

MY INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY

How I Came to Be a Historian of New World Slavery

David Brion Davis

The connections between what a scholar chooses to write about and teach and the rather winding path of his or her personal life are cloudy and somewhat obscure. Yet there surely are many such connections, and I'll try at least to dredge up some of them here.¹

In the 1930s, every child was asked, again and again and again, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" My answer always was, "A scientist." I had a passion for collecting minerals and had a big butterfly collection. Above all, I collected fossils. I had brachiopods and even some dinosaur bones. By the age of twelve, I had a small chemistry lab in the basement and was doing all kinds of experiments following a high school or college text. Once a flask broke and chlorine gas went all over the floor, and my mother had to come and help sweep it down the drain.

99

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Davis was elected president of the Organization of American Historians for 1988-89. He is a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*. He has written or edited eighteen books, including *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1966), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, the Anisfield-Wolf Award, and the National Mass Media Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews; *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1975), winner of the National Book Award for history and biography, the Albert Beveridge Award, and the Bancroft Prize; *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford University Press, 1984); *Revolutions: American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Harvard University Press, 1990); *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (Yale University Press, 2001); *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2003); and *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006), winner of the Connecticut Book Award for nonfiction, the Association of American Publishers Award for excellence in history and American studies, and the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Davis has also received the Society of American Historians' Bruce Catton Prize for Lifetime Achievement (2004), the Horace Kidger Award for Excellence in Teaching, Scholarship, and Service, from the New England History Teachers Association (2004), the Presidential Medal for Outstanding Leadership and Achievement, from Dartmouth College (1991), and the American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction (2007). Former graduate students have published two festschrifts in his honor. He has been elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Association, and the British Academy.

My dad was a journalist before he became a successful independent novelist. As a reporter, he interviewed an endocrinologist in Buffalo, New York, and was immensely impressed with what he thought would be an exceedingly important and vital field for health and human improvement in the future. After hearing him talk so much about that, when people asked me the big question, I'd say, "I want to be an endocrinologist." In high school I was not especially interested in history courses. I loved English and the study of literature, and I very much liked chemistry, physics, and biology.

The mention of high school evokes the terrible crisis I faced at age sixteen, when I nearly lost out on any chance of attending college. Since my career has been focused on the Ivy League of Dartmouth, Harvard, Cornell, and Yale, it's crucially important to recall the winds of fortuity which shape and threaten us all.

My father was a wholly self-educated but quite successful novelist whose career required moves in 1942 and 1943 from upstate New York to Hollywood and then Manhattan. Accordingly, I ended up going to no fewer than five high schools. After doing well in ninth grade in Hamburg, New York (where I was elected student president of the Junior High School) and then in tenth grade at Beverly Hills High School, in September 1943 I finally landed in the Straubenmuller Textile High School in Manhattan. It was one of the few schools that still taught German, which I had already begun studying, and was not far from our fine Riverside Drive apartment. After several weeks, both my parents and the school realized this was a mistake (the school did not prepare students for college), so I took and passed the test for the Bronx High School of Science. But when I arrived at Bronx Science, I was already far, far behind in the rigorous classes in math and physics. Classrooms were so jammed that in two of them I had to sit on a radiator in the back of the room. I grew so depressed that one day I traveled to the midtown headquarters of the U.S. Marines, where I stood outside debating whether to go in and enlist, lying about my age. If I had done so, I would certainly have soon been in the South Pacific.

When I was threatened with failure toward the end of the term (and thus being barred from most colleges), my mother discovered McBurney College Prep, a small-class school run by the YMCA at 15 West 63rd Street (then attended by Felix Rohatyn, a year behind me, and later by J.D. Salinger). I transferred just in time and got terrible grades in McBurney's end-of-term exams (an F in math). Then, thanks to the wonders of McBurney, and to such stupendous teachers as Benjamin Chamberlin, in English writing and literature, I went on to win the Robert Ross McBurney gold medal for academic and extracurricular achievement on June 8, 1945. Three days later, I moved off to Georgia to get rigorous combat training for the expected invasion of Japan. Without the move to McBurney, there would have been no Dartmouth, Harvard, Cornell, or Yale.

