

*The Problem of
Slavery Studies Today -
“How Many? Where? When? and Why:
The Numbers Game”*
David Sowell

The question of how many people were forced into slavery in the Americas is crucially important to the study of slavery. Not too long ago a team of scholars led by David Eltis of Queen’s University completed a twenty year project on the “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.” This research will no doubt serve as the authoritative source on this topic for some time. The objective of the project was quite simply to identify all shipments of slaves from Africa to the Americas from the beginning to the end of the slave trade. Although enslaved people accompanied the initial voyages of Christopher Columbus, the first direct shipment of slaves from Africa appears to have taken place in 1519. The last shipment likely took place in 1867. The team recorded as much information as possible about each voyage in a massive database. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Database records 27,233 voyages in this 348 year period, an estimated two-thirds of all shipments to the Americas. This means that beginning in 1519, every three or four days a ship departed Africa with a human cargo until the year 1867.

This essay centers on numbers and how to interpret them.

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The “numbers game” focuses upon the volume of the slave trade, where slaves originated and where they were sent, which nations were involved in the slave trade, and why patterns of the slave trade changed over time. In the process of determining the numbers associated with slavery, one gains insight into the single most important historical process in shaping the Atlantic world since 1500.

Figure 1:

Volume of Transatlantic Slave Trade from Africa by Nationality of Carrier (in thousands)

	Britain	France	Netherlands	Spain	US & British Caribbean	Denmark*	Portugal	All Nations
1519-1600	2.0						264.1	266.1
1601-1650	23.0		41.0				439.5	503.5
1651-1675	115.2	5.9	64.8			.2	53.7	239.8
1676-1700	243.3	34.1	56.1			15.4	161.1	510.0
1701-1725	380.9	106.3	65.3		11.0	16.7	378.3	958.6
1726-1750	490.5	253.9	109.2		44.5	7.6	405.6	1,311.3
1751-1775	859.1	321.5	148.0	1.0	89.1	13.4	472.9	1,905.2
1776-1800	741.3	419.5	40.8	8.6	54.3	30.4	626.2	1,921.1
1801-1825	257.0	217.9	2.3	204.8	81.1	10.5	871.6	1,645.1
1826-1850		94.1		279.2			1,247.7	1,621.0
1851-1867		3.2		23.4			154.2	180.8
All years	3,112.3	1,456.4	527.7	517.0	280.0	94.2	5,074.9	11,062.0
% of trade	28.1%	13.2%	4.8%	4.7%	2.5%	0.9%	45.9%	100%

Source: David Eltis, “The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 58:1 (January 2001), 43.

A table (Figure 1), taken from an article by David Eltis, serves as the backbone for my analysis of the slave trade. The Eltis team estimated that just over 11,000,000 people were loaded onto ships in Africa to begin the Middle Passage across the ocean between 1519 and 1867. Some 9.6 million people survived the voyages and were landed in the Americas. People were enslaved all along the western coast of Africa, from eight different regions. The largest amount, almost five million people, came from west central Africa,

the region now dominated by the Congo and Cameroon. The Middle Passage normally took between 45 and 75 days, largely depending upon the points of departure and arrival. During most of the passage, slaves were chained below deck, with a limited amount of food and water and scant opportunity to move about. An estimated 1,463,000 people did not survive the Middle Passage, a mortality rate of just over 13 percent. People died from illnesses, suicide, and brutality. Slaves were landed in scores of ports in the New World, most of them closely associated with a region of intense slavery. Importantly, these regions changed significantly over time.

Portugal and England dominated the slave trade. Together they carried almost 75 percent of the total slave population across the Atlantic. Of the two, Portugal carried an estimated 46 percent and England just over 28 percent of the trade. France totaled just over 13 percent of the slave trade, with Spain and the Netherlands each conducting just under five percent of the trade. The U.S., Denmark, and British colonies accounted for the balance. Importantly, Portugal dominated the trade until about 1640. England took the lead from that point until 1807 and Portugal again dominated the remaining 60 years of Atlantic slave voyages.

