

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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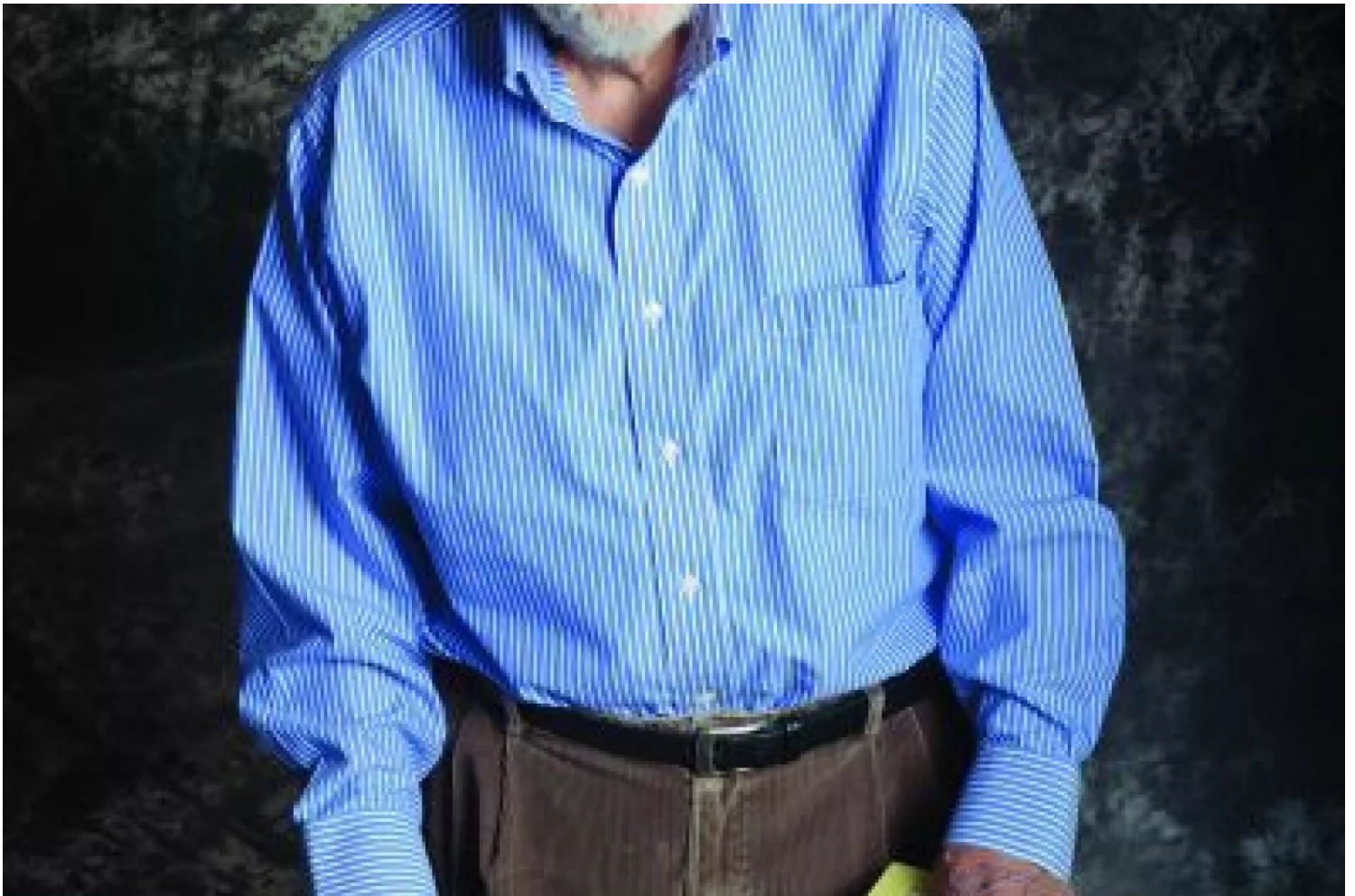
THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

## The Long Reach of David Brion Davis

The historian's influence has been enormous, if not always obvious

By *Marc Parry*

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**Davis at home, with his own books under his right hand and students' works under his left.**

**I**n the spring of 1955, a graduate student at Harvard met a visiting professor from Berkeley. Their encounter helped to change how history is written, and slavery's place in that story.

The student was David Brion Davis, then 28, whose experiences in America's segregated Army had sensitized him to the country's racial problems. The professor was Kenneth M. Stampp, then 44, who was about to publish *The Peculiar Institution*, the first major challenge to the racist slavery scholarship that prevailed at the time.

Stampp's example taught Davis the urgent need to re-examine the then-marginalized subject of slavery. That became his life's work. It culminates this month when Knopf publishes *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, the final book in a trilogy that Davis, who is about to turn 87, began more than 50 years ago.

Davis's slavery investigation grows from a question: Why, at a certain moment in time, did people begin to recognize a great moral evil to which they had been blind for millennia? To understand the antislavery story, Davis traces a confluence of forces: religious dissent, coming especially with the Quakers; a shift in economic relations, with the Industrial Revolution; political revolutions, which rearticulated the meaning of freedom. In a discipline often constrained by geography and epoch, Davis's books cross both.

"He's an undaunted historian," says Sean Wilentz, a Davis protégé and professor of history at Princeton. Columbia's Eric Foner says Davis "has probably had more influence than any other single scholar that I can think of on how we think about slavery and its central role in the history of the United States and the Western hemisphere and the whole Atlantic world."

But as scholars toast his feat of intellectual tenacity—Davis’s book will be feted at events at Harvard and Yale—one of the most important aspects of his influence is the least obvious.

Just as Stampff changed Davis’s life, Davis, who taught at Yale from 1970 to 2001, has shaped the intellectual trajectories of generations of scholars