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Children in Slavery Through The Ages

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As the editors? introduction notes, this is the first of two volumes examining the subject of children in slavery, in a pioneering attempt to expose at least part of an area that ?has only recently become the focus of academic research? (p. 1). Consequently, it offers comparative examples of children in slavery from the 8th up to the 20th centuries, and across broad geographical areas, from America through to Africa and China. There is no doubt that most attention in the historiography has been paid to the experience and incidence of adult male slaves, with some more recent discussion of women in slavery. But while it remains difficult to establish the extent to which child slavery existed in the pre-modern world, there is evidence that the proportion increased significantly from the later 18th century, at least as far as this is possible to measure, and today children form a considerable proportion of those who fall under the rubric of ?modern slavery?.

The editors quickly outline two of the key definitional problems: firstly, what is slavery; and secondly, what is a child? The former, of course, has ramifications in all areas of slave studies, although some measure of consensus has emerged at least in relation to the common linguistic basis of the word ?slave? in European languages. As the editors note, however, this cannot be easily extended beyond the Atlantic world where there were numerous forms of bondage that shifted and overlapped across time and space. Slaves did not

only appear as chattels without basic civic rights who transmitted their status to their offspring, but also as agents within a broader range of status possibilities, some of which could lead to positions of considerable wealth and influence. With regard to the latter problem, defining what is meant by a child has also proved challenging, but largely because of arbitrary boundaries ? at least when considered comparatively ? that determine the point at which access to certain social institutions is granted. While in line with the most western countries, the United Nations currently defines anyone under the age of 18 as a child, differential ages exist for: entering the work force; joining the army or navy; marrying; drinking alcohol; voting; and driving. Defining childhood is equally problematic in the past. Arriving at the entrepôt of Arguin on the West Coast of Africa in the 16th century, for example, slaves were usually divided by merchants according to age and sex; but since precise ages could rarely be established, individuals were often distinguished by their stage of maturation, the referent being certain physical characteristics, such as the appearance of bodily hair. Even where ages were known, the boundary to adulthood could vary considerably. British officials in the Moluccas defined children in 1804 as all those aged ten or less; in the Mascarenes, under French control, girls and boys were generally understood to enter adulthood at the age of 15.

The organisation of the volume is thematic rather than chronological, and broken down into two sections: section one is entitled ?The Trades in Slave Children?; and section two ?The Treatment and Uses of Slave Children through the Ages?. This second section has a further subdivision into Part A, ?Children Acquired for Social, Political and Domestic Roles; and Part B, ?Children in Commercial Slaveries?.

The first two chapters provide at least a measure of quantification within which to set the scene. The volume opens with the pioneer study by Antonio de Almeida Mendes of the trade in child slaves in the early North Atlantic during the 15th and 16th centuries. While the Portuguese trade in black Africans began as early as the 13th century, by the early 16th century ? the first time that complete figures for the trade between Portugal and Africa become available ? children and women were making up more than 70 per cent of the slaves that were exported from Arguin to Portugal, in order to satisfy a long-standing demand for women and children, both black and white, in the spheres of domestic and sexual work. Mendes offers some useful price data: adult men and women were traded at the same price; children between the ages of six and seven were worth 40 to 45 per cent of the adult price. He is also the first to suggest reasons why children were consistently the victims of enslavement, offering explanations that have their echoes in all the subsequent chapters. Along with women, children were often an easy target, and frequently became the earliest victims of feuding political factions that expanded under the influence of the Atlantic demand. In addition, slave children, especially the younger ones, tended to adopt their European owners as parents; ?when educated, converted and acculturated while very young (they) were more easily integrated into Portuguese society than adults? (p. 32).

In chapter two, Richard B. Allen shifts the focus from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, and from the early modern to the modern period, looking at slave trading in Mauritius and the Mascarenes in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The Indian Ocean trade, in which ?millions of men, women and children are estimated to have been shipped (from Africa) by Arabs and Muslim traders?, was much older, if less well-known than its Atlantic counterpart, and quantitative details remain unclear. Although Europeans traded slaves in the Indian Ocean from the 15th century, there is little evidence in the records of their activities, aside from that relating to ships bound from Madagascar, India, Southeast Asia and East Africa to the Mascarenes in the late 18th century. The estimation obtained from these records is that girls and boys were found to constitute anywhere between 20 and 35 per cent of cargoes.

Setting Fred Morton?s subsequent chapter next to that of Allen allows a fleshing out of more of the context of this trade, at least as far as its East African component is concerned. Morton?s qualitative approach extends our knowledge of the trade in child slaves from East Africa in the 19th century through the evidence of a relatively large number of child slave biographies. As on the west coast, children were clearly in demand as servants, but they also served as a highly portable form of ?small capital suited for negotiating deals, settling debts, or establishing credit? as they made their journey by degrees to the coast (p. 55). Morton reveals that children were enslaved locally by Africans, but unlike their adult counterparts, were less likely to have been enslaved as a result of war. A third of children were pawned or sold by families for debt,

for example, with the death or absence of parents being a key factor affecting their vulnerability. On reaching the coast some were put on board dhows for the Zanzibar slave market, while others were shipped to a variety of destinations including Madagascar, the Mascarenes, India or Oman. All would have suffered the trauma of being removed to a distant region, where many lacked knowledge of either the language or the people. But this appears to have been part of their attraction: the bulk were impressionable, easy to control and quick to learn, and soon developed an attachment to their masters that made them ideal servants.

