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SLAVERY IN AFRICA

Richard Rathbone

The almost casual concern of African specialists with a question of such significance as the social consequences of the slave trade on African societies appears at first sight rather surprising. While this problem is the object of some judgement or other in most regional or general treatments of African history that extend to the period of the trade, it has attracted far less attention in the monographic literature. Even more surprising is the fact that despite the wide range of historical assessments made by various scholars, there has been little direct confrontation of opposing views. The brief - and generally inconclusive - exchanges between Walter Rodney (1966) and John Fage (1959;1969;1975) and between Fage and Wrigley (1971) seem rather to underline this observation than to contradict it.

Whatever the sources of this lacuna might be, they are certainly fed by the generally speculative way in which the issue has been pursued and, more seriously, the absence of any sound theoretical framework within which the weighing of evidence and testing of hypotheses can proceed. In this paper I propose to examine the principal contributions to this discussion with a view to assessing how the debate on this important question could be most fruitfully pursued, and to raise a few suggestions with regard to the strengthening of the theoretical foundations of the debate.

The Conflicting Views

A convenient summary of the established view of the slave trade, until the early 1960's, is offered by Andrew Kamarck:

> It drew off from the continent human beings at the most productive ages. Worse still, it encouraged tribe to fight tribe and encouraged conflict within tribes. Finally, and perhaps most important, any advantages that Africa derived from contact with the rest of the world - the learning of some skills, the introduction of new foods, such as maize and manioc - were more than offset by the salve trade plunging vast stretches of Africa into anarchy.
> (*The Economics of African Development*, quoted in Markowitz, 1977, p.147)

Basil Davidson, respectful of empirical data and more sensitive to the ambiguities of historical development, accepts that 'depopulation was seldom a primary social factor of the oversea trade' but concurs that '....in spite of an undoubted improvement in food supplies .... there can be no doubt that on balance the economic effects of the European contact worked steady and decisive damage .... the slave trade exercised a serious and continuing effect in retarding and reducing African production'. (Davidson, 1961, pp. 238-41). Much the same verdict is pronounced by Jean Suret-Canale who, despite his acceptance of a figure in excess of 40 million for the population loss due to the slave trade, concludes that 'The trade was less serious in its numerical, demographic consequences, properly speaking, than in its unforseen economic and social consequences .... the general retarding influence of the trade seems to us beyond question.' (Suret-Canale, 1964).

The principle advocate of the contrary proposition is John Fage. Concentrating upon the existence of the institution of slavery within West African societies prior to the trade, the existence of a far more ancient trans-Saharan trade, and the political dynamics of the region, Fage concludes that the slave trade may actually have been a factor in strengthening the emergence of large-scale state structures and hence social development:

> There seems in fact to be a close correlation in West Africa between economic development (and political development, because indigenous commercial activity was largely king- or state-directed) and the growth of the institution of slavery as here defined ... On the whole it is probably true to say that the operation of the slave trade may have tended to integrate, strengthen and develop unitary territorial political authority, but to weaken or destroy more segmentary societies.

> Whether this was good or evil may be a nice point; historically it may be seen as purposive and perhaps as more or less inevitable.
> (Fage, 1969)

Drawing upon the efforts of Philip Curtin to provide firmer estimates of the numerical dimensions of the trade, Fage further concludes that the demographic effects of the trade were strictly limited: 'Two things are at once apparent:

i) this is not an outstandingly high rate of loss; and

ii) it is of much the same order of magnitude as the likely natural growth rate.

In gross, therefore, the quantitative demographic effect of the slave trade on the population of West Africa is likely to have maintained it at an approximately static level over a period of up to one hundred years.' (Fage, 1975, p.18)

It must be noted that throughout his discussion Fage is at pains to restrict his remarks to *West* Africa, acknowledging that the different economic and social context of the trade in East and Central Africa may well have made it far more historically disruptive. While this distinction is empirically well-founded (indeed it appears to make Fage a tougher critic of the trade in these regions than Davidson and Suret-Canale, whole abandonment of the depopulation hypothesis was not regionally specific) it still leaves serious problems in Fage's chosen terrain of West Africa.

By and large the Fage perspective appears to have taken on something of the status of a 'new orthodoxy' with only a few *ripostes* to his arguments forthcoming. It may therefore be worthwhile to take its central propositions as a starting point and examine them and their opposing counterparts in turn.

