History, Not Ideology, Should Guide How We Teach Slavery In America

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The thesis is simple. A civic curriculum that asks students to form judgments about injustice must tell the full story of slavery. In the United States, classroom units on slavery usually focus almost exclusively on the transatlantic traffic of Africans to the Americas. That story must be taught. Yet the same classrooms often give little or no attention to the centuries long enslavement of European Christians by Islamic powers in North Africa, the Ottoman realms, and the Black Sea steppe.

The result is an imbalance that quietly encourages a racialized narrative of victim and oppressor, rather than a human narrative of power and predation. That imbalance is bad for everyone. It miseducates black students by presenting a one track account of bondage that can feed a politics of grievance, and it miseducates white and other students by erasing episodes in which their forebears suffered the same brutal fate. To teach well, one must teach completely. The point is not to minimize Atlantic slavery, it is to contextualize it within the global institution of slavery and to make clear that the capacity to enslave was not racial, it was human.

Begin with a fact that surprises many. Only about 388,000 Africans forced onto ships in the Atlantic trade disembarked in North America. The vast majority went to other countries and continents. The number is small relative to the total, yet it is still a moral catastrophe. Its smallness, however, matters for curricular truth. It shows that the North American story, while vitally important, is a regional fragment of a global system. The fragment cannot bear the whole moral weight of that system without distortion, and a curriculum that treats the fragment as the whole invites confusion about causes, responsibility, and remedies.

Now consider the other fragment that is often missing. Starting in the 8th Century, Muslim corsairs from Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Moroccan ports raided European coasts and seized ships at sea, carrying off Christians for sale in North African markets. In the east, the Crimean Tatar khanate, a vassal of the Ottomans, conducted regular slave raids deep into Ukraine, Poland, and Russia, funneling as many as 4 million white slaves into Ottoman centers like Istanbul. Historians estimate that the Barbary states alone enslaved more than a million white Europeans from roughly 1500 to 1800.

When one adds the Black Sea trade under the Tatars and Ottomans, the cumulative toll runs into the millions more. This was not a brief episode. It lasted, in varying intensity, for a millenia peaking in the 17th century. Despite majoring in history in college, I had almost no familiarity with the Barbary Wars until I joined the Marine Corps and was taught of their involvement. It ended not because the pirates repented but because European navies and empires forced the issue, culminating in the Barbary Wars and the bombardment of Algiers in 1816.

It helps to make the matter vivid. In 1627, raiders from Algiers and Salé struck as far as Iceland, kidnapping hundreds from villages as far north as the Arctic circle. In the mid 1600s, observers described swathes of Mediterranean coastline becoming thinly populated because coastal life had become perilous. Algiers at times held tens of thousands of Christian slaves who labored in quarries, dockyards, and oared the corsair fleets. The pattern in the east was no gentler. Tatar raiding, known as the harvesting of the steppe, repeatedly swept up rural

populations, tore apart families, and sold men, women, and children downstream into Ottoman markets. These facts do not diminish the horror of the Middle Passage. They enlarge the moral canvas so that students can see the human institution of slavery in its breadth.

A natural objection arises. Was not the Atlantic trade distinct because it was racialized chattel slavery tied to plantations, while Barbary and Ottoman slavery was religious or strategic rather than racial, often with different legal forms and some prospects of ransom or assimilation. Yes, there were differences in legal status, economic use, and ideological justification. These differences belong in the classroom. They clarify rather than blur.

But difference is not the same as incommensurability. In both systems, people were violently captured, uprooted, sold, and compelled to labor under the threat of punishment and death. In both systems, countless captives died in bondage. In both systems, entire regions were reshaped by the fear and fact of raiding. Students can hold two thoughts at once, that the Atlantic system was uniquely large in scale in the early modern Atlantic world, and that the Islamic enslavement of Europeans was protracted and numerically significant across centuries in the Mediterranean and Black Sea worlds. The hardest sentences in moral education are often compound sentences. We should teach our students to parse them.

Another objection says that raising the history of white slaves in Islamic markets is a tactic designed to minimize the suffering of black Americans. That is not the thesis argued here. We do not minimize, we contextualize. Context is not excuse, it is orientation. A young reader taught only the Atlantic story can easily slip into a crude syllogism. Blacks were enslaved in the Americas, therefore slavery is a black phenomenon, therefore whites are historical oppressors and blacks historical victims, therefore the present should be structured around redress. Each step in that chain is simplistic.

A young reader taught the broader history is less likely to fall for a reductive politics of grievance and more likely to see that slavery has been a

human institution that corrupts whomever holds power. If curricula teach both the Atlantic and Islamic stories, then the lesson that emerges is not racial resentment but a sober understanding of how power preys upon the weak unless restrained by law and virtue.

The curricular consequences follow. First, a balanced unit on slavery should include an extended treatment of Barbary raiding and Ottoman slave routes alongside the Middle Passage. That treatment should include the political economy of corsair states, the role of the Ottoman slave markets, and the Tatar system on the steppe. It should track how captives were procured, how they were used, how ransom worked, how often death or assimilation was the endpoint, and how European states eventually suppressed the trade by force. Including this material would correct the false inference that European societies were always and only slave traders and that Muslim societies were only victims of European imperialism. It would also help students understand how Anglo American abolitionism sits within a longer story in which naval power, treaties, and changing norms brought multiple slave systems to an end.

Second, a balanced unit should carefully compare numbers and timelines without turning moral education into a perverse scorekeeping of pain. The best recent syntheses agree that the Atlantic trade shipped about 388,000 slaves to North America. The Barbary states likely enslaved over a million Europeans between 1500 and 1800, with Algiers as the largest market. The Black Sea trade under the Tatars plausibly added several million more over five centuries, with new quantitative work suggesting a floor in the mid single digit millions.