During the early weeks of armored infantry training at Camp Gordon, Georgia, the ongoing battle of Okinawa, where we lost 12,513 American troops, gave us a rather

frightening foretaste of what to expect when we hit the beaches of Japan. (Sixty-six thousand Japanese soldiers died, some by suicide; only 7,000 were captured.) In the early twenty-first century, it's difficult to imagine the way I and my high-school classmates saw the state of the world. The war did not seem to be "nearly over." In the Battle of the Bulge – a crucial battle that ended only sixteen days before I turned eighteen, the age of the draft – 9,300 American troops (and 100,000 Germans) died, including at least one McBurney student who was a year ahead of me. A few days before my birthday, we killed 35,000 German civilians in the bombing of Dresden (I would soon see similar destruction). And three days after I needed a temporary school deferment from the draft, we invaded Iwo Jima, where 6,821 Americans were killed – as were more than 20,000 of the 21,000 Japanese troops on the island, only 216 of whom were taken prisoner.

Then, in mid-August 1945, very suddenly and unexpectedly, the war was over.

In the fall I found myself on a large troop ship bound for Le Havre. Although I was seasick, an officer gave me a club and ordered me to go down a circular ladder-like stairway to the lowest hold, where I was told to prevent the "jiggaboos" – that is, the African-Americans – from gambling. Having been trained in Georgia, I had been exposed to the appalling racism of the Jim Crow South. Until then, I had had no idea there were any black soldiers on board. When I got to the bottom, the scene looked like what I now would think of as a slave ship. When some nearly naked blacks asked me what I was doing down there, I said I was merely following orders. Then I found a shadow in which to hide for four hours or so, on so-called duty.

A few weeks later, I was jammed into a railroad boxcar that seemed identical to the one my dad had described in France in World War I. For five days, we moved through France very slowly and finally got to the American zone of occupied Germany. Because I had taken some high-school German, I soon became a policeman in what was called the Sicherheitspolizei, or American Security Police, in Mannheim. Eventually, I moved to the headquarters of the U.S. Constabulary in Stuttgart.

In Mannheim, I actually spoke more German than English. I had to learn a lot quickly. But I was deeply shocked by the bitter conflict between black and white troops in Germany. I was especially outraged by the racist speeches we heard from Major General Ernest Harmon, an officer who actually helped to lose the Battle of Kasserine Pass in North Africa. He used the "n" word repeatedly and declared to us that the "n's" were a far worse problem than the Germans. He attacked the United States government for having ever sent blacks to Europe in the war. The tension was increased greatly because many German women seemed to have no Nazi prejudices against dating black American soldiers.

On one occasion, we were called out in battle gear in the middle of the night, rushing in armored half-tracks to the site of a bloody racial shootout. This was probably the scariest event in my life. We arrived at a dancing club where some white and black American soldiers had fought over the issue of blacks dating German women.

Blood spattered the sidewalk and dance floor. Our commander was a West Point second lieutenant—the lowest real officer you can be—and a virulent racist. He got in a face-to-face shouting match with a superior black first lieutenant, who said, “Don’t you call me nigger!” He was in command, I think, of at least a dozen or more black troops. As far as I remember, they were not armed, but our lieutenant ordered us to pull back the bolts of our submachine guns, so we were ready to fire into this crowd of blacks. At the last minute, a tasseled white major, who had been pulled out of bed somewhere, came stalking in. There was a call of “A-tten-tion!” and he diffused the situation. But this was a very, very close call.

