Classical Sociological Theory: Introduction

A The Classical Tradition

1. Role of wisdom
2. People are naturally unequal: some have more wisdom
3. Language is for finding wisdom and truth
4. After Christianity, leading role of Church in finding truth
5. Great chain of being
    a. God, Church hierarchy, King, Aristocracy, Commoners
6. Society as a family or body (corporatism)
    a. Head of society like a father
    b. The different parts fit together and are (or should be) in harmony
    c. The parts are organized in corporate structures, not individuals

B The Individualist/Utilitarian Tradition

1. Hobbes and Social Contractarianism
    a. State of Nature
        1) Individuals as atoms
        2) Individuals have complete sovereignty over themselves
        3) People motivated by desire/pride and fear of death: maximizing their utilities
        4) People are equal: all have desires; all fear death; all are mortal
            a) Implicitly democratic

5) War of every person against every other person

6) Condition of anarchy and strongest person winning; but strongest person must also fear

7) Denial that religion is effective in reducing fear

8) Problem of aristocratic pride

b. Social Contract to build state and society

1) Rational people will give up sovereignty to state

2) Note prisoner's dilemma: rationality of social contract ineffective against aristocratic pride and religious zeal

2. Locke's moderation of this view

a. Society can create state
b. Right of revolution
c. Toleration

3. Adam Smith and the harmonization of individualism

a. Theory of Moral Sentiments

1) "Sympathy" leads to comparison
2) Comparison leads to striving
3) Striving changes whole face of the globe

b. Wealth of Nations

1) People are equal, but have different talents; have tendency to "truck, barter and exchange one thing for another"

2) This leads, not to war, but to peaceful complementarity

3) Market society as a social contract:

a) Feudal society as anarchy, state of nature, warfare, mafia turf-battle

b) Market society as a pacified society

(i) Order and good government

(ii) An expanding pie displaces violent confrontation

c) The Invisible Hand

d) The night-watchman state

4. Bentham and Utilitarianism

a. Motto: The greatest good for the greatest number

1) Calculation of pleasures and pains

b. Based on the same atomism, egalitarianism, and self-interest as Hobbes

1) Now explicitly democratic
2) Maintains the same peaceful and harmonious orientation as Smith

c. Promoted Liberal reformism in England

1) Reducing privilege
2) Widening franchise
3) Improving living and working conditions
4) Supporting toleration

5. Criticisms of Utilitarianism

a. Economics became institutionalized and separated

b. Socialists criticized atomism as leading to new forms of privilege and thus being undemocratic

c. Sociologists criticized atomism as empirically false

d. Psychologists criticized pleasure/pain calculations as simplistic (Pygmalion: Bentham "Pushpin as good as Poetry," JS Mill, GB Shaw, My Fair Lady)

e. Moralists criticized isolation of atoms, loss of community, decline of altruism

6. By the period between the two world wars, Utilitarianism appeared to be dead, but since the 1950s, it has made a come-back in sociology

   a. Homans and Exchange Theory

      1) Criticizes Parsons' reification of "society"

      2) Society is composed of people doing things for each other and thereby forming solidaristic bonds

      3) Blau shifted theory from emphasis on individual psychology to structures of interaction

      4) Note anomalies discovered from structural perspective

         a) Arrow's impossibility theorem

         b) Schelling's theories of "bandwagon effects" or "tipping"

   b. Limits of Rationality

      1) March and Simon's "bounded rationality" and the problem of information overload: "satisficing" rather than maximization of utilities

      2) Mancur Olson's "free rider" problem

         a) Marwell/Oliver's solution in field of social movements

      3) "Prisoner's dilemma" and game theory (recall Hobbes)

         a) Iterated games as a possible solution: problem of information overload

   c. Limits of Atomism in social structure

      1) Networks in markets: White and Granovetter

      2) Corporate actors as powerful actors in markets (Coleman)

3) Coleman's theory of social capital

4) State as a social actor, not as a social contract: Tilly's theory of State as a protection racket or organized crime

5) Structural problems of democratic optimal solution

    a) Polarization and Grand Coalitions block alternance
    b) Minimum winning coalitions leaves out minority
    c) Pivotal position can block/extort majority

C The Conflict Tradition

1. Marxism: The intellectual background

    a. Hegel's dialectic as a conflict theory

        1) Thesis, antithesis, synthesis
        2) But this was also a theory of harmonization under the Prussian State
        3) Left Hegelians (including Marx) stressed the conflict aspect

    b. Classical political economy and Materialism

        1) Much of Marxism and conflict theory can be derived from Adam Smith and his followers

        2) Material interests and class conflict are at the basis of social action and social structure

            a) Values and ideology stem from economic roots

        3) Analysis of social classes according to the means of production

            a) Capitalists - owners of capital; live from profit
            b) Workers - work for capital; live from wages
            c) Landlords - monopoly owners of land; live from rent

        4) Classes are necessarily in conflict with each other, and history is the history of class conflict

            a) Implicit in classical political economy; explicit in Marx

2. Marxist Sociology and Conflict theory

    a. Social classes based on the means of production (capital)

        1) Society is bifurcating into two main social classes, capitalists and proletarians (owners and workers)

        2) Middle classes are being squeezed out

3) Lumpenproletariat results from unemployment: incapacity of capital to employ all workers

4) Due to capitalist competition and concentration, most people will increasingly belong to the proletariat

b. Theory of Ideology

1) Ideas or values stem from material conditions: thus, one's ideas stem from one's class position

2) The dominant ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the dominant class

a) The dominant class controls the means of disseminating ideas (e.g. news media, advertising)

b) The dominant class can afford to hire professional ideologists or intellectuals

3) This theory can be generalized as a theory of class cultures or of group subcultures, if the group has its own material interests

c. The theory of political conflict

1) The dominant class must control the State to protect its economic position and prevent subordinate classes from rebelling

2) Politics is a struggle to control the State

a) The dominant class wins this struggle

b) A rising class sometimes overthrows and displaces an existing dominant class

c) The capitalist class overthrew the old aristocracy in the French revolution

d) The proletarian class will overthrow the capitalist class in a socialist revolution

e) The class that wins generally has superior material resources and superior organization (networks of ties, unlike the peasantry: a sack of potatoes)

(i) Theories of resource mobilization

f) Capital as a sorcerer's apprentice

(i) Brings together and organizes workers for production

(ii) Workers use this organization to seize political power

(iii) However, this prediction did not come true because of economic decentralization

3) In practice, revolutions involve unstable coalitions among classes

a) The lower classes sometimes act as shock troops for higher classes

(i) They have false consciousness
(ii) The have less internal organization and can be led

b) Theory of Bonapartism

(i) Bourgeoisie cannot rule directly in a democracy because they are not a majority

(ii) Lumpenproletariat and peasantry must defeat proletariat for the bourgeoisie

(iii) Bourgeoisie must rule with a friendly dictator

3. Max Weber's multidimensional theory of stratification: Three bases instead of one

a. Class is defined more broadly than in Marx

1) Relations to the means of production is one basis

2) Market position is another basis

a) Skills and the theory of human capital
b) NB more recent theory of social capital

b. Status crosscuts class lines

1) Basis of status is honor: abhors market higgling
2) Also based in patterns of consumption

c. Parties are pure competitors for power

1) Basis is pure organization and adherence to the organization

a) May well cross class or status lines

b) May involve disloyalty to or betrayal of class or status interests: NB Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy

D The Functionalist Tradition

1. Durkheim's Problem of Social Order

   a. The question is, What holds society together; what is the nature of the social bond?

