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Slavery and Abolitionism in the Scholarly Legacy of David Brion Davis (1927–2019)

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Abstract

This historiographical article examines the fundamental scholarly legacy of David Brion Davis (1927–2019) in the study of the institution of slavery. The research is based on the scholar's monographs addressing various aspects of slavery. The methodological framework includes historiographical analysis, the historical-systematic method, and other approaches.

D.B. Davis was a leading scholar in the field of slavery studies, conducting research on the subject for more than 50 years. In his monographs devoted to the institution of slavery, Davis examined its history, defining characteristics, and influence on the economy and intellectual thought from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century.

Davis also conducted an in-depth analysis of the abolitionist movement, its origins, and the humanistic ideas that contributed to its emergence. The scholarly significance of Davis's monographs lies in his substantial contribution to the development of a comprehensive approach to the study of slavery. His research employed transhistorical and transnational perspectives, emphasized the ideological and cultural dimensions of how slavery was perceived by different civilizations, and examined abolitionism in close connection with the socioeconomic transformations that took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Professor D.B. Davis's scholarly works earned him numerous prestigious awards in the field of nonfiction literature, including the Pulitzer Prize (1967), the National Book Award (1976), the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (1967), the Bancroft Prize (1976), the Beveridge Award (1975), the Bruce Catton Prize (2004), the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award (2007), the National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, among others. Davis became a Sterling Professor at Yale University and also served for a time as Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society.

Keywords: David Brion Davis, 1927–2019, history, history of slavery, history of abolitionism.

1. Introduction

David Brion Davis (1927–2019) was one of the most distinguished historians of slavery, a subject he studied for more than half a century. This article seeks to pay tribute to the scholar and provide a concise analysis of his major works devoted to the history of slavery.

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It should be noted that relatively few historiographical studies have specifically examined the scholarly legacy of D.B. Davis, which underscores the relevance and scholarly contribution of the present research.

2. Materials and Methods

The primary sources for this study were the major works of D.B. Davis examining the institution of slavery throughout human history, namely: *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Davis, 1966), *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Davis, 1975), *Slavery and Human Progress* (Davis, 1984), *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (Davis, 2001), *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Davis, 2006), and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (Davis, 2014).

The methodological framework of the study includes the historiographical method, which involves analyzing the content of Davis's works on slavery; the historical-systematic method, which provides a comprehensive examination of his monographs in the context of contemporary sociopolitical developments; and comparative analysis, which was employed to compare Davis's works and trace the evolution of his scholarly interests in the study of slavery.

The research is based on the fundamental principles of historical scholarship, including objectivity, systematic analysis, comprehensiveness, and historicism.

3. Results

David Brion Davis (Figure 1) was born on February 16, 1927, in Denver, Colorado, USA. His father was a novelist, and his mother was also engaged in creative writing. Consequently, the future historian grew up in an environment characterized by creativity, diligence, and intellectual activity. However, Davis experienced difficulties during his school years and attended several educational institutions before completing his secondary education. Some of these changes were associated with family relocations, and he eventually graduated from high school in New York.

After serving in the military in Germany, Davis returned to the United States and enrolled at Dartmouth College, graduating in 1950 with a bachelor's degree. Six years later, he earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University. He taught at Dartmouth College and Cornell University before joining Yale University in 1970, where he was appointed Sterling Professor in 1978.

