{essays in history}

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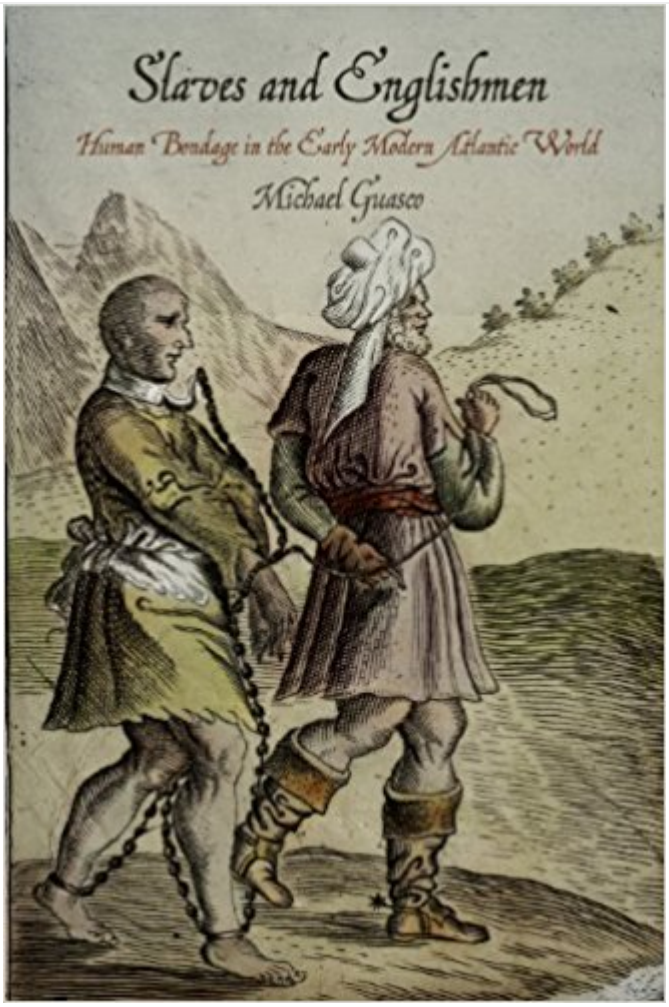
Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World



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Reviewed Work(s)

Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World. By Michael Guasco (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Pp. 328. Cloth, $45.00.

The second half of the seventeenth century marked the beginning of the codification of racialized slavery in the Anglo-Atlantic – a process that created the social and legal apparatus for the development of slave societies in the English colonies of the Caribbean and North America. Frequently, 1619 is treated as a starting point for analyzing the rise of racialized slavery. However, by using early modern histories, travel writing, and Privy Council records, Michael Guasco's new book asserts that this codification was the culmination of over a century of English thought and experiences. A central premise in Guasco's well-written *Slaves and Englishmen* is that a wider chronological and geographic perspective reveals that "slavery was not simply invented out of whole cloth, in situ," by Englishmen encountering the institution for the first time in the seventeenth century (8). Guasco contends that Englishmen thought and wrote extensively about slavery, both as a way to explain the particular liberties of Englishmen and as a way to understand their place in a world where slavery was ubiquitous. By exploring domestic precedents as well as encounters in the Mediterranean and throughout the Iberian world, Guasco demonstrates how Englishmen developed a sophisticated understanding of slavery that allowed them to think "about human bondage circumstantially, rather than as a consistent or uniform phenomena" (157). This ability to conceive of slavery as taking various forms accounts for the different ways in which Englishmen viewed and treated Indians, indentured servants, and Africans in the early Anglo-Atlantic. First, Guasco asserts that Tudor-Stuart Englishmen knew more about the institution of slavery than is commonly assumed. Sixteenth-century Englishmen viewed themselves and their world through the prism of slavery. Always fearing their own enslavement, they created national historical narratives that traced English liberties to Greek or Anglo-Saxon origins. As Englishmen confronted slave systems throughout Europe and the

Mediterranean, "their national antipathy for human bondage" grew (44). Identifying the institution of slavery with an exotic "other" allowed Englishmen to disparage wealthier civilizations in Asia, Russia, and the Islamic world for lacking the so-called civilized principles of English liberty. Importantly, Englishmen's experiences across the world introduced them to systems of slavery that featured a variety of racial hierarchies. It could not be otherwise, as Englishmen recognized the danger of their own enslavement at the hands of Islamic traders in the Mediterranean as well as the existence of African slavery in Iberian Europe. In this sense, Englishmen entered the late sixteenth-century Atlantic world with an understanding of slavery that was multifaceted and situational.

By the end of the sixteenth century, Englishmen began to encounter enslaved and free Africans on a more consistent basis during their voyages of piracy and privateering in Spain's Atlantic world. From John Hawkins to Francis Drake, English ventures into Spain's colonial territories in this early period depended upon alliances with African agents, who served as guides and translators. According to Guasco, these experiences convinced the English that it was practicable to treat Africans as commodities. Englishmen developed what Guasco calls "pre-plantation African slavery," in which the Iberian norms of racial mixture, manumission, and the Christian conversion of enslaved Africans briefly predominated. This moment, however, gave way by the end of the seventeenth century to the rise of the plantation complex and to racist justifications for it. While African slavery in the Anglo-Atlantic initially mapped onto the preexisting practices that Englishmen observed in the Iberian colonies, the use of indentured labor and the enslavement of Indians diverged from those Iberian precedents. Guasco highlights the unwillingness of seventeenth-century Englishmen to equate indentured and Indian labor with slavery. In the English view, these forms of labor redeemed individuals and reinforced a well-ordered, stable society. As Guasco argues, the English issued indentured contracts lasting "'fourscore & nineteen years'" to Indian slaves in Bermuda to buttress this convenient legal fiction (188).

If Guasco's narrative sounds unfamiliar, it should. He agrees with the standard view that a race-based, plantation labor system that looked very different from its Iberian counterpart developed in the Anglo-Atlantic

during the second half of the seventeenth century. But, by exploring the century before this development, Guasco reveals that "Anglo-Americans let slavery operate according to the conventions of the Atlantic world" (232). The English initially adopted many aspects of a preexisting system of slavery. However, Guasco's sixteenth-century Atlantic world is surprisingly selective, especially considering the huge geographies he traverses when explaining early Englishmen's experiences with slave systems across the globe. While Guasco uses the term "Iberian" almost interchangeably with "Spanish," closer analysis of the Portuguese Atlantic could have offered an important and complementary perspective – especially considering the extensive use of Indian and Africans slaves in Portuguese Brazil, and the ways in which plantation technology, to say nothing of social and legal practices, moved from Brazil to early Barbados. In addition, a more nuanced analysis of Spanish labor systems that draws on the insights of Brian Owensby and others could have added depth to Guasco's assertions about the role of Iberian precedents in the development of the Anglo-Atlantic.

Casey Sylvia Schmitt

The College of William and Mary

[1] These critiques notwithstanding, Guasco's scholarship is exceptionally thought-provoking and suggests many questions for future scholars. More impressive, Guasco's intellectual and cultural history also challenges many long-held assumptions about the rise of plantation slavery in the early Atlantic world.

[1] Owensby, Brian Phillip. *Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

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