

Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World

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Forty years ago last autumn, Cornell University Press published a revised and expanded dissertation, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* ([1](#)). The massive tome encompassed 505 pages—it was a time when university presses were not as inclined to urge junior faculty to slash manuscripts as they are today—and earned its young author, David Brion Davis, the 1967 Pulitzer Prize. Since then, Professor Davis, now the Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University, has written (or co-authored) more than a dozen works on slavery and freedom, most of them as imposing as his first. Although there is every reason to suspect that the indefatigable Davis will continue to publish, *Inhuman Bondage* reads like a conclusion of sorts, a summing up of all that its author has learned over nearly a half century of study and reflection. Readers rightly expect first-rate syntheses from senior scholars who produce these types of hefty, richly-documented surveys, but the work under review here truly is a masterpiece that will—and pardon the cliché—reward careful and repeated readings.

Despite Davis's longstanding interest in slavery, *Inhuman Bondage* began in a curious fashion. In 1994 he began to teach a two-week summer seminar for high school teachers on 'the problem of slavery.' Although courses in black history had been in vogue in predominantly white universities since the 1960s—and, of course, virtually from their inception at black institutions—semester-long classes on comparative slavery were just beginning to emerge. The 1990s in particular witnessed an explosion of monographs and anthologies on every imaginable aspect of slavery, both ancient and modern. But a truly comprehensive synthesis that reached beyond North America remained unavailable, largely because few single authors enjoyed the breadth of knowledge to craft one. Davis, it appears, is one of the few who does.

Following a lengthy prologue that explains the book's inception and describes the topics covered, Davis opens his narrative with a brief chapter on the *Amistad* case of the late 1830s. As the trial involved captives from Sierra Leone who were sold into slavery by members of their own region before being transported to Cuba by Portuguese traders in violation of Spanish law, and who then seized the vessel and sailed into the tip of Long Island, the now-famous saga illustrates the central point Davis makes throughout the text; 'the multinational character of the Atlantic Slave System' (p. 12). The majority of the sources cited here (as well as throughout the book) are secondary, but while some are as recent as 2004, other are obscure and appear in a dazzling variety of journals and published collections of documents. Unhappily, Davis's discursive notes appear at the end of the text, rather than at the bottom of each page where they belong.

An early chapter on the ancient foundations of Atlantic slavery will prove especially useful for modern students, who are inclined to believe that slavery emerged, together with cotton, sometime in the early 1830s in Mississippi. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, Davis wades into welcome, but brief, historiographical detours as he sums up the conventional wisdom or confronts major interpretations. Perhaps because most general readers have never stopped to ponder precise definitions of 'slavery', Davis slightly amends Orlando Patterson's definition of extreme 'personal domination', so that the 'animalization' of a human allows the master to deny 'the redeeming rational and spiritual qualities' that would otherwise bind the two together (pp. 30–2). Even in a time when most American high school or college students study global history, rather than merely western civilization, the classroom focus on slavery outside the United States remains the Atlantic slave trade, and so virtually all of this background to modern slavery will be an eye-opener to non-specialists.

Perhaps because it is one of the few topics taught today, Davis devotes surprisingly few pages to the Atlantic slave trade, except to emphasize just how 'basic and integral' the shipment of Africans westward was in the creation of the Americas (p. 102). Far from being a minor if tragic episode in the emergence of American colonies, the Atlantic slave systems laid the foundation for 'everything America was to become'. Possibly because he has dealt with the myth that Jews dominated the slave trade elsewhere, particularly in an insightful essay in his recent anthology, *Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (2), Davis does not mention that falsehood here. Yet the Nation of Islam's 1991 *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, regrettably, continues to circulate on college campuses, and academics who suspect that purveyors of this legend have retreated underground are sadly mistaken (as this reviewer can attest after receiving hate mail for writing a similar paragraph in an earlier book review).

Once his story reaches the North American mainland, however, Davis takes considerable pains to explore the varieties of labor found in the British colonies. Despite an earlier chapter on the cultural background of anti-black racism in the Americas, here Davis emphasizes the opportunities that Africans and black Americans experienced in the early Chesapeake. But this relative flexibility was rarely found in what Davis describes as the 'far more conservative culture of the Deep South' (p. 135), just as it also began to vanish in Virginia in the years immediately following Nathaniel Bacon's rebellion, as white planters began to slow their purchases of English indentures in exchange for bondmen brought directly from the African coast. The American Revolution shook these emerging slave societies, but not enough to deliver a deadly blow in the colonies (or states) where slave populations were the largest, and where unwaged labor was critical to agrarian economies. (Yet in a fascinating counterfactual digression, Davis wonders how the future would have been different if the colonies of Georgia and South Carolina, like Britain's Caribbean holdings, had

remained loyal to the crown, a move that would have rendered matters more complicated for British abolitionists while possibly sparing the United States from the agonies of Civil War.)

Like virtually all scholars, Davis experiences some difficulty in sorting out the organization for the six chapters that fall between the Peace of Paris of 1783 and the late antebellum period. Sensibly, Davis crafts chapters that are both topical and chronological, but this schema occasionally creates some confusion, as the actors and events covered here frequently overlapped and, therefore, defy easy categorization. The discussion of the French and Haitian Revolutions logically follows American independence, although the slave rebel Gabriel, who first appears in the latter, was inspired in part by the revolt in Haiti. British abolitionists appear after two chapters on the rise of the cotton South, although some of their earliest successes, such as the Somerset decision of 1772, occurred on the eve of the American Revolution. A chapter chronicling most of the major nineteenth-century slave revolts and conspiracies properly follows a discussion of slave (and free black) life in the early national South, but black activist David Walker appears in cameos in chapters from the American Revolution to abolitionism. To the extent that young Walker almost certainly knew the militant antislavery rebel Denmark Vesey during his brief time in Charleston—and here, it should be noted, Vesey remains a rebel, contrary to some recent depictions—separating blacks like Vesey into the chapter on slave rebellions while relegating Walker to that on antislavery demonstrates the difficulty in drafting topical chapters about decades characterized by geographical movement and shifting ideological positions.

When it came to shifting positions, of course, Abraham Lincoln was the undisputed master. For those who are inclined to insist that Lincoln was either an avowed racist or devout champion of civil rights—and both extreme positions may be found in the recent literature—Davis's chapter on the Civil War will come as a revelation. Charting the course of Lincoln from a young antislavery politician who openly acknowledged his own prejudice to a determined president willing to employ black troops to crush the planter rebellion, Davis details the Republican's evolving thought on race, as well as his occasional backsliding toward conservative policies like the colonization of freed people in Africa, a position that Lincoln abandoned only reluctantly. The idea of removing former slaves back to the lands of their ancestors was a complicated (if morally unattractive) program that modern historians tend to simplify, but Davis here, as he has elsewhere, discusses this plan with sensitivity. As a former Whig and a disciple of Henry Clay, Lincoln had long endorsed colonization, but as president, Davis observes, Lincoln was also inclined to endorse the policy 'as a way of preparing the racist white American public for universal emancipation', just as he realized that some free blacks might actually wish to emigrate to Liberia 'to escape a racist society' (p. 318).

On occasion, Davis supports his analysis with a personal story, such as his experience with black soldiers as an eighteen-year-old sailor in the last days of World War II. As fascinating as some of these anecdotes are, they detract from the central narrative of *Inhuman Bondage* and should perhaps have been nestled within his detailed endnotes—or reserved for the historian's autobiography that many readers hope will be Davis's next thick book.

Notes

1. D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. B. Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven, 2001). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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