      1) It focuses on the ties between individuals, not on the individuals themselves

      2) It is a critique of the atomistic assumptions of Social Contract theory

         a) There must be precontractual elements of contract

         b) Otherwise, people will not uphold their agreements if they have the opportunity to cheat

   b. Social density or concentration is the key factor

      1) The less the social density, the greater the social homogeneity

      2) The greater the social density, the greater the social differentiation or specialization: the greater the division of labor

         a) Durkheim assumes a social evolution from simple, sparsely populated, homogeneous societies to large, densely populated, complex and differentiated societies

         b) Spencer takes a similar view of social evolution toward large, complex societies, but unlike Durkheim, he bases it on methodological individualism

      3) Problems of coordination of this division of labor lead to problems for individuals and society

         a) Especially the problem of anomie (lack of regulation), but also:
         b) Forced division of labor
         c) Egoistic or altruistic suicide

   c. Social bonds are created and reinforced in rituals

      1) These are moments of heightened social density

2) The highest points of social density, moments of social effervescence, create rituals

3) Symbols and ideas represent the power of the social bonds, even when rituals are not taking place

a) Therefore symbols are revered, and their violation is tabooed

d. The content of these social bonds is Morality, Values, Norms, Rules, Law

1) Society punishes those who break these morals or laws - that is, those who violate the social bonds

2. American functionalism around the 1950s: Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons

a. This functionalism looked at the contribution of any phenomenon to society

b. These may be divided into manifest and latent functions

1) Manifest functions are those that people consciously strive for

2) Latent functions are those whose purpose may not immediately be apparent

a) E.g., an urban political machine that is corrupt but serves the interests of its patronage clients and thus keeps the lower classes attached to society

b) Of course, such latent functions can be analyzed in the conflict tradition simply as different group interests

3) Occasionally, when the functionalist analyst cannot see any purpose for a phenomenon, it may be labeled a "dysfunction"

c. This functionalism was generally conservative because almost anything that existed was considered to be all for the best

1) An extreme example of this conservatism was Davis and Moore's theory of stratification that says higher paid people earn more because they contribute more to society

2) Durkheim's own functionalism was not so conservative because he could be critical of some things that exist

3. Some examples of the power of Social Symbols and Rituals from cultural sociology and social anthropology

a. Marcel Mauss's analysis of the symbolic features of the Gift

1) The "kula ring" of gift giving in the Trobriand islands illustrates the precontractual elements of contract

a) The islanders trade two types of goods, economic goods like fish and coconuts, and symbolic money-like goods which travel around the islands in a ring

b) Only after the chieftains have given gifts of the money-like goods does economic trading take place. Prior to that, an air of (potential) hostility would make market negotiations dangerous

2) Some gifts establish social hierarchy

a) The one who can afford to give the most expensive gifts is shown to hold the highest status

b) Potlatch gift-giving among the Indians of the Canadian Pacific takes this form and can be very competitive

c) Some chieftains on South Sea islands receive gifts from the tribal members and then give them back at huge ceremonial feasts

(i) This may appear to be circular, but it demonstrates the power of the chieftain

b. Erving Goffman and Randall Collins on interaction rituals and class subcultures

1) Goffman posits that everyday interactions are actually ritual performances

a) They create ideal images of the self, negotiate social ties, control others

b) Some are "frontstage" performances meant for public consumption

c) Others are “backstage” activity meant for the privacy of intimate relations

2) Collins divides society according to how many orders people give or take

a) Those who give lots of orders constitute the “official class,” who uphold the “frontstage” ideals and formalities of society

b) Those who take orders are alienated from the official frontstage and retreat to a “backstage” subculture

E The Microinteractionist Tradition

1. Its greatest strength is the analysis of the Self and the immediate social situations it faces

    a. Its analysis of macrosociology tends to be thin and rather naive

2. It is the most uniquely American of the major traditions: it was developed here, and most of its major proponents have been American

    a. However, it has not necessarily been the strongest tradition in America; it simply hasn't been very strong elsewhere

3. Theoretical background

    a. Pragmatism: the philosophy of Charles Pierce (also William James, John Dewey)

        1) Pierce criticized formal, deductive logic from the point of view of his new theory of "semiotics," the science of signs

        2) The mind does not directly apprehend objects; signs mediate

        3) Signs can include words/language, symbols, etc.

        4) Signs are necessarily social because each individual does not invent them

        5) These philosophers did not develop the sociological aspects of their insights very far

    b. The sociology of Charles Horton Cooley

        1) Cooley begins with the observation that children often have imaginary playmates

        2) Cooley argues that also, for adults, there is no essential difference between real and imaginary persons because our perception of others is in our minds

        3) Thus, society is a mental phenomenon

        4) Cooley's idea of society was very benign and naive, excluding phenomena like domination or conflict, but it set the stage for further microsociological thinking

4. The microsociology of George Herbert Mead

    a. Very similar to Adam Smith's theory in the Theory of Moral Sentiments

    b. The Self is a reflexive entity because a person can be both a subject and also an object for himself/herself: an "I" and a "Me"

    c. As children, we begin by imaginary role playing, and eventually acquire an idea of rules for games and rules for life

    d. We apply these rules to others and to ourselves. In this sense, we both enforce and internalize the rules

    e. As we grow older, we realize that these rules are created socially, interactively, by what Mead calls "the Generalized Other"

        1) The Generalized Other is the repository of social standards: rules, norms, values - but also language, signs and symbols (as with Pierce's Semiotics)

        2) The Generalized Other is also society, but it is not external to us because we are a component part of it

        3) Thus, we both internalize social standards, and we can also influence social standards

        4) The self is not completely determined from outside, but it has an element of freedom and initiative.

    f. In this respect, society is a looking-glass world. We regard ourselves according to the standards of the Generalized Other, and we judge others according to these standards, which we internalize, but can also influence

    g. And since we exist in different social situations (as child, parent, spouse, friend, employee, etc.), our Self is also divided into different <u>roles</u>, each of which may correspond to a somewhat different Generalized Other - i.e., into different sets of norms.

