

Indian Slavery in the Americas
Lecture given at Sonoma State on November 16, 1992

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Note: This will be a talk about Indian slavery as an aspect of the history of the Americas. Before I begin, I want to be clear with you about the meaning that I assign to the terms "slave" and "slavery" as applied to Native American experience. The colonial system in the Americas subjected most persons of very race to hard labor, low pay, low social status, severely restricted life opportunities and the threat of harsh physical punishments. Among those so subjected were the various categories of supposedly "free" persons: wives, children, wage laborers, tenant farmers, artesans, peddlars and so forth -- and the various categories of people whose freedoms were severely restricted by law: slaves, indentured servants, apprentices, soldiers, prisoners, seamen, even the members of religious orders. Slaves, most commonly, were African immigrants and their descendants.

Indians in particular were always subjected in the ways I have suggested, to the extent that they and their communities fell under the control and scrutiny of the European authorities. But among the exploited and despised Indians of the Americas, the great majority experienced their subjection to the colonial authority as members of viable autochthonous communities retaining important elements of their own languages and cultures, and a measure of control over their own land and resources. But a certain number of Indians in every country in the hemisphere (a great many more of them than is usually acknowledged) were physically removed from their home communities, transported to distant places, defined in the white man's law as chattels (that is, as articles of personal, movable property), and subjected only then to the harsh regime of colonial labor. The human experiences of such people were very different from those of the majority of the exploited Indians of the colonies; and they have rarely even been mentioned in the history books.

What I will be talking about, then, is not the general question of the exploitation and mistreatment of Indians through the systems of *encomienda*, *repartimiento*, *mita*, tribute collection, frontier warfare or actual genocide in colonial

America, but specifically the slave experience of physical removal, transportation, redefinition in the law and systematic exploitation. That, as we we will see, was a very much more common experience in every part of of the hemisphere than is generally recognized.

A final note has to do with the question of slavery in Native American society. (elaborate: something like it under the state systems. But dependent status elsewhere was of a very different order. Nothing about Native American life prepared people for decommunalization and treatment as commodities.)

This talk will sketch some ideas that are central to a book project in comparative colonial American history in which I am engaged, which attempts to survey the whole experience of the Native American peoples with European slaving and slavery. The principal concerns of this project are to determine the time periods in which Indian slaving was practiced on each frontier of the Americas, the mechanisms of enslavement, the legal provisions for it, the numbers of people enslaved, what became of the people who were enslaved, and the impact of the Indian slave trade on the histories of the peoples from among whom these slaves were taken. As much as possible, the book will attempt to focus the reader's attention on slaving and slavery as an Indian experience rather than as a European practice, to explain the persistence of Indian slavery on some frontiers and its short life on others, and to situate the whole phenomenon in Native American history. This project came out of the research I did years ago for a doctoral thesis on the history of the Indian slave trade in the Amazon valley, and the history of the Indian slaves and other "domestic Indians" in that region; but the purpose now is to focus attention on the general phenomenon of Indian slavery, and on the large role that I believe that institution played both in the operation of the more peripheral economies of colonial America, and in the depopulation of Native America.

Columbus

The story of how Christopher Columbus and his men invaded the Greater Antilles during the last decade of the 15th century has been on everybody's mind this Fall, as we commemorate the quincentennial of those events. One of the more interesting, not to mention appalling aspects of that story, is the readiness with which those first conquerors of America turned in their search for profits to the enslavement of the Native Americans they found there. Within a few days of his first landfall in the Bahamas, Columbus determined on the one hand that the natives appeared to be strong, good looking and intelligent people -- and on the other that since they went about naked, had no iron tools or weapons and few possessions of

any kind, were peace-loving rather than warlike and seemed to have no religion, it would be legitimate to for the Spaniards to round them up and carry them off so that they might "learn to speak" as he put it in his journal, be instructed in Christianity, and be put to work as the servants of such of their countrymen as could afford to buy them. Some two dozen of these captives were carried back to Spain when the first expedition returned home just three months later, most of whom died at sea before they got there. Six Native American people were presented as gifts to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella; and of these two were sent back on the second voyage to serve the Spaniards as interpreters.

