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Book Review by Allen C. Guelzo

## THE LOGIC OF LIBERTY

*The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, by David Brion Davis.  
Alfred A. Knopf, 448 pages, \$30



DAVID BRION DAVIS'S CAREER AS A historian can be said to have begun on the day in early June 1945 when he was drafted out of high school and, on the basis of a few high-school German classes, sent to Germany as a military policeman to participate in the sorting out of postwar Germany's rubble. It was not a high-profile role—hustling black-marketers, arresting minor criminals, rooting out from hiding the occasional low-level SS officer. What disturbed him much more was the appalling racism displayed by his fellow white soldiers toward black soldiers in what was then still a segregated U.S. Army—black soldiers packed like sardines into the bottom of a troopship, black soldiers shot by whites enraged to find them dancing with white German girls. He could not reconcile a war fought to prevent the assertion of Aryan racial dominance with the casual brutality of Americans asserting racial dominance over other Americans, and when he finally matriculated at Dartmouth in 1947, he hoped to find the answers to this lethal conundrum in the history of race in America. He did not get much of an explanation. The course he took on post-Civil War Reconstruction was “deeply racist in outlook,” and featured a “humorous picture of the Ku Klux Klan” as neighborhood peace-keepers. It was not until Davis arrived at Harvard for graduate work that he finally found someone who was willing to confirm his suspicions that race in America was seldom what it seemed. That was a visiting professor from the University of California, Kenneth Stampp, whose almost-finished book on *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956) would overturn the history of race in America.

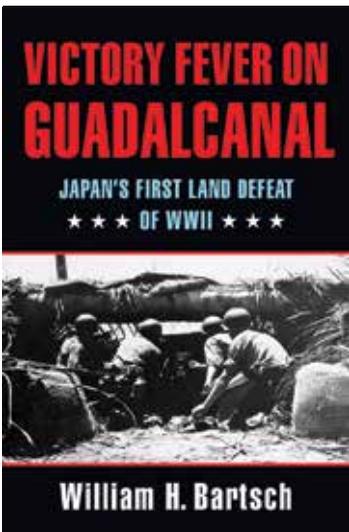
For a generation, the controlling view of America's racial past had been supplied by Ulrich Bonnell Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918). A Georgian and a graduate of the University of Georgia, Phillips was deeply influenced by the dean of Progressive historians, Frederick Jackson Turner, and wrote his Ph.D. dissertation in 1902 under another Progressive star, William Archibald Dunning of Columbia. Like the Progressives, Phillips spoke of the Civil War as a “calamity of misguided zeal and blundering” made worse by the Radical Republicans' attempt to impose a Northern capitalist ideology on the South. Phillips was not an apologist for the Confederacy or for slavery, but he did see the plantation South as a sunny, pre-modern patriarchal society that had been victimized by Northern economic imperialism (which he stigmatized as “the Republican programme of negro incitement”). What elevated Phillips above a mere “Lost Cause” apologist for the Old South was the meticulous research he did in Southern plantation records. (Phillips's two-volume collection, *Plantation and Frontier Documents: 1649–1863* [1909] is still a rich source of plantation accounts, slave sales, and diaries.) His command of the sources allowed him to assert beyond much challenge that slavery had been unprofitable, harmless, moribund, and “borne with light-heartedness, submission and affection by a huge number of the blacks.”

KENNETH STAMPP, BY CONTRAST, WAS raised to revere Eugene Debs, cast his first vote for Norman Thomas, and flirted briefly in the 1930s and '40s with the Communist Party before turning into an academic historian. After writing his first book, *And the War Came: The North and the Secession*

*Crisis, 1860–1861* (1950), Stampp focused his energies on the institution which had made the war come—slavery—only to collide with the smothering influence of Phillips. In a 1952 article in the *American Historical Review*, and then in full-dress fashion in *The Peculiar Institution*, Stampp assaulted Phillips's portrayal of slavery as a benign and benevolent institution. Far from it, slavery was “a thoroughly cruel and brutal system of social control...a systematic method of controlling and exploiting labor” and “the most bestial regime that has tarnished America.” Forget submission and affection. Slaves retaliated, ran away, staged work sabotage; and slaveowners beat, raped, and murdered their slaves. Moreover, the Reconstruction that followed slavery's demise in 1865 was no disastrous interlude imposed by Northern interlopers. In *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (1965), he argued that Reconstruction was an early version of the civil rights movement, and deserved to be seen as a noble but doomed effort to achieve racial justice.

