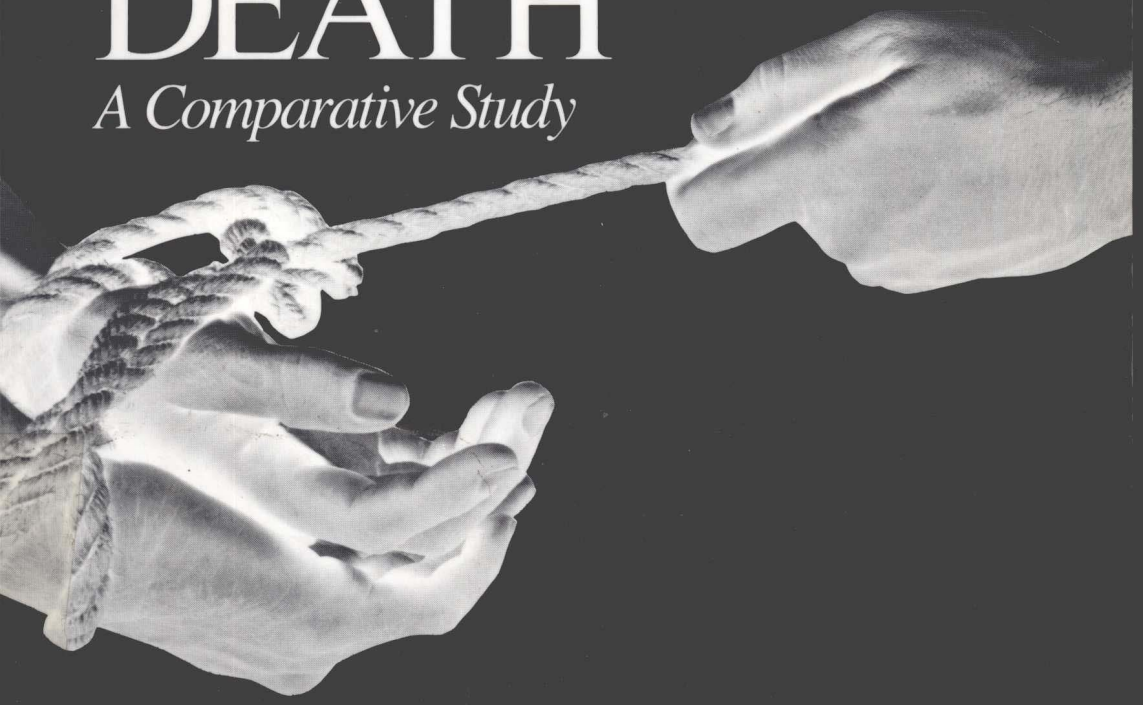
Orlando Patterson

SLAVERY and SOCIAL DEATH

A Comparative Study



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For Nerys

. . . dissymlaf gwreic a bonedigeidaf i hannwyt a'y hymdidan oed.

The Mabinogi

Preface

THERE IS NOTHING notably peculiar about the institution of slavery. It has existed from before the dawn of human history right down to the twentieth century, in the most primitive of human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harbored the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slaveholders.

Why then the commonplace that slavery is "the peculiar institution"? It is hard to say, but perhaps the reason lies in the tendency to eschew what seems too paradoxical. Slavery was not only ubiquitous but turns out to have thrived most in precisely those areas and periods of the world where our conventional wisdom would lead us to expect it least. It was firmly established in all the great early centers of human civilization and, far from declining, actually increased in significance with the growth of all the epochs and cultures that modern Western peoples consider watersheds in their historical development. Ancient Greece and Rome were not simply slaveholding societies; they were what Sir Moses Finley calls "genuine" slave societies, in that slavery was very solidly the base of their socioeconomic structures. Many European societies too were genuine slave societies during their critical periods. In Visigothic Spain, late Old English society, Merovingian France, and Viking Europe, slavery—if not always dominant—was never less than critical. The institution rose again to major significance in late medieval Spain, and in Russia from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth. Slaves constituted such a large proportion of the Florentine population during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that they significantly transformed the appearance of the indigenous Tuscan population. Late medieval and early Renaissance Venice and Genoa were extremely dependent on slave labor, and the Italian colonies of the Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages not only were large-scale plantation slave systems but, as Charles Verlinden has shown, were the models upon which the

advanced plantation systems of the Iberian Atlantic colonies were based. These, in turn, were the testing grounds for the capitalistic slave systems of the modern Americas.