During that second expedition, Columbus seized upon the fears generated by a traditional war between the Arawak Tainos of the island of Hispaniola and their Carib neighbors to the south, to propagate the myth of Carib cannibalism as a "crime against nature" which could be used to justify the enslavement of Indians. Wherever the Indians offered a spirited resistance to the Spaniards' efforts to conquer them, this too was a justification for enslaving those who had not been killed in battle. It wasn't long before the European invaders were persuaded that cannibalism was very widespread among the Native Americans (in fact it was rare), and that it was practiced especially by those who resisted conquest the most. In the absence of any other major source of removeable wealth, Columbus determined that Indian slaves would be one of the principal exports of the new colony. In fact he proposed in cold-hearted fashion to exchange these captives for the imports of cattle and other supplies that were needed from the mother country. The Queen rejected this idea, and the Crown decreed that the inhabitants of the new colony were free persons who should be paid wages for their involuntary labor; but in practice the settlers paid little attention to

Several hundreds of people were sent to Spain as slaves before the end of 1495; and many more were parcelled out among the Spanish settlers for their service. Indians held individually as slaves did most of the gold-panning, construction and agricultural labor for the settlers of Hispaniola during the first decade following the conquest. Then when the native Tainos very quickly fell victim to epidemic disease, over-work, starvation and the depression they experienced in the face of the systematic destruction of their way of life, the settlers moved to replace them where possible with Indian slaves acquired from the other Caribbean islands, from the Florida and Venezuelan mainlands and eventually from Mexico and Central America. An estimated half-million Indian slaves were transported from Nicaragua alone during the second quarter of the 16th century; and the capture of

Indian slaves was a main objective when Hernán Cortés' followers pushed the conquest beyond Mexico City out into the northeastern and northwestern regions of that country.

This early determination of a colonial policy based on the systematic violation of human rights did not of course come to Christopher Columbus out of nowhere. In European tradition it was the unquestioned right of the conqueror to enslave people who had been defeated in a just war and might otherwise have been killed in battle. In Columbus' own lifetime this legal tradition had been given new meanings by Spain's final victory in the centuries-old war for the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from the Moroccan Muslims, during which the Catholic monarchs had ordered that the inhabitants of cities taken by assault be offered for sale to pay for the costs of war. The prevailing attitude towards slavery in newly conquered territories had also been influenced by the Portuguese establishment of slave-trading outposts on the West African coast, and especially by the conquest of the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean whose uncivilized native inhabitants the Guanches had for the most part been subdued by force and sold to the mainland as slaves. Columbus himself had participated in the West African trade, may have joined in the conquest of the Canaries and had lived for years on the Atlantic island of Madeira where sugar was being raised with slave labor. The enslavement of the weak and the culturally different was therefore entirely normal in his experience, as was the subordination of any instinct of human solidarity to the pursuit of profit -- the Admiral's visionary Christian piety notwithstanding.

But the large-scale enslavement of Indians for service in Europe or even in the West Indies turned out within a very few years to be an abysmal failure. It didn't make anybody rich; and it didn't repopulate the Spanish West Indies. The number of native inhabitants there declined relentlessly, from several million people in 1492 to just a few tens of thousands by 1550. By then the emphasis in the recruitment of labor for the Indies had shifted to West Africa, and the New Laws issued by the Spanish King in 1542 had forbidden slavery as a way to coerce native labor -- except as a punishment for resistance to or rebellion against the establishment of the Spanish colonial order and the propagation of its Roman Catholic state religion. As we shall see, however, it was going to take a whole lot more than well-intentioned reformist legislation to eliminate the institution of Indian slavery from colonial society in the Americas.

Generalizations from the first decades.

These first experiences with Native American slavery revealed a few general characteristics that would endure. The first of was that generally speaking Native Americans turned out to be poorly suited for enslavement. The work regime which most of the native inhabitants of this hemisphere had developed was one which required strenuous exertion, but in which work was greatly varied day by day, and involved differing physical and mental challenges to the worker. It was a regime in which the only purpose of work was to produce goods for the benefit of one's family and community; for most there was no experience of producing a surplus for the benefit of others. In the few places where great Indian states had been established which were capable of collecting tributes and compelling labor for public works, the exactions were finite and bearable; and they were kept predictable so as not to disrupt the subsistence cycle. There was no prior experience in this hemisphere that would prepare a Native American worker for routinized, disciplined labor under the threat of physical violence -- labor organized without regard for the people's expectations, for the explicit purpose of producing a surplus for the employer and denying as much as possible of it to the worker and his family. The result was that Native American slaves generally resisted the exactions of the European labor system where they could, and when compelled to it by force they would often commit suicide or fall into a severe and debilitating depression and despondance.

