

Slavery – a sticky inheritance

The slavery institution

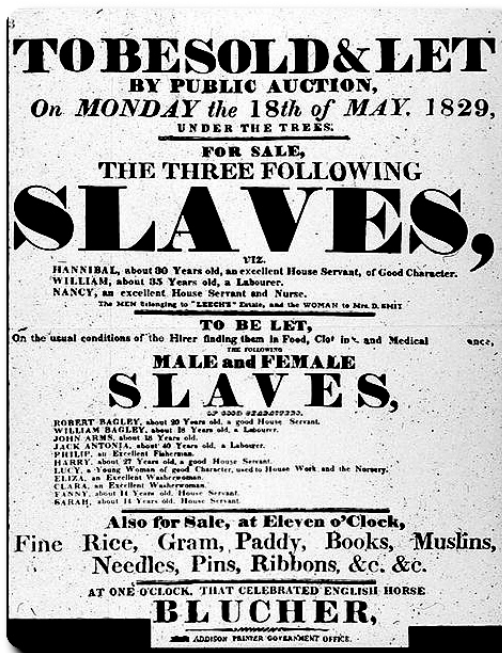
Slavery is the "status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised", as defined in the first international instrument devoted to the issue, the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1926.

Slavery involves absolute control of one person or a social group of persons, the slave master, over another person or another social group, the slaves. A major defining feature of slavery is that it is a permanent condition, often based on birth, rather than one with a fixed duration. Further instruments by the ILO (International Labour Office) and the United Nations (UN) attempted to provide specifics of modern day "slavery-like practices":

- Slavery and abductions;
- Compulsory participation in public works;
- Forced labor in agriculture and remote rural areas;
- Domestic workers in forced labor situations;
- Bonded labor, debt bondage or "debt slavery";
- Forced labor exacted by the military;

- Forced labor related to trafficking in persons;
- Prison-linked forced labor.

These "slavery-like practices" encompass situations of forced labor, where individuals or social groups are forced to work for others. Nevertheless, forced labor is a wider concept that includes slavery and other forms of exploitation of human beings.



Enslaved humans : a merchandise just like ribbons, pins, needles, rice...
[source : Wikimedia Commons].

The beginning

Slavery is an ancient and widespread practice, virtually adopted by all civilizations at some point in time. However, the carrying from overseas of vast numbers of slaves to be used as human tools for production purposes was likely started by the Roman Empire. Roman law ruled that "servus non est persona" – being destitute of legal value, the slave cannot be a citizen.

The word slave, from the Medieval Latin sclavus or slavus, for Slavic, substituted to the word serf, from the Latin servus, as numerous inhabitants of Slavic countries were enslaved in medieval Europe.

While for Aristotle, slaves were mere "animated tools", major religions had a rather ambiguous posture. Muslims considered that only could be enslaved children of slaves and prisoners of war native of nations outside the Muslim community. Christians hesitated and

debated the issue since the initial condemnation of slavery by St Paul. St Augustine (4th century) and Thomas of Aquinas (13th century) justified slavery, and the Vatican formally approved capturing and trading of African slaves in the middle 15th century.

The slave trade

Children born from enslaved people were themselves slaves, this process being the provider of most slaves for a long while. Slave trade emerged when the demographics of birth failed to meet the exploiters' needs. Historical research is incomplete as regards slavery and the slave trade in Asia, pre-Columbus America or medieval Europe. However, an increasing number of historians have studied the African slave trade, which starts to be relatively well known, in particular its Atlantic facet. Researchers estimate that Africa, with populations of 106 million people in 1750 and 133 million in 1900, had 14 million people victimized by the internal African slave trade over 13 centuries, 17 million by the Oriental slave trade between years 650 and 1920, and 11 million (of which 1.4 million died during the crossing) by the Atlantic slave trade from 1450 to 1809'.

The Atlantic slave trade required complex financial and supply chains, implying four prerequisites'. First, the development of stable, organized supply networks. Second, the

dissociation of the production place, where people are enslaved, and the utilization place, where slaves are put to work. Third, the existence of middle-men that ensure transportation and delivery of slaves to the ultimate exploiter. Four, the complicity of political rulers, administrators and moral (religious) authorities.