5. Mead's microsociology was developed in several different directions

a. Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism

1) We constantly re-negotiate our social situation: in reality, it is very fluid and can change rapidly

2) If social structures appear stable, it is because people keep re-negotiating their relations in the same way

3) Part of this tradition has investigated deviant behavior (especially "victimless crimes" like prostitution, drug abuse) with sympathy for the underdog in society

b. Role theory

1) Much more static investigation of the structure of interaction

2) Different situations correspond to the different roles in which we act

6. Other branches of microsociology

a. Harold Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology

1) Ethnomethodology stems from Husserl's philosophy and existentialism, which doubts reality much more radically than does Pierce's Pragmatism

a) We can't know reality for certain - though we wish we did - so we construct myths, conventional understandings, about the way the world works.

b) Ethnomethodology shows how easily these myths can be undermined

2) The social world we perceive is a socially-constructed reality: a set of conventional roles, activities bundled together and labeled

3) Social research must examine in detail the actual activities that make up some named role: the way, say, an astronomer or plumber actually goes about his or her work

a) By doing this, the researcher shows that the role of astronomer or plumber is actually a conventional justification of a set of activities, and not necessarily the overall role that those persons claim for it

b) The social researcher is part of this world and must take his act of observing into account

4) This approach has been applied to an extremely detailed study of audio- and videotapes

a. Erving Goffman

1) Really, Goffman is more of a Durkheimian: he stresses social structure first, and subjective consciousness second

2) Goffman criticizes ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists: why should we accept the actor's own definition of his situation rather than analyzing the "frame" (social context) within which he acts?

3) Some frames are embedded in other frames, but actors are rarely confused about where they are. We can generally get easily to the core or primary frame.

a) The core or primary frame is the material world in the Durkheimian sense

4) His analysis of speech acts is similar: we must investigate the underlying (material) social situation in which it takes place

F The Historical Background of Social Theory: Stories, Hypotheses, and Debates about the emergence of Modern Society

1. Two Stories, the "Endogenous" and the "Exogenous"

   a. "Endogenous" means that the causal elements of the story are mainly "internal" to the system (the society). Society develops by an internal logic that unfolds or develops. By contrast, an "Exogenous" story means that the causal elements are "external" to the system (the society). External influences affect the development of the society.

   b. Most of the theory we read in this class take an endogenous approach, though DuBois begins to introduce more exogenous elements. We find the endogenous story, with variations, in most of the theorists we read, especially conflict theorists like Adam Smith, Marx, and Weber, but also implicitly among functionalists like Spencer. DuBois follows much of this, but begins to introduce more "exogenous" elements as well.

   c. Exogenous stories have been increasingly prominent in theory and history in the years after most of our theorists worked, including Lenin around WWI, and decolonizers after WWII, who began to introduce a variety of exogenous elements into accounts of Western and World development.

   d. A useful recent book reviews the historical literature on world economic development and evaluates how many of the "classical" sociological theories stand up to current historical research: Mark Koyama and Jared T. Rubin, *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth,* Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022. (Koyama and Rubin 2022) Seeking to explain sustained economic growth (at the core of "modern" society), first in the West, and then in other regions of the world, they examine:

      1) Endogenous factors: Institutions, Culture, Demography, and Industrialization
      2) Exogenous factors: Geography, and Colonization and Exploitation

2. The Standard "Endogenous" Story (very oversimplified!)

   a. Weber argues that most historical societies tended to be either tribal – small, decentralized, and comparatively egalitarian – or empires – large, centralized, powerful, and hierarchical. Empires lived by conquest and exploitation of the surplus of the peoples they conquered.

b. According to this story, ancient Europe had been largely a tribal society, but was conquered by the Roman empire.

c. As the Roman empire lost power and slowly withdrew from Europe, the tribal chieftains harried the Roman legions out of their territory, but did not seek to pursue them back to Rome.

d. These tribal chieftains became the nobility or aristocracy of Europe. They practiced domination and exploitation of the population on a local scale. They maintained a military (knights) to defend themselves against neighboring aristocrats and to enforce domination and exploitation of the local population. The common people were peasants, and the economy was agrarian.

e. The aristocrats did not have the power to expand and centralize their power, so they remained local powers. But monarchs (kings and queens) arose among the aristocrats and wished to exert their power over the aristocrats, but were not militarily strong enough to do so. If they had succeeded, European society might have become an empire or a series of empires. Instead, it developed into feudalism, a semi-decentralized system very rare in world history.

f. Within feudal society, towns emerged. The townspeople began as impoverished artisans or traders who might set up shop at a crossroads, but they were subject to the depredations and raids of the aristocrats, who wanted to seize their surplus, just as they did with the peasants.

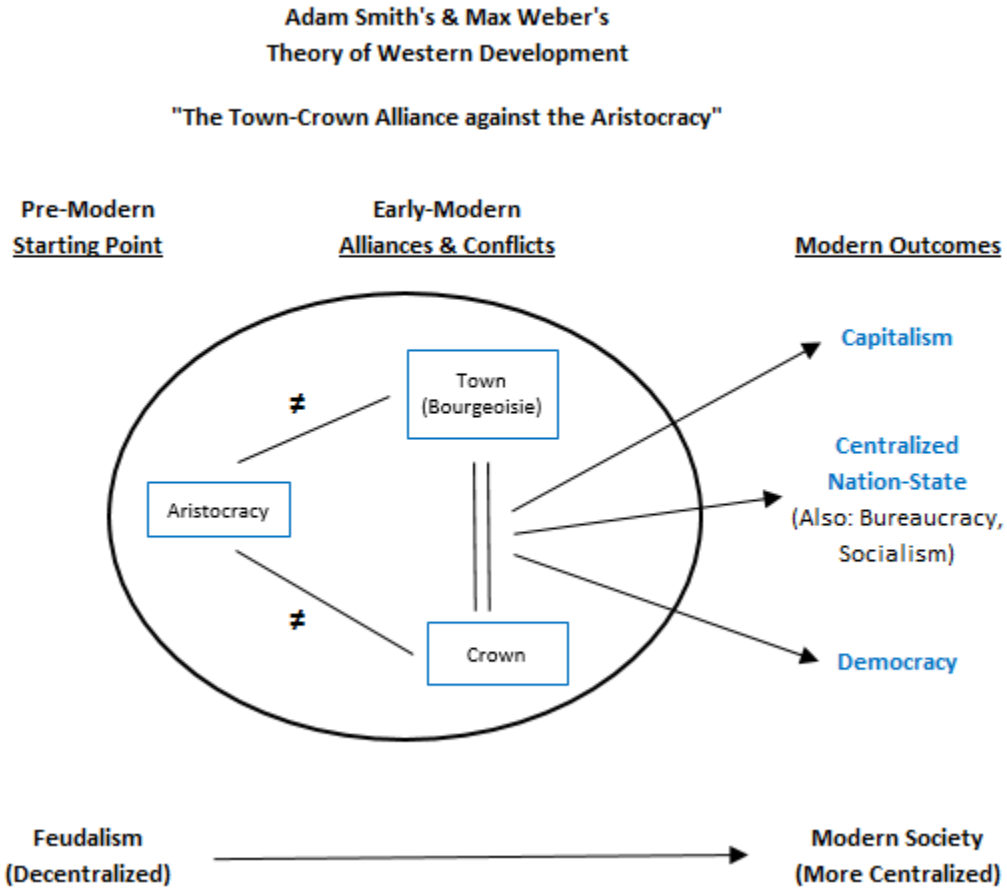
g. In time, the townspeople were able to erect town walls to protect themselves against the aristocrats and in order to keep more of their own surplus.

