

Slavery and freedom: the american paradox

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African-Americans have lower-life expectancies than their white counterparts and the insidious legacy of slavery has many ramifications. Seeking to understand the paradox of American liberty and a shameful legacy of slavery, Edmund S. Morgan does an excellent job highlighting an oft-ignored aspect of American history with ramifications on the lives of Americans today (see Williams and Tucker 2000; Morgan 3-13).

Seeking to highlight the American history of slavery, Edmund S. Morgan demonstrates that while the United States evolved during the concept of freedom and liberty from colonial Britain, to a large extent “ Americans bought their independence with slave labor” (3). Many of the founders – paternally referred to as the Fathers of Independence – were slaveholders themselves and their concept of freedom pertained only to a certain class of people. Most often, their notions of freedom were limited and excluded non-whites, women and those without property. Thus, this concept of freedom, so engrained in the American psyche and so much a part of the American historical narrative, was a limited sort of freedom which was inherently exclusionary and certainly not universal. Furthermore, when Thomas Jefferson, the world-renowned spokesperson for American freedom and liberty, discussed the abolition of slavery, “ he found it inconceivable that the freed slaves should be allowed to remain in the country..” (8).

Exploring racial discrimination in both England and the American colonies during the late period of British rule in the Americas, Morgan argues that the dual and polarizing concepts of slavery and freedom were both “ intertwined and interdependent, the rights of Englishmen supported on the wrongs of Africans... The American Revolution only made the contradictions more glaring” (26). Thus, while the American revolutionaries sought to wrestle the

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bonds of British colonial rule through an appeal to the universality of man and the natural human rights which demand freedom, liberty, and independence from a foreign ruler. Ironically, the United States is based upon these ideals yet many Americans remain ignorant of the fact that this country was built through the hard labor of slaves. Charting evidence from the pre-revolutionary period in Virginia and elsewhere in the plantation states, Morgan does an excellent job demonstrating the paradoxical interdependence of slavery and freedom in the United States. Providing substantial evidence to support his claims and a wealth of expertise in pre-Revolutionary American history, in *Slavery and Freedom: the American Paradox*, Edmund S. Morgan provides a service to all Americans by shedding much-needed insight into one of the most forgotten and understudied periods of American history.