



Race-myths from the extreme left

Editor's Introduction -- Many of today's schoolbooks promote the extreme left's brand of racism. Textbook-writers disseminate race-myths and racial stereotypes that leftists favor, and the writers conceal any information that contravenes the leftists' racial ideology. Here is an article that describes how these practices have shaped the treatment of slavery -- and especially the treatment of the Atlantic slave trade -- in some world-history books.

from *The Textbook Letter*, November-December 1992

How Textbooks Obscure and Distort the History of Slavery

Jonathan Burack

In the year 869, a group of slaves rose in a great rebellion against the Abbasid empire -- an empire whose territories now form Iraq, Kuwait and parts of Iran, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. For fourteen years, the slaves fought their Abbasid masters in the marshlands of what is now southern Iraq. And in the end, they were crushed. Their leader's head was paraded through the streets of Baghdad, and their uprising became nothing more than a bloody footnote to the history of Islam.

Not even as a footnote, however, does the uprising appear in any of six world-history texts that I have examined during an inquiry into the treatment of slavery in schoolbooks:

Merrill's *The Human Experience* 1990
McDougal, Littell's *Links Across Time and Place* 1990
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's *World History: People and Nations* 1990
Prentice Hall's *World History: Patterns of Civilization* 1991
Heath's *World History: Perspectives on the Past* 1992
Scott, Foresman's *History and Life* 1993

Viewed in one way, this omission may not seem grave, for the rebellion in 869 had no lasting impact on the development of Islam or on the overall course of history. Viewed in another way, though, the omission illustrates a serious failing of all the books in question, because the slaves who staged that rebellion were blacks. They had been imported from East Africa to drain marshes and to toil under conditions as bad as any that would exist, much later, in Brazil or in Mississippi or on the Caribbean islands.

If the books that I have surveyed are representative, students in our high schools are reading little, if anything, about the slave trade that delivered millions of blacks to Islamic societies in the Middle East. Yet this commerce, established centuries before Europeans arrived on the scene in the mid-1400s, affected the history of the Middle East and Africa alike. Moreover, it was part of a bigger system whose later ramifications would include the great Atlantic slave trade -- the trade that eventually would convey more than 10 million blacks to the New World. Students cannot hope to understand the Atlantic trade unless they know about the African trade from which it arose.

This isn't to say that the books entirely ignore the slavery that existed in Africa before the Europeans' coming. The books usually do mention it, but the descriptions are fleeting at best, always distorted, and often apologetic. The textbook-writers do not project the idea of slavery as a moral outrage. They rouse our sense of outrage only when, later, they describe the Atlantic trade and the

Europeans who controlled it.

The slave trade that supplied the Middle East had two major components: the East African and the Trans-Saharan.

The East African trade handled slaves from the eastern and southern parts of the continent. Most of the slaves were natives of a region that now includes such states as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Mozambique; they were moved to ports on the Indian Ocean or the Red Sea, then were shipped to Islamic lands lying to the east and the north. In his book *Transformations in Slavery*, the historian Paul E. Lovejoy estimates that 2.4 million slaves were traded along the East African and Red Sea coasts during the years 800 to 1600 [[see note 1, below](#)]. Most were ultimately sold to customers in the Middle East and North Africa, who used them as soldiers, concubines, administrators and laborers.

The Trans-Saharan trade handled slaves captured throughout western Africa. These were assembled at various points on the southern edge of the Sahara (in a region that now includes Chad, Niger, Mali and Senegal) and then were taken northward, across the desert. They eventually were distributed to buyers throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

How is this commerce being presented in schoolbooks? Consider the East African component first:

The schoolbooks I have examined say nothing substantive about the East African trade, and some of them say nothing whatsoever. For example, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's *World History: People and Nations* merely mentions slaves in a brief listing of trade goods:

Sailors explored the seas and developed trade routes linking all shores of the Indian Ocean. Africans exported gold, slaves, ivory, hides, and tortoise shells and imported porcelain and weapons.

Merrill's *The Human Experience* describes Arab and Persian domination of trade in ports on the Indian Ocean, but it does not mention slaves at all. Neither does Prentice Hall's *World History: Patterns of Civilization*. Neither does D.C. Heath's *World History: Perspectives on the Past*. The Heath book, in describing the commerce that flowed through East African city-states, says only this (on page 319):

For centuries, the Arabs acted as middlemen in the Indian Ocean. They brought Asian luxuries to Africa and African luxuries to Asia. In the busy markets of Kilwa, Mombasa, and Malindi, Arab sea captains displayed porcelain bowls and vases from China and jewels and cotton cloth from India. In return, they obtained African ivory, gold, tortoise shells, and rhinoceros horns. The 50-pound elephant tusks were carved into Indian chess pieces and the hilts for swords and daggers. Tortoise shells were made into decorative combs.

