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Teaching ‘Slavery in a Global Context’: Some Pedagogical Themes and Problems

Catherine Armstrong

Abstract

This chapter will discuss a new second year undergraduate optional module entitled ‘Slavery in a Global Context.’ This module is open to History and Joint Honours History students and uses lectures and seminars to explore a chronological history of global slavery. The module covers many of the themes of the conference including the connection between slavery and race, class and gender, the significance of the legal framework and the connection between particular economic and social systems and the prevalence of slavery. The term ‘slavery’ itself is discussed, and taken broadly: we examine serfdom and feudal bonded labour, and also consider contemporary coerced labour such as sex trafficking, domestic slavery, child marriage and child soldiers. We begin in the Ancient World, progressing to slaveries in China and India, the Indian Ocean world, and medieval and early modern Europe. The transatlantic trade and slavery in the Americas also feature, before a discussion of modern slavery-like practices such as convict labour. Finally, we devote several weeks at the end of the module to discussing modern day slavery. This chapter explores the pedagogical justification behind the syllabus and teaching and assessment methods, as well as reflecting on this module’s place in the curriculum. I acknowledge the challenges faced when teaching this module in contrast to the more ‘traditional’ approach to transatlantic slavery that I have adopted previously in other modules. I reflect on the success of my aim to challenge students’ preconceptions of slavery as an Atlantic phenomenon. This module also uses a non-typical assessment strategy, requiring students to devise a museum exhibition on a topic of their choosing related to the global history of slavery. Finally I reflect on the ways that the module will be adapted for subsequent years in response to the participation and feedback of students in this first cohort.

Key Words: History of slavery, global history, higher education pedagogy, student experience, assessment.

This chapter will discuss the planning, design, development and delivery of a new second year undergraduate optional module, which attracted fifty students in its first cohort, entitled ‘Slavery in a Global Context.’ This module is open to History and Joint Honours History students at Loughborough University and uses lectures and seminars to explore a chronological history of global slavery. I am an American historian and for five years taught a module on slavery in the Atlantic

world. However, on moving institutions I decided to change focus and adapt this module, making broader in chronological and geographical scope. Partly this was in response to the way that slavery is taught here in British higher education institutions. The vast majority of modules on slavery focus on the North American experience, while some introduce comparative elements bringing in evidence from the Caribbean and South America. The popularity of the Atlantic World as a discipline has encouraged this broadening. As with school education, much of the focus is on the Transatlantic slave trade, (often simplified, even at university level, as the euro-centric 'triangular trade'). The Atlantic History approach, championed by scholars such as Bernard Bailyn, Alison Games and David Armitage, does try to challenge this by bringing in the African perspective.¹ Their agency, their role as actors rather than reactors to historical change is still underplayed. Even within this limited case study, the picture is presented simplistically, in purely 'black and white' terms if you'll pardon the pun. School or higher education classrooms tell students about none of the liminal, more complex stories of slave ownership and experience in the Americas, for example, ownership by poor whites, by free people of colour or by Native Americans. US-based teaching about slavery is equally restrictive, seeing 'their' example of slavery as the overriding one. Many modules at school and college focus more on the legacies of slavery, the racial aftermath, including up to the present day. This work is, of course, crucial in preparing students for full citizenship as Laurence Blum's work on *High Schools: Race and America's future* has shown.² However, the breadth of understanding of slavery is limited and I argue this restricts the students' understanding of twenty-first century hegemonic relations. According to Blum, few American high school students in his classes knew of Anthony Johnson, a seventeenth-century African who arrived in Virginia on the first transport in 1619 as a slave, and who bought his freedom and a plot of tobacco land in Virginia's Northern Neck and proceeded to use white indentured and black slave labour to farm it.³

