

Historia Da Escravidão

Maurilio De Gouveia

Excellent history of world slavery. Mentions the United States twice in 425 pages

História Da Escravidão - Maurilio De Gouveia - Amazon doesn't have the Portuguese accents right

I read this book from the Georgetown University library eleven years ago as I prepared to travel to Brazil. It is one of those touchstone books that wants to call you back. Sadly, by the time the spirit moved me, they had disacquired a large part of their Portuguese collection, this among them.

Trades slavery from the classical era through Europe and into modern black slavery. It was almost accidental. Henry the Navigator, working from Sagres, Portugal, was attempting to find a sea route to India. Nobody knew the extent of Africa, but they knew India was to the east. He was attempting to find a sea route south of Africa.

Once they got beyond Moracco, hard going because their caravel ships tacked badly, and they were going against the wind, they came to the slave coast. And what was for sale? Slaves. As a novelty, they bought a few and took them home to Lisbon.

Gouveia does a good job of recounting the history of slavery in classical times, especially in Europe, and its gradual disappearance with the decline of the Roman empire. It was never outlawed, but it stopped making much sense in the majority of contexts. In some domains, such as the Arab world, it continued to be actively practiced. There was an extensive trade in black slaves along the east coast of Africa.

Slavery was a long-established institution. Portuguese law, derived from Roman law, had statutes governing how slavery was managed. The simple fact was that Europe did well without slavery. They had their own institutions such as serfdom to serve the same ends. I add later that the eastern Slavs under Catherine the Great made the serfs into actual slaves, in that they could be bought and sold as property.

Black slaves were a useless commodity on the Lisbon market. There were too many Portuguese who had been driven off the land by the enclosure and would work for almost nothing. However, with the discovery of the sunny, uninhabited island of Madeira things changed. It would support sugar culture, and slaves were ideal to perform the cultivation.

This same logic was soon applied to sugar and Brazil. Slaves were also useful in sawmills, needed for building boats, and other types of plantations. They didn't work out as well for mining. Black slaves worked better than Indians for several reasons. First, the Indians didn't like to work and could not be as easily coerced. Secondly, it was their country and they were ingenious about melting out into the forests. Lastly, the Jesuits found that saving the Indians' souls was problematic when the lay members of their society were enslaving them.

Brazil eventually imported six times as many slaves as the US. Brazilians treated them worse, literally working them to death because Africa was close enough that they could be easily imported. Far fewer female slaves were imported; it made no sense to breed them when they were so easy to import. Many slaves escaped and formed some long-lived communities of their own in the jungles. The Portuguese very often arrived without their own women. The result was that whites and blacks alike made do with Indians for female companionship, resulting in the most racially mixed society in the world.

Slavery ended by very slow degrees in Brazil. There was no war, as in the United States, simply mounting international pressure, mostly from Britain, to end slavery. They outlawed the importation, then the sale, and finally, twenty-five years after the US (ie, 1889), the institution itself. The country had such ineffective central government that even then some forms persisted.

In closing, I note again that Gouveia sees slavery in the United States as a footnote. This perspective is totally at odds with the way it is seen in the United States, where it counts as our country's original sin. It was not original with Americans in any sense, except that we were the first country in which the dominant race fought a bloody war to ensure the freedom of slaves of another race.