The second general characteristic evident in the first decades of experience with Indian slavery was that the European conquest introduced a variety of disease microorganisms to which the native American population had no genetic resistance. The result here as elsewhere was that the populations of Indian communities were decimated over and over again during the colonial centuries, and the overall population of the hemisphere declined by between 50% and 75% during the first century and a half. Indian slaves were hit much harder by this phenomenon than any others -- given the harsh conditions of their employment, the poor nutrition brought on by the interruption of traditional subsistence activities, and the depression brought on by systematic exploitation, uprooting and the ever-presence of death from epidemic disease.

A third general characteristic of Indian slavery and the Indian slave trade in America was that despite these horrors, it turned out as was true in West Africa that Indians could often be persuaded to assist the Europeans in rounding up Indian slaves, or to engage in the Indian slave trade on their own account. This was due to the colonialists' establishment of alliances with one tribe in warfare against another,

and it was due especially to the dependence described by Alfred Métraux in his article on "The Revolution of the Ax" (describe). A good example of this was the slave trade of the Caribs with the Dutch in the Orinoco valley of northern South America (retell).

Finally, as a fourth general characteristic of the Indian slave system visible from the start, it could be noted from the beginning that in a few remote places where the numbers of Indian slaves were large enough, enough of them survived despite the terrible sufferings that most experienced, to form the core populations of groups of "domestic Indians" who were deprived like the African slave communities of the Americas of most elements of their traditional languages and cultures and survived on the lower levels of the European dominated colonial societies. These groups eventually lost themselves, through race mixture with Blacks and Europeans, in the general populations of colonial society.

Examples of the persistence of Indian slaving.

Given the difficulty of obtaining and disciplining Indian slaves, their short life expectancy under conditions of exploitation by Europeans, these slaves were generally viewed as undesirable by both settlers and colonial administrators, and replaced in the labor force wherever free Indian laborers, African slaves, European indentured servants or a population of free immigrant workers became available. But slaving was generally allowed in practice as a punishment for Indian resistance; and there were important exceptions to the rule of undesirability which kept Indian slaving alive for a long period.

New England

South Carolina

New Mexico

War vs. Apaches on North Mexican frontier

Chile

Bolivia (Santa Cruz de la Sierra)

Mission kidnappings

Capture of women & children for domestic service

Indian Slavery in the Amazon Valley

During the 17th, 18th & early 19th centuries, the Amazon Valley was systematically drained of people by slave-raiders and slave-traders seeking to provide a labor force for the impoverished Portuguese colony of Pará at the great river's mouth. Indian slavery was introduced by the first settlers there, and though

officially abolished in 1755 it continued under other names and with only minor changes until well beyond the end of the colonial period. This seems to have been the widest-ranging and longest-lasting Indian slave trade in the history of the Americas, and the most important to a regional economy. Virtually all production in colonial Pará was carried out by Indian slaves or by other Indian forced laborers. Even the ostensibly "free" Indians residing in the mission villages of the region could be recruited by force to labor alongside slaves in the settlers' enterprises. Once "reduced" and resettled or "domesticated," as the saying went, the Indians of whatever legal status in Pará were obliged to spend most of their lives engaged in involuntary labor for only token wages. The chronic shortage of Indian labor was seen as the principal barrier to the economic development of the colony in all periods.

The Amazon region also suffered exceedingly from a series of epidemics of smallpox and measles during the colonial period and afterward. These afflictions arrived with travellers from abroad, and after attacking the Indian working people of Pará they would sweep up the great river to lay waste the villages of the hinterland. Each plague killed a third or more of the inhabitants of every settlement it ravaged, and there was virtually no defense against them. Disease combined with the system for the exploitation of Indian labor to sap the vitality of individuals, communities and cultures and in Hobbes' term to make life "nasty, brutish and short" for nearly everyone in colonial Amazonia. It is difficult to distinguish between the slave trade and epidemics as causal factors in the decline of the native Amazonian peoples; but the result of both working together was the drastic depopulation of the entire region, and particularly of the once densely-settled alluvial floodplains of Amazonia, by the middle of the 18th century. It was only by means of long and painful process of recovery that the few Indian survivors in these areas joined with the few Europeans and Blacks of the colony to produce the caboclo people and culture which are to be found scattered along the water routes of the Amazon region today.

