

The Slave Trade, Slavery, and Empire

For Britain, France, and in parts of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, it was slavery that made empire pay and empire that made slavery possible. Northeastern Brazil pioneered the sugar plantation on a massive scale, but Britain and France became increasingly dynamic participants in the sugar economy. Total imports of people to the Americas from Africa had been below 1,000 per year in 1500, but passed 10,000 per year in 1600 and stayed over 60,000 for most of the 1700s. The slave trade eclipsed all other forms of transatlantic migration: in the sixteenth century, about 25 percent of people who crossed the ocean were slaves, in the seventeenth century 60 percent, in the eighteenth century over 75 percent. The British Caribbean, especially Jamaica, was a prime destination, as were the islands of the French Caribbean, Saint Domingue most notoriously. Because mortality was horrendous, the planters' appetite for slaves was never-ending. In the case of Britain, the sugar colonies made the entire Atlantic enterprise work. The growing number of laborers devoted to cane

created a demand for provisions that stimulated the food-exporting economy of New England in the late seventeenth century. Meanwhile, sugar mixed with tea from China and India began to provide a significant portion of the calories of industrial workers in England, whose products went to North America and the Caribbean, as well as to markets beyond the empire, including Africa.

Because empire was a mobile political form, it created demands for labor where no potential laborers lived or wanted to go. Enslavement is a process of displacement—of alienating a person from his or her social roots. Alienation and displacement made slaves useful as soldiers and high officials, as well as ordinary servants, in some empires that we have examined and as units of labor in others, from Greece and Rome onward and in a variety of circumstances in Africa and Asia as well. But the linkages formed by imperial expansion—particularly into the ecologically rich and demographically fragile regions of the American tropics—took slavery to an unprecedented scale. Imperial power was crucial to the creation of slave labor systems as well as to their maintenance; organized force was needed to deter or defeat slave rebellions and to protect land, slaves, processing machinery,

and ships from other empires or pirates. The sugar islands of the Caribbean were subject to all these threats.

In [chapter 8](#) we will consider the relationship of empire and slavery to capitalist development. Here we explore the implications of the empire-slavery nexus beyond the border of the maritime empires—in Africa. Slavery and the slave trade existed in Africa prior to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but not on the scale they reached once the transatlantic connection developed. For social and geographic reasons, what Albert Hirschman calls the “exit option” was relatively open to people in much of Africa. Some places offered the resources to sustain prosperous societies, but around them were regions with resources adequate for survival, and kinship structures in Africa made mobility a collective process. A would-be king who tried to extract too much from his own people ran into the danger that subjects would flee or use their united strength to resist subordination. Power depended on controlling and exploiting people external to one’s own society and on attracting followers detached from their own group or coercing outsiders into service.

We arrive at a tragic intertwining of histories. Europeans were determined to put their new lands to work, and labor had to come from somewhere else. In parts of Africa, kings could gain resources (guns, metals, cloth and other goods with redistributive potential) by seizing someone else's human assets. Raiding slaves from another polity and selling them to an outside buyer externalized the problem of supervision as well as recruitment. Over time, the overseas outlet for captives gave advantages to the most militarized of African states—Asante, Dahomey, Oyo, Benin—and produced more efficient slave-trading mechanisms. Militarization of some kingdoms put neighbors that did not follow suit in jeopardy. The chance to sell war captives propelled a vast system of slave catching and slave marketing. The African slave trade depended on acts of coercion initially committed in Africa, outside the Atlantic imperial system, but it was driven by that system's appetite for labor, by its transoceanic trading mechanisms, and by the capacity of empire-states to build regimes capable of disciplining a huge labor force, uprooted and brought into colonial societies.

Connections, Territories, Empires

The world became more interconnected in the sixteenth century, but not because anyone set out to make it that way. Under Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and British auspices, state power was used not just to gain access to new goods and new lands of settlement but to prevent others from doing so. None of the imperial regimes could maintain the monopolies they sought, but the fact that they tried put pressure on others to build overseas empires, too. Nor could any empire—or European empires in general, if one wants to impose a retrospective unity on them—actually make the world its frame of reference. The Ottoman and Chinese empires were too powerful to become enmeshed in a European web; the interior of Africa was inaccessible. European maritime empires depended on links to commercial networks, in Africa as well as Asia, that Europeans did not control or even know very much about. The world in the eighteenth century was still multipolar.

We should be careful about making the sixteenth century into an avatar of “globalization.” Instead,

thinking about a history of *connections* allows us to focus on the changes specific to this time. From the perspective of empire, we will first review reconfigurations of power and commerce around the world, then look at changes and limits on changes in the nature of sovereignty.