The late Eric Williams may have gone too far in his celebrated argument that the rise of capitalism itself could be largely accounted for by the enormous profits generated by the slave systems of the Americas. But no one now doubts that New World slavery was a key factor in the rise of the West European economies.

Europe, however, was hardly unique in this association of civilization and slavery. The rise of Islam was made possible by slavery, for without it the early Arab elites simply would not have been able to exploit the skilled and unskilled manpower that was essential for their survival and expansion. Even more than the Western states, the Islamic world depended on slaves for the performance of critical administrative, military, and cultural roles.

The same holds true for Africa and certain areas of the Orient. In both the pagan and Islamic regions of precolonial Africa advanced political and cultural developments were usually, though not always, associated with high levels of dependence on slavery. Medieval Ghana, Songhay, and Mali all relied heavily on slave labor. So did the city-states of the Hausas, Yorubas, and Ibibios, the kingdoms of Dahomey and Ashanti at their peak, the caliphate of Sokoto, and the sultanate of Zanzibar.

Oriental societies are unusual in world historical terms for the relatively low level of association between periods of high civilization and the growth of slavery. Even so, it is easy to underestimate the role of slavery in this part of the world. The institution existed in all oriental systems, and slaves played significant roles in the palatine service and administration. In fact, it is in the oriental state of Korea that we find one of the most extraordinary cases of economic dependence on slaves among all peoples and all periods. Large-scale slavery flourished there for over a thousand years up to the nineteenth century. For several centuries the servile population was proportionately higher than the one in the U.S. South at its peak of dependence on slavery in the nineteenth century.

In the Western world the paradox is compounded by another historical enigma. Slavery is associated not only with the development of advanced economies, but also with the emergence of several of the most profoundly cherished ideals and beliefs in the Western tradition. The idea of freedom and the concept of property were both intimately bound up with the rise of slavery, their very antithesis. The great innovators not only took slavery for granted, they insisted on its necessity to their way of life. In doing so, they were guilty not of some unfathomable lapse of logic, but rather of admirable candor. For Plato and Aristotle and the great Roman jurists were not wrong in recognizing the necessary correlation between their love of their own

freedom and its denial to others. The joint rise of slavery and cultivation of freedom was no accident. It was, as we shall see, a sociohistorical necessity.

Modern Western thinkers, especially since the Enlightenment, have found such views wrong, disturbing, and deeply embarrassing. The embarrassment was not confined to those who puzzled over the ancient world: it was to reach its zenith in the most democratic political constitution and social system ever achieved by a Western people—the experiment called the United States. Americans have never been able to explain how it came to pass that the most articulate defender of their freedoms, Thomas Jefferson, and the greatest hero of their revolution and history, George Washington, both were large-scale, largely unrepentant slaveholders. Slavery, for all who look to Enlightenment Europe and revolutionary America as the source of their most cherished political values, is not the peculiar institution but the embarrassing institution.

Our distress, however, stems from a false premise. We assume that slavery should have nothing to do with freedom; that a man who holds freedom dearly should not hold slaves without discomfort; that a culture which invented democracy or produced a Jefferson should not be based on slavery. But such an assumption is unfounded. We make it only because we reify ideas, because we fail to see the logic of contradiction, and because in our anachronistic arrogance we tend to read the history of ideas backward.

I show in this book that slavery and freedom are intimately connected, that contrary to our atomistic prejudices it is indeed reasonable that those who most denied freedom, as well as those to whom it was most denied, were the very persons most alive to it. Once we understand the essence and the dynamics of slavery, we immediately realize why there is nothing in the least anomalous about the fact that an Aristotle or a Jefferson owned slaves. Our embarrassment springs from our ignorance of the true nature of slavery and of freedom.

Exposing and removing our misconceptions about a subject is a necessary part of any attempt to comprehend it. This book, however, is not a study in the history of ideas; it seeks an understanding of a social fact. It will attempt to define and explore empirically, in all its aspects, the nature and inner dynamics of slavery and the institutional patterns that supported it.