h. The monarchs began to form alliances with the towns to protect them against the aristocrats, under the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and in return for a fixed tax. The fixed tax meant that the townspeople could strive to become more productive and more profitable, because they could keep this surplus for themselves. This is the important picture we get from Adam Smith and Weber of the tripartite interaction in feudal Europe of the Town-Crown alliance against the Aristocracy.

i. This arrangement was a standoff, and neither Smith nor Weber tell us why it ended. But it did eventually end with the victory of the Town-Crown alliance.

j. This transition created the modern world. It had three major consequences.

1) The Nation State. Under Absolutism, the monarchs were able to establish states (later, nation states), which were not large or strong enough to be empires, but which became very strong economically and militarily. Even when monarchs were later overthrown, the nation state survived, and it has become the dominant form of political organization in the world, displacing empires.
2) Capitalism. The townspeople were able to extend trade among the towns, now that the countryside had become de-militarized, and they were able to expand their production, leading to manufacturing. This eventually gave rise to capitalism and great national wealth.
3) Democracy. As part of their deal with the monarchies, the townspeople demanded and got the ability to govern themselves, and to have civil and economic freedoms. These rights grew into citizenship and democracy, were expanded, slowly or quickly, to other sectors of society.
4) See diagram:



k. This modern form of society became so rich and powerful, it was able to conquer other parts of the world. And other parts of the world also wanted to emulate this

system. This modernism did spread, by conquest and emulation, and eventually, other parts of the world were able to compete effectively against Western societies. Thus, especially since the 1970s, Asian economies (e.g., Japan, South Korea, China) have outcompeted Western economies and have begun to spread their versions of modern models throughout the world. Their competition has also contributed to much deindustrialization of Western societies and the consequent social dislocations. We might be entering into newer phases of history, which will require new social theorizing.

l. Note: Koyama and Rubin cite recent literature that shows that Weber's thesis of a Protestant advantage in economic development is entirely accounted for by Protestants' higher levels of education – and that education also accounted for Jews' economic successes prior to, and since, the Protestant Reformation (see Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.)

3. A newer "Exogenous" Story (one among several, and also very oversimplified!)

a. Since at least the late 19th Century, there has been an exogenous story, largely built on older ideas of empire. The story is generally that European nations managed to become empires and seize and exploit the resources (including labor) of populations they conquered.

b. Lenin's Marxian theory of "imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism" is one version of this. The decolonizing leaders of former European colonies after World War II presented other versions of these theories.

c. Another, more nuanced, theory emerged, which centered especially on the system of sugar-producing slave plantations of the early modern period. I draw on three main sources for this story:

1) Eric Williams book, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Williams 1944). Williams came from Trinidad and Tobago, and went to Oxford for his PhD in economic history in the late 1930s. This was his dissertation, and was published in book form in the 1940s, while he was a professor at Howard University. He later returned to Trinidad and Tobago, became the first prime minister, and led decolonization and independence. He set the main thesis here. It has been much debated, and evaluations have gone back and forth.
2) Sven Beckert's book, *Empire of Cotton* (Beckert 2014). Beckert is a Harvard history professor, and his 2014 book has been extremely influential.
3) Howard French's 2021 book, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War* (French 2021). French is a

Black American, born in Virginia, who was a New York Times journalist, and is now a professor at Columbia; his wife is from Ghana. He was bureau chief for the NYT in Beijing and several African capitals, and he has written a number of books, including two about Chinese history.

4) I have also learned a good deal from these recent books and articles:
   a) Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade.* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. (Klein 2010)
   b) Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade.* Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008. (Lindsay 2008)
   c) Barbara L. Solow, *The Economic Consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014. (Solow 2014)
   d) Sean Arnold Stilwell. *Slavery and Slaving in African History.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014. (Stilwell 2014)
   e) Geraldine. Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018. (Heng 2018)
   f) Mark Koyama and Jared T. Rubin, *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth,* Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022. (Koyama and Rubin 2022)
   g) Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution.* Polity Press, 2023 (Berg and Hudson 2023)
   h) Ulbe Bosma, *The World of Sugar: How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years,* Harvard University Press, 2023 [I haven't read this one yet; it's in my queue] (Bosma 2023)
   i) Two important studies on the comparative history of slavery, especially comparing Europe and Islamic systems:
      (i) Lisa Blaydes and Eric Chaney, "The Feudal Revolution and Europe's Rise: Political Divergence of the Christian West and the Muslim World before 1500 CE." *The American Political Science Review* (2013) 107(1):16-34). (Blaydes and Chaney 2013)
      (ii) J.C. Sharman, Ayse Zarakol, "Global Slavery in the Making of States and International Orders," *American Political Science Review* (2024) 118, 2, 802–814. (Sharman and Zarakol 2024)
   j) Several tough critiques by economic historians of foregrounding the role of slavery in the development of the modern economy, focusing on errors in the analyses of Beckert and the "new historians of capitalism:"
      (i) Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello. 2020. "Slavery and the new history of capitalism." *Journal of Global History 15(2):225-244.* (Burnard and Riello 2020)
      (ii) John Clegg. 2020. "A Theory of Capitalist Slavery." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33(1):74-98. (Clegg 2020)

(iii) Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode. 2018. "Cotton, slavery, and the new history of capitalism." *Explorations in Economic History* 67:1-17. (Olmstead and Rhode 2018)
(iv) Gavin Wright. 2020. "Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited." *Economic History Review* 73(2):353-383. (Wright 2020)

k) Some more recent works on slavery:
(i) Sharman, Jason C. 2026. *Ties that Bound: Slavery and Power in Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Sharman 2026)
(ii) La Rue, George. 2026. "Slave Trades and Diaspora in the Middle East, 700 to 1900 ce." in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and the Diaspora in African History*: Oxford University Press. (La Rue 2026)
(iii) Gordon, Matthew S. 2021. "Slavery in the Islamic Middle East (c. 600–1000 CE)." Pp. 337-361 in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 2: AD 500–AD 1420, vol. 2, The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, edited by David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, Craig Perry, and David Richardson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Gordon 2021)
(iv) Marozzi, Justin. 2025. *Captives and Companions: a History of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Islamic World*: Random House. (Marozzi 2025)

d. This story, mostly taken from French, and building on Williams and Beckert, goes something like this (as always, oversimplified):

e. Europe in the middle ages was poor, ignorant, and backward. Muslim and Asian societies of the time were more advanced.

f. In 1325, Mansa Musa, Muslim emperor of the Malian empire, made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Mali had extensive gold mines, and Musa has been called the richest person in human history. Musa took a large caravan, with many slaves, with him on his pilgrimage, and gave away masses of gold, hoping to be recognized as a great leader. While he did not receive the recognition he sought, he did alert the world to the riches of gold in Mali.

