Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c.900–1900

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Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c.900–1900

Forms of Unfreedom at the Intersection between Christianity and Islam

Edited by

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Preface

Ehud R. Toledano

Each and every snowflake is unique, no one is like the other, no two ones have exactly the same shape, goes a famous cliché, and the analogy to humans is obviously implied. Whether this is scientifically or socially true or not, professional historians are snowflakes people. We are trained to look for human specificity, talk about the uniqueness of societies and the inimitability of the human experience, which forever is bound to a specific time and space. To historians of enslavement, enslaved individuals and enslaving societies each developed in their own circumstances, each having their own unique characteristics. What it meant to be a slave in ancient Greece or Rome, and what it was like to legally be "owned" in the Atlantic world during the 19th century is almost by definition, maybe even by nature, fundamentally different.

This was so until the incorporation of historical studies into the framework of the social sciences as the 20th century reformulated our notions of how to write history, a process that happened in the United States first, and then followed through in Europe. Inter alia, that process raised several key questions: who do we write for? what is the purpose of writing history? how is history relevant to the historian's time? and, can history be "useful", or should it be? From my perspective, writing the history of enslavement has to convey a clear message about the sinister nature of human bondage and the need to fight against it – today as in the past. Although in our post-emancipation age legal slavery has been abolished, trafficking in humans, especially women, and the abuse of children, persist in many parts of the globe, and tens of millions are being deprived of their freedom and basic human rights. Hence, we cannot escape the question: what kept enslavement alive in societies across the world and at all times, from antiquity to this very day?

Yes, of course, there were significant differences between the way slavery was practised in enslaving societies, but the understanding of the core phenomenon of individuals and groups who continued to own other humans, through law or practice, remains elusive. Twenty years ago, in Tokyo, I suggested that there was something in human nature that made that possible. Although from the 19th century on, value systems have come to reject enslavement as an acceptable option, it took lengthy and hard-fought battles to end slavery and suppress the slave trade. In the Atlantic world it happened less than two centuries ago, in other parts of the world only some sixty to seventy years ago. Whichever way we count the years, people had enslaved other people for

millennia, while most of humanity has enjoyed various degrees of individual freedom for only a couple of centuries, a striking indictment of human nature by modern and contemporary standards. But why did humans succumb to their lamentably deficient nature? The simple answer is – because they could, and because the moral checks on their natural inclinations failed.

Modern historians of slavery have tried for more than a century to find out what were the actual realities in which enslaved people and their enslavers lived, and how the mechanisms enforcing unfreedom operated in historical societies around the world. It is in the first decades of trying to establish these basics that they diverged, having been absorbed by the peculiarities of the enslaving societies they were studying. Martin Klein observes that "as historians become increasingly specialized and amass more and more data on narrower specialties, it becomes harder to generalize. Few of us have the breadth to compare. Some do so in the classroom, but are cautious on the printed page."[1] In short, they have in fact become snowflakes historians. But within few decades, it became clear to most of them, especially from the 1950s on, that a great deal could be gained by actually going beyond focused, specific case studies and begin comparing slaveries. Rather than stressing how different bondage was in each particular neck of the woods, comparative work began to explore larger sections of the forest. Arguably, the earliest attempts to compare occurred within the discourse about the Atlantic world, between the US, Brazil, and the Caribbean.

This was generated by scholarly cooperation among historians working on Brazil and Cuba who came to study and teach in North America, and to a lesser extent vice versa. Such comparative work proved highly beneficial to both, but for decades their gaze ignored the rest of the world, and to a large extent covered only the early modern and modern eras. But it was not before the 2010s that efforts to look at slavery as a global phenomenon have come together to produce the two volumes of the *Cambridge World History of Slavery* (*CWHS*): volume 3 was published in 2011, and volume 4 in 2016. Historians of slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world have gradually come to identify the advantage in comparing their work with and drawing insights from what was being done on enslavement in the Indian Ocean, western Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean (ancient and modern). The first attempts tended to stress the differences, but ultimately that undertaking ushered in the third, global cycle of enslavement studies. We are now in the stimulating and inspiring phase in

