

### Slavery, Emancipation & Freedom: Comparative Perspectives

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## Review

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**Engerman, Stanley L.** *Slavery, Emancipation & Freedom: Comparative Perspectives*. Louisiana State University Press, \$25.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807132364

An Anything but Peculiar Institution

Slavery in a World Perspective

Few historians have written more about slavery than Stanley Engerman, professor of history at the University of Rochester. Perhaps most closely associated with the landmark *Time on the Cross*, a quantitative study of American slavery, Engerman's record of scholarship extends deep into the Atlantic World. His latest book grew from the Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures at Louisiana State University and is a synthesis of his vast knowledge of slavery and abolition in the western hemisphere. It is a wonderful introduction to the vagaries of slavery and serves as a guide to the important issues and scholarship that currently guides scholarly inquiry into enslavement and its aftermath.

Americans might associate slavery with the phrase the peculiar institution, but Engerman rightly explains that slavery was anything but peculiar. Slavery has been omnipresent in world history and remained a global phenomenon long after Americans fought (and died) over its future in the United States. The book admirably brings American slavery into sharp relief through a description of the ways in which bondage played out in other cultures. Engerman notes that slavery was often reserved for outsiders but not all outsiders became slaves, a concept that came to define American slavery. Americans followed the examples of Europeans by relying on race to define the parameters of slavery, but these ideas came under siege when abolitionists challenged the belief that slaves were not insiders and thus entitled to basic human rights. This shift in the intellectual terrain altered the terms of debate even if all of the antislavery arguments were in place by the start of the nineteenth century.

Engerman argues persuasively that the institution of slavery derived strength from its ability to adapt to various technologies and conditions of labor. Masters ensured this flexibility and achieved a high rate of productivity through their reliance on incentives within slavery. While American slavery was similar to other forms of thralldom, demographics set it apart. More so than anywhere else, the population growth of slaves in America equaled that of the white population. This high rate of fertility meant that American slaves probably had better material conditions than their counterparts in the rest of the hemisphere. The debate over the relative treatment of slaves has been a contentious one over the years, and Engerman treads carefully enough to make a convincing case.

Just like slavery itself, emancipation varied widely across time and space. And once again the situation in the United States both typical and atypical. Not surprisingly, Engerman relies heavily on economic causes to explain the demise of slavery, and he could have paid more attention to ideological factors. For instance, he notes how the Black Death in England drove up the price of labor and made free labor relatively dear, but quickly moves past notions of slavery as a moral evil and what motivated abolitionists. The vagaries of emancipation are too numerous to recount here, but freedom in the United States violated the tendency towards the hemispheric norms of compensation to slave owners and peacetime legislation. In the United States -- strange as it may seem -- there was probably more commitment to the rights of the newly freed than in most other countries. Former slaves in America achieved higher incomes and better economic growth than their peers in other nations. Perhaps this surprising development is related to the abrupt nature of the American Civil War, but Engerman does not speculate.

Engerman's narrative loses some of its force towards the end of the book and he makes some questionable or unclear claims. For instance, Engerman dismisses the notion that a significant commitment of land and assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau would have provided long-term economic gains for the former slaves. Perhaps he is correct, but for individuals starting at the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder, direct government help could have staved off the ravages of sharecropping. A more complete discussion would have been helpful. Engerman also sees a sharp break in southern race relations in the 1890s, a position that leans too heavily on C. Vann Woodward's battered paradigm. Finally, Engerman is a bit unclear in his description of how and why black voting decreased in the 1890s. He writes that literacy tests and grandfather

clauses sharply reduced black voting in the South, a statement that is misleading (65). Southern legislatures used legislation to disfranchise blacks but implemented literacy tests and grandfather clauses to retain the vote for poor whites.

Engerman's book, though, should not be remembered for a few missteps in the later pages. It is a clear, coherent, and useful synthesis of the economics of slavery, emancipation, and freedom in the western hemisphere. For the foreseeable future, it will remain the starting point for understanding these most important issues in American -- and world -- history.

*Robert Gudmestad is an assistant professor of history at Colorado State University. The author of A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade (2003), he is writing a book about steamboats and the growth of the cotton kingdom.*