Two sets of societies provided the data for this work. The first, and far the more important, comprises all those societies in which slavery attained marked structural significance, ranging from those in which it was important for cultural, economic, or political reasons, or a combination of all three, through those in which it was critical though not definitive, to those in which it was the determinative institution. It is these societies on which we have the richest data both quantitatively and qualitatively, and they are the basis of most of the textual discussion in this book. There is as yet no consensus among students of slavery on a terminology. I have followed others in using

the phrase "large-scale slave societies" to describe the groups I have considered; I have also sometimes used Finley's term "genuine slave societies."

One of the mistakes frequently made in comparative research is the exclusion of all societies in which the object of one's inquiry, even though it may occur, does not attain marked systemic importance. I have tried to avoid this as an unwarranted delimitation of the data base. If one's concern is with the internal structure of a given process, if as in this work one is attempting to describe and analyze exhaustively its nature and inner dynamics, then to restrict oneself to those cases in which the process in question attained structural significance is to build a wholly inadmissible bias into one's account of the process.

For it is often the case that the most systemically or externally significant manifestations of the process are not the most typical. There are some kinds of events which, when they happen, are always structurally important: from the social universe, one may cite revolutions; from the biological universe, cancer. But this is certainly not the case with very many processes. To take another analogy from biology, the typical viral infection is often a structurally minor event. A biologist attempting to analyze the nature of viruses who restricts himself to cases of chronic viral pneumonia will end up with a highly distorted account. Slavery is a case in point from the social universe. Its typical occurrence is in contexts where it does not have much structural importance. If I am to understand the universal features of the internal structure of slavery, I am obliged to give due weight to a consideration of it under those conditions where it is of minor significance.

Another reason for considering the structurally subordinate cases is of less concern in this work, but should nonetheless be noted. If one confines oneself to major cases only, to the structurally important cases, one remains unable to answer what is perhaps the most serious structural problem, namely, how and under what conditions the process in question ceases being unimportant and becomes important. It is a mistake to think that one can answer the question from a set of major cases. One can only explain how the process becomes structurally *more* important, not how it became important in the first place. It is often assumed, as a response to this problem, that the factors explaining the movement from structural importance to even greater structural importance are identical with those explaining its movement from unimportance to importance, or worse, from nonexistence to minor or significant existence. This may be true of some processes (although I cannot think of any offhand), but it is not true of *most* processes, and it is certainly not true of slavery. The movement from nonbeing to being, and structurally, from nonsignificance to significance, frequently involves different sets of explanatory conditions, but they usually share the quality that mathematicians and some physicists call a "catastrophe." An exploration of the nature and causes of catastrophic changes in the external systemic relations of slavery is

not one of the objectives of this work. However, sound comparative analysis requires attention not only to the minor, typical, and advanced cases but to the circumstances that account for changes in the structural significance of the process.

In order to be able to make statements about the entire range of slaveholding societies, I have employed George P. Murdock's sample of world societies. If Murdock's list of 186 societies is a valid approximation of the full range of human cultures, then drawing on the slaveholding societies in this sample should provide a reasonable basis for formulating general statements.

There has been an enormous growth in slavery studies in recent years. Indeed, the most important developments in quantitative historical methods have been disproportionately concentrated in this area. Almost all have centered on the Atlantic slave trade and the slave systems of the modern Americas, although there are indications that the focus is beginning to shift to other areas, especially Africa. Traditional historians, particularly in Europe, have analyzed the institution of slavery in the ancient and medieval world for over a hundred fifty years, and such studies continue today at almost as rapid a pace as studies of modern slavery.

It is clearly impossible to read every scholarly work produced on every slaveholding society. I do not pretend to have done so, nor can I claim to have acquired a full understanding of the wider social contexts of the large-scale slave societies discussed in this book. After twelve years of concentrated comparative study (mainly of secondary materials), preceded by six years of intensive archival work on what was once my special area of interest—the British Caribbean slave societies, especially Jamaica—I remain painfully aware of the gaps in my knowledge of this global institution.