1) Slavery had existed in Africa since pre-historic times, in "low density" (mainly, household) and "high density" (mainly controlled by states/empires and estates) forms. While some have suggested that low density slavery was less harsh than high density slavery, it was still harsh, and slave status could be inherited across numerous generations, and slaves could be killed in human sacrifice rituals.

2) African slavery was spurred by external slave trading, initially with Muslims, across the Sahara and across the Indian Ocean, and later by the Atlantic slave trade. Muslims traded horses for slaves, and the Ghanaian, Malian, Songhai

empires utilized the horses to conquer neighboring areas, taking slaves as they expanded. Mali also employed high density slave labor in its gold mines.

g. Europe was too weak to compete for the Malian gold, especially not by the land routes through the Middle East and across the Sahara and Sahel. But Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal decided to try for a sea route along the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa, which were largely unknown to Europeans at the time.

h. The Portuguese were able to sail down the coast of West Africa, and after a while, around the Cape of Good Hope, up the east coast of Africa, to India, bypassing the land routes.

i. The Portuguese eventually managed to establish an early 3-way trade system of certain European goods (e.g., metal pots and pans), Indian cotton fabrics, and African gold. And this attracted the interest and competition of other Atlantic-facing European countries like Spain, France, Britain, the Netherlands, and others.

j. None of the European powers were strong enough to conquer African societies or even land without permission. Indeed, the Europeans were dependent on powerful Africans even for their provisions. The Portuguese did manage to get permission to build a fort on the coast of present-day Ghana in 1471, called Elmina ("the mine"), which later became a notorious slave-shipping post.

k. As a side endeavor, the Portuguese established sugar-growing farms on the islands off of West Africa, the Azores, the Canaries, and especially Sao Tome. Sugar rapidly revealed itself as a highly desired cash crop, and the Portuguese expanded their operations to plantations employing African slave labor. The Portuguese made this labor system especially intensive and efficient, especially on Sao Tome, which led to widespread deaths among the slaves.

    1) Slave-based sugar plantations had already existed for centuries before the Portuguese, in the Eastern Mediterranean, largely under Muslim control. This earlier slave production was also high-density, intensively organized, and commercially oriented.

l. Other European nations also noticed this slave-based sugar plantation economy and raced to either take it over or emulate it, especially after Columbus established sea routes to the Western hemisphere. Slave-based sugar plantations, later also with coffee, were established throughout the Caribbean and on the coast of present-day Brazil, and all major Atlantic-facing European countries competed here.

m. The Sugar economy helped kick-start European economies, leading to the development of consumer markets, ship-building, finance and insurance, and also to the increase in navies and state power. European economies and states began to grow strong and rich.

n. The European countries used more and more African slave labor, but they were still militarily too weak to land on the African continent, so they obtained their slaves in trade with powerful Africans. It was not until the late 19th century that European powers became strong enough to land on the African continent and control the lands, during a later stage of imperialism or colonialism. Yet by the time European colonialism gained power on the land in Africa, most European countries had banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

    1) Note that Europeans almost never captured slaves in Africa themselves, but rather, purchased them from powerful Africans who captured and enslaved other Africans. Some powerful Africans could and did refuse to sell slaves (even though they might themselves practice slavery), and African sellers mostly demanded and got full market valuations, not trinkets.

        a) This was in contrast to the Islamic slave trade. Islamic forces, whether Middle-Eastern or African muslims, were often strong enough to capture and enslave Africans themselves.

    2) During the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans also had to depend on African rulers for rights to dock, build fortresses, hold slaves for transport, as well as for food and provisions. Europeans did not gain power to decisively control things till late in the 19th century; and decolonization after World War II again reduced their power over African societies.

    3) African slavery actually expanded after the Western abolition of the slave trade in the 19th century and lasted into the early 20th century. There were generally as many slaves in Africa as in the Americas, and the percentage of enslaved people in Africa could reach 20-50% in some regions at some times. Most aspects of slavery in Africa are highly variable – and highly debated – but slavery in Africa was a major feature of its history.

o. The sugar plantation owners became incredibly rich, protected by European mercantilist policies and navies, and flanked by privateers and pirates, who also sometimes became planters. The plantation owners began to return to their home countries and engage in domestic economy and politics, sometimes becoming absentee owners, sending managers to engage in increasingly brutal labor practices on the plantations.

1) Barbara Solow and others argue that slave plantations drove the economic development of the Americas. European elites never succeeded in inducing sufficient numbers of free Europeans to settle in the Americas. And with the availability of vast amounts of land (at the expense of indigenous peoples), American landowners could never induce Europeans to work for wages when they could homestead. American yeoman small farmers were basically subsistence farmers, producing little for markets or driving economic development. It took coercive slave labor to produce enough export goods to drive economic development; and even non-slave regions like New England largely developed by providing slave regions with slaves, production goods, and markets.

p. However, sugar production tended to exhaust the fertility of the soil, meaning the planters had to find new islands or mainland locations for their plantations. Also, increased production worldwide began to lead to a glut of sugar and an overall collapse of prices.

q. At this point, Eric Williams argues, mechanization of cotton spinning and weaving begins to emerge in Manchester, Britain, and the enormously wealthy sugar planters – as well as the increasing wealthy general economy – begin investing in cotton mills. Beckert also takes up the story here.

r. Sugar planters had attempted to expand to North America, especially around South Carolina and Louisiana. But sugar production did not work as well there, so planters turned to rice and then cotton, still using slave labor.

s. Paradoxically, Williams and to a lesser extent Beckert, argue that even though the demand for cotton for the mills was increasing, and production in the America South was increasing, the mills became more and more able to source cotton from all over the world, including India, the Middle East, and China. Thus, Williams and Beckert argue that slave production of cotton became less and less economically necessary and viable.

t. Cotton fabric production also became so profitable, that the British and also New Englanders began to turn away from mercantilism and toward free trade, because nobody else could compete with them.

u. Given these factors, Britain began to turn away from the slave trade and slave production, and outlawed it in 1807. The American South continued slave production till the Civil War (and Cuba and Brazil still longer), but to their surprise, their cotton production actually increased after Emancipation. Initially, it is thought

(cf. DuBois) that this was due to Jim Crow measures like share-cropping and convict labor, which attempted to reintroduce slave labor by other means. But the rest of the U.S. was establishing mechanized agriculture after the Civil War, and it was very productive. The Southern planters resisted mechanization until the Great Migration caused them to lose their Black work force, and they were forced to turn to mechanization – and actually experienced another increase in productivity without such oppressive labor practices.

v. Thus, this story suggests that:

