

# Book review on black boy

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



## **Black Boy by Richard Wright**

Black Boy is definitely one of the books which makes the blood boil as it is difficult to intrinsically accept what went on in the Deep South of the 1950's and 1960's where black people were treated as worse than animals and children were made to suffer inordinately without much hope of a better chance in life. The rural South was obviously a place where racism was rampant and opportunities for youngsters were few and far between but if you were a black person than those chances were virtually nil.

In this excellent book, Wright also traces the origins of slavery from its origins in the Colonial period to the latter parts of the institution. He focuses primarily on slavery as an American institution and largely focuses on the historiography of the topic especially where the mannerisms of African slaves are concerned. The author also delves deeply into the manner why those who who are sometimes underrated as resilient beings with the focus being chiefly on their suffering and not on their strengths as individuals. Wright also delves deeper into the mechanics of the Reconstruction period than many arguing that emancipation was taken away from the former masters who were chomping at the bit to continue dominating the slaves.

### **Slavery in earlier times:**

Wright delves deep into the mechanics of the slavery system in the early 18th century and how this was crucially important to the growth of the American economy in the deep South. However slavery seemed to develop from the trend of forced labour in the Caribbean colonies which had an appetite for this type of labour long before it became popular in the United

states. The vast sugar plantations in Trinidad and Jamaica required considerable slave labour so the British who eventually became very anti slavery in their beliefs were actually the great pioneers of slavery in its commercial sense.

Wright speaks about the importance of the great slave centres in Africa such as the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone which were the great slave centres of the New World and where African chieftans and intermediaries were as much guilty and culpable of selling their own people into slavery as the Europeans themselves.

The conditions in the Caribbean plantations were much harder and more pronounced than those in the United States where slaves could at least assimilate themselves into the culture with some success. This aspect of slavery is very often overlooked as the slaves quickly became part of American culture especially with regards to religion and other aspects of life which always served them in good stead in their futures. Wright continues to harp on this point and although it was true that some masters treated their subjects pretty brutally, others were quite kind and humane and actually allowed slaves to have some form of education accordingly.

### **Other aspects**

Other aspects which are treated in the book include slaves' resilience to forced labour and other similar situations. Slaves could not always perform the tasks allotted to them and some even rebelled when faced with these situations. The harsh repression practiced by some plantation owners is discussed at length although there is also a tendency to dehumanize the

slaves in efforts to become more colonial and authoritative. African culture remained an intrinsic part of the slaves' life until well into the 19th century but life was changing for the average slave even as customs were changing and other freedmen were imbuing several new ideas into the slaves' minds.

Wright is rather circumspect about the influence of slavery on the Civil War and he prefers to see that as a logical conclusion to a lengthy debate on humanity and the influence of commerce. All this comes together in his narrative on certain aspects of the slave's life which was not always as bad as portrayed especially in the border states.

The situation in Virginia where slaves had their initial origins on a large scale is also discussed extensively in the book. One has to remember that most of the slaves in the beginnings of the American colonies were actually indentured servants from Great Britain and these carried out the hard manual labour accordingly. The shift to large scale slavery is discussed constantly in the book and provides the major leitmotif for all proceedings accordingly.

However Wright focuses mostly on life in the Antebellum South and what this actually meant for slaves in this context. Naturally enough he espouses great detail on the work which went on in the plantations and how this was intrinsically affected by the whims and foibles of the masters. He also goes into great detail on the resilience of slaves to the adverse working conditions especially those who were concerned with picking cotton. The roles of slaves in society according to gender is also discussed at length, especially the women who had a hugely important role to play as well as the situation

regarding children who were initially treated with kindness although everything degenerated accordingly.

Wright's major argument seems to be focused on the fact that slaves could not always be masters of their situation but they did have some form of influence which should not in any way be overlooked. Naturally they could not always be at the forefront of things but they could always lead their own lives without any form of deep intrusion which could have made this intolerable. This aspect is dealt with at length by Wright and it is a point with which I definitely do not agree. Slavery was slavery and one could not have any qualms about condemning it as a despicable institution.

### **Reconstruction period – a new life for slaves or a return to the old?**

Reconstruction after the Civil War was an important aspect of the American nation coming to terms with the end of slavery. Wright is again very detailed about this period and provides some insightful analysis into all of the proceedings. However there are some aspects with which I do not agree especially as he seems to be arguing that reconstruction was a bit hard on whites in the Deep South due to the fact that they were deprived of their principal form of labour. This was actually not the case as the black people could now offer their services but had to be paid according to what they did which was probably only fair but which was something which the white people seemed unable to understand.

Reconstruction was also important for former slaves as it also gave them the first taste of politics where they even held office in the US Senate for a time. Wright argues that this was made possible by the understanding that slaves

were no longer sub human individuals but were also individual beings possessed of a mind of their own and who could contribute to life in general even on a social basis. This obviously brought about considerable opposition from the white minority in the South who could not bring themselves to be ruled by blacks. This is an aspect which may be afforded much discussion but which at the end of the day is also an important moot point for those who wish to understand the deep rooted effects of slavery on American society in general and how this is continually relevant today even in the context of a liberalized society.

### **Conclusion: slavery and its long term effects on American society**

Slavery remains a topic which arouses much controversy both amongst Americans and also throughout the world when discussing the past and its effects on society in general. One has to take into account the fact that slavery remains ingrained in certain societies although the American institution also persisted for several decades after it supposedly ended through the system of sharecropping and other forms of indentured labour. To sum up, Wright provides an interestingly different analysis of proceedings regarding slavery which are not always given their due or their importance. Wright deals with the effects of slavery as a consequence of experiences in the rural plains of Mississippi and Alabama and the childhood of his past which was shrouded in unhappiness and pain.

One has to consider the fact that Wright's documentation is occasionally rather scarce and scant but at the end of the book, one finds a detailed bibliographical essay which has some fascinating and highly readable

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anecdotes on several issues. Although I am not in total agreement with Wright on some of the issues in the book, his account is certainly highly readable and direct and should provide the discerning reader with several interesting points for discussion which may be expanded and delved much deeper into. The book is also an interesting companion for the scholar on slavery which also fills in some gaps that are very much overlooked.

### **Bibliography:**

Wright R, Jones Edward P; Black Boy; New York, Mass Market Paperback, 2009, Print