In spite of the narrow concerns of the vast majority of slave studies, important theoretical contributions have been made. My debt to those who have paved the theoretical way and have provided models of comparative analysis is amply demonstrated in my notes. The fact remains, however, that no global analysis of the institution of slavery has been attempted since H. J. Nieboer published his classic study over three-quarters of a century ago. Furthermore, Nieboer's work was largely confined to the study of preliterate societies and his focus, unlike mine, was on the conditions under which slavery existed—its external relations, so to speak. Nieboer was fully aware of his neglect of the internal issues and in his concluding chapter specified what he called the "outlines of a further investigation of the early history of slavery," which could almost pass for a table of contents of my own work. This book, in short, is a response to a scholarly challenge laid down eighty years ago. It is my hope that I have done some small justice to so worthy a challenger.

* * *

I HAVE INCURRED many intellectual debts in the production of this work. One of the greatest is to Stanley Engerman, whose help and advice have been quite extraordinary. Not only did he offer detailed textual criticism at various stages, but he gave enormously helpful general criticism of both a theoretical and a practical nature, to say nothing of amiable encouragement. It has been my unusual good fortune to have so generous a friend and colleague, and I am extremely grateful.

All who engage in comparative studies live in apprehension of the specialist, and no group of specialists is more to be feared than the students of ancient Greece and Rome—not because they are more hostile to generalists than other specialists, but because their subject has more traps and pitfalls for the unwary comparativist than any other. I have been extremely fortunate in the assistance I have received from several scholars in this area. I want to single out Peter Garnsey of Jesus College, Cambridge, who read and commented on the manuscript and during my year at Cambridge University, when most of the first draft was written, was a constant source of friendly support.

All of us who work on the comparative study of slavery are in intellectual debt to Sir Moses Finley. My study of classical slavery began with his works; so did my fascination with the wider historical sociology of the ancient world. Above all, his theoretical writings constituted the intellectual springboard for my own reflections on the nature of slavery and slave societies. His personal encouragement of my work persuaded me that a nonspecialist could with benefit immerse himself in the vast secondary and translated primary sources on the classical world; at the same time, his sharp and incisive criticisms of my manuscript and exposure of my blunders kept me fully aware of the scholarly minefield through which I picked my way.

Another classicist, Dr. Valerie Warrior, read my work with the greatest care and offered judicious revisions and technical assistance in the translation and interpretation of critical passages from the classical texts. My colleague John Padgett offered useful criticisms of the theoretical aspects of the work. I am grateful also to another colleague, Gosta Esping Anderson, for his kindness in translating an important Swedish text.

I took most of the advice I received, though not all. Any factual errors or lapses of logic in this work are entirely my own.

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Many research assistants have aided me over the years, and I am deeply indebted to them. Paul Chen, at the time a graduate student at Harvard, translated literally hundreds of pages of important texts for me. His fluency

in Chinese and Japanese (as well as in English), and the meticulous care with which he translated and interpreted the texts, effectively compensated for my inability to read these languages. Russell A. Berman was extremely helpful in my study of the secondary sources on slavery in the ancient Near East and classical world. Maurie Warren labored with me for months on the anthropological data on slavery in the preliterate world and was invaluable as a first coder of these materials. Tong Soo Chung, a former student, interpreted important Korean texts and provided a useful coding of the Korean materials. Murray Dalziel, Hiroshi Ishida, and Don Katcher were reliable and skillful programmers. Karen Lee typed repeated drafts with a speed and accuracy excelled only by her patience.

I have used many libraries in the preparation of this work and am grateful to their staffs, especially those at Harvard, Princeton, Cambridge University, and the University of the West Indies. I should like to single out for special praise the Tozzer Library at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology; my work has been immeasurably aided by the extraordinary facilities there. Nancy J. Schmidt and her superbly competent and gracious staff have given invaluable assistance over the years.

Last and most significant is the debt I owe Nerys Wyn Patterson. As a student of medieval Celtic societies, she not only provided me with innumerable references to valuable sources on Celtic slavery, but translated and interpreted important Welsh and old Irish texts. As a historical anthropologist, she has been an invaluable colleague willing to listen to my latest interpretations and theories and to offer sober criticisms and illuminating insights. As my wife, she has refused to bear with traditional wifely fortitude the frustration of living with a spouse obsessively engaged in a twelve-year project. Her impatience has been my salvation: it has been good to be reminded every so often that there really are other important things in the world besides understanding the nature of slavery.

