DAVID BRION DAVIS

THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY IN WESTERN CULTURE

WINNER OF 1967 PULITZER PRIZE

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York Oxford

Oxford University Press
Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Beirut Berlin

First published in 1966 by Cornell University Press
124 Roberts Place, Ithaca, NY 14850

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1988
Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016-4314

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

International Standard Book Number 0-8014-0101-1
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 66-14348
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0-19-505639-6 (PBK.)

4 6 8 10 9 7 5
Printed in the United States of America

The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture

TO THE MEMORY OF

MY MOTHER, MARTHA WIRT DAVIS,

AND

MY FATHER, CLYDE BRION DAVIS

Preface

PERHAPS the best way to define the purpose and scope of this book is to give a brief account of its origin. Quite some time ago I began a comparative study of the British and American antislavery movements. I was interested in such questions as international influence, the effect of different social and political structures on antislavery thought, and the interaction between the changing social role of reformers and their governing beliefs and values. Above all, I was interested in a problem of moral perception. Why was it that at a certain moment of history a small number of men not only saw the full horror of a social evil to which mankind had been blind for centuries, but felt impelled to attack it through personal testimony and cooperative action?

As I pursued these questions in both America and Great Britain, I became convinced that the problem of slavery transcended national boundaries in ways I had not suspected. Unlike representative government or trial by jury, Negro slavery was an institution common to virtually all New World colonies; it was, so to speak, the joint creation of the maritime powers of Europe. Moreover, the nations of Western Europe shared a whole network of beliefs and associations regarding slavery which derived from the Bible, the works of classical antiquity, and actual experience with various kinds of servitude. To a large extent this cultural heritage provided the framework and defined the issues for the public controversies of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And when antislavery

movements arose almost simultaneously in Britain, France, and North America, the reformers drew on the same accounts of Africa by such travelers as Michel Adanson; they borrowed the same philosophical arguments from Montesquieu and Francis Hutcheson; and they were inspired by the same eighteenth-century ideals of moral progress and disinterested benevolence.

The more I became aware of this cultural and historical dimension of the problem, the more I realized that I could not see abolitionists in proper perspective until I knew whether slavery had long been a source of latent tension in Western culture; whether there had been continuing protests against the institution; whether "slavery" meant something radically different in ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, and North and South America; whether Christianity had always had the tendency of softening and gradually eroding the institution. Much to my surprise, I found that while there were excellent recent histories of slavery in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in the United States, there was no modern study of slavery in different periods and nations. And since the publication of Russell P. Jameson's highly informative *Montesquieu et l'esclavage,* in 1911, there has been no systematic attempt to trace the intellectual origins of antislavery thought. Any comparative analysis of slave systems must owe much to the questions framed by such original and provocative books as Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen* and Stanley M. Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life.* Any student of changing attitudes toward slavery must be heavily indebted to such specialized studies as Edward D. Seeber's *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France During the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* and Wylie Sypher's *Guinea's Captive Kings.* I was unable, however, to find any general history of the intellectual and cultural sources of the great international controversy over Negro slavery.

This book, then, was written as an introductory volume for a projected history of antislavery movements. It makes no pretense of being a history of slavery as such, or even of opinion concerning slavery. Although the scope is broad, I have omitted much that has not seemed relevant to an understanding of the later conflicts over Negro bondage. I have been concerned with the different ways in which men have responded to slavery, on the assumption that this

will help us distinguish what was unique in the response of the abolitionist. I have also been concerned with traditions in thought and value from which both opponents and defenders of slavery could draw. I hope to demonstrate that slavery has always been a source of social and psychological tension, but that in Western culture it was associated with certain religious and philosophical doctrines that gave it the highest sanction. The underlying contradiction of slavery became more manifest when the institution was closely linked with American colonization, which was also seen as affording mankind the opportunity to create a more perfect society. After surveying representative attempts to conceptualize this moral and historical problem, we shall turn, in Chapter Two, to a comparative analysis of slave systems in the Old World. Chapters Three and Four will then deal with the response to slavery in European thought from antiquity to the eighteenth century, excluding, for the most part, the question of Negro bondage in America. Chapters Five through Nine consider early attitudes toward American slavery, and are particularly concerned with problems and conditions which might aid or impede the rise of antislavery thought. Chapters Ten through Fifteen are devoted to early protests against Negro bondage, and to the religious, literary, and philosophical developments that contributed to both sides in the controversies of the late eighteenth century. In sketching certain broad economic and institutional trends, it has sometimes seemed appropriate to include material from the late eighteenth century and even the nineteenth. In general, however, this study extends only to the early 1770's, and does not cover the first organized efforts to abolish the African trade or Negro slavery. The next volume will begin with the reformers in England, France, and North America whose writings and correspondence led to the creation of the first antislavery societies. And it will be my hope in the succeeding volumes to trace the evolution of the international controversies over Negro slavery, giving particular attention to the growth and implications of antislavery thought.

