

## **What We Know Today: A Contemporary Understanding of the Atlantic Slave Trade**

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1. Sir Moses Finley, the Cambridge University Professor of Classic History, reminds us in his work *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* that even the study of something as distant as slavery of the Greco-Roman eras is politically inspired, contextualised, and propagated<sup>1</sup>. That the centrality of the *Classic* eras to the meta-ideology of the West as manifest in the Enlightenment and Modernity, has meant that, until recently, slavery within classic Greece and Rome was downplayed or ignored as challenging those elements of the past which sought to be put forward as part of the Enlightenment Project. Thus, it is rather easy to see that little space would be given to human bondage and exploitation when the fundamental underpinnings of Western ideology are predicated on the classic ideas of *freedom* and *liberty*. In essence then, the study of the classics was ideologically truncated to give voice to the virtues of the dominant class while disregarding the plight of those people that actually built and allowed the City States of Sparta and Athens and the Roman Empire to prosper.

2. Professor Finley's consideration of ancient slavery took place in the era when the classical elements of Western ideological hegemony was being challenged not by Marxist-Leninism of the Cold War, but by the North-South rift which, in the era of decolonisation, had its place in overturning the orthodoxies of the West. Granted, the civil rights movement in the United States and the student revolts of Europe also played their part in undermining from below the ideological *status quo* of the 1960s. So too did advances in science which made plain that the Enlightenment Project, which displaced religion by scientific inquiry, could *not*, in fact, explain all, and that ultimately humanity is left no closer to understanding the fundamental questions about our existence, our destiny, than before Galileo or Newton. As a result, the latter half of the twentieth century was marked by the emergence of *Post-Modernity*. An era when the Enlightenment Project, anchored as it was in the deliverance of science, was displaced by a meta-ideology which accepts that there can be no established 'right' answer, that ultimately what we know and don't know is politically driven and socially constructed.

3. Within this evolving social revolution within the Western world, it is clear that the Classics could not withstand the rigours of a post-modern evaluation which not only reconsidered the fundamental tenets of the discipline, but asked probing questions as to why slavery had played such a minor role in the study of Greco-Roman civilisations thus far. With the disintegration of the Western ideological construct from below, it should come as little surprise that the question of slavery generally – and the Atlantic slave trade in particular – moved from the peripheries to become central to the discipline of History. Thus within the last forty years, the study of slavery has gone from being near to naught, to being all encompassing and engrossing. The current doyen of British slavery historians, James Walvin, writes: "When I first began to work on slavery in the British West Indies in 1967, the corpus

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<sup>1</sup> See Brent Shaw (ed.), Moses Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 1998.

of relevant secondary literature was relatively thin. Now – in the mid-1990s – it is virtually impossible to keep abreast of current scholarship”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, as a result of the last forty years of enquiry, historians have provided the raw material essential to considering the slave trade in a new and well-informed manner, moving away, for instance, from a one-dimensional understanding of the issues which painted, for instance, British abolition of the slave trade “as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in this history of nations”<sup>3</sup>. The state of this contemporary scholarship will now be considered.

4. To do so, what now follows is a tour through the Atlantic World of the nineteenth century, following the notorious triangular trade, both at its height and through its legal abolition. As regards this Atlantic Slave Trade, Professor Herbert Klein has noted, in his seminal survey, that: “despite a quarter century of sophisticated multinational studies, the gap between popular understanding and scholarly knowledge remains as profound as when the trade was first under discussion in literate European circles in the eighteenth century”. Klein goes on to say that not “only is there been a failure in the dialogue between the academic and general literate world, but there is surprising ignorance even within the scholarly world at large about the nature of the trade”<sup>4</sup>. This may be said to be doubly so with regard to legal scholars where, as recently as 2004, a young historian could write: “While the last three decades have seen a reinvigorated interest in almost all aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, legal historians have completely neglected it”<sup>5</sup>.

