

Inhuman Bondage: On Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights

Monday 15 August 2011, by [FONER Eric](#) (Date first published: 10 August 2011).

This past spring, television viewers in Britain were treated to a six-part series called *Civilization* about the rise (and possible fall, if China has its way) of the West, hosted by the historian Niall Ferguson. The series offered a highly reductive version of history, identifying “the West” with qualities such as competition, scientific inquiry and the rule of law, and denigrating societies from Asia to the Middle East and Latin America for lacking these virtues. In effect, it provided a usable past for those who see the world as riven by a clash of civilizations.

One episode explored why after independence, the United States forged ahead economically while the nations of Latin America stagnated. In an unusual twist, Ferguson chose South Carolina, a state governed by a tight-knit planter oligarchy, as a model of Jeffersonian democracy resting on small property ownership, in contrast to the autocratic societies south of the border organized around large latifundia. Only after forty-five minutes of the one-hour show did Ferguson mention the existence of slaves—the majority of South Carolina’s population. When slavery was finally discussed, it was presented not as a crucial structural feature of early American society but as a moral dilemma, an “original sin” expiated by the election of Barack Obama.

Among the many virtues of Robin Blackburn’s *The American Crucible* is its demonstration that slavery must be at the center of any account of Western ascendancy. Without the colonization of the New World, Blackburn notes at the outset, the West as we know it would not exist, and without slavery there could have been no colonization. Between 1500 and 1820, African slaves constituted about 80 percent of those who crossed the Atlantic from east to west. More than any other institution, the slave plantation underpinned the extraordinary expansion of Western power and the region’s prosperity in relation to the rest of the world.

In two earlier books, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988) and *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to Modern* (1997), Blackburn traced the creation of New World slavery and its abolition in the British, French and Spanish empires, covering the years to 1848. These works established him as one of the foremost scholars of slavery as an international institution. Blackburn then took a detour to write two prescient volumes on the looming crisis in pension funding, which had somehow escaped the notice of bankers and credit rating agencies. In part, *The American Crucible* summarizes his earlier volumes; but it goes well beyond them, drawing on recent scholarship to amplify his previous arguments about slavery’s rise and fall and taking the story to around 1900. He explores emancipation in the nineteenth century’s three greatest slave systems—those of the United States, Cuba and Brazil. The book is an outstanding example of a major trend in recent historical writing: looking beyond national boundaries in favor of Atlantic or transnational history. Yet Blackburn cautions that while both the growth and abolition of slavery were international processes, they took place “in national histories” and followed no single pattern or path. With its theoretical sophistication and combination of a broad international approach and careful attention to local circumstances, *The American Crucible* takes its place alongside David Brion Davis’s *Inhuman Bondage* as one of the finest one-volume histories of the rise and fall of modern slavery.

Blackburn emphasizes that far from being static, New World slavery was a constantly evolving institution, and he identifies three broad eras in its history. In the first, which he dates from about 1500 to 1650, slavery was centered in the Spanish colonies, small-scale and urban-based. By 1630 half the population of the great colonial cities Lima, Havana and Mexico City consisted of African slaves and their descendants. But in the countryside, in the silver and gold mines that enriched the Spanish crown and on the haciendas ruled by powerful colonial settlers, the indigenous population performed most of the labor.

At the time, the Spanish Empire lacked an extensive plantation system. That system developed first in Brazil and then quickly spread to the British and French colonies of the Caribbean and mainland North America, launching the second era of modern slavery's history (1650–1800). Sugar and tobacco produced by slave labor, along with African slaves themselves, 6 million of whom were transported across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, became key commodities of international commerce. Sugar was the first mass-marketed product in human history. By 1770 colonial exports and re-exports, mostly of slave-produced goods, represented between a third and a half of Atlantic trade. The profits swelled merchants' coffers and the treasuries of European nation-states. By this time, too, the slave plantation had become a highly versatile economic unit, well adapted to the demands of the capitalist marketplace and quite modern in its methods of production, marketing and credit arrangements. Far from a retrograde drag on economic development, slavery was "a sinew of national strength" and of economic prosperity.

During this second era, slavery came to play a central role in key features of Western economic development—the spread of market relations, industrialization and the rise of a consumer economy. Carefully examining the old debate about the relationship between slavery and the Industrial Revolution, Blackburn concludes that the vast accumulation of capital derived from slave labor was a necessary, but not sufficient, cause of industrialization. Such profits did not boost manufacturing development in Spain and Portugal. Industrialization required not only money but a large home market and a supportive state, both of which only late eighteenth-century Britain possessed. Once it got under way, industrialization spurred the further growth of slavery, creating a giant market for cotton from the American South and fueling the spread of a "commodity-based notion of freedom," in which ordinary consumers demanded more and more of the sugar, tobacco, rum and coffee produced on slave plantations.

* * *

In the nineteenth century, slavery entered its third era, one rife with contradictions. During the century's first four decades, Haiti, born of a slave revolution, emerged as the hemisphere's second independent republic, and the northern United States, the independent nations of Latin America and the British Empire began taking steps toward abolition. Yet Blackburn cautions against the idea of a preordained, "irresistible advance" toward emancipation. Even as slavery died elsewhere, it thrived in Brazil, Cuba and the American South. Indeed, in 1860, on the eve of the American Civil War, far more slaves (around 6 million) resided in the Western Hemisphere than ever before. And slave-grown products (Cuban sugar, Brazilian coffee, American cotton) played a greater role than ever in the new economy of mass consumption. By this time, to be sure, industry had outstripped plantation slavery in supplying goods for the consumer marketplace. But, Blackburn insists, no purely economic reason existed to prevent slave plantations from continuing to coexist with industrializing economies, supplying their demand for raw materials and consumer goods from the tropics.

Blackburn also rejects the idea that emancipation arose from what he calls "latent virtue," a comforting notion sometimes invoked by American historians to excuse the founding fathers for lack of action against slavery on the grounds that their ideals set in motion the abolition process. High ideals alone did not abolish slavery. And while not neglecting slave agency, Blackburn argues that

the concessions and customary rights wrested by slaves from their owners over a long period of day-to-day struggle did not pose a fundamental challenge to the system. Rather, he insists, emancipation emerged from specific historical circumstances—a nexus of slave resistance, ideological conflict and political crisis.

Blackburn examines in detail the myriad strains of antislavery thought—religious, nationalist, humanitarian, economic—and the abolitionists' pioneering use of mass-produced pamphlets, lithographs, petitions and the like to spread their message. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, a genteel antislavery sentiment had become a hallmark of enlightened opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. But Blackburn is quick to note the limited accomplishments of respectable antislavery. Often, early emancipations consisted of "free womb" laws that ended slavery over a prolonged period by freeing future offspring, not living slaves. Moreover, in most times and places, abolitionists represented only a small minority of the free population. Only in times of crisis did abolitionists acquire the power to influence national policy.

It was not the slow accumulation of rights by slaves or the persuasiveness of antislavery arguments that produced emancipation but "revolutionary ruptures" and political crises. In revolutionary France, as well as in a Spanish Empire wracked by wars of colonial independence, a Britain beset by the crisis over parliamentary reform in the early 1830s and Civil War America, slave resistance suddenly gained new salience, and abolitionist arguments found a receptive audience among the general populace and political elites. As in his previous studies of slavery, Blackburn also insists that emancipation was closely connected to the state-building process. The act of abolition presupposed the existence of a new kind of state, one intolerant of the special local sovereignty of slave owners and capable of carrying out radical measures. It gave the state moral legitimacy, allowing it plausibly to claim to be the embodiment of liberty.

Blackburn offers an excellent account of the path toward emancipation in the United States and of Abraham Lincoln's evolving attitudes and policies. The Civil War clearly exemplified the linkage of nineteenth-century nationalism with abolition, and the destruction of the hemisphere's largest and most powerful slave system compelled Cuba and Brazil to reckon with their reliance on slavery. Spain enacted a free womb law for Cuba in 1870, but abolition there, as elsewhere, also involved violence. About half the rebel army in the war of independence of the 1870s consisted of present or former slaves, and patriots demanded equal citizenship for all, regardless of race, in an independent Cuba. Slavery in Brazil finally ended in 1888, seemingly peacefully, although numerous slave revolts and the enlistment of thousands of slave soldiers in the war against Paraguay between 1865 and 1870 preceded emancipation.

