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The Scholar Who Shaped History

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Issue

The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation

by David Brion Davis

Knopf, 422 pp., \$30.00



Granger Collection

'Slaves Waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia'; painting by Eyre Crowe, 1861

Since the middle of the twentieth century, our understanding of the American past has been revolutionized, in no small part because of our altered conceptions of the place of race in the nation's history. And that revolution has taken place largely because of a remarkable generation of historians who, inspired by the changing meanings of freedom and justice in their own time, began to ask new questions about the origins of the racial inequality that continued to permeate our segregated society nearly a century after slavery's end.

Published in 1956, just two years after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision called for school integration, Kenneth Stampp's pathbreaking *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* turned prevailing wisdom on its head. His history, written

with a premise of fundamental black and white equality, yielded insights about slavery quite unlike the conclusions of earlier writings based on unquestioned assumptions of black inferiority. The leading early-twentieth-century historian of slavery, Ulrich B. Phillips, had portrayed a benevolent system designed to uplift and protect benighted Africans. Stampp, deeply affected by the emerging civil rights movement, painted a very different picture. With vivid archival detail, he demonstrated that slavery was harsh and exploitative of those who, he explained in words that rather startlingly reveal both the extent and limits of midcentury white liberalism, were after all “white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less.”

But the outpouring of research and writing about slavery in the years that followed went far beyond simply changing assumptions about race and human equality. It yielded as well an emerging recognition of the centrality of slavery in the American experience—not just in the South, but in northern society too, where it persisted in a number of states well into the nineteenth century. It also fundamentally shaped the national economy, which relied upon cotton as its largest export, and national politics, where slaveholding presidents governed for approximately two thirds of the years between the inaugurations of Washington and Lincoln.

At the same time, the burgeoning study of slavery was revolutionizing the practice of history by significantly expanding the kinds of sources scholars thought to employ in their effort to illuminate the elusive past. In order truly to understand slavery, it seemed imperative in the post–civil rights era to have a far richer understanding of the experience and perspectives of the slaves themselves. Yet by law throughout the South, slaves had been prohibited from reading and writing and thus prevented from leaving the written records on which history traditionally so largely depended.

In order to create the new history of slavery, scholars ventured into unaccustomed fields of research—demography, quantitative analysis, which came to be dubbed “cliometrics,” oral history, folklore, music, material culture, archaeology, and comparative history, to name a few. These modes of inquiry have now become staples in historical fields well beyond the study of America’s peculiar institution. In developing a new history for slavery over the past half-century, scholars have at the same time contributed to fundamentally changing the ways history is done, significantly expanding the kinds of remnants of the past that might be tapped as sources of historical understanding.

The new scholarship that placed slavery at the heart of American history and that recognized race as a central and enduring dimension of the American experience was the creation of prodigiously talented scholars who both argued and collaborated, at once learning from and disputing with one another, at times bringing especially vehement scholarly debates to prominent attention in the national media, to magazine covers and television talk shows. For me, a southern historian, a graduate student and assistant professor in the 1970s, it was a heady time, when history mattered so intensely to contemporary life and when brilliant scholars produced a stream of weighty volumes, each one of which required revised understanding and prompted—even mandated—new directions for research. They included such individuals as Kenneth Stampp, Stanley Elkins, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, John Hope Franklin, Lawrence Levine, Leon Litwack, John Blassingame, Orlando Patterson, Robert Fogel, and Stanley Engerman. And prominent among them, David Brion Davis. Davis did not focus his primary attention on the experience of slaves or the details of the institution of slavery, but about what he defined in the title of his influential Pulitzer Prize–winning 1966 book *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (*PSWC*): slavery as a problem and contradiction in human thought and human morality, not just in American history but across both world history and geography from the Greeks onward.

Davis’s book and his subsequent work would become a major influence in the emergence of a comparative history of slavery and abolition, in essence a global history well *avant la lettre*. It would, among other achievements, powerfully influence traditional approaches to intellectual history by embedding ideas in social and political action and institutions. This was historical writing with a scope and ambition that would shape scholars and scholarship for decades to come.

