

The problem of slavery in western culture essay sample

[Economics](#), [Trade](#)



David Brion Davis in his book 'The Problem of Slavery In Western Culture' has given an historical research of societies attitude towards slavery. In no ancient society was the distinction between slave and free man so sharply drawn in America. Although European morals had progressed in the age of enlightenment, the slave trade in America gave a constant stimulus to the worst vices and passions of mankind. Davis attempted so much in order to compare the problem of slavery in different cultures. Davis dealt more on pre-1776 writing a lot in this book. It is a great book for history majors but it is not recommended for casual readers. Davis book is an apt summary tracing the roots of slavery and the abolitionist movement. He believed that racism caused the enslavement of African people and explains the opinion and arguments of several other prominent historians in the subject. Davis began the book by demonstrating that slavery has always been a source of social and psychological tension, but that in Western culture it was associated with certain religious and philosophical doctrines that gave it the highest sanction.

African slaves arrived in the New World as early as 1503; they played an instrumental role in the commerce of Spain and Portugal. Competition between all maritime European powers made the slave trade more lucrative. Slavery was indispensable to the economic growth of the New World. What was once considered a mild and domestic institution (slavery) became a harsh and depraved global phenomenon. Slavery grew exponentially. If history was progressive, America retrogressed. He moved on to a comparative analysis of slave systems in the Old World. Abolitionist argued that American slavery was unique, harsher than its predecessors, whereas

proslavery forces argued that American slavery was similar to other forms of bondage throughout history. No slave system in history was quite like that of the West Indies and the Southern State of America. The Negro slave also found his life regimented in a highly organized system. Hammurabi code in Babylonia defined a concept of chattel slavery that served as a way of classifying the lowliest and most dependent workers in society. Under the Hammurabi code, a man who killed someone else's slave was merely required to pay compensation to the owner.

A Jewish owner might be liable to punishment if his slave died within three days of chastisement. Davis excluded, for the most part, the question of Negro Bondage in America in Chapters three and four. " For some two thousand years men thought of sin as a kind of slavery. One day they would come to think of slavery as sin", Davis made reference to the Old Testament in order to establish the fact that slavery also existed in the bible where Moses liberated the Israelites from bondage. For Plato and Aristotle who were Greek philosophers, slavery was a system whereby enlightened men cared for and controlled their inferiors. Freedom, accordingly, was for the elite; the stoics associated slavery with the world's imperfections. A slave body, according to the stoics, belonged to his master but his soul was his own. Because early Christian associated slavery with sin, the disappearance of slavery meant a disappearance of fundamental aspect of Christian doctrine. Augustine and others urged Christians to treat slaves as brothers in Christ. Aquinas suggested that slavery was part of nature's pattern of governance, but he also claimed that slavery was against nature.

Christianity held in the medieval era that slave had to be manumitted to be baptized. A slave of a Jewish master generally could not be baptized. In the medieval era generally, marriage between a slave and a free person was permitted only if the free person understood the legal status of the slave. Subsequent chapters considered early attitudes towards American Slavery, and are particularly concerned with problems and conditions that might aid or impede the rise of antislavery thought. In the late seventeenth century, Louis XIV, with slight reservations about climate and cost, sanctioned the import of slaves into Canada. But Canada's efforts at slavery were unsuccessful because it could not compete with economies in warmer regions, which enjoyed more commercially viable opportunities. This did not stop Canada from trying, in the early eighteenth century, to mimic the slave systems in the West Indies.

On the one hand, American society believed that slavery was the cornerstone of its economy; it believed that slaves undermined cultural safety and solidarity among colonist. Slavery in America could not compete with slavery in West Indies. Even in places like Virginia, the ballooning institution of slavery was deflated by fears of overproduction, debt and market instability. Colonials idealized the noble savage and had a hard time enslaving he natives because Europeans associated Africans with Moore's and cast them as infidels, but they romanticized the natives as part of the New World and not the ancient world, which laid the foundations for slavery. The mid-eighteenth century saw a rise in the number of people willing to educate, Christianize, moralize, and civilize slaves in the colonies. At this

time colonials began to agitate against cruel treatment of slaves.

Slaveholders blamed slave revolts on missionaries who had put the idea of liberty into the minds of slaves.

Missionary tried to transform slaves by building schools, teaching slaves the bible, exposing and criticizing harsh masters. By the eighteenth-century, travelers believed that slave conditions were better in Brazil and the Spanish colonies than in America, perhaps because the Catholic Church did not celebrate private profit. Further chapters in the book were devoted to early protest against Negro bondage, and to the religious, literary, and philosophical developments that contributed to both sides in the controversies of the late eighteenth century. Davis made reference to Quakers; these are members of the Religious Society of Friends, a faith that emerged as a new Christian denomination in England during a period of religious turmoil in the mid-1600. Quakerism allowed members to release themselves from the burdens of the past and to embrace a new life in Christ. They could own slaves but they cautioned themselves against doing so and also against trading slaves as business transactions.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Quakerism had made antislavery positions more acceptable throughout America. Eventually and suddenly, Quakerism supported full-fledged abolition around 1760. Davis made reference to philosophers who argued that the New World brought riches that corrupted and perpetuated institution's like slavery. He mentioned the likes of Du Pont de Nemours, a Frenchman who published a journal in the 1770s that militated against slavery using economic arguments. He also mentioned

Adam Smith, who wrote the *Wealth of Nations*; Smith claimed that slave labor was inefficient, because slaves had no incentives to earn profit or hold property. Davis concluded the book by explaining how the image of Africa changed the way people thought about slavery. Davis points the most defining characteristic of such images was skin color; Blacks had long been associated with evil and badness in European metaphor and mythology while the whites were painted with color of purity and innocence. People began to believe that the hot sun or climate burned Africans' skin into blackness; some suggested blacks became whiter the longer they lived away from Africa.

It was unknown how Africans were black. The level of ignorance was so high that some suggested blacks descended from apes. Davis does a lot of digressions, which was a credit to his writing. To survey history is to digress because it is always more than one current steering event. In page 41, he was talking about Chattel slavery and later jumped to talk about the great Mediterranean slave trade on page 43. He was talking about the time of Plato and Aristotle in page 117 (he expressed their views on slavery) and switched to John Locke's idea of slavery on page 118. The merit of this book is that it allows readers to acquire a broad understanding of this crucial story as it affects different cultures. Davis to a greater extent mentioned other scholars by name in the text. He does copiously. Davis made use of paradox by pointing out a fundamental contradiction in early American values that prized liberty yet perpetuated slavery. The book is not without its flaw; the

book extended only to early 1770's and does not cover the first organized efforts to abolish the African trade or Negro slavery.

Another flaw was that Chapter 2 did not compare the treatment of bondsmen in America to slaves of other previous slave societies because the author claims that not enough evidence exists to explore that issue; " but because of the number of variables, the conflicting and inadequate evidence, and the lack of rigorous comparative studies, we simply do not know enough about the actual treatment of bondsmen in different societies..." (Page 30) Davis writing is rich in powerful prose. Some chapters of the book could be boring, there are times where Davis makes reference to people I am not familiar with, it makes it look like he has gone off track and that sometimes lead to me struggling to keep up with the chapter I am reading. I was having difficulties with the names because he got them from different cultures I am not familiar with. The book is pretty voluminous therefore it was easy to loose focus on several occasions. Never the less he did a good job in exposing slavery in different cultures, which has help us to know what has happened before now.