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TERMS OF LABOR

SLAVERY, SERFDOM, AND FREE LABOR

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Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern World

DAVID ELTIS

WHY IN THE LAST FOUR CENTURIES has the Western world developed the most extreme forms of both freedom and unfreedom, and what has this development to do with transatlantic migration, coerced and free? Assertions about the emerging uniqueness of the Western world's experience—or at least the part that had to do with freedom—were common in popular eighteenth-century literature, and as late as the mid-nineteenth century Southern United States newspapers could argue that slavery is "the natural and normal condition of the laboring man, white or black," and that free labor was an unfortunate "little experiment . . . in a corner of western Europe," that had "failed dismally."[1] Advocates of free labor agreed with all but the "failed dismally" part of this statement. Adam Smith, Arthur Young, and others had pointed out that all Africans, all Asians, and most of those in the Americas were, if not under slavery, at least unfree in the Western sense, and that free labor was a term that could be applied to only a small percentage of the world's population—almost all of it living in northwestern Europe and related settlements.

Western exceptionalism was not of recent origin, nor was it shared equally by all of western Europe. The observations of Smith and others would have had almost the same validity if made three centuries earlier—at the time of the Columbian contact. There were certainly more slaves in southern Europe in 1492 than in 1772—slaves made up ten percent of the population of Lisbon in the 1460s. However, north and northwest Europe had been free of chattel slavery since the Middle Ages. Indeed the incidence of chattel slavery everywhere in western Europe had declined irregularly since Roman times, but the pace of the decline had been greater in northern than in southern Europe. More generally, free labor in the modern sense

scarcely existed anywhere before the nineteenth century, but by 1800 the coercive element imposed on those who worked for others had been in decline for a better part of a millennium. From the Neolithic Revolution to the Middle Ages, every society had had some slaves. Suddenly there was a culture, and the larger part of a subcontinent, that did not. Perhaps we should regard abolition as originating before 1500, not after 1750.

Why did this trend fail to continue when Europeans established transoceanic societies? Social structures and the ideologies that sustain them have proved to be the most malleable of the cultural traits that migrants carry with them.[2] But Europeans not only reaccepted slavery in the face of New World realities, they gave it dimensions that had not previously existed. All the *major* slave societies in human history have been either European or under European control—Greek, Roman, Brazilian, Caribbean, and United States South. Three of these emerged in the Americas in the aftermath of European overseas expansion, and the slavery they imposed involved exploitation more intense than had ever existed before. It is inconceivable that any societies in history—at least before 1800—could have matched the output per slave of seventeenth-century Barbados or the nineteenth-century United States. European exceptionalism thus extended beyond the slave-free dichotomy noted by Young and Smith in that the slavery European migrants imposed had a large economic element that made it totally different from what existed in non-European societies—at any time. But if there were no slave plantations in the pre-contact Americas and Africa, neither was there a counterpart in the European Americas to the open systems of slavery that existed in Africa, the indigenous Americas, and the Middle East. Peoples of African descent—the only peoples brought across the Atlantic as slaves—had small chance of non-slave status, and smaller again of full membership in European settlement societies.

In Europe itself, on the other hand, the entrenchment of certain individual freedoms was such that there were frequently doubts about the legal status of those few enslaved peoples brought to Europe from the slave Americas. The slavery that evolved in the Americas in the three centuries between Columbus and Arthur Young was imposed by the very countries that occupied the "free" enclave to which the latter drew attention. It evolved during the Renaissance, Reformation,

and Enlightenment—shifts in European thought that helped the rights of the individual to evolve into recognizably modern form.[3] In summary, at the end of the fifteenth century slavery did not exist in most of western Europe. At the end of the eighteenth century, it still did not exist in western Europe, but it had greatly intensified and expanded in those parts of the non-European world that Europeans had come to dominate. Europe was exceptional in the individual rights that it accorded its citizens, *and* in the intensity of its slavery, which, of course, was reserved for non-citizens.

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Free and Coerced Migration

In the early years after Columbian contact it was by no means clear that a paradox of the scale and type suggested above would develop. Tables 1 and 2 chart the divergence of Europeans in Europe and of Europeans overseas. In table 1 the African arrivals in column 1 and the European departures in column 3 provide a rough sum of migration into each national jurisdiction in the Americas, whereas the sum of columns 2 and 3 gives the numbers carried on board the ships of each major national carrier.[4] Table 2 reduces some of the raw estimates in table 1—specifically the number of slaves carried—to percentages. Europeans took African slaves to the Americas and enslaved the Amerindians that they found there from the beginning. But initially, northwestern Europeans were little involved in transoceanic migration, and the proportion of Spanish- and Portuguese-controlled migration comprising slaves before 1530 was little different from the proportion of the Iberian population that was enslaved. Moreover, the institution of indentured labor—seen by many scholars as temporary slavery, and under which most English made their transatlantic passage between 1650 and 1780—was virtually unknown to Spanish and Portuguese migrants of the early modern period. Elaborate systems of dependency bound the majority of Iberian migrants to their social superiors, but these ties were not well suited to extracting intensive labor in mines and on plantations and were never used as such. After 1540 the transatlantic slave trade increased markedly with the result that between 1492 and 1580—covered by panel 1 of table 1—almost one quarter of the migrants to the New World were African slaves.