The Areas of Contention

1. The Demography of the Trade

It seems unclear why Fage has concentrated so much effort upon the issue of demographic impact. Even the appearance of Curtin's estimates does not really introduce a dramatically new element in the interpretation of the trade: as far back as the 1930's Kuczynski explicitly rejected the wilder estimates in favour of a figure of 15 million for total slave imports to the New World. While this is substantially in excess of Curtin's current figure of 10 million, the difference, over such a long period and given the immense uncertainty surrounding the population base from which it was drawn, seems of limited significance. Moreover, as we have seen, leading advocates of the opposing view of the trade, such as Davidson and Suret-Canale, accept that depopulation was not a widespread consequence of the trade.

At the same time his discussion of demography does not really engage his opponents on the correct ground: for their case, while drawing upon a higher initial estimate of slave exports, rests upon the 'multiplier' of deaths and casualties sustained in the hunt for slaves. If such a procedure were to be applied to the lower figure of Curtin/Fage they would still generate a population loss rate several times in excess of the natural growth rate. This may or may not be an acceptable procedure: but it must be refuted, not simply ignored, if Fage's confident assertions about the insignificant demographic consequences of the trade are to carry conviction.

The fundamental difficulty is of a more basic order, however: Fage treats demography purely as a statistical and not a social or theoretical question. His number-juggling thus produces conclusions which, whatever their veracity, tell us nothing at the socio-economic level. Fage asserts that 'I cannot see any evidence that, by and large, the Atlantic slave trade had a crippling effect on the growth of population in West Africa.' But what is a century-long stagnation of population and an historically rather crucial century at that? Obviously if one assumes that West Africa had attained some idyllic 'natural balance' prior to the 18th. century then the slave trade can be viewed as a felicitous mechanism for preserving it. But on what basis would such a proposition rest? As Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch argues, even from a slightly more sophisticated statistical perspective, Fage's picture is one of 'relative depopulation' in which the continent's demographic stagnation leads to a decline in its share of world population from 18-21 per cent in the mid-17th. century to less than 8% by the early part of this century. (Coquery-Vidrovitch and Moniot, 1974)

Of course none of this tells us anything about the actual state of African societies under the impact of the slave trade or their social dynamics. Did a stable population represent a force for social stability or one which sapped the "inspiration" for growth and development?

Moreover serious questions must be raised about the aggregates which Fage operates with: Curtin has pointed out that:

> For statistics 'sub-Saharan Africa as a whole' is useful entity, but not for this historical problem. People did not live in 'Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole'. They lived in a series of particular African societies ... (Curtin, 1969, p.271)

Undoubtedly Fage's conceptualisation of 'West Africa' is a step forward, but is it still a meaningful aggregate for the treatment of such a socially variable set of phenomena?

Perhaps more serious is his aggregation of long-period demographic trends and his treatment of the population as totally homogenous. The demographic profile of a society is

not merely a matter of numbers but incorporates as meaningful variables such as sex and age composition. The slave trade was not neutral in its impact upon these. Drawing (throughout its existence) disproportionately on younger males, the trade meant that there was a continuing modification of the sex and age-ratios that would otherwise have existed. While this might all come out in the statistical wash once the disturbing factor had been removed and internal population dynamics had reasserted themselves, the intervening period was lengthy enough for profound socio-economic consequences to have ensued.

2. Social Consequences of the Trade: Slavery and State Formation

It would of course be wrong to suggest that Fage ignores the broader social consequences of the trade. On the contrary, this is the principal concern of his earlier study. His error is in detaching demographic issues from their social causes and consequences, and falling into the trap of believing that meaningful conclusions about the slave trade can be drawn from the former alone.

Fage's discussion of the wider social questions reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. In his favour we must set the following points:

1. he looks at the issue of slavery and the slave trade, to use his own words, 'in the context of West African history', rather than seeing it purely as a European initiative in which Africans could do nothing but passively acquiesce;
2. he is prepared to look at historial development in terms of its real, contradictory course, and not in terms of some benificent schema;

thus the possibility that social advance may follow the route of growing social differentiation, oppression and violence is not excluded *a priori* (this is what Wrigley castigates as his 'historicism').

In these respects Fage appears upon firmer ground than his critics, who include, curiously, both explicit anti-Marxists (Wrigley) and Marxists (Davidson, Suret-Canale). All of these seem loth to accept that the emergence of slaving, military artistocracies out of village communities could represent anything other than a retrograde social development. Wrigley does so on at least the consistent basis that the affirmation of liberal values is more important than understanding history (reducing, *en route*, the complex upheavals of the southern Africa *mfecane* to the actions of 'a raging psychopath', and concluding by harnessing the horses of the slave trade to the chariot of the Biafran conflict). Rejecting the notion that history can be theorised, Wrigley naturally has no theory of West African social formations, and thus nothing to put in the place of Fage's analysis. But the perspective of Davidson and Suret-Canale is really little better: they too lack any

articulated theory of the social formations under consideration, and thus insert a minus sign before the slaving regimes purely on the basis of their repugnanat, repressive character.