Any broad work of historical synthesis is heavily dependent upon the research, aid, and criticism of many people. This is particularly true when a historian strays beyond his own field and ventures into unfamiliar and often forbidding territory at a time when scholars reap the greatest rewards by tending their own gardens. I am all too

aware of the risks I have taken by attempting so much, and I would not excuse my inevitable errors by pointing to those who have helped me. Nevertheless, I would have committed many more mistakes of both fact and judgment if portions of the manuscript had not been read by Professors Donald Kagan, Allan Bloom, Denys Hay, Brian Tierney, Kenneth Stampp, Carl N. Degler, Winthrop D. Jordan, Paul W. Gates, Arthur M. Wilson, Walter LaFeber, Walter Simon, and Knight Biggerstaff. For their criticism, advice, and generosity I am deeply grateful.

I am also indebted to Dr. John Walsh, Dr. Robert W. Greaves, and Professors Walter Pintner, Eugene Rice, Magnus Mörner, and Richard Graham for guiding me to materials I would otherwise have missed. Dr. John A. Woods generously lent me his transcriptions of the Granville Sharp papers, which served as general background for this book and which will be invaluable for the succeeding volume. When I was nearing completion of this manuscript and learned that Professor Winthrop D. Jordan was working on a related topic, he allowed me the extraordinary privilege of reading his excellent study, "White Over Black: The Development of American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812," which will soon be published by the University of North Carolina Press, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture. While Professor Jordan and I found that we had used many of the same sources, we were comforted to discover that our books complemented each other and that we could exchange bits of useful information.

My greatest debt is to Dr. Felix Reichmann, Assistant Director of Cornell University Libraries, who not only acquired countless books and microfilms which aided my research, but whose astonishing erudition guided me to numerous discoveries. This book could not have been written without the great collection on slavery and antislavery which Cornell has been accumulating since the University's founding. I am most grateful to the entire staff of Cornell University Libraries, and I am also grateful for the help and cooperation I received from the library of the British Museum; the Bodleian Library; the Historical Manuscripts Commission, National Register of Archives; Friends House, London; the Library of Congress; the Henry E. Huntington Library; the Library Company of Philadelphia, Ridgeway Branch; Duke University Library; the British and

Foreign Bible Society; the New-York Historical Society; the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; the Boston Athenaeum; Boston Public Library; Allegheny College Library; and Harvard University Library.

I am indebted to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a fellowship which allowed me to begin my researches in England. I am also indebted to the Ernest I. White Professorship at Cornell, which has provided funds for research and clerical assistance. In the later stages of research Miss Jean Laux was an invaluable aid in tracking down books, transcribing material, and offering helpful suggestions. I am also most grateful to Professors Jean Parrish and Dalai Brenes for aiding me with French and Spanish translations; to Miss June Hahner, Miss Irene Berkey, Miss Christy Reppert, and Mr. Philippe Chaudron for checking footnotes; to Mrs. Tazu Warner and Mrs. Jacqueline Holl for typing different drafts of the manuscript; to Miss Anne Loveland, Miss Marcia Luther, and Mr. Jack Holl for various bibliographical chores; and to Mrs. Catharine McCalmon for helping with the index. An earlier version of Chapter Three was published in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists,* edited by Martin Duberman (copyright © 1965); Princeton University Press has kindly granted me permission to reprint this essay. To my students, both graduate and undergraduate, I owe the questions and criticisms which dissolved some of my most dubious theories and helped to clarify the rest. Finally, I can never express sufficient gratitude to my wife and children for their patience and encouragement.

Ithaca, New York DAVID BRION DAVIS
October 1965

During the past twenty-two years many thousands of scholarly books and articles have appeared that touch on virtually every aspect of "the problem of slavery." When Oxford University Press generously decided to reissue this volume, I realized that a full-scale revision, incorporating this vast literature, would be out of the question. I have taken the liberty, however, to correct some of the more important errors that have come to light as a result of more recent scholarship. I have also referred in footnotes to a few of the most significant works that bear on a particular issue or discussion.