TABLE 1

European-Directed Transatlantic Migration, 1500–1760 by European Nation and Continent of Origin (in thousands)

	Africans arriving in American regions claimed by each nation	Africans leaving Africa on ships of each nation	Europeans leaving each nation for Americas (net)	Africans and Europeans leaving for Americas (col 2 + col 3)
		(a) Before 1580		
Spain	45	10	139	149
Portugal	13	63	93	156
Britain	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	58	74	232	306
		(b) 1580–1640		
Spain[a]	289	100	188	288
Portugal[a]	181	488	110	598
France	2	1	4	5
Netherlands	8	9	2	11
Britain	4	4	126	130
TOTAL	484	602	430	1032
		(c) 1640–1700		
Spain	141	10	158	168
Portugal	225	325	50	375
France	75	47	45	92
Netherlands	49	160	13	173
Britain	277	371	248	619
TOTAL	767	913	514	1427
		(d) 1700–1760		
Spain	271	0	193	193
Portugal	768	903	270	1173
France	414	487	51	538
Netherlands	123	244	5	249
Britain[c]	1013	1342	372	1714
TOTAL	2589	2976	891	3867
		(e) 1500–1760		
Spain[a]	746	120	678	798
Portugal[a]	1187	1779	523	2302
France	491	535	100	635
Netherlands[b]	180	413	20	433
Britain[c]	1294	1717	746	2463
TOTAL	3898	4564	2067	6631

SOURCES (number refers to row, letter refers to column):

1A, 2A, Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, WI, 1969), 116; 5A, ibid., for 1581–94; Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamerica y el Comercio de Esclavos* (Seville, 1977), 206–9 for 1595–1640; 6A, 10A, Curtin, *Census*, 116, 119 for 1581–1600; David Eltis, "The Volume and American Distribution of the Seventeenth Century Transatlantic Slave Trade" (unpub. paper, 1995) for 1600–40; 7A, Curtin, *Census*, 119; 8A, Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (Cambridge, 1990), 21; 9A, 15A, David Eltis, "The British

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Transatlantic Slave Trade Before 1714: Annual Estimates of Volume and Direction," in Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville, FL, 1996), 182–205; 12A, 13A; Eltis, "The Volume and American Distribution," 13; 14A, Postma, *Dutch Slave Trade*, 21, 300; 17A, Curtin, *Census*, 25, 216; 18A, 18B less 15% for voyage mortality (it should be noted that Curtin's estimate of arrivals in Brazil for this period [959.0 thousand] is 18% greater than this figure); 19A, David Richardson, "Slave Exports from West and West-Central Africa, 1700–1810: New Estimates of Volume and Distribution," *Journal of African History* 30 (1989): 1–22; 20A, Postma, *Dutch Slave Trade*, 186, 191, 195, 212, 218, 220–21, 225; 21A, Richardson, "Slave Exports," less 150.0 thousand to Spanish Americas (Colin Palmer, *Human Cargoes: The British Slave Trade to Spanish America* [Urbana, IL, 1981], 110–11 adjusted, for 15% voyage mortality); 1B, 2B, Curtin, *Census*, 116 plus 20% voyage mortality (Spain/Portugal breakdown is a guess); 3B, Hawkins's voyages in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*, 10 vols. (London, 1927–28), 10:7–66; 5B, 6B, 5A+6A plus 20% voyage mortality (Spain/Portugal breakdown is a guess); 7B, Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* 7:95–96 indicates some early French slaving activity in Africa, but the French Americas contained few slaves and no record of French slave trading to the Iberian Americas has surfaced; 8B, Postma, *Dutch Slave Trade*, 21; 9B, 9A plus 20% voyage mortality; 11B, Spanish were reported buying slaves in Cacheo, 1678–83 (T70/10,1; T70/16, 50), though this may have been for Spanish markets. No records of Spanish ships selling in the Americas at this time have survived. An allowance of 150 a year is assigned to allow for such activity; 12B, 12A plus 15% voyage mortality plus Portuguese imports to Spanish America (9A less Dutch, English, and Spanish arrivals) plus 20% voyage mortality on these imports; 13B, 13A plus 20% voyage mortality, divided by two (half of all slaves taken to French Americas assumed in French ships); 14B, 15B, Volume appendix, table 1 plus 20% mortality; 18B, Jose C. Curto, "A Quantitative Reassessment of the Legal Portuguese Slave Trade from Luanda, Angola, 1710–1830," *African Economic History* 20 (1992): 1–25 for Angola; Patrick Manning, "The Slave Trade in the Bight of Benin, 1640–1890," in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, eds., *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1979), 117 for Bahia; plus guess of 5 thousand for Upper Guinea-Brazil; 19B, Richardson, "Slave Exports," table 2; 20B, Postma, *Dutch Slave Trade*, 295; 21B, Richardson, "Slave Exports," table 1; 1C, 5C, Magnus Morner, "Spanish Migration to the New World prior to 1810: A report on the State of Research," in Fredi Chiapelli et al., eds., *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (Berkeley, 1976), 771 less 20% for returns; 2C, 6C, 12C, Vitorino Magalhaes-Godinho, "L'émigration portuguaise du XVe siècle à nos jours: Histoire d'une constante structurale," in *Conjoncture économique—structures sociales: Hommage à Ernest Labrousse* (Paris, 1974), 254–55 estimates gross emigration. This is divided by three to allow for movements to Atlantic Islands, Goa and returns; 7C, 13C, 19C, Leslie Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 20–22, 162, multiplied by 5 (G. Debien, "Les engages pour les Antilles (1634–1715)," *Revue d'histoire des colonies* 38 (1951): 9–13, 141–42 found a ratio of 4:1 for the Caribbean and Canada); 8C, 14C, 20C, Jan Lucassen, *Dutch Long Distance Migration 1600–1900* (Amsterdam, 1991), 22–23 less 20% returns; 9C, Gemery, "Emigration from the British Isles," multiplied by 2 to allow for pre–1630 emigration; 11C, 5C multiplied by ratio of America's silver production, 1640–1700/1580–1640. For the latter see Arthur Attman, *American Bullion in the European World Trade, 1600–1800* (Goteborg, 1986), 20; 15C, Gemery, "Emigration from the British Isles," for 1640–50, plus David Galenson, *White Servitude in Colonial America: an Economic Analysis* (Cambridge, 1981), 216–18 plus 5% voyage mortality for 1650–1700; 17C, 5C multiplied by ratio of America's silver production, 1700–1760/1580–1640. For latter see Attman, *American Bullion*, 20; 18C, Magalhaes-Godinho, "L'emigration portuguaise," 255 estimates gross emigration. These divided by two to allow for movements to Atlantic Islands, Goa and returns; 21C, Galenson, *White Servitude*, 216–18 plus 5% voyage mortality.