When it comes to the consequences of abolition, Blackburn presents a rather somber assessment. Antislavery ideas were always linked to notions of liberty and progress, but less often to racial equality. As they extended their empires across the globe in the late nineteenth century, European powers "claimed to be inspired by abolitionist principles" even when acting in blatantly racist ways. Everywhere in the Western Hemisphere, new systems of racial and labor subordination succeeded plantation slavery. Emancipation's economic impact turned out to be less drastic than many had hoped or feared. The export value of the main crops—American cotton, Brazilian coffee and Cuban sugar—quickly recovered.

Blackburn is particularly pessimistic about the postslavery United States, warning against a scholarly tendency to "exaggerate the gains made by former slaves and their descendants." While acknowledging the remarkable effort during Reconstruction to create an interracial democracy in the South, he sees that era as a minor detour on the road to a new system of racial domination based on segregation, disenfranchisement and economic subordination. He goes so far as to say that in the entire hemisphere, "the blacks of the US South gained least from the ending of slavery."

It is unclear what standard of comparison Blackburn is applying here, because, as he notes, postemancipation societies in general remained highly unequal. Despite its failure, Reconstruction closed off even more oppressive possibilities in the United States. Moreover, the rewriting of the laws and Constitution during Reconstruction to enshrine the idea of equal citizenship rights for blacks established the legal framework for subsequent challenges to the postemancipation racial regime. And the creation of autonomous black churches and schools put in place institutions that would serve as the strongholds for future struggles. Without attributing social change to “latent virtue,” one can note that unlike racial systems in other countries, the South’s Jim Crow laws remained regional, not national, and that options existed for American blacks not matched elsewhere, especially the possibility of migration to the North and West, where a different (though hardly egalitarian) racial system prevailed.

Slavery and emancipation form two of the three parts of Blackburn’s subtitle. The third, human rights, receives less attention but represents a new concern compared with his previous work. In part, Blackburn’s discussion is a response to recent scholarship by Lynn Hunt, who locates the origins of human rights consciousness in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution [see “On the Genealogy of Morals,” April 16, 2007], and Samuel Moyn, who situates the idea’s emergence much more recently, in the 1970s [see “Human Rights in History,” August 30/September 6, 2010]. Earlier definitions of human rights, Moyn points out, were tied to the nation-state, as the title of one key such document, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, makes clear. People enjoyed human rights by virtue of membership in a particular polity, not their common humanity. Only lately, Moyn claims, did the idea arise of human rights that transcend and challenge national sovereignty and are thus truly universal.

Blackburn acknowledges the force of Moyn’s argument and has no desire to create a selective and ahistorical genealogy of human rights. He insists, however, rightly in my view, that the abolitionist movement played a major role in developing the concept of human rights unbounded by race and nationality. “In the heat of these momentous clashes over slavery,” he writes, “a new notion of human freedom and human unity was proclaimed.” Indeed, the attack on slavery also involved a critique of the pretensions and power of the nation-states that protected and profited from the institution.

Unlike previous scholars, Blackburn places the slave uprising in St. Domingue—the richest of all the sugar colonies, which became the nation of Haiti—at the center of the early history of human rights. The Haitian revolution, he notes, is rarely given its due by historians. Half a century ago, R.R. Palmer wrote an acclaimed two-volume work, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, that barely mentioned Haiti. Lately, thanks in part to the bicentennial of Haitian independence in 2004, a spate of works have appeared. Drawing on this literature, Blackburn insists that the rebellious slaves profoundly affected Atlantic political culture and human rights consciousness. Not only did events in St. Domingue directly inspire the 1794 French decree abolishing slavery (later reversed by Napoleon); the revolutionary convention’s decision to seat black and brown delegates from the island marked a stunning affirmation that the entitlements of the Declaration of the Rights of Man were available to all French citizens, regardless of color.

Ironically, if “the West” is to celebrate the idea of universal human rights as one of its distinctive contributions to modern civilization, part of the credit must go to the mostly African-born slave rebels of Haiti.

Eric Foner

P.S.

* August 10, 2011 | This article appeared in the August 29-September 5, 2011 edition of The Nation.