Re-Examining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture

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I. My Introduction to 'The Problem'

I'M OFTEN ASKED HOW I became preoccupied back in the 1950s with what I've termed the 'Problem of Slavery' and have then continued to pursue the subject for more than fifty years. I was at least introduced to the legacy of American slavery in 1945, just after the end of World War II, having earlier been trained as a combat infantryman for the invasion of Japan.

My first taste of the racially segregated army came on board a troopship bound for France in the fall of 1945 (after landing, we then traveled for five days on railway boxcars to Germany). Still wobbly on the troopship from seasickness, I was given a billy club and sent down into the deep hold to make sure the 'Jiggaboos' there were 'not gambling.'

Until then, I had not dreamed that the ship contained some two thousand black soldiers. After winding down endless circular staircases, I found myself, in effect, on board a slave ship—or

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what I imagine some slave ships to have been like, though the blacks were not chained together. Gazing through flickering light at dozens of crowded crap games, I was greeted by some amused, nearly naked black soldiers who asked, 'What yo doin' down here, white boy?' I soon found a shadow in which to hide.

Some two months later, as a member of the Security Police in occupied Germany, I was increasingly struck by the contrast between young Germans, who allegedly believed in Aryan supremacy but seemed to warmly accept black Americans, and our own white troops, many of whom were ready to declare war on 'the God-damned black sonsabitches' who dated German girls. In a letter home, I told my parents how after some minor raid on Belgian black-marketeers, a riot alarm rang through our old German police building, one of the very few structures in Mannheim not reduced to rubble. Some officer shouted, 'Niggers!' In three minutes we were roaring in the night through empty streets in jeeps, wearing steel helmets and carrying submachine guns. Nobody seemed to know what it was all about. When we pulled up to a curb, I immediately saw splashes of blood on the sidewalk and bullet marks outside a typical G. I. club, with a dance floor, bar, and orchestra stand.

As we entered the smoke-filled room, a crowd of officers stood in the middle of the floor, with lots of blood and broken glass not far from their feet. Attention focused on an angry argument between a black captain and our outranked Southern, West Point lieutenant, who began by saying, 'Now as I understand it, these Niggers from your company . . . .' Glaring eyeball to eyeball (and I'm quoting from my letter home), the black officer stood more erect and said, 'Cut out that Nigger stuff, see!' Our commander then said 'Shut up, you Nigger!' and ordered us to prepare to fire at the black troops, some of whom were still armed.

Everyone stood tense as the two officers faced each other. Then the cry of 'A-TENCHUT!' A gray-haired major stomped in, sleepy-eyed, very plainly aroused from sleep a few minutes before. More argument and waving of arms. The black captain exclaimed that this had been going on ever since his company had

moved into the area. According to one rumor, some armed black troops had entered an all-white G. I. club, but more likely, it had been the other way around. A fight had broken out, Military Police had come, one of whom was shot, and the battle then spilled out into the street just before we arrived.

If it had not been for the timely arrival of the major, I might have been faced with an order to shoot my fellow black American troops. Later on, this racial hostility was outrageously exploited by Major General Ernest Harmon, the commander of the U. S. Constabulary, who lectured hundreds of us that the 'Niggers' were a much bigger problem than the Germans. What was especially upsetting was the way most white troops cheered Harmon on. As I wrote home, 'One of the biggest mistakes the Army ever made was race segregation, which swings the larger, undecided group toward intolerance.' Even as a teenager in occupied Germany, I glimpsed the cancerous racial division and exploitation that has festered at the core of American society for well over three hundred years.

II. The Historians' Dimension

A few years later, as I moved on through college and graduate school, I read such pioneering works as Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* and began to see the strong links between the segregated and racist army, which President Truman bravely reformed in the Korean War, and the way most American historians had dealt with issues of slavery and race.

By 1950, it was an embarrassment to find a passage such as the following in a popular history that had won acclaim from New Deal liberals like my parents: 'The slave system . . . did incalculable harm to the white people of the South, and benefited nobody but the negro, in that it served as a vast training school for African savages. Though the regime of the slave plantations was strict, it was, on the whole, a *kindly* one by comparison with what the imported slave had experienced in his own land. It taught him discipline, cleanliness and a conception of moral standards.'