Since, at ages eighteen and then nineteen, I was also exposed to concentration camp survivors, displaced-person camps, and cities reduced to piles of rubble that smelled of death—in Mannheim, most Germans were still living in underground bunkers—this year’s experience in 1945 and 1946 exerted a profound impression on my views of humanity and history, and thus on my choice of a career. On October 9, 1946, I wrote from Stuttgart to my parents and my grandmother, who lived with us and who was old enough to remember Lincoln’s assassination:

I’ve been thinking over the idea of majoring in history, continuing into post-graduate research, and finally teaching in college, of course, and have come to some conclusions which may not be original, but are new as far as I’m concerned. It strikes me that history and proper methods of teaching it are even more important at present than endocrinology and nuclear fission. I believe that the problems that surround us today are not to be blamed on individuals or even groups of individuals, but on the human race as a whole—its collective lack of perspective and knowledge of itself, and that’s where history comes in. Now, there’s been a lot of hokum concerning psychoanalysis, but I think the basic principles of probing into the past, especially the hidden and subconscious past, for truths which govern and influence present actions, is fairly sound. Teaching history, I think, should be a similar process. An unearthing of truths long buried beneath superficial facts and propaganda; a presentation of perspective and an overall, comprehensive view of what people did and thought, and why they did it. When we think back into our childhood, it doesn’t do much good to merely hit the high spots and remember what we want to remember. To know why we act the way we do, we have to remember everything. In the same way, it doesn’t help much to teach history as a series of wars and dates and figures, the good always fighting the bad, and the bad usually losing. Modern history especially should be shown from every angle. The entire atmosphere in color should be shown as well as how public opinion stood and what influenced it.

Perhaps such teaching could make us understand ourselves. It would show the present conflicts to be as silly as they are. And above all, it would make people stop and think before blindly following some bigoted group to make the world safe for Aryans, democrats, or Mississippians.

During the 1930s, there were many advances in methods of teaching history. The effect cannot be overemphasized. After talking with many GIs, young GIs who mostly all had been in the Battle of the Bulge and many in Normandy, I’m convinced that the recent course in modern European history that they had did more good than any other single high school subject. And that’s just the beginning.

There are many other angles, of course, but I’m pretty well sold on the history idea at present. It is certainly not a subject, as some think, which is dead and useless. You know the line, “Why should I be interested in history?” That’s all past. We should concern ourselves with the present and future—cars, vacuum cleaners, steel mills, helicopters, atom bombs, juke boxes, movies—and on into [Aldous] Huxley’s world of soma, baby hatcheries, feelies (instead of movies) [referring to Huxley’s *Brave New World*]. It is extremely difficult to tell whether an interest like this is

temporary or permanent. It does fit in with my other plans. After I once get into school, college, and out of this vacuum, I'll be able to narrow my sights and bring things into focus. But now at least I've got something to talk about.<end>

I was nineteen when I wrote that letter. In February 1947, two months out of the army, I began my three and a half years of GI Bill-funded college education at Dartmouth, a school my non-college-educated parents had selected for me after they encountered Hanover's isolated beauty on a lovely summer day.

Though revolted by the dominant fraternity culture, which involved heavy drinking and a blasé attitude toward study (and thus made it much easier for me to graduate in the class of 1950 *summa cum laude*), I soon made contact with knowledgeable nonfraternity seniors who recommended the outstanding courses in philosophy, Dante, political theory, and comparative literature. Though I had originally intended to major in history, I found that Dartmouth's History Department was surprisingly weak and old-fashioned. So I chose a philosophy major.

The professor who did the most to shape the foundation of my entire future career was the philosophy professor, Francis Gramlich. I was especially influenced by his charismatic lectures on the historically changing views of human nature. Even Thucydides begins his history with a theory of human nature. A Princeton-trained philosopher as well as a former army psychotherapist, Gramlich devoted much time to Freud as well as to the so-called dualisms that extended from Plato to Descartes and beyond. Yet the capstone of the course – as in the great Perry Miller's year-long course on the history of religion in America, which I took a few years later as a graduate student at Harvard – was Reinhold Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man*, later supplemented by Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*. I was by no means alone in being intellectually and spiritually transformed by Niebuhr, who also gave spellbinding lectures at Dartmouth. His influence extended from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. to Felix Frankfurter, Lionel Trilling, W.H. Auden, Hubert Humphrey, and Perry Miller, and to some of the brain trust that later surrounded President John F. Kennedy. Especially in view of Niebuhr's passionate attacks on pride and arrogance, I've often pondered the paradox of his supposed influence on the "Camelot" group around JFK.