5. Before departing on our tour of the Atlantic World, it is import to place slavery in context, by noting that with regard to the universal history of the world, it is free labour and not slavery which is the rather ‘peculiar’ institution the norm having been slave labour; likewise slavery itself has only existed where a distinction was established allowing for private property to exist; and finally, slavery only persisted where economic development allowed for advanced means of production and consumption<sup>6</sup>. It should be emphasised also, that slavery has existed since time immemorial, with recorded traces being found in Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Code of Hammurabi.

6. On the African continent, the nineteenth century was marked by three types of slavery. The start of the nineteenth century, with the end of the Napoleonic Wars, saw so-called ‘white slavery’ on the Barbary coast, before the United States of America sent its first-ever naval squadron to liberate its merchant seamen from Algiers. That 1815 naval expedition was meant to put to an end the practice by Barbary States (Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli) whereby pirates under their protection captured foreign sailors at sea, enslaved them, and held them for ransom. Before the use of this gunboat diplomacy by the United States, the ‘White Slave Trade’ had been managed through international agreements which required maritime powers plying in

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<sup>2</sup> James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery*, 1997, p. vii

<sup>3</sup> See Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810*, p. xx; where he quotes W.E.H. Lecky, *A History of European Morals*, 1884.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 1999, pp. xvii and xx.

<sup>5</sup> Holger Lutz Kern, “Strategies of Legal Change: Great Britain, International Law, and the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade”, *Journal of History of International Law*, Vol. 6, 2004, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup> See Brent Shaw (ed.), Moses Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, 1998, pp. 299 and 14.

the Mediterranean to pay annual tributes to the Beys of the Barbary States. The end of this type of slavery was ultimately delivered in 1816 by the British who, with the assistance of the Dutch, bombarded Algiers, destroyed its navy, and extracted promises from the Beys of Tunis and Tripoli that the practice would be put to an end<sup>7</sup>.

7. The second type of slavery which existed in nineteenth century Africa was the so-called 'Oriental Slave Trade' (also referred to in the literature as the 'Arab Trade', the 'Islamic Trade' or 'Sahara Trade'). This slave trade, which was older and more ingrained in the fabric of Africa than the Atlantic Slave Trade, had existed for more than a millennium before it was outlawed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Oriental Slave Trade, as opposed to the western oriented, capitalist driven, trade generally enslaved two women for every man, with the final destination being domestic service in the homes or concubines of North Africa or what is today termed the Middle East. This trade, like that of the Atlantic, focused on the enslavement of inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, with the main means of transportation eastward being not ocean going caravels, but camel caravans crossing the North African dessert and small dhows sailing the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea. It is estimated that this trade involved seven million slaves, of which three million were transported during the nineteenth century<sup>8</sup>. By the 1870s, the Oriental Slave Trade had been funnelled into Omani ruled Zanzibar as the primary outlet for the slave trade on the east coast of Africa (which, rather embarrassingly, was under British protection). It was only when the Atlantic Slave Trade ended and European States undertook to conquer the whole of the African continent that the suppression of the Oriental Slave Trade was undertaken. This transpired by means of a British naval presence on the east coast of Africa, the 1890 Final Act of the Brussels Conference establishing the international abolition of the slave trade within a prescribed zone encompassing those areas of the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Red Sea where the trade was known to persist, and monitoring of State action via the International Maritime Bureau located at Zanzibar – the first ever intergovernmental institutions established on the African continent.

8. Despite the existence of these two types of slavery, the Atlantic Slave Trade, which emerged in the late fifteenth century should be understood as a new "species of slavery", whereby a type of 'artisan' slavery was replaced by 'industrial' slavery. Or as Robin Blackburn notes, as part of his seminal trilogy, the "slaves of the New World were economic property and the main motive for slaveholding was economic exploitation; to this end at least nine tenths of American slaves were put to commodity production"<sup>9</sup>. The Atlantic Slave Trade emerges as a result of the receding of the Islamic threat from Europe at the end of the fifteenth century; rather secure on the home front, advances in maritime technology allowed Iberian States to first, under Prince 'Henry the Navigator' of Portugal (1394-1460), to incrementally make their way further south, down the African Coast on an annual basis; ultimately opening the sea lanes to the New World (Christopher Columbus, 1492), around the Cape of Good Hope to India (Vasco de Gama, 1498), and finally to the circumnavigation of the globe (Ferdinand Magellan, 1522).