I quote from W. E. Woodward's *A New American History*, published in 1936. This was essentially the view popularized by movies like *Gone With the Wind* and embodied in Yale Professor Ulrich B. Phillips's classic book, *American Negro Slavery*, which was still the only comprehensive scholarly work on the subject of American slavery when I attended Harvard Graduate School thirty-three years after its publication. In the early 1950s, slavery was consigned to a *very* marginal place in the curriculum; it was scarcely mentioned in the courses I took at Harvard.[1]

Let me give an extremely revealing example. Perry Miller, whom I considered the most brilliant teacher and scholar I had at Harvard, was the author in 1965 of a posthumous first volume of a larger great project, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War.* The book is a magnificent account of religion, the legal mentality, and science; it carries immense praise on the cover by such figures as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the great theologian and liberal minister Reinhold Niebuhr. But the index contains *nothing* on slavery, antislavery or abolition, proslavery, Negro, or race! The same is true for his Plan for Book Three, which is outlined at the end. Yet Miller was writing about the period from 1776 to 1865. As I later went through my notes, I found the same omissions in his great lecture course on the history of religion in America.

Let me add that after preparing for my Ph.D. orals in the History of American Civilization, I remained totally ignorant of the work of such black historians as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, Benjamin Quarles, and Eric Williams.

But in my last semester at Harvard, when I was finishing my dissertation on homicide, I had the exceptional good fortune to make the acquaintance of Kenneth M. Stampp, a visiting historian from

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1. William E. Woodward, *A New American History* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1936); *Gone With the Wind* (1939), directed by Victor Fleming; screenplay by Sidney Howard from the book by Margaret Mitchell; Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (New York: Appleton, 1918).

Berkeley who was working on his landmark book, *The Peculiar Institution*, which in 1956 became the first serious challenge to Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*. Like Phillips, Stampp had done prodigious research in plantation records and other sources. But unlike Phillips, Stampp based his work on the premise of inherent racial equality. As Stampp also emphasized, 'one must know what slavery meant to the Negro and how he reacted to it before one can comprehend his more recent tribulations.' I was much influenced by Kenneth Stampp, who revealed an enormous gap in my education just as I was completing my graduate studies. I soon hoped to do for the neglected subject of American antislavery what Stampp had done for slavery.

Of course the explosion of new scholarship on slavery and antislavery in the 1960s and 1970s was closely related to and nourished by the Civil Rights movement. As an exceptional example, my late Yale colleague C. Vann Woodward marched at Selma with Martin Luther King, Jr., who hailed Woodward's book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, as 'the Bible of the Civil Rights movement.' If my *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* had been published in 1946 or 1956, instead of 1966, I am sure it would not have won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction (defeating even Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*) or the other two awards I was so lucky to get.

III. Antiquity

As I began my own research on American antislavery and related reform movements in the late 1950s, I had no expectation that this would be a lifelong project on slavery in the New World, or that my planned *opening* chapter on the long-term historical 'background' would be transformed into a 505-page book. In 1958 I had been teaching at Cornell for three years, when I had the immense good fortune of being granted tenure and winning a year's Guggenheim Fellowship for my project. Cornell's library had a phenomenal collection of American and British antislavery materials, but Henry Allen Moe, the Guggenheim Foundation's

first administrator from its inception and later the first director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, persuaded me, in a face-to-face talk, to spend the year abroad, in this case in London. Mr. Moe deserves much credit for the broad scope of my book, since it was in the library of the old British Museum that I discovered the global dimensions of slavery and the surprising continuities in the history of both slavery and the intellectual responses to it from Greco-Roman antiquity to the emerging labor systems of the New World. No doubt I was especially receptive to this information since as an undergraduate I had majored in philosophy and had concentrated especially on the changing philosophical conceptions of human nature and on the history of Western culture in general.

While greatly excited in London by the expanding scope of my project, I also became worried over the prospect of spending years doing research. I had been under great personal pressure in graduate school and had done my dissertation in one year. Now, in London, I acquired another great debt, this one to the eminent colonial American historian Carl Bridenbaugh, then fifty-five years of age (I was thirty-one). Carl had also received a Guggenheim Fellowship that had brought him to the British Museum. We often ate lunch together in a nearby British pub. Carl greatly encouraged my ambitious goals and kept repeating, 'David, this is what tenure is all about. It's why we have tenure. So that people like you can take on larger projects and don't have to worry about deadlines.'

