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SLAVERY

Slavery is an ancient and complex social system that permits the control of and often the actual ownership of an individual and his or her labor by another. This institution often blends into other forms of forced labor, which include a vast array of relationships that extend from formal systems, such as serfdom, indentured servitude, and conscription, to informal systems of family labor and to even illegal control of labor and other services. This complex and constantly changing system of servitude has played a central role in many societies since before the agricultural revolution and still exists in informal and illegal manifestations today. This entry focuses on the history of slavery within North America and the United States and its relationship to the development of intergroup relationships among races, classes, and sections within the United States.

Early Development of Slavery

Racial slavery helped fuel a virulent racism that became and has remained a central theme in the history of the United States until this day. The institution also led to class tensions within the South between slave owners and poorer Whites and created sectional tensions that led to the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865). This system began with the Portuguese voyages down the African coast

during the later 15th century. These early adventurers purchased slaves from Africans located along the coast and transported the slaves back to Portugal or began to use them to produce sugar on their Atlantic islands or a little later in Brazil. By 1600 a new form of racial, plantation-based slavery had taken root in the Americas.

Slavery quickly spread throughout the Americas. During the early and mid-17th century, the British and other European powers moved into the West Indies and began producing sugar. In North America, Dutch and British colonists began to import slaves, and by the early 18th century, plantation-based racial slavery had become well established in Maryland, Virginia, and Carolina.

The British and their colonists established a system of slavery that differed considerably from the ancient system and less decidedly from the Portuguese and Spanish models. Unlike those in most of the ancient institutions, slaves in the Americas faced perpetual servitude not only for themselves but also for their descendants. Slavery also became associated with color or African background. Slavery, as a legal institution, had died out in northern and western Europe during the Middle Ages, and although individuals from this region could be forced to labor as indentured servants, criminals, or prisoners of war, they could not be perpetually enslaved. Africans, on the other hand, even if baptized as Christians, could be kept in perpetual bondage. The British system treated individual slaves as real or personal property. Owners could buy or sell them as individuals, could use them as collateral for loans, could rent or hire them out to others, and could will them to their descendants. Unlike other systems in which slaves performed a variety of roles as soldiers and bureaucrats owned by the state or became incorporated into families, British North American slavery became based on large-scale commercial agriculture. Slaves also worked as artisans, domestics, urban and rural laborers, and sailors and at a wide variety of occupations, of course, but the plantation remained the economic foundation of the American institution.

Race, unlike the situation in earlier and other forms of slavery, played a central role. Slavery became limited to Africans, and race became a symbol of freedom and slavery. The British also imported large numbers of indentured servants

and convicts, but these individuals became free after their term of servitude. Unlike the situation in the Iberian colonies, the difficulties of manumission in the British system led to a much smaller proportion of free Africans and thus intensified the linkage of race to slavery.

By 1776 the conditions of servitude had become well established in all the British North American colonies. Every one of the colonies had legislated a slave code that gave owners control over their property and awarded only extremely limited rights to slaves. The codes differed from colony to colony, but all accepted the ideal of perpetual servitude and the protection of the property rights of owners. The colonists through their legislatures passed these slave codes, which were unknown in northern and western Europe.

The American Revolution brought independence to the United States but only limited changes for slaves. Between 1776 and 1804, several of the newly created states began the process of ending slavery. Vermont led off by ending slavery in its 1777 constitution, and New York and New Jersey ended this process in 1799 and 1804, respectively. New Jersey would be the last state until the Civil War to move toward eventual abolition. Because none of the southern states followed this lead, the United States, after 1804, became sectionally divided by slavery between the northern, so-called free, states (the North) and the states to the south (the South), which continued the institution.

U.S. Slavery, 1790–1860

During the 1790s, the industrial revolution, spearheaded by the rapid development of the British textile industry, fueled the demand for cotton, which quickly became the leading cash crop of the Carolinas and Georgia. When the United States purchased Louisiana in 1803, sugar and cotton production based on slavery spread into these new territories. Meanwhile, the action of Congress to outlaw the importation of slaves in 1807 led to the rapid development of an interstate slave trade as owners in the Chesapeake and other areas of the upper South began to sell or transport slaves to the cotton and sugar lands in the central states of the South.

Between 1810 and the Civil War, slavery played a central role in the economic, social, cultural, and eventually the political history of the United States.

From the 1820s to the Civil War, slave-produced cotton alone accounted for around half of the value of all exports from the United States, and tobacco and other slave-produced commodities added another tenth. U.S. commercial and financial institutions became heavily involved in supporting the shipment of these products to Europe, and a rapidly developing textile industry in the northeast became dependent on Southern cotton. The U.S. merchant marine, the second largest in the world, transported most of the cotton to Liverpool and other ports in Britain and Europe. By the eve of the Civil War, slaves accounted for around \$4 billion worth of property, which accounted for at least 20% of the total wealth of the United States and which compares to a gross domestic product of \$4 billion for the nation in 1860. Slavery had become big business.