The timelines do not perfectly overlap. Atlantic chattel slavery, as a transoceanic system, lasted roughly three centuries. Islamic enslavement of Europeans, while episodic, endured in some form for closer to a millennium, beginning in the early medieval period and ending in the 19th century. These contrasts show students something crucial. Human beings have found many ways to rationalize and implement slavery, often for very long periods, and sometimes at industrial scale. The moral is not that one group owes another group a debt for all time, it is that

any group entrusted with unchecked power can be tempted to treat outsiders as property.

Third, balanced curricula should be candid about procurement. In the Barbary and Ottoman systems, European captives were overwhelmingly seized in raids or taken as war captives. There was no franchised network of European coastal elites selling their neighbors to North African traders. The corsairs themselves stormed ashore and the Tatars themselves rode in to take people. In the Atlantic system, by contrast, European and American traders depended on African intermediaries to supply captives at coastal entrepôts. African polities and raiding confederations, some influenced by prior Islamic slave trading patterns, captured other Africans and sold them to Atlantic merchants. To say that is not to deny European culpability. It is to teach the honest structure of the trade. Students should learn to distinguish between the roles of collector, broker, transporter, and buyer. They should also learn that participation in evil can be distributed across many hands, including hands of the same race as the victims.

Fourth, and most important for civic formation, students should see how free nations ultimately ended multiple slave systems. The United States fought the Barbary pirates in two wars. Britain bombarded Algiers to force the release of captives and treaties against enslaving Europeans. European pressure and, later, colonization of North Africa shut down the corsair markets. In the Atlantic world, Britain and the US outlawed the trade in the early 19th century and the US abolished slavery after a civil war. This is not triumphalism, it is instruction. Free institutions can correct grave injustices, sometimes by persuasion and sometimes by force. Teaching that story rightly tends to unite rather than divide, because it emphasizes shared commitments that cut across race and creed.

Some will worry that adding this content will give license to racists who want to minimize the significance of black suffering. That worry is understandable. The answer is not to censor but to teach with rigor. A teacher who says both that 388,000 Africans were landed in North America and that millions of Europeans were enslaved across centuries in the Islamic world has not said that slavery in America was trivial. He has said that slavery is universal. A teacher who says that

African polities often supplied captives to European traders has not absolved Europeans of responsibility. She has broadened the map of responsibility so that students can see how evil acts propagate through incentives. Education cannot inoculate against every abuse of history, but it can give students the tools to distinguish between careful comparison and crude whataboutism.

A final point concerns civic rhetoric. American students are too often told that the labor of enslaved Africans built America. The truth is more specific. Enslaved labor contributed significantly to certain regional economies and to certain sectors, especially in the South and especially in plantation agriculture. That contribution was real. It does not follow that the nation as a whole was built primarily by slave labor or that the nation's moral standing is fatally compromised by that fact.

The country was built by many kinds of labor, free and unfree, immigrant and native born, black and white, and by many kinds of capital, ideas, and institutions. If one insists on reductive slogans, one can produce them for any region. The better course is to retire the slogans and teach the particulars. When we do, students of all backgrounds will see both the distinct horror of Atlantic chattel slavery in the United States and the broader human story of slavery's reach. That perspective does not divide. It equips.

The moral and civic argument for curricular reform therefore runs as follows. First, tell the global truth about slavery with the same granularity that we already devote to the Atlantic trade. Second, make careful comparisons across systems and eras to show what is similar and what is different. Third, be precise about numbers and timelines without losing sight of the moral core. Fourth, emphasize how lawful power, republican government, and Anglo American naval and military action helped end the enslavement of Europeans as well as Africans. Fifth, invite students to reflect on a sobering constant of human life, the temptation of the strong to prey upon the weak, and the countervailing power of institutions that bind the strong. A curriculum that does this will produce graduates who are harder to manipulate, more willing to see dignity in every victim, and less eager to sort their classmates into permanent roles of debtor and creditor.

One more concrete recommendation follows from the history. Include readings that make the vanished lives present. Let students read excerpts from accounts of Barbary captivity, like the narrative of Ólafur Egilsson after the 1627 raid on Iceland, alongside narratives of the Middle Passage and plantation life in North America. Let them read diplomatic correspondence from the Barbary Wars beside abolitionist speeches from the 19th century. When young people hear many voices and see many maps, they learn to distrust neat binaries and to prefer truth to ideology. A nation that teaches that habit to its children is a nation capable of self government.

Because this argument resists the current fashion, it will attract caricature. Some will accuse it of whitewashing, others of Islamophobia. The former charge falls to the ground once the full scale of Atlantic slavery is taught accurately, including the ongoing legacies of discrimination in the United States. The latter charge is unfair. To say that Islamic polities engaged in slave trading at various times is not to condemn Islam as a faith, any more than saying that Christian kingdoms engaged in slave trading condemns Christianity. It is to condemn an institution and those who used it, across time and creed. The proper response to historical wrong is not selective silence but comprehensive truth.

If we teach this fuller history, we gain something precious. Students who know that millions of Europeans were enslaved by Islamic powers and that millions more Africans were enslaved in the Atlantic world will be able to see a more complex moral landscape. They will be less susceptible to ideologues who weaponize partial truths. They will be more likely to see their classmates as partners rather than as antagonists in a permanent struggle. They will be more likely to honor the accomplishments of a nation that, for all its faults, helped to suppress slavery across multiple theaters. They will be more likely to celebrate the institutions that made that suppression possible and to defend those institutions when they are attacked.