



Abolition Was Exceptional

Publish Date:

November 2021

Claims that slavery built the West are not supported by evidence, and are confounded by Abolition, argues historian and IPA Adjunct Fellow, Bradley Bowden.

We should hardly be surprised American conservatives reacted with outrage to *The 1619 Project* launched by *The New York Times* in August 2019, as it turned on its head their commitment to ‘exceptionalism’, the notion that with its seemingly unique commitment to liberty the USA functions as a ‘light on the hill’ for the world. Instead, *The 1619 Project*—taking its title from the landing of the first slaves in Virginia in 1619—asserted all that was exceptional about America could be traced to its record of slavery.

Out of slavery—and the anti-black racism it required—grew nearly everything that had truly made America exceptional ... its exceptional penchant for violence, its income inequality ... and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day.

My interest was piqued by Nikole Hannah-Jones’ lead article in *The 1619 Project*, which leads one

to believe that not only is American democracy founded upon a lie but also that virtually every American success was founded upon slavery. Only through slave labour, Hannah-Jones declares, were American settlements transformed “into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire”. Similarly, “the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing” of slaves and plantation products “made Wall Street ... the financial capital of the world”.

Thus—as an historian of capitalism and business—my first task was to address this question: is the claim of *The 1619 Project* that America’s slavery explains the great wealth of America, both then and now, actually true? That said, my second but no-less-important question concerned the moral claim that slavery is uniquely a stain on the heritage of the US, and by inference the civilisation of which it forms part. Is this true, or even partially true?

My own research over many years allowed me without much difficulty to confirm the answer to the first question is: no, America’s creation of wealth is not attributable to slavery. Instead, we must look to its embrace of personal liberty, protection of property, the rule of law, and other key ideas and institutions of Western Civilisation that enable wealth creation and human flourishing.

In considering the second question, I was familiar already with the story of William Wilberforce and the Abolitionists, and indeed the willingness of Abraham Lincoln and the northern States to fight a war to end slavery. Just these bare historical facts should be sufficient for a rebuttal, but further research provided even more. An abolitionist movement was active decades before William Wilberforce achieved notoriety as its most eloquent Parliamentary advocate, one which had already disposed of the claim that the West relied upon slavery to create its great increase in wealth.

Authors of *The 1619 Project* argue deeply ingrained racism drove modernity.

The unsung hero of that period is Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), born of a religious and highly intellectual father. In addition to being a Church of England minister his father was Master of one of England’s oldest private colleges, Wisbech Grammar School. A gifted student, Clarkson followed in his father’s footsteps. The turning point in Clarkson’s life came in 1785 when the University of Cambridge offered a prize for the best dissertation, written in Latin, on the evils of the slave trade. By winning the prize, Clarkson was brought to the attention of anti-slavery activists who until then were largely comprised of Quakers (dissenters whose impact was muted by dint of them being outside the Church of England/Anglican caste which mostly ruled Great Britain).

A founding member of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, Clarkson abandoned his chosen career to become a life-long anti-slavery activist. Reflecting upon this decision later in life, Clarkson remembered his decision was guided by the realisation “there could be no hope of success, except that it [abolition] should be taken up by someone who would make it an object or business of his life”. Working with noted anti-slavery advocates within Parliament such as William Wilberforce and Edmund Burke, Clarkson worked tirelessly as a community organiser. Undertaking an almost endless series of campaigns, Clarkson’s efforts turned the anti-slave trade agitation into a mass movement. In 1788 alone, 103 community petitions were

submitted to Parliament. Among these petitions were submissions from the City of London, and Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Slavery was as common in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa as in classical Greece.

This was subsequently recorded in his great study, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of The Abolition of The African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, published in 1808. Admittedly no literary masterpiece, this stretches over two volumes and more than 1100 pages, sometimes drowning the reader in detail. One reads not only of key parliamentary speeches but also of campaigning efforts waged in every British town and district, large and small. Drawing on records at Liverpool's Customs House subsequently lost to wartime bombing, Clarkson's book also destroyed the myth perpetuated by slave traders that their commerce was key to Britain's prosperity. After examining the record of ship movements and crew hiring in Liverpool, the city most heavily engaged in the slave trade, Clarkson concluded "its opulence ... was not indebted" to the slave trade. Of the 170,000 tons of shipping engaged in foreign commerce in 1787, Clarkson estimated only 13,000 tons—7.6 per cent—was involved in slaving. Nor did the slave trade's inflated claims to economic significance afford it much protection from the public scorn that doomed it to legal extinction in Britain in 1807. Summing up the general view, the man often acknowledged as the father of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, is cited as saying "no case of [economic] necessity could be made out strong enough to justify this monstrous traffic".