Contents

Introduction

The Constituent Elements of Slavery

ALL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons. Power, in Max Weber's terms, is "that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests."[1] Relations of inequality or domination, which exist whenever one person has more power than another, range on a continuum from those of marginal asymmetry to those in which one person is capable of exercising, with impunity, total power over another. Power relationships differ from one another not only in degree, but in kind. Qualitative differences result from the fact that power is a complex human faculty, although perhaps not as "sociologically amorphous" as Weber thought.

Slavery is one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave. Yet it differs from other forms of extreme domination in very special ways. If we are to understand how slavery is distinctive, we must first clarify the concept of power.

The power relation has three facets.[2] The first is social and involves the use or threat of violence in the control of one person by another. The second is the psychological facet of influence, the capacity to persuade another per-

son to change the way he perceives his interests and his circumstances. And third is the cultural facet of authority, "the means of transforming force into right, and obedience into duty" which, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the powerful find necessary "to ensure them continual mastership." Rousseau felt that the source of "legitimate powers" lay in those "conventions" which today we would call culture.[3] But he did not specify the area of this vast human domain in which the source of authority was to be found. Nor, for that matter, did Weber, the leading modern student of the subject.[4] In Chapter 2 I show that authority rests on the control of those private and public symbols and ritual processes that induce (and seduce) people to obey because they feel satisfied and dutiful when they do so.

With this brief anatomy of power in mind we may now ask how slavery is distinctive as a relation of domination. The relation has three sets of constituent features corresponding to the three facets of power. It is unusual, first, both in the extremity of power involved, and all that immediately implies, and in the qualities of coercion that brought the relation into being and sustained it. As Georg Hegel realized, total personal power taken to its extreme contradicts itself by its very existence, for total domination can become a form of extreme dependence on the object of one's power, and total powerlessness can become the secret path to control of the subject that attempts to exercise such power.[5] Even though such a sublation is usually only a potential, the possibility of its realization influences the normal course of the relation in profound ways. An empirical exploration of this unique dimension of the dialectic of power in the master-slave relationship will be one of the major tasks of this work.

The coercion underlying the relation of slavery is also distinctive in its etiology and its composition. In one of the liveliest passages of the *Grundrisse,* Karl Marx, while discussing the attitudes of former masters and slaves in postemancipation Jamaica, not only shows clearly that he understood slavery to be first and foremost "a relation of domination" (his term and a point worth emphasizing in view of what has been written by some recent "Marxists" on the subject) but identifies the peculiar role of violence in creating and maintaining that domination. Commenting on the fact that the Jamaican ex-slaves refused to work beyond what was necessary for their own subsistence, he notes: "They have ceased to be slaves, . . . not in order to become wage labourers, but, instead, self-sustaining peasants working for their own consumption. As far as they are concerned, capital does not exist as capital, because autonomous wealth as such can exist only either on the basis of *direct* forced labour, slavery, or *indirect* forced labour, *wage labour.* Wealth confronts direct forced labour not as capital, but rather as *relation of domination"* (emphasis in original).[6] It is important to stress that Marx was not saying that the master interprets the relationship this way, that the master is in any way necessarily precapitalist. Indeed, the comment was pro-

voked by a November 1857 letter to the *Times* of London from a West Indian planter who, in what Marx calls "an utterly delightful cry of outrage," was advocating the reimposition of slavery in Jamaica as the only means of getting the Jamaicans to generate surplus in a capitalistic manner once again.[7]

Elisabeth Welskopf, the late East German scholar who was one of the leading Marxist students of slavery, discussed at great length the critical role of direct violence in creating and maintaining slavery.[8] Force, she argued, is essential for all class societies. Naked might—violence, in Georges Sorel's terminology[9]—is essential for the creation of all such systems. However, organized force and authority—what Welskopf calls "spiritual force"—usually obviated the need to use violence in most developed class societies where nonslaves made up the dominated class. The problem in a slaveholding society, however, was that it was usually necessary to introduce new persons to the status of slaves because the former slaves either died out or were manumitted. The worker who is fired remains a worker, to be hired elsewhere. The slave who was freed was no longer a slave. Thus it was necessary continually to repeat the original, violent act of transforming free man into slave. This act of violence constitutes the prehistory of all stratified societies, Welskopf argued, but it determines both "the prehistory and (concurrent) history of slavery." To be sure, there is the exceptional case of the Old South in the United States, where the low incidence of manumission and the high rate of reproduction obviated the need continually to repeat the violent "original accumulation" of slaves. While Welskopf does not consider this case (her concern is primarily with the ancient world), her analysis is nonetheless relevant, for she goes on to note that the continuous use of violence in the slave order was also made necessary by the low motivation of the slave to work—by the need to reinforce reward with the threat and actuality of punishment. Thus George P. Rawick has written of the antebellum South: "Whipping was not only a method of punishment. It was a conscious device to impress upon the slaves that they were slaves; it was a crucial form of social control particularly if we remember that it was very difficult for slaves to run away successfully."[10]

