

Why is Slavery Still With Us?
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I have just revisited the 1997 movie, *Amistad*, based on an actual case. In 1839, a Spanish Cuban slave ship washed up on shore with only Africans on board, the crew, with the exception of two White men, having been killed. The queen of Spain demanded the return of the vessel with its cargo. The two White survivors claimed the cargo as well, based on fraudulent documents. But even the US had banned the African slave trade; was this case a violation of the ban or was it only moving slaves from one place to another?

What made this case famous was that a decent young lawyer, with the help of former President John Quincy Adams, took the case to the Supreme Court. The prosecution claimed that slavery existed from the beginning of humanity and that it is neither sinful nor unnatural. Some people were destined to serve others. (The prosecution also noted that God created man and woman, one of them subordinated to the other.)

That court, despite that seven of the nine justices were slave owners themselves, ultimately freed the black prisoners and permitted them to be returned to Africa. They were thus affirming that Blacks were not always slaves or property but there were times that they had been, as in this case, free men who had justifiably resisted abduction into slavery.

At the end of the film, when the freed heroic Black leader returned to his home village, he found that black slavers had taken the whole village into slavery. Black complicity in the slave market has always been underplayed.

Slavery is indeed an ancient institution that came into being with the advent of agriculture and mining, both requiring vast human labor. Ancient slavery was monstrous--the fruits of warfare, and an enormous enterprise. The one saving grace in ancient slavery was that when the slaves looked like their captors, it made escape or being freed feasible.

The western hemisphere slave industry that began in the 16th century had much older roots and much more horrible circumstances. The discovery of the New World by the Spanish and Portuguese opened up vast plantation agriculture and the mining of gold and silver. Native Americans, when enslaved, died in horrific numbers. The usual slave markets of Medieval Europe (Circassians and other Slavic peoples) had been decimated by the cyclical Black Plague. The only region not affected by Bubonic Plague was Black Africa, a region long providing slaves captured by warring Black tribes and then by a well-organized Arab Muslim slave trade. The Arab world had an enormous appetite for slaves, both for labor and for the harems, an industry aided by the Vikings and unscrupulous Christian nobility in Southern Europe.

The largest 16th century slave market was Portuguese in their Brazilian territory. Then came Spain, and finally the southern American states with their need for agricultural labor in a climate that would kill European laborers. In addition, African slaves brought with them the skills that they had before their abduction: carpentry, pottery, cooking, brickmaking, farming, and other skills needed by their plantation owners. These slaves, looking different, could not easily run away or buy their own freedom. Ancient slavery had never been as permanent.

Despite this, it was only the Western world, first Britain and next America, that ultimately abolished commercial slavery. You would never know this when hearing the usual anti-Western rantings of our detractors.

Slavery is still with us today because one traditional type of slavery has never been recognized as slavery. Women throughout history used to be considered property under the law. Today, this is still so under Muslim law. Saudi Arabia was shamed into banning black slavery as late as 1954. However, marriage and concubinage were never considered slavery; they were just sexual customs.

In addition, international trafficking in sexual slavery is no different than the original abductions of Black Africans. Where is the international outrage? This is a

deadly industry that needs a global emancipation effort and prison for those complicit in it.

669 words

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