In the western part of the former Roman empire, the quest to revive imperial hegemony led each aspiring power to compete for resources within Europe and beyond the seas. European empires interacted, sometimes violently, with a wide range of polities across the world, but they did so in the context of their rivalry with each other. Not all empires were in this game. The Ottoman and Chinese empires could opt out and continue, for a long time, to prosper.

Competing empires had to devise new repertoires of power. Innovations in shipbuilding, navigation, and armament were crucial tools. Trading enclaves, company monopolies, plantations, and colonies of settlement became staples of overseas empires. European empire-builders could be extremely destructive—with effects beyond their intentions. Even so, indigenous people sometimes made their compromises, played off invading empires against each other, took trading opportunities to gain new

tools and crops, and at times found something in the invaders' religious institutions and social practices to meld with their own.

The world did become more connected in this period. The operations of empires extended ties, visible in the length of trade routes (Amsterdam to Batavia, for example) and tightened market relations such that mining silver on one continent become critical to the money system on another.

Expanded imperial circuits also presented opportunities to trading communities (Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Arabs, Gujaratis) who operated along the lines and in the interstices of power. Trade networks did more than carry commodities around the world. They carried genes—of people, crops, and animals, not to mention diseases, from plague to syphilis and smallpox. Commercial connections also carried ideas and social practices. Not only Christianity but also Islam, which had earlier crossed the Indian Ocean, moved faster with the growth of exchange. The annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca as well as networks of scholars continued to move people across spaces. Despite the monopolistic goals and practices of maritime empires, they could not control the circuits or the practices they fostered, and where networks over-

lapped, they were not woven into a single pattern of cultural and material connections.

One might in retrospect say that it was precisely the vulnerability of western European empires—their deadly competition—that drove them to improve their military and administrative capacities, and that the Ottoman and Chinese in the long run suffered from their earlier success. No one in the early eighteenth century knew that. What they did know was that they lived in a world of empires, and each—from China to Portugal—was striving to build and maintain power with the material and imaginative means at its disposal.

In these circumstances, empires, as always, had to work with intermediaries, and they had to play the politics of difference, to juggle incorporation and differentiation. In Asia, European empires were obliged, whether they liked it or not, to interact with a variety of local powers, from Mughal emperors to local traders, producers, and creditors. That they sometimes destroyed entire communities—as the Dutch did in trying to secure a monopoly of spices—did not necessarily make the system more effective. The costs of coercion were high. The intended and unintended destructiveness of colonization in the Americas confronted Spanish

rulers with a labor deficit, but empire space offered solutions to such self-created problems, too—the importation of yet another kind of labor force, African slaves in this instance, from one continent to another.

Had any aspiring power—from Portugal to England to the Mughals—tried to play by the rules of “free” markets, thinking they could avoid the cost and burdens of running an empire, they would promptly have been marginalized or eliminated from the scene. Telling a story of “economic development” or “the rise of the west” cannot, therefore, get us very far.

Nor do theories of “sovereignty” that treat the state abstractly, without focusing on how states, as they actually existed, constrained each other into mobilizing the resources of diverse populations and territories. Some scholars distinguish neatly between a premodern politics that is not about territory but personal allegiance to a monarch (perhaps through a hierarchy of lords and magnates) from one in which the polity is defined as a bounded territory. The period we are discussing in this chapter is a prime candidate for such a transition. But rather than divide the world into epochs we should recognize that alternative concepts of

territoriality and sovereign power coexisted and were debated and struggled over. We should not mistake a political actor's claim to territory or a political thinker's assertion of a territorial principle for a definition of an era or for a characterization of a transition in political practices.

The most dramatic changes from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century were not in the depth of rulers' control over a given territory but in the extent of space over which power was exercised. In the Americas, the kings of Portugal and Spain built an apparatus of direct monarchical control over territory and trade that they could not erect at home. The fiscal-military state that developed in England by the early eighteenth century was both motivated and enabled by the state's ventures overseas. English rivalries with Spanish, Dutch, and French empires from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean meant that a great deal of what the state had to do (witness the Navigation Acts) was to ensure that England would be at the center of dispersed economic processes, from sea routes all over the world to sugar plantations in the Americas to trading outposts in India. The French state, under Louis XIV, came as close as any to producing a tightly bound regime at home, thanks in part to the rela-

tively compact area—now called the “hexagon”—that the monarchy tried to rule. Yet France, too, was acting like an empire among empires, had its overseas adventures and conflicts, was playing dynastic politics with its neighbors and was dependent on patrimonial relations with regional elites, and hence less absolute than the designation “absolutist monarchy” suggests.