But Marx and the Marxists were not the first to recognize fully the necessity or the threat of naked force as the basis of the master-slave relationship. It was a North Carolina judge, Thomas Ruffin, who in his 1829 decision that the intentional wounding of a hired slave by his hirer did not constitute a crime, articulated better than any other commentator before or after, the view that the master-slave relationship originated in and was maintained by brute force. He wrote:

> With slavery . . . the end is the profit of the master, his security and the public safety; the subject, one doomed in his own person, and his posterity, to

> live without knowledge, and without the capacity to make anything his own, and to toil that another may reap his fruits. What moral considerations such as a father might give to a son shall be addressed to such a being, to convince him what it is impossible but that the most stupid must feel and know can never be true—that he is thus to labour upon a principle of natural duty, or for the sake of his own personal happiness. Such services can only be expected from one who has no will of his own; who surrenders his will in implicit obedience in the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body. There is nothing else which can operate to produce the effect. The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect.[11]

Justice Ruffin may have gone a little too far in what Robert M. Cover describes as "his eagerness to confront the reality of the unpleasant iron fist beneath the law's polite, neutral language."[12] He certainly underestimated the role of "moral considerations," to use his term, in the relationship. But his opinion did penetrate to the heart of what was most fundamental in the relation of slavery. As we shall see when we come to the comparative data in Chapter 7, there is no known slaveholding society where the whip was not considered an indispensable instrument.

Another feature of the coercive aspect of slavery is its individualized condition: the slave was usually powerless in relation to another individual. We may conveniently neglect those cases where the slave formally belonged to a corporation such as a temple, since there was always an agent in the form of a specific individual who effectively exercised the power of a master.[13] In his powerlessness the slave became an extension of his master's power. He was a human surrogate, recreated by his master with god-like power in his behalf. Nothing in Hegel or Friedrich Nietzsche more frighteningly captures the audacity of power and ego expansion than the view of the Ahaggar Tuaregs of the Sahara that "without the master the slave does not exist, and he is socializable only through his master."[14] And they came as close to blasphemy as their Islamic creed allowed in the popular saying of the Kel Gress group: "All persons are created by God, the slave is created by the Tuareg."[15]

These Tuareg sayings are not only extraordinarily reminiscent of Ruffin's opinion but of what Henri Wallon, in his classic study, wrote of the meaning of slavery in ancient Greece:

> The slave was a dominated thing, an animated instrument, a body with natural movements, but without its own reason, an existence entirely absorbed in another. The proprietor of this thing, the mover of this instrument, the soul and the reason of this body, the source of this life, was the master. The master was everything for him: his father and his god, which is to say, his authority and his duty . . . Thus, god, fatherland, family, existence, are all, for the slave, identified with the same being; there was nothing which made

> for the social person, nothing which made for the moral person, that was not the same as his personality and his individuality.[16]

Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death. Ali Abd Elwahed, in an unjustly neglected comparative work, found that "all the situations which created slavery were those which commonly would have resulted, either from natural or social laws, in the death of the individual."[17] Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was punishment for some capital offense, or death from exposure or starvation.

The condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death. Slavery was not a pardon; it was, peculiarly, a conditional commutation. The execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness. The master was essentially a ransomer. What he bought or acquired was the slave's life, and restraints on the master's capacity wantonly to destroy his slave did not undermine his claim on that life. Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson.

This brings us to the second constituent element of the slave relation: the slave's natal alienation. Here we move to the cultural aspect of the relation, to that aspect of it which rests on authority, on the control of symbolic instruments. This is achieved in a unique way in the relation of slavery: the definition of the slave, however recruited, as a socially dead person. Alienated from all "rights" or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication.

Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. That they reached back for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage.