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# Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study

*Orlando Patterson*

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**Orlando Patterson : Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study:

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This is the first full-scale comparative study of the nature of slavery. In a work of prodigious scholarship and enormous breadth, which draws on the tribal, ancient, premodern, and modern worlds, Orlando Patterson discusses the internal dynamics of slavery in sixty-six societies over time. These include Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, China, Korea, the Islamic kingdoms, Africa, the Caribbean islands, and the American South. Slavery is shown to be a parasitic relationship between master and slave, invariably entailing the violent domination of a natively alienated, or socially dead, person. The phenomenon of slavery as an institution, the author argues, is a single process of recruitment, incorporation on the margin of society, and eventual manumission or death. Distinctions abound in this work. Beyond the reconceptualization of the basic master-slave relationship and the redefinition of slavery as an

institution with universal attributes, Patterson rejects the legalistic Roman concept that places the "slave as property" at the core of the system. Rather, he emphasizes the centrality of sociological, symbolic, and ideological factors interwoven within the slavery system. Along the whole continuum of slavery, the cultural milieu is stressed, as well as political and psychological elements. Materialistic and racial factors are deemphasized. The author is thus able, for example, to deal with "elite" slaves, or even eunuchs, in the same framework of understanding as fieldhands; to uncover previously hidden principles of inheritance of slave and free status; and to show the tight relationship between slavery and freedom. Interdisciplinary in its methods, this study employs qualitative and quantitative techniques from all the social sciences to demonstrate the universality of structures and processes in slave systems and to reveal cross-cultural variations in the slave trade and in slavery, in rates of manumission, and in the status of freedmen. *Slavery and Social Death* lays out a vast new corpus of research that underpins an original and provocative thesis.

Densely packed, closely argued, and highly controversial in its dissent from much of the scholarly conventional wisdom about the function and structure of slavery worldwide. (Boston Globe) There can be no doubt that this rich and learned book will reinvigorate debates that have tended to become too empirical and specialized. Patterson has helped to set out the direction for the next decades of interdisciplinary scholarship. (David Brion Davis New York of Books) This is clearly a major and important work, one which will be widely discussed, cited, and used. I anticipate that it will be considered among the landmarks in the study of slavery, and will be read by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists--as well as many other scholars and students. It will be of concern to readers interested in just about any time and place, and not only to those with a specific interest in slavery. It covers an enormous range of materials in history, the social sciences, and the humanities, with unusually broad geographic and chronological scope. The materials are very well handled using a variety of methods, the questions asked are interesting and important, and the entire discussion is of highest quality. (Stanley Engerman, coauthor with Robert Fogel of *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*) About the Author Orlando Patterson is John Cowles Professor of Sociology at Harvard University.