1 Martin Klein, "Global Slavery", Review Article, *Journal of Global Slavery*, 1 (2016), 325–340, especially the section "History of Slavery as World History", 331–334 (quote at 331).

which we respectfully acknowledge the snowflakes, but also realize the need to make a snowball.[2]

The volume before us is a reflection of the distance we have travelled, though it is only a first step in the much-needed inclusion of that important region into the conversation about global enslavement. As can only be expected at such a stage, the contributions presented here are a mixture of snowflakes and some snowballs. Felicia Roșu, whose vision and broad scholarly perspective have put together the conference on which this volume is based, mentions the "bewildering diversity" of the various forms of enslavement that were practised in the Black Sea basin and argues that it "challenges the theoretical models developed so far and encourages new perspectives on global slavery". Thus, while recognizing the challenges, the current project deliberately chooses to push forward the new opportunities to develop a global perspective that might enrich the arsenal of insights that historians can gain from. Roșu rightly identifies the "complex systems of unfreedom" in Ottoman and other Muslim-majority societies as having been thus far "insufficiently integrated into the broader discussion on slavery as a global phenomenon".[3] I would add the potential enveloped also in the study of bondage in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and South East Asia to those already mentioned here.

Hence, the contribution offered by this volume is twofold. First, to open a conversation about the intricate forms of enslavement in the regions that stretched along the Black Sea, as over and across its waters, while at the same time adopting a language that makes these accessible to scholars working on other regions and searching a global perspective. At the same time, however, we do have here the beginnings – modest and hesitant as they may be – of opening up to the benefits of learning from other enslaving societies and other periods of time. The key to expanding the conversation is language: social scientists, including historians, who work on forms of legally grounded unfreedom – and lately on practice-bound contemporary slavery – use a similar language derived from social science theory. In order to enable a mutually beneficial dialogue between snowflake empiricists and snowball historians, it is essential that we speak and write the same language. That language has emerged from the older and later attempts to construct models of enslavement that seek convergences *without* ignoring divergences. As Joseph C. Miller has observed, the field of slavery studies is "increasingly truly global in range and

2 I am here echoing T. R. Darling's line: "Every snowflake is special, until you need to make a snowball", in her *Quiet Pine Trees* (London: Unbound, 2018).

3 Felicia Roșu, Introduction, this volume, p. 5.

framed historically".[4] So, while snowflakes must be respected, to me at least, snowballs generate all the fun and play.

But let us carry the metaphor one step forward. To be effective in hitting the target, snowballs need to be small enough to fit into the palm, they need to be tight so that they do not fall apart while being thrown, and they must be clearly seen as made up of actual snowflakes. In other words, for any model or framework for understanding global enslavement to work for historians we need to keep it simple, clear, minimal, without jargon-laden intricacies or papered-over, overstretched concepts. Otherwise, those efforts will remain unused and uninspiring: they will be dumped into the dustbin of historical studies. Abstractions are fine, but they cannot be obfuscated and removed from empirical realities; rather, they must be intelligible, and easy to use and be applied to historical data.

One point I hope may enjoy broad consensus is that we need to move away from devoting additional energy to *definitions* of slavery. It is true that we need to agree about what constituted enslavement in different societies around the globe if we want to have some common ground to work from. However, we need also to understand that essentialist definitions are useless and easily diverge and break up when examined in light of specific historical realities. The concept we formulate about slavery has to be modular and flexible; it cannot be rigid and positivist. We also have to recognize that there is a hierarchy of historical explanations, ranging from "strong" to "soft", and that the definitions we can work with will have to be internally differentiated and graded, with a small and hard core tapering off towards a larger and softer periphery: there will be no binaries, but more continuums. As we modulate our notions of what effective definitions of slavery should look like, few variables will populate the core, and more variables will inhabit the diluted margins. While this notion may seem complex, the actual product, yet again, has to be simple, clear, and useable.

