**Myths and Misconceptions: Slavery and the Slave Trade**

by Steven Mintz

**Slavery and World History**

**Myth**: Slavery is a product of capitalism.  
**Fact**: Slavery is older than the first human records.  
  
**Myth**: Slavery is a product of Western civilization.  
**Fact**: Slavery is virtually a universal institution.  
  
**Myth**: Slavery in the non-Western world was a mild, benign, and non-economic institution.  
**Fact**: Slaves were always subject to torture, sexual exploitation, and arbitrary death.  
  
**Myth**: Slavery was an economically backward and inefficient institution.  
**Fact**: Many of the most progressive societies in the world had slaves.  
  
**Myth**: Slavery was always based on race.  
**Fact**: Not until the fifteenth century was slavery associated primarily with people of African descent.

**Enslavement and the Slave Trade**

**Myth**: New World slaves came exclusively from West Africa.  
**Fact**: Half of all New World slaves came from central Africa.  
  
**Myth**: Europeans physically enslaved Africans or hired mercenaries who captured people for export or that African rulers were “Holocaust abettors” who were themselves to blame for the slave trade.  
**Fact**: Europeans did engage in some slave raiding; the majority of people who were transported to the Americas were enslaved by Africans in Africa.  
  
**Myth**: Many slaves were captured with nets.  
**Fact**: There is no evidence that slaves were captured with nets; war was the most important source of enslavement.  
  
**Myth**: Kidnapping was the usual means of enslavement.  
**Fact**: War was the most important source of enslavement; it would be incorrect to reduce all of these wars to slave raids.  
  
**Myth**: The Middle Passage stripped enslaved Africans of their cultural heritage and transformed them into docile, passive figures wholly receptive to the cultural inputs of their masters.  
**Fact**: Slaves engaged in at least 250 shipboard rebellions.

**Slavery in the Americas**

**Myth**: Most slaves were imported into what is now the United States.  
**Fact**: Well over 90 percent of slaves from Africa were imported into the Caribbean and South America.  
  
**Myth**: Slavery played a marginal role in the history of the Americas.  
**Fact**: Slave labor made it profitable to mine for precious metal and to harvest sugar, indigo, and tobacco; slaves taught whites how to raise such crops as rice and indigo.  
  
**Myth**: Europeans arrived in the New World in far larger numbers than did Africans.  
**Fact**: Before 1820, the number of Africans outstripped the combined total of European immigrants by a ratio of 3, 4, or 5 to 1.  
  
**Myth**: The first slaves arrived in what is now the United States in 1619.  
**Fact**: Slaves arrived in Spanish Florida at least a century before 1619 and a recently uncovered census shows that blacks were present in Virginia before 1619.

**Slave Culture**

**Myth**: The slave trade permanently broke slaves’ bonds with Africa.  
**Fact**: Slaves were able to draw upon their African cultural background and experiences and use them as a basis for life in the New World.  
  
**Myth**: Plantation life, with its harsh labor, unstable families, and high mortality, made it difficult for Africans to construct social ties.  
**Fact**: African nations persisted in America well into the eighteenth century and even the early nineteenth century.  
  
**Myth**: Masters assigned names to slaves or slaves imitated masters’ systems of naming.  
**Fact**: Slaves were rarely named for owners. Naming patterns appear to have reflected African practices, such as the custom of giving children “day names” (after the day they were born) and “name-saking,” such as naming children after grandparents.  
  
**Myth**: Slaveholders sought to deculturate slaves by forbidding African names and languages and obliterating African culture.  
**Fact**: While deculturation was part of the “project” of slavery, African music, dance, decoration, design, cuisine, and religion exerted a profound, ongoing influence on American culture.  
**Fact**: Slaves adapted religious rites and perpetuated a rich tradition of folklore.

**Economics of Slavery**

**Myth**: Slaveholders lost money and were more interested in status than moneymaking; slaves did little productive work.  
**Fact**: Slaves worked longer days, more days, and more of their life.  
  
**Myth**: Slavery was incompatible with urban life and factory technology.  
**Fact**: Sugar mills were the first true factories in the world; slaves were widely used in cities and in various kinds of manufacturing and crafts.  
  
**Myth**: Slaves engaged almost exclusively in unskilled brutish field labor.  
**Fact**: Much of the labor performed by slaves required high skill levels and careful, painstaking effort.  
**Fact**: Masters relied on slaves for skilled craftsmanship.

**Religion**

**Myth**: West and Central Africans received their first exposure to Christianity in the New World.  
**Fact**: Catholic missionary activities began in the central African kingdom of Kongo half a century before Columbus’s voyages of discovery and Kongo converted to Catholicism in 1491. A sizeable community of African Christians developed around Portuguese settlement.  
  
**Myth**: Priests and missionaries were primarily responsible for converting slaves to Christianity.  
**Fact**: In Latin America, slaves were instructed not by European clergy but by African Christians, who spread a specifically African interpretation of Christianity.  
  
**Myth**: Upon arrival in Latin America, slaves were given hasty instruction in a complex foreign religion in a language they could barely understand.  
**Fact**: A certain number of slaves were baptized Christians and others were familiar with Christianity.  
  
**Myth**: The Catholic Church did not tolerate the mixture of Catholicism with traditional African religions.  
**Fact**: In Kongo and in Latin America, the Church did tolerate the mixture of Catholicism with African religions, allowing Africans to retain their old cosmology, their understanding of the universe, and the place of gods and other divine beings in the universe.  
  
**Myth**: Before the Civil War, southern churches were highly segregated.  
**Fact**: In 1860, slaves constituted about 26 percent of Southern Baptist church membership.  
  
**Myth**: Slave Christianity was essentially a “religion of docility.”  
**Fact**: Christianity was dual-edged and marked by millennialist possibilities; whites could not prevent black preachers from turning Christianity into a source of self-respect and faith in deliverance.

**Resistance**

**Myth**: Slaves were brainwashed and stunned into submission and rarely resisted slavery.  
**Fact**: Resistance took a variety of forms ranging from day-to-day resistance, economic bargaining, running away and maroonage, and outright rebellions.