

Dennis Beesley

US Colloquium I Final Exam – Answering Question Number 8

Speechless: Slavery in American Historiography

The history of slavery has undergone significant changes over the last century of scholarship. Countless studies, however, demonstrate the weakness in writing about slavery in general terms. From Ulrich B. Philip's *American Negro Slavery* in 1918 to Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944, scholars have made claims regarding slavery that assume universal significance. Since Williams there have been many scholars who have contributed to the history of slavery, though few who have altered our perception in ways reminding us of the particularities of history. Stanley Elkins, Edmund S. Morgan, Kathleen Brown and Ira Berlin are four scholars who have transformed slavery's historiography most significantly since Eric Williams' profound work. However, while these works play important roles in the way slavery has been studied, it is in Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone*, published in 1998, that we may find the key to understanding how these studies can best continue to influence the direction of our scholarship. In this groundbreaking work, Berlin introduces the study of slavery into spatial considerations of both geography and time to show how "societies with slaves" became "slave societies" and vice versa in different times and places around the larger Atlantic World. Berlin was not the first to study the varying particularities of slavery, but his work spotlights this importance. Thus, when revisiting the work of Elkins, Morgan, and Brown, it is imperative that scholars recognize the particular and varying features that may remove the universalizing influence of their work while maintaining their scholarly importance.

In *Slavery: A Problem in Institutional Life*, published in 1959, Elkins responded to the general historiography set by Ulrich B. Phillips that places slavery into a paternal relationship that separated slaves from a degraded Africa and gave them a more blissful life in America. Phillips was a Southern apologist who sought to picture the lives of slaves as one that maintained a degree of autonomy and offered better opportunities than they could have experienced in the backward lands of Africa. This historiography was generally accepted, despite the challenges of such figures as W.E.B. Du Bois who wished to open our understanding of how difficult life was for slaves. Du Bois accepted the notion that slaves were able to build their own lives and culture, though he differed from Phillips in the picture of slaves as accepting their lot in life. Elkins, however, completely transformed the debate on its head when he wrote of the institutionalizing effect of slavery. He argued that whites were able to strengthen their own power over slavery because America lacked the institutional structures that could have fought against it. Even abolitionists failed to build strong enough coalitions in their desire to end slavery. According to Elkins, it was in the institutional strength of slavery that slaves lost their autonomy and were unable to live life with any degree of joy. Their African culture was obliterated, much in the way Phillips had argued, though this was no longer seen as a positive result of slavery. To illustrate what life was like for the slave Elkins interviewed survivors from Nazi Concentration Camps and made comparisons between them. He argued that slaves became like children, "Sambos," because they had no other choice. Finally, Elkins denied that race had anything to do with slavery; it was pure economics. This idea mirrored Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, though it opened the doors to scholars who began looking at race in the application of African slavery.

Elkins' book is perhaps one of the most influential histories of slavery, not because of any particular accuracy in his work but due to the backlash it provoked. Throughout the 1960's

and 1970's, historians took on Elkins' theses, particularly the void of a slave or African culture, and began examining different aspects of slave life. Albert Raboteau, for instance, studied slave religion which he called an "invisible institution." He saw how slaves looked for some degree of acceptance among whites in their entrance into Christianity. While Raboteau was responding to Elkins' thesis of social death, some scholars chided what seemed to be his agreement with Elkins in that no aspects of African culture were discussed in his study of slave religion. Some scholars looked at slave women to understand how slavery affected gender, while others looked to uncover whether certain African cultural elements survived in American slave culture. One such scholar, John Thornton studied the Stono Rebellion and showed how certain aspects and knowledge of Angolan warfare aided the slaves who participated in that uprising. No history after 1960 was able to discuss slavery or the lives of slaves without considering the arguments of Elkins. Unfortunately, any attempt to support or challenge particularities in Elkins' work often assumed its own universal significance. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*, for instance, was exceptional in providing rich detail of slave culture, though the slaves in his narrative (much like those in others) remained a part of the entire slave community rather than being given their own particular voices.

Another of the most significant works on slavery in the latter half of the twentieth century is Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, published in 1978. In this innovative work, Morgan attempts to answer the paradox wherein slavery and liberty simultaneously emerged and institutionalized in American history. His conclusions were remarkable in that Morgan claimed that the institution of slavery allowed for liberty to materialize and flourish in the white community. Drawing upon sources in colonial Virginia, Morgan demonstrated how slavery was strengthened as an institution to benefit those whites that

were able to harness their own individual autonomy. To move out of social bondage, whites who had not been elites were able to purchase not only land but slaves to aid in their agricultural pursuits. Not every white purchased slaves, but by strengthening the need for slaves the older practice of indentured servitude dwindled and became unnecessary. Thus, slavery and liberty did not simply grow independent of each other but were mutually strengthened and dependent on their opposite.