Thus many history modules approaching the subject of slavery are chronologically, geographically and thematically limited. The slave experience presented therefore can be monolithic. At times, fruitful use is made of comparative techniques, following for example the work of Peter Kolchin in comparing African-American slavery with Russian serfdom.⁴ But most modules do not attempt to look at the essence of what slavery is across different times and places. Another crucial issue is the ignorance of modern day slavery. As a historian, I find teaching the contemporary world challenging, but to bring to bear the weight of historical knowledge on such a challenging problem is crucial to developing students' understanding of past and present. The group Historians against Slavery has done a great deal in the United States to highlight this issue with two conferences and the development of networks of scholars.⁵ However, in undergraduate teaching, most modules convey the idea that slavery is something that happened in the past. It was a factor of the uncivilized, pre-modern past that

was mostly eradicated by whites of European ethnic origin and is now a 'done deal.' Blum observed that his high school students adopted a position on the moral high ground because slavery has ended. They believed that they are more civilized than those ignorant people in the past.⁶ Laura Brunell has described the importance of students undertaking programmes of 'civic engagement' while at university but has stressed that, in many contexts, this has been interpreted as a concern with purely local issues. She and I argue that this is not necessarily the most fruitful context and that encouraging what she calls 'global connectedness' enhances student engagement more successfully. Brunell suggests that we should encourage a 'conscious cultivation of a global sense of *civitas*.'⁷ One challenge faced by teachers trying to prepare a module that introduces a broader definition of slavery into their classroom is that the vast majority of the pedagogical literature concerning the teaching of slavery deals with transatlantic slave trade and its racial legacy, precisely the part of the topic that is already well-embedded into the curriculum.

1. Syllabus and Teaching Methods

The 'Slavery in a Global Context' module covers many of the themes that concern this conference, including the connection between slavery and race, class and gender, the significance of the legal framework in determining the nature of slavery and the connection between particular economic and social systems and the prevalence of slavery. The purpose of the module was to allow students to compare types of slavery and bonded labour across time and space by examining the causes, slave experience, both physical and psychological, the influence of gender, race and class, the importance of war as a means of enslavement, the potential of achieving freedom, and resistance to slavery from those within or without the system, among other factors. The purpose was not to identify which types of slavery were harshest, although inevitably, some students did think in those terms.

Initially, the term 'slavery' itself was discussed, and taken broadly: we examined serfdom and feudal bonded labour, and also considered contemporary coerced labour such as sex trafficking, domestic slavery, child marriage and child soldiers. We studied other slavery-like systems of work such as convict labour. In each context we explored in some depth who was likely to be enslaved and for what purpose, how they were treated by their owners, by the rest of society and by the legal system. This involved temporarily immersing ourselves in the literature of a particular historiography for one week only, for example, the ancient world. Examining journal articles in the field as well as primary sources formed a key part of our studies. There was no core text for the module, and, indeed, there is a great potential for one to be written. However, Orlando Patterson's seminal work, *Slavery and Social Death* of 1982 formed a starting point for the reading of many students.⁸ We began in Ancient Greece, Egypt and Rome, progressing to slaveries in China and India, the Indian Ocean world, and medieval and early modern

Europe. The transatlantic trade and slavery in the Americas also featured, before a discussion of modern practices such as convict labour in Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the Southern United States in the early twentieth century. Finally, we devoted several weeks at the end of the module to discussing modern-day slavery.

For each week three recent journal articles were provided, outlining the latest scholarship in that particular area. In all weeks, including the contemporary studies, we made use of primary evidence derived from the slave owning hegemony and, where available, from the slaves themselves, analysing its reliability and authenticity as well as its contents. For example, we examined whether John Blassingame's cautions about the use of the United States' Works Progress Administration slave narratives of the 1930s might be applied to twenty-first century slave narratives. Blassingame urged caution and required us to consider the power relations present in the testimonial interaction between a former slave and a white, middle class recorder.⁹ Other primary sources examined included: deeds of sale for slaves in Tang China, a Sanskrit treatise mentioning slavery in 300BC, William the Conqueror's description of slavery in England, an edict from the Pope in 1204 on Jewish slave owners, a legal code limiting serfdom in 1649 Russia, as well as images, including for example romanticized images of the slave market of Cairo painted in 1878.