Slavery created a powerful, wealthy elite that played an important role in Southern and national history. This small group dominated the economic activity in the Southern states and played a vital role in their social composition. Slavery intensified class divisions within the South as the minority of households that owned slaves looked down on the majority of poorer Whites. A virulent racism also became associated with the system. Many Southerners saw it as a system of racial control while Northerners associated Africans with slavery. Thus the endemic racism prevalent in the nation during these decades continued after the Civil War and continued to play a powerful role in U.S. history well after the destruction of slavery.

Life for slaves within this powerful institution remained controlled yet complex. In theory, slaves possessed very limited rights, but in practice, the amount of control slaves actually possessed depended on the constant interactions among themselves, their masters, and other Whites. Even under slavery, many found space to create and protect families, to develop cultural and religious practices, and to sell products in local, often illegal markets. Different situations also produced diversity. Life on a large sugar plantation in Louisiana differed from the life of a single slave on a small western Virginia farm. The status of a field hand in Mississippi differed from that of a skilled iron worker in the Shenandoah Valley. The situation of slaves hired out to a railroad company differed from that of slaves working as domestics in Baltimore, Richmond,

or New Orleans. There was a variety of environments for slavery, but the power to buy and sell, to hire out, or to punish meant that the owner retained an enormous amount of control.

Abolition and Civil War

This institution, which had become central to the nation, created both attackers and defenders. Some people in the United States, influenced by Enlightenment and/or evangelical ideals, began to criticize the institution, and by the 1830s a small but active group of abolitionists had sprung up in several Northern, or free, states. Africans, both freed and enslaved, also attacked the institution. Many freed Africans joined the abolitionists or aided fugitive slaves to escape into enclaves for free Blacks in the North or in Canada. Slaves ran away, sometimes rebelled, and committed other actions against the institution. Slavery always had its defenders, and these attacks brought forth a full-fledged defense based on the deep cultural and historical roots of the institution, its acceptance in the Bible and among early Christians, and the virulent racism common to all regions of the nation. The North never became dominated by the abolitionists, but many people in the United States began to question the morality of the institution. On the other side, Southerners, now influenced by a powerful proslavery rhetoric, began to demand Northern acceptance of the institution.

Slavery had long been a sporadic political issue. Debates at the Constitutional Convention, in the early 1790s, and over Missouri between 1819 and 1821 had riled politicians, but the Mexican War, in the 1840s, placed the slavery issue in the midst of national politics. When the United States seized Mexican territory, the debate flared over whether slavery should be permitted in these newly acquired possessions. The Free-Soilers, not abolitionists, wanted to contain the extension of slavery, but many Southerners, now convinced by a proslavery argument, believed it to be in the best interest of the nation for slavery to expand. After serious sectional confrontations, Congress cobbled together the compromise of 1850, which failed because Free-Soilers, in the North, attacked the Fugitive Slave Law and many extreme Southerners believed their section had gained little. The passage of the Kansas–Nebraska Act in 1854 led to the battles

over “bleeding Kansas” and the formation of a new Free Soil Republican party. The efforts of President James Buchanan and his administration to admit Kansas as a slave state inflamed politics so much that when abolitionist John Brown attacked Harper’s Ferry in 1859, leading Southern politicians demanded that Congress pass legislation that would protect slavery in the national territories. This demand led to the division of the Democratic Party in early 1860, the election of Lincoln in late 1860, and the secession of slave states. By the spring of 1861, the Civil War had begun.

At first the Lincoln administration merely wished to reverse secession, but in early 1862, Congress passed legislation ending slavery in the territories and providing for compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia. The war continued, and Lincoln moved forward with his famous Proclamation, which freed slaves only in areas under Confederate control as of January 1, 1863. Congress, realizing that such a proclamation might be eventually ruled unconstitutional, passed after serious division the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ending slavery as a legal institution, in early 1865.

The courts later decided that the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, also prohibited peonage and other forms of forced labor. This ended the ancient institution of slavery within the United States. Abolishing the institution of slavery did not end its impact on inter-group relations, however. Racism remained a central feature in U.S. politics and society. While class conflict based on slavery died away in the South, the results of slavery, the Civil War, and abolition helped create a strong Southern sectional identification that persists to this day. The ancient institution ended in the United States in 1865, but its impact remains with us today.

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See also Apartheid; Dehumanization/Infrahumanization; Discrimination; Minority Groups in Society; Prejudice; Racism

Further Readings

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