Like Elkins' book, *American Slavery, American Freedom* opened the doors to scores of scholars addressing this paradox. Most notably, American intellectual and political historians were forced to confront the contribution of slavery in the making of the nation. His book even aided the way histories could analyze more deeply the contribution of individual slaves themselves. Gary Nash, for instance, wrote *The Forgotten Fifth* to show how significant African Americans were in the Revolutionary struggle. Morgan also furthered discussions (which had already begun as a result of Elkins' book) of the role of race in the choosing of Africans as slaves. These in turn led to studies of whiteness by scholars like David Roediger. Many of these theories are not tied directly to Morgan's work, though his theories opened the way for addressing how ideas of slavery and blackness were used to further the upward social mobility of whites and those considered less-than-white (like Irish immigrants in Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*). However, also like Elkins' book, scholars applied Morgan's work to slavery as a whole, even though the subtitle to his book points directly to colonial Virginia. Surely the growth of liberty or even capitalism itself was not uniform in every time and place of colonial America.

Another significant work centered on Virginia was Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, Anxious Patriarchs*, published in 1996. It has already been mentioned that scholars began looking at gender and women in slave culture following Elkins' book. Brown's book,

however, placed race and gender as the central features of white, male power in colonial Virginia. Seeing both race and gender as social constructions, Brown no longer separated them as independently constructed but showed how race and gender both influenced each other. Race was constructed hierarchically in that blacks were seen as inferior to whites, thus substantiating the practice of slavery. Likewise, according to Brown, gender was modeled after the hierarchy of race, thus that women were seen as inferior to men, whether they acted in their proper role as “good wives” or their less-than-proper role as “nasty wenches.” These constructions of race and gender were strengthened because of “anxious patriarchs” who desired to maintain control over all of their affairs. While Brown’s work has been one of the most significant histories combining slavery with the constructions of race and gender, her work also challenged prior assumptions regarding slave women. With both their race and gender denigrated to an inferior status, slave women were thus placed in a position far below any condition of an assumed “matriarchal” role.

While Brown was not the first to address gender or race, her work revolutionized studies both of slavery and gender by bringing them together. Scholars studying either race or gender today can hardly do so without considering the other. In *Saltwater Slavery*, for instance, Stephanie Smallwood focuses not only on the social death of slaves as people, but on how women and men were diversely affected in the middle passage. Of course, Brown’s book, with its post-structural influence already assumes general applicability in that any application or idea of race or gender can be seen as constructed. However, the connection between race and gender does not have to be universal. It is necessary to see Brown’s study as one that looks at the particularities of race and gender in Virginia, rather than America as a whole, for surely similar gender ideas were constructed in areas without slaves. Likewise, knowing that “societies with

slaves” were profoundly different from “slave societies,” scholars can now examine more closely how gender roles may have differed under these different systems.

When examining Berlin’s *Many Thousands Gone*, it is likewise necessary that we recognize his study as a focus on the particular. In this book, as well as his later *Generations of Captivity*, Berlin outlined the difference between “societies with slaves” and “slave societies.” While these characterizations of slavery are important, they should not be assumed as universal in and of themselves. Berlin effectively illustrated how such societies could revert between each other in that the autonomy of slaves could even change within a single location over a period of time. Also, he placed the study of slavery into the broader Atlantic World by showing how different geographies operated independently but also influenced each other. The danger in placing this work into the Atlantic World, however, is that scholars can be tempted to study slavery in the Atlantic as having universal effects. Recently, for instance, Smallwood wrote in *Saltwater Slavery* how the “middle passage” was so brutal that it essentially annihilated any possible social life that could be had by slaves. With books like this, published as recently as 2007, we are reminded of the power of “social death” outlined in Elkins’ earlier work. While significant scholarship has provided examples where African ethnic influences can clearly be traced in some slave societies (or societies with slaves, as the case may be) scholars are still tempted to generalize their findings. No doubt the experiences of slaves in Smallwood’s work added to the possibility of social death amongst certain individual slaves, but even social death does not need to mean the complete annihilation of any African influence, as shown in Vincent Brown’s *The Reaper’s Garden*, which likewise pointed to the importance of death in the Atlantic world. What we learn in Berlin’s *Many Thousands Gone*, is that slave history should be about those thousands of slaves rather than the general idea of slavery itself. By recognizing that within

studies of slavery there existed slaves, and that these were people living in different times and places with varying backgrounds, feelings, and knowledge, scholars will be able to uncover their voices. Until the history of slavery becomes the history of slaves, therefore, we are in danger of perpetuating the history of slaves as speechless.