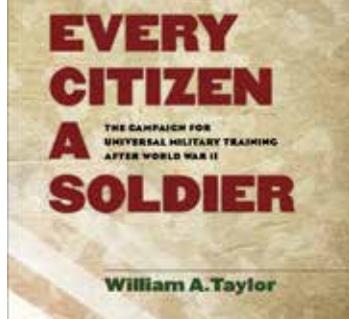
Stampp's work unleashed a tide of rewrites of the history of slavery, and his example was followed by some of the most notable historians of the last generation—Eugene Genovese, Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, Stanley Elkins, and, most honored of them all, David Brion Davis.

Davis taught briefly at his Dartmouth *alma mater*, then at Cornell until 1970, and then as the Sterling Professor of History at Yale until his retirement in 2001. His published work has had few of the political overtones implicit in Eugene Genovese (with his echoes of Antonio Gramsci) or the “cliometric” preoccupation with economic productivity that shaped Fogel and Engerman's *Time on the Cross: The*



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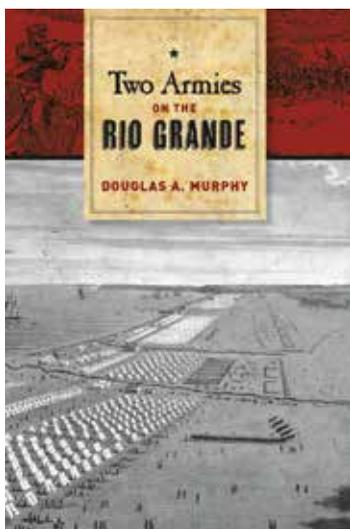
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*Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974). Davis's undergraduate major at Dartmouth had been philosophy rather than politics or economics (or history, for that matter), and his curiosity about slavery was distinguished from other historians' by his interest in how the institution had come to be defined. His first major book on slavery, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966), was, in effect, an intellectual history, tracing "patterns of continuity" in human bondage from the ancient world, through the medieval and early modern eras, to the startling emergence of anti-slavery thought in the 18th century. *Startling*, because in many senses slavery had been for so long understood as simply one aspect of the human condition that the appearance of a determined and organized critique of slaveholding was itself remarkable. But Davis had still more surprises up his sleeve, since he severely discounted the self-congratulatory role that secularism and modernism might have claimed to play in the unfolding of anti-slavery movements in the West. "[T]he traditional justifications for slavery had survived the scrutiny of Humanists and seventeenth-century rationalists," Davis wrote. "Famous philosophers had shown that a defense of slavery could be reconciled with belief in abstract natural law and natural rights." Instead, the roots of anti-slavery were planted in the soil of Christianity, which equated slavery with bondage to sin, and therefore considered slavery as a blight from which one should seek escape. Only with the arrival of Lockean natural law philosophy did the Enlightenment finally produce a secular natural rights version of anti-slavery, and even then it was mottled with pseudo-scientific "theories of racial inferiority."

**T**HE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY WON A PULITZER Prize in 1967, and Davis continued to explore the thread of slavery's philosophy in two subsequent studies, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975) and *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (2006). From all three, he created a picture of the nature and destruction of slavery in the New World based on four basic propositions:

• Slavery's foundation rested on *dehumanization*, and was modeled on the domestication, sale (or transfer), and coercion of animals. In ages when the only form of power was human or animal muscle, the need for large-scale labor could only be satisfied by treating that muscle uniformly as *animal*. Hence, the slave became *animalized*, and the mark of the slave was his "animalistic inferiority" "regardless of origin or ethnicity."

