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Inhuman Bondage
The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World
Oxford Press
David Brion Davis

When evaluating an effective history book, the reader must ask three questions: What question is the historian posing, what sources does the historian use, and how effective is the historian in answering his question. In Inhuman Bondage historian and Yale professor emeritus David Brion Davis answers these questions in a scholarly, interesting and effective way. The question as to why African slavery in the New World developed, flourished and ended is complex and often difficult to comprehend. Davis uses primary source documents along with the writings of contemporary historians to effectively explain the complexity of slavery in the New World.

While Davis concentrates mostly on slavery in the United States, he does demonstrate the global reach of slavery, particularly as it relates to the Atlantic World. He addresses the connection that places such as ancient Rome and Great Britain had in the development of New World slavery.

Slave labor was instrumental to the mercantile economic system development in the Atlantic World. Slaves produced goods that European countries had a demand for such as tobacco, sugar, rice, and cotton. These goods encouraged countries to participate in the African slave trade to provide a steady source of labor. This trade could not have existed without the aid of Africans willing to participate in the slave trade. Davis points out that there was a lack of Pan-African consciousness that allowed to Africans being willing to enslave other Africans.

Davis' traces of the roots of slavery to the ancient world, the acceptance of slavery is present in the Bible, and the writings of many ancient philosophers such as Plato. Aristotle referred to the ox as the poor man's slave. The comparison of slaves to animals served to de-humanize slaves. The acceptance of the fact that some people were born to rule and some were born to serve was a constant theme throughout world history. The existence of slavery throughout world history meant for thousands of years slavery was accepted as a way of life.

A question that Davis posits is why African slavery? He effectively relates blackness to slavery. Similar to his tracing of the roots of slavery, Davis goes back to history to the belief that black was inherently thought of as evil, inferior, and slovenly. Not only was that the view held in Christian Medieval Europe, but also in the Islamic Arab world. According to Davis, the invention of race in the 18th century made African slavery easier to accept.

Only 5-6% of African slaves were sent to what would be the United States; yet by 1850, 30% of all African slaves were living in the United States. Davis is very effective at comparing slavery on the sugar plantations of the West Indies, Central and South America, where because of the brutal conditions and workloads of the sugar plantations, life expectancy was much lower than that of slaves laboring in the Southern Plantation system.

Davis maintains that the United States was not subjected to constant slave uprisings as in other parts of the Americas. He devotes a chapter to the Haitian Revolution, maintaining that the revolution showed blacks that liberation was possible. While he cites many examples to support this contention, he lacks a clear explanation why this was so. He credits self-discipline on the part of slaves, but topic needs more explanation.

Davis dispels the myth that the Southern Plantation system was weak and inefficient. He compares the Southern Plantation system with the agribusiness of the 20th century. Labor on the plantation was the early forerunner of time-motion studies. Free agriculture labor in the North was by comparison much more wasteful and inefficient.

The perception many students have of slavery is the plantation slaves laboring in the fields. Davis explains how many slaves were highly skilled craftsmen who often were hired out and had a greater degree of freedom than slaves employed on the plantation. He also describes the varying conditions under which slaves labored. Neither the notion that all slaves were ready to rebel, nor the “sambo” happily toiling under his benevolent master is accurate. Conditions and attitudes varied greatly under slavery.

The ideas of equality and inalienable rights which formed the basis for the American Revolution were not lost on slaves and, in some cases, their masters. Through the early republic, slavery was viewed as a necessary evil that would die out. As Davis mentions, many slaves owners in the upper South freed their slaves. Many Northern states abolished slavery either gradually, such as New York and Pennsylvania, or immediately, such as Massachusetts and Vermont. When the cotton gin was invented and the United States acquired the rich farm lands in the Deep South, the institution of slavery transformed from a necessary evil to an economic necessity. John C. Calhoun maintained that slavery was necessary to defuse class conflict.

Like slavery, abolitionism is a complicated topic. Early in the Republic slavery was widely accepted even if not personally condoned. Those who favored emancipation most often favored colonization of freed blacks back to Africa. It was the blacks themselves who largely rejected the notion of returning to Africa.

The connection Davis makes between the Second Great Awakening and abolitionism is an effective. Often Southerners would claim biblical passages for the justification of slavery. The belief generated from the Great Awakening was that slavery was sin and therefore inconsistent with the tenets of Christianity.

Davis claims more emphasis should be given to Great Britain's 1834 emancipation and its effects on Southern slaveholders. The economic decline in the British West Indies after emancipation appeared to Southern slaveholders as a preview of what would happen if emancipation took place in the United States. Southerners also realized that British emancipation started with the call only to end the African slave trade and blossomed into full-scale immediate emancipation. To many Southerners, the British having realized the mistake they made with emancipation wanted to recoup their economic losses by pushing emancipation on all of the Americas. Southerners were quick to point out that Great Britain had no slaves and therefore did not have to face the consequences of millions of suddenly emancipated blacks wreaking havoc on society. Davis maintains the British model led Southerners to overreact to the small minority of abolitionists. Many Southern slave owners saw a Northern conspiracy to end slavery.

In the 1860 election Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected president with 40% of the popular vote. Davis points out the concerns Southern secessionist had; Lincoln was elected president without having received a single vote in 10 slave states. Even if Lincoln was true to his word regarding not interfering with slavery where it existed, could the same be said of the next Republican president? To Davis the ensuing Civil War represented the failure of the political system to compromise.

In Davis' view the Civil War was truly a revolutionary war. At the war's conclusion, 4,000,000 slaves were emancipated with no compensation for the loss of

property. He points out that in all other instances of emancipation in the Americas, there was either monetary compensation or gradual emancipation.

However, according to Davis emancipation ended slavery, but not racial discrimination. As the historiography of the Civil War changed, the cause of the war changed from slavery to states rights. The “Lost Cause” historiography maintained that both sides were noble and heroic. Blacks were either lost in this new historical interpretation of the Civil War or scapegoated. To the credit of black writers the true purpose of the war was revived.

The end of slavery in the United States was followed within two decades by emancipation in Cuba and Brazil. As Davis points out, the Americas ended inhuman bondage even though they were economically profitable and productive.

Davis writes a readable informative book on the rise and fall of slavery in the Americas. He takes a complicated subject and gives it a great degree of clarity. Parts of his book could be very useful in the classroom.

Students often have trouble dealing with the international scope of slavery. Their understanding of slavery is confined the United States, particularly the South. Using passages from Inhuman Bondage, students can see the international aspects of slavery. Slavery survived and flourished because of non-slaveholders complicity. The “Lords of the Looms” in Britain and New England supported the “Lords of the Slaves” in the South. Northern ships carried Southern cotton to New England and European mills. Essex County shipping logs prior to the Civil War show hogsheads of salted cod heading for the West Indies, Central and South America. That fish was food for slaves toiling on sugar plantations.

Davis also gives valuable statistical information that can be used in the classroom. Statistics such as the number of slaves coming to what would become the United States

as opposed to the number of slaves that were shipped elsewhere in the America, life expectancy and slave values provide material for the statistical analysis of slavery.

The passages in Inhuman Bondage describing the life of a slave in the Southern Plantation system and slave life on a West Indian or Brazilian sugar plantation affords the students detailed information to compare and contrast the two systems.

Perhaps most important students can use Inhuman Bondage to explore the meaning of race not only to the institution of slavery, but to the meaning of race in the 21st century. Race is such an integral part on American history. The complexity of the issue is often difficult for students to comprehend. Proper use of Inhuman Bondage can help bring clarity to the issue of slavery.