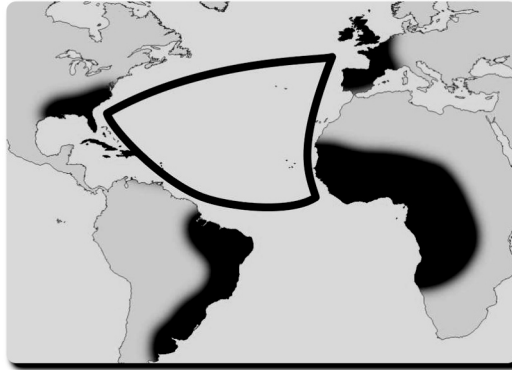
Portugal kick-started the Atlantic slave trade in the mid 15th century, and assured delivery of 49 % of all African slaves that ever landed on the other side of the ocean. Such an ignominy is strictly ignored

by Portuguese school textbooks, allowing Portuguese youngsters to enjoy undisturbed sweet dreams, and adults to remain untroubled by obnoxious facts. Nevertheless, Zurara, an early Portuguese historian²

described with occasional compassionate tones the spectacular arrival at the harbor of Lagos (a small southern sea-town of Portugal where the first Atlantic slave market was inaugurated in 1444) of boatloads of wretched African men, women and children, to be sold as slaves. In one instance, he reports the split of a lot of

slaves, under the close monitoring of Prince Henry the Navigator, the influential third child of King John I of Portugal, zealously controlling the quality of the "quinto" (the fifth) to which he was personally entitled.

This epitomizes the complex system that



Triangular slave trade : European goods buy African slaves, to be sold in America, and paid in sugar for the European market [source : Wikimedia Commons].



The first Atlantic slave market at Lagos (Portugal) [source : Wikimedia Commons].

underpinned the slave trade : strong financial backing to commission ships and crews, pay the slave suppliers, cover travel, subsistence and insurance costs; state power to protect the missions, impose rules on all involved agents and fight off competition; a network of middle-men and outposts to feed the slave supply chain; and the set of deceitful moral excuses required to brush away guilty feelings and bad conscience.

Split consciences

The Atlantic slave trade gave birth to a naughty virus that would contaminate the consciences and the minds of Western peoples, all social layers confounded, and would severely impair their morals and their logical thinking abilities until the present day.

Most westerners take pride of their civilization on two accounts. On one hand, the Christian creed, calling for universal brotherhood and compassion among people respectful of the Golden Rule : "Do to others as you would have them do to you". On the other hand, the social and political philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment encapsulated in the French triptych : "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity", that would lead to today's consensus on the rule of law, the supremacy of democracy and the human rights imperative.

But there is a snag : how could Christians and humanists alike reconcile such noble beliefs and values with the remorseless practice of capturing and tearing apart African families, uprooting millions of God's creatures, taking them across the Atlantic in horrendous conditions, and use them as mere work tools

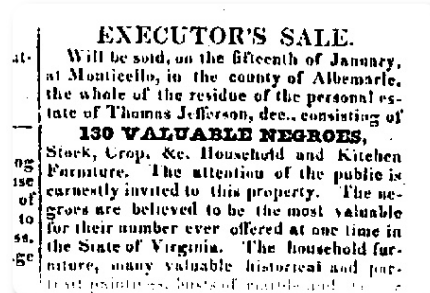
in the American plantations until their last day. How could they fail to grasp the real purpose of the murderous enterprise : to maximize the profit for the entire slave production chain from the industrialist supplier of liquor and artifacts

used as payment, to the shipping companies, the African suppliers, the slave factory middle-men, the colonial planters, and the European sugar companies.

The fact remains that even the best people could successfully extend a mantle of blindness on everything that might disturb³. The Spaniard friar Las Casas (1484-1566), deeply committed to the improvement of life conditions of the Indians, urged the authorities to further import African slaves. The Portuguese preacher António

Vieira (1608-1697) expressed in his sermons real compassion for the Amazonian Indians, without a single word to acknowledge the plight of African slaves. Ultimately, as long as heathen slaves were baptized and received the "light of the church", all the rest was excused.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment did not show higher coherence. Slavery in the colonies and the slave trade never really disturbed their minds, kept busy exploring the philosophical foundations of civil liberty, of political freedom and of social justice. Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu were at best silent accomplices, far from taking a clear anti-slavery stand as did Diderot or l'Abbé Raynal. Both Grotius and Hobbes viewed slavery as reasonable, and Locke, the influential champion of liberty, himself a shareholder in the Royal Africa Company, a slave trade



The "Jefferson Paradox" : the paladin of liberty and equality depended upon his slaves to keep his way of life [source : Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture].

enterprise, did not hesitate to grant Carolina planters absolute power over their slaves. Jefferson, the paladin of liberty and equality, drafted the Declaration of Independence, wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, yet he always depended on the labor of people he held in slavery to maintain his way of life. At his death, a public auction was organized to sell his Monticello estate, including "130 valuable Negroes".