I still think that Niebuhr's insights and arguments point to the heart of our problem as human beings. As evolved animals, he argued, we are above all finite. We are temporal blobs of matter, cells, molecules, atoms, and, we might add today, subatomic particles or super-strings for which an atom might be as immense as the solar system is for an atom. (As a theologian, Niebuhr wholly accepted all scientific discoveries.) We grow from fertilized eggs into young men and young women, and then with luck we hurdle at seemingly accelerated speed into old age. That said, Niebuhr insisted, we are also self-conscious beings who know that we are finite. Even the rationalists, he argued, do not always understand that man's rational capacity involves a further ability to stand outside himself, a capacity of self-transcendence, the ability to make

himself his own object. We not only know we will die, but can envision such death. We can study the cells and atoms of which we are made and, to update the argument, we can analyze our galaxy, antimatter, dark matter, black holes, other galaxies, and the Big Bang. No less important, we can imagine what it would be like to be someone else.

We are, as Niebuhr put it, self-transcendent even in our finiteness. He succeeds, I think, in distinguishing this existential human dilemma from the many dualisms of the past. He would grant that all our capacities are rooted in cellular matter. He does contend, however, that the tension between our self-transcendence and finite reality creates an inevitable “anxiety,” to use his word, an anxiety that is the source of all human sin. To escape such anxiety, many humans deny, at least temporarily, their capacity of self-transcendence and become immersed in the sin of sensuality. This sensuality is much intensified by our repeated yearnings for infinitude and immortality. Much worse, other humans – one thinks especially of Hitler, Stalin, or Mao – deny their human limits, their finitude, and carry the sin of pride to the point of self-deification. Accordingly, their own ends come to justify the most ghastly means. Ironically, Niebuhr points out, the attempt to maintain one’s own pride and self-respect by holding others in contempt leads to an uneasy conscience, to the general insecurity which the attitude of contempt is meant to alleviate.

Various religions have nourished this idolatry by feeding delusions of divine sanction, holy alliances, or the arrogance symbolized by the “Gott mit Uns” logo on the belt buckles of German soldiers in World War I. The archetype of this sin of pride and contempt for others, I later concluded, was human slavery, especially racial slavery. If Niebuhr has remained a major influence on my own historical work, and one could say that my studies of homicide, slavery, and major historical shifts in “moral perception” have been ways of examining Niebuhr’s “rediscovery of sin,” I must also acknowledge the great influence of William James and George Santayana, who at first glance seem to be as different from each other as each figure is from Reinhold Niebuhr.

Perhaps as a result of this background, I became increasingly dissatisfied as a student in Harvard’s History of American Civilization Program, where I encountered the kind of intellectual history that traces the flow, convergence, and succession of many “isms” such as rationalism, nominalism, neoclassicism, romanticism, and so on. As I became more aware of the leading anthropologists and other social scientists of the 1950s, particularly Talcott Parsons, Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn, John Dollard, Eric Fromm, and David Riesman, I became taken by the notion of studying concrete human problems as a way of tracing, within social and cultural frameworks, broad shifts in beliefs, moral values, assumptions, and ideology. I turned first to homicide as a universal human problem. Whether one looks at a murder or a duel or an official execution, there is no more dramatic way of asserting a kind of godly self-transcendence than by proving, through killing, the finitude of another human being.