At the outset, I was struck by three amazing facts. First, even Gunnar Myrdal, who was attuned to sociology and not history, noted the long-term tendency 'to localize and demarcate America's Negro Problem.' And I'm sure most Americans still think only of the South when you mention the word slavery. Yet in actuality, if you had traveled in 1776 all the way south from Canada to Chile and Argentina, you would not only have encountered some black slaves in every province but would have found that the institution was legal throughout the entire hemisphere.

Second, chattel slavery, in which a right-less individual is legally reduced to the level of livestock or other domesticated animals and can be bought, sold, bequeathed, or inherited as property is as old as the first human written records, in ancient Mesopotamia, and has appeared in most human societies around the globe throughout history.

But third, there were no movements to abolish slavery, even very gradually, until the late eighteenth century–and, with very few exceptions, no protests or condemnation of the principle of slavery until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and then, only in areas of Western culture. As for exceptions, I discussed Philo of Alexandria's early first century inclusion of radical abolitionist principles in his idealized picture of the Jewish Essenes, a virtue not found in Josephus's account of the group or in the surviving Dead Sea Scrolls. I also examined the philosopher Jean Bodin's unique condemnation of slavery in 1586, but missed Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who in the late 300s denounced slavery along with many other sins but in no way called for any sort of abolition.

Fourth, despite this virtually universal acceptance of slavery, at least in principle, we find that in late Roman law, the Justinian Code of the sixth century, slavery is defined as the only institution that is contrary to the Law of Nature, yet legitimated by the Law of Nations. Thus while Roman law served as a basis for many European legal codes after its rediscovery in the eleventh century, and while it provided a strong precedent for accepting slavery, it nevertheless made clear that no slaveholding should exist in a purely natural, i.e. sinless world.

This *tension* between the ideal and real, which ultimately rests on the impossibility of wholly dehumanizing human beings, is what I term 'the Problem of Slavery.' It rests on a fundamental contradiction, even though it would require a particular cultural tradition for a full recognition of this contradiction. The basic concept of the slave was modeled on the domesticated animal; yet the slave's master wanted and needed *human* capacities and abilities, which were also expressed in the slave's resistance.

When we look carefully, this 'Problem of Slavery' pervades the Bible from the selling of Joseph by his brothers, to slave traders who took him to Egypt, on to the inspiring story of how God responded to the groans and suffering and afflictions of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and then helped them in their great Exodus to the Promised Land. Then we have the passage from Isaiah, which Jesus 'stood up to read,' according to St. Luke, in the synagogue at Nazareth. In this example, the ancient Hebrew Jubilee, freeing all slaves every fifty years, prefigured Christ's mission, taken from the words of Isaiah, 'to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.'

Again, I should repeat, neither the Bible nor any other known ancient sources contain a clear denunciation or repudiation of slavery, coupled with a call for even its gradual abolition. Indeed, nineteenth-century defenders of slavery pointed endlessly at precedents of ancient Greeks and Romans, who celebrated both slavery and freedom, and pointed out that Greek slavery and democracy advanced together. I have tried in my work to focus attention on the supreme paradox that Western culture has long combined extraordinary coercion and violence with a celebration of individual freedom. Defenders also made much of the fact that Jesus condemned most of the sins of his world but never slave-holding. From St. Augustine to St. Thomas Aquinas, a defense of slavery became integrated into Christian theology and thus became extremely difficult to challenge. For Aquinas, slavery was part of the governing pattern of the universe, a symbol of man's limitations and need for order and discipline. Slavery was positively sanctioned by Luther and Calvin and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation, despite the fact that the institution had long since disappeared from Northwest Europe. In 1515 we even find a fully-developed system of slavery in Thomas More's famous book *Utopia*, the picture of an ideal state still in tune with human nature.

Yet as I've indicated, Western Judeo-Christian culture transmitted a deep tension or unease over slavery, a fairly common belief

that the institution could be justified only by an appeal to our sinful nature, that it could not be tolerated in a truly perfect or ideal world. As I concluded my chapter on 'The Ancient Legacy': 'For some two thousand years men thought of sin as a kind of slavery. One day they would come to think of slavery as sin.' But let me stress that while I focused on some cultural preconditions for antislavery, I carefully *tried* to prevent this theme of tension and unease from implying that there was any teleological 'stream' that inevitably led to an abolitionist outcome.

