

Slavery

Slavery – the ownership of one person by another – was an accepted feature of almost every society, everywhere in the world, for most of human history. This was one of the greatest of all evils. One of the many interrelated glories of our own society (The West) is that it has eradicated this evil within itself, fought it with great (but not yet total) success elsewhere, and put it permanently on the defensive morally and intellectually.

President Bush, visiting Senegal today, made some [comments](#) about slavery:

“Liberty and life were stolen and sold,” Bush said after touring a centuries-old house that was used as a processing center for countless thousands of Africans who were herded aboard ships that took them into slavery in America.

“Human beings delivered, sorted, weighed, branded with marks of commercial enterprises and loaded as cargo on a voyage without return,” Bush said. “One of the largest migrations in history was also one of the greatest crimes of history.”

There can be no doubt that this is the literal truth. And yet, in context, there is something misleading about the last sentence. For it seems to endorse a theory of historical causality which, though widespread, is a wicked calumny, namely that slavery was essentially a Western institution, a Western crime against the peoples of other societies. Speaking about the evil of slavery in terms of the historical actions of America in particular was a magnanimous and arguably appropriate thing for a US President to do while standing in this terrible place, where Americans committed appalling crimes against humanity on a massive scale. Nevertheless it will give comfort to those who would place a similar, and now utterly erroneous, interpretation on present-day events. We, who are not standing in that place, need to incorporate the broader context into our world view as well. It is very well known that Westerners took several million slaves from Africa; but, for instance, the history of Africa and slavery is not complete without the story of the African Arabs who [kidnapped and enslaved an](#)

[estimated million Westerners](#), and of how *that* evil tradition [was](#)

ended.

Most importantly, though the West perpetrated slavery, it also (particularly Britain and the US, unlike others) rejected slavery, chose to abolish slavery, fought bitter wars against slavery, and created the arguments, the conceptual framework – including the very concept of a ‘crime against humanity’ – and the way of life that is incompatible with slavery and is the only real protection against its return.

Tue, 07/08/2003 - 21:02 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

I could not agree more

One of the things that has irritated me for years is how, in America, the word "slavery" is almost universally used to refer to enslavement of Africans in the United States.

Any history text used by a public school will inevitably use the word "slavery" *only in that context*. I agree that it was big part of our history, but big enough to redefine the word?

by [Ewin](#) on Thu, 07/10/2003 - 23:53 | [reply](#)