D.B.D. Orange, Conn.
Feb. 23, 1988

Contents

PART I

One

The Historical Problem: Slavery and the Meaning of America

AMERICANS have often been embarrassed when reminded that the Declaration of Independence was written by a slaveholder and that Negro slavery was a legal institution in all thirteen colonies at the beginning of the Revolution. "How is it," asked Samuel Johnson, "that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" The inconsistency was not overlooked by American Tories, who exhibited it as proof of the rebels' hypocrisy. Even English liberals who sympathized with the Revolution were disturbed by a conception of liberty that seemed to exclude the Negro race. During the struggle with Great Britain, American leaders often admitted that slavery was contrary to the principles for which they fought, and a number of reformers warned that the Revolution could be justified only by a decision to rid the land of slavery. In 1775, for example, Deacon Benjamin Colman noted that Boston, the first slave-trading port on the continent, had been the first victim of British oppression, a "remarkable providence" which clearly indicated that Massachusetts could not secure her own freedom until she emancipated her slaves. And toward the end of the war David Cooper observed that "our rulers have appointed days for humiliation, and offering up of prayer to our common Father to deliver us from *our* oppressors, when sights and groans are piercing

his holy ears [*sic*] from oppressions which we commit a thousand fold more grievous." [1]

But the irony of slaveholders fighting for the natural rights of man was only part of a larger paradox which has seldom been grasped in its full dimensions.[2] The antislavery arguments of the Revolutionary period were often grounded upon a belief in America as a liberating and regenerating force—as the world's new hope. This belief had taken various forms and had only recently been directed against slavery. But from the time of the first discoveries Europeans had projected ancient visions of liberation and perfection into the vacant spaces of the New World. Explorers approached the uncharted coasts with vague preconceptions of mythical Atlantis, Antillia, and the Saint Brendan Isles. The naked savages, living in apparent freedom and innocence, awakened memories of terrestrial paradise and the Golden Age described by the ancients. Even the practical-minded Columbus fell under the spell of the gentle natives on the Gulf of Paria, who wore golden ornaments and lived in a land of lush vegetation and delicious fruits. He concluded in August, 1498 that he had arrived on the "nipple" of the earth, which reached closer to Heaven than the rest of the globe, and that the original Garden of Eden was nearby.[3] Seventeen years later, when Sir Thomas More began writing *Utopia,* he naturally chose the Western Hemisphere as his setting.

[1] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (Modern Library ed., New York, n.d.), pp. 747–48; George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York, 1866), p. 147; [David Cooper], *A Serious Address to the Rulers of America, on the Inconsistency of Their Conduct Respecting Slavery: Forming a Contrast between the Encroachments of England on American Liberty, and American Injustice in Tolerating Slavery* [Originally published in Trenton, N.J.] (London, 1783), p. 16.

[2] Even Gunnar Myrdal fails to see the importance of the historical dimension of the "American Dilemma," which he conceives as simply a conflict between "the American Creed" and social conduct and valuations concerning the Negro. He perceives, however, that *"the Negro problem is an integral part of, or a special phase of the whole complex of problems in the larger civilization. It cannot be treated in isolation."* And he notes the tendency of Americans "to localize and demarcate the Negro problem." The same points can be made regarding the history of slavery and antislavery. See Myrdal *et al., An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem in Modern America* (New York, 1944), p. liii.

[3] Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston, 1942), pp. 556–57.

Columbus's successors pursued elusive visions of golden cities and fountains of youth; their narratives revived and nourished the utopian dreams of Europe. From antiquity Western thought had been predisposed to look to nature for the universal norms of human life. Since "nature" carried connotations of origin and birth as well as of intrinsic character, philosophers often associated valid norms with what was original in man's primeval state. They contrasted the restraints, prejudices, and corrupting tastes of civilized life with either a former age of virtue or a simpler, more primitive state of society.[4] Many of the explorers and early commentators on America drew upon this philosophic tradition; in the New World they found an Elysium to serve as a standard for criticizing the perverted manners of Europe. Catholic missionaries, being dedicated to ideals of renunciation and asceticism, saw much to admire in the simple contentment of the Indians, whose mode of living seemed to resemble that of the first Christians. As Gilbert Chinard has pointed out, the *voyageurs* and Jesuit priests who compared the evils of Europe with the freedom, equality, and felicitous life of the American savages, contributed unwittingly to the revolutionary philosophy of the eighteenth century.[5]

Some writers, to be sure, described the Indians as inferior degenerates or as Satan's children, and presented a contrary image of America as an insalubrious desert. Antonello Gerbi has documented the long dispute over the nature of the New World—"mondo nascente o neonato, mondo deserto e misero." [6] Howard Mumford Jones has recently shown that America was conceived at once as an idyllic Arcadia and as a land of cannibalism, torture, and

[4] Arthur O. Lovejoy, Gilbert Chinard, George Boas, and Ronald S. Crane, *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, I (Baltimore, 1935), pp. 12–18, 109–11.

[5] Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1913), pp. v–vii, 119–50, 431. See also Lois Whitney, *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1934), pp. 40–48, and *passim;* Maren-Sofie Røstvig, *The Happy Man; Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal, 1600–1700* (Oslo, 1954), pp. 16, 41–46, and *passim;* Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York, 1928), pp. 10–13, and *passim.*

[6] Antonello Gerbi, *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo: storia di una polemica, 1750–1900* (Milano, 1955), *passim.*