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Phillimore, *Commentaries upon International Law*, 1879, p. 320 and 319.

<sup>8</sup> See James Walvin, *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire*, 2001, p. 267; and also Ralph Austen, "The Mediterranean Islamic Slave Trade out of Africa: A Tentative Census", Patrick Manning (ed), *Slave Trades, 1500-1800; Globalization of Forced Labour*, 1996, pp. 1-36.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery (1776-1848)*, 1988, p 7.

9. In the wake of this global adventurism, came the establishment of colonial outposts. This nascent European colonial expansionism, in the sixteenth century, manifested itself in New World economies which were plantation based, growing labour-intensive products, such as sugar, coffee, rum, and tobacco, that were now made available for larger public consumption in Europe<sup>10</sup>. These plantations were not a new phenomena, *per se*, as slave-based sugar plantation under Spanish and Portuguese control had existed previously in the Levant, on the islands of Mediterranean as well as the West Coast of Africa (the Azores, Canaries, Cape Vertes, Madeiras islands, as well as San Tomé and Príncipe). Within the New World setting, it was sugar which, by far, was the most relevant as “some 70 per cent of *all* Africans imported into the Americas were destined, in the short term at least, to work in sugar”<sup>11</sup>. Professor Walvin has recently put into perspective the importance of the Atlantic Slave Trade in general terms. He writes that the Atlantic Slave Trade had profound consequences not only for Africa, but “it was a major ingredient in the transformation of the West”. He continues:

Slavery was the means by which the West emerged to a position of unrivalled economic and political dominance. Stated simply, African slave labour, transplanted into the Americas, was critical to the creation of Western wealth and the consequent relegation of other regions and peoples to the overarching power of the West.<sup>12</sup>

10. The legal basis upon which of European expansion into the New World during this era, took place as a result of religious sanction which divided the globe – beyond Europe – between Portugal and Spain. The *Inter caetera* of 1493 issued by Pope Alexander VI, was a Papal Bull granting Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain a monopoly over all lands three hundred miles west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands; there being a line of demarcation drawn vertically from the Arctic to the Antarctic poles<sup>13</sup>. The Bull precipitated the signing of the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 between Spain and Portugal which ended a certain controversy “as to what lands, of all those discovered in the ocean sea up to the present day” belonged to which Iberian State<sup>14</sup>. The Treaty effectively divided the yet to be discovered world between these States; it also moved the demarcation line approximately seven hundred miles westward, thus granting Portugal its Brazilian foothold in South America.

11. During the sixteenth century, Iberian States busied themselves conquering the New World, introducing sugar estates, and manning them with indentured Europeans and enslaved native Americans<sup>15</sup>. However, for a number of reasons, including rapid economic growth in Europe and alien diseases brought to the New World, African slaves “became the most desired labour force for Europeans to develop their American export industries”<sup>16</sup>. During this period, Portugal busied itself opening up

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*, 1994, pp. 17-29; or John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 1999, pp. 152-182.

<sup>11</sup> James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery*, 1997, p. 32. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>12</sup> James Walvin, *A Short History of Slavery*, 2007, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See *European Treaties bearing on the History of the United States and its Dependencies to 1648*, Frances Davenport (ed.), 1917, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> See Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades*, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, p. 21.

West Africa on its side of the line; while Spain, unable to recruit workers from Europe and having more than decimated the native American population, turned to granting *Assientos* – trade monopoly licences – to furnish, in this case, slaves to its colonies<sup>17</sup>. The slave-trade *Assientos* would become amalgamated as one *Assiento* and, by 1701, be fought over and granted to foreign States by way of treaty. By 1750 however, the *Assiento* as so-called ‘interlopers’ – had broken the Iberian monopolies on both side of the line; colonies and forts having been established in the New World and in Africa by the British, Brandenburgs, Danes, Dutch, French, Norwegians, and Swedes.