Clarkson's study is everything *The 1619 Project* is not. Whereas Clarkson's account is a first-hand record of someone who dedicated his life to slavery's abolition, the latter's authors never acknowledge that the abolition of slavery—not its continuation—was the great contribution of Western Civilisation. Whereas Clarkson's massive work is given over to almost endless detail, *The 1619 Project* is characterised by journalistic hyperbole. Nowhere do we witness anything remotely resembling Clarkson's attempts to carefully weigh up the economic importance of slavery vis-à-vis the non-slave economy. Whereas Clarkson's claim to fame rests on a work of impressive detail, that of Nikole Hannah-Jones—the most acclaimed of *The 1619 Project* authors—relies on 12 magazine pages.

Far from acknowledging the ways in which the Enlightenment heralded in a new dawn for freedom, the authors of *The 1619 Project* argue that deeply ingrained racism was the real driver of modernity. The "inhumanity visited on black people by every generation of white Americans" meant, Hannah-Jones claims, that, "for the most part black Americans fought back alone". Conveniently ignored are not only the efforts of people such as Clarkson, but also the hundreds of thousands of Americans who died to end slavery in the Civil War. Also 'disappeared' from history in *The 1619 Project* are the 'Freedom Riders' from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, people who risked their lives by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their African-American compatriots. People such as Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, white New Yorkers whose reward for their efforts was a shallow grave in a Mississippi swamp (events portrayed with appropriate outrage in the big-budget Hollywood movie, *Mississippi Burning*, in 1988).



The mission should be to ensure no one's contribution remains unrecognised—that events and people are portrayed fairly and truthfully. A desire to condemn slavery and consider the years it took following abolition to expunge its heritage from America is no reason to rewrite the historical record. It is legitimate to consider where slavery sits within broader consideration of the legacy of Western Civilisation; but then it must be holistic, and accurate. Taking the long view of Western Civilisation, one does need to acknowledge that the Western Civilisation of classical antiquity—like most other pre-industrial civilisations—had a troubled relationship with slavery.

The capacity of slavery to divide is evident in the opening pages of Homer's *Iliad*, the first and greatest literary work in the history of Western Civilisation. As warriors who placed individual freedom above any other virtue, Agamemnon and Achilles quarrelled over captive slave girls. Forced to surrender his captive, Chryseis, to placate the wrath of Apollo, Agamemnon seizes Achilles's captive in recompense. In doing so, he humiliates Achilles by declaring that "mine own self will I go to thy hut and take Briseis of the fair cheeks ... that though mayest well know how far greater I am than thou". Ill-advised, this humiliation caused Achilles to withdraw from military combat with almost fatal consequences for the Greek cause.

The use of slaves remained endemic throughout classical antiquity. In classical Athens and Roman Italy, slaves comprised 30-40 per cent of the total population. As Keith Hopkins observed in *Conquerors and Slaves* (1978), the reasons were economic rather than cultural.

Nor was the economic logic behind slavery confined to the West. For, as Hopkins correctly noted,

A pre-industrial society can be defined, not merely as a society whose major source of energy is muscle power of men and animals, but also as a society whose small surplus production is bespoke, embedded, routinely used for the same purpose, year after year.

Caught within a series of Malthusian traps, slavery offered pre-industrial societies a means of acquiring surpluses otherwise beyond their means. Accordingly, slavery was as common in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa as it was in classical Greece. In 1807, as Hugh Thomas noted in his definitive study of the Atlantic slave trade, there were "more slaves in Africa ... than in the Americas". In the Muslim states of West Africa, "there were slaves in households, in workshops, in the fields, in the harems".

What is peculiar about Western Civilisation is not the use of slavery during antiquity, but rather its abandonment in the Christian era that followed the Roman Empire's collapse during the fifth century AD. Part of the reason for the West's abandonment of slavery was economic. Amid the collapse of empire, Western Europe experienced a profound demographic crisis. Labour became a more valuable commodity than land. To maintain and motivate their labour force, landholders broke up their estates, offering farms to their former slaves in return for a share of the annual harvest. Known to history as "serfdom", this system of share-cropping proved more remunerative than slavery. Effectively, peasants were given permanent tenure of their farms, incentivising them to increase production for their own benefit as well as that of the feudal lord.

People of every race and color were enslaved—and enslaved others.

The disappearance of slavery also reflected changing cultural values. Unlike classical Athens and Imperial Rome, where only citizens were valued, Christianity respected individual worth regardless of material circumstance. As one early church leader, archbishop of Constantinople, St John Chrysostom, advised his flock: “I do not despise anyone ... Even if he is a slave, I may not despise him; I am not interested in his class, but his virtue.”



The Slave Market of Constantinople painting by Sir William Allan, 1838.