European states had to reconfigure themselves in the context of global empire, but one can easily exaggerate the extent of change within Europe itself. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) is often heralded as the beginning of a new regime, signaling the acceptance by major European powers of the principle of territorial sovereignty, mutually recognized, of each state. But the treaty was less innovative and less far-reaching. At Westphalia, European powers (the Holy Roman Emperor, the princes of that realm, the kings of France and Sweden) attempted to end a prolonged period of religious and dynastic conflict—known as the Thirty Years’ War in Germany or the Eighty Years’ War between Habsburg Spain and the Netherlands. The Dutch got their independence—but they were already inventing a different kind of sovereignty in the East Indies. The treaty recognized the sovereignty of

some three hundred princes on territories under the Holy Roman Empire, but the empire remained an overarching political entity, somewhere between a confederation and an empire for another 158 years. Sweden and France were assigned new territories, not necessarily speaking the same language or with any loyalty to a state.

The signatories to the treaty were neither very national nor neatly bounded; they pursued and were subjected to imperial ambitions for the next three centuries. A variety of different and nonequivalent forms of state persisted long after 1648: strong monarchies like those of France and Spain, a Dutch merchant republic, a Polish aristocratic republic, a Swiss confederation, Italian merchant republics. Europe kept its popes, emperors, kings, dukes, counts, bishops, city administrations, and land-holding lords. Emperors interacted with each other and fought over or passed around component parts of their domains as they had before. France was generally England's rival, but sometimes its ally against the United Provinces. Dutch support helped one faction to oust another in an English civil war in 1688–89. A new dynastic combination emerged in 1700 (despite British attempts to prevent it),

when Bourbons, springing from the lineage of the kings of France, became the kings of Spain.

The Treaty of Westphalia was supposed to promote religious tolerance among Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists and limit the ability of princes, by their own conversion, to try to change the religious affiliations of “their” territories. But religious strife did not cease and the territorial principle of sovereignty was neither new in 1648 nor respected afterward. The layered sovereignty of emperor over king over prince was still a viable European option in the nineteenth century and new forms of layered sovereignty, as we shall see, were invented in the twentieth. The idea of “Westphalian sovereignty”—a world of bounded and unitary states interacting with other equivalent states—has more to do with 1948 than 1648 ([chapter 13](#)).

The interactions among unequal, composite, and unstable empires did push innovations in diplomacy and law. As we have seen ([chapter 5](#)), the Ottomans had offered communities of foreigners the right to be governed by their own rules and had insisted on protection of ambassadors and embassies in other countries. As the VOC and EIC squared off against each other, Hugo Grotius produced his treatise, “Freedom of the Seas” (1609),

borrowing from maritime traditions—the sea as an open highway—of the Indian Ocean. But the sea was less free in the seventeenth century than it had been in the fifteenth. Meanwhile, faced with the capacity of Mughal sovereigns to obstruct or enhance their commercial operations, Europeans broke canon law rules against making treaties with non-Christian powers and recognized the legitimacy of their negotiating partners. These innovations in what would later become known as “international law” took place at the interfaces between empires and their various legal traditions—Roman, Christian, Ottoman, Muslim, Mughal. Diplomacy and law were not focused on regulating relationships among equivalent states but gave legitimacy and order to a highly unequal world.

If empire always implied governing different people differently, the empires of the Americas brought out explicit debates about what a politics of difference should be. Catholic empire, Las Casas insisted, included indigenous Americans, whose civilizational status deserved recognition even as they were the objects of conversion. American colonists relied on a politics of sameness—insisting that their geographical displacement did not diminish their rights as Englishmen. Neither argu-

ment gave much thought to slaves except as units of labor, but most empires gave lip service, at least, to a minimal code of conduct for slave owners if they wanted to be considered respectable members of the social order. The institutions of empire gave some subordinated peoples a small opportunity to demand protection from the Crown against local authorities and landowners, hardly enough to save them from the greed and brutality of elites. But not all imperial elites thought that conquered or enslaved people were there to be humiliated and exploited at will; the relationship of incorporation and differentiation was not necessarily going to remain the same.

The extension of empires around the world from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries was not a single-minded conquest by a securely organized Europe but rather a multifaceted transformation. Societies and polities were disrupted, reconfigured, and created as rulers extended power across space, sought intermediaries, and manipulated hierarchies. Along the way, a few people, like Bartolomé de las Casas, paused to ask, what have we wrought?