At the same time, no single-cause framework is likely to appeal to historians, who by training are programmed to prefer multi-causalities, or combinations of several elements that together created and sustained global slavery. Political economy people would push market explanations and the role of capitalism for plantation economies (commercialized agriculture), while social historians would argue that where enslaved people had a limited economic role, socio-cultural factors and network analysis would help us to better understand slaving. Nonetheless, for global enslavement we need to combine

4 Joseph C. Miller, "Appreciation and Response: Historical Paths Forward from Here", *Journal of Global Slavery*, 2 (2017), 337.

all approaches in order to get a fuller and more rounded story. To illustrate this point, I arbitrarily chose three recently proposed interpretative frameworks: Noel Lansky's *Intensification*, Kostas Vlassopoulos's *Contexts, Strategies and Dialectics* of global slavery (for want of a catchier term), and *Slaving Zones* by Jeff Fynn-Paul.[5] Lenski's and Vlassopoulos' are, to my mind, too complex and too hard to apply, whereas the Fynn-Paul model better fits the bill for appeal to historians.

Lenski's model requires a great deal of data collection, data that for many historical societies simply do not exist or are not that reliable. He honestly admits that much, however, when writing that the integers used in his charts "represent estimates based on my personal knowledge of both slave systems [Ancient Rome and the Old South, ERT] … One could, however, derive data-driven metrics based on quantitative values that would offer greater precision."[6] While I think the Intensification Model improves our ability to compare enslaving societies globally, it might very well overtax the ability of most historians to deliver on this tall order, certainly for most societies, perhaps with the exception of modern ones, such as the US South, Brazil, the Caribbean, and maybe China or Russia. Even for the well-documented Ottoman Empire, I doubt that evidence can be extracted to support the integers that Intensification requires. And again, as I wrote elsewhere, even by Lenski's own admission, Intensification "keep[s] alive the spirit of Moses Finley's inquiry", while "alter[ing] his terms for the debate", this despite the demolition job Lenski did on Finley's model, as did others, including Kostas Vlassopoulos.[7]

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5 Noel Lenski, "Framing the Question: What Is a Slave Society?", in *What Is a Slave Society?*, ed. Noel Lenski and Catherine M. Cameron (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 52–57; Kostas Vlassopoulos, "Does Slavery Have a History?: The Consequences of a Global Approach", *Journal of Global Slavery*, 1, no. 1 (2016): 12–14; and Jeff Fynn-Paul, "Introduction", in *Slaving Zones: Cultural Identities, Ideologies, and Institutions in the Evolution of Global Slavery*, ed. Jeff Fynn-Paul and Damian Alan Pargas (Leiden, 2018), pp. 1–19. Except for Vlassopoulos' ideas, I have discussed the other two, plus a host of other past and recent models, in "Models of Global Enslavement", in *Slaves and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Stephan Conermann and Gül Şen (Göttingen, 2020 in press). For my thoughts about the older and famous Patterson's framework, see "Ottoman Elite Enslavement and 'Social Death'", in *After 'Slavery and Social Death'*, ed. John Bodel and Walter Scheidel (Oxford, 2017), pp. 136–150.

6 Lenski, "Framing the Question", p. 53.

7 See my "Ottoman and Islamic Societies: Were They 'Slave Societies'?", in *What Is A Slave Society?*, ed. Noel Lenski and Catherine M. Cameron (Cambridge, 2018), p. 364 (the quote from Lenski is from Lenski, "Framing the Question", p. 57). Vlassopoulos writes that "The distinction between slave societies and societies with slaves might be a useful shorthand for certain tasks, but ultimately it is too bland a tool of analysis" (Vlassopoulos, "Does Slavery Have a History?", 10).

Vlassopoulos' efforts aim at abandoning social science theory in favor of natural science methodologies. "[W]e need to shed the ahistorical conceptual and methodological apparatus we have inherited from social science", he writes, suggesting that in pursuing the study of global slavery, we should explore "how other historical disciplines, like biology, geology and paleontology, approach variation, change and narrative globally".[8] The problem with this approach is that it assumes social science theory is not historically-driven, which is patently wrong for most work done in sociology, anthropology, psychology, geography, or demography. All the models I know in social science are based on historical studies and have served comparative and global historians well without necessarily pushing them to essentialize slavery or any other major social phenomenon. There is of course nothing objectionable in looking for methods or borrowing metaphors from biology or geology, but we need not expect them to offer us more than what they can, namely ideas for looking at universals; after all, and perhaps before everything, enslavement is profoundly and intensely a human phenomenon, not any nature-driven "set of practices".[9]

