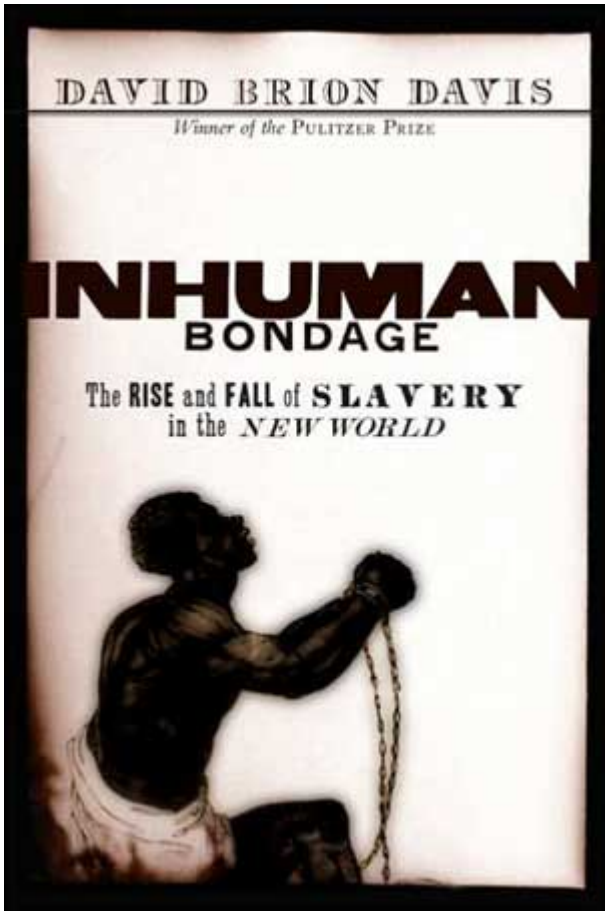
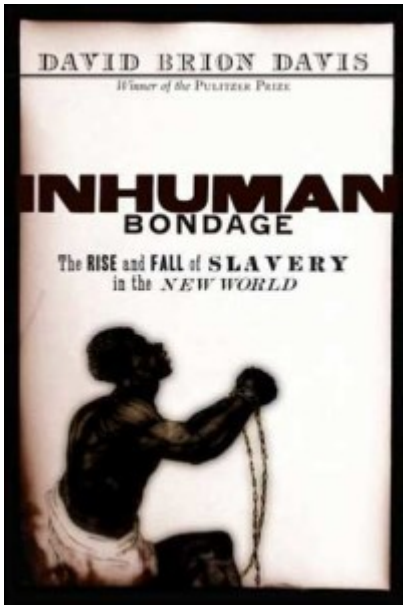
The Inhumanity of Slavery





David Brion Davis, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 440 pp., hardcover, $30.00.

In this impressive book, David Brion Davis, one of our foremost historians of slavery, provides us with a comprehensive historical narrative of the central

place of slavery in the making of the New World and of the movements to abolish it. The book opens with the famous rebellion aboard the ship *Amistad* (1839) and the equally famous legal cases surrounding it, addressing the issues of the international slave trade, racial slavery, abolitionist opposition, and the place of slavery in the American political and judicial system. Davis uses this incident as a jumping off point to provide us with a sweeping historical overview of the rise and fall of slavery in the United States and the Western world.

Well known for his magisterial works on slavery that span world history, Davis begins his story in antiquity. He compares the relatively favored and socially mobile slaves of Babylon with those held by the Tupinamba in preconquest Brazil. The latter murdered and cannibalized their slaves, revealing, Davis argues, how slaves were dehumanized and seen as animals. The process of enslavement was comparable to the domestication of animals. According to Davis, slavery can be best defined as reducing human beings to the status of chattel property, what he refers to as the "animalization" of human beings. Such a definition would incorporate Orlando Patterson's definitions of slavery as "natal alienation" from the society of one's birth and the general dishonoring of slaves in societies of their enslavement. Thus Plato compared the slave to the body and the master to the soul, and Aristotle claimed that some people were slaves by nature. In the New World, slavery would be equated with race and antiblack racism.