Scott, Foresman's *History and Life* is another book that fails to mention slaves among the products that moved in the East African trade after the year 700, though Scott, Foresman's writers (like Heath's) are diligent in telling about elephant tusks.

It seems strange for a book to extol the importance of ivory while making no mention of the slaves who transported the ivory from Africa's interior to the coast -- slaves who sometimes were sold at the coast, by their African or Arab owners, along with the ivory that they had carried. It seems all the stranger because these history books regularly tell how commodities were transported across the Sahara: by caravans of camels. In the East African trade, however, the presence of the tsetse fly precluded the use of hoofed animals for transportation, because the fly transmitted pathogens that were lethal to such beasts. Traders therefore used salable slaves to transport ivory and other goods, and this arrangement helped to make the trading system profitable.

While the East African slave trade is hardly acknowledged in these world-history books, the Trans-Saharan trade, along with the prevalence of slavery in West Africa, receives somewhat more attention. The books typically focus on the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai (which flourished in the years from about 500 to 1600), and they typically mention slaves as trade goods. Yet none of the books makes clear how important slavery was to the West African kingdoms' growth and power. Even McDougal, Littell's *Links Across Time and Place* fails in this respect, though McDougal, Littell's writers later will offer an unusually good treatment of the slave trade between West Africa and the Americas.

The two most important commodities in the commerce that crossed the Sahara were gold and salt. These should get special attention; and in the books that I have sampled, they do. But why do all the books fail to tell that both commodities were produced by slaves, and that slaves made up the armies that held the West African kingdoms together?

The books also fail to give any sense of the importance of slaves as goods in West African commerce. Lovejoy estimates that 5 million West African slaves were sent across the Sahara during the thousand years that ended in 1600. After 1600, the trade expanded. It lasted well into the 20th century, and it may still exist. Does this not argue for giving some serious attention to it in our history textbooks?

Apparently not. Instead, we find a heavy emphasis on the wealth and accomplishments of the African kingdoms, perhaps with sidebars that tell about jewelry or offer inflated estimates of the sizes of African armies. If slaves appear at all, they appear in connection with the elaborate pilgrimage of Mansa Musa, a king of ancient Mali, who journeyed through Cairo to Mecca in the early 1300s. And the textbook-writers' aim is surely not to tell about slavery but to underscore Mali's power and wealth. See, for example, pages 314 and 315 of Heath's *World History*:

Five hundred slaves, each carrying a six-pound staff of gold, arrived first [at Cairo]. They were followed by 100 camels, each of which carried a 300-pound load of gold dust. . . .

The people of Cairo learned that Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim who was making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. His visit to Cairo created a sensation. One Egyptian later wrote that Mansa Musa gave away so much gold that the value of this precious metal declined for 12 years.

A shorter account appears in HBJ's *World History*, with each of the 500 slaves carrying gold in the form of a four-pound bar, rather than a six-pound staff.

The depiction of West African kingdoms sometimes decays into giddy boosterism. On page 334 of Scott, Foresman's *History and Life*, for example: "Benin is one of the best examples of a strong, just, and materially advanced African culture that developed in the absence of European or Middle Eastern influence." The writers do not explain what they mean by "just" or why they assign that description to a kingdom whose economy depended heavily on slave raiding and the slave trade.

Dubious Comparisons

The textbooks that I have surveyed provide no significant treatment of African or Middle Eastern slavery until they are ready to introduce *American* slavery and the slave trade that spanned the Atlantic. When that moment comes, the books almost invariably make a point of depicting African or Middle Eastern slavery as benign, comparing it favorably with the slavery that evolved in the New World. We see this even in McDougal, Littell's *Links Across Time and Place*. That book correctly tells that Africans were partners with Europeans in operating the Atlantic trade, and that Africans, not Europeans, captured and enslaved most of the people who eventually were shipped to the Americas. Yet the book also says, on page 459:

In most African societies, slaves had some legal rights and often were integrated into the families of their masters. Slaves in Africa were permitted to marry nonslaves, and the children of slaves often were freed. In contrast to North America, the practice of herding big gangs of slaves to work on plantations and isolating them from the free population was unusual.

