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Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World

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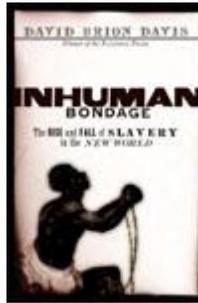
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Book Review



David Brion Davis. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 440 pp., illustrations, 8 pp. halftone plates, 8 maps. \$30, ISBN 0195140737.

Review by Ira Berlin, May 16, 2006.

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Slaves in the Family

It wasn't so long ago that few Americans spoke of slavery, least of all historians. Except at a handful of black colleges, it rarely entered the classroom. History texts gave it scant recognition, other than noting how its presence burdened white Americans. Perhaps the only exception was discussion of the Civil War, but even then slavery made only a brief appearance -- since everyone knew the great conflict was about states' rights.

Now slavery is everywhere, with movies like "Amistad," "Glory" and "Beloved," and television documentaries like "Unchained Memories" and "Slavery and the Making of America." Nearly every major museum has mounted an exhibition on slavery, while new museums devoted entirely to the subject are being planned. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, two presidents representing very different constituencies, have visited the West African slave trading post of Gorée and peered out the "Door of No Return." Congress has mandated that the National Park Service address the question of slavery at all Civil War battlefields, and federal and state courts have adjudicated numerous cases regarding profits extracted from slave labor centuries ago. In today's history books, slavery has become the foundation for our understanding of the past, and almost all universities in the country offer some course on the subject. Books pour from the presses; by one count more than 75 have been published this past year. More are on the way, along with the usual array of CD's and Web sites.

But despite this enormous outflow, controversies continue. For some, slavery is a handy metaphor for exploitation (thus "wage slavery" and the "slavery of sex"). Today's sweatshops, they say, are indistinguishable from yesterday's sugar mills and cotton fields.

For others, however, chattel bondage is not just one kind of coercion. Its specific attributes distinguish it from all other forms of oppression, giving it a unique place in human history. And for all Americans, there is the enduring contradiction of their republic as both the beacon of liberty and the world's largest slaveholder.

So the publication of David Brion Davis's "Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World" could not be more welcome. As much as any single scholar, Davis, a professor emeritus and the former director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition at Yale University, has made slavery a central element in modern historiography. Although the focus of "Inhuman Bondage" is largely on the Americas, he appreciates that the slavery of the recent past cannot be understood apart from its long history, one that reaches back to antiquity and stretches across the globe. [\[read more >>>\]](#).