

Summaries of the UNESCO Report on the Atlantic Slave Trade: Slave Trade History in a Nutshell...

Chapter 1 - The Origins and Development of Slavery

Summary

Slavery as a social and economic institution existed in most ancient societies. That it survived into modernity in many parts of the world attests to its flexibility and adaptability in a variety of circumstances over time. However, the word “slavery” did not mean the same thing in all circumstances; instead, it expressed a variety of relationships, and this was in itself an important part of the institution’s ability to adapt to multiple circumstances.

White slavery ended in Europe during the Middle Ages, but the same period saw a growing use of slave labour among Africans in Africa, and this in turn led to the increasing use of enslaved Africans in the Mediterranean and in Europe. This meant that while the white labour used in the European colonization of the East-Atlantic islands and the Americas was not enslaved, even if it was bonded in various ways, the black African labour used was slave labour. And this development was driven by the westward expansion of large-scale sugar plantations to the Caribbean.

Chapter 2 - West Africa before the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Summary

The expansion of slavery in Africa during the 15th and 16th centuries is associated with the disintegration of the larger African states and the proliferation of smaller, fragmented ones. In this context, the local ruling elites saw slave owning as a principal way of consolidating their power and prestige.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the 14-40s did not inmate slave trading in the region; rather, it served to give a transatlantic dimension to what was already an established commercial culture. Initially, the Portuguese engaged this culture on its own terms, and it was not until the beginning of the 16th century that Europeans began to determine and reshape the content and context of this slave-trading culture in fundamental ways.

Chapter 3 - The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Summary

The transatlantic slave trade had developed as the largest commercial undertaking of the Atlantic World by the end of the 18th century. Beginning slowly during the 16th century, its dimensions were enlarged as all European nations with colonial interests in the Americas began to participate, European demand for slaves in the Americas seemed insatiable, and African suppliers did what was required of them to meet market demand. Extensive organizational efforts were also required of the participants in the trade, and as a result it gained the support and involvement of political elites on both sides of the Atlantic.

Chapter 4 - Slavery in the Americas

Summary

The distribution of enslaved Africans across the Americas was determined principally by the location of the sugar industry. As a result, the Caribbean and Brazil, the heartlands of the sugar plantations, accounted for at least two-thirds of all arrivals. Other industries, such as cotton

and tobacco production in the colonies that eventually became the United States of America, and mining and logging in South and Central America, were minority users of slaves. Only in the United States were Africans able to reproduce themselves fully.

The slave populations of Brazil and the Caribbean exhibited failing demographic trends, and these colonies pressed for larger imports of slaves as a result, rather than taking measures to reduce mortality. This trend was only reversed later at the time of growing agitation for the abolition of the slave trade.

In all the colonies, the enslaved population was controlled by a combination of military might and legal provisions. Important differences in the way that relations between slaves and free persons were conceived determined the nature of the laws designed for governing the slaves, and there were significant differences across national boundaries concerning the social relations and lived experiences of the slaves.

Chapter 5 - Financial and Commercial Organization

Summary

The effectiveness of the transatlantic slave trade as a large-scale business enterprise was assured on account of the rise of the joint-stock company as a core organizing unit, having the capacity to create and maintain a network of agents and brokers to serve its many interests. These large enterprises, initially given monopolies by their respective governments, were later obliged to compete with a host of smaller operators within a system of free trade.

The transatlantic trade was profitable - had it not been, it could scarcely have been sustained for over 300 years. Nevertheless, profits fluctuated considerably over time and according to the conditions under which individual voyages were carried out. Some European nations were better prepared for the trade than others, and by the end of the 18th century English slavers, though still not the majority carriers, extracted a greater return on investment than did their competitors. In general, profits were modest when compared to certain other alternative forms of business. However, they were still sufficiently attractive to sustain the attention of established and new investors over the long term.

Chapter 6 - Volume and Variation

Summary

Despite attempts spanning three decades, a definitive figure for the number of Africans shipped to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade remains elusive. Curtin's pioneering census of 1969, which proposed a total of 11.2 million departees, was quickly criticized as conservative. Though the latest figure of 11 million, published in 1999 by Eltis, Richardson, et al. on CD-ROM, constitutes a significant development and takes the figure further from the upper limit of 12.6 million suggested by Inikori, further work still needs to be done, particularly on the Portuguese trade, before a final figure can be arrived at. The number of voyages unaccounted for on this CD-ROM also suggests that the overall figure of 11 million that it gives may be too conservative.

