

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Modern World

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Until recently, the transatlantic slave trade, like the institution of slavery itself, had not figured prominently in public discourse. The past five decades have witnessed a significant qualitative and quantitative increase in studies of the slave trade and slavery in academic circles. But the subject did not begin to become an issue of widespread public discussion and debate until the appearance of Alex Haley's "Roots" television series in the mid-1970s. In the midst of the U.S. bicentennial celebration, "Roots" provoked more discussions of slavery and the slave trade than any single event or activity since the Civil War.

Elsewhere in the transatlantic world, the government of Brazil sponsored a yearlong national celebration of the centennial of the abolition of slavery in 1988. Museums in Nantes, France, and Liverpool, England, organized and presented major exhibitions and public programs on the role of their nations in the transatlantic slave trade. Commentations of the Columbus quincentenary throughout the Atlantic world in 1992 focused renewed public interest on these subjects on both sides of the Atlantic. And the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with its "Slave Route Project," is collaborating with several African, European, and American governments to heighten the awareness of the multifaceted ways in which the transatlantic slave trade transformed the economic, political, and cultural character of the peoples, nations, and continents involved in the largest, albeit involuntary, migration in the history of humankind.

Yet, despite these recent initiatives, public knowledge of the central defining role of the transatlantic slave trade in the making of the modern world remains extremely limited. Over the past five decades, scholars in Europe, Africa, and the Americas have made the slave trade the object of new historical, economic, political, and cultural studies. Gradually, they have begun to discover and assess the far-reaching impact that the slave trade and slavery had on the societies, nations, and continents of the Atlantic world and

indeed, the modern world.¹ I propose to suggest briefly some of the ways in which the intended and unintended consequences of the slave trade shaped the world we know today.

There is no general agreement about what constitutes the modern world and when it began. I have chosen to date the origins of the modern world from the first of the Columbian transatlantic voyages, for it was that voyage that ushered in the era of European colonial expansion that resulted in, among other things, the organization of the transatlantic slave trade. The slave trade, in turn, fostered the development of entirely new levels of communication, trade, cultural exchange, and economic and political interdependence between the peoples of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The emergence and development of these interdependent continental relationships distinguishes the modern era from its predecessors.

Over the four-hundred-year history of the slave trade, upwards of twelve million Africans survived the Middle Passage and were distributed throughout the Americas. Estimates of the total number of African lives lost or impaired by the process of warfare, capture, and enslavement number up to one hundred million people. The slave trade in all its facets—capture in Africa, transshipment across the Atlantic, and sale in the Americas—took place in a market-driven, uneven fashion. It was uneven in terms of the time when the migrations occurred, the places from which the African captives were taken, and the islands, continents, and colonies in which they were enslaved. More than 40 percent of the Africans sold in the Western Hemisphere went to Brazil, while only 4.5 to 5 percent ended up in the continental United States. The tiny island of Barbados matched U.S. percentages, while Jamaica almost doubled them. Upwards of 50 percent of the survivors of the Middle Passage were transported to the Americas during the eighteenth century. More than 90 percent of the Africans involved in the trade were from the West African coast.²

The demographics of the slave trade take on remarkable significance when studied within the overall context of the peopling of the Americas. Contrary to popular opinion, Africans constituted the majority of the people who migrated from the Old World to the New World during the formative stages of European colonial expansion in the Americas. This basic fact suggests a much larger economic, political, and cultural role for African peoples in American colonial development than we have begun to imagine.³

According to historian Ralph Davis in *The Rise of the Atlantic Economy*, "Some six and a half million people migrated to the New World in the three centuries between its discovery by Columbus and the American Revolution of 1776; a million of them white, the remainder Africans, who came unwillingly to slavery."⁴ Thus, more than five out of every six people who came to the Americas in the first three centuries after their "discovery" were African. And according to *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, as late as 1820, three times as many Africans as Europeans had come to the Americas.⁵ As a result, one of the major consequences of the slave trade was the peopling of the continents and islands of the Western Hemisphere with predominantly African peoples who constituted the demographic foundation on which the societies and cultures of the Americas were built.

We have not studied these facts in history books, and this knowledge has not been a part of our understanding of the development of the Americas. To the contrary, the histories of the Americas have been written from colonial perspectives that have neglected to take into account the economic, political, and sociocultural consequences of the undeniable fact that the overwhelming majority of the people involved in the development of the Americas were African.

Those of us who are involved in the study of the African Diaspora and the American experience are faced with two intellectual challenges: to set the record straight about the nature of African experiences in the Western Hemisphere, and to rewrite in a fundamental way the history of the Americas to include the impact of the African presence, and African economic, political, and sociocultural activity, on the shaping of the Americas and the modern world. If more than five-sixths of the peoples who developed the new societies of the Western Hemisphere have not been included in the telling of its history, then we do not know very much about this history.

Africa's multiplicity of ethnic groups, with their cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, was represented in the populations involved in the slave trade. Frequently as much strangers to each other as they were to their European captors, Africans, upon arriving on American shores, began to refashion themselves into new peoples. They brought with them their Yoruba, Akan, Bakongo, and other cultures, which they interconnected and intertwined with the cultures and experiences of other Africans, as well as of the indigenous peoples and the peoples of the various European colonial powers. Africans, as a result, were transformed into new people who were both biologically and culturally the products of their New World experience.⁶

In the process of re-creating themselves, these New World Africans invented new forms of communication. Because the languages that had served them well in Africa did not serve them in the new environment, they created throughout the Western Hemisphere new language systems at variance with the English, Dutch, Spanish, French, and Portuguese of their colonizers.