NOTES:

[a] Spain and Portugal are treated as separate countries despite the Crowns of the two countries being united between 1580 and 1640.

[b] Includes Dutch Brazil.

[c] Includes migrants from Germany.

TABLE 2

Slaves Carried to the Americas as Percentage of Total Migrants and as Percentage of Migrants on Board Major National Carriers, 1500–1760

	Slaves as % of all migrants
(A) All Carriers Combined	
Before 1580	24.2
1580–1640	58.3
1640–1700	64.0
1700–1760	77.0
(B) Major National Carriers 1500–1760	
Spain	52.0
Portugal	69.0
Britain	63.0
France	83.0
Netherlands	90.0

SOURCE: Calculated from table 1

Panels 2 to 4 of table 1 show that after 1580, as more of the Americas came under European control and as the control of transatlantic migration passed steadily from southern to northwestern European hands, the coercive element in the migrant flow increased. Table 2 shows that the slave component increased from less than one quarter between 1492 and 1580 to nearly three quarters between 1700 and 1780. With few exceptions it would seem that within three generations of Columbian contact Europeans imposed or at least accepted slavery wherever they settled outside Europe. At the same time the trend toward less coercion within Europe continued unabated. Of the 23 percent of transatlantic migrants that were not slaves in the 1700–80 period, most crossed the ocean under indenture, or carrying a "labor debt." Indentured servitude grew out of the annual master-servant contract in English agriculture.[5] However, the length of the term and the master's power that evolved in the Americas would not have been tolerated within Britain itself. The position of the servant was not only inconsistent with modern conceptions of free labor, it was at odds with concepts of full membership of the community that held in early modern Britain.

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tic shift from Europe that saw over 50 million Europeans relocate in the Americas in less than a century, 90 percent of those coming across the Atlantic were African, not European. The peak years of the transatlantic slave trade, say 1680 to 1830, were sandwiched between early Iberian, then English emigration on the one side, and the later mass migration emanating from first northern and then southern Europe on the other. The forced, African component was much larger than the European component before the nineteenth century and occurred in part because of the voluntary nature of the latter. And much of the later European migration occurred because abolition denied employers in the Americas access to slaves.

The shift north in the control of migration was very pronounced. Before 1580 the Iberian nations accounted for almost all transatlantic movements of peoples. By 1700 to 1760 on the other hand, Britain, France, and the Netherlands were carrying twice as many people across the Atlantic as were the Iberians, with the British alone carrying nearly half of everyone shipped. Except for the Spanish, all European nations carried more Africans than Europeans to the Americas in the first three centuries after Columbian contact, but it was the nations of northwestern Europe that carried the most Africans and the most bound Europeans. Despite the size and high scholarly profile of British migration, the British actually carried three Africans to the New World for every European down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, and almost nine out of every ten people on British ships before 1800 were there under some obligation to labor for others upon their arrival in the Americas. It was the northwestern Europeans in particular who were likely to impose slavery or employ indentured labor whenever they found themselves in transoceanic lands. Yet over the preceding three centuries, it was these very nations that had developed concepts of the modern liberal state (and notions of personal freedom) that have become central parts of the western cultural domination of the late twentieth-century world.

Both the predominant labor regime and the nationality of the leading carrier were heavily influenced by exports from the Americas. Coerced and non-coerced migrant streams alike gravitated toward export-producing regions. Plunder and trade may have dominated the early decades of European expansion, but the main focus quickly became production, and between 1500 and 1760 the peak

decades for migration within each national group coincided broadly with peak years of exports produced by coerced and free migrants and their descendants. Despite much scholarly attention, trade with indigenous peoples in the Americas was trivial. And in Africa, while African-produced gold predominated before 1700, the raison d'etre of the slave trade, which after 1700 became many times more valuable than gold, was the production of commodities in the European-dominated Americas. Long-distance migration in the pre-contact Americas and within Africa, or indeed Asia too, had never been as closely associated with commerce and production and the intensive forced involvement of other peoples. The terms of the charter for the Virginia Company of 1612 and the Royal African Company 60 years later are similar in the sense that the companies expected to profit from the production of goods on the other side of the Atlantic.[6] If transatlantic migration was an extension of migration within Europe, then productive enterprises located across the Atlantic, whether they used slave or non-slave labor, were initially very much replicas of Old World organizations. They drew upon the same pools of capital, management expertise, and in the non-slave sector, markets for European labor.

Thus it is not difficult to see why slaves formed an increasing proportion of transatlantic migration down to the nineteenth century, and but for abolition, might have done so down to the twentieth. From the standpoint of New World users of labor, slavery was an institutional arrangement particularly well suited to both trans-oceanic transportation and the kinds of tasks necessary to produce most New World exports. The best data concern British-directed migration. After an early period without a dominant crop, during which English settlement hung in the balance, tobacco and sugar exports correlated well with the movement of both Europeans and Africans to the English Americas. Similarly, the early Portuguese slave trade was tied to bullion exports from Spanish America and Brazilian sugar production. The Dutch were the only exceptions, in that (leaving aside the temporary Dutch occupation of northeastern Brazil) production in the Dutch Americas was trivial until the development of Surinam in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Yet, as with the Portuguese, prior to the English Navigation Acts and Colbert's reforms of the 1660s, the Dutch organized, fetched, and carried for other nations.

