

Brenda E. Stevenson, *What is Slavery?* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2015), 246 pages, \$16.91.

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Book review

The present book, *What is Slavery?* by Brenda E. Stevenson, is a worthy addition to the increasing pool of literature on the violence, abuse and exploitation of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the United States. The sustained scholarly interest on slavery has been stimulated by the fact that that institution, obnoxious as it were, profoundly shaped what we know today as the American history and society. Slavery was critically essential to the creation and maturation of America's agricultural, industrial and mercantile economies, and greatly moulded the country's political and cultural landscapes. Thus, as the author notes:

Slavery was a brutal exercise of exploitation by the individual and state, of the bondsman and bondswoman, and it was extremely profitable. Even though popular ideas about slavery in the United States today are framed by a belief of regional (southern) importance, slave-produced wealth shaped the economies, both directly and indirectly, of most of the original thirteen British colonies, as well as those of the Spanish and French territories that would become part of the United States in the nineteenth century (Stevenson, 2015: 3-4).

The book which runs into four chapters begins with an examination of the institution of slavery across time and space before the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade. And so in chapter one, slavery was examined in such regions as the Ancient World, the Middle East and Asia, Africa, Europe and Ottoman Empire, as well as the Pre-Contact America. This is further evidence that slavery had existed in virtually all societies of the world with varying degrees of similarities and de-similarities in operation regarding methods of acquiring the bonded persons, slave status in society, avenues of manumission, as well as resistance to the inhuman institution.

In chapter two, the author introduces the reader to the African genesis of the Atlantic slave trade; numbers of Africans traded in the traffic, the American destinations, British North American slave imports, organization of the trade, and the Middle Passage – that ocean trip from Africa to America during which at least four million Africans died as a result of numerous diseases, maltreatment, dehydration, starvation or suicide. But the author notes that of the 28 million Africans who were enslaved and sold between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, approximately 12.5 million left for the Americas and the Caribbean, and that it was 11 million or so that actually arrived in the Americas. Thus, it is now clear that the Atlantic slave trade that is, the trade in African labour to the Europeans and Americans, had tremendous impact on creating and shaping the modern world – in terms of the millions of enslaved Africans that contributed immensely to the

economic underdevelopment of Africa; the four centuries length of the traffic; the global mercantile implications; the destruction of vast expanses of western and central western Africa; the numbers of European nations that participated in the trade; and the immense wealth that the trade produced and which became a major backbone of the industrialization of Europe, among others. It was the Atlantic slave trade that became the major machinery through which the African Diaspora to the Americas was inaugurated, and also the genesis of the Euro-American racism from which the world has not recovered.

Then we come to the experiences of African slaves in the colonial world of North America which the author discusses in chapter three. Slavery in the early Spanish, French and Dutch settlements was analysed, to be followed by the British colonization and evolution of African slavery in North America, slave laws and economy in the Northern and Middle Colonies of the British mainland, Southern slave culture, labour and family, as well as slavery in the age of the American Revolution and the early republic. With the founding in 1526 of the colony of San Miguel de Guadalupe on the Peedee River in the present location of Georgia by Lucas Vazquez de Ayllon, Spain became the first European country to establish a settlement in North America, with a number of Black slaves who became the first to revolt against the system, that same year. By 1682, France had established their “New France,” a vast territory that included the present-day states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota. Though the French did not settle much of this land, they created some mercantile and agricultural settlements in and around the Lower Mississippi River that harboured both indigenous and African slaves. Their first settlement was the rather temporary Fort Maurepas (near Biloxi) in 1699, while the first permanent settlement was at Natchitoches in 1714.

The author also informs us that Virginia was the first permanent British mainland colony in North America, and argues further that slave trade and labour were crucial to the economies of the Northern and Middle colonies particularly in the cash-crop Seaboard colonies of Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas. The necessity for slave labour increased with passage of the seventeenth century when fewer white contract or indentured servants were available. And in terms of ethnic composition, the Igbo were the majority of enslaved Africans in Virginia and Maryland, but not in South Carolina.

The book is rounded off in chapter four in which issues as slave population growth and relocation; antebellum slave labour and family life in the South, slave punishment and material support, slave resistance and community life, slave frontiers, and then abolition, were discussed. It is instructive that the United States slave population doubled in size from two million in 1820 to four million in 1860. But more than 25, 000 relocated from the Upper South to the Lower South between the 1830s and the 1850s, thereby dashing, to some extent, slaves’ hope of having families as many were torn apart, leaving significant generations in deep trauma.