This module used a non-typical, innovative assessment strategy, requiring students to devise a museum exhibition on a topic of their choosing related to the global history of slavery. This served the purpose of providing skills for those students who wanted to choose the heritage industry as a career, but also offered the entire cohort a way in to the debates over history and heritage. I concur with Jay Rounds that museums provide a 'safe place to explore otherness' and thus sensitive topics such as slavery and race can be handled carefully in this context.¹⁰ The students selected a number of images, artefacts and textual sources to display in their exhibit before writing captions for these. They also wrote a catalogue entry for their exhibition, explaining in depth the historical background to their topic and justifying their choice of artefacts. The issue of significance is very important here. They discussed why they had selected these particular artefacts for display. Some students produced outstanding pieces of work, including several who decided to tailor their exhibition to a particular audience, for example primary school children. This approach mirrors the findings of Savenije, Van Boxtel and Grever who argue that a 'heritage approach' to the study of slavery in the past is rewarding but challenging. Students must be carefully instructed so as to avoid the 'instrumental and mythical constructs' of the past and the 'loss of multi-perspectival approaches.'¹¹ Thus, through this module students have been able to develop citizenship skills by better understanding the suffering of slaves in the contemporary world, and also through undertaking the assignment have been able to develop skills useful in the pursuance of a career in the heritage industry. They

have also become aware of some of the tensions between academic and public history.

2. Analysis of First Cohort Performance and Feedback

Having completed the teaching and assessing for this module in its maiden year, I am in a position to reflect on its success. First, I want to acknowledge the challenges faced when teaching this module in contrast to the more ‘traditional’ approach that focuses on transatlantic slavery. Requiring students to familiarize themselves with the histories of so many times and places was demanding. Many of these topics, such as the ancient world, the Indian Ocean world and the Medieval world, will not have been studied in detail before, despite this cohort having taken a World History module in the second semester of their first year. Time was limited in this module. We had three hours in order to examine the slavery of Ancient Greece, Egypt and Rome, for example. However, many students responded to this challenge positively, welcoming the opportunity of studying many places and times through the prism of a single theme. I was clear from the start that this module would involve breadth rather than depth of study and the cohort engaged positively with this concept.

Many of the challenges faced in this module were those also confronted by teachers of transatlantic slavery: how do we teach sensitively about this? Teaching about slavery and imperialism is a sensitive topic in the Netherlands as well as in the UK.¹² There was a tendency by teachers in a classroom shaped by the postcolonial migration patterns to assume that the classroom was peopled by descendants of enslaved people or traders and this could result in a polarized cohort. It is vital to avoid a sense of victimization or of ‘white guilt,’ both of which shut down genuine debate and cooperation. White students debating slavery are frequently fearful of disagreement, of sharing their personal views or of disagreeing with others, especially with students of different ethnic origins, because they are loathe to be seen as racist. By broadening the students’ understanding and horizons about slavery, and showing that slavery exists in many times and places, it is vital to prevent the idea of excusing the perpetrators to come to the fore in classroom discussion. Because slavery is ubiquitous, this does not mean that we should accept it as part of human society. How do we avoid excusing the perpetrators? The answer must be by educating about the causes and effects of slavery. Another issue that I faced when teaching about slavery in British classrooms is that often I am not working with an ethnically diverse class. What does it mean as a white female to be teaching a class of mostly white ethnically British students about global slavery? Will they question my ‘authenticity?’ How do I make this meaningful to them? Would I teach differently to a diverse classroom? Allison Dorsey found that African-American students were often less forthcoming in classes about slavery. This self-imposed silence was adopted by the students because they felt that they should have already known ‘their’ history.

Because of their embarrassment at their lack of knowledge, they were reluctant to participate.¹³

I will now reflect on the success of my aim to challenge students' preconception of slavery as a solely transatlantic phenomenon. In the end of semester cohort feedback, the vast majority of students commented on enjoying studying something new. The module was new to them in terms of the content and the assessment design. But still well over half of the cohort chose to produce their assignment on the transatlantic slave trade rather than on one of the many other times and places where slavery or slavery-like systems of labour operated. When asked why this was, students' answers varied. Some stated that they simply found the transatlantic slave trade the most interesting out of all the topics studied. Others suggested, justifiably, that more information was available on the transatlantic slave trade and that they knew they could easily find enough material to complete the assignment. Still others, more depressingly, claimed that they stuck with the 'safe' topic of the transatlantic slave trade because they had studied it before.