IV. Continuities

Unfortunately, the more the complexities of the subject increased, the more I learned about the continuing historical justifications of slavery. For example, take the great English philosopher of freedom, John Locke. It is hardly surprising to read his famous proclamation, 'Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation, that tis hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for it.' Yet Locke, who owned stock in England's major slave-trading company, defended the enslavement of prisoners-of-war, as in Africa, as a legitimate action outside the sacred social contract. He also drafted a proslavery constitution for the colony of South Carolina.

The central question I began to address was what I called a problem of moral perception: Why was it that at a certain moment of history, a small number of men and women not only saw the full horror of a social evil to which mankind had been blind for centuries, but felt impelled to attack it through personal testimony and cooperative action? As I soon discovered, this question required a very complex analysis of how profound intellectual and cultural change can occur. This was the basic question that guided the first volume of my 'Problem of Slavery' trilogy, which then set the stage for continuing issues regarding the consequences of this shift in moral perception. Here I have in mind the specific events and ideological needs that led to a mass movement

in Britain for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, and then in 1833 to the emancipation of some 800,000 British colonial slaves–as well as to the fate of parallel but weaker movements in the United States, France, and eventually Spain, Cuba, and Brazil. I should mention that these latter subjects, involving the *causes* of slave emancipation, have proven to be far more controversial than the theses and themes of my first volume.

In order to understand the significance of the sudden rise of antislavery in the late eighteenth century, which I examine in some detail in my book, one must have some grasp of the striking and long-neglected continuities between Old World and New World slavery. The millennium and more of struggle between Christian and Muslim societies, beginning in the seventh and eighth centuries, including the crusades and the conquest and re-conquest of Portugal, Spain, and the Mediterranean islands, made the Mediterranean a cauldron of enslavement long after slavery had disappeared from Northwest Europe. There was a growing conviction in England and Northwest Europe that only Muslims and pagans could legitimately be enslaved. One sees this nationalism in the famous refrain, 'Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves; Britons never will be slaves,' a song written in the early eighteenth century, after many generations of Britons had in fact been enslaved by Barbary corsairs who raided the British west-country coast and kidnapped people on captured British ships. I was unaware of this point when I wrote my first volume and did not put enough emphasis on what David Eltis more recently calls the changing *eligibility* for enslavement among Europeans.

But I did examine many ethnic precedents for the later European purchase of enslaved Africans. The West European words for 'slave,' *esclave* (French), *sklave* (German), *esclavo* (Spanish) all derive from the Latin term for 'Slav' (*esclavus*), that is, a Slavic person. Beginning in the tenth century, a disproportionate number of slaves were taken from the Dalmatian Coast, and then from

the early thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, Italian merchants purchased and shipped tens of thousands of so-called Slavic slaves from the Black Sea regions to Christian and Muslim markets throughout the Mediterranean. Long before the birth of Columbus, Genoese and Venetian merchants invented the distinctive institutions that would later be applied to the African trade and West Indian colonization. Arriving on the coasts of the Black Sea in the thirteenth century, they ultimately established bases or factories which became thriving markets for the purchase of slaves. Like the later Portuguese who built forts in West Africa, the Italians were not required to seize slaves on their own. Tartar merchants swarmed to such posts as Tana, and eagerly traded their children, neighbors, or captives for precious goods. By 1300 there were even a few black African slaves on the sugar plantations in Cyprus, which had become virtually a prototype for the West Indian colonies. Some Genoese merchants who owned slaves on Cyprus later played an important role in developing commerce in the Atlantic, and Italian sailors and merchants who were familiar with the Black Sea slave trade were attracted to the first Spanish and Portuguese ventures at slave trading in West Africa.

As I've suggested, some of the Mediterranean slave labor was concentrated in the production of sugar, which was highly labor-intensive, and which slowly moved westward from Asia to Palestine, Cyprus, Sicily, southern Spain, and then to such crucial Atlantic islands as Madeira and São Tomé, off the African coast. After the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 and gradually shut off the supply of white slaves, more African slaves were transported by the Arab caravan trade across the Sahara to the Mediterranean. And beginning in the 1440s, there were increasing shipments of black slaves from Africa to Portugal and to the sugar plantations on the Atlantic islands. Ironically, I have found that in Sicily notaries making records in Latin referred to the 'sclavi negri,' literally 'black Slavs,' from Africa, who by the 1490s outnumbered white slaves on the island.

