The enforced servitude of one person (a slave) to another or one group to another. A slave has no personal rights and is considered the property of another person through birth, purchase, or capture. Slavery goes back to prehistoric times; it flourished in classical times, but declined in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. During the imperialistic eras of Spain, Portugal, and Britain in the 16th to 18th centuries, and in the American South in the 17th to 19th centuries, slavery became a mainstay of an agricultural labour-intensive economy, with millions of Africans sold to work on plantations in North and South America. Millions more died during transportation, but the profits from this trade were enormous. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, in the USA at the end of the Civil War (1863–65), and in Brazil in 1888. Mauritania was the last country to abolish slavery, in 1981. However, slavery continues illegally in some countries today in the form of forced labour, which the International Labour Organization estimated in 2005 affects at least 12 million people. Other modern forms of slavery include debt bondage and human trafficking, particularly of women and children.

Chattel slavery involves outright ownership of the slave by a master, but there are forms of partial slavery where an individual is tied to the land, or to another person, by legal obligations, as in serfdom or indentured labour. Historically there have been two basic types of chattel slave. Domestic or house slaves performed menial household duties for their masters and were often counted as a measure of status. Productive or field slaves, who usually held a lower status, worked to produce marketable goods; the African-American slaves who laboured on the American plantations of the 17th–19th century are an example.

The 1926 League of Nations Slavery Convention was adopted by the United Nations in 1953. Slavery was officially abolished in Saudi Arabia in 1963 and in Mauritania in 1981, but not until 2007 were laws passed to enforce the ban by criminal punishment.

As a social and economic institution, slavery originated in the times when humans adopted sedentary farming methods of subsistence rather than more mobile forms of hunting and gathering. It was known in Shang-dynasty China (c. 1500–1066 BC) and ancient Egypt, and is recorded in the Babylonian code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BC), the Sanskrit Laws of Manu (c. 600 BC), and the Bible. Slave labour became commonplace in ancient Greece and Rome, when it was used to cultivate large estates and to meet the demand for personal servants in the towns. Slaves were created through the capture of enemies, through birth to slave parents, through sale into slavery by free parents, and as a means of punishment.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, slavery persisted in Arab lands and in central Europe, where many Slavs were captured and taken as slaves to Germany (hence the derivation of the word). Historically, slave-owning societies included the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean khanate, the Aztecs (Mexico), the Inca Empire (Peru), the Sokoto caliphate, and the Hausa (both Nigeria). Central Asians such as the Mongols, Kazakhs, and various Turkic groups also kept slaves, as did some American Indian peoples (such as the Comanche and the Creek). In Spain and Portugal, where the reconquest of
the peninsula from the Moors in the 15th century created an acute shortage of labour, captured Muslims were enslaved. They were soon followed by slaves from Africa, imported by the Portuguese prince Henry the Navigator after 1444. Slaves were used for a wide range of tasks, and a regular trade in slaves was established between the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa and the slave markets of the Iberian peninsula.

Slavery became of major economic importance after the 16th century with the European conquest of South and Central America. Needing a labour force, but finding the indigenous inhabitants unwilling or unable to cooperate, the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors used ever-increasing numbers of slaves brought from Africa. Although slavery already existed in Africa, the status and relationship of African slaves to their African masters were very different from chattel slaves. Slaves in Africa were considered part of the extended family of their masters and held a status similar to children or wards. The function of indigenous African slavery was to increase the size of a family or clan rather than to perform labour or to serve as a material asset.

The rise of European capitalism directly influenced the slave trade. American plantation colonies grew and prospered using slaves as a labour force. These slaves had a great impact on the sugar and coffee plantations. A lucrative triangular trade was established – alcohol, firearms, and textiles were shipped from Europe to be traded for slaves in Africa, and the slaves would then be shipped to South or Central America where they would be traded for staples (such as molasses and later raw cotton). In 1619 the first black slaves landed in an English colony in North America (at Jamestown, Virginia). At first few slaves arrived from Africa, and their status as slaves was not legally defined. During the mid 17th century the colonies established the legal status of slavery, and increasing numbers of slaves from Africa were used in the South on coffee, tobacco, sugar, and rice plantations. After the invention of the cotton gin (1793), the demand for slaves soared, so much so that the slave populations of some states exceeded the free populations. Africans were also taken to Europe to work as slaves and servants.

The vast profits from the slave trade to the Americas became a major element in the British economy and the West Indian trade in general. It has been estimated that the British slave trade alone shipped 2 million slaves from Africa to the West Indies between 1680 and 1786. The number of slaves shipped to the Americas in 1790 alone may have exceeded 70,000. According to another estimate, during the nearly 400 years of the slave trade, a total of 15 million Africans were sold into slavery and some 40 million more lost their lives in transit. An estimated third of all enslaved Africans traded in the Atlantic slave trade went to Brazil, to work mainly on sugarcane plantations.

Slaves were usually outsiders, removed from their own cultures but denied assimilation into their new ones. In the USA, treatment of slaves varied. Although they were entitled to some rights, such as support during periods of illnese and in old age, they were often denied basic human dignities. The slave trade meant forced relocation and the breakup of families, including children from parents. Nevertheless, slaves retained some cultural elements from Africa, such as religious practices, music, and food. Some of these have survived and are evident in African-American culture.

Antislavery movements and changes in the political and economic structure of Europe helped to bring about the abolition of slavery in most of Europe during the late 18th and early 19th century, followed by abolition in overseas territories somewhat later. Prominent in this movement was William Wilberforce, a British evangelical Christian philanthropist and politician.

Only in the southern states of the USA did slavery persist as a major component of the economy,
providing the labour force for the cotton and other plantations. While the northern states abolished slavery in the 1787–1804 period, the southern states insisted on maintaining the institution. Slavery became an issue in the economic struggle between southern plantation owners and northern industrialists in the first half of the 19th century, a struggle that culminated in the American Civil War.

At the centre of the slavery debate was the question of allowing slavery in new territories. So explosive was this issue that a gag rule, automatically tabling antislavery petitions and discussion, existed in Congress until the mid 1840s. Kansas, for example, became the scene of bloody conflict between pro- and anti-slavery groups, a period known as ‘Bleeding Kansas’ (1854–61). The Wilmot Proviso (1846), a proposal to prohibit slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico after its defeat in the Mexican–American War, also helped to increase regional tensions. The major compromises, the Missouri Compromise (1820), the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1864), were ultimately unable to prevent the war.

Despite the common perception to the contrary, the Civil War was not fought primarily on the slavery issue. President Abraham Lincoln, however, saw the political advantages of promising freedom for southern slaves, and the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted in 1863. This was reinforced after the war by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution (1865, 1868, and 1870), which abolished slavery altogether and guaranteed citizenship and civil rights to former slaves. Apart from the moral issues surrounding slavery, there has also been a good deal of debate on the economic efficiency of slavery as a system of production in the USA. It has been argued that plantation owners might have been better off employing labour, although the effect of emancipating vast numbers of slaves could, and did, have enormous political and social repercussions in the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. Freed slaves were often resented by poor whites as economic competitors, and vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan formed to intimidate them. Although outlawed in most countries, various forms of slavery continue to exist – as evidenced by the steps taken by international organizations such as the League of Nations between the world wars and the United Nations since 1945 to curb such practices. In February 2001, African-American groups called for reparation of between US$1 trillion and US$10 trillion from the US government to compensate descendants of slaves for their ancestors’ unpaid labour and for other forms of racism. See also United States: history 1783–1861, the slavery issue; and United States: history 1861–77.

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