By 1400, slavery was long extinct in Western Europe. Even serfdom was in terminal decline. Only in the European periphery, most notably in Russia and the Iberian Peninsula, did conditions akin to serfdom survive into the Age of the Enlightenment. In the 15th century, these peripheral regions also witnessed a revived involvement in the slave trade, selling captives into the slave markets of Muslim North Africa and the Turkish Ottoman Empire. For, as Hugh Thomas noted, while slavery became extinct in Christian Europe, the Muslim world continued to accept it “as an unquestionable part of human organisation”. As the Portuguese and Spanish reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula gathered pace in the 15th century, ever-increasing numbers of Muslim prisoners of war made their way to the North African slave markets.

As American economist Thomas Sowell has noted:

Of all the tragic facts about the history of slavery, the most astonishing to an American today is that, although slavery was a worldwide institution for thousands of years, nowhere in the world was slavery a controversial issue prior to the 18th century. People of every race and color were

enslaved—and enslaved others. White people were still being bought and sold as slaves in the Ottoman Empire, decades after American blacks were freed.

Despite its profound demographic effects in reshaping the racial and ethnic composition of the Americas, it is easy to exaggerate the slave trade's economic significance. Across its entire 350 year history (1520-1870), the number of slaves shipped to the Americas averaged only 3,235 per year. Everywhere, the small-scale nature of pre-industrial shipping directed plantation production towards high-value, low-volume luxury foodstuffs and intoxicants: sugar, coffee, and tobacco.

Contrary to the popular imagination and studies such as Sven Beckert's recent *Empire of Cotton*, US cotton also played little role in Britain's Industrial Revolution until 1820. Prior to 1802, when the Industrial Revolution (1760-1830) was more than half over, there were no imports from the US. Even after 1802 the supply was often negligible. In three years (1808, 1809, 1811) it was close to zero. During the War of 1812 (1812-1815), there were no US exports at all.

The comparative insignificance of slavery to the process of European industrialisation runs contrary to narratives hostile to Western Civilisation that have emerged since the 1960s. Writing in 1961, the West-Indian born, Paris-educated psychiatrist, Franz Fanon, asserted in *The Wretched of the Earth* that,

Europe is literally the creation of the Third World ... The ports of Holland, the docks of Bordeaux and Liverpool were specialised in the Negro slave trade, and owe their renown to millions of deported slaves.

The 1619 Project is heir to this narrative, which sees Western Civilisation as nothing other than a system of exploitation built upon slavery. Missing from *The 1619 Project* is mention of the industries in which slavery played little or no part: coal mining, iron and steel production, engineering, and electrification. Yet these industries, concentrated in the North rather than the South, really underpinned American industrialisation and economic success. This gave the North and the South divergent interests as well as economies. Reflecting on their profoundly different political economies, French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s that the South had "special reasons for preserving slavery which the North" had not.

The British squadron captured 1,635 slave ships and freed 360,000 slaves.

Dishonest in its characterisation of US success, *The 1619 Project* is mendacious in its lack of acknowledgement of the abolitionist campaigns that freed African-American slaves from their predicament. Also absent is any sense of the shared humanity captured in the emblem of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade; an emblem that depicts a bound African slave above the motto: *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*

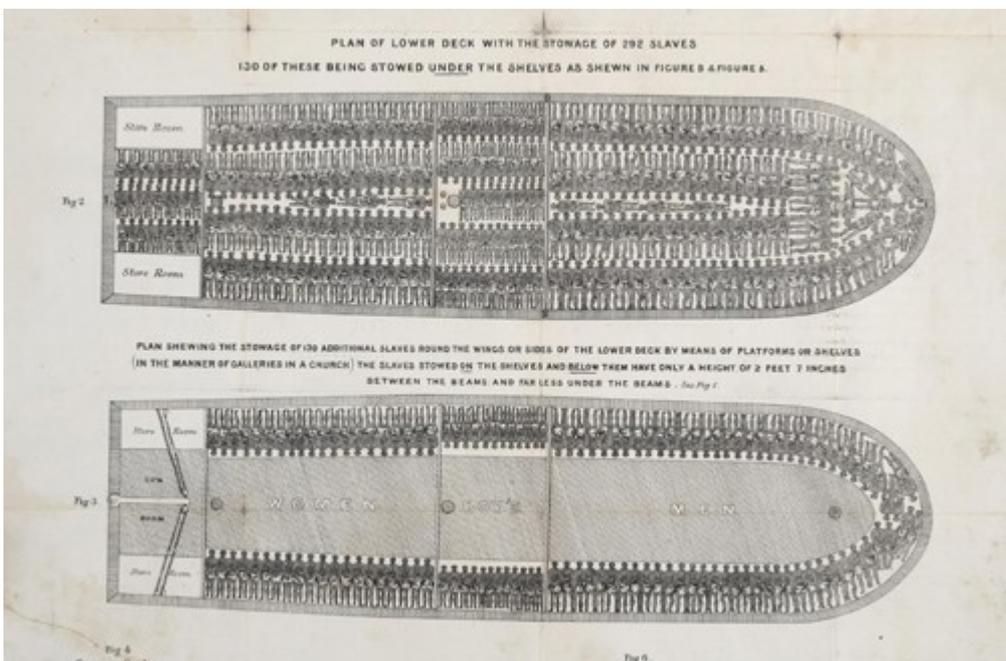
Founded in 1787 with Clarkson as its main organiser, the Abolition Society drew together anti-slavery movements on both sides of the Atlantic. The Society's first Chair, Granville Sharp, led the campaign to change common law attitudes to slavery; a campaign that culminated in the famous