Thus, well before Columbus's first voyage in 1492, most of Europe's sugar was being produced by black slaves, mainly in the Atlantic islands. While New World slavery, which long concentrated almost entirely on the production of sugar, became highly distinctive in terms of scale, racial character, and orientation to multinational markets, Charles Verlinden, the great Belgian medieval historian on whose work I heavily relied in my first volume, was surely right when he underscored the strong and crucial *continuities* between the slave colonies of medieval and early modern times. In 1600, by the way, there were still a few 'Slavic' and Greek slaves in Cuba and other sites in the Caribbean.

V. The Origins of Antislavery

These continuities have an important bearing on the way we view the origins of *antislavery*. In effect, I argue that the continuities in slavery and slave trading from the medieval Mediterranean and Atlantic Islands to sixteenth and seventeenth-century Brazil, and from Brazil to seventeenth and eighteenth-century Barbados, Jamaica, Virginia, and South Carolina, show that late eighteenth-century antislavery was *not* a spontaneous and immediate response to a new and unprecedented evil, a wholly new kind of exploitation and dehumanization, as sometimes suggested. If abolitionists had appeared in fifteenth-century Sicily or eastern Spain, or for that matter in the Roman Empire or ancient Greek silver mines, they would quickly have found horrors equal to those in the later Americas. I have thus argued that the emergence of an international antislavery opinion, beginning with such events as a repressed antislavery petition signed in 1688 by four obscure Dutch-speaking Quaker immigrants in Germantown, Pennsylvania, represented a momentous turning point in the evolution of humanity's moral perception, and thus in the human image of ourselves. As it happened, this signified the extension of human empathy and identification to groups whose systematic *dehumanization* had traditionally cut them off from such connections of belonging, of being seen as truly human.

Some of the early crusaders against slavery were viewed as eccentric zealots, or madmen, such as the Quaker Benjamin Lay, who was disowned even by his fellow Quakers or Society of Friends. In 1736 Benjamin Franklin published Lay's wild abolitionist tract attacking slaveholders, especially Quaker slaveholders, as being notorious apostates, guilty not only of 'a Hellish Practice but a filthy sin, the Capital sin, indeed, the greatest Sin in the World, of the very Nature of Hell itself, and is the Belly of Hell.' According to Lay, slaveholding, which he had observed in Barbados as well as Pennsylvania, was 'Baal and Sodom and the black Dragon all rolled into one putrid mass of evil.'

As these words suggest, one of the key sources of antislavery thought can be found in the perfectionist and millennial Christian sects that challenged all traditional authorities and sought to live their lives wholly free from sin. In essence, their ideal involved a form of mutual love and recognition that precluded treating humans in any way as objects or animals. Since the more radical sectarian groups that emerged in the English civil wars of mid-1600s also threatened all forms of private property and patriarchal rule, they exceeded the bounds of even Oliver Cromwell's tolerance and never survived the later Stuart Restoration, beginning in 1660.

The notable exception was the Society of Friends, which early found ways to compromise with the society around it and was thus able to survive. The Quakers combined their quest for a purified life with more pragmatic and institutionalized methods of bearing witness to their faith. They achieved a certain balance between a commitment to perfection and the necessity of living in an imperfect world. In the eighteenth century the Quakers also acquired considerable economic and political power, and were the only sect to become deeply involved with the Atlantic slave system. By the early 1700s there were Quaker planters in the West Indies and Quaker slave merchants in London, Philadelphia, and Newport, Rhode Island. But during the Seven Years' War, from 1756 to 1763, the pacifist Quaker opposition to war

led to much soul-searching, to attempts at self-purification, and finally, to a commitment to withdraw entirely from slaveholding as well as slave-trading. The Quaker decision to require all members of the Society of Friends to free their slaves prefigured the Quaker leadership in the 1770s and 1780s in the first antislavery movements in both Britain and America. It was not coincidental that even in France the first abolitionists called themselves the *Amis des Noirs*, or 'Friends of the Blacks.'