The history of the Portuguese Indian slave trade in the Amazon valley ran parallel to that of the system for Indian slaving which was operated by the Dutch from Guyana in the Orinoco valley to the north. The differences were due to the competitive economic advantage that the Dutch enjoyed over the Portuguese. Both groups of colonial settlers had established themselves on the north coast of South America in the first quarter of the 17th century; but the Dutch West India Company factors could offer better axes, knives, cutlasses, fishhooks and lengths of cloth, and more of them per slave, than the poorer and less well-organized Portuguese of Pará.

The result was that with the help of the Caribs and others, the inter-tribal trade of a vast area extending beyond Orinoquia and into the northern Amazon basin was soon reoriented toward the delivery of Indian slaves and a variety of forest products to Guyana rather than to Pará. When the Portuguese travelled the hundreds of miles upriver to the central Amazon valley in about 1640, they found the Indians there already accustomed to receiving Dutch goods from the trading-partners of some yellow-haired white men to the north.

Exasperated by this competition, the Portuguese were obliged to move aggressively into the interland in order to obtain the slaves and forest products which would never be brought down to them by Indian middlemen as was being done on a large scale to the Dutch in Guyana. They were obliged to adapt their way of life more thoroughly to that of the humid tropics, and learn more from the Indians than did the Dutch. Paradoxically, the Portuguese never enjoyed the cordial relations with Indian trading partners that the Dutch maintained; they therefore had more contact with them over the years, and this in turn had disastrous results for the Indian population of Amazonia. The initial disadvantage in trade had the far-reaching implication that over the long run the Amazon valley became Portuguese territory rather than Dutch. The Portuguese and their caboclo offspring never enjoyed the cordial relations with Indian trading partners that the Dutch maintained; but they had much more contact with them over the years, and this in turn had disastrous results for the Indian population of Amazonia. They were obliged to adapt their way of life more thoroughly to that of the humid tropics -- and in so doing they learned more from the Indians than did the Dutch. In the end it was the Portuguese rather than the Dutch who made themselves masters of the Amazon basin.

The productive system of colonial Pará was primarily an extractive one. A few hundred canoes manned by Indian slaves and forced laborers from the missions would set out for the sertão each year to collect wild cacao, sarsaparilla, vanilla and a variety of other "precious drugs" -- or to salt fish, extract the useful oil from giant turtle eggs, or preserve the meat of the manatee. These collecting expeditions soon got into the habit of rounding up a few Indians if they could find them, to bring back and sell as slaves. There were a few thousand settler households, as well as some cattle ranches, sugar plantations and primitive manufacturing establishments near the towns of Belem do Para and Sao Luiz in nearby Maranhao -- all of them continually hungry for Indian workers. The market was a relatively small one; but

the casual slaving done by collecting crews was nevertheless seldom sufficient to meet the demand for Indian labor.

During the first decades of Portuguese settlement, the principal mechanism for recruiting additional labor had been warfare. Parties of settlers with their Indian allies would simply raid their "undomesticated" Indian neighbors, and capture people wholesale to be sold. Sometimes, when an excuse for declaring a "just war" could be trumped up, the expedition might be sent out by the government itself as a *tropa de guerra*. Captives would be divided among the soldiers and the Indian chiefs who had participated in the raid, once the King and governor or the private financial backers of the expedition had taken the lion's share. Then they would be auctioned off in the public square. Under this system, the population of the lower Amazon valley was reduced quite drastically during the 17th century. The one-time Indian allies faded away as they fell victim to disease or were themselves enslaved; hundreds of once-prosperous villages were abandoned; and before long only the few communities that had managed to withdraw into places deep in the forests or beyond the first impassable rapids of the rivers, remained beyond European control. Each time an epidemic decimated the labor force of Maranhão and Pará, a cry would go up from the settlers for more slaves to prevent the final ruination and abandonment of the colony itself. In each decade, the slavers had to range farther and farther westward in order to bring back any people at all.