A final challenge faced when teaching this module was that some students were left asking what they might do with this knowledge - they wanted to become activists. In future iterations of this module I would like to offer them an outlet to do this. This is developing Laura Brunell's idea that even in a smaller community like Loughborough, as well as in cosmopolitan hubs like London or New York, students can become engaged in global issues as long as the teacher 'creates space for action in class.'¹⁴

3. Plans for the Future

Finally I will reflect on the ways that the module will be adapted in subsequent years. I hope to spend fewer sessions on the case study of the Atlantic world. Currently, we spend thirty hours out of a total of sixty-six covering transatlantic slavery and the antebellum United States. Perhaps this weighting of classroom time still gives the impression of the over-riding significance of this example of slavery. A changing of this weighting could allow more time for the discussion of contemporary slavery (currently three hours) or convict labour (one hour). The study in more depth of convict labour will allow students to explore issues of class and race more broadly and also to think about the militarization and commercialization of convict labour. But crucially I want to allow more room in the syllabus for developing and undertaking activism and for the discussions over the causes of the use of bonded labour over time and space.

Another aspect of the module that I wish to enhance includes learning outside the classroom. As Jack Crittenden argues, engaged citizenship is developed best outside the classroom as students 'do' rather than just 'learn.'¹⁵ There is an excellent resource for the study of transatlantic and contemporary slavery in the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool. Another option would be a closer trip to Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire, a Heritage England property with connections to

slavery about which historians have written a report detailing the links between the family and its slave owning past. I would be very keen to learn of a site within easy traveling distance of the English Midlands where students might learn in situ about other sorts of slavery (outside the transatlantic realms), but thus far a search has failed to come up with any possibilities.

4. Conclusions

Pedagogically, this module was a success and it has shown me that British undergraduate history students will engage with material that challenges and stretches them by forcing them to become engaged citizens and consider how their historical knowledge might trigger their activism. In feedback solicited after the module, the vast majority of students preferred this varied approach to the single-type of slavery approach of a module on transatlantic slavery. However, overcoming the challenges of familiarity with and availability of source material in order to encourage more students to undertake research on non-Atlantic topics will be difficult. Most English archives and sites relate to slavery in the Atlantic world. And of course, this slavery is an important part of the story of slavery as a whole and I would never want to exclude this. Given my American history background I see that transatlantic slavery is tremendously important, and as many students discovered, those personnel involved in slavery in one part of the world often had interests in another.

Notes

¹ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005); Alison Games, 'Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, Opportunities,' *American Historical Review* 111.3 (2006): 741-757; David Armitage and Michael Braddick, *The British Atlantic World 1500-1800* (London, Palgrave, 2009).

² Lawrence Blum, *High Schools: Race and America's Future* (Cambridge, Harvard Educational Press, 2012).

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labour: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990)

⁵ Viewed on 25 June 2015, Historians Against Slavery website <<http://www.historiansagainstsavery.org/main/>>

⁶ Blum, *High Schools*, 80.

⁷ Laura Brunell, 'Building Global Citizenship: Engaging Global Issues, Practising Civic Skills,' *Journal of Political Science Education*, 9.1 (January 2013): 16-18.

⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative History* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990). I have since also located Jeremy

Black's textbook *Slavery: A New Global History* (London, Constable and Robinson, 2011), but it too, is limited in its coverage of some topics.

⁹ John Blassingame, 'Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,' *Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 473-492.

¹⁰ Jay Rounds, 'Doing Identity Work in Museums,' *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 49 (2006): 133-150.

¹¹ Geerte Savenije, Carla van Boxtel and Maria Grever, 'Learning about Sensitive History: Heritage of Slavery as a Resource,' *Theory and Research in Social Education* 42.4 (November 2014): 520.

¹² *Ibid.*, 517.

¹³ Allison Dorsey, 'Black History Is American History: Teaching African-American History in the Twenty-First Century,' *Journal of American History* 93.4 (March 2007): 1171-1177.

¹⁴ Brunell, 'Building Global Citizenship,' 19.

¹⁵ Jack Crittenden, *Democracy's Midwife: An Education in Deliberation* (Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2002).

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