But a valid emphasis on the pioneering role of Quakers leads to the question why Quakers were able to exert such surprising influence by the 1780s, for example, in pointing the way to a mass petition campaign against the British slave trade. In *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* I reject the theory that antislavery emerged simply or inevitably as the offspring of a continually expanding British philanthropy. I rather insist that one must carefully analyze changes in religious values in the face of decaying faith as well as the challenges imposed by materialistic figures like Thomas Hobbes, who had ignored the human capacity for moral feeling but asserted that all men are particles of unmitigated self-interest that require a coercive external authority if total anarchy is to be avoided. Partly in response to this challenge of Hobbesian infidelity, we see from the 1690s to the 1760s the soaring rise of a so-called cult of sensibility or moral feeling, a belief in man's inherent moral sense and natural benevolence, exemplified in responses to human suffering. Poets, novelists, essayists, and above all playwrights paid homage to this theme of moral feeling, and in so doing evoked a transformation in public values. While this pre-romantic style originally clashed with neoclassicism and with the hard-boiled realism and sophistication of England's ruling classes, by the 1770s it had made a cliché of the image of the suffering Negro slave, whose innocence and remoteness, unlike the situation of a British factory worker, removed any sense that intervention would pose a serious threat to England's social order.

That said, whether one looks at the 1790s or 1830s, two of their most active decades, most British and American abolitionists

were deeply religious and were driven by religious motivations, even though the Christian churches were very slow in taking even a cautious and gradualist approach to slave emancipation. But one important source of the antislavery impulse, in addition to the so-called man of feeling, was the new evangelical faith in instantaneous conversion and the human ability to overcome sin. In 1774 John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, made clear that the sins of the world would soon be judged and that every slaveholder or investor in slave property was deeply stained with blood and guilt. Significantly, Wesley's church soon backtracked and put the needs of mass religious conversion above the antislavery principles of its founder. Even so, John Newton, the author of 'Amazing Grace,' who as a sailor and slave ship captain had seen the full horrors of both the slave trade and West India plantations, could testify that 'inattention and interest' had so blinded him to sin that he had never doubted the legitimacy of Negro slavery even after his religious conversion. Newton's decision to denounce slavery as a crime and confess his former depravity became a model, for his pious admirers, of authentic sanctification. Little known today, such key abolitionist leaders as James Stephen in England and Theodore Dwight Weld in America exemplified the merger of passionate religious faith and keen political wisdom that powered the abolitionist movements.

The African's cultural differences, which served as an excuse for various failures at Christianizing slavery, also acquired a *positive* image at the hands of eighteenth-century primitivists, who searched through travel accounts and descriptions of exotic lands for examples of man's inherent virtue and creativity. The literary conventions of noble savages and sable Venuses, reinforced by poems and writings of Africans and African Americans such as Equiano and Phyllis Wheatley, helped to modify Euro-Americans' arrogant ethnocentrism and counteract some of the fears and prejudices that had long cut the Africans off from the normal mechanisms of sympathy and identification. For many Europeans, as diverse as John Wesley in England and the Abbé

Raynal in France, the African was an innocent child of nature whose enslavement in the Americas betrayed the very notion of the New World as a land of natural innocence and new hope for mankind. By the early 1770s, such writers portrayed the Negro slave as a man of natural virtue and sensitivity who was at once oppressed by the worst vices of civilization and was yet capable of receiving its greatest benefits.

The secular Enlightenment bequeathed mixed messages on slavery and race. The scientific classification of plants and animals, epitomized by the biological breakthroughs of Linnaeus and Buffon, involved an attempted study of human differences that led to a pseudo-science of race and racial superiority. Even Linnaeus, who resisted theories of racial inferiority, described Africans as 'phlegmatic . . . indolent and negligent . . . [and] governed by caprice.' Such great figures as Voltaire, Hume, and as I later discovered, Immanuel Kant, went much further and asserted the natural inferiority of Negroes to whites. As I note in the first volume, the statements of Hume and Voltaire helped to make a defense of the African a defense of religion itself. By repeatedly identifying the theory of racial inferiority with Hume, Voltaire, and alleged atheism, antislavery writers undoubtedly made the idea less palatable. But unfortunately, this alignment also had the effect of tying racism to secular science, which had regrettable long-term consequences, such as the affirmation of Negro inferiority in the classic 1911 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