In my view, of the three frameworks briefly referred to in this Preface, Fynn-Paul's Slaving Zones model offers the most suitable ideas for looking historically at global enslavement. Slaving Zones, that is regions from which slaves could be captured or purchased, tended to be populated by non-monotheistic societies. Monotheistic societies, on the other hand, created "no-slaving zones", which were theoretically, and often practically, off limits to slaving. In addition, some societies were internally fractured, allowing the enslavement of weaker groups even within societies that were considered no-slaving zones. Thus, fractures can exist even within a given society, when some groups, such as criminals, or the poor, or people of a certain race, creed, or ethnicity might be legitimate slave targets, while others are off limits. While agreeing with Fynn-Paul's assertion that identity and ideology play[ed] key roles in determining the actual boundaries of slaving zones,[10] I would take exception to placing these above political and economic factors. As already stated above,

8 Vlassopoulos, "Does Slavery Have a History?", 27.

9 This is not the place for a more detailed critique of Vlassopoulos' framework for studying global slavery, which I hope to offer elsewhere.

10 Jeff Fynn-Paul, "Introduction", 1–8; Jeff Fynn-Paul, "Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era", *Past and Present* 205, no. 1 (2009), 3–40, here 8. Accordingly, Felicia Roșu rightly observes that "the northern shore of the Black Sea – sometimes far into the mainland – may be safely considered the main slaving zone in the region: throughout the entire period covered in this volume, that was where the majority of the slaves were captured" (see Roșu, Introduction, this volume, p. 10).

privileging one factor above others is likely to defeat an effective understanding of global enslavement.

A temporary middle-of-the-road approach between snowflakes and snowballs might also exist in our efforts to better understand the human phenomenon of slavery. Some of the authors in this volume would prefer a *comparative* to a *global* approach. Comparative seems less threatening to historians, perhaps also more manageable. The obvious choice in such a direction would be regional comparative studies, such that take the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, North Africa, or the Levant, and interrogate the similarities and differences within such regions. If larger units are considered, such as the Ottoman Empire, greater diversity is revealed in terms of geography, climate, ecology, and the social organization and culture impacted by them, but one would also need to define the framing itself – why is the Ottoman Empire a suitable unit of study for investigating enslavement? Still, even large political units such as empires were never really isolated from the regions that surrounded them, and we know that boundaries were often ill-defined and porous, with frontiers serving as spaces for frequent and dynamic interactions, including for slaving raids and trafficking.

The Black Sea was, in that sense, a true crossroads where different social systems and their enslaving practices intersected and influenced each other, constantly learning and unlearning how to maximize the exploitation of the enslaved and the profit to the enslavers. So, while scholars attempt to fathom those transregional socio-cultural inseminations, raising our gaze towards the global perspective is the obvious next project. If a society- and region-specific examination of enslavement stresses nuances and sings the praise of peculiarities, then a global approach – by and large – tries to work with basic commonalities, looking for what elements were present in almost all relationships between enslavers and enslaved humans. Reductionism is a major pitfall that must be avoided here; that is, putting forth a hollow structure which is at once banal and uninsightful. Instead, globalists should aim at offering localists effective tools to enrich their explanations of enslavement in particular societies and regions. The most promising path, in my view, is a "glocal" approach, where both "sides" build on the work of each other and even collaborate in specific projects.

To avoid essentialism and enable a dynamic review, it seems to me that we need to privilege a synchronic over a diachronic examination of slaving systems. This would make it possible to formulate a global *problematique* of enslavement in "era segments" rather than in a chronological stretch from antiquity to modernity. We need to agree that while the flow of human history is one and uninterrupted, there were and still are well-recognized ruptures

that changed the course and nature of the stream. In that regard, this volume opens a millennial time span that is arguably too long for a reasonably successful comparative project of enslavement history. At the same time, it is possible to assert that by including the transition from Mamluks to Ottomans, as from Safavids to Qajars, for example, we actually get a chance to examine an important transition period in the annals of bondage and unfreedom. In any event, a most effective periodization should be one that derives from the history of enslavement itself. Changes of that kind were induced by technological developments that altered the capacity to enslave people (as the introduction of firearms) and transport them to enslaving destinations (as the use of steam ships), or those that came with the shifting discourse on liberty and human rights, which accessed the option of antislavery print culture and enabled abolition movements.

