The Atlantic Slave Trade: Crash Course World History #24

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, my name is John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today we're gonna talk about slavery.

Slavery is not funny. In fact, it is very near the top of the list of things that aren't funny, so today's episode is gonna be a little light on the jokes but, I'm gonna help you understand what pre-Civil War Americans often euphemistically refer to as "the peculiar institution."

(Intro)

Slavery is as old as civilization itself, although it is not as old as humanity thanks to our hunting and gathering foremothers, but the numbers involved in the Atlantic slave trade are truly staggering.

From 1500 to 1880 CE somewhere between 10 and 12 million African slaves were forcibly moved from Africa to the Americas and about 15% of those people died during the journey.

I know you're saying that looks like a very nice ship, I mean my God, its almost as big as South America, yeah, not to scale, and those who didn't die became property; bought and sold like any commodity.

Where Africans came from and went to changed over time, but in all 48% of slaves went to the Caribbean, and 41% to Brazil, although few Americans recognize this, relatively few slaves were imported to the U.S, only about 5% of the total.

It's also worth noting that by the time Europeans started importing Africans into the Americas, Europe had a long history of trading slaves.

The first real European slave trade began after the 4th Crusade in 1204; the crusade that you will remember as "The Crazy One". Italian merchants imported thousands of Armenians, Circassian and Georgian slaves to Italy. Most of them were women who worked as household servants but many worked processing sugar, and sugar is of course a crop that African slaves later cultivated in the Caribbean.

Camera 2 side note; none of the primary crops grown by slaves--sugar, tobacco, coffee--is necessary to sustain human life. So in a way, slavery is a very early by-product of a consumer culture that revolves around the purchase of goods that bring us pleasure, but not sustenance.

You are welcome to draw your own metaphorically resonant conclusions from this fact.

One of the big misconceptions about slavery, or at least when I was growing up, is that Europeans somehow captured Africans, put them in chains, stuffed them on boats and then took them to the Americas.

The chains and ships bit is true as is the America part if you define America as America and not as 'Merica, but Africans were living in all kinds of conglomerations. From small villages to city-states to empires and they were much too powerful for the Europeans to just conquer. And in fact, Europeans obtained African slaves by trading for them.

Because trade is a two-way proposition, this meant that Africans were captured by other Africans and then traded to Europeans in exchange for goods; usually like metal tools or fine textiles or guns; and for those Africans, slaves were a form of property, and a very valuable one.

In many places, slaves were one of the only sources of private wealth because land was usually owned by the state.

And this gets to a really important point; if we're gonna understand the tragedy of slavery, we need to understand the economics of it; we need to get inside what Mark Twain famously called "a deformed conscience." We have to see slaves both as they were, as human beings, and as they were viewed, as an economic commodity.

Right, so you probably know about the horrendous conditions aboard slave ships, which at their largest could hold 400 people. but it's worth underscoring that each slave had an average of four square feet of space. That is 4 square feet. As one eye-witness testified before Parliament in 1791, "They had not so much room as a man in his coffin."

Once in the Americas, the surviving slaves were sold in a market very similar to the way cattle would be sold. After purchase, slave owners would often brand their new possession on the cheeks, again, just as they would do with cattle. The lives of slaves were dominated by work and terror, but mostly work.

Slaves did all types of work, from housework to skilled crafts work, and some even worked as sailors, but the majority of them worked as agricultural laborers. In the Caribbean and Brazil, most of them planted, harvested and processed sugar, working ten months out of the year, dawn until dusk.

The worst part of this job, which is saying something, because there were many bad parts, was fertilizing the sugar cane. This required slaves to carry 80 pound baskets of manure on their heads up and down hilly terrain.

MFTP:"Mr. Green, Mr. Green! ...Isn't there a poop joke in there somewhere?"

John Green: No, me-from-the-past, because this whole thing is too depressing!

When it came time to harvest and process the cane, speed was incredibly important because once cut, sugar sap can go sour within a day. This meant that slaves would often work 48 hours straight during harvest time, working without sleep in the sweltering sugar press houses where the cane would be crushed in hand rollers and then boiled. Slaves often caught their hands in the rollers, and their overseers kept a hatchet on hand for amputations.

Ugh.....I told you this wasn't going to be funny.

Given these appalling conditions, it's little wonder that the average life expectancy for a Brazilian slave on a sugar plantation in the late 18th century was 23 years.

Things were slightly better in British sugar colonies like Barbados, and in the U.S., living and working conditions were better still. So relatively good that, in fact, slave populations began increasing naturally, meaning that more slaves were born than died.

This may sound like a good thing, but it is of course it's own kind of evil because it meant that slave owners were calculating that if they kept their slaves healthy enough, they would reproduce and then the slave owners could steal and sell their children. Or use them to work their land, either way, blech!

Anyway, this explains why even though the percentage of slaves imported from Africa to the United States was relatively small, slaves and other people of African descent came to make up a significant portion of the U.S. population. The brutality of working conditions in Brazil, on the other hand, meant that slaves were never able to increase their population naturally, hence the continued need to import slaves into Brazil until slavery ended in

the 1880s.

So I noted earlier that slavery isn't new, it's also a hard word to define. Like Stalin forced millions to work in the gulags, but we don't usually consider those people slaves.