1) Slave-plantation sugar production directly and indirectly revolutionized European economies and states, hugely increasing their wealth and power.
2) This new capital was reinvested in industrialization, which accelerated the growth of Western wealth and power, and led to a turning away from mercantilism and a reliance on slave labor.
3) By this time, cotton could be sourced from everywhere in the world, and slave production was no longer economically "necessary," but it still continued in the American South till it was ended by the Civil War. And while oppressive labor practices continued through the Jim Crow era, mechanization also showed that these practices were also economically "unnecessary." In fact, these practices probably held back Southern economic development for a century after the Civil War. We might need another explanation for these practices: if not for economic reasons, perhaps for reasons of political power.

w. Not all theorists and historians endorse this version of the "exogenous" story. While the story may have internal coherence, recent historical research summarized by Koyama and Rubin (also see the critics of the "new history of capitalism" cited above) shows that:

1) Other historical empires (Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Muslims) did not produce sustained economic growth. They simply stole goods and people (slaves) from one place and moved them to their imperial centers. Sustained economic growth did not take hold until it began in modern Western societies, whether for endogenous or exogenous reasons. In fact, it was only Britain, with industrialization, that first broke through to sustained economic growth, not the other European powers, though they also built empires and used slave labor; they only caught up later by following Britain's path.
2) Williams' thesis, that profits from slave-plantation sugar production provided the start-up capital for industrial development, has not stood up well to historical evidence. (a) Most of the start-up capital for industrial production came from small inventors and craftsmen in the North of England not connected to the centers of capital in London or Liverpool. (b) Sugar-based capital was a small

part of the British economy, and like cotton profits, it soon declined due to overproduction from around the world.

3) Beckert's thesis, that it was cotton, also falls short for many of the same reasons. (a) As we have seen, and Beckert agrees, slavery was not economically "necessary" for producing cotton profits: other regions without slavery also produced profits, and profits did not fall in the American South after Emancipation. (b) The price of cotton fell, like sugar prices, due to world over-production. Textile mill owners could source cotton world-wide, without having to rely on slave production. (c) Cotton production did not drive the US economy, either during slavery or afterwards: cotton exports accounted for less than 6% of the US economy. (d) Cotton production actually held back economic development in the American South, during slave times and for a century after. Again, the plantation owners got rich and maintained their own political power at the expense of the region and the whole of America.

x. Recent analyses of the history of slavery has also questioned the uniqueness of the Western case.

1) Two major articles on the comparative history of slavery, the state, and the economy, especially comparing European and Islamic slavery, came out in the *American Political Science Review* in recent years:

- Lisa Blaydes and Eric Chaney, "The Feudal Revolution and Europe's Rise: Political Divergence of the Christian West and the Muslim World before 1500 CE," in *The American Political Science Review* 107(1):16-34 (2013), presents a comparison of medieval Western European state development with Islamic state (empire) development.

    - Western European kings didn't have sufficient revenue to pay for military, so they had to barter the military service of nobles for land. That gave the aristocracy an independent source of power & revenue, and enabled them to extract liberties & parliaments from the kings. This eventually enabled the emergence of towns, the commercial revolution, and economic growth. Ultimately, it also made possible the concept of a legitimate opposition & political tolerance and eventually led to the creation of strong democracies. This narrative resembles the Smith/Weber story of the town-crown alliance against the aristocracy.

    - The Muslim rulers had revenue to pay for Mamluks, slave militaries and administrators. The Mamluks were loyal only to the Caliphs or Sultans, and it was hard for independent local rulers to achieve independence. This led to much more centralized states/empires, but ultimately, they

were brittle & not flexible enough to meet the challenge of a rising Europe in early modern times. This narrative resembles Tocqueville's warnings about centralization.

- Sharman & Zarakol on the uses of slavery in state-making (J.C. Sharman, Ayse Zarakol, "Global Slavery in the Making of States and International Orders," *American Political Science Review* (2024) 118, 2, 802–814), authored by two professors of international relations at the University of Cambridge, England, one Western, the other Turkish. They seek to move beyond the dominant & parochial Euro-American focus and show how widespread the phenomenon was and what variety it entailed. They show the different uses slavery was put to in state/empire formation and emerging economic structures. In doing so, they also seek to contextualize the dominant trans-Atlantic focus in most Western scholarship.

    - "Slaves as the State." Most typical of Islamic empires, but also includes African & Asian polities. This represents an alternate approach to state centralization to the European model. The ruler uses slaves as military and administrators to weaken the power of local powers; and the slaves are loyal only to the ruler.

    - "Slaves under the State." Most typical of Europe & America, but again, also includes African & Asian polities. Slaves are used for economic production, but state capacity has to grow to protect this economic exploitation and oppression. The clearest case is European mercantilism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and plantation economy.

    - Both of these models entailed the development of international slave orders, with long-distance trade and military dominance. Both forms prohibited the enslavement of socio-cultural "insiders" (esp. defined by race or religion), but access to "outsiders" required the expansion of the state or empire to capture more slaves. It also led to the development of client states that enslaved local populations and sold them to the core state or empire.

2) Benjamin Reilly, *Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria (Reilly 2015)in the Arabian Peninsula,* Ohio University Press, 2015 (Reilly 2015), explores plantation chattel slavery, using enslaved Africans, in the Arabian peninsula, in a period somewhat coterminous with the Atlantic slave trade. This was large-scale industrial slavery, carried out in malarial oasis areas, where Arab workers could not/would not work. Reilly notes, as did Bernard Lewis, that even though there are detailed archives of the Ottoman Empire that cover this practice, those archives have

been closed to scholars. The societies of Muslim empires were largely urban, and the largely unexplored question is who provided the urban dwellers with food in the centuries after the slave revolts around Basra in the 10th century seemingly ended the slave-labor plantation economies of that time. Thus, Reilly questions:

a) Whether chattel slavery was unique to the West, or even rare outside the West.
b) Whether chattle slavery was necessary for the creation of a capitalist market, or an economy that produced sustained economic growth.
c) Recall also that large-scale slavery on sugar plantations emerged on islands in the Mediterranean under Islamic control well before Europeans began similar production.

y. It should also be noted that by, say, the period of industrialization, or at the latest, by the end of WWII, or perhaps the rise of Asian economies around the 1970s, the "endogenous" and "exogenous" stories largely dovetail. The "endogenous" story accepts that international domination took place after Western modern societies emerged; and the "exogenous" story suggests that these practices always existed. And both stories speculate that the age of Western dominance could be coming to an end, but that Asian societies may also begin to practice forms of global domination.

z. The question of Racism.