The ability to remain unaware of the other side of reality still pollutes the contemporary minds. In 2001, the French parliament passed a "remembrance law" known as "law Taubira on slavery" that reduces slavery strictly to the Atlantic slave trade — exclusive of other slavery practices. In fact the law serves to warn historians to keep hands off. First, they must not meddle with other slavery practices, such as the Asian and the inter-African, or with historical periods other than the 3-century long Atlantic slave trade, because they are out of scope. Secondly, they must stop delving into the Atlantic slave trade, since this has become the object of criminal law, not of history. One could hardly devise a more brutal attempt to retrospectively moralize history.

The invention of the 'white' and the 'black' races

Slavery is nowadays strongly co-notated with racism. Think of slave, and the picture of a black person immediately pops up to your

mind. However, for many centuries, slaves were just slaves — without any linkage to a specific genotype. The concepts of 'white' and 'black' races were just unknown, until they were invented by the North American ruling class in the late 17th century to serve their political program. The colonial records unburied by recent historical studies^{4,5} provide evidence that there were no "white" people in North America until 1680. The black-white racial dichotomy emerged as a construct of proslavery sectors in response to labor solidarity as manifested in the civil war, and to try and preempt slave rebellions that became frequent in the Americas of the 18th century.



Slaves became "Black" by the late 17th century — before they were colorless
[source : Wikimedia Commons].

The invention and teaching of a "white" identity successfully transformed victims of racial oppression in Europe into "white American" defenders of racial oppression. In order to break the solidarity among slaves of all origins, the ruling elite advocated the myth of an innate white supremacy, and put forward the argument that it was advantageous for the white workers, whatever their actual social condition, to take the "white" European-

Americans side, against the "black" African-Americans. Measuring the maneuver by the yardstick of the number of slave uprisings thus prevented, then it was undoubtedly quite an achievement — North America did not experience anything like the successful rebellion of Haiti slaves against Republican France in 1791-1804. But if one considers that, long after racial slavery was legally done with, America had to deal with resilient forms

of racial conflict, one must concede that racial slavery has proved to be a potent poison that still derails social relationships in Europe and America today.

Abolition of slavery

For 3 centuries, the slave trade business thrived and attained high degrees of inhumanity, involving most European maritime powers : Portugal, Spain, Holland, Denmark, England and France, in a web of competitive and often conflicting interests. But it could not last forever in the changing environment of the Modern era. The Enlightenment philosophy was developing fresher mindsets. The ideals of individual freedom, equality and justice for all spread across Europe in the 18th century. Meanwhile, the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy less dependent on slave work, the global competition by the imperialist powers to dominate the western world trade, especially the competition between France and England in the early 19th century, all contributed to exacerbate the adversarial positions on the slave trade issue.

A determining factor was the string of slave rebellions, both spontaneous and organized, that gained prominence and terrified the American slave owners throughout the 18th century. Repression itself of rebel slaves, both by making it known that rebellion was feasible, and by actually publicizing the ideals of the victims, ignited the hearts of the slave populations and became a powerful brake to the trade. Thus, in 1793, the French ruler of Saint-Domingue, caught between the hammer of a slave insurrection and the anvil of the English threat, decided to abolish slavery, a step that was soon confirmed and enlarged to the other French colonies by the revolutionary Convention on 4 February 1794. Sadly, Napoleon the French "liberator" annulled the decree and re-established slavery in 1802.


The political, economic and philosophical context was nevertheless favorable to the Quaker's humanistic advocacy in England and North America, who put forward convincing arguments in support of the eventual abolition of the slave trade (England, 1808) and, subsequently, the abolition of slavery (England, 1833) itself. Other nations followed, with more or less slow reluctance, and varying degrees of effectiveness. It is noteworthy to recall the preamble of the 1848 French decree that put a definite end to slavery in France : "there will be no slaves nowhere in the territory of France" — yet large scale slavery persisted in Equatorial French Africa, at least until 1906⁶.

Slavery eradication : not yet there

By the end of the 20th century, eradication of modern day slavery was still work in progress, as evidenced by the need for further international law instruments to address the issue, such as:

- 1926 League of Nations Slavery Convention;
- 1930 ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29);
- 1950 European Convention on Human Rights on slavery, servitude and forced labour;
- 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the abolition of slavery, the slave trade, and institutions and practices similar to slavery;
- 1957 ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105);
- 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

The first decade of the 21st century could have been a step forward — instead it was a period of regression. New estimates raise to 21 million the number of people that fall victim of modern-day slavery worldwide. Forced

labor is making a comeback into the legislation of democratic states, under the disguise of "workfare laws" — there is yet a stretch to go until the slavery temptation is definitively eradicated. 

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Source :

http://stats.areppim.com/glossaire/slavery_def.htm