Davis traces the roots of racism in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions that used the biblical "Curse on Ham" story to justify the enslavement of Africans and equated blackness with sin, slavery, and pollution. These ideas received a powerful impetus with the rise of the pseudoscience of race during the Enlightenment, which linked Africans and apes in the Great Chain of Being. They percolated into the thought of Thomas Jefferson, the American apostle of liberty, who crudely speculated that black women had sexual intercourse with apes. While some Enlightenment figures criticized slavery, the "scientific" and philosophical ideas of the day bolstered notions of racial inferiority among some famous thinkers including Hume, Kant, and Voltaire.

It was precisely at this time that the European voyages of discovery and the start of the Atlantic slave trade linked the destiny of West Africa with that of the New World or, in Davis's words, made Africans integral to world history. With great clarity, he argues that although African participation enriched a few elites, the insatiable European demand for slaves resulted in a holocaust of African lives and geared the internal economies of Africa for slave production. Various European powers entered and dominated the African slave trade in its dismal four-hundred-year history. The failure of Indian slavery, as large numbers of Native Americans succumbed to European diseases and warfare, sealed the fate of Africa and people of African descent in the New World.

The Spanish and the Portuguese exported the slave-based sugar-plantation

economies of the islands off the coasts of Africa and southern Europe to the Western Hemisphere. While slavery also became legal in all the British colonies, it was in the plantation colonies of the West Indies, Virginia and Maryland, and South Carolina and Georgia that it became the central socio-economic and political institution. In the nineteenth century, sugar, tobacco, and rice would soon be joined by other staple crops dependent on the use of slave labor, like coffee in Brazil and cotton in the southern United States. Slavery thus flourished and contributed considerably to the wealth of European nations and the early American republic. In two excellent chapters about the American South, Davis shows how slavery gave rise to a slave society that constructed an elaborate proslavery argument to justify the enslavement of African Americans. He also shows how it created distinct black cultures and communities that allowed slaves to survive the daily brutalities of the slave system.

However, the enslavement of Africans was challenged systematically in the Age of Revolution when slave rebellions, national revolutions, and abolitionist movements inaugurated emancipation in much of the West. In the second half of the book, Davis shows himself to be as astute a scholar of abolition as of slavery. Antislavery writers drew ideological inspiration from revolutionary ideas. Even more than the American and French revolutions—which abolished slavery in the northern states and led to one of the first national emancipation decrees in France—the Haitian revolution, the only instance of a successful slave rebellion in world history, spelled the doom of slavery. Massive slave rebellions convulsed South America and the Caribbean. In the United States such attempts proved to be suicidal. Beliefs in the superiority of free labor and the iniquity of human bondage spurred the growth of an Anglo-American abolitionist movement. Religious revivalism further led the movement to view slavery as a moral evil and sin, an idea that influenced Abraham Lincoln, who was not so much an abolitionist as antislavery in conviction.

Davis’s last chapters trace the politics of slavery and emancipation during the Civil War and the political career of Abraham Lincoln. He shows growing southern aggressiveness over the expansion of slavery into the West and in plans to reopen the African slave trade. In the North, abolitionism evolves from a minority position to a broad-based political antislavery represented by Lincoln’s Republican Party, which was committed to the non-expansion of slavery in the West. The Civil War, Davis argues cogently, was a revolutionary moment in American history when the actions of runaway slaves, Congress, radical Republicans, and the president inaugurated emancipation and the arming of black men in the Union Army. During Radical Reconstruction, the nation even experimented with notions of black citizenship and an interracial democracy before the “redemption” of the South inaugurated the long nightmare of segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching.

In a short epilogue, Davis extends his epic tale to Cuba and Brazil where Lincoln and abolitionists like Clarkson, Wilberforce, Garrison, and Sumner inspired emancipation movements. This book is perhaps the single best work we

have on the rise and fall of slavery. As Davis perceptively concludes, the Western Hemisphere and the “devastated continent of Africa” (331) still live with the historical legacies of modern racial slavery.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.2 (January, 2008).

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