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# Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World

David Brion Davis  
Yale University, [david.b.davis@yale.edu](mailto:david.b.davis@yale.edu)

Anya Zilberstein  
Concordia University, [Anya.Zilberstein@concordia.ca](mailto:Anya.Zilberstein@concordia.ca)

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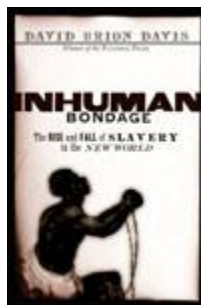
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## Book Review



David Brion Davis. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 440 pp., illustrations, 8 pp. halftone plates, 8 maps. \$30, ISBN 0195140737.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Anya Zilberstein, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

There are now several excellent big histories of Atlantic slavery, including Robin Blackburn's, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (1997), Seymour Drescher's, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* (1999), and David Eltis's, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (2000), to name just a few. David Brion Davis's latest book is bigger. Davis, Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale, has long been one of the preeminent historians of American slavery. The Atlantic is the geographical center of *Inhuman Bondage*; the development of the slave trade and plantation economies, racial slavery, and emancipation are its primary themes. But Davis situates New World slavery in a broader international context and locates the origins of its core problems and legacies in cultural developments over the long term. *Inhuman Bondage* considers the ownership of people as it has been practiced and experienced in societies as diverse as ancient Sumeria and medieval Scandinavia to present-day sweatshops and the traffic in sex slaves. Davis does not offer a single, sweeping argument to encompass this immense scope. Rather, *Inhuman Bondage* is a deeply engaging and elegantly written survey of New World slavery and antislavery in comparative perspective.

The key to the book's title is Davis's proposition that 'animalization' -- reducing people to salable beasts of burden -- is a crucial element of human bondage. Adding to Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as a state of extreme personal domination, natal alienation, and isolation from social networks, Davis writes that the enslavement of people is analogous to the management of domesticated animals: masters have regarded their human chattel much as they have their livestock and pets (pp. 30-35). This attempt to bestialize humans was explicit in the common ancient Greek term for slave -- *andrapodon* or, man-footed creature. As an African-American former slave remarked in the nineteenth century, "plantation owner[s] thought no more of selling a man away from his wife, or a mother away from her children, than of sending a cow or horse out of the state" (p. 201).

Davis calls the "fundamental paradox of slavery" the fact that, despite such degrading definitions, historically slaves found ways to retain their human dignity and resist total domination by their masters, through cultural adaptations, the formation of extended kin or social networks, and individual or collective rebellions. Yet the aims and consequences of slave rebellions were often localized and worked against radicalizing antislavery ideology among free blacks and white sympathizers (this point is especially subtly demonstrated in a chapter comparing slave conspiracies and uprisings in the nineteenth-century U.S. South and the British Caribbean). Instead, Davis emphasizes the importance

of changes in moral attitudes, the ideological impact of revolutionary rhetorics of liberty and human equality, and the mixed success of gradual emancipations. He argues that, ultimately, the legal and institutional changes in New World slavery in the nineteenth century were mobilized by national and international abolitionist movements rather than destabilized by economic forces or by agitation from below.

The book opens with the multinational debate in the 1830s and '40s over the legal status of the Cuban ship *La Amistad* and its passengers, followed by a chapter on non-racial and apparently more moderate forms of slavery, which draws on examples from Antiquity and pre-contact Brazil. In Chapter 3, "The Origins of Anti-black Racism in the New World," Davis discusses the association of swarthy skin with lowly status in the medieval Eastern European and Mediterranean slave trades and argues that by the late fifteenth century slavery had already taken on deep racial connotations, a tendency exacerbated by the expansion of the African Atlantic slave trade in the early modern period. He also attends to historical Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpretations of the biblical Curse of Ham legend and its enduring, if misconceived, authority as a justification for racial slavery and anti-black racism.

The majority of *Inhuman Bondage* focuses on the rise of slavery in the Atlantic world, particularly in the colonial and nineteenth century southern United States (to which Davis devotes two chapters). The 'fall' of slavery is treated in chapters on British and American abolitionism, the politics and impact of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, and the radicalism of emancipation policy in the American Civil War. While much of the story regarding slave work culture, plantation life, or the economics of staple crop production and trade will be familiar to specialists, Davis's originality and exceptional breadth as a historian is revealed in his provocative analogies and his choice of uncommon anecdotes. He identifies aspects of work discipline in early modern sugar plantations, for example, as precursors to Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of 'scientific management' for industrial factories. Readers who tend to think of the Atlantic crossings of Africans as unidirectional will be intrigued by the case of freed slaves who migrated to Liberia in the 1780s and maintained a correspondence with their former white masters in Virginia.

Readers of this newsletter may note that archaeology and material culture minimally inform Davis's narrative or arguments. Perhaps the only obvious reference to work by archaeologists is the 1992 discovery of the African burial ground in Manhattan as evidence for the surprisingly substantial presence of African-American slaves in colonial New York (and the North generally). Indeed, this is a book that emphasizes the social, economic, and political aspects of New World slavery, focusing on continuities in the moral and ideological underpinnings of slavers throughout Western history and the transformative power of reform movements.

But Davis's intellectual work in integrating debates across a broad range of disciplines provides a productive framework for further dialogues. By tracing the legacies of ancient, classical, and biblical traditions in New World slavery, for example, *Inhuman Bondage* shows convergences between the concerns of archeologists across numerous subfields (a point implicit in the book's useful maps and well-chosen illustrations. Its long-term, world

**history perspective also suggests points of connection and comparison in diasporic slave communities: Davis notes, for example, that white slaves from Eastern Europe were sent to sugar plantations in the Americas in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition, scholars of material culture will be engaged by Davis's exhortation to see the mutual shaping of African-American and white ethnic cultures, rather than seeking to isolate the supposedly distinctive features of each (see especially Chapter 10).**

**The book's organization is somewhat disjointed, likely because it is not the product of new primary research, but a composite of lectures from Davis's university courses and previously published work, revised and updated to include recent and emerging scholarship in a range of relevant fields. This variety will not be a concern for teachers seeking to situate the archeology of Atlantic slavery in a world historical context, for whom *Inhuman Bondage* should prove indispensable.**