George Michael La Rue?s chapter on ?Ali, the Kordofan orphan, uses the story of one particular slave child to reveal a number of features of the Egyptian slave trade in the Sudan in the early 19th century. This includes, for example, a discussion of the measurement of slaves (in handspans, from ankle to ear); the importance of making sure a slave was healthy; the problems of small-pox; and the use and dangers of castration. The story also captures the mentality of abolitionist sympathisers who sought to use ?Ali to disprove the inferiority of Africans, and the level of depravity that was associated with enslaving societies: ?Buyers in Cairo showed a strong preference for young, newly-imported slaves in the belief that their morals had not yet been corrupted? (p. 79). It also highlights a very important aspect of the history of slavery that is often overlooked: the problem of illegality. Those researching modern forms of child slavery tend to assume that because slavery was legal in the past, all forms of slavery were legitimate.(1) A reading of the chapters in this volume confirms that this was not at all the case, and that children may have been disproportionately representative of those who were illegally enslaved.

In the final chapter in section one, Susan Donovan takes a rather different perspective, looking at the trade in children who were already enslaved in America between 1820 and 1860. In the course of the agricultural revolution that swept through the country from 1800 to the Civil War, more than four million slaves were relocated on a permanent or temporary basis. This ?Second Middle Passage?, which ?tipped the locus of American slaveholding from southern Virginia to the Deep South?, was especially difficult for children under the age of 15: they formed 30 per cent of those sold interstate; and many others were traded locally (pp. 95, 89). There were some attempts to prevent the separation of families, but young slaves were often the first to be sold in times of financial crisis, and were considered the most suitable candidates for hiring purposes, their best reproductive and productive years being still in the future. Donovan?s findings confirm those of her fellow contributors. Nomads almost from birth, this repeated dislocation left children disoriented, but also ?ripe for learning the art of submission? (p. 97).

Moving into section two offers a refreshing and revealing opportunity to consider the lives of an exclusively non-Western collection of children in more unusual forms of bondage. The first section opens with the work of Kristina Richardson, and the main problematic in the Islamic sphere ? that ?there can be no single model for the study of slavery in Islamic societies? (p. 105). She locates her study of the singing slave girls of the ?Abbasid court in the broader context of elite female slavery, arguing that it should be read against both the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, and the Pattersonian elaboration of it: in the world of medieval Islam ?domination of master over slave was not fixed and absolute? (p. 106). The singing slave girls or qiyan of the ?Abbasid court were purchased typically as children. Since Muslims could not be legally enslaved, they were usually imported from areas outside the central lands of Islam, and once acquired, were rigorously trained in music, poetry and Arabic; consequently they were greatly appreciated in elite circles. And since the slave who bore her Muslim master a child enhanced her legal status, motherhood presented a unique opportunity for female slaves to better their social position. Nevertheless, the qiyan held a liminal position in Arabic society because ?a fine line was drawn between performers and prostitutes, and one group was often associated with the other? (p. 109).

Liminality is a key feature of all the discussions in this section of the book. In the second chapter Gulay Yilmaz describes the training of young Christian children conscripted into the Ottoman Empire through the *dev?irme* system. The boys were usually between ten and 18 years of age, ?able-bodied, handsome, clever, unmarried, uncircumcised, well brought up, and of ?good birth?? (p. 9). As in the case of the singing slave girls, they were given careful training, and could rise to positions of significant power. But the legality of the *dev?irme* system has been subject to considerable scholarly scrutiny, and the designation of a *dev?irme* as a *kul* rather than an *abd* (a definition used explicity to describe a purchased slave) which gave him privileges

that distinguished them from other subjects of the Sultan, refers us back to the difficulty historians have to contend with in defining a slave.

If the liminality of the *dev?irme* revolved around issues of legal and social status, that of the palace eunuchs in China, as outlined in the next chapter by Bok-Rae Kim, was most notably sexual, and engineered primarily for that reason ? the protection of the imperial harem. Again there were considerable advantages to be gained, and such were the opportunities for the sexually impotent in ancient and medieval China that some individuals were prepared to undertake self-castration in order to further their positions, despite the extremely high death rates for surgical castration of between 20 and 50 per cent. Of all the chapters in the volume, Bok-Rae Kim?s discussion of palace eunuchs is perhaps least tailored to the title of the book, but it nevertheless proves especially revealing about the treatment of children: of eunuchs deliberately castrated for the purposes of social or political advancement, most underwent the process at the hands of their parents, who would tie off the genitals of a newborn son with a silk thread, leaving them to wither and eventually fall away. Children were then central to the making of eunuchs in this system, and peculiarly vulnerable to their parents? demands.