Such impressions are common [\[note 2\]](#). They also are dubious, and many scholars have challenged them. Roland Oliver, for example, in his recent book *The African Experience* [\[note 3\]](#), gives this assessment for Africa as a whole:

Evidence from one end of the continent to the other agrees that the captured or bought slave, male or female, juvenile or adult, was a person entirely without rights, who could be put to any kind of work, punished at will, killed as a sacrificial victim or sold as a chattel either inside or outside the community.

For a rather egregious example of how textbooks mislead students, look at page 566 of Prentice Hall's *World History*:

Slavery had existed in Africa since ancient times, as it had in many other parts of the world. In Africa, slaves were often people captured in war. Others were people who sold themselves into slavery for food and shelter during drought or famine. Sometimes a society took slaves in order to increase its population. In time, many slaves were absorbed into their new societies.

The transatlantic slave trade was very different from African slavery. Africans were forced to leave their own societies and were shipped thousands of miles across the Atlantic. In the Americas, they faced a completely unfamiliar culture. . . .

The distinction implied here is false. The writers clearly want to promote a romantic, happy-family picture of African slavery, portraying it as fundamentally different from slavery in the New World. Unquestionably, the transatlantic trade differed from the African trade in many ways, but the essential scheme was the same in both cases: People were captured and then were taken far away from their own societies -- so far that the idea of escape became meaningless. Only when escape was unimaginable could the captives be freed from their chains; only then could they be resocialized, taking up their subservient roles in a new land. This was true for slaves inside Black Africa, for slaves who were marched across the Sahara, and for slaves who were shipped across the Red Sea or the Atlantic.

A number of schoolbooks suggest that slaves in Africa and the Middle East were regularly able to win their freedom. Two things can be said about such claims. With respect to *most* African societies, the claims are false. And when societies did show high rates of manumission, the moral implications of such rates were exactly opposite from what the schoolbooks convey.

In any ongoing system of slavery, a high manumission rate necessarily created a high demand for replacements. In other words, for every slave who was set free, a free man or woman had to be enslaved. The moral significance of this is clear if we recall that the taking of new slaves often involved the slaughter of innocents, and the new slaves themselves usually suffered substantial mortality while they were being transported to market. All in all, a society in which manumission was rare would have caused less agony and death, in the distant populations from which its slaves were drawn, than a society in which the manumission rate was high.

What About Racism?

Another misrepresentation seen in some textbooks is the claim that racism was not a factor in the slave systems of Africa or the Middle East. Scott, Foresman's *History and Life*, on page 252, says that "there was little racism in the Muslim world." Then, on page 334, it offers a grand non-sequitur:

Some international trade in slaves also existed in the Muslim cities. However, this slave trade was not based on race since both light- and dark-skinned people were sold in slave markets [note 4].

Even without the non-sequitur, Scott, Foresman's assertions would certainly seem odd to anyone who had looked through Bernard Lewis's *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, with its dozens of quotations from Middle Eastern writers [note 5]. Here is Lewis's rendering of a pronouncement by the 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun: "Therefore, the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery because [Negroes] have little [that is essentially human] and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals."

With the partial exception of McDougal, Littell's book, the world-history texts that I have surveyed fail to provide legitimate accounts of African slavery or of the slave trade within Africa. Further, all the books state or imply a stark contrast between African or Middle Eastern slavery and the slavery that Europeans fostered in the Americas. Though some real distinctions can be made, the distinctions suggested by these books aren't valid. Such distortion -- combined with mawkish writing about the splendors of African kingdoms -- merely replaces old myths of African barbarism with new myths of African innocence and glory. And in the process, history is sacrificed.

Notes

1. Paul E. Lovejoy. 1983. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. Cambridge University Press (London). 347 pages. [[return to text](#)]
2. The notion that New World slavery had few (if any) Old World precedents is not confined to high-school books. It appears, for example, in ". . . to form a more perfect union . . .", a middle-school American-history text sold by Walsworth Publishing Company. In the teacher's edition, a note advises the teacher to "Emphasize that the institution of slavery in America was sharply different from slavery elsewhere." [[return to text](#)]

3. Roland Oliver. 1991. *The African Experience*. HarperCollins Publishers (New York). 284 pages. [\[return to text\]](#)
 4. The idea that racial distinctions made New World slavery unique is another notion that shows up in middle-school books as well as high-school books. Walsworth's ". . . to form a more perfect union. . ." insists that racism made American slavery singularly "cruel" (page 121). [\[return to text\]](#)
 5. Bernard Lewis. 1990. *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, an Historical Enquiry*. Oxford University Press (New York). 184 pages. [\[return to text\]](#)
-

Jonathan Burack is editor-in-chief of Knowledge Unlimited Inc. (Madison, Wisconsin), a company that specializes in instructional materials for the social studies.