12. The involvement of various European States in the Atlantic Slave Trade (which spanned from 1519 until 1867), it should be noted, was part of a well established international market connecting Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe<sup>18</sup>. Professor Herbert Klein writes that:

the Atlantic Slave Trade was one of the more complex of international trades that existed in the modern period. It intimately tied cowry and textile exports from Asia to Africa imports and involved massive movements of people across large land masses and great oceans. It tied up European capital, ships, and crews for long periods of time and involved very complex credit arrangements for the sale of American crops in European markets. [...] The] economic ties between Asia, Europe, Africa and America clearly involved a web of relationships that spanned the globe. At the heart of this system was a Europe committed to consuming American plantations crops at an every expanding rate, crops that ranged from luxuries to basic necessities within the European population<sup>19</sup>.

13. In contrast to common perceptions that Europeans raided the African coast to gain slaves, traders in short order tapped into a market which already existed<sup>20</sup>. However, these European traders facilitated the expansion of the slave trade not only by creating an ever-growing demand, but also by supporting the commercial and political ambitions of local African elite. These ambitions – which, for instance, would lead to the creation of the Ashanti and Dahomey Kingdoms in West Africa – transpired through warfare which, while producing territorial gains, also created as a by-product, the main source of slaves for the Atlantic trade. The human bounty of war were often forced to walk from the interior to the west coast of Africa, where those that survived were offered for sale in places such as St. Louis and Gorée (in modern day Senegal), Elmina and Cape Coast (Ghana), on the so-called ‘Slave Coast’, must notoriously in Ouidah (Benin), and further south in Luanda (Angola)<sup>21</sup>.

14. While we know little (and never will ) of the numbers of individuals captured, or the number of those who died on the African continent awaiting transport, the last forty years has, through historical research, revealed much of what transpired once

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<sup>17</sup> See Georges Scelle, “The Slave-Trade in the Spanish Colonies of America: The *Assiento*”, *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 4, 1910, p. 617.

<sup>18</sup> For the dates quoted see David Eltis, “The Volume and Structures of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, 2001, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, n. 4, pp. 101-102:

<sup>20</sup> See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 1999, p. 125; where he writes: “In conclusion, then, we must accept that African participation in the slave trade was voluntary and under the control of African decision makers. [...] Europeans possessed no means, either economic or military, to compel African leaders to sell slaves”.

<sup>21</sup> Eltis notes that on “the African coast, West Central Africa [re: Angola] was an even more important source of slaves than the recent literature credits”. See Eltis, *op. cit.*, n. 24. p. 41. West Central Africa accounts for 44.2% of departures of all known slaves from Africa heading to the New World (4,887,500 individuals). See Table II, *id.* 44.

Africans fell into European hands. A decade long project which started in the late 1980s, under the auspices of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute of Harvard University, has brought together data on “perhaps 70 percent of all slaving voyages” and provides much well-grounded insight into the various elements of the trade<sup>22</sup>. From this data, it can be said that during the period in which the Atlantic Slave Trade persisted, more than eleven million men, women, and children, are known to have been forcefully enslaved and taken from Africa. Of these, approximately one and a half million did not reach the Americas, having died at sea during the so-called ‘middle passage’<sup>23</sup>. Over time, as the trade became more sophisticated, it became evident that the most cost effective slave for the New World was a young man, one who could withstand the heavy burden of plantation life. During the 1600s, 60% of slaves transported were male, with 12% being children; by the 1700s, 65% were male, and 23% children, finally, during the 1800s males constituted 72% of all those transported and 46% of the human cargo was comprised of children<sup>24</sup>. Great Britain and Portugal accounted for more than seventy percent of all the slaves transported during the Atlantic Slave Trade. “Broadly”, Professor David Eltis notes, “the Portuguese dominated before 1640 and after 1807, with the British displacing them in the intervening period”<sup>25</sup>. In the New World, with the exception of “the meteoric rise and fall of St. Domingue [modern day Haïti which gained its independence in 1804 as a result of a slave revolt<sup>26</sup>], the primary receiving regions were Brazil, the British Caribbean and, briefly, in the nineteenth century; Cuba”<sup>27</sup>.

15. As we are aware today, the Atlantic Slave Trade literally changed the face of the Americas, enslaved Africans and their descendents having marked most notably Brazil, the Caribbean and United States of America in that order. Today, in 2007, there are two markedly different dynamics at play in considered the legacy of the Atlantic Slave Trade, both ideologically driven. The first, is the acknowledged participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade by the United Kingdom wherein former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, expressed his ‘deep remorse’ for his country’s involvement in the trade. Yet, the leading role of the United Kingdom in the Atlantic Slave Trade was acknowledged within the context of the celebration of the 1807 Westminster Bill abolishing the slave trade for British subjects. This year then, the United Kingdom has played host to literally hundreds of events, from primary school projects to the major motion pictures focused not on the slave trade, but on its abolition. This then resulted in the secular canonisation of the so-called ‘saints’, the likes of William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and Grandville Sharp having re-entered the public consciousness and provided the British State the possibility to utilise its abolitionist past to motivate present interests – most obviously – with regard

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<sup>22</sup> David Brion Davis and Robert Forbes, “Foreword”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> See Eltis, *op. cit.*, n. 24. The dataset is found in David Eltis *et al.* (eds.) *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> See Klein, *op. cit.*, n. 4, pp. 161-162:

<sup>25</sup> See Eltis, *op. cit.*, n. 24, p. 20. From the nationality of the ships, the data reveals that Great Britain was responsible for 28.1% of the trade which amounts to 3,112,300 Africans transported (Portugal being responsible for 45.9% of the trade). See Table I, *id.* 43.

<sup>26</sup> For a consideration of the revolt in St. Domingue and the emergence of an independent Haïti, see the eloquently written classic, first published in 1938: C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 2001. For a consideration of the leader of the Haïtian Revolution written by the foremost French abolitionist of his day, in 1889, see Victor Schoelcher, *La Vie de Toussaint Louverture*, 1982.

<sup>27</sup> See Eltis, *op. cit.*, n. 24. p. 41.

to global warming. Like the ultimate abolition of the slave trade and slavery, which the United Kingdom spearheaded, the menace of global warming is being sold to the nation in messianic terms wherein it is part and parcel of being British to lead the fight against global warming, and to impose its will on others in both paternalistic terms, but also on economically terms wherein Britain is best placed to prosper. The second dynamic at play is that of reparations lead, at the international level, by Caribbean States which are seeking compensation as a means of correcting this historical injustice. While Dean Gowok from Jimma University, Ethiopia will consider the issue in greater detail in his presentation, it suffices for me to note, that ultimately, the issue is a political one, not a legal one; as from a legal perspective the issue comes up against the rather sobering doctrine of inter-temporal law, which dictates that State responsibility will only be incurred with regard to violation of laws which have been consented to by States and from that period onwards, with no possibility of retroactivity *unless agreed to*. Whether reparations will ever be forthcoming, or payment in kind, as debt relief, remains to be seen.

16. What remains true of these two modern dynamics is that they are part of competing historical narratives about the place of the Atlantic Slave Trade in contemporary society. In this, the post-modern era, the glorification of abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade stands side-by-side with an acknowledgement that Europe was responsible for destroying the Americas, both north and south, and depopulating large tracks of Africa so as to provide slave labour to build the New World in its image. Further, we must recognise that Western motivation for ending slavery in Africa was a pretext for Empire, and for the European colonial project. Historians, for their part have, over the last forty years, unlocked the secrets which laid dormant in archives all over the world, untouched for ideological reasons. What we know today about slavery provides us with a sound foundation from which to address the issue of the Atlantic Slave Trade and its legacy in our contemporary world. Yet, we must also accept that ideology, as Sir Moses Finley reminds us, drives knowledge; and as such the most effective means of acknowledging the Atlantic Slave Trade and its legacy, is to ensure that it becomes and remains part of a discourse which is not bogged down in economic arguments but acknowledges the inhumanity and racism which allowed for the taking of millions of Africans from their homes and families and introducing them to the hell on earth which was the Atlantic Slave Trade.