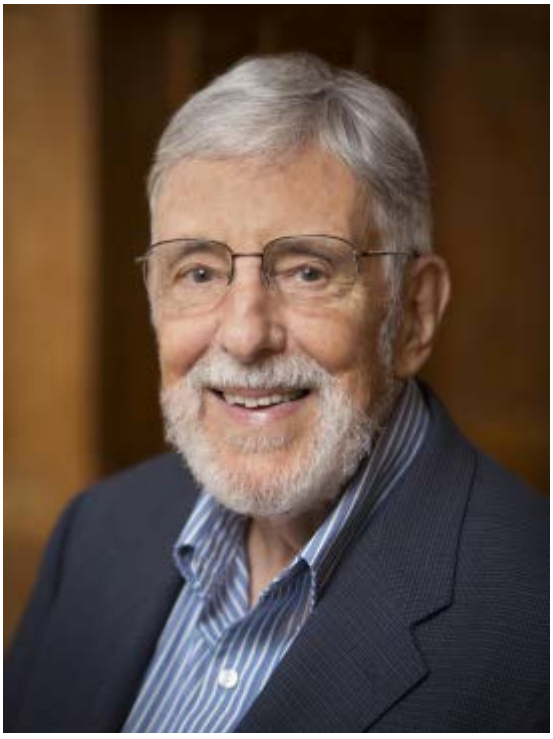


Fig. 1. Historian of slavery and abolitionism, Pulitzer Prize winner, Professor David Brion Davis (1927–2019)

D.B. Davis became one of the most distinguished historians of slavery. His numerous honors included the Pulitzer Prize (1967), the National Book Award (1976), the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (1967), the Bancroft Prize (1976), the Beveridge Award (1975), the Bruce Catton Prize (2004), the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award (2007), and the National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction. He was also a Guggenheim Fellow and a member of the American Philosophical Society. For a period, he served as Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University.

David Brion Davis died in 2019 in Guilford, Connecticut, USA.

Let us briefly examine Davis's scholarly legacy devoted to the history of slavery. Davis authored numerous scholarly works, among which his studies of slavery and abolitionism occupy a particularly important place. Given the limited scope of the present article, the aim is not to analyze all of Davis's works on slavery but rather to focus on his most significant and widely recognized studies.

D.B. Davis's first major scholarly work was *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860: A Study in Social Values* (Davis, 1957). Although this monograph was not primarily devoted to the institution of slavery, it also indirectly addressed certain aspects of slavery.

Historical issues directly related to the institution of slavery became a central focus of Davis's scholarly interests during the 1960s.

His first major study of slavery was *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Davis, 1966), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1967[1], The monograph examines the historical origins of slavery and its significance for America, the patterns of development of this institution across different historical periods and geographical regions, its oppressive manifestations from antiquity through the nineteenth century, and attitudes toward slavery in the Middle Ages and the modern era. The second part focuses on the American system of slavery, particularly its differences from European, Asian, and African systems, the contradictions between the institution of slavery and the moral principles of Christianity, and the distinctions between slavery in North and South America, among other issues.

The central theme of the monograph concerns how Western intellectual thought grappled over the centuries with the moral problem of one human being enslaving another, reducing the enslaved person to the status of property or even treating them as a kind of "domestic animal", thereby deliberately denying their humanity (Davis, 1966: 44-46). This process may be understood as the dehumanization of enslaved people.

From this premise emerges one of the central problems of slavery identified by David Brion Davis: despite repeated attempts at dehumanization, enslaved individuals continued to preserve their humanity and moral agency through persistent resistance, rebellions, uprisings, and other forms of opposition to enslavement, fundamentally distinguishing human beings from animals.

Davis was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize not only for the relevance of the subject but also for the innovative approach, originality of the research questions, and central arguments presented in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. The work was published in 1966 by Cornell University Press in the United States and subsequently republished in 1988 by Oxford University Press in the United Kingdom.

Another major work was *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Davis, 1975), which continued the research presented in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. In this monograph, Davis examines the institution of slavery in Europe and the Americas from the early 1770s to the early 1820s, a period characterized by widespread revolutionary movements. These included the American Revolution (1765–1783), the French Revolution (1789–1799), and the revolutionary movements of the 1820s in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

The monograph consists of several sections devoted, among other subjects, to an analysis of the major events of 1770–1823, presented in a chronological overview, and their relationship to slavery and the growing movement toward emancipation. It also examines the emergence and development of abolitionism (the movement aimed at abolishing slavery) in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe during this period. The concluding sections address legal controversies and their influence on the struggle against slavery.