The volume of the transatlantic slave trade varied considerably over time, and there were significant variations between participating West-African regions and European carriers. The 18th century was undoubtedly the heyday of the trade in terms of its volume, associated with the phenomenal expansion of the sugar industry in the Caribbean and Brazil. However, the Portuguese were still in the end the single largest carrier, since it was they who dominated both the early and closing phases of the trade.

Chapter 7 - The Middle Passage: A Way of Death

Summary

In addition to the many well-known descriptions of the Middle Passage that depict its horror, inhumanity and general destruction of life, it is now possible to arrive at detailed figures for the number of slaves who died while on board the ships transporting them to the Americas. However, the Middle Passage should not be regarded as only the transatlantic part of the slave-transportation system; rather, it should include the slaves' initial capture and sale, as well as their transportation overland to the waiting slave ships off the coasts.

The brutality of conditions during the Middle Passage resulted in considerable loss of life among the slaves. Described as "a way of death" by one historian, scholars have examined in detail the many causes of the high mortality rates that afflicted the slave population on their journey to the Americas. That the slave ships were in effect "floating tombs" has long been understood. It is only more recently that precise measurements of the number of enslaved Africans who died while on board have been available as a feature of the literature. In addition, scholars have not only gained greater understanding of the aggregate loss of life sustained during the Middle Passage, but they have also studied the rates of such loss and the extent to which these changed over time, as well as between voyages, for different parts of Africa and among different European slavers.

Chapter 8 - Prices and Profitability

Summary

In general, slaves were sold at a profit by African suppliers in Africa, and by European suppliers in the Americas, and it was profit that made the trade attractive to all those participating in it, determining the extent and duration of their engagements. Slaves were treated like marketable commodities, though considerations of their "perishability" were also always a prime consideration.

European slavers have left financial accounts suggesting that profits made in the trade could fluctuate considerably. Though there was a trend for profits made in the trade to rise significantly over time, the growing number of European traders had served to drive down average profits for all to only moderate levels by the early 18th century. Thereafter, any increase in profits would have required significant improvements in operational efficiency, as well as cuts in costs. By the end of the 18th century English slavers had considerable advantages in this regard, chiefly because they were able to turn the benefits of England's being the first industrialized European nation to their advantage.

Chapter 9 - Resistance and Rebellion

Summary

Africans did not wish to be captured, enslaved and sold as commodities on the labour markets of the New World, and despite the client relationships that existed between African suppliers and European traders there is considerable evidence of African resistance to the transatlantic trade.

All Africans, whether suppliers, traders, collaborators, or captives, were adversely affected by the slave trade, and resistance to it took many forms, appearing at the levels of state policy, community agitation and individual action. The slave trade was therefore circumscribed by refusal and opposition on the part of the African slaves that at times could threaten, even if only temporarily, its effectiveness in particular locations. Resistance was always discernible among those captured for the trade, rebellion taking place en route to the coast, in the barracoons and on board the slave ships. At every stage of the Middle Passage, remarkable attempts at escape

from the grip of the transatlantic trade took place.

Chapter 11 - The Impact of the Trade on Western Europe and the Americas

Summary

The extent of European material, social and psychological benefits from engagement in the transatlantic slave trade has generated lively and contentious discussion among historians. In this discussion, no one has suggested that the European economies suffered a net loss as a result of their engagement in the trade. Rather, discussion has highlighted the extent to which the trade stimulated industries such as shipbuilding, insurance and finance and metallurgy and textiles, and the impact that these industries had on European development.

Recently, historians have moderated earlier claims on the importance of the slave trade for European economic growth, arguing that the transatlantic trade made only a marginal contribution to European economic and social development. However, the evidence shows that almost every aspect of European life was touched by profits from the slave trade. The debate among historians, then, is less about the fact that European societies benefited from the slave trade and more about the magnitude and extent of those benefits.

Chapter 12 - Abolition Struggles and Opposition Movements

Summary

Bringing the transatlantic slave trade to an end required enormous efforts on the part of all concerned and on both sides of the Atlantic. There had always been opposition to the trade in Africa, Europe and the Americas, but this was not sufficiently well organized or determined to defeat the slavers until the beginning of the 18th century.

Though the Africans themselves had set opposition to the trade in motion, this opposition later spreading to all parts of the world that witnessed its horrors. It was the governments of Europe and the Americas that finally ended the trade, first declaring it illegal and then patrolling the seas to enforce anti-slaving laws. However, special mention should be made of the fact that some African states also made efforts to outlaw the trade in their jurisdictions, and that it was the post-revolutionary black government of Haiti that first outlawed the slave trade.