1) Eric Williams argues that racism did not cause slavery, but the reverse: that slavery caused racism. Africans were easier to identify than indentured Europeans, who were often treated just as badly. If either tried to escape, it was easier to identify the Africans.
2) Williams' colleague at Howard University, Frank Snowden, makes a parallel argument in his book, *Before Color Prejudice, The Ancient View of Blacks* (1983) (Snowden 1983). Snowden argues that Europeans noticed the difference between themselves and Africans, but they didn't feel that this caused important differences between the groups.
3) The argument that the 1492 Expulsion from Spain caused racism. Ferdinand and Isabella ordered Jews and Muslims to leave Spain or convert to Christianity. Many left, and some converted, but some said they converted but continued to secretly practice their religion. The Inquisition then developed the idea that all conversions were insincere, and that "blood" or race prevented Jews or Muslims from becoming true Christians. Some have argued that this is the true source of "scientific" or "genetic" racism.

a) Geraldine Heng argued (*The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages,* 2018) that racism in Europe can be traced back to medieval times – but still beginning by considering Jews to be hereditary outsiders.

aa. Sugar and civil society.

1) Some have argued (e.g., Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [1962] (Habermas 1991)) that sugar and coffee directly transformed European society.
2) They were consumer commodities and helped created consumer markets, a component of capitalism
3) Cafes partly displaced bars. And thus, stimulants (coffee, sugar) partly displaced depressants (alcohol). This contributed to greater energy and productivity, an important component of capitalism.
4) Just as importantly, cafes became gathering points for discussion and debate.
   a) Prior to this, debate could take place within the Church or the Church-controlled University, or within aristocratic salons.
   b) The scope of debate was definitely limited within the pre-modern Church or the Church-controlled University.
   c) The aristocratic salons are credited with being an important source of Enlightenment thinking, but aristocratic sponsorship may have also limited the scope of debate.
   d) By contrast, cafes were gathering spots for lay commoners and may thus have contributed to the emergence of bourgeois civil society and bourgeois intellectuals, who produced competing worldviews in contrast to Church or aristocratic worldviews.
   e) Later worldviews emerged in similar environments, but were critical of bourgeois ideology. These might include labor, race/ethnic minority, feminist, LGBTQ+, anti-colonial, and other perspectives.
5) Thus, some have argued that sugar and coffee – and cafes based on them – represent the turning point from "traditional" to "modern" sources of consumer society, increased productivity, and social theory production.
6) However, others are skeptical of this thesis. See the evidence summarized by Koyama and Rubin, above. They argue that sugar production was just one of many factors, and not necessarily the largest of them, and that sugar production by other historical empires did not lead to sustained economic growth.

Notes on some recent works on slavery that are not [yet] incorporated into the above outline:

- Sharman, Jason C. 2026. *Ties that Bound: Slavery and Power in Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Sharman 2026). Sharman, one of the co-authors of the influential APSR article cited above, argues that the incentives of the slave trade – both

to Islamic lands, the Transatlantic trade, and internally in Africa – helped produce strong, militarized African states that proved to be unstable in the long run. As we saw above, Sharman argues that these states were stronger than the Europeans during the time of the Transatlantic slave trade, and largely dictated the high (and constantly rising) market prices for slaves. But they were often not stronger than the Islamic states/empires with which they interacted, and market prices for slaves was consequently lower. These African states also used slaves themselves for agricultural labor, military and administrative personnel, as sex slaves, and in some cases for human sacrifice. Sharman's account begins around 1400, around the time of the arrival of the Europeans, so it doesn't have as much to say about the similar interactions with Islamic powers earlier, or the history of slavery within Africa – or the trade of African slaves to outside powers before the rise of Islam (see Stilwell for some of this history).

- La Rue, George. 2026. "Slave Trades and Diaspora in the Middle East, 700 to 1900 CE." in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and the Diaspora in African History*: Oxford University Press. (La Rue 2026). A comprehensive scholarly literature review. La Rue covers the history of Islamic slavery in the Middle East, noting sources of slaves from Central Asia, Europe, and Africa; the very high mortality rates (up to half) in violent slave raids and transport; the uses of slave labor in agriculture and industry, military, administration, domestic, sex, and other sectors, many dangerous with high mortality; and the evolution of practices of slavery over the centuries. La Rue notes that recent scholarship has challenged many of the beliefs prior to the 21st century. It should be noted that his survey does not include Islamic societies outside the Middle East, such as North Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, which had high numbers of slaves.

- Gordon, Matthew S. 2021. "Slavery in the Islamic Middle East (c. 600–1000 CE)." Pp. 337-361 in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 2: AD 500–AD 1420, vol. 2, The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, edited by David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, Craig Perry, and David Richardson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Gordon 2021). A concise scholarly review of literature on slavery in the first four hundred years of the Middle East Islamic empires. After a discussion of historiography, it covers several historical periods and several of the roles slaves were forced to fill: eunuchs, sex slaves (concubines and courtesans), and slave soldiers.

- Marozzi, Justin. 2025. *Captives and Companions: a History of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Islamic World*: Random House. (Marozzi 2025). A semi-scholarly book by a reporter (*Financial Times, Economist*) who speaks and reads Arabic. The book covers the entire history of Islam including chapters on slavery in the birth of Islam, racism, sex slavery, slave soldiers, eunuchs, slavery and piracy in the Mediterranean, routes of the slave trade, abolition, and modern slavery – including a surprising interview he conducted with an escaped slave in northwest Africa. The book is an informative and light read, but is unfortunately more anecdotal than analytical.

A few addenda that are still open questions or that I have not yet read:

