

The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800

By Robin Blackburn. London and New York, 1998. 602 pp.

Robin Blackburn's mighty tome takes readers on a historical journey through three hundred years of colonial slavery in the New World. As one travels through Europe, Africa, and the Americas, one meets a wide range of characters: slaves, slave traders, merchants, seamen, national navies and armies, free and indentured laborers, planters, national leaders, and government officials, all of whom have a part to play that is duly examined by the author. The author has drawn on a very wide variety of sources: American, British, Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin texts, ranging from the texts of antiquity to those of the late twentieth century. Some useful maps of the period are included, as well as informative illustrations and many tables of economic and demographic surveys of the colonies. The detailed notes provide helpful signposts to readers wishing to pursue certain aspects of slavery and related topics in greater depth. The book comprises twelve chapters as well as an introduction, an epilogue, and a comprehensive index.

In the Introduction, the author describes the book as "an account of the making of the European systems of colonial slavery in the Americas" (p. 3). The author attempts to show its role in the advent of modernity and to examine slavery in its historical perspective as an ever-present reality. Indeed, slavery existed from the earliest of times and was accepted as part of life by the Greek and Roman civilizations and later by Christianity. The main justification for slavery was difference — implying inferiority — which could be derived from ethnicity, color, social status, genealogy, or criminal behavior. Prisoners of war were also frequently enslaved.

Blackburn examines at some length various arguments for slavery, as its practice was questioned repeatedly by concerned individuals throughout history. One excuse for enslaving Africans, which stood the test of time, was the biblical story (Genesis 9) of Noah's curse of slavery on the descendants of his son Ham, as a punishment for seeing his father naked while drunk. According to another version in the Talmud, Ham boarded Noah's Ark with white skin, but disembarked with black skin, as a punishment for disobeying his father's injunction against marital intercourse on the Ark. Medieval Christian theology also linked the color black to sin, although this did not rule out the occasional valorization of black Africans as strategic allies against Islam. However, the Qur'an did not reiterate the story of Noah's curse on Ham; rather, it strove to erase all distinctions of race, and it was only subsequently that several Muslim commentators adopted the myth of the curse, citing and embellishing Jewish and Christian sources.

Slavery declined markedly in Europe with the establishment of the feudal system. The spread of Islam, with its ban on the enslavement of co-religionists, also influenced the Christian tradition, although on the whole, slaves in Muslim societies had better prospects of promotion and possible freedom than those in Christian societies.

The Atlantic slave trade established itself as increased incomes in Europe led to a rising demand for exotic foodstuffs — particularly sugar, which outstripped the supply from the Levant. European sovereigns were also perpetually short of money for waging wars, so when explorers brought news of rich resources in Africa and the Americas, it made sense to sponsor further exploration. The establishment of trading posts in Africa and the opening of mines in the Americas also led to the need for defenses, which in turn meant the settlement and control of the surrounding areas. Thus began the age of West European empire-building. And as the Americas and the Caribbean were explored, conquered, and colonized, so national systems of colonial and naval administration and commerce were developed. Plantations, which were found to be more profitable than mines, required a vast increase in labor, and the demand for African slaves grew.

African slaves were usually preferred to natives because they came from settled societies, had useful skills in agriculture and metal working, and were self-sufficient. Having been uprooted from their homes, stripped of their kinship identity, transported across the Atlantic in atrocious conditions, and deposited among strangers in a strange land, they were also disorientated and demoralized, and thus more manageable. Once trained in field and craft work, they became a fixed, skilled labor force, unable to refuse to work or resign their employment, and any resistance was met with harsh discipline.

Christian missionaries followed in the wake of the explorers and colonists, each supporting and providing an excuse for the other: The conquests were actively supported by governments and were given official approval by the Church — all turning a blind eye to the destruction and exploitation generated. Similarly, it was con-

sidered preferable to buy slaves and introduce them to Christianity than to allow them to be bought by Muslims and exposed to Islam.

What particularly distinguished colonial slavery from that of earlier times was the sheer size, organization, and influence of the system: The "acquisition of some twelve million captives on the coast of Africa between 1500 and 1870 helped to make possible the construction of one of the largest systems of slavery in human history" (p. 3). A large proportion of slaves died before, during, and shortly after the voyage to the Americas due to overwork, malnutrition, and disease. The author reminds readers throughout the book of this enormous human sacrifice and presents statistics that show that it was cheaper for planters to neglect their slaves and replace those who died than to spend money on their welfare and encourage them to raise families. However, he also points out that although the treatment of the slaves and indentured servants seems shocking, it was often no worse than the treatment given in the home country to those who were different in some way or deemed to have misbehaved.

A large part of the book is devoted to the economic ramifications of the plantation system and its effects on the home country's economy. Goods such as sugar, coffee, tea, and tobacco—previously luxuries for the very rich—were, by the end of the eighteenth century, being enjoyed by the growing middle classes and even by wage laborers. The governments also benefited financially from the trade, for as well as receiving the benefits from the premium cash crops produced by the plantations, they could "impose customs and excise on the resulting trades" (p. 311). As economic links were developed, a "triangular trade" was established between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The expansion of the plantations stimulated both existing industries, such as metalwork and shipbuilding, and new industries, such as the processing of tobacco and cotton. The Industrial Revolution also created a new type of slavery in Europe, as both adults and children were being forced to work long hours in arduous conditions for meager wages. Such misery was made more bearable by the consumption of tea, coffee, sugar, and tobacco, although the resulting ill-health from malnutrition created an infant mortality rate that was higher than that of the British West Indies.

The relationship between the colonies and the governments of the home countries was ambivalent. The colonies controlled their own internal security: The planters were armed and could call upon the support of free employees in the event of slave rebellions; in the case of some colonies, such as the Caribbean, where slaves vastly outnumbered white Europeans, constant vigilance was necessary. Garrisons and naval support from the home countries provided back-up as well as protection from attack by rival colonies, although this was offset by taxes and commercial restrictions.

Could there have been an alternative to slavery? The author shows that the Atlantic slave trade was created by a combination of racist assumptions and the

clamor for commercial gain by planters and merchants, but in the long run, racial slavery was costly and inflexible in both economic and human terms. Complete dependence on waged or indentured labor would have required a reconstruction of the whole system, but it could have been done, and Blackburn cites as examples the navies and the merchant marine. Furthermore, slavery was not used everywhere, and it was certainly not a prerequisite to producing large profits. Madeira and the Canary Islands were indeed examples of intensive agriculture whose high productivity "was based on independent craft labor and wage labor" (p. 362). And even if Europe were not able to spare the large number of workers needed, then the Africans could at least have been hired on a contract basis with the offer of freedom or return passage after five years or so.

The text is well written in clear, flowing, straightforward English, with few typographical errors. There is no verbal padding; not a word is wasted. However, it would have been helpful if a bibliography of the books cited and a list of the numerous and very informative tables could have been added.

On such a long but extremely eventful journey, a few extra signposts are of great value. This book provides a useful foundation for students and researchers intending to study slavery and related topics in greater detail, and is also a thoroughly good read for those with an interest in the history of the period beyond the European shores.

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