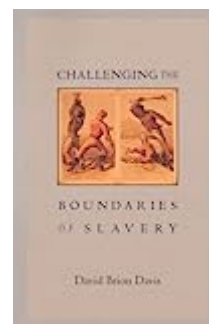


David Brion Davis. *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. x + 115 pp. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01182-3.



Reviewed by Martin A. Klein (Department of History, University of Toronto)

Published on H-LatAm (August, 2005)

The Dark Underside of the American Dream

Over a long and illustrious career, David Brion Davis has been one of the most original and subtle students of American slavery. He has played a major role in setting American slavery in a broad, comparative cross-cultural perspective. He also always has been sensitive to both the moral and theoretical questions involved in that history. The book under review, originally given as the Nathan Huggins lectures at Harvard in 2002, is masterful in its treatment of the ambiguities of American slavery, which he refers to as the dark underside of the American dream (p. 32).

Davis sees what he is doing as challenging boundaries in both time and space and the analytic boundaries that have shaped the study of slavery. In the first chapter, he lays out the origins and nature of new world slavery. He starts with a comparison of modern and pre-modern slavery which may exaggerate the non-economic nature of pre-modern slavery, but it leads to the basic contradiction in the slaves' condition: the tension between the total domination of the slave master and the necessity the master faces of recognizing the slaves' humanity:

“[N]o matter how degraded or responsive to a mas-

ter's sticks and carrots, the slave is of course an independent center of consciousness, a unique human mind often aware of an owner's weaknesses and capable of defiance, retaliation, or subtle triumphs that uncloak a master's pretensions to godhood” (pp. 6-7).

Davis looks at the different traditions that influenced American slavery: the classical inheritance, Arab slavery, post-Crusade Mediterranean slavery, and the emergence of Africa as a source of the more degraded forms of slavery. He argues that large imports of slave labor were essential to the development of the Americas and crucial even to non-slave areas. He looks at the three potential sources of slaves: indigenous inhabitants of the New World, Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe, and Africans, and explains why slavery comes to be defined by race and how that fact has affected subsequent race relations.

Chapter 2 focuses on the year 1819, which marks the beginning of conflict over the extension of slavery. It reviews the debates leading to the Missouri Compromise, but focuses on two documents. The first was John Marshall's decision in the case of *McCulloch v. Maryland*, which maintained the right of the federal government

to create a national bank and shifted the boundaries between state and federal power by denying states the right to interfere with the federal government's exercise of its power. The other was an address given by William Ellery Channing in Baltimore, which laid out a liberal Christian position that rejected strict construction of the Bible. By stressing the moral perfection of God, it provided the theoretical basis for the abolitionist use of Christianity and justified ignoring biblical sanctions for slavery.

Chapter 3 starts with the rejection of the African colonization movement by ordinary African Americans, who saw themselves as American in spite of the discrimination and harassment that they faced. This rejection influenced the emergence of a militant abolition movement led by William Lloyd Garrison. This in turn was much exaggerated by Southern defenders of slavery, who were also threatened by slave revolts and by the rejection of slavery by the country that purchased most of the cotton they produced. There is also an interesting contrast to an earlier generation of slaveholders, who had committed the nation to principles that seemed to clash with all forms of bondage (p.78). In the end, by not understanding that the North was neutral and racist, Southern mili-

tants created an antislavery North in the sense that many Northerners felt personally and justifiably threatened by an undemocratic Slave Power (p. 90).

Throughout the book, Davis stresses the role of chance. For example, Africa became the major source of slave labor in the mid-fifteenth century because the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople cut off the flow of Slavic slaves from the Black Sea. More important, he ends with a series of crucial events. If Virginia had not seceded, and it was hesitant, the war might have ended quickly and slavery would have been preserved. If George McClellan had been a better general or Robert E. Lee a lesser one, the Emancipation Proclamation might not have been necessary. And finally, it was almost providential that by April 1861 the nation was in the hands of a highly skilled politician who sincerely believed, as he put it, if slavery was not wrong, nothing was wrong. A man who believed, in terms of boundaries, that proposition of equal rights, upon which the nation had been founded, included all men, regardless, as he put it, of color, size, intellect, moral development, or social capacity (p. 91).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Martin A. Klein. Review of Davis, David Brion, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11103>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.