

Book Reviews

Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, 236pp.

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This is arguably the best introduction to the demography of the slave trade, the largest forced migration in human history, a subject that remains central to a full understanding of Africa and its place in the world economy. Unlike most contemporary historians on the slave trade, who seem more fascinated by the sophistry of their econometric models, rather than the catastrophic dimensions of this inhuman trade, Manning skilfully combines dry statistical analysis with poignant descriptions of the tragedy of slavery. The tone is set in the prologue where he states that although the study:

focuses primarily on economic history... the influence of slavery has extended beyond the economy to transform human emotions and trouble the human spirit. For this reason I have chosen to integrate spiritual and dramatic terms into this tale of costs and benefits: slavery was a sacrifice of Africans for the transformation of the wider world, and slavery was a tragedy for the people of Africa (p.1).

This is economic history with a big H. It goes beyond the petty concerns of economic balance sheets to ask the great moral questions. The book has some of the passion of Walter Rodney's bitter treatise, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the breadth of Williams' monograph *Capitalism and Slavery*, echoes of James, C L R' *The Black Jacobins*, and the cold feel for numbers of the statistician. It supports and elaborates on Rodney's thesis that the Atlantic slave trade contributed to the growth of slavery within Africa, and Williams' thesis that it assisted the growth of industrial capitalism, and reiterates James' argument that slave rebellions, not just liberal humanitarian protests and falling rates of profits, played a key role in the abolition of this hideous institution.

Manning is unsparing in his condemnation of the Europeans who launched the trade and the Africans who participated in it for their own short-term prosperity, to the long-term detriment of their societies. His conclusion is unequivocal. On the one hand, slavery left Africans "depleted in population, divided irremediably among themselves, retarded economically, and despised as an inferior race in a world which had built a vision of racial

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hierarchy based on the inspiration of their enslavement" (p.2). On the other hand, it brought economic progress to the western world and civilization's advance. "The very term "western civilization", Manning argues, "serves to arrogate full credit for the present economic supremacy of the Atlantic nations to its European ancestors", forgetting the indispensable contributions of African slaves (p.6).

As a story of beneficiaries and victims, Manning confronts the question of how the contemporary world should respond to this past. There are those who demand reparations, a demand that has now reached the chambers of the OAU. Manning observes that there are practical problems in identifying the current heirs of the beneficiaries who should make the reparations and the heirs of the victims who should be compensated. Should the reparations go to the descendants of slaves in the Americas, or to Africa from where the slaves were taken? And were reparations to be paid to Africa, how could it be ensured that the compensation did not go to "the descendants of the slave merchants rather than the descendants of the slaves" (p.175). Despite these problems, Manning believes that "the idea of reparations is important because of a key concept it brings with it: it serves effectively to deny the notion that the current poverty and weakness of Africa is a result of its current qualities" (p.175). In the absence of reparations the least that can be done is to remember the African slaves, to "honour their memory and thereby ensure that no such sacrifice will be made again" (p.176).

That is what the book is about, an attempt to remember the slaves, to determine how many suffered this tragic fate, and assess the impact of their enslavement on the societies they left behind and those that they went to. He begins the story in Chapter 2, where he argues that slavery was practised by most of the world's societies at one time or another. In fact, by 1500 Africans and people of African descent were a clear minority of the world's slave population. "What distinguishes Africa and Africans with regard to slavery", he contends, "is modernity. The enslavement of Africans increased in the modern period, a time when enslavement of other peoples was dying out" (p.27; *Italics original*). It is no secret why the Europeans wanted African slaves after the so-called discovery of the Americas. More difficult to decipher is why African societies supplied them. This is where Manning fails. He believes the answer lies in the relatively low productivity of African agriculture, an assertion based on a wild misreading of African agricultural system. But even if it were true, as he himself recognizes, low productivity, "did not in itself make the slave trade inevitable" (p.35).

Manning is on surer grounds when he discusses the growth of the slave trade in the subsequent chapters. He carefully distinguishes the geographical origins and destinations of the slaves and the demographic structure of the different slave populations. He identifies three clusters - the Western Coast, the Savanna and Horn, and the Eastern Coast - each of which, is further

subdivided. The slave trade from the Western Coast began in the early fifteenth century, was predominantly male and was destined for the Americas. The slave trade from the Savanna and Horn to what he calls the Oriental markets, was much smaller, although older, and female slaves predominated. By Oriental he means not only Asia, but also North Africa, an unfortunate homage to Eurocentricism. The last to develop was the slave trade of the Eastern Coast. It exploded in the nineteenth century and "combined the experiences of the Western Coast, the Savanna and Horn into a dizzying and disastrous sequence of events" (p.52).

The demographic consequences of these slave trades were far-reaching. The populations of the affected regions not only fell absolutely, but their growth rates were also curtailed by changes in fertility and family patterns, settlement patterns and economic activities. The exact combination of factors, of course, differed from one region to another, given the varied demographic regimes. On the Western Coast, fertility rates were depressed by the growth of polygyny, while in the Savanna and Horn, there was a relative shortage of women. Manning believes that on the Western Coast especially, the experience of slavery reinforced patriarchy. He concludes that as a result of the slave trade "Africa had virtually no population growth from about 1750 to 1850", precisely "the era in which European and American populations began a high rate of growth" (pp.84-85). Altogether, he estimates that about 14 million persons were exported from tropical Africa as slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alone, two-thirds of them from the Western Coast, a fifth from the Savanna and the Horn, and the rest from the East Coast.

It was not just the demographic and economic structures which were distorted by the slave trade, social and political institutions and values were also affected, so that even after slavery to the Americas was abolished, the infrastructures, developed to supply slaves, remained and were now used to expand local labour supplies to produce commodities demanded by European economies. In short, slavery corrupted African societies. As Manning puts it, "slavery was corruption: it involved theft, bribery, and exercise of brute force as well as ruses. Slavery thus may be as one source of precolonial origins of modern corruption" (p.124).

The impact of slavery was, therefore, profound and contradictory. It contributed significantly to capitalist construction and the development of racist ideologies in the West, and demographic and economic stagnation in Africa. But it also helped create the very idea of Africa. And, lest we forget, African societies survived the scourge. Perhaps we should be inspired by that as we face the depressing present and the unpredictable future.

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