In the last half of the 17th century, this unruly system of labor recruitment came under vigorous attack from the missionaries of the colony. The Jesuits in particular lobbied in Lisbon for reforms which would place the Indian slave trade under government control and Jesuit supervision. The result of their work was the institution of an annual *tropa de resgate*, a slave-buying expedition outfitted at government expense, staffed by government employees and accompanied by a Jesuit chaplain to supervise its transactions. The *tropa* did not replace the earlier systems of recruitment, but became a very effective supplement to them. It was sent up the Amazon to buy slaves from any friendly Indian chiefs who might be disposed to sell them -- with the official rationalization that since the Amazonian Indians were all cannibals (which the Portuguese continued for many decades to insist that they were in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary), they only made war on their neighbors to capture people for slaughter. To buy their prisoners of war was therefore to save the unfortunate wretches from being eaten. Having done this, the slave buyers were entitled to exact a lifetime of service from the resgatados or "rescued ones," or to sell them as slaves to the highest bidder. The

tropa was expected to put an end to "unjust" enslavements, since the Jesuit chaplain was to interview each slave about the circumstances of his/her enslavement, and draw up a legal document in each case to certify that it was a just one. When slaves were found to have been captured unjustly (that was, captured for the purpose of being sold to the Portuguese rather than according to the conventions of intertribal warfare), they were to be shipped off to Pará just the same, but held there only "conditionally" for a period of five years as slaves -- after which they would be remanded to the custody of a Jesuit missionary. On no account, even in the law, were they expected to be returned to their homes.

After the legal abolition of Indian slavery and the tropa de resgate in the 1750's, the private trade continued on a clandestine basis for many decades; and the tropa de guerra continued to be employed to subdue groups of Indians found guilty of resistance or rebellion. The settled Indian labor force was placed under the supervision of government-appointed Village Directors charged with managing production for the benefit of the state and the settler elite, as well as for their own profit. Manpower needs under the Directorate system were met by arranging voluntary or involuntary descimentos, in which whole villages of upriver tribesmen were relocated in the settled areas with the "assistance" of government troops. In later years, great numbers of Indian men continued to be recruited by force for service on public works projects and in the regional militia.

The net effect of casual private slaving, erratic incursions by the tropas de guerra, the regular operation of tropas de resgate from the 1690's to the 1750's, and of descimento and military conscription in years after, was that between about 1620 and about 1820, as an average at least a thousand Indians a year were transported from their upriver home territories to Pará and Maranhão. There they were subjected to forced labor, to systematic deculturation, to harsh physical punishment, to chronic malnutrition and epidemic disease. Most people who fell into these catastrophic circumstances survived only a few months or a year or two before succumbing and having to be replaced with new recruits from the sertão. A more counter-productive system of production, one more relentlessly destructive of human life and of its own labor force, would be difficult to imagine.

Conclusion

At an early stage in the relations between Europeans and Native Americans on every settlement frontier of the Americas, individuals or groups of Spanish, Portuguese, English, French or Dutch transfrontiersmen undertook to enrich themselves by supplying the labor needs of the new colonies with Indian workers.

In order to do this they would kidnap individual Indians, or capture groups of them in war, or purchase them from their enemies. Then they would transport these people to places far from their homes, and convert them into slaves whether by legal or customary means, and offer them for sale to other Europeans. As slaves, according to European law and practice, such Indian captives were obliged to provide labor services to their captors or new owners with no more compensation than minimal sustenance. Indian slaves were generally subjected to a harsh labor discipline and severe physical punishments, they were susceptible to sale and purchase; they were deprived of most human rights; and for the most part they were denied the comforts of family and community. Generally speaking, the Indians caught up in this primitive system of colonial exploitation did not thrive. Most died within a short period of time from a combination of disease, harsh treatment and despair; only exceptionally did they survive to reestablish communities of "domestic Indians" which were capable of reproducing themselves either culturally or as a labor force. Thereafter the survival of communities of "domestic Indians" was accomplished in large measure through the mechanisms of race mixture and assimilation, with the result that after a few generations such communities lost themselves within the general population of racially mixed people who form the majority in most countries of the Americas.

Because Indian slaves seldom survived the hardships to which they were subjected by the colonial system, they have left little visible trace on the social history of the Americas. The phenomenon of Indian slavery is barely noted in most of our national and regional histories -- mentioned, if at all, as a lamentable but ephemeral phase in the evolution of more viable and more durable systems for the exploitation of land and labor. Yet several millions of Native American people ended their lives in colonial slavery; on some frontiers the institution of Indian slavery endured for a long period of time; and on few (most notably that of Portuguese Amazonia), it was the principal means of labor recruitment for a colonial economy. Somehow, some day, this dimension of the colonial history of the Americas and of Native America must be acknowledged.