Now, in 2014, David Brion Davis, age eighty-six, has published the final volume in the trilogy he inaugurated with *PSWC* and continued with *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (*PSAR*) in 1975. In the years since, he also has written or edited twelve other books, and he has published in these pages a continuing account of slavery scholarship, contributing some three dozen essays since the 1970s. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, which he began in 1980, completes the trilogy and is, he writes, “the fulfillment of a career.” This career has produced not just extraordinary scholarship and numbers of graduate students who are now leading historians in their own right. Davis has also been dedicated to extending and disseminating a true understanding of the place of slavery in American history by founding and then leading the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study

of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale and by offering a course on slavery for high school teachers each summer for nearly a decade.

Davis came somewhat indirectly to slavery studies. An undergraduate philosophy major at Dartmouth and then a graduate student in Harvard's program in the History of American Civilization, he was interested in how ideas are refracted through real human problems in the everyday world. History, Davis believed, could serve as a "source for disciplined moral reflection." In his dissertation and first book, the problem he chose to consider was homicide—how a human being can come to deny and obliterate the humanity of others. But his inquiry into the nature of dehumanization soon shifted its focus to the injustices of race and slavery that had been under increasing academic and public discussion in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Davis had himself experienced something of an epiphany on these issues during his military service at the end of World War II. A peripatetic childhood had taken him to five high schools across the North, yet he had never shared a classroom with an African-American. A training camp in Georgia introduced him to the injustices of southern segregation, but an incident on a troop ship carrying him to Germany at the very conclusion of the war made an even more forceful and lasting impression. Ordered to descend into the hold and enforce the prohibition against gambling among those quartered below deck, Davis discovered with dismay hundreds of black soldiers—whom he had not even known were on board—segregated in conditions he believed not unlike those of a slave ship. Davis's experiences in the army introduced him to the realities of racial prejudice and cruelty that he had never imagined existed in America's twentieth-century democracy. The shock of recognition rendered these impressions indelible, but it was a chance circumstance of his graduate school years that seems to have transformed them into a scholarly commitment.

In his time at Dartmouth and Harvard, slavery and race occupied almost no place in the curriculum. The work of the great scholar W.E.B. DuBois, for example, Harvard's first black Ph.D., was not a part of the historical training offered by his own alma mater. But during Davis's last spring in Cambridge, as he was finishing his dissertation, he encountered Kenneth Stampp, a visiting scholar on the verge of publishing *The Peculiar Institution*. Davis came to see that slavery and its abolition offered an extraordinary vehicle for examining how humans shape and are shaped by moral dilemmas and how their ideas come to influence the world.

Historians are interested in change, and the history of slavery provided Davis an instance of change in human perception of perhaps unparalleled dimensions and significance. Understanding and explaining that change became his life's work. Why, he wondered, did slavery evoke essentially "no moral protest in a wide range of cultures for literally thousands of years"? And then, "what contributed to a profound shift in moral vision by the mid- to late eighteenth century, and to powerful Anglo-American abolitionist movements thereafter?"

PSWC launched Davis's inquiry with a focus on the "problem" at the heart of the institution in all its appearances across time and space: "the essential contradiction in thinking of a man as a thing," at once property and person, object and yet undeniably an agent capable even of rebelling against his bondage and destroying the master who would deny his agency. Grappling with this contradiction vexed every slave society, but only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did these inconsistencies begin to yield substantial opposition to the institution itself. After tracing the cultural heritage of these ideas from Plato and Aristotle, through the evolution of Christianity, into the thought of the Enlightenment and the seemingly paradoxical strengthening of both rationalist and evangelical impulses in the course of the eighteenth century, the first volume of Davis's trilogy introduces the origins of modern antislavery thought.

In *PSAR*, Davis then explores the implications of this intellectual legacy and emerging antislavery consciousness in the social and political milieu that both enabled and circumscribed their impact. The second volume of Davis's trilogy seeks to demonstrate the "points of intersection between ideals and social action" and succeeds in situating intellectual history in a world of action and consequence. It is hard to think of any scholar who has made a better case for the proposition that ideas matter and can even override power and wealth, as Davis makes clear in his oft-repeated point that emancipation ultimately triumphed even though slavery was in fact flourishing economically in the nineteenth-century world that abolished it.