You have quite likely heard of the “tri-angular trade,” a phrase used to describe the mercantile relationship between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The tri-angular trade envisions the European shipment of finished goods to Africa where they are sold and exchanged for people. The human cargo was transported across the Atlantic to be sold, with the ensuing profits used to purchase raw materials that are returned to Europe to be transformed into manufactured goods.

While this is a workable and revealing phrase, and does capture some important elements of mercantilism, it hides the broader importance of the slave trade within the Atlantic economic system. The basic patterns of European colonization of the Americas, trade policies, and geopolitical struggles are revealed in a simple analysis of the slave trade. From about 1500 until the early 1800s, European powers maintained a closed trading system that permitted only national ships to trade in their colonial spheres. Importantly, this closed trading system did not begin with enslaved labor, but instead to protect the profitability of

Spain's shipments of silver and gold. This trading network evolved into the *flota* system with the discovery of silver in Mexico and Peru in the 1540s. The *flota* system involved the movement of great fleets of ships protected by naval power carrying European goods from Spain to the Caribbean, where silver and gold were picked up, and then back to Spain. This system was intended to protect the rich cargo from English and other European predations. As commodity production and slavery became firmly linked in the early 1600s, the enormous profits led European nations involved in Atlantic commerce to close their trading networks, thereby fostering trade and geopolitical rivalries that often erupted into open warfare. Our movement for independence, for example, came directly as a result of the impact of the Seven Year's War upon colonial society.

Portugal dominated the trade in human cargo for some 200 years, from the mid-1400s to about 1640. Portugal began to explore the Atlantic south of Iberia in the early 1400s. Most gold used in European commerce came from sub-Saharan sources through Moslem intermediaries. Portugal's explorations down the coast of Africa sought to find the sources of this gold and thereby cut out the infidels from the trade circuit. These voyages were quite successful, leading to Bartholomew Dias's passage round the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, thereby laying the foundation for that country's profitable trade empire in India. Portugal's initial slave trading activity was in Africa, from the Bight of Benin to the Gold Coast region. The center of control for this trade became the castle of São Jorge da Mina, "Elmina," a notorious slave center for hundreds of years. Luanda, the other Portuguese slave center, was developed in the late 1500s. In addition to slave trade within Africa, Portugal also imported slaves into the Iberian peninsula, a service the Spanish crown used to supply its empire with slave labor.

Spain did not initially use African labor in the Americas. Rather, Spaniards used indigenous peoples in the Caribbean to labor on farms and in gold mines. Ponce de León's discovery of Florida, for example, was not due to his search for the Fountain of Youth, but rather for people to enslave and return to the island of Cuba. Spain granted Portugal the right to bring slaves to its empire – the *asiento* – in 1518. The next year, the first shipment of slaves

arrived in Puerto Rico on a Portuguese ship. In the years that followed, the largest numbers of slaves were shipped to Peru, coastal Mexico, and the gold mining region in Colombia. By 1650 some 50,000 slaves had arrived in Mexico and twice that number in Peru. Of the 850,000 slaves that Portugal shipped to the Americas before 1650, almost one-third went to Spanish colonies, with Peru the largest single destination.

Most Portuguese slaves were sent to Brazil to labor on sugar plantations. Slavery was linked most intensely to the production of sugar, a relationship forged by Portugal the late 1400s. The production of sugar by slave labor began in several islands in the Atlantic, first on the Canaries, then the Madeira, and finally on São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. This industry was transferred to the coast of Brazil in the 1550s, where a mix of indigenous and slave labor was used to produce the commodity that soon became the most profitable agricultural export in the Atlantic world. In the years before 1600, most slaves were sent to Recife and the Pernambuco region of northeast Brazil, with smaller numbers to Salvador de Bahia. By the 1580s native sources of slaves were exhausted, to be replaced by large scale imports from Africa. By the early 1600s, sugar production was booming in Brazil, with the region around Rio de Janeiro also in production.