The advantages of slave labor over free were not confined to relative productivity in the plantation Americas. Potentially, at least, slave labor was cheap to obtain in the Old World, and cheap to transport relative to free. Societies in all parts of the world have always generated criminals and prisoners of war, the conversion of whom into full chattel slaves could have occurred with few costs beyond those normally involved in keeping order and waging war. In addition, as millions of Africans found out, the preferences of involuntary migrants could be ignored during the transatlantic voyage. The crowding, feeding, selection and organization of people into barracoons and ships that followed from the voicelessness of slaves translated into large savings in migrants per ton. On the American side, because a buyer of a slave obtained the balance of a life of labor instead of a fixed term of years (and would be prepared to pay more for the former), transatlantic slave merchants could afford to organize longer and more costly voyages and thus draw on a wider range of provenance zones. It is thus not slavery that is difficult to understand, but rather the ethnicity of the slaves. In no case were Europeans brought as slaves and, apart from occasional members of an African elite on a business, diplomatic, or educational visit to Europe, Africans were never carried over as anything other than slaves. The switch from European to African migration thus also implied a switch from non-slave to slave labor in the dominant export sector. If the traffic in people from Africa to the Americas had been restricted to shorter terms *and* voluntary recruitment, it would have no doubt started later than the slave trade (if at all) and carried fewer people.

But why use Africans instead of Europeans? And, to pose a very much related question, why do so without any self-questioning—given the long absence of slavery from northwestern Europe? The divergence of slave and non-slave regimes within the European world via the revival of slavery and its imposition on the Americas is extraordinary. On the continent of Europe, Bartolomé de las Casas and, later, Jean Baptiste du Tertre encouraged reflection, and in the former case real change in the way aboriginal peoples were treated, but both accepted the idea that some peoples—specifically Africans—were natural slaves. Samuel Johnson's question, why "drivers of Negroes" should make "the loudest yelps for liberty," was not even posed more than a century earlier as the English

Commonwealth, fresh from overcoming the tyranny of the Crown, vigorously laid out the foundations of a Caribbean slave empire. Some English Levellers were prepared to countenance slavery as a punishment for Englishmen, though unlike African slavery in the Americas this never became a reality.[7] In the early- and mid-seventeenth century it was the remnants of villeinage in England rather than the emergence of chattel slavery in the Americas that preoccupied English observers.[8] More than a century later, as their slave empire approached its zenith, the British could still sing "Rule Britannia" including the line "Britons never, never, never shall be slaves" with no sense of irony.

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Gender in Europe and Africa

A parallel situation existed with respect to European gender roles in that the scope for individual action that evolved in northwestern Europe in the early modern period was much more fully developed for males than for females. Women may have had slightly better occupational opportunities than they were to have during and after the Industrial Revolution, but they were hugely underrepresented in all skilled occupations and professions in seventeenth-century England and the Netherlands.[9] Likewise their legal rights were better than they were to become under the nineteenth century marriage property acts, but again primogeniture practices throughout the West—to take just one example—denied them anything approaching a legal status that matched that of males. Women were clearly not slaves in the sense that non-Europeans were to become. In addition, women in northwest Europe had significant reproductive rights compared to non-European women, particularly with respect to whether to marry and the choice of mate if they elected marriage. Yet the fact remains that the substance as well as the discourse on marriage that emerged in the pre-nineteenth century West demonstrated an unawareness of gender inequality. As with the slavery issue, even radical groups shared mainstream attitudes.

Just as European conceptions of ethnicity ensured that most transatlantic migrants before 1800 would be of African origin, so gender attitudes ensured that the European migration that did oc-

cur was overwhelmingly male. Because European women were systemically prevented from acquiring non-domestic skills and were regarded as unfit for field labor on plantations, they formed only a tiny fraction of the indentured servants that left Europe. In sharp contrast to African women, European females traveled across the Atlantic primarily as family members—in other words in their reproductive role—rather than as providers of labor. More important for the argument advanced here, contemporaries, while fully aware of the facts, considered gender imbalances unworthy of comment, much less debate. The relationship between ethnicity and gender—more specifically the contribution of attitudes toward gender to the decision that Africans would be used as slaves on New World plantations—is examined elsewhere, but it is immediately clear that, as with enslaved Africans, females in the early modern Atlantic world were not perceived as having the potential for full membership in the community.[10]

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Western and Non-Western Conceptions of Freedom

Such blindness to differences in the way ethnic and gender groupings were treated is of central importance in understanding the slave-free dichotomy in the Western world and forms the main foundation of the assessment of the relationship between slavery and freedom offered here. The slavery that Europeans revived and refined was for non-Europeans, and it was for non-Europeans of both sexes. Indeed the absolute line of ethnicity would have been hard to enforce in a waged labor market. Even under apartheid, or in the post-reconstruction United States South, occupation and ethnic divisions never coincided with the exactness that existed in slave regimes in the Americas. Productivity of slaves was probably much higher in the nineteenth century than earlier; and as slave values increased, the capacity of slaves to resist, the treatment of slaves, and the "space" allowed them all likely improved.[11] Yet the African exclusivity of the institution remained absolute, as did the sharing of some occupations between male and female slaves. The power of the owner remained overwhelming through nearly four centuries. But it was this very ethnic divide that provided Europe-

ans with the blinkers necessary to come to terms with an institution that was so different from the labor regimes which they saw as appropriate for each other.

The African exclusivity of slavery in the Americas is the first key point in reassessing the slave-free paradox; the second is the increasing reliance of Europeans and their descendants in the early modern era on the odd institution (in global terms) of waged labor. It is widely recognized that there were no equivalents to full plantation-based chattel slavery among Amerindian or African cultures at the time of the Columbian contact.[12] But what receives less attention is that there were few counterparts in the non-European world to free labor and its associated market either, much less to the modern labor force where employer and employed were equal before the law. All European and early American societies contained vestiges of the medieval concept of labor as a common community resource subject to community allocation and prescription. The master's authority over the servant was in part a jurisdiction defined and delegated by society and in part a proprietal right over persons exercised temporarily during servitude.[13] There are interesting parallels between the relationship of an individual to society that this potent mix of freedom and authority implies, and its counterpart in the kin-group-based societies of African and Amerindian peoples. But a global perspective suggests that European wage and free labor systems and the social structures that supported them shared far more with each other than either did with labor regimes that lay outside the European orbit.

