Chapter 11

Obama and Slavery

Whereas chapter 2 discussed the language and context of slavery from early in the fifteenth century into the twentieth century, this chapter suggests, ever so briefly, some twentieth-century and twenty-first-century instances before examining Barack Obama and slavery, especially in one speech in 2012. There are people alive who can remember the Holocaust and the civil rights marches of the 1950s and 1960s, and thus the ghastly dogma of white supremacy was being played out violently. The end of apartheid in South Africa is very recent, and Nelson Mandela, so courageous in his battle with it, has been in and out of hospital this year (2013), some of his respiratory problems apparently arising from the tuberculosis he contracted while in jail on Robbin Island. The body of the book began with Zurara’s language in describing slavery and ends with Obama’s representation of slavery.

The virulent racism of the Nazis against Jews and a number of other groups was another ghastly form of prejudice. The Ku Klux Clan and lynchings of African Americans in the United States were another instance of this denial and psychology of justification and violence that had been developing since the first division of the Africans before the Infant that day with which chapter 2 began. Forced labor and destruction of whole populations for profit and ideology were a recurrent theme in the history of slavery in this Atlantic world.

Here we have discussed all too briefly examples from a vast archive and trace of the suffering of the slaves. Chapter 2 has also presented a shard of the story of the rise of the abolitionists. Another part of the tale is that of civil disobedience. Perhaps Jesus practiced this in obeying something else, his beliefs. Certainly Henry David Thoreau becomes key in the history of modern civil disobedience, and he influenced others like...
Martin Luther King. In the decolonization of the European empires in the twentieth century Natives and Africans and others who had been transported against their will were able, with education, to stand up for themselves and to argue against discrimination and the practices of slavery and exploitation. This also happened in countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, the United States and South Africa in the former sphere of the British Empire.

There is, then, a kind of lineage of speaking and writing against empire or a hierarchy of privilege and prejudice. In his Nobel speech, Martin Luther King alludes to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi just as in his Nobel speech Nelson Mandela refers to King. This web of reference connected Gandhi, King and Mandela and also linked them to those who fought slavery and favored civil disobedience in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. Some, like Henry S. Salt, saw affinities between the civil disobedience of East and West, Gandhi and Thoreau. In an article in 1930, Salt saw such parallels and quoted from Gandhi’s letter of October 12, 1929: “My first introduction to Thoreau’s writings was, I think, in 1907, or later, when I was in the thick of the passive resistance struggle.” Quiet change in the face of inequity and repression, liberty and equality for all became a theme also for the person who ends this chapter and the body of this book: Barack Obama.

Obama’s Speech on Modern Slavery

In September 2012, President Obama gave a speech to the Clinton Global Initiative. Obama takes up a long struggle, part of which I have discussed in chapter 2, between enslaving others for profit or other ideological reasons (religion—conversion to Christianity) or fighting that impulse to enslave for humanitarian and other reasons (religion—that Christians believe that all people are equal before God and that slavery is abhorrent because it goes against that equality). Obama says:

And today, I want to discuss an issue that relates to each of these challenges. It ought to concern every person, because it is a debasement of our common humanity. It ought to concern every community, because it tears at our social fabric. It ought to concern every business, because it distorts markets. It ought to concern every nation, because it endangers public health and fuels violence and organized crime. I’m talking about the injustice, the outrage, of human trafficking, which must be called by its true name—modern slavery.