[1] The Pulitzer Prize is one of the most prestigious awards in the United States, recognizing achievements in journalism, literature, music, and drama. Established through the provisions of the will of Joseph Pulitzer (1847–1911), an American newspaper publisher of Hungarian-Jewish origin, the prizes were first awarded in 1917.

According to Davis, a fundamental contradiction in public thought during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries concerned the status of enslaved individuals, who were recognized as human beings while simultaneously being treated as the property of their owners. Davis also emphasizes that Enlightenment ideas and certain Christian religious movements, particularly the Quakers, challenged the ideological foundations of slavery by arguing that enslavement prevented individuals from developing their personalities, maintaining family relationships, and cultivating their relationship with God (Davis, 1975: 213-254).

According to Davis, alongside moral, religious, and other considerations, the emerging bourgeoisie also had an interest in the abolition of slavery. Industrialists and merchants recognized that enslaved labor could be less efficient than wage labor and that the overall costs of maintaining enslaved workers could be higher. Consequently, they sought to support abolitionist ideas, which could contribute to expanding the supply of free labor in the labor market.

Merchants received a degree of support from politicians, whose political careers often depended on financial contributions from commercial interests. However, this support remained inconsistent and uncertain, since politicians also relied heavily on political and economic elites, many of whom were slaveholders. As an example, Davis discusses Thomas Jefferson, whose position on abolitionism was inconsistent and frequently influenced by the interests of the slaveholding elite (Davis, 1975: 176-185).

In summary, Davis argues that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked a crucial turning point in the gradual dismantling of the institution of slavery, which had existed for thousands of years. One of the principal driving forces behind this transformation was the Enlightenment, whose ideas increasingly emphasized the dignity and value of the individual.

The work did not go unnoticed, and D.B. Davis received the National Book Award[1] in 1976, as well as the Bancroft Prize[2], for this study.

In 1984, Davis published *Slavery and Human Progress* (Davis, 1984). In this study, he focuses on the evolution of societal perceptions of the institution of slavery and movements for the emancipation of enslaved people, from antiquity to the legal abolition of slavery, extending into the early twentieth century.

His analysis of the history of slavery led Davis to formulate several important arguments:

– From antiquity until the eighteenth century, slavery was associated with economic development and progress. Enslaved people were perceived as possessing skills essential to production, while slaveholders were regarded as members of a civilized social elite.

– A turning point occurred during the Enlightenment, when new ideas emphasizing the value of the individual increasingly encouraged recognition of the humanity of enslaved people. The development of capitalism and the expansion of wage labor also exposed the limitations and inefficiencies of enslaved labor as a means of production. Christianity played an important role as well, gradually shifting from scholastic traditions toward humanistic principles and increasingly challenging the notion that one human being could legitimately own another.

– At the same time, the abolitionist movement was characterized by certain contradictions. In particular, Britain opposed and eventually prohibited the slave trade while simultaneously pursuing colonial expansion and subjecting African populations to various forms of coercion and exploitation.

The monograph consists of three sections:

1. The first section, *How 'Progress' Led to European Enslavement of Africans*, examines the history of slavery and its relationship with the imperial ambitions of powerful states, from the Hellenistic kingdoms and ancient Rome to European and American states in the late eighteenth century.

2. The second section, *Redeeming Christianity's Reputation*, explores the role of evangelical Christians and liberals as intellectual and moral advocates of the abolitionist movement.

3. The third section, *Abolishing Slavery and Civilizing the World*, analyzes the abolition of slavery in various developed countries, as well as the emergence of liberation movements in

[1] The National Book Award is a prestigious annual American literary award, originally established by the American Booksellers Association in 1936 and currently administered by the National Book Foundation. It recognizes outstanding achievements in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, translated literature, and young people's literature.

[2] The Bancroft Prize is a prestigious American award presented by the Trustees of Columbia University for distinguished works in the history of the Americas.

colonial territories against European domination, influenced by Enlightenment ideas in general and abolitionism in particular.