• Slavery had been a constant factor in human civilization since Sumer; but slavery since the 14th century in the West had taken on the additional factor of identification with race. By the time Columbus launched his first voyage in 1492, Portuguese adventurers along the western African coast were already buying blacks as slaves and translating their blackness into the criterion of dehumanization and enslavement.

• The development of New World societies was heavily, almost exclusively, dependent on slave labor. "In retrospect," wrote Davis, "it appears that the entire New World enterprise depended on the enormous and expandable flow of slave labor from Africa."

• The elimination of slavery resulted from a revolution in the moral imagination of the West, something Davis described as "a major transformation in moral perception" on the part of Europeans and Americans "who were willing to condemn an institution that had been sanctioned for thousands of years."

**T**HESE WERE NOT UNCONTROVERSIAL positions. In 1959, Stanley Elkins (in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*) proposed treating slavery as a fundamentally psychological problem. This was the heyday of Erich Fromm and William Whyte, of *The Organization Man* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and it was no great leap for Elkins to frame slavery in a similar psychological box. The slave, argued Elkins, was a psychological casualty of a totalizing system similar to the regime experienced by inmates of the Nazi concentration camps; slavery rested on a process Elkins called *infantilization*, which broke down resistance to the system and smothered rebellion. The model it produced was Sambo, the compliant slave who embraced the plantation regime and was reduced to the behavioral patterns of children. This explained, for one thing, why Phillips found slaves to be so submissive; not because slavery was so likable but because it was so terrifyingly violent. Infantilization also explained why there had never been any large-scale slave revolts in the American South, and how large populations of slaves in the Deep South could be controlled by such comparatively few white handlers.

Infantilization, however, was swiftly denounced for suggesting that blacks had been helpless cooperators in their own degradation. In a decade struggling to restore black civil equality in the Jim Crow South, infantilization sounded almost like a racial slur. Both John Blassingame, in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972),

and Herbert Gutman, in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), angrily replied that slaves had managed to create far more autonomy within the system than Elkins recognized, and were far more skilled than mere Sambos at using evasion and sabotage as mechanisms to earn respect and praise among fellow slaves. Then, in 1982, the Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson offered an alluring alternative to Elkins's infantilization thesis in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) by substituting the concept of *dishonor* as the basis of slavery. "[S]lavery," wrote Patterson, "is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons." Dishonor meant that the slave was not only legally dead (since the master acquires the entirety of the slave's life), but that the master is not obliged to recognize any form of a slave's social existence, whether slave families, marriages, or property ownership, and rests all of his control of the slave on direct coercion. The slave is, in effect, merely an extension of the master's hand, and exists only through the will of the master.