Both waged and slave systems appear to have provided the basis for a rate of economic growth in Europe that greatly exceeded that in the non-European areas of the world. Slave societies around the Atlantic may not have experienced industrialization directly, but they probably at the least kept pace with their non-slave counterparts in output per capita, or output per acre or per unit of capital. The nineteenth century evidence suggests that the productivity advantage lay with the coerced rather than the free labor regions of the Atlantic.[14] The evidence for the seventeenth century is less systematic, but the important point here is that in the post-Columbian Atlantic world, Europeans and their descendants owned and used slaves for the same reason that masters hired servants in the non-slave sector, which was to produce goods for sale

to others. Indeed, in the Atlantic world as a whole, the share of slave labor involved in such activities, especially goods destined for export, was no doubt greater than the share of non-slave labor similarly employed. A corollary of this also holds: the proportion of non-slave labor providing personal services and involved in "non-productive" activities was greater than its slave counterpart.[15] Just as important, masters in both labor sectors obtained the labor they needed from well-organized markets in which buyers and sellers responded to price changes. In short, setting aside the process of enslavement, employers of both free and slave labor bought their labor and set it to work to produce goods and services. The focus on production, particularly on production for sale in transoceanic markets, as well as the reliance on markets to obtain the necessary labor separated European- from non-European dominated slavery, and European from non-European non-slave regimes.

Despite parallels between the communal ties of pre-Columbian European societies and counterparts in Africa and the Americas, the balance between individual and group rights had, in relative global terms, shifted toward the former in Europe before the era of European expansion and well before the emergence of possessive individualism in the seventeenth century. Europe was characterized by the absence of a single dominating structure of government for the sub-continent as a whole. And within the European state, the curbs on the arbitrary acts of government were such as to give powers to individuals against surplus-extracting elites that did not exist in the non-European world. In the economic sphere, capital and labor could move within and beyond the sub-continent with considerable ease relative to any other part of the world in 1500. It was an environment particularly well suited to the "technological drift," in Eric Jones's words, that provided Europeans with the means to establish transoceanic trading and imperial links. Traditional ties still bound workers to master in early modern Europe. Free labor in the modern sense did not exist even in England and the early American Republic. A master-servant relationship gave masters a proprietal right so that non-performance by the servant was theft, with prison as the outcome. Yet choice of masters was increasingly possible even if the option of avoiding labor markets and working for oneself was less viable over time.[16]

Nor, from a global perspective, was the ability to choose between

masters in northwest Europe regularly circumscribed by the threat of starvation after 1650. The last life-threatening food shortage in England occurred in 1623, later than in Holland and perhaps a century earlier than in France; but famines on an African or Asiatic scale had disappeared centuries before, if indeed they had ever occurred. For most social historians it is the harshness of the English Poor Laws and their counterparts in other European countries as well as their place in securing the position of elite classes that calls for analysis. Yet however miserable the support provided, there appear to have been few systems of poor relief in the non-European world of four centuries ago that attempted to offset deprivation as inclusively as say English parish relief, and none at all that left the realm of individual action so uncircumscribed. Relief in England by the early modern period was based on place of residence of the individual rather than membership of a group such as kin or family, and was not conditional on the surrender of long-term "rights in people," including labor.[17] Relative to Africans, Asians, and pre-contact aboriginal Americans, early modern Europeans were nutritionally secure, and less subject to natural or man-made catastrophe. Life expectancy in western Europe in 1500 was much lower than it was to become, but it was higher than anywhere else on the globe.

The key distinction is not that individuals in sixteenth-century Europe had more rights in relation to society than those in Africa and the pre-contact Americas, though this was probably true and certainly came to be the case. Rather it is that property rights in particular, especially those in human labor, one's own and others, were vested in the individual in Europe rather than the group.[18] Generally, status and rights in Africa and the pre-Columbian Americas derived not from autonomy and independence, but from full membership of a kin-group or some other corporate body.[19] Such a group would make collective decisions and hold, again collectively, at least some of the property rights in persons which in the European Atlantic world would be held by individuals. Europeans might purchase property rights in others (slaves) outright, or they might enter the labor market themselves and temporarily trade some of their own rights in persons in return for wages, but in either case there was an individual owner of the rights in persons and a market transaction.

To be a full member of the community in much of the non-European world meant having more social bonds and less autonomy than

would a marginal person without kinship ties. Freedom meant a belonging, not a separateness.[20] By contrast, in Europe and the European Americas full membership of the community meant freedom from such bonds, full ownership of property rights in oneself, and, before the eighteenth century at least, the ability to avoid hiring out these rights to others in return for wages. It was not just intensive slavery that came out of the West. More fundamentally, it was the concept of rights, including rights to the labor of oneself and others, being vested in the individual rather than a group. The idea of full membership in society and, ultimately, freedom as independence from others deserves the title "the peculiar institution" to a much greater degree than did slavery.[21] European contact may or may not have gradually transformed African and Amerindian slavery, but from present-day perspectives it was the new concept of "freedom" or more precisely, the new relationship between the individual and society, rather than the new concept of slavery that had, and is having, by far the larger impact on the non-European world.

Western systems of slavery and free labor thus had the same roots—the relative latitude allowed for individual action in Europe in the era of expansion. It is likely that the very capacity of Europeans to sail beyond oceans and establish and maintain trading systems and empires hinged on a relationship between the citizen and the state, between elite and non-elite, and between employer and employed that was without precedent in non-Western societies in the scope it allowed for the individual. European overseas expansion could not have occurred without such scope, which implied freedom to enslave others. If neither Africa nor the Americas expanded overseas, it was, perhaps, because of their social structures rather than any shortfalls in wealth and technology. A corollary of this is that the impact of European values and social relationships on the non-European world seems far more important than the impact of European wealth and technology.