In concluding the analysis of Davis's *Slavery and Human Progress* (Davis, 1984), it should be emphasized that the author raises profound philosophical and religious questions concerning the justification of slavery and the mistreatment of human beings. He also examines the challenges faced by the abolitionist movement during its formative stages.

Another major work addressing the problems of slavery is *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (Davis, 2001).

This study consists of a series of interconnected essays addressing Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., and the historical scholarship of C. Vann Woodward and Eugene D. Genovese. It also explores the problem of resistance among enslaved people and the relationship between the abolitionist movement and the struggle for women's emancipation.

Davis concludes that the development of abolitionism and the legal abolition of slavery in various countries resulted not only from economic interests but also from the emergence of opposition to slavery in the United States and Great Britain, grounded in natural law theory and a renewed understanding of the image of God in humanity. The author particularly emphasizes the humanistic role of Christianity and certain Christian denominations in the development of abolitionism and the emancipation of enslaved people. Overall, Davis argues that moral and religious considerations were among the decisive forces behind the growth of the abolitionist movement and the eventual abolition of slavery.

In 2006, Davis published *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Davis, 2006), a study examining the history of slavery in a global context. The monograph received widespread recognition and represented one of the crowning achievements of his scholarly career. In 2007, it was awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award.

In this study, Davis draws upon the accounts presented by H. Jones in *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (1987).

The illustrated monograph consists of 15 chapters devoted to the institution of slavery in the British Empire and the United States. The book opens with an analysis of the revolt of July 1–2, 1839, aboard the Spanish schooner *Amistad*, which was transporting enslaved Africans to Cuba. According to Davis, this revolt represented a significant challenge to the institution of slavery in North America from the emerging abolitionist movement. One can agree with Davis's observation that the Amistad affair affected American politics, the judicial system, and international relations at the highest levels. It also exposed some of the most profound legal and philosophical contradictions associated with slavery (Davis, 2006: 12).

The monograph then examines the ancient foundations of slavery and their legacy in the nineteenth century, the origins of racism toward Black populations in North and South America, the large-scale forced transportation of enslaved Africans to the Americas, and the formation of African American communities as an integral part of the history of the New World. A separate chapter is devoted to the institution of slavery in Brazil and the Caribbean.

However, the primary emphasis is placed on the study of slavery in North America and Britain. In particular, Davis examines the distinctive characteristics of slavery in the North American colonies, the problem of slavery during the American Revolution, various aspects of the everyday treatment of enslaved Black people, and the development of African American culture. The study also addresses conspiracies, revolts, and uprisings among enslaved people during the nineteenth century, as well as government policies and the legal regulation of slavery in the United States, including the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved people.

Particular attention is devoted to British abolitionism (Davis, 2006: 231-249) and American abolitionism (Davis, 2006: 250-267), including their origins, development, similarities, and differences.

Finally, D.B. Davis's last major scholarly study was *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, unlike his earlier monographs (Davis, 2014b).

In this work, Davis analyzes slavery as a system that deprived human beings of their dignity and reduced them to the status of property belonging to slaveholders. The existence of enslaved populations was perceived by society as a source of constant threat, which slaveholders attempted to suppress through harsh treatment and coercive measures.

The monograph comprises several chapters. The first chapter examines the problems of dehumanization and animalization of enslaved people, the ideological construction of the so-called "ideal slave" (Davis, 2014b: 26), and the processes of domestication and internalization imposed upon enslaved individuals.

The second chapter examines the processes of emancipation and self-emancipation among enslaved people, including the slave uprisings in Haiti, as well as the status and rights of formerly enslaved individuals who had gained their freedom. The study also explores the Quaker movement and its role in the emergence of abolitionism, the conflicts surrounding colonization, and the activities of Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, Marcus Garvey, and others.

Davis examines the confrontation between advocates of colonization and proponents of immediate abolition, the migration of White and Black populations in North America, the influence of African Americans on abolitionist politics, and the search for national and racial identity, including efforts to dismantle racial segregation during the twentieth century.