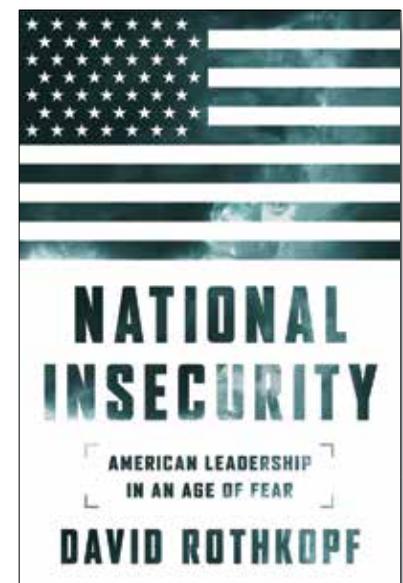
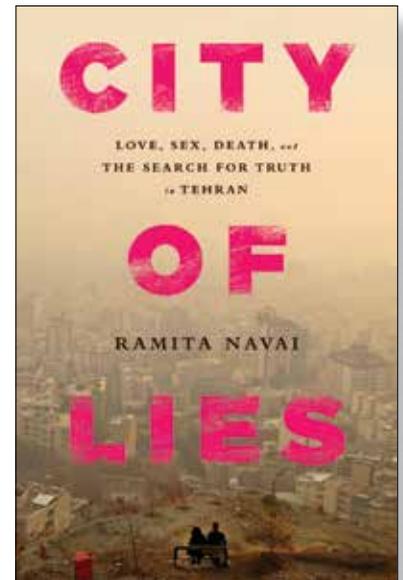
**A** FAR LESS COMPLICATED CRITICISM OF Elkins came from Marxist historians, who had no use for psychological babble when slavery seemed to them much more clearly a matter of pure class struggle. The pioneer of the Marxist historiography of slavery was W.E.B. Du Bois, whose despairing turn to Marxism in the 1930s led him to cast the history of slavery as the oppression of a racial proletariat. Du Bois was seconded by Left historians who, in the depths of the Depression, discovered that African Americans could become a fertile recruiting field for the Popular Front. Melville Herskovits, in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), pictured slaves as proto-revolutionaries, using shirking, destruction of tools, stealing, and slowdowns as means for crippling plantation capitalism, while Herbert Aptheker, in *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), elevated Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner into the equivalent of full-scale slave revolutionaries. Nor did the Marxists have much use for the idea that slavery was killed by moral indignation. Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), dismissed abolition as a sort of moral soufflé, indulged in by capitalists because slavery was, by the middle of the 19th century, no longer profitable. It was the "defection of the capitalists from the ranks of the slaveowners and slave traders" which doomed slavery, not moral posturing. "The rise and fall of mercantilism is the rise and fall of slavery." Although Williams was writing about the end of slavery in the British West Indies, the lesson was not entirely without application to the American environment. As James Oakes would write in *The Ruling Race: A History of*

*American Slaveholders* (1982), slaveowners in the American South were a class of acquisitive entrepreneurs whose chief goal was accumulating land and sufficient slaves to work it. What killed slavery in America was a "revolutionary crisis" in the form of the Civil War, which disrupted the ability of the plantation ruling class to dominate in the old way.

**T**HE SIREN SONG OF THE MARXISTS, however, has held little interest for David Brion Davis. In the latest installment of his now half-century-long survey of the ideology of slavery, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, Davis remains skeptical of explaining either slavery or emancipation in Marxist, economic, or psychological terms. The dehumanization thesis remains central to his understanding of slavery, even if it is (as Davis acknowledges) a distant kin of Elkins's infantilization. What distinguishes *dehumanization* from *infantilization* is that it is a description of the attitude of the masters, and avoids Elkins's imputation that slaves somehow incorporated their ignominy into their identity. "[T]he view that slaves were essentially children was often a variant on the animal metaphor" and was "clearly the goal of numerous slaveholders," but that did not mean that "slaves significantly internalized" it. Dehumanization, moreover, was a game many could play: Muslim slavemasters in 14th-century Tunisia and 18th-century *philosophes* (including Voltaire, Kant, and Hume) deployed the same vocabulary of animalization and childishness to describe slaves, with a fine disregard for anything which resembled Marxist ideas of class. Nor does Davis vary at all from his fundamental contention that abolition was a moral movement. He is polite but frank in his rejection of another Marxist conceit still on the upswing in popularity, the idea of slave self-emancipation—that the slaves of the Confederate South emancipated themselves by running away, by various forms of labor resistance, and by pressuring the Lincoln Administration finally to issue an emancipation proclamation which placed slavery's destruction at the center of the Civil War's aims—and gently dismisses Steven Hahn's description of the Civil War as "the greatest slave rebellion." A good deal of the enthusiasm for the "self-emancipation thesis" is a well-intentioned desire to promote black agency in the ending of slavery, and there was certainly plenty of that (as the 133 regiments of United States Colored Troops and the U.S. Navy's 25,000 black sailors demonstrated); some of it, however, harks back to Marx's insistence in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* that the working class had to be their own self-emancipators, without alliances with the bourgeoisie. Davis, however, has no such flattering unctio to dispense. Slavery died, Davis insists,

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by decapitation, from the head downwards, beginning with the Emancipation Proclamation and carried forward by the Union Army. Nothing less than the declaration of “legal freedom” by President Lincoln sufficed to ensure “true liberty” for the slaves; nothing less than the Union Army was needed as “an army of liberation, extending freedom—as John Brown had desired—into the South.”

