

Although slavery did not begin with America, its effects still poison the dreams of the America Black underclass and the fevered imaginations of Old South romanticizers and virulent racists. Unfortunately, slavery is and has always been a universal horror.

At our beginnings as a species, a practice emerged to compel some members of the clan to perform work that others did not want. Anthropologists tell us that among our hunter-gather ancestors, hunting required muscle and tracking skills. The other needs of the clan were to bear children (obviously), tend a fire, gather water, prepare food, sew garments, gather plants for food and healing medicines, and satisfy men's lust.

The most arduous of these tasks were relegated to the least powerful: gathering firewood and water. Women were, in a way, the first slaves. A recent Nova broadcast discussed the most complete skeleton of one of the "first Americans," found in Mexico. She was a 17 or 18-year old who died from a fall in a cave attempting to gather water. Her bones revealed damage from too-early pregnancies (three of them), crookedly healed-over fractures from beatings, and tooth enamel indicating periods of starvation. She did not have a good life. Although life expectancy for men was 30 and for women, 20, the shortage of child-bearing women did not help how they were treated.

The Old Testament provides insight into tribal life: chieftains, their high-status wives, and their slaves and concubines. Later, Hebrew law, quite enlightened for the time, limited the status of slave to seven years, upon which they had to be freed. This rule denied freedom to women slaves who bore children for the masters.

Ancient Greece and Rome depended on both male and female slavery for labor and sex, including galley slaves to row war ships. Most of these slaves were the fruit of conquest, but there was an interesting wrinkle: a clever slave with a skill could buy his own freedom, and runaways could, with luck, make it to freedom.

As Christianity replaced Rome's polytheism, slavery was frowned on and almost abolished. It was replaced in Christian lands with serfdom, a bondage to the land. Feudalism sustained this sort of servitude in agriculture; but as cities emerged, paid service replaced slavery.

Slavery had a brisk revival with the emergence of Islam. Muslim pirates and their partners, Vikings, trolled the rivers and seas, capturing unlucky travelers and selling them at Muslim slave markets. Greedy nobility in southern Italy, particularly in Sicily, sold their peasants to Arab slavers when short of ready cash. Beautiful girls and boys wound up in harems and adult men were sent as slaves to salt mines.

All of this came to an end when the Bubonic Plague swept the world from China, along the Silk Route and on to Europe, where it wiped out one-third to half the population. The Caucasus had long provided beautiful blonde women prized as concubines in Muslim harems. Plague ended this trade. Arab slavers found the only region not affected by the plague was sub-Saharan Africa. The old African slave trade now exploded with opportunity. Slaves captured in tribal warfare now became a big business: selling the slaves to Arab traders and soon to the Portuguese and Spanish, who provided labor to New World planters.

Planters found that the Native-Americans could not survive agricultural slavery. Enterprising slave traders transported millions of Africans to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the American south. It was at this point that slavery became for the first time a caste issue: color identified them, making escape difficult. The monogamy of Christian cultures left no room for concubines to give birth to mixed blood children who would be free. Nothing changed this until movements in the 19th century in Russia (serfs), the US (abolition), and Brazil ended slavery.

Today slavery is alive and well in the Muslim world, enjoying a comeback as an Islamist enterprise (slave markets). It flourishes worldwide as sex slavery. And in traditional societies, the status of wives and daughters qualify as involuntary servitude. It reflects our worst, not our better angels. We must fix this.

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