The attitudes of parents, along with the simple fact of their presence ? or lack of it ? had implications for children in other areas of Chinese life. In the last chapter of this section, Pauline Pui-Ting Poon examines the well-being of *mui tsai*, purchased domestic servants in early twentieth century Hong Kong, of whom there were nearly 6, 000 under the age of 14 in 1921. Those most vulnerable were frequently under the age of 15, and were characteristically homeless and orphaned. Conceived as a charitable practice, the buying and selling of children in general, and of girls in particular, had been a feature of Chinese life for many centuries, both as a means to alleviate poverty, and to save the lives of unwanted female children. The system of *mui tsai*, which has many similarities with the modern *restavèc* system in Haiti, was nevertheless open to considerable abuse, from the initial abduction, to the gross cruelty some suffered at the hands of their masters, to the resale of girls either as *mui tsai* or as prostitutes.(2)

In the final section, ?Children in Commercial Slaveries?, the book returns to its former Atlantic focus. Here, Pierre H. Boule looks at a very different form of cruelty, the young black slaves who became the playthings of the aristocracy in late 18th-century France. The presence of slave children was often a direct contravention of French law, since only plantation owners were allowed to bring slaves to France, and only then in order to train or religiously educate them. Yet there were ?little black domestics? at the court at Versailles, and satirists mocked the fashion for black slave children who provided a substitute for exotic pets. Of the non-white population who were brought to France, half of the males had been brought before the age of 15 and the same proportion of the girls before 18; there was also a considerable non-white native population, often with a white mother and a freed black father. The main occupation for all non-whites in France was domestic service, including nearly 40 per cent of those below the age of 13, although some were apprenticed or educated for a trade or profession. In the reversal of the normal model of master-slave sexual exploitation, however, male slaves, much more so than female, tended to be freed on attaining adulthood. Boule suggests this reflects the perceived sexual danger presented by favoured boys to their mistresses as they grew to maturity.

The final two chapters focus on opposing aspects of parental loss. The first of these, Kenneth Morgan?s essay on the subject of infant mortality in the British Caribbean, makes for sobering reading as it reveals that between 25 and 50 per cent of all slave children died before the age of five. In a sensitive reassessment of the causes of this mortality, Morgan argues that there was rarely any mono-causal explanation; the agency of slave mothers was not the main cause of infant mortality, but rather one factor in a combination that included the effects of disease, malnutrition, and poor hygiene on a child that was often already weakened by the condition of its mother. The final chapter is set in the Chesapeake, as Calvin Schermerhorn outlines the fate of those orphans who were left behind in the great migration of the ante-bellum period. Here the economic as well as sexual exploitation of children without parental protection is revealed, but also the psychological strategies that children developed in order to cope with the most dehumanising aspects of their enslavement. Indeed Schermerhorn?s chapter, in revealing the incredible resilience of many children in the face of repeated separations, provides a welcome conclusion to a volume that is too often characterised by

the notion of suffering.

Reviewing of a collection of essays is always difficult because of the limited time that can be allotted to individual contributions; the aim of the reviewer was simply to provide a flavour of the excellent and varied material that is on offer. The aims of its editors ? to uncover the reasons for the purchase of slave children; and to illustrate their experiences ? are amply fulfilled. In the process many of the common denominators in the enslavement process are also revealed. Children appear as the victims of war, raiding or kidnap, often in the latter case through deceit; as commodities sold by parents and relations; and as victims of various forms of familial debt. They were easy to enslave because of their heightened vulnerability, especially when they had lost their parents, and were in demand because of perceptions about their greater malleability. The fact that they were easier to acclimatise, train and regulate, however, meant they were also easier to abuse, whether such abuse was of a physical, sexual or psychological nature. What is particularly illuminating about these essays is their potential to inform the study of children in contemporary forms of slavery, where here too, poverty is a central feature, deceit is widespread, and children are perceived as more submissive and easier to control.(3)

This volume testifies not only to the variety of work now being undertaken in the field of child slavery, but also to its conceptual, methodological and evidential problems. Definitions are a major tipping point; material is sketchy; and in addition, as the editors are keen to point out, ?whole regions, and whole sections of the economy in which children were, and still are, enslaved, remain to be explored? (p. 1). But the value of the book, to use the prevailing idiom, is that it opens a conversation about childhood enslavement that will surely lead on to further discussion.

Notes

1. Gary Craig, editorial introduction to ?Child slavery worldwide?, *Children and Society*, 22, 3 (2008), 147.Back to (1)
2. See for example Jean-Robert Cadet, *Restavec: from Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American* (Austin, TX, 1998).Back to (2)
3. Serdar M. Degirmencioglu, Hakan Acar and Yuksel Baykara Acar, ?Extreme forms of child labour in Turkey?, *Children and Society*, 22, 3 (2008), 196; Jonathan Blagborough, ?Child domestic labour: a modern form of slavery?, *Children and Society*, 22, 3 (2008), 184?6.Back to (3)

The editors will respond to this review in due course.

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