**W**HAT DISTINGUISHES *THE PROBLEM of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* from Davis’s earlier work is the attention he pays to the phantom of colonization—the sugar-coating some abolitionists put on emancipation by promising that the end of slavery would be immediately followed by the deportation of the freed slaves somewhere else—to the Caribbean, to Liberia, even to the American West. Davis devotes nearly a hundred pages to examining various colonization projects, and he takes them more seriously than as mere strategies to make the end of slavery more palatable to white Americans. Colonization expressed both a fear and a hope, that “a dangerous population could be gradually drained away and that black missionaries could be enlisted to carry Christian civilization to Africa.” And it did manage to acquire African-American supporters—Paul Cuffe, Martin Delany, and Alexander Crummell—then, and later, if one regards Marcus Garvey and 20th-century black nationalism as a latter-day version of colonization. But even if Davis is reluctant to denounce the colonizationists as necessarily evil, or black colonizationists as “misguided accomplices in a racist conspiracy,” he cannot bring himself to conclude his assessment of colonization without insisting that it really was a form of ethnic cleansing, no matter how genteel its dress; and, perhaps even

worse, that colonization was a confession that the universalist assumptions of the Declaration of Independence were, in fact, unable to overcome the immutability of race.

Emancipation, not colonization, was the real goal to which the logic of the American Founding was driving the nation. As much as Davis regards “the extreme fortuity and contingency” of the Civil War’s results as a genuine threat to the triumph of equality, “the outlawing of New World slavery” was as “foreseeable” as it was “astonishing.” Foreseeable because, as Lincoln had declared, everything in the reasoning of the founders pointed inexorably toward the incompatibility of liberty and equality with slavery; astonishing because the collapse of slavery happened so quickly, so violently, and so totally. The Emancipation Proclamation and the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution (13th through 15th) possessed a power which seems to Davis not only tectonic but intellectually irresistible on the premises of the Declaration of Independence. The “sudden liberation of some 4 million slaves—far more than had ever been amassed in one part of the New World”—was “the climax and turning point of the Age of Emancipation.” Despite the reminders that emancipation and Reconstruction were followed by a new form of serfdom and “the emergence of a Southern penal system that was ‘worse than slavery,’” emancipation was a world-historical achievement, “a crucial landmark of moral progress” that finished off slavery as a form of social organization around the world.

**T**HIS IS A GOOD WORD TO HEAR AS WE move toward the close of the Civil War sesquicentennial, an anniversary marked far more by stifled non-observance

than by celebration or commemoration. To draw a bright line from the founders to the Civil War has become one of the most difficult interpretative tasks confronting American historians, if only because we confront, on the one hand, truculent bands of neo-Confederates who struggle to disguise the fatal corruption of the Confederate rebellion in modern libertarian garb, and, on the other, the brigades of neo-Progressives who have been only too happy to sunder the founders from emancipation in order to subvert any notion that an 18th-century Constitution still has viability after being crisped up in the flames of the Civil War. What both neo-camps ignore is how hugely the accomplishment of the founders—whether in the secular language of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton or the sacred language of the Awakeners—represented a decisive break with all previous notions of human political organization. The achievement of Lincoln was to carry that break relentlessly forward against its oldest foe. The achievement of our times—if there will be one to write about—will depend largely on how we resist the newer, more subtle, forms of dehumanization which now, like the tireless tide, creep all around us again.

*Allen C. Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, where he serves as director of the Civil War Era Studies Program. He is the winner of the Lincoln Prize in 2000 for Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) and in 2005 for Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America (Simon & Schuster), and is the author, most recently, of Gettysburg: The Last Invasion (Alfred A. Knopf).*

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