Preface to the Second Edition

Twenty years have passed since I first offered an overview of the history of slavery in Africa (Lovejoy 1979). The first edition of this book was my attempt to relate the internal development of slavery in Africa to external forces. My approach was to use the newly available quantifiable data on the scale, timing, and direction of the slave trade across the Atlantic to explore the political, economic, and social history of Africa, looking for correlations in the trans-Atlantic trade with developments in western Africa. From an Africanist perspective, such an approach also required consideration of the Islamic trade in slaves, Indian Ocean patterns, and Dutch use of slaves at the Cape of Good Hope. My approach tried to tie the known dimensions of the external trade in slaves to a history of slavery in Africa. Since the publication of the first edition, there has been considerably more research done on the demography of the slave trade, resulting most especially in the combination of various data into a single database, the W.E.B. Du Bois database, which draws on records of more than 27,000 slaving voyages between Africa and the Americas.¹

In preparing the second edition, I have relied on the Du Bois database, although in certain minor ways, the Du Bois data have been supplemented.² In the first edition, I generated my own synthesis of available data on the scale of the slave trade, drawing heavily on Curtin’s earlier work (1969). This overview was in turn subjected to critique and revision.³ The Du Bois database makes much of the debate over the initial Curtin census (1969) and the subsequent revisions obsolete. In addition, other statistical studies have meant that most of the tables in the first edition have had to be modified. Hence most of the tables in this edition are new, although reference to the earlier literature is retained for purposes of comparison. To take account of the new demographic data, I have altered the discussion of the various tables accordingly, and additional references have been provided to reflect ongoing scholarship on the history of Africa and the role of slavery in that history. Where appropriate, I have
qualified or otherwise modified my analysis in exploring the implications of the revised figures.

Although I have relied on the Du Bois database for my analysis of the demography of the slave trade, I am well aware of numerous weaknesses in its conceptualization and implementation. The database is weak on Portuguese and Spanish sources, and hence is less reliable in studying the trade to Brazil and Hispanic America, especially in the early period, than the trade to the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only is there a need for caution because of the extent of lost or corrupted data, but much of the database is based on derived statistics that warrant additional caution. To calculate the scale of the trade, scholars have been forced to make a variety of assumptions, such as the carrying capacity of ships on the basis of ship tonnage, or the loss of slaves during the trans-Atlantic passage, in order to standardize material for analysis. In using the database, therefore, I am aware of the risks in presenting a false degree of certainty. Methodologically, I have attempted to use the imputed statistics of the Du Bois database to verify or otherwise inform historical developments in Africa that are also documented in other ways. The analysis suggests that demographic data can reveal significant issues of history, in this case the impact of forced migration through slavery on the history of Africa.

In developing a thesis that emphasizes the transformation of servile institutions under the pressures of the slave trade, particularly the trans-Atlantic and Islamic slave trades, I have sought to place African events and processes at center stage, despite my emphasis on the importance of external influences. Pursuing insights that I gained from Walter Rodney, I have focused on the impact of the slave trade on change in Africa, fully recognizing that transformations always occur in context, which is inevitably local. Hence it is not a question of whether internal or external influences were more important, but how these influences affected the course of history. I have not been interested in demonstrating that the trans-Atlantic slave trade caused African underdevelopment, although I think that the evidence demonstrates a causal relationship. Rather, I have wanted to explore the ways in which the demand for slaves in the Americas and elsewhere affected the political economy of the areas from where the slaves came, and in so doing to demonstrate the interaction between local and global forces. Critics, however, have sought to demonstrate that internal economic, political, and social factors were so overwhelmingly dominant or otherwise impervious to external influence that there were no transformations within Africa that resulted from the slave trade. For Eltis, economic indicators are used to demonstrate the economic marginality of the slave trade on African economies. For Inikori, slavery did not exist in Africa during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the transformation that occurred took place in the Americas in a racialized context. Thornton, on the other hand, argues that slavery was so pervasive in Africa that the Americas could be settled by slaves only because of their prior availability. For Thornton, the extent of transformation has been overstated.
Based on available demographic data, it seems clear that the impact of trans-Atlantic slavery varied considerably, and much of the impact was in fact concentrated in relatively restricted regions of western Africa. Similarly, the trans-Saharan slave trade and Indian Ocean trade were concentrated in their impact, affecting areas along clearly marked trade routes and political frontiers that changed over time but are nonetheless discernable in the historical record. The analysis is supported by the simulated demographic study of Manning, which attempts to demonstrate the probable range of impact of different slave regimes. As Manning also argues, enclaves of external influence had a ripple effect into the interior, which by the nineteenth century meant that slavery was widespread in many parts of Africa, not only in areas that had become enmeshed in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In this book, I explore changes in the political economy that account for the spread of slave use within Africa, specifically exploring the effects of Islam, external markets, and the actions of slaves and former slaves themselves in the debate over abolition and emancipation.

Theoretically, I draw attention to the process of change that resulted in the intensified use of slaves as a “mode of production” based on slavery, in which the institutionalization of enslavement, the formal structure of trade, and the codification of slavery in law and custom guaranteed that slavery was central to the production process. The conceptual framework that emphasizes slavery as a system, and not simply an institution, is intended to demonstrate a fundamental difference between slavery in those places in the diaspora where many of the enslaved were forced to go, including the Americas and the Islamic world north of the Sahara, and slavery in sub-Saharan Africa itself. Enslaved Africans were found in Africa as well as in the Americas and North Africa, but they were taken to distant lands as slaves; they were not enslaved there. I argue that the specific features of slavery as a mode of production in Africa harnessed the mechanisms of enslavement with the slave trade and slave use.

Elsewhere, enslavement was not an integrated part of the slave system, other than through the biological reproduction of slaves themselves and the purchase of slaves from Africa. There was no such geographical and structural separation between enslavement and the trade and use of slaves. In Africa, the structure of slavery that underpinned the social and economic formations of the largest states and societies was closely tied to enslavement itself. The book explores the implications of these differences, but only in the African context.

Many issues arising from the analysis of the transformations in the political economy of slavery that are presented here cannot be examined in a revised edition. The extent to which local situations were influenced by the market for slaves, and how that influence was shaped, requires detailed, local studies, such as those that have since been published. The available studies, many of which are included in the revised, and expanded, bibliography in this edition, demonstrate that the concentration of slaves in the export sector and along trade routes led to the transformation of local conditions and society in ways that are comparable to those discussed here. Because the centralization of slavery
Preface to the Second Edition

activity at specific places on the coast directed the flow of people, the slave trade thereby affected the ethno-linguistic identities of the enslaved. Although unwillingly, people had to adjust to the forces of change. Moreover, slaves of similar ethno-linguistic background, including those who accommodated themselves to the dominant-language community, tended to be concentrated in specific places in the Americas, and indeed in the Islamic world, so that slavery had the effect of shaping the ethnic map of the Americas, as well as altering the ethnic map of Africa. However, the issues relating to the connections between the African homelands of the enslaved and the diasporas of slavery in the Americas and the Islamic world, including the continuities and disjunctures of diaspora history, are not explored in this study. Nonetheless, I believe that understanding the history of servile institutions in Africa is essential to the study of slavery in the Americas and elsewhere. Even though the story of these influences and connections is beginning to be understood, a full study of ethnicity, historical continuity, and cultural change is warranted, although it is surely beyond the scope of this study. This revised book is intended to provide useful background for an analysis of the linkages between diaspora and Africa.

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