≺ IV ≻

Interactions between Slavery and Freedom

But if the two concepts, slavery and free labor, had the same roots, why in the very long run did one survive and the other wither; and

to ask a related question—one perhaps that has to be asked first—how did the concepts and the practices of slavery and freedom interact and sustain each other in the European-dominated Atlantic world? As the European waged labor and slave systems diverged, they nevertheless continued to reinforce each other. The two were tied together by markets for products and factors of production. Although the Atlantic slave economy was never more than a relatively small appendage to the European economy, it provided a market for European goods and services, and at the same time was able to thrive because of the buoyant European market for tropical produce, and access to the largest capital markets in the world—Amsterdam and, later, London. While slave and waged labor systems drew on each other, it seems likely that the dependence of the former on the latter was rather greater than the reverse. There are major debates on the contribution of the slave systems to industrialization. Would the British have found it possible to fund government war-induced debt, or build canals or textile mills, or feed a rapidly growing population in the absence of Africa and the Americas? Probably. Would there have been a slave trade and plantations in the Americas without the credit and mortgage financing that flowed out from the European metropolitan centers?[22] Certainly not. As Adam Smith noted, the prosperity of the English sugar colonies was based "in great measure" on "the great riches of England, of which a part has overflowed . . . upon these colonies."

But among the strongest (and most ironic) ties between the slave and non-slave systems of the European Atlantic are those suggested by a closer look at the evolution of the waged labor force—especially in England where "modernization" proceeded fastest. Early English transatlantic migration was in fact intimately connected with this process. If "modernization" means anything today, it is the creation of a modern labor force—a phenomenon increasingly viewed by labor and economic historians as cultural rather than economic.[23] Seventeenth-century England may not have had slavery, but it did give masters large powers to enforce contracts. Those who would not enter such contracts, and who did not own sufficient land to support themselves, faced severe laws against vagrancy and idleness, the aim of which was the extraction of labor from those unwilling to volunteer it for wages. Migration—perhaps within England, but increasingly overseas—may be

viewed as an attempt to avoid this status and achieve the premodern ideal of a piece of land and independence from the labor market. Thus, indentured servitude was something to be entered into voluntarily and endured temporarily by young people as an escape route from waged labor in much the same way as Eric Foner has posited for the Republican workers of the mid-nineteenth century urban United States.[24]

At some time in the centuries touched on here, however, worker aspirations in, first, England, and then the rest of Europe, shifted. Perhaps the essential meaning of modernization is worker acceptance of waged labor and a stress on consumption of goods and services—for which pecuniary income is necessary—over nonpecuniary rewards in the form of leisure or independence. As James Steuart said on the eve of industrialization, people must be slaves to others or slaves to want. The direct result of this was an increase in the supply of labor in the waged sector and, less directly, a stronger conviction in the advantages of waged as opposed to slave labor within domestic European economies. In the English case, the pamphlet literature circulating among the elite moved away from stressing low wages and draconian social legislation, and toward the advantages of high wages in creating enhanced worker productivity and a market for goods.[25] Among the goods European workers wanted were of course sugar, alcohol, tobacco, and eventually cotton goods, all of which meant slavery.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that it was not just the European and African slave merchants that helped ensure Africans would become slaves in the Americas; it was also the aspirations of the European worker. The demand for cheap plantation produce was part of a gradual, secular rise in well-being that set in after 1650 in the English case, and later elsewhere in Europe. This was accentuated by changing values on the part of the worker as plantation produce formed a part (albeit miniscule) of the goods that the "modernized" worker now began to demand, as well as by the associated willingness to respond to higher wages on the part of more English and later European workers. Given the European taboo against European slaves, modernization of the English work force thus meant more slavery in the Americas for Africans. A similar process—termed a "first consumer revolution"—has been observed among indigenous populations as they came into initial

contact with European goods. But the additional work effort required for Amerindians and Africans to obtain such consumer items went into the acquisition of commodities (or in the African case, slaves) for trade rather than a formal labor market. No more than Europeans would Africans and Amerindians work voluntarily in mines and sugar plantations in gang labor conditions, though unlike Europeans many of them were not given the choice.[26]

But shifts in worker attitudes toward consumption had further and ultimately quite different impacts on the free-slave dichotomy pursued here. In the very long run the shifts served to make slave and wage systems incompatible and helped destroy the former. By the late eighteenth century waged workers worked longer and harder in order to consume. Higher productivity and the emergence of an industrial sector were associated with the emergence of a free labor force in the modern sense where employers no longer held property rights in the employed and where the two groups were considered legal (as opposed to material) equals. If possessive individualism and the market system seemed equally compatible with waged and slave labor before say 1750, they appeared ideologically much closer to the former than to the latter by the nineteenth century.[27] Shifts in worker attitudes in the waged sector of the European Atlantic world thus encouraged the rise of antislavery; after its success the European world attempted to impose only one labor system—the waged—on the non-European world, instead of two.[28]

To summarize, early modern Europeans shifted property rights in labor toward the individual and away from the community. As noted above, such a situation was consistent with either free or slave labor. With respect to Europeans it led eventually to the former. As applied to non-Europeans (at least in the eyes of Europeans) it led to the latter. The European route to free labor for themselves ensured African subjection to the other (and polar) implication of the evolution of property rights in labor in Europe—full chattel slavery. Europeans who had initially worked in the plantation fields as non-slaves in Brazil and then the Caribbean gradually withdrew from such activities in the seventeenth century, though in the absence of Africans and Amerindians (and after the attendant rise in wages) some would no doubt have continued to work under such conditions. The geographic pattern of African slave use in Europe in the sixteenth century (mainly southern) was some-

what similar to what it was to become in the Americas in the sense that regions closest to Africa were most likely to use slave labor.[29] If Europeans had enslaved their own, there would have been far more slaves in the early modern Americas. The fact that African slavery in the Americas took longer to evolve than any European counterpart would have done—at least in North America—is accounted for by the greater costs of moving people from Africa as opposed to Europe; and if Africans had been allowed European migrant shipping conditions, higher shipping costs would have slowed the evolution of the African slave trade (and the trade in plantation produce) even further.[30]

The slave-free dialectic and the associated paradoxes are undoubtedly starkest in early modern northwestern Europe, and particularly England. The Europeans with the most advanced capitalist culture, the Dutch and the English, had by 1700 moved domestically furthest toward the modern conception of the labor force and away from subjecting their own citizens to forms of forced labor.[31] These were the countries with the harshest and most closed systems of exploiting enslaved non-Europeans. They were also the countries that came to dominate Europe's relations with the non-European world: the Dutch specializing to a greater degree than the English in Asia, and the English in the Americas. The English and Dutch conception of the role of the individual in metropolitan society was closer to the modern Western ideal than was that of other European states. It made it impossible for their own subjects to be chattel slaves or even convicts for life. For some scholars the enslavement of Africans made possible the fuller development of individual rights in England and the Netherlands. But the thrust of the present analysis is that the English and Dutch view of themselves may have ensured the accelerated development of African chattel slavery in the Americas (and Asian slavery in the East Indies).