On the other hand, it was Montesquieu who put the subject of black slavery on the agenda of the European Enlightenment. Montesquieu weighed the institution against the general laws or principles promoting human happiness, and encouraged his readers to imagine how a defender of slavery would respond to a national lottery that would make nine-tenths of the population the absolute slaves of the remaining tenth. The shocking idea of role-reversal, of having a master and slave exchange positions, became

a favorite literary device. And by the 1760s the arguments of Montesquieu, Diderot, and the Scottish philosopher Frances Hutcheson were being repeated, developed, and propagated by Quakers like Anthony Benezet and various lesser known writers.

Thus by the eve of the American Revolution there was a remarkable convergence of cultural and intellectual developments which at once undercut traditional rationalizations for slavery and offered new modes of sensibility for identifying with its victims. It is at this point that *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* concludes: with a rash of antislavery books, sermons, poems, plays, and pamphlets and with the initiative taken by individual reformers in America, England, and France, whose international communications led to an awareness of shared concerns and expectations. If I were writing the book today, I would draw on later historians who have focused more attention on the more general changes in responses to cruelty, and others who have done more to illuminate the revolutionary expansion of the media in this period, and still others who have discovered increasing press coverage of African slave revolts on slave ships, which occurred overall on about fifteen percent of the voyages.

Yet if this growth of antislavery opinion signified a profound cultural change, which influenced even slaveholders like Washington and Jefferson, what difference did it make in the end? And as the great ancient historian M. I. Finley asked in a long and extremely laudatory review of my book, in the *New York Review of Books*, why was it that such a 'revolutionary shift in attitudes towards sin, human nature, and progress' focused only on slavery and did not extend to racism and other evils of the world? As I tried to show in the second volume, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, the question of abolishing slavery ultimately became a question of power, class, and ideology, of finding ways to preserve as well as transform aspects of the social order. These issues have proved to be far more controversial than the ones I addressed in the first volume, and given the vast

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The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture by David Brion Davis was published by Cornell University Press in 1966 and won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction the following year.

avalanche of social and economic history during the past forty-two years, we have acquired a stupendous amount of new information even though many questions still remain unresolved.

No changes in the historiography of slavery have been more significant than the work of Robert Fogel, Stanley L. Engerman, Seymour Drescher, David Eltis, and others, showing that New World slavery was NOT in economic decline in 1780, 1830, or even 1860. While these discoveries had limited relevance to my first volume, I made some appropriate revisions in my 1988 paperback edition. The continuing economic strength and vitality of slavery actually reinforced my thesis regarding the central importance of ideas, moral perceptions, and public opinion.

While the American Revolution led to the emancipation of tens of thousands of slaves and to the ultimate and gradual abolition of slavery in the North, we now know that racial slavery was far stronger in North America in 1790 than in 1770 – and stronger still in 1800 and 1820. Indeed, by the 1830s the moral doubts of the Revolutionary generation were giving way in the South to strong religious, economic, and racial arguments that defended slavery as a 'positive good.'

In the crucial case of Britain, it was ultimately the unprecedented power of well-organized public opinion that overcame the nation's and the empire's economic self-interest, first, as I've said, by outlawing the British slave trade in 1807, then in emancipating some 800,000 colonial slaves in 1833, and abolishing their so-called apprenticeship in 1838. Yet by the 1850s there was a growing consensus that this once-called 'Mighty Experiment' had been an economic disaster! It was only the American Civil War that finally transformed perceptions of the British actions into a bold, pioneering moral achievement that led to the extermination of bondage in most of the world.

That said, it's crucial to note again that in 1776 racial slavery *was* legal throughout the Western Hemisphere, from Canada to Chile. But in 1888, when finally abolished in Brazil, slavery had been outlawed in all the Americas, almost exactly a century after

the formation of the first small and feeble American and British antislavery societies. Though historians still debate the fundamental reasons and motives for this revolutionary reform—some exaggerating, I think the importance of slave revolts—it's clear that slave emancipation required, as a *precondition*, a basic shift in moral perception–and that this change in values and expectations constituted one of the few clear-cut examples in human history of what I won't hesitate to call genuine moral progress.