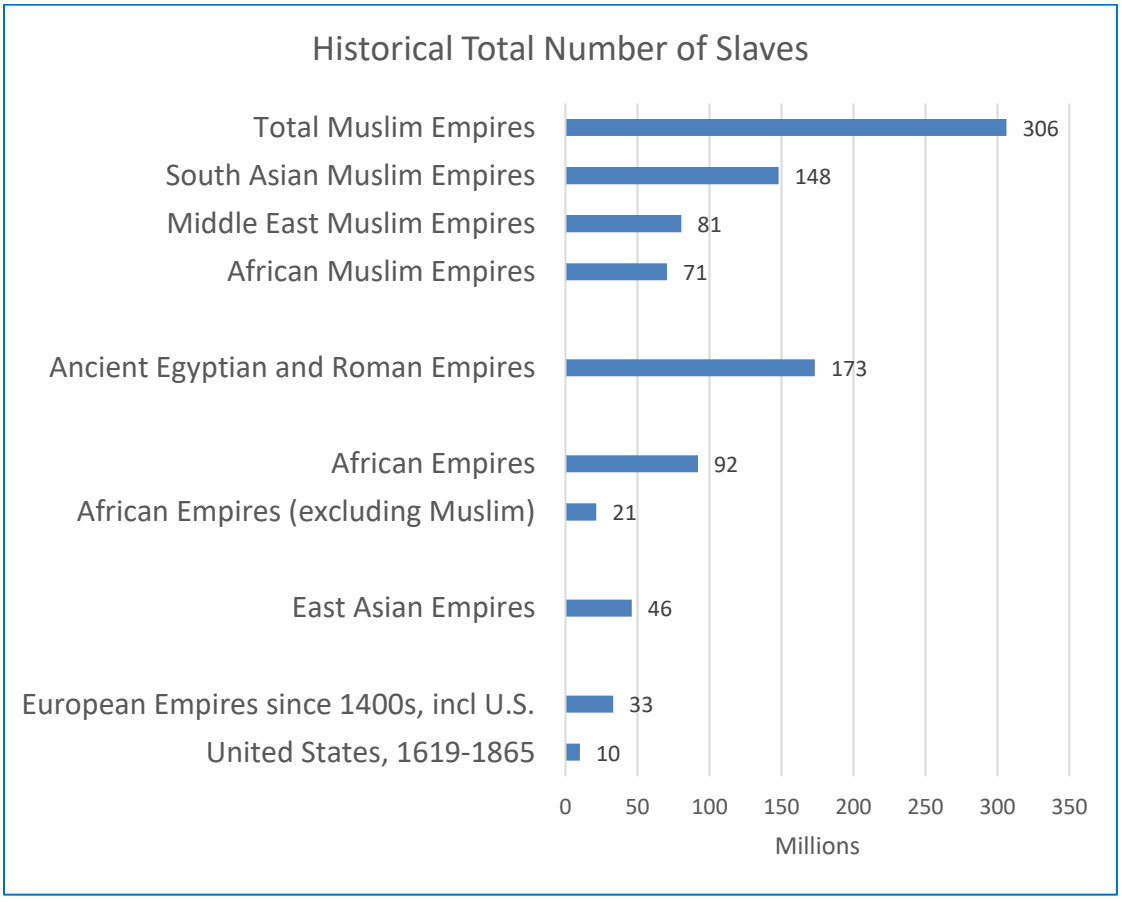
- Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution.* Polity Press, 2023 (Berg and Hudson 2023). The authors, respected economic historians specializing in the industrial revolution in Britain, seek to buttress the Eric Williams thesis, arguing that slavery was a much more important factor in Western economic development than has been given credit for, especially for the industrial revolution. They present a wealth of detailed information and data and provide an extensive review of recent literature. However, though they present bottom-line evaluations of the long-term harm slavery has done to descendants of slaves and to Africa and colonial areas, they decline to provide a bottom-line evaluation of how important slavery was to Western development. This has frustrated more than one reviewer, and it leaves unanswered several of the central questions raised above:
    - What was, in fact, slavery's impact on Western development, even at a ballpark level?
    - Slavery and empire have existed in so many societies. Why did sustained economic growth only emerge in Western societies, beginning with Britain, and only after slavery had ended? And why Britain, when other European countries (France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands) had as large or larger slave-based economic sectors?
    - More generally, though the authors explore the connection between slavery and other sectors that were important for economic development – finance, the state, the military, manufacturing, especially textiles, a consumer market, among others – they don't evaluate how strong a causal impact. If slavery had a "multiplier effect," how big was it?
    - European slavery was part of the mercantilist system and did not survive the end of mercantilism. How much did slavery actually affect the emergence and operation of the free market system that came after mercantilism?

  These factors are going to need to be debated and evaluated more fully before we can say that anything like a consensus exists.

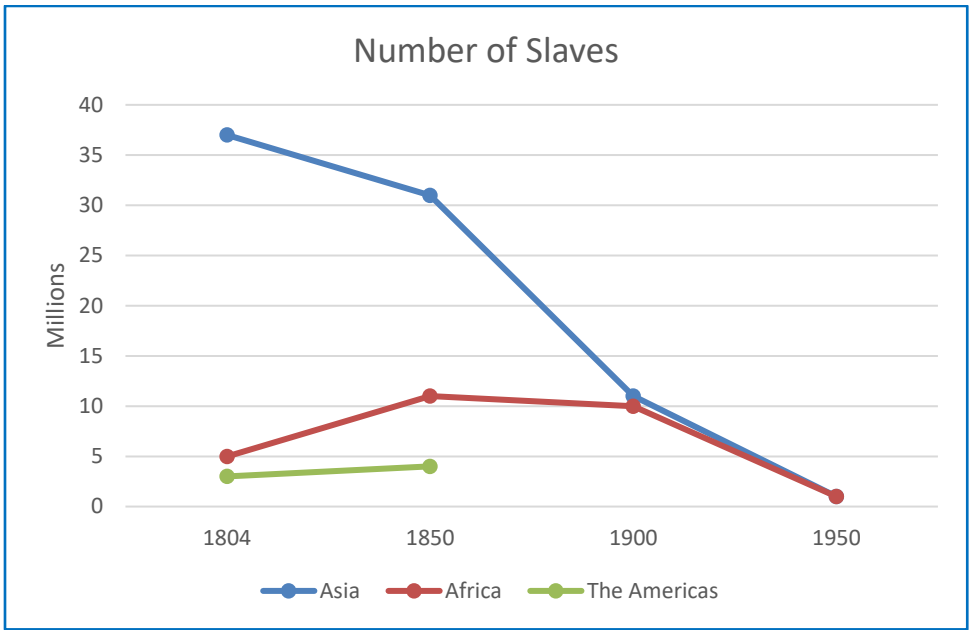
- A new book came out in 2023, which I still need to read: Ulbe Bosma, *The World of Sugar: How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years,* Harvard University Press, 2023.

- Sven Beckert published a new book in late 2025, *Capitalism: A Global History,* Penguin Press, 2025 (Beckert 2025). At 1344 pages, it might be a while till I read it.

- In December 2025, a British economic commentator and comedian named Dominic Frisby made a serious attempt to estimate the total number of slaves over history in the great world empires. Frisby is not a scholar and based his estimates mainly on internet searches, including AI. He gives estimates for 27 empires. Yet notably, the rank-order size of his estimates across different empires bears similarities to the scholarly estimates of B. W. Higman (see below). See https://www.theflyingfrisby.com/p/the-10-largest-slaving-civilisations and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hjwmZJhGII. I supplemented Frisby's estimates with a peer-reviewed scholarly estimate of the total number of slaves in the boundaries of the present United States from 1619 to 1865, J. David Hacker, "From '20. and odd'to 10 million: the growth of the slave population in the United States," *Slavery & Abolition* 41(4):840-855, 2020. (Hacker 2020)
    - I made a chart summarizing Frisby's and Hacker's estimates:



- A less detailed, but more scholarly set of estimates of the extent of slavery in different parts of the world is given by B. W. Higman, "Demographic Trends," Pp. 20-48 in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 4: AD 1804–AD 2016*, edited by David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and David Richardson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017 (Higman 2017). Note that Higman's estimates are not cumulative, but estimates at given points of time – and only since 1804. Also, unlike Frisby, his estimates for Asia and Africa do not distinguish between Muslim and non-Muslim areas. Despite these differences, Higman's estimates notably give a somewhat similar rank-order of magnitude between the different societies.
    - I made a chart summarizing Higman's estimates:



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