

Much current discussion of the history of slavery ignores the larger picture. Slavery was universal, still exists in parts of the world, and was only finally abolished in the 19th century by England (1833), Russia (emancipating serfs in 1861), and by the United States in 1864. These emancipations were unique to the West, not the rest of the world, which still practices domestic slavery (women as property) and in some places in the Islamic world, sexual, agricultural, and mining slavery.

Slavery, a system of forcing people to perform work, began about 10,000 years ago, when our hunter-gatherer ancestors discovered how to cultivate plants and animals in settled communities. In their former lives, nomadic life following animals needed for food and clothing, there was no need for forced labor, with the exception of childbearing women, always in short supply. Armed nomads captured nubile girls to replace their own who died in childbed.

Settling and cultivating crops required a more complex system than nomadism. Communities required leadership that would provide protection, allocate water from irrigation systems, and organize religious rituals to appease dangerous gods or bribe benevolent ones. This was the beginning of class differences, as well as gender differences, women becoming childbearing and labor property, which they were not as nomads.

Some work was so dangerous and arduous that communities had to compel unwilling substitutes: slaves. The discovery of mining minerals from the ground and smelting them into usable weapons and tools gave rise to slaves forced into that scariest of all industries: digging and entering deep mines.

The new class of leaders (aristocrats) gave rise to styles of living that required labor: guards, cooking, and child care that the women of their families could not and would not do. Upper class women needed slaves who could also be forced to service the sexual needs of aristocratic men. (Read the Old Testament: barren or wives not able to give birth to male children provided their husbands with "handmaidens" (slaves), to fill in for them.

Slavery became a worldwide phenomenon, independently arising in the New World Native Americans, with no influence from Eurasia or Africa. Slavery is not a white invention; it is universal.

A partial outlier to slavery was Judaism, which mandated that every seven years (Sabbatical) all slaves had to be freed, except for slave women who had borne children to their masters.

Founders of Christianity only instructed that slaves must obey their masters but that masters were required to be kind. As Christianity absorbed the Roman Empire, slavery declined. There were no more galley slaves, no domestic child-bearer slaves, and no more gladiator games. There was (in theory) monogamy, and (in theory) women were permitted assent for the husband chosen by their families.

In Christian Europe, slavery was replaced by a slightly less drastic version of forced labor, serfdom. Peasant labor was not enslaved to a master, but was bound to the master's land, with punishments for running away.

Meanwhile, a new major religion emerged, Islam, which came out of Arabia, which was just beginning to replace nomadism with settled life, mostly trade cities. The new religion had to catch up with being a thousand years of Jewish and Christian societal evolution. Slavery became a big need, providing unwilling galley slaves for pirate ships, slaves to mine salt and gold (both deadly), and an enormous sexual slavery institution providing women (and boys) for harems for the rich and brothels for the rest. Capturing slaves in warfare became a Muslim enterprise, almost depopulating southern Europe.

Until the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) decimated the slave trade with Islam and the shortage of agricultural serfs, most slaves were White. Africa, however, was the only place in the Old World in which the plague did not come, and the already flourishing business of Black slavery became universal. Black chiefs grew wealthy selling their own people to both Muslim and now Christian buyers. The Black Slave Trade flourished, just in time to meet the needs of settlers of the New World.

Abolition is an entirely Western Civilization practice. We now are working on the incomplete task of undoing the social damage.

687 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.