

SLAVERY AND HUMAN PROGRESS

by David Brion Davis
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A half century ago, in 1933, Great Britain celebrated with much pomp and pamphleteering the centennial of the abolition of slavery in the imperial colonies. Dignitaries hailed a century of progress against chattel slavery—in French and Danish territories, in the United States, in Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere. In the view of leading British historians such as G. M. Trevelyan and Sir Reginald Coupland, emancipation constituted “proof of progress,” validating the then-fashionable interpretation of history as a record of mankind’s continuous ascent.

Yale historian David Brion Davis here demonstrates how far away from Whiggish optimism historians have moved. Davis ranges widely, from ninth-century Iraq to the 20th-century Soviet Union, but his focus is on the experiences of Britain and America. In both nations, abolitionists saw slavery not only as an odious moral wrong, but as an “intolerable obstacle to human progress” as well.

Davis deems “fluid” and “ambiguous” the connection between emancipation and the idea of progress; his key sections on British emancipation are entitled “A Deceptive Model.” It was deceptive, he believes, on many counts. By insisting that free labor would be more economical and efficient than slave labor, abolitionists created expectations that went unmet after emancipation. One result: a hardened resolve among white southerners in the United States never to follow Britain’s example. British emancipation was *legislated*, achieved without bloodshed, leaving Anglo-American social thinkers and reformers with an unrealistic faith in the “moral power” of peaceful collective action. Emancipation’s unintended consequences were legion. British efforts to stamp out the slave trade became a justification for imperial expansion. At the same time, the reluctance of former slaves to work as before on plantations only “magnified prejudices” and “reinforced racist theories.”

Davis challenges the traditional equation of abolition and progress on other grounds. He asserts that for thousands of years (until about 1770) the idea of progress was in fact more closely linked to the *expansion* of slavery than to its abolition. Plantation slavery, he writes, was created by “the most progressive peoples and forces in Europe—Italian merchants; Iberian explorers; Jewish inventors, traders, and cartographers; Dutch, German, and British investors and bankers.” This theme strikes me as more of a *tour de force* than a compelling argument. No one before 1750 is quoted as describing slavery as one component of a universal movement toward moral and material improvement. Indeed, until the 18th century, the very idea of progress is difficult to discern in social thought.

Such reservations, however, do not diminish Davis’s achievement. His book is an apt reminder that the calculus of human liberation is not simple, that every step forward is not necessarily a step up.

—Seymour Drescher, '84