Africans and their descendants also invented new religious expressions. Africans brought with them the religions they had practiced in Africa, and they and their descendants transformed them into new syncretic systems drawing from several African cultural streams. They took up Euro-American religions, put their cultural stamp on them, and transformed them into something new and different. The Christianity that African Americans practice and the ways in which we practice Christianity in the United States are qualitatively different from what the master class practiced or invented.⁷

New World African peoples also created new foods, new literatures, new musical forms, new dances, and new social, political, and cultural organizations. African cultural forms gave birth to the blues and jazz in the United States, the tango in Argentina, the guaguancó in Cuba, the samba in Brazil, and the cumbia in Colombia. Carnivals from New Orleans to Buenos Aires are characterized by African rhythmic and masking traditions. Gumbo in Louisiana and feijoada in Brazil are just two popular examples of dishes from the many New World African cuisines. Indeed, few if any American popular cultural forms have not been influenced in some way by the African presence. So, if there is

any truth to the notion that the Americas are a New World, it was the African peoples who were central to the creation of these new forms of human existence, as expressed in new economic, social, and cultural systems and relationships, who made it new.⁸

The transatlantic slave trade also had a significant impact on the development of modern Europe, because Europeans had to reorganize their social, economic, political, and cultural institutions in order to carry out this vast trade. Eric Williams has demonstrated the central role of the slave trade and slavery in the development of British capitalism in his book *Capitalism and Slavery*.⁹ The same is true for the other European nations that built their modern economies on the slave trade. New industries were created to build and supply slave ships, and new cities were created to organize the shipping activity and to exploit the products being produced in the colonies. The economic and political activities of the major European powers were, in fact, shaped and reshaped by the ways they waged war with one another to gain and maintain control over the slave trade and the American colonies.¹⁰

It was, of course, impossible to disrupt the lives of tens of millions of Africans without having a devastating impact on their continent. If the slave trade provided the foundation for the development of Europe during the modern era, it was also the root cause of the underdevelopment of Africa. There are several immediately obvious aspects of that underdevelopment to which we might point. First was the loss of human capital—up to one hundred million disrupted or terminated lives, and more than twelve million people were actually transferred to labor in the Americas.

Another consequence was the distortion of the traditional organization of African life. As the transatlantic slave trade grew more virulent in its quest for human souls, African political and economic infrastructures were reorganized to accommodate this new kind of economic activity. Entire societies were transformed from their traditional ways of functioning into slave-catching societies, and people's lives became organized around how to make war and gather other people for the transatlantic slave trade.¹¹

In conclusion, let me reiterate several points that indicate ways in which the slave trade as an economic, political, and sociocultural phenomenon was seminal in the making of the modern world. First, the slave trade was central to the development of Europe and the Americas. Second, it was central to the underdevelopment of Africa. Finally, it was through the slave trade and its related economic activities that Europe, Africa, North, Central, and South America; and the Caribbean were knit into a system of mutual interdependency, with Europe and the United States as the dominant, controlling influences that they are today.

NOTES

1. Cf. Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies and People in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

2. Cf. Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
3. Cf. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*; Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973).
4. Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies*: 125.
5. David Eltis, David Richardson, Stephen D. Behrendt, and Herbert S. Klein, eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.
6. Cf. Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972); Melville J. Herskovits, *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afro-American Studies*, ed. Frances S. Herskovits (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); and Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
7. Cf. Bastide, *African Civilizations*; Herskovits, *The New World Negro*; and Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*.
8. Cf. Bastide, *African Civilizations*; Herskovits, *The New World Negro*; and Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*.
9. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964, [1944]).
10. Inikori and Engerman, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*.
11. Cf. Inikori and Engerman, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*; Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Impact of the Slave Trade on Africa in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of African History* 30 (1989); and Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).



Africans and Economic Development in the Atlantic World, 1500–1870

Joseph E. Inikori

In spite of the heated debate that has surrounded the issue of African slavery in the Americas for several decades, the literature examining the role of African slavery in the economic history of the Atlantic world is relatively recent. For many years the favored subject of the debate was the politics of abolition.¹ Next in volume to the literature on abolition is that on the private profitability of slavery and the slave trade. An important characteristic of the literature on private profitability is its narrow geographical focus on the economic relationship between the individual Western European economies (England, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain) and their American colonies.²

The earliest work that came closer to focusing on a systematic study of the economic history of the Atlantic basin as a unit of analysis within which to locate the role of African slavery in the Americas was *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies*. Whereas the title gave the misleading impression that the Atlantic basin was being studied as an economic unit in a process of development over time, Ralph Davis actually argued that "the main influences on European economic development arose within the countries of Europe themselves," which freed him from the need to study interconnections between the economies in the Atlantic basin.³ Consequently, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* is basically a story of the independent rise of the national or regional economies in the Atlantic basin, in which the economies of Western Africa are not even included.

Another dominant part of recent literature concerns the contributions of African peoples to cultural developments in the Atlantic world. A particularly disturbing trend in this part of the literature is the glorification of the cultural achievements of oppressed and exploited Africans in the Americas, with emphasis on the freedom they had that allowed them to make these cultural achievements, but no reference made to their oppression and exploitation.⁴ The other currently popular part of the subject concerns various aspects of the volume of the trade that brought Africans to the Americas as enslaved people: the numbers exported and imported; the levels and causes of mortality among the enslaved and the