ruling of 1772 by Lord Mansfield in the case of James Somerset. In the House of Commons, William Wilberforce acted as the Society's principal spokesperson. Across Britain's ports and towns, Quakers provided the Society with its core constituency. Among the Society's foundation members, William Dillwyn represented American Quakers and anti-slavery activists. By 1787, these American abolitionists were already a significant force. In Pennsylvania, the local society's president was Benjamin Franklin. Where the Society differed from its American counterparts was in seeking only the abolition of the slave trade, rather than slavery *per se*. Explaining this decision's rationale, Clarkson recorded,

By asking the Government of the country to do this, and this only, they were asking for that, which it had an indispensable right to do; namely, to regulate or abolish any of its branches of commerce.

The Society's reasoning was well founded. For in seeking the destruction of the slave trade the Abolition Society was taking aim not only at British slavery but also that of other nations. Of the research conducted by Clarkson and the Abolition Society, none had a greater impact than that of an engraving created in 1788 to depict the circumstances endured by slaves on the voyage from Africa. By the shipping standards of the time, the ship depicted in the engraving, the *Brookes*, was unusually large. Boasting a dead-weight of almost 300 tons, it was twice the size of the typical sailing ship. The ship's spacious holds, however, provided no solace to those crammed inside. As depicted in the engraving (pictured left) published by the Society, the following space was the maximum allowed:

... to every man slave six feet by one foot four inches ... to every woman five feet by one foot four, to every boy five feet by one foot two, and to every girl four feet six by one foot.



The Abolition Society commissioned and circulated this engraving of below decks in the slave ship, *Brookes*, causing the desired empathy

and outrage.

Whereas previous literary discussions of the slave trade had often left little mark, the widely-circulated print of the *Brookes* made “an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it”. The outrage engendered by the Abolition Society’s efforts is indicated by the size of the parliamentary vote in favor of ending the slave trade. In the House of Commons vote, held in February 1807, there were 283 in favor and only 16 against. The vote in the House of Lords was almost as overwhelming, 125 in favor and 17 against.

Slavery was incompatible with capitalism’s emphasis on economic liberty.

Nor was the vote against the slave trade an empty gesture. Immediately on the passage of the abolition bill, a naval squadron was dispatched to the West African coast. Over the next 50 years, the British squadron and its allies captured 1,635 slave ships and freed 360,000 slaves. Diplomatic pressure caused Spain to also abjure involvement in the slave trade from 1820. Across the Atlantic, the Abolition Society’s sister organisations also made spectacular progress. Between 1780 and 1804, all Northern states enacted laws to bring slavery to an end within their borders. A federal bill passed in March 1807 made American involvement in the international slave trade illegal from 1 January 1808, the first date allowed under the nation’s Constitution. Thomas Sowell records:

In 1862, a ship carrying slaves from Africa to Cuba, in violation of a ban on the international slave trade, was captured on the high seas by the US Navy. The crew were imprisoned and the captain was hanged in the United States—despite the fact that slavery itself was still legal at the time in Africa, Cuba, and in the United States.

If slavery persisted after 1808, it was nevertheless increasingly clear this venerable institution had become a detested pariah. This was hardly a new development. In its Western European heartlands, slavery was effectively cast aside with the fall of the Roman Empire. Profoundly at odds with the Christian emphasis on individual worth, slavery was also incompatible with capitalism’s emphasis on economic liberty and choice. That slavery re-emerged in the New World is thus largely an aberration, one produced by a chain of events that can be traced back to Portugal and Spain’s earlier involvement in the Muslim slave trade of North Africa.

That it was eventually destroyed—not only in the New World, but also in Africa—is one of Western Civilisation’s greatest achievements. For nowhere else in history do we witness a society that has turned its back on slavery so completely and irrevocably.

Bradley Bowden is an Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs and a Professor in Griffith University’s Griffith Business School.

This article from the [Winter 2021 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by IPA Adjunct Fellow, Bradley Bowden.