All societies are based on imagined hierarchies, which are not necessarily the same. Even when we account for the differences, we are still left with the fact that all social hierarchies contained a special group of individuals who were – one way or another – enslaved. In contrast to other animal worlds, human social hierarchies and statuses are not natural and are not inscribed in their heritable DNA, but are rather socio-culturally determined and have to be reproduced from generation to generation. The quality of human nature that enables the enslavement of other humans is a learned property. How and through what mechanisms it was reproduced and sustained over the millennia must be part of the conversation about global slavery. Social hierarchy in itself is normative, but the ownership of other humans has to involve a process of othering, objectification, dehumanization, and category assimilation to domesticated (farm) animals; from early Sapiens societies on, enslaved people were not considered as fully human. That enabled extreme – though rarely total – domination, violence, coercion, physical and sexual exploitation, and unfreedom. Yet, for the enslaver to be able to extract labour and services, the enslaved had to be kept alive and exploitable, physically and emotionally.

The "imagined order" that organizes human lives is based on "belief in shared myths" and populated by constructs that are as real as the sense-observable world around them. That order of things, to use Clifford Geertz's words about elites and social centers, confers upon itself an "aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built".[11] Enslavement was "burnt" into that order from very early on, as human interaction made communities the only option for survival. Although not biological, unlike the hierarchy of gender, the enslaver-enslaved binary was

11 Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power", in his *Local Knowledge* (New York, 1983), p. 124.

deeply entrenched and almost universal, even when we adopt a *continuum* model of it, as I have repeatedly advocated; within that, as Martin Klein correctly observes, the gender issue was global.[12] Not surprisingly, enslaved persons were removed from the ranks of humans and welded into the categories of livestock and inanimate objects, as *inventaires après décès* reveal in many cultures. It is therefore difficult to overestimate the dramatic transformation that for "the first and only time in history", societies gradually and voluntarily ended slavery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[13]

"For abolition to gain acceptance", writes Yuval Noah Harari, "abolitionists had to convince enslavers and the enslaved that the imagined order, which is an inter-subjective order shared by millions, must change and relinquish enslavement."[14] I would argue that understanding abolition and emancipation is a crucial component of understanding global slavery. As we examine more carefully how societies traversed the moral twilight zone from unfreedom to freedom across the globe and throughout history, the differentiated nature of both enslavement and freedom is likely to reveal a great deal about the evolving nature of slavery among Sapiens. Thus, emancipation is one of the three focal points that are likely to emerge in the conversation about global slavery.

Another focal point is the role of microhistory in how the story will be told by historians. Zooming in to provide concrete evidence and zooming out to draw the big picture would help us gain at least a sense of control over a vast and complex *problematique*. Historians will have to overcome the seeming paradox of negotiating these two poles of interpretative technique – the macro and the micro – as we already witness the increasing use of microhistory in enslavement studies. Just as Michael Zeuske points out, "a fresh microhistorical view changes always, or almost always, global narratives."[15] And finally, the third focal point would take a fresh look at the *agency* of enslaved people, which is a direct outcome of microhistorical studies that examine the individual rather than the group, where much of the resistance work has thus far resided. All three points need elaboration and development both theoretically and empirically.

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12 Klein, "Global Slavery", 332.

13 This partly draws on Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London, 2011), pp. 117–122, 131, 158, 161.

14 Harari, *Sapiens*, p. 131. For my view on abolition and transition see, "Abolition and Anti-Slavery in the Ottoman Empire: A Case to Answer?", in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Mulligan and Maurice Bric (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 117–136, and "Enslavement and Freedom in Transition: MENA Societies from Empires to National States", *Journal of Global Slavery*, 2 (2017), 100–121.

15 Michael Zeuske, "Review of Noel Lenski and Catherine M. Cameron (eds.), *What Is a Slave Society?*", *Journal of Global Slavery*, 4 (2019), 278.

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