In addition, the monograph provides an in-depth examination of the motives and causes of slave uprisings, the activities of Black abolitionists, the processes of emancipation among African Americans in the United States, and numerous other related issues.

As a result of his research, Davis concludes that the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of enslaved people represent some of the greatest achievements of human civilization, bringing an end to an institution and its associated forms of discrimination that had persisted for thousands of years. The monograph represents a culmination of Davis's scholarly investigations into slavery, a subject to which he devoted more than half a century of research.

D.B. Davis also published several dozen scholarly articles devoted to the study of slavery. However, an examination of these publications falls beyond the scope of the present article.

We shall also briefly discuss several monographs that addressed the institution of slavery indirectly, within the context of other historical issues.

The work *Ante-bellum Reform: Interpretations of American History* (Davis, 1967) examines the reform movements that emerged in the United States in the decades preceding the Civil War. The volume also addresses issues related to the abolitionist movement, the temperance movement, philanthropy, and other aspects of antebellum reform.

The monograph *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Davis, 1971) explores American public perceptions of political subversion and conspiracy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines reactions to European revolutions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ideological movements and political phenomena of the twentieth century, including McCarthyism and anti-communism, as well as organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and political controversies surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

The study *The Emancipation Moment* (Davis, 1983) is devoted to the emergence of various emancipation movements, including those associated with gender, race, and nationality.

The work *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture* examines violence, irrationality, and the definition of social and cultural boundaries in nineteenth-century American society. It also addresses abolitionism, counter-subversive movements, and the figure of the cowboy as an embodiment of American heroism (Davis, 1986a). The problem of colonial slavery is examined in the shorter work *Slavery in the Colonial Chesapeake* (Davis, 1986b).

The monograph *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* explores not only the moral and ethical dimensions and motivations of the abolitionist movement but also its connections with movements for the emancipation of women and African Americans (Davis, 2001). Another work, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery*, examines the moral, ethical, and aesthetic patterns underlying European and American attitudes and behavior toward enslaved people, as well as the influence of revolutions and abolitionism on these patterns (Davis, 2003).

European revolutions and the American Revolution are examined in *Revolutions* (Davis, 2014a).

Among D.B. Davis's historiographical works, particular attention should be given to *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty: A Documentary History of America from Discovery through the Civil War* (Davis, Mintz, 1998).

In addition, D.B. Davis published several dozen scholarly articles devoted to the study of slavery (see, in particular, Davis et al., 1992). His scholarly legacy also includes lectures delivered at

various prestigious universities (see, for example, Davis, 1970a; Davis, 1970b; Peterson et al., 2008, the latter work co-authored with G. Peterson, R. Reichl, M. Sahlins, and J. Wilson).

4. Conclusion

D.B. Davis was one of the leading scholars in the field of slavery studies, having devoted more than 50 years to research on the subject. In his monographs examining the institution of slavery, Davis explored its history, defining characteristics, and influence on economic development and intellectual thought from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century.

Davis also conducted an in-depth analysis of the abolitionist movement, its origins, and the humanistic ideas that contributed to its emergence. The scholarly significance and originality of Davis's monographs lie in his comprehensive analysis of the institution of slavery through transhistorical and transnational approaches, his emphasis on the ideological and cultural dimensions of how different civilizations perceived slavery, and his examination of abolitionism in close connection with the socioeconomic transformations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Professor D.B. Davis's scholarly achievements earned him numerous prestigious awards in the field of nonfiction literature, including the Pulitzer Prize (1967), the National Book Award (1976), the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (1967), the Bancroft Prize (1976), the Beveridge Award (1975), the Bruce Catton Prize (2004), the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award (2007), and the National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction. He was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, among other distinctions.

Davis held the distinguished position of Sterling Professor at Yale University and served for a period as Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University. He was also a member of the American Philosophical Society.

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