in southern and western Sudan from the 1960s to the 2010s, for example, has led, and still leads, to the enslavement of captured men and women. Across Africa, rebel groups have captured and capture women for sex slaves. In 2014, Abubakar Shekau, the head of the Nigerian Islamic militant group Boko Haram, announced in a video: "I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market by Allah. There is a market for selling humans. Allah says I should sell. He commands me to sell. I will sell women. I sell women." The movement also kidnapped men and children for enforced service, including as soldiers. In Iraq, the Islamic State followed both processes, and on a large scale.

To understand all is not to pardon all, but broader understanding of a moral abomination as profound as slavery should help shape better public policy. Encouraging societies to confront the historical significance of slavery is in itself a laudable goal, but the preference of some commentators for attacking past Western misdeeds rather than confronting large-scale trafficking and slavery today, distorts both our understanding of the past and also our current responsibilities. Moral condemnation of past misdeeds is important if societies are to grow and develop, but should not distract us from the challenge of trying to produce a more livable future.

*Jeremy Black is the author of A Brief History of Slavery (Running Press, 2011) and The Atlantic Slave Trade in World History (Routledge, 2015).*

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