Though I originally planned an interdisciplinary study of homicide, including criminal trials, changes in American state and national criminal laws, the insanity plea, literary and pamphlet treatment of homicides and capital punishment, my personal need to begin and complete a dissertation in one year forced me to concentrate on homicide in American fiction between 1798 and 1860. However, I included a good bit of background on such subjects as legal views of insanity and responsibility. As I now look back on it, this first book, *Homicide in American Fiction: A Study in Social Values, 1798-1860* (1957), foreshadowed the so-called new historicism by fusing historical legal changes with literature. It also anticipated the much later fad of “cultural studies” by combining famous canon writers like Melville and Hawthorne with forgotten pulp fiction and such wonderful but forgotten pre-Civil War novels as Joseph Holt Ingraham’s *Beautiful Cigar Girls* and George Lippard’s amazing *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*. Since this was 1957, one can understand why Jacques Barzun wrote a truly devastating review in the *American Scholar*, picturing my book as the key example of how our graduate schools were going to hell. Let me emphasize that I’ve had no taste for the jargon-ridden theories of the 1970s and 1980s, and feel fortunate that I’ve not been branded with such labels as post-structuralist and post-modernist.

In the spring term of 1955, while completing my dissertation, and before taking a full-time assistant professorship in history at Cornell in the fall, I had the immense good fortune to become acquainted with Kenneth Stamp, who was then a visiting professor at Harvard on leave from the University of California at Berkeley. Stamp was finishing his groundbreaking book *The Peculiar Institution*, which was the first full-scale challenge to Ulrich B. Phillips’s openly racist but deeply researched *American Negro Slavery*, published in 1918. Fortunately, I was able to maintain my ties with Ken, who later urged me to come to Berkeley and whom I even saw in 2004, when I had the privilege of giving the Jefferson Lecture at Berkeley. Though then ninety-two, Ken picked me up by car at the faculty club and drove me to a marvelous restaurant, where we reminisced about our past lives and discussed the more recent important works on slavery. Ken seemed at least twenty years younger than he was and expressed a fascinating grasp of some sixty years of historiography.

Only after my first long talks with Kenneth Stamp did I begin to realize how the crucial subject of racial slavery had been repressed and marginalized in my courses both at Dartmouth and at Harvard. In the early to mid-1950s, Phillips’s book was still the standard work on the subject of slavery and appeared on the course syllabi at Harvard and other leading universities. (From 1929 to his death in 1934, Phillips was a professor at Yale.) Though his book still contains useful information gathered from a wide range of plantation records, Phillips frankly affirmed that blacks were inferior to whites and that southern slavery had been a benign civilizing force for “easy going, amiable sturdy light-hearted savages from Africa.” This had been the message conveyed by popular films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), as well as by popular books like W.E. Woodward’s *A New American History* (1936), which was considered

a highly liberal or even “progressive” work. (This Woodward was no relation of C. Vann Woodward’s.) W.E. Woodward also affirmed that slavery served as a vast training school for African savages. Though the regime of the slave plantation was strict, according to Woodward, it was, on the whole, a kindly one by comparison with what the imported slave had experienced in his own land: “It taught him discipline, cleanliness, and a conception of moral standards.”

In 1953-54 I had taken a year’s leave from Harvard Graduate School in order to accept a Ford Foundation teaching internship, as it was called, at Dartmouth. This proved to be an invaluable experience in helping me to learn how to teach, but one of my mentors, a seasoned professor of American history, saw the Civil War as a needless tragedy; he maligned Radical Reconstruction and presented the Ku Klux Klan as a harmless group that used humorous tricks and devices to “put the Negro in his proper place.”

Like most college teachers in the 1950s and early 1960s, I was required in an American history survey course to use the most highly respected textbook, Henry Steele Commager and Samuel Eliot Morrison’s *Growth of the American Republic*. While in most respects an excellent work, it declared that the American slave, or “Sambo,” as Morrison called him, “was adequately fed, well cared for, and apparently happy.” In the early twenty-first century, it is so very difficult to recapture the consensual white views on slavery and race, in the 1940s and 1950s, that I’ve begun several public lectures in recent times with the startling and I think defensible affirmation that in terms of ideology regarding race, the South won the Civil War.

But by 1955-56, I could not have been more excited by the importance of Kenneth Stampp’s work on slavery, based on the bedrock assumption that blacks were inherently equal to whites. By then, I was already familiar with Gunnar Myrdal’s great volume *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem in Modern Democracy* (1944), as well as the shocking report published by President Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights, called *To Secure These Rights* (1947). Those were, I think, real landmarks for students in those times.