During the three decades he worked on *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, Davis altered its original plan as he took up parts of the story in other books, most notably in a study of the changing relationship of slavery to ideas of human progress and in a volume based on his lectures to high school teachers that chronicles the rise and fall of slavery in the New World. These projects have permitted him to craft *PSAE* as a "highly selective study" focused on abolitionism in Britain and the United States, while employing

what he has characterized elsewhere as “a wide-angle lens” on bondage more broadly. Unlike its predecessor, *PSAE* does not include dates in its title, but the “Age” Davis discusses reaches from the 1780s and the post-Revolutionary emancipationist impulse in the United States to the 1880s and the abolition of slavery in Brazil.

Davis begins by introducing what he identifies as the “central theme” of the book: “dehumanization and its implications,” a theme that has indeed been central to his work since he was writing about homicide long ago. The debates over slavery in the era of the American Revolution, he had shown in the preceding volume of the trilogy, had left a perception of black “incapacity for freedom” as the fundamental justification for the perpetuation of slavery. These assumptions of black inferiority, variously characterized as innate in a discourse that allocated increasing importance to race, or acquired through the oppressions of the slave system itself, were held not only by whites. They deeply affected blacks as well, Davis writes, in a form of “psychological exploitation” that yielded “some black internalization and even pathology” but also “evoked black resistance.” As escaped slave and black abolitionist Henry H. Garnet described the “oppressors’ aim”: “They endeavor to make you as much like brutes as possible. When they have blinded the eyes of your mind,” then slavery has “done its perfect work.”

Davis’s emphasis on the centrality of dehumanization and his treatment of the internalizing of these notions of inferiority in a form of “black self-contempt” evoke historians’ bitter battles of the 1960s and 1970s over Stanley Elkins’s highly controversial portrait of “Sambo” as a model slave personality, a docile being whose psychological oppression had emasculated and infantilized him and left him without culture or community.

Objecting to such a characterization, a generation of historians set about to discover—successfully—evidence of black culture, community, family, creativity, and identity thriving within slavery. But Davis reminds us that cruelty and injustice necessarily take a powerful toll on their victims, and he cites numerous statements by nineteenth-century African-Americans—both slave and free—that acknowledge the withering and lingering effects of slavery on the heart and mind. A half-century beyond Elkins’s book and the controversy it generated, Davis asks us to embrace a more nuanced understanding of both the damage slavery inflicted on individuals and communities and the extraordinary resilience marshaled against it.

The force of these conceptions of black incapacity and their salience for the progress of emancipation lead Davis to explore how they were related to three realities that proved of critical importance for the coming of freedom: the influence of the Haitian Revolution, the movements for colonization and emigration, and the leadership and example of free blacks, who represented the “most killing refutation of slavery” and served as “the key to slave emancipation.”

When Davis began his study of the Age of Emancipation, he was struck by how little historical attention had been directed at the Haitian Revolution. His own writings have helped generate a level of scholarly interest in Haiti that has done much to mitigate that neglect. In this volume, Davis builds on that work to consider the ways Haiti influenced emancipationist efforts from the British Parliament’s 1792 consideration of outlawing the slave trade to Brazil’s abolition nearly a century later. Haiti was, in the words of Frederick Douglass, the “pioneer emancipator.” But, as Davis recounts, Haiti’s experience sent contradictory messages about the meanings of black freedom. Certainly the uprising demonstrated that slaves had not been so dehumanized as to lack the initiative and capacity to organize effective military forces and win independence. Yet at the same time, the violence and terror of the revolt reinforced white images of blacks as brutes.

In the short run, the Haitian Revolution “seriously damaged” the worldwide antislavery movement. But in the longer term, Haiti became the symbol of a polity and a society in which blacks could fully claim and exercise their freedom. In the eyes of free blacks, Haiti represented a harbinger of hope for universal emancipation in its demonstration that “bondage was not an inevitable or eternal fate.”

The obstacles that dehumanization of slaves posed for emancipation played out as well in the movements for colonization and migration that emerged in the early nineteenth century. Davis believes that colonization, the effort to free blacks and return them to Africa, has been poorly understood by modern historians, and he seeks to introduce a more complex view of its character and appeal. The founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816 was deeply influenced by fears that Haiti aroused about the potential for violence inherent in an oppressed black population, and Davis finds among colonization’s advocates the same preoccupation with the dehumanization of slaves that he identifies in discussions of the meanings of the Haitian Revolution.