Several trends emerged in the early 1600s that would transform both the slave trade and commodity production in the Americas. After the conquest of the Mexicans and Incas, Spain's lack of attention to the Caribbean allowed other European powers to develop colonies in the region. In addition to Virginia, Britain established St. Kitts, Barbados, and Nevis, and seized Jamaica from the Spanish. France established St. Domingue, Martinique, and Guadalupe in the last third of the century. Initially, these colonies used largely indentured labor, a pattern altered by the Dutch after the 1650s.

The Netherlands revolted against Spanish rule in the early 1600s and gained their independence in 1648. Dutch power rested largely on its mercantile might, symbolized the organization of the Dutch West India Company in 1621, and the conquest of the sugar producing region of the Pernambuco in Brazil in the 1630s. The Dutch promptly constructed their own trading centers in Africa and briefly seized the Portuguese center in Luanda and began to

export slaves to the British and French colonies in the Caribbean. When Portugal regained control of the Brazilian coast in 1654, the Dutch took technical and experiential knowledge of sugar production into the Caribbean, thus breaking Portugal's near-monopoly control of that commodity, thereby paving the way for an explosion of sugar production in the Caribbean.

The fifty years after 1650 signals a transition period away from the primacy of Brazilian sugar and toward the importance of the Caribbean as the major sugar producing region of the Americas. France entered the slave trade, taking the largest number of people to the Windward Islands and a smaller number to St. Domingue. Britain carried large numbers of slaves to its Windward Islands, notably Barbados, but a larger number was taken to the recently acquired Jamaica. Denmark too enters the sugar island business. Taken together, the end of the Brazilian monopoly of sugar production is clear. It is important to note, however, that sugar did not cease to be produced in Brazil, nor did its infrastructure collapse. It remained in place, ready for a revival and for a re-allocation of slaves to other, more lucrative activities.

The entry of new European nations into the slave trade changed commercial relations with Africa. The Netherlands, British, and French all built new trading forts along the "slave coast," in the Bight of Biafra region in present-day Cameroon and Gabon. Powerful local leaders blocked the construction of stone castles such as Elmina, allowing only mud constructed holding areas to which slaves were taken by local traders. More to the east, along the coast of Nigeria, the so-called Bight of Benin, also drew European traders. Traders here, however, were not permitted to build on land and were forced to anchor offshore and await the delivery of their human cargo.

The 1700s saw divergent patterns in Brazil and the Caribbean. For the latter, sugar ruled. For Brazil, the 18th century saw the emergence of new exports produced by slave labor that led to the development of new regions of the country. Gold was discovered in the southeast interior in the 1690s, leading to a massive movement of slaves from the old northeast slave region. This forty-year boom was followed by a thirty-year boom of diamond mining, a two-phased process that developed Minas Gerais. Cattle production and whale hunting dominated the lands south of Rio. To the north of

Pernambuco, cotton production expanded using slave labor. From its domination as a sugar colony, Brazil had the most diversified slave economy in the Americas by the end of the 18th century.

Although most islands in the Caribbean produced sugar via slave labor, the British colony of Jamaica and the French colony of St. Domingue merit special attention. Britain carried just over a million slaves to Jamaica, most of them in the 100 years after 1700. That island rapidly overtook the value of Barbados, producing three times the amount of sugar as the former jewel in the British colonial crown by mid-century. The Jamaica market consumed over half of all British trade with its Caribbean colonies. Jamaican sugar plantations were larger than any others in the Americas. Whereas most sugar plantations numbered either around 50 or 100 slaves, Jamaican plantations numbered around 200 slave laborers. The island is also unusual in that few other commodities were produced, with sugar constituting over three-quarters of the island's exports.

Commodity production was quite distinct on St. Domingue. This colony on the western half of Hispaniola began to use slave labor in earnest after the 1720s, with slave imports totaling almost 780,000 by the time of the Haitian revolution in 1791. By that time, more slaves labored in this colony than in any other in the Caribbean. Three out of every four French slaving vessels went to this colony in the 1700s. Although St. Domingue was the most important producer of sugar in the Americas in the 1700s, it was also the leading producer of coffee, and produced significant amounts of cotton, indigo, and cacao. Two-thirds of all French Caribbean exports sailed from St. Domingue, whose value exceeded the combined total of all Spanish and British colony exports in the Caribbean. The French Revolution of 1789 unleashed revolutionary tensions within this slave society. By 1791 slaves throughout the island were in open rebellion, leading to the establishment of the first Revolution in the Americas and the establishment of an independent Haitian regime in 1804.

The significance of the slave trade to European powers is vividly evident in 18th-century conflicts and struggles for empire. In 1700 the Spanish Hapsburg monarch died without leaving an heir, leading the court to ask the French Bourbons for a male to assume the Spanish throne. The union of the two major Catholic nations of

Europe so frightened Protestant powers that war ensued, a conflict that was finally settled by the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. The treaty gave Britain control over the *asiento*, the monopoly of supplying slaves to the Spanish Empire, plus the right to send one trading vessel every year to the Caribbean. Needless to say, British captains used the opportunity to trade illegally throughout the Caribbean, supplying up to two-thirds of all goods to the region in contraband trade in violation of the Utrecht treaty. Spanish authorities were rightfully furious, leading to one of the more curiously named wars in our hemisphere, the War of Jenkin's Ear. Robert Jenkins, an English captain, was seized by the Spanish with illegal cargo and in the scuffle that ensued had his ear cut off. This 1739 conflict led Spain to deny Britain the *asiento* and served as the first volley in a European conflict that lasted until 1749.

These issues are closely associated with mercantilist trade policies as well. British colonists in the region that would become the United States supplied British slave colonies in the Caribbean with flour, fish, meat, and other staples, buying molasses in the region to make into rum. They sold the same products to French slave holders, who in turn supplied them with molasses at a cheaper rate than British suppliers. By the 1730s, British plantation owners had convinced the Parliament to deny North American colonists the right to trade with French islands. The 1733 Molasses Act was the first of a series of Navigation Acts that crippled colonial exports and proved to be a major variable in the movement by North American colonists for independence. European efforts to closely monitor the slave trade were no less successful, for by the second half of the century no country could be deemed to have gained full control over the trade. The monopoly companies of the late 17th and early 18th centuries were gradually disbanded to be replaced by "free" trade.

Despite this trend, the importance of commodity production and the slave trade within geopolitical conflict increased in the second half of the 18th century. The Seven Year's War of 1756-1763 provides a perfect example. This war is known in U.S. history as the French and Indian War, the primary opponents of the British and their colonists. In fact, the war pitted Britain and France, along with their allies, in the first global conflict. Britain seized the port of Habana in 1762 and immediately opened the port to trade and

stimulated the expansion of sugar production on the island. The Treaty of Paris returned the Cuban capital to Spain in exchange for Florida, but the brief occupation had vitalized the production of sugar in Cuba. Thirty years later, with the Haitian Revolution, scores of French plantation owners fled to this Spanish island, further expanding sugar production, which in time would make Cuba the largest producer of sugar in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth-century slave trade was finally brought to an end as first Britain, then the U.S., and finally France prohibited the practice. Nevertheless, the overall volume of the trade did not decline significantly, as Cuba and Brazil each experienced dynamic periods of expansion in the importance of slavery to their economies, as did the U.S.. The nineteenth-century boom in Brazil was associated with both sugar and a new export commodity, coffee. The old sugar regions of Pernambuco and Bahia were revitalized after the Haitian Revolution, but the dynamic expansion took place in the south. Coffee was first exported from Rio in 1792. Within twenty years, 300,000 bags were exported, a figure that reached two million bags by 1830, six million by 1850, and ten million by 1860. The demand for slaves skyrocketed, as did the demand for wage laborers from southern Europe. Although the slave trade to the U.S. ended in 1808, slavery sustained the most important economic activity in the U.S. in the years before the Civil War. Slaves in Cuba labored on sugar mills that were now run by steam power and were linked by rail to fields and export facilities. Imported chemists vastly improved the refining process, so that by the 1850s Cuban sugar production could justly be labeled as industrial. This is an important point within the historiography of slavery, in that many scholars have maintained that slavery was incompatible with industrial production and that it was less efficient than wage labor. Evidence from nineteenth-century Cuba, Brazil, and the U.S. calls this long-held belief into question.

The slave trade was ended not because the institution had lost its profitability, but because of political and military action. Several European nations and the U.S. ended the trade in the first decade of the nineteenth century. In England, abolitionists had gained improved conditions on slave ships through acts of Parliament in the 1780s and 90s. They gained an end to British participation in

the trade in 1807, even as Britain was the largest shipper of slaves in the Atlantic. An agreement reached twenty years earlier ended U.S. participation in the slave trade in 1808. France freed its slaves and ended the trade early in the century, only to re-impose it prior to complete emancipation in the 1830s. By this time, British ships were intercepting ships from Africa in a military effort to end the trade. In 1851, Britain convinced the Brazilian government to end its own legal trade. Similar pressures forced the Spanish government to end the trade to Cuba in 1867.

We are certainly familiar with the abolitionist pressure and regional crisis that led to the Civil War and the 1863 emancipation in the United States. The Ten Year's War that began in Cuba in 1868 as a movement for independence saw many slaves offered their freedom in exchange for military service. Spain joined forces with Cuban republicans to pass a gradual emancipation law in 1872. Absolute emancipation took place in 1886. In Brazil, the war against Paraguay in the same period unleashed republic forces that strove to reduce the political power of the slave aristocracy, leading at first to gradual emancipation and finally passage of the Golden Law in 1888. Legalized slavery in the Americas had finally come to an end.

In no country where slavery was vital to the economic structure did masters voluntarily end the practice. Either political or military action, or a combination of the two in conjunction with international pressure was necessary to end this noxious institution. Slavery was simply too profitable and important to end voluntarily.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade seriously affected the demographic growth of many African societies directly, and others indirectly. Two thirds of all people carried across the Atlantic were men. The forced migration of many young men meant a shift in marriage patterns as the number of marriageable men declined. For many societies on the West coast of Africa during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, populations either declined, remained constant, or had very little growth, usually suffering a varying disproportion between the numbers of men and women. For the Upper Guinea Coast, for example, slave exports were great enough during the latter half of the eighteenth century to reduce the regional population, and halt growth into the first decade of the nineteenth century. During this

period the ratio of men to women dropped to below eighty men per one hundred women. In those societies where there were few slaves taken, population growth was more constant, although demographic effects of the slave trade were still a factor. The disruption caused by inter-tribal warfare and the capturing of slaves for the European market often heightened the effects of natural disasters such as disease or famine. The continual interaction between villages brought about by the migrations of slaves across Africa facilitated the spread of diseases, further disrupting the growth of populations. These disruptions were especially devastating for the region of Angola, where an increase in slave exports in the nineteenth century resulted in an even greater decline in population. It has been estimated that in 1600, the population of Africa stood at about 50 million people, or thirty percent of the combined populations of the New World, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. By 1900 the population of Africa had grown to 70 million, but made up only ten percent of the total combined population. The population of Africa in 1850 has been estimated to have been only about half of what it would have been had slavery and the slave trade not been a factor in African history.

Finally, how did the forced migrations of Africans as slaves compare to the voluntary migration of Europeans in shaping the population of the New World? If we consider the period from the early 16th century to about 1820, the answer is startling. For every one European who voluntarily migrated to the New World, 3.55 Africans arrived as slaves. The estimate is that some 2.4 million Europeans migrated to the Americas in the period before 1820, while at least 8.4 million Africans arrived as slaves. Recall that slave mortality on the Middle Passage was about 13 percent, meaning that another million people left Africa as slaves but died before they arrived in the New World. This startling number suggests that we must think quite differently about the role of African slavery in shaping the New World, and perhaps acknowledge that slavery was the single most important historical process in shaping the Atlantic world since 1500.

WORKS CONSULTED

The historical literature on Atlantic slavery is voluminous. This essay barely taps the wealth of scholarship on the topic. It draws

quite heavily from David Eltis, “The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 58:1 (January 2001), 17-46; Eltis, “Free and Coerced Transatlantic Migration: Some Comparisons,” *The American Historical Review*, 88:2 (April 1983), 251-80; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