After attending Dartmouth for three and a half years, then working in an airplane factory for a year as an assembly-line scheduler, and spending only three years at Harvard (in addition to the one-year faculty internship at Dartmouth), I was teaching my first year at Cornell in 1955-56 when I found to my dismay and horror that the Harvard historian Frederick Merk demanded extensive revisions in my dissertation, which had already been accepted by my major advisor, Howard Mumford Jones. Cornell made it clear that I would lose my job unless I received my Ph.D. at the end of the year. I have never again had such an extremely trying and difficult year, teaching three new courses a term and struggling to revise my dissertation and get my degree. Nevertheless, Professor Merk’s proposed revisions fortunately made the dissertation publishable in the eyes of Cornell University Press, which brought me the security of tenure in 1958, after only three years of teaching.

Having had my first book and various articles published by 1957, I discovered that Cornell's library contained an immense collection of American and especially British antislavery writings. This elicited the dream of doing for antislavery what Kenneth Stampp had done for American slavery. But as matters developed, I found that to understand antislavery, I needed to learn a great deal more about related reform movements and about slavery itself. I've long been firmly convinced that any serious student of the abolitionist movements must learn as much as possible about the diversities of human bondage itself.

The central question, the absolutely central question that fascinated me was, given the fact that slavery evoked virtually no moral protest in a wide range of societies and cultures for literally thousands of years, how could we explain the sudden emergence of a new moral perception in the mid- to late eighteenth century? By the late 1780s, New World slavery was not only widely condemned in Britain, America, and France, but hundreds of thousands of ordinary Britons signed petitions against the Atlantic slave trade. This central question acquired more importance in view of the new broad consensus among historians that New World slavery was not declining economically, that its abolition was a version of what the historian Seymour Drescher later termed "econocide," the destruction of a highly profitable and economically successful system. Abraham Lincoln was probably not exaggerating when he predicted in 1858 that the peaceful abolition of U.S. slavery would take at least one hundred years.

The word *slavery* can mean many things. For example, we can be "enslaved" to love, or alcohol, or drugs, or our own work. But despite the amazingly late appearance of the first attacks on the institution, the term *slavery* has almost always had negative connotations even when the institution was not being attacked. Thus, in the King James Bible you have the repeated use of "servant" or "maidservant," even though the Hebrew and Greek words clearly meant "slave." Many southerners used the words *servant* or *maidservant*, and some came up with politically correct euphemisms like *warranteeism* to replace the negative term *slavery*. "Slave," unlike "servant," has almost always referred to the most degrading, humiliating, dehumanizing condition a human being can suffer. In the 1770s, the American colonial rebels repeatedly explained that they were fighting a war for independence because the English were determined to "enslave" them. And when a typical Englishman of 1600 or even 1700 thought of "slavery," he or she pictured the English sailors and the thousands of innocent people living in the coastal west country of England, whom the Barbary corsairs had captured by making raids on the coast. While some of these captives were ransomed, large numbers were converted into galley slaves or construction workers of various kinds in North Africa. As Frederick Douglass summed up the actual experience of being what he called "broken in body, soul and spirit," by the "Negro breaker," Edwin Covey: "My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died, the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed into a brute!"

Douglass's testimony shows how enslavers have sought above all to extinguish or deny a person's capacity for self-transcendence, which Niebuhr identified as the essence of being human. In other words, the ideal slave, as both Aristotle and Frederick Douglass affirmed, would be a wholly finite person, incapable of rational reflection, a mere "instrument" of his or her master's will. From Dio Chrysostom to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, philosophers perceived enslavement as a substitute for killing prisoners of war. Instead of executing prisoners, a common practice from the Bible to Homer, it was more humane and useful to enslave them, especially as people moved from a life as pastoral shepherds to labor-intensive agricultural societies. The killer literally reduces a human into a nonbeing, removed from the flow of time. The enslaver reduces a human being to a state of "social death," to use Orlando Patterson's phrase, in which the captive is defined as an object, a thing, without history.