On another level, however, Wrigley's accusation of 'historicism' against Fage does hit home. For what Fage applies to West African history is not so much a coherent theory (or even the elements of such a theory) but, as Wrigley says, an overarching teleological principle - that of 'state formation'. That is nowhere clearer than in the excerpt we have already quoted:

> There seems to be a close correlation in West Africa between economic development (and political development, because indigenous commercial activity was largely king- or state-directed) and the growth of the institution of slavery ....

Here we have a double movement: the collapsing of the category of 'economic development' into that of 'commerical activity' and the detachment of the large-scale political structures or states from the social foundations of local agricultural communities upon which they rested. Apart from the empirical problems involved (for example, what becomes of the Niger Delta city states and their merchant oligarchies or the 'trading diasporas' of the Dioula or Hausa?) this procedure is theoretically fatal. Its foundation seems to lie in the 'formalist' bias of most African economic historians, which renders them inordinantly blind to the processes at work within the communities of agricultural producers upon which the edifice of West African states rested and inordinantly preoccupied with the market-orientated activities in which state institutions and state-dependent social strata were predominant.

Its most serious consequence - and one which invades the interpretation of otherwise very perceptive commentators such as Hopkins (see Hopkins, 1973, pp. 117-23 for the slave trade) and Curtin (1975, ch.4) - is that it blurs the crucial distinction between production and exchange. For Fage this has the implication that he fails to distinguishing systematically between *slavery* and the *slave trade* (despite the fact that he is at pains to reject the view that the slave trade was an important force in disseminating servile relations; and at one point explicitly points to the problematic relationship between mobilising slave labour and trading in slaves: but both are seen simply as alternative, equivalent devices for securing state power). Thus the close interrelationship between slavery and state-formation becomes translated into a positive contribution of the *slave trade* to the emergence of large-scale political institutions.

In order to expand these critical observations on Fage's approach into a more coherent overview of the problem I will attempt to sketch the outlines of an alternative model of the relationship between the slave trade and West African social

development, starting from these various points of divergence.

Outlines of an Alternative Model

Broadly speaking, West African social formations prior to the colonial era were based upon the articulation of one or more of three distinct modes of production. On the one hand was the *lineage mode of production* in which direct producers organised through kinship based institutions were engaged primarily in agricultural production and subjected to a more-or-less exploitative appropriation of their surplus labour through the lineage hierarchy of 'elders and 'young men' and through the sexual division of labour. Broadly parallel to Meillassoux's 'self-subsistent societies', this mode of production rested upon a set of productive forces in which human labour and its various forms of organisation were overwhelmingly predominant.

Secondly, there existed a widespread *tributary mode* in which some form of central political structure acted as an appropriative centre for surplus labour and product from the lineage-based local units, as well as developing its own forms of production, and often an urban or semi-urban form of organisation. A greater degree of the social division of labour and the emergence of at least an embryonic non-agricultural sector were the essential preconditions for this mode (hence its close ties with trade and ecologically transitional zones); however, the relatively parasitic appropriation of surplus from the productive local communities tended to predominate (hence its tendency to generate military-aristocratic formations).

Both these modes stimulated social inequality within the social formations which rested upon them, and articulated with other, embryonic, forms of exploitation. The essence of these was to attach to the social 'core' of each mode - in the one case the lineage in the other the state apparatus - additional human resources in subordinate positions, thus enhancing the exploitative capacity of the dominant social groups. The variety of these relationships occupy the field that is commonly designated as 'slavery', but includes a spectrum of relationships ranging from client-patron relations through pawnship to something closely paralleling 'chattel slavery'. Moreover, the position of slaves in each of the two modes is radically different: in the lineage mode ranking among the exploited, in the tributary mode as an auxiliary component of the exploiters.

This provides the basis for the emergence of a third mode of production - a slave mode. This involves the emergence of a genuinely distinct form of production and expropriation of surplus out of the other two modes: in the one case, typically, through the growth in the number of slaves and the splitting of the community into 'aristocratic' and 'slave' strata; in the other through the creation of slave plantations or communities subject to a particular relationship with the state structures.

The complex variation of these modes, their interrelationship, and differing combinations of domination and subordination generate a wide range of social formations. And it is these which provide the necessary 'context of West African history' for an adequately-founded discussion of the impact of the slave trade.