Because domestic slave trade thrived in the Antebellum South, slave family life was disintegrated as traders forced enslaved men, women and children from the Upper South to the Deep South frontiers that became Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. The violent oppression imposed by owners, overseers, drivers, slave traders, and Southern law meant that no slave couple could legally marry; slaves were denied parental rights; slave men were not recognized as patriarchal heads of their families, or slave

women as feminine dependents worthy of sexual and physical protection. It was the inhuman treatment of the slaves that gave rise to the numerous slave revolts such as the Nat Turner Rebellion of August 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia – the state with the largest slave population. Between 1526 and 1860 a total of 41 revolts took place and there were many other plots discovered but not actually executed.

The result was that abolition of slavery in the United States was coming close involving a mighty struggle that would lead to national division and civil war. As would be expected, Africans and their descendants were the most important advocates for freedom. Organized efforts at anti-slavery resulted in the end of the legal African slave trade to the United States, the gradual end to Black slavery in the Northeast and some Western territories, lenient manumission laws in the Upper South, and founding of the American Colonization Society and the colony of Liberia for freed slaves. Other organized efforts geared towards abolition involved the publication of magazines and the founding of societies such the *Liberator Magazine* (1831) and the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) (1833).

Eventually, in 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, and in 1865 slavery was abolished in the United States via the Thirteenth Amendment. But Black freedom was soon challenged with the imposition of discriminatory Black Laws, mob rule, disenfranchisement, and Jim Crow such as the Montgomery Incident of December 1, 1955, involving the African American woman, Rosa Parks. Mrs. Parks was an active civil rights leader in Montgomery, Alabama, and on this day she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat for a male white passenger on a Montgomery bus (Carson, 2000). The refusal was against the Jim Crow laws that regulated race relations in the city of Montgomery and throughout most of the South. But her arrest produced enormous outrage in the African American community, which organized a boycott of the bus system and demanded an end to segregation in bus seating. The Bus Boycott was very effective as it put enormous economic pressure not only on the private bus company but also on many Montgomery merchants: the bus boycotters tended to make their purchases in the neighbourhood stores as it was difficult to get to the downtown stores.

In late 1956, the Supreme Court, inspired partly by the protest, declared that segregation in public transportation was illegal. By this decision of the Supreme Court, the discriminatory seating policies in buses in Montgomery were abandoned, and the boycott came to an end. But the Montgomery boycott has legitimized a new form of racial protest and elevated to prominence a new figure in the civil rights movement – Martin Luther King Jr., a local Baptist pastor chosen to lead the boycott movement (Brinkley, 1997).

Racial discrimination, segregation and domestic terrorism snapped Blacks back into a state of submission, inferiority and dependency quite similar to their status in slavery. And just as the legacies of inequality remain in the United States till today as markers of Blacks life, “so too remains the determination of the descendants of slaves to resist this dehumanization and to insist, instead, on equality” (Stevenson, 185). Such was the fate of the Black man, George Floyd who, on May 25, 2020, was strangled to death by white police officer, Derek Chauvin, for allegedly using a counterfeit bill in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Having pinned Floyd to the floor, Chauvin knelt on his neck for about 8 minutes 46 seconds; and after crying “I can’t breathe” for several times, Floyd was later confirmed dead.

A noticeable flaw in the work is its inability to identify all the crucial slave resistance incidents in the United States such as the Ibos Landing episode of May 1803, at Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Reputed throughout the Atlantic world for escaping slavery by suicide, a group of enslaved Igbo landed at Dunbar Creek in a slave ship, having survived the Middle Passage. Still in chains and never became reconciled to their new life, they all started singing and marched right down into the river to march back to Africa. But of course, they all got drowned (Chambers, 2014). The historical significance of the event in the struggle for Black emancipation qualified the site to become known as Ibos Landing. By and large, Stevenson's book is of global importance as it brilliantly explores the contours of the diverse spectrum of slavery in the ancient and modern worlds. Most specifically, scholars working on the institution of Slavery in the United States, African Diaspora, Atlantic History, African American History and/or Black Studies in general will find the book an indispensable tool.

References

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