If enslavement was originally modeled on the domestication of beasts of burden, as I suggest in a widely reprinted essay, and if humans had really been "domesticated" and genetically transformed into the kind of "natural slaves" Aristotle envisioned, they would have been incapable not only of reflection and analytical thought, but also of Niebuhrian sin.

Ironically, the Hebrew word *'abd*, the Greek word *doulos*, and the Latin *servus* carried no ethnic connotations and were sometimes used for "servant," as well as slave. Yet the West European words *slave*, *esclave* (French), *sklave* (German), and *esclavo* (Spanish) all derive from the Latin term for "Slav" (*esclavus*), that is, a Slavic person. Beginning in the tenth century, a disproportionate number of slaves were taken from the Balkans, and then from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries tens of thousands of so-called Slavic slaves from the Caucasus and Black Sea regions were shipped to markets throughout the Mediterranean. Ironically, I have found that in Sicily notaries making records in Latin referred to the *sclavi negri*, literally "black Slavs," from Africa, who by the 1490s outnumbered white slaves on the island.

I was extremely fortunate to publish the first edition of my book *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* in 1966, a time when the civil rights movement was beginning to stimulate a reexamination of the very foundations upon which New World societies and economies were built. In early May 1967, I was in Hyderabad, India, teaching courses on American history, when an Indian journalist brought the unbelievable news that the book had won the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction. I had not the slightest inkling of how this incredible stroke of good fortune, a sign of the new interest in racial injustice, would transform my life. Still, most teachers of American history continued to regard "Negro slavery" as a branch of local U.S. southern history. It was only in 1969, when Phillip Curtin made the first serious effort to compile an accurate census of the entire Atlantic slave trade, that an increasing number of historians began to grasp the intercontinental breadth and importance of the subject.

In the 1960s, however, I really had no intention of devoting my entire scholarly career to the history of slavery. I was employed at Cornell in 1955 to teach what was

called “American intellectual history” (along with the traditional American history survey course). In 1969, Yale also hired me as an American intellectual historian who happened to write about slavery and antislavery as examples of largely intellectual and cultural change. Thus I faced an uncomfortable gap, during much of my career, between my research and writing on topics connected to slavery and race, and my teaching about such figures as Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, the Transcendentalists, William James, and the early Progressives – mostly figures who aspired to find ways of marshaling our human capacity for self-transcendence to create a happier and fairer world.

Since I’ve always taken a negative view of “schools” of scholars following the tracks of some idolized mentor, I’m happy to say that very few of the sixty doctoral dissertations I’ve directed have had anything to do with slavery or antislavery. Still, an outstanding festschrift published in 1998, entitled *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, shows that many of my students have addressed moral problems of enormous diversity. A second festschrift, *The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform* (2007), does contain more material on slavery and race.

As my own published collections of essays indicate, I’ve tried to maintain a variety of interests even as my own teaching and writing became increasingly devoted to the problem of slavery. I have tried to do a great deal to reach a wider public in my attempt to convey some sense of the big picture regarding the place of New World slavery in creating not just America but the entire modern world. Thanks to the aid of two very wealthy Yale alumni, Richard Gilder and Lewis E. Lehrman, both of whom love history, I taught from 1994 to 2000 an intensive course for New York City high school and middle school teachers on the origins and significance of New World slavery. Then in 1998 I founded and served as director of Yale’s Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. I stepped down from that position at the end of June 2004, but happily Gilder and Lehrman seem committed to the center’s continuation.

My experience teaching the Gilder Lehrman seminars led me to create a new lecture course on slavery and abolition, for Yale undergraduates. That extremely rewarding experience led me to convert the lectures into a book called *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, which Oxford University Press published in 2006. Fortunately, the book received fine reviews in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, and even a small paper for the homeless in Washington, D.C. Since this is the only time I have had a chance of reaching a fairly broad general audience, I can only hope that the book will help disseminate more important knowledge about a somewhat repressed part of our heritage, the darker underside of the American dream.

Endnotes

- 1 Some of this material was published in my Introduction to David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 1-13.