≺ V ≻

The Slave-Free Paradox

The emphasis here on what is ultimately a non-economic argument allows a re-evaluation of the work of other scholars who have

addressed the slave-free dichotomy. The tensions posed by slavery in the Americas came to be recognized in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Given the not coincidental growth of abolitionism, the initial result of this recognition was the demonization of slaveowners and slave traders. Slavery was now seen as aberrant and certainly temporary. The conception of slavery as a "peculiar institution" was born in the abolitionist era. The view that some peoples were slaves by nature to which Las Casas subscribed came to be tempered by the idea that slavery was one stage through which all "uncivilized" peoples progressed toward a measure of freedom.[32] But in this form, as the influence of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips suggests, it remained widely held into the twentieth century. If slavery was a temporary condition and all peoples were potentially equal, then it might be assumed that the paradox of the extremes of slavery and freedom appearing in the Western world would be a temporary phenomenon.

From the mid-twentieth century the literature lurched toward explanations in terms of the economic self-interest of Europeans. For world systems scholars, slavery is associated with an early phase of European capitalism called "mercantile" or "merchant" as opposed to a later version termed "industrial" capital. Slavery and the slave trade have a central role in the growth of the former and therefore flourish with merchant capitalism, but they are incompatible with the latter and go into decline when industrial capitalism becomes dominant. But even when the former is in the ascendant, slavery is profitable only in the Americas, or "periphery." In the metropolitan center of the European world system, it is always more profitable to use free labor. The pattern of slave-free use is thus explained by the self-interest of European capitalists.

The absoluteness of the barrier that prevented Europeans from becoming slaves suggests that the world systems model, in which European capitalists organized coerced labor on the periphery and free labor in the core economies, is at least incomplete. We should have expected at least some Europeans—the prisoners of war, felons, and displaced Irish who were forced to the colonies—to have been slaves. Yet Portuguese degradados in Angola, Brazil, and Goa, French convicts sent to Canada, their Spanish counterparts who built the massive Havana fortifications, and the thousands of Cromwellian prisoners were never chattels and were always sub-

ject to "Christian usage."[33] More fundamentally, the ethnic barriers, like the gender barriers that barred European women from skilled manual occupations, lead us to question all explanations of European expansion that hinge on unrestrained mercantile and mercantilist capitalism. If, as seems likely, European slaves would have been available more cheaply than Africans (as providing women with skills would have reduced the cost of skilled labor), then European merchants could not have been both profit maximizers and prejudiced (or outright racist and sexist) at the same time. If sexual and ethnic chauvinism did prevail over profit—which is likely—then between 1500 and 1700 Europeans operated within cultural constraints. At least the image of naked predatory capitalism that dominates the current historiography of early European expansion requires some modification. Indeed, a more pecuniary or profit-maximizing or "capitalist" attitude would have meant less African slavery (and greater equality for females) in the Americas.

An alternative method of dealing with the parallel evolution of more extreme forms of freedom and coercion—which also relies on the self-interest of European capitalists—rests on the argument that there was little substantive difference between waged workers and slaves. If the freedom of the waged labor market was at root a freedom to starve, freedom was therefore largely illusory. Slavery in the colonies and wage labor at home appear as two different methods of coercing workers and, as some English radicals argued in the early nineteenth century, the difference between the two was small. Abolition of slavery, when it eventually occurred, simply imposed a new form of coercion on the ex-slaves, and both the rise of slavery and its abolition thereby become less in need of an explanation. Much recent work on the post-emancipation Caribbean is consistent with this approach. From such a perspective, the economic elite, especially in northwestern Europe, used different methods to reduce the economic independence of non-elites in Europe on the one hand and in the Americas on the other. By the nineteenth century it had become necessary to rely on wage labor, effectively if indirectly controlled, in all parts of the Atlantic world. Once more, the tension between Western freedom and Western slavery is reduced—once we understand the true interests of European capitalists and the strategies they adopted. Variants of

this draw on Gramsci, for whom slavery, or perhaps the abolition of slavery as espoused by the elite, becomes a way of legitimizing the ruling classes and making the conditions of European workers seem acceptable by comparison with those of slaves.[34]

Yet the self-interest of capitalists or indeed economic motivations in general seem, by themselves, to provide an unpromising route to understanding or setting aside the paradox. Slavery was certainly an economic system offering costs well below those possible using waged labor. But if the system was so effective, why was it confined so absolutely to non-Europeans? As for the contrast (or rather lack of) between free and slave labor—free laborers and slaves themselves had no doubts on the distinction between labor regimes, and slaves had no hesitation in attempting to achieve non-slave status, however defined and hedged, at least in the European dominated world. Having experienced slavery, Frederick Douglass was particularly sensitive to the differences between slave and non-slave labor. To underline the peculiar awfulness of the former, he several times informed crowds he was addressing that a job vacancy had been created by his escape from slavery, and that free laborers could offer their services as slaves to fill it.[35]