On the other hand, many slaves in history had lives of great power, wealth, and influence. Like remember Zheng He, the world's greatest admiral?He was technically a slave, so were many of the most important advisors to Suleiman the Magnificent. So was Darth Vader!

But Atlantic slavery was different and more horrifying, because it was chattel slavery, a term historians use to indicate that the slaves were move-able property.

Oh, it's time for the open letter?

An open letter to the word slave.

But first lets see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh. It's Boba Fett. Noted owner of a ship called *Slave One*. And apparently a ballet dancer. (Singing) Do do doloo do do doo...

Stan: That's a fine approximation of ballet music.
(Laughter)
John: Thank you Stan.

Alright, dear slave, as a word. You are over used.

Like Britney Spears, *I'm a Slave 4 U*, no you're not! Boba Fett's ship, *Slave One,* a ship can't be a slave!

But more importantly slave, you are constantly used in political rhetoric, and never correctly! There's nothing new about this,witness for instance, all the early Americans claiming that paying the stamp tax would make them slaves. And that was in a time when they knew exactly what slavery looked like!

Taxes, as I have mentioned before, can be very useful. I, for instance like paved roads. But even if you don't like a tax, it's not slavery. Here, I have written for you a list of all the times it is okay to use the word slave, oh, it is a one item long list!

Best Wishes, John Green.

So what exactly makes slavery so horrendous? Well, definitions are slippery, but I'm going to start with the definition of slavery proposed by sociologist Orlando Patterson.

It is "the permanent, violent and personal domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons." According to this definition a slave is removed from the culture, land and society of his or her birth suffers from what Patterson called "social death".

Ultimately then, what makes slavery slavery is that slaves are de-humanized. The Latin word that gave us 'chattel', also gave us 'cattle'.

In many ways Atlantic slavery drew from previous models of slavery, and took every that sucked about each of them and combined them into a big ball so that it would be the biggest possible ball of suck.

Stan am I allowed to say suck on this show? (pause) Nice.

Now to understand what I'm talking about we need to look at some previous models of slavery. Lets go to the Thought Bubble.

The Greeks were among the first to consider otherness a characteristic of slaves. Most Greek slaves were Barbarians and their inability to speak Greek kept them from talking back to their masters, and also indicated their slave status.

Aristotle, who despite being spectacularly wrong about almost everything was incredibly influential, believed that some people were just naturally slaves, saying "It is clear that there are certain people who are free, and certain people who are slaves by nature, and it is both to their advantage, and just, for them to be slaves"

This idea, despite being totally insane, remained popular for millennia. The Greeks popularized the idea that slaves should be traded from far away, but the Romans took it to another level.

Slaves probably made up 30% of the total Roman population, similar to the population of America at slavery's height. The Romans also invented the plantation, using mass numbers of slaves to work the land on giant farms called latifundia, so called because they were not fun.

The Judeo-Christian world also contributed as well, and though we are not going to venture into the incredibly complicated role that slavery plays in the Bible because I vividly remember the comments section of the Christianity episode, the Bible was widely used to justify slavery. And in particular the enslavement of Africans, because of the moment in Genesis when Noah curses Ham, saying "cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers".

This encapsulates the two ideas vital to Atlantic slavery: 1. that slavery can be a hereditary status passed down through generations, and 2. that slavery is the result of human sin.
Both ideas serve as powerful justifications for holding an entire race in bondage. Thanks Thought Bubble.

But there were even more contributors to the ideas that led to Atlantic slavery. For instance, Muslim Arabs were the first to import large number of Bantu speaking Africans to their territory as slaves. The Muslims called these Africans Zanj and they were a distinct and despised group, distinguished from other North Africans by the color of their skin.

The Zanj and territory held by the Abbasid staged one of the first big slave revolts in 869 CE, and it may be that this revolt was so devastating that it convinced the Abbasid that large scale, plantation-style agriculture on the Roman model just wasn't worth it.

But by then they'd connected the Aristotelian idea that some people are just naturally slaves with the appearance of Sub-Saharan Africans. The Spanish and the Portuguese, you no doubt remember, were the Europeans with the closest ties to the Muslim world because there were Muslims living on the Iberian Peninsula until 1492. So it makes sense that the Iberians were the first to these racist attitudes towards blacks.

And as the first colonizers of the Americas and the dominant importers of slaves, the Portuguese and the Spanish helped define the attitudes that characterized Atlantic slavery, beliefs they'd inherited from a complicated nexus of all the slave holders who came before them.

In short Atlantic slavery was a monstrous tragedy, but it was a tragedy in which the whole world participated, and it was the culmination of millennia of imagining the other as inherently lesser. It's tempting to pin all the blame for Atlantic slavery on one particular group, but to blame one group is to exonerate all the others, and by extension ourselves.

The truth that we must grapple with is that a vast array of our ancestors, including those we think of as ours, whoever they may be, believed it was possible for their fellow human being to be mere property.

Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, this show is written by my High School history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last weeks Phrase of the Week was "Cinnamon Challenge", I hate you for that by the way. If you want to suggest future Phrases of the Week you can do so in comments, where you can also guess at this week's Phrase of the Week or ask questions of our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.