Spokesmen for the American Colonization Society argued that removing blacks from the degradations of American slavery would enable them to prove their capacity for civilization and thus combat the prejudices that had grown up in response to slavery's oppressions. White proponents of colonization, Davis argues, were genuinely perplexed about how to deal with racism and the conditions that had produced it. But their ideas were greeted with "vehement hostility" by free blacks who perceived the colonizationists' purposes as racial removal rather than benevolent uplift, a conclusion encouraged by the racist remarks of such prominent advocates of colonization as Henry Clay, who called the free black population "a dangerous and useless part of the community."

Yet some black leaders, such as Henry H. Garnet, proposed emigration schemes of their own, stressing Africa's glorious past and envisioning an escape from white oppressions in a kind of proto-black nationalism. Davis underscores the "complex dynamic... between the white desire to expel and the black quest for independence." But the bitter opposition of African-Americans, conveyed by publications like Samuel Cornish's *Freedom Journal*, founded in 1827, and David Walker's stirring 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, characterized colonization as itself a new form of oppression and thwarted any alliance between the movement and committed antislavery forces.

By the early 1830s a new biracial mobilization for "immediate" emancipation of American slaves emerged with the establishment of William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* in 1831, with his "all-out attack" on colonization in 1832, and with the founding of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1832 and 1833. Significantly, Davis points out, it was the financial support of free black Philadelphia merchant James Forten and a subscription list of which 75 percent were black readers that kept *The Liberator* alive. And significantly, too, it was the accomplishments of the free black community, of men such as Forten, Douglass, and Walker, that best refuted the efforts to dehumanize their race.

The "free colored man's elevation," Frederick Douglass remarked, "is essential to the slave colored man's emancipation." The "first emancipation," the wave of manumissions that followed the Revolution, together with the ending of slavery in the North, created a substantial free black community that became the core of the abolition movement. At the same time the lingering anomaly inherent in being at once black and free sharpened the contradiction between the prejudices of race and the new nation's commitment to citizenship and equality.

In the repudiation of gradualism, Davis sees "a token of a major shift in intellectual history." Garrison's voice, as Forten observed, "operated like a trumpet call." Although Garrison himself remained committed to pacifistic "moral suasion," there emerged what Davis describes as a "very slow and gradual acceptance of violence," encouraged by the outrages that followed the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and exemplified by the end of that decade in John Brown's raid, which pointed the nation toward the violent end of slavery in the Civil War.

Davis, however, underscores the contingency of ultimate emancipation. The North could have decided not to fight; the South could have won—in which case, Davis believes, slavery would in all likelihood have continued into the twentieth century. Instead, the Emancipation Proclamation and, especially, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments established freedom and citizenship as the "culmination of the Age of Emancipation."

Although the American Civil War ultimately proved the most significant instrument of liberation, Britain served throughout the Age of Emancipation as a "model" and "global leader," combating the oceanic slave trade and freeing 800,000 slaves in its colonies. Its powerful abolition movement emerged in a different setting from that in the United States, however, and Davis uses the contrasts between them to illuminate each. With no slave population at home, British opposition to slavery did not stir up the kinds of fears of racial "amalgamation" and violence that challenged the American antislavery movement. The persistence of class hierarchies in Britain and its colonies made race seem a somewhat less necessary form of social division and order. Gradations of power and status contrasted with the starker American dichotomy of slave and free sustained by the boundaries of racism and legal bondage.

In both Britain and the United States, however, antislavery forces helped create the conditions for an emancipation that was, as Davis describes it, "astonishing.... Astonishing in view of the institution's antiquity..., resilience, and importance." Hailing this example of human beings acting so decisively against both habit and self-interest, Davis proclaims abolition to be "the greatest landmark of willed moral progress in human history."

David Brion Davis has spent a lifetime contemplating the worst of humanity and the best of humanity—the terrible cruelty and injustice of slavery, perpetuated over centuries and across borders and oceans, overturned at last because of ideas and ideals given substance through human action and human agency. He concludes his trilogy by contemplating whether the abolition of slavery might serve as precedent or model for other acts of moral grandeur. His optimism is guarded. “Many humans still love to kill, torture, oppress, and dominate.” Davis does, after all, describe the narrative of emancipation to which he has devoted his professional life as “astonishing.” But even in his amazement, he has written an inspiring story of possibility. “An astonishing historical achievement really matters.” And so does its history.

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