The various attempts to deal with the paradox—best embodied perhaps in the work of David Brion Davis, Seymour Drescher, Edmund S. Morgan, and Orlando Patterson—have tended to explore the paradox rather than attempted to resolve it in terms of class or economic interests. The cultural evolution and economic growth of the West that has shaped the modern world embodies a tension between coercion and freedom of choice which may be elaborated or understood, but not reduced, dismissed, or readily explained. For Patterson the tension long predates European overseas expansion. Freedom as a social value could not exist without slavery in the sense that in all societies what is marginal defines what is central. The conception of freedom as autonomy from personal and social obligations was perhaps possible only if an antithetical slave status defined as total dependence on another existed. Sparta, with helots rather than pure chattel slaves, had narrower concepts of individual freedom than Athens, where slavery was extensive and closed, and where the rightlessness of slaves was frequently set against the rights of adult male citizens. Both here and in Rome, the appearance of full chattel slavery was associated with the disappearance of any status intermediate to

the slave-free polarity—a situation with some analogies to the early modern European Atlantic world.[36]

In seventeenth-century England, the term "slavery" was applied to many situations of perceived injustice, and it already represented something devalued. The implication, clearly, was that Englishmen should be free of such restraints. Historians of North America have developed variants of this relationship to explain social cohesiveness and the ability of slaveholders to espouse an ideology in which the right of peoples to be free from oppression had a central place—"peoples" and "social order" being for those of European descent.[37] On the other hand, historians also see a dramatic reversal in this mutually sustaining relationship helping to overthrow the slave system from the end of the eighteenth century. In the era since slavery disappeared from the Americas, Western concepts of freedom have tended instead to draw on and define themselves in terms of what is perceived as a lack of freedom in non-Western societies.[38]

Yet before the eighteenth century, these associations seem, if not invalid, somewhat overdrawn. Personal freedom in the seventeenth-century Netherlands appears much more rooted in the social structure, religion, and immigration trends of the Low countries than in the coercive activities of a few thousand Dutchmen in Asia. The Dutch did not even enter the Atlantic slave trade until the 1630s, and compared to the Portuguese and the English they remained of marginal importance until well after 1660. Likewise it would be difficult to attempt to link any of the political or religious upheavals of England in the 1640s and 1650s to a nascent slave system on one small island over 4,000 miles away, involving at most 30,000 people in 1650—less than half of whom were slaves. Even at the time of the English Revolution, the English slave system in the Americas was of trivial importance compared to the domestic economy and society. It did not occupy a large part of the domestic consciousness.[39] In no sense did the English or Dutch live with slaves as did their counterparts in ancient Greece and Rome. In the English case, the Irish would seem more promising territory for this type of analysis, but while the Irish were conquered, expropriated, and absorbed into the English economy as thoroughly as any Mediterranean peoples into say the Roman Empire, they were neither enslaved nor reduced to serfdom as were the victims of those earlier Western slave societies, ancient Greece and Rome.

After 1700 the slave empires of the Americas were of larger significance to Europe in all senses, but the rise of movements to abolish slavery in the 1780s makes it hard, initially, to track the effects of slavery on freedom and vice versa. Abolition may have helped validate waged labor systems in Europe and reinforce the position of political and economic elites, but the fact remains that the slave systems themselves were abolished in the process. Moreover, in ideological terms, surely the employers of labor in England would have found it more useful to have slavery in the colonies continue rather than come to an end. Slavery would have acted as a continuing reminder to free laborers of how much worse their predicament might be and indeed, as the mining serfs in seventeenth-century Scotland discovered, might become. In any event, in the post-1700 world, it seems that Europeans, especially the English, rather quickly outgrew any need for slavery to define concepts of freedom for themselves even supposing that they had once felt such a need. In short, whatever the powerful validating influences of American slave systems on concepts of freedom, and more specifically waged labor systems, of the North Atlantic, the influence of free over slave systems of the early modern world was greater rather than vice versa. There is no suggestion in any European country of a "bargain" between workers and elite to reserve slavery for Africans and Amerindians, and to guarantee at the same time wider freedoms for non-elite Europeans.[40]

The possibility of enslaving other Europeans lay beyond the serious intent of any European class or nation even before the onset of the early modern period. Slavery in the Americas was created by the freedom that Europeans had in Africa and the Americas, a freedom that was unrestricted by social structures and values that held in the non-European world—the same factors that underlay the rise of waged labor systems. In stark contrast to classical times, however, this freedom of the individual against the group did not include the right to enslave other Europeans. European conceptions of the "other" ensured that only non-Europeans could be slaves. Given the transportation and production cost advantages of slave labor there can be little doubt that if European slavery could have been enforced, slavery in the Americas (white slavery) would have been very extensive in the sixteenth century. The flow of specie and plantation products from the Americas to Europe would have

been greatly accelerated, because it was simply much cheaper to take slaves from Europe than Africa.

The work of Drescher, Patterson, Davis, and Morgan has moved beyond explanations rooted in the self-interest of a European elite, but with the exception of Drescher, each of these scholars, in very different ways, makes freedom in the Western world dependent to some degree on the slave systems that western Europe also developed. To these might be added the work of Robert Steinfeld on the demise of indentured servitude and the emergence of modern conceptions of free labor. For Steinfeld, the indenture contract could not survive a nineteenth-century world that had known slavery, at least in the United States.[41]

In contrast, what I have tried to argue here is the reverse of these positions—that freedom as it developed in Europe meant in part the freedom to exploit others. Freedom thus made possible the slavery of the Americas. The present argument focuses on the links between freedom in Europe and slavery in the Americas. Specifically, the conditions—mainly environmental—that made Europe different from the rest of the world also created a social structure where the extremes of slavery and freedom were possible. It also stresses the significance of slavery being confined to those of African descent and downplays the European awareness of the slave-free paradox (as opposed to a consciousness of their own liberty, at least in the English case) prior to the late eighteenth century. Slavery was associated with very high land-labor ratios of the early modern Americas, but the slaves themselves were normally drawn from outside the community or kin group. Europeans, indigenous Americans, and Africans alike enslaved only outsiders. Of course, while European conceptions of freedom made slavery possible, they also in the end ensured its demise. To return to where this chapter began, abolition—the idea that no one should be a slave—was as quintessentially and uniquely Western a concept as was slave labor in the Caribbean.