Within this framework, for example, the question of demography becomes considerably clearer. The details of the number-juggling become somewhat less significant than a rather simple axiom: the removal of population by the slave trade meant that West Africa had a smaller population than if they had not been removed. As Fage and other commentators have observed, there is no necessary relationship between population and economic growth, citing the 19th. and 20th. century emigration from Europe to North America. But this related to social formations based upon the capitalist mode of production, in which economic growth is the product of rising labour productivity stemming from the accumulation of capital. If the substition of capital for labour proceeds more rapidly than demographic shifts then economic growth can proceed apace (indeed labour shortages occasioned by migration may stimulate capital investment). In the social formations of West Africa the underlying modes of production depended upon unassisted human labour and its forms of organisation; extended reproduction was coterminous with demographic expansion. Even a *relative* slackening of the rate of population growth would thus have a negative effect on economic growth. The effects of the trade upon age and sex-ratios would reinforce this effect.

Furthermore the pattern of slave appropriation could exercise an inhibiting effect upon social development within the lineage-based communities in a number of ways: the transfer of marginal groups outside of the community through the salve trade would reduce precisely those strata who were subject to the most instense exploitation within the lineage mode and thus furnished the greatest quantity of surplus product; the enslavement of social malcontents as a mode of social control within the lineage community would strengthen the dead-hand of the elders and curtail the more dynamic elements possibly capable of developing and extending new forms of production.

This raises another crucial point: the slave trade, as opposed to slavery, could act as an inhibiting rather than a stimulating factor in state-formation. Dissident 'young men' seem often to have provided the inspiration for new commerical and political ventures, and the intensification of community discipline over them would most likely curtail such activities. If the trade expanded commercial opportunities as well, then it would most likely do so at the expense of political and productive projects (the containment of Igbo political structures within the Delta commercial city-states is suggestive of this). Moreover, within already established social formations resting upon the tributary mode the slave trade could unleash centrifugal tendencies as power-groups competed for access to the new

commercial opportunities and became detached from the central political structures. Recent reinterpretations of Dahomey's political development have highlighted this aspect: Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch has suggested that the kings of of Dahomey genuinely wanted to supress the slave trade, but were unable to do so becuase of the opposition of dignitaries involved in the trade (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1975, pp. 111-12). A similar situation would seem to have emerged in Angola and the Congo (Miller, 1976).

One interesting illustration of the contradiction between slavery and the slave trade is afforded by the case of the Vai. Holsoe has pointed out that after the export of slaves from Vai territory was terminated by British and American naval action it was only women and children who were employed in domestic slave production; male captives were executed, because there did not exist the institutional framework necessary for their regulation. In other words, the existence of the trade provided an outlet for male captives which had made unnecessary the development of the social superstructures appropriate to the emergence of a slave mode of production.

More widely speaking, the social consequences of *trade per se* is highly ambiguous. It cannot be treated as an undifferentiated stimulus to economic activity (as Fage, Curtin and Hopkins do); but neither can it be regarded as marginal to economic development. In so far as it serves as a stimulus to productive activities, deepens the internal division of labour, or acts as a source for capital accumulation which can be shifted into productive activities, trade can have revolutionary consequences. But the overwhelming bias of the slave trade would appear to lie in opposite direction: its own ramifications in the productive sphere undid any potentially positive impact it might have had, and its association with the military oligarchies (whether of a centralised state or 'war lord' variety) meant that profits realised on the trade tended to be channelled into the ostentatious and redistributive forms characteristic of militarist social formations.

This generalisation needs some modification. The existence of specific merchant communities involved in the trade enhanced the potential for productive capital accumulation, although their subordination to the military oligarchies checked the potential of this strata. The relative facility with which much of West Africa adjusted to the ending of the trade and the rise of 'legitimate commerce' (see Klein, 1971) stresses the two sides of this equation: the potential for trade to link up with productive development was there, but it required the ending of the slave trade to see its realisation.

Moreover, the opening up of trade between Africa, on the one hand, and Europe and the New World, on the other, did not centre exclusively on slaves, even though the latter did predominate. Philip Curtin's figures for Senegambia show that other commodities occupied a significant share of African

exports throughout the period of the slave trade. Moreover imports were more varied than is often suggested, with textiles, iron, monetary objects (such as silver) outweighing firearms and beads. Moreover it appears that the latter were often of a high quality, and fed the development of a local jewellery industry as well as playing a monetary function. (See Curtin, 1975, ch.8)

To this must be added a factor which, as Walter Rodney has pointed out (Rodney, 1968), has largely gone unnoticed - the development of a trade in foodstuffs designed to provision the slaves and the crews of the slave ships both during their often lengthy stays on the coast and through the 'Middle Passage'.

What this suggests is a closer relationship between the slave trade and 'legitimate commerce' than has generally been recognised, and the necessity of looking further back in time for some of the social consequences that have often been ascribed to the emergence of the latter. Thus Walter Rodney (Rodney, 1968) has offered an interpretation of the 18th. century *jihad* in Futa Jallon that is very close to Martin Klein's interpretation of similar movements in Senegambia a half century later (Klein, 1972).

Despite these offsetting factors, the net effect of the slave trade would appear to have been negative as regards the development of productive activity and productive forces. This conclusion is underlined by the fact that the emergence of genuine slave modes of production seems to have gone furthest in those social formations most removed from supplying the Atlantic trade - Futa Jallon, the state network of the middle Niger, and the Hausa states. The 19th. century *jihad* movement, centred in these regions, would appear to have the character of a political convulsion stemming from real social developments: a phenomenon not really paralleled in the coastal regions until after the transition to 'legitimate commerce'.

Some remarks should also be made about the importance of new food crops that arrived in Africa from the new world. These are either dismissed as of limited significance (as in the works we quoted at the beginning of this paper) or else attributed arbitrarily with major demographic consequences (Curtin, 1969, pp. 270-1). This is a question which cries out for serious case studies. But it would be very foolish to underestimate the impact of major new crops upon the level of productivity of labour-intensive agricultural societies. Eric Kerridge has demonstrated the immense impact that relatively inconspicuous (and consequently disregarded) agricultural innovations such as crop rotation, new crops, and better methods of fertilisation, had upon 16th. century England, even attributing much of England's later industrial dynamism to this 'agricultural revolution'. The fact that the new arrivals from America still make up major staple food items in West Africa should suggest at least the possibility that a

similar process might have taken place in West Africa in the era of the slave trade. If this was the case its demographic impact would seem to be the least important implication.

The point is, what has this really to do with the slave trade? As Walter Rodney has pointed out, the dissemination of food crops is one of the most pervasive of human phenomena (as East Africa's borrowings from South-East Asia demonstrates) and requires only a limited level of social contact (Rodney, 1972, pp. 111-12). Even if Africa had not been a major supplier of unfree labour to the new world, European interest in both the Americas and Africa (and the vagaries of sail navigation) would have been sufficient to allow the process of cultural diffusion to take place.

Finally, the socially disruptive consequences of the trade have to be assessed. Here Fage's view seems to be better founded than that of his opponents. The social disruption that ensues from slaving is more a function of the form that it takes than of the numbers involved. Thus disparate raiding by specialised slaving groups has much more disruptive consequences than the activities of centralised states, employing methods of judicial coercion, and the exaction of tribute from subject peoples as well as more violent methods of enslavement. Even organised warfare is probably less severe in its social disruption - involving organised and mobilised forces and following a regular seasonal pattern - than sporadic raiding. This would seem to explain much of the difference between the relatively contained impact of slavery in West Africa (supported, as Fyfe has pointed out, by the evidence of stability of West African language groups: Fyfe, 1976) in contrast with the devastation in the Centre and East. Moreover, we have suggested that Fage is right about the relationship between slavery and social development (although wrong about the slave trade). Thus the only viable 'counter-factual hypothesis' for West African development would rest upon the development of extended domestic-slave modes of production rather than slave exports. This would hardly have involved less domestic violence, as the experience of the Hausa states demonstrates, in the short to medium-term. What it might have produced is the eventual stabilisation of larger scale political institutions and a more effective resistance to European colonisation (assuming of course that there was a 'Europe' to do any colonising in the absence of African labour to open up the Americas).

To conclude, the balance sheet that we would offer of the consequences of the slave trade is as follows:

1. it retarded West African economic development by diminishing the dynamic effects of population growth and reducing the potential sources of human labour essential for such growth;

2. while opening up new commercial opportunities and sources for capital accumulation in certain areas, it at least

counter-balanced, and probably overshadowed these, by acting to reinforce existing social institutions and dominant social groups hostile to new forms of developmen ;

3. by attracting economic energy into commercial pursuits it perpetuated, and even reinforced, the tendency for the most powerful sector of West African social formations (the state sector) to play a parasitic role divorced from production and to dissipate wealth in redistributive and ostentatious activities;

the slave trade thus inhibited the development of the slave mode of production.

These hypotheses remain, however, on the theoretical level, unsubstantiated by historical data. Only a much closer inspection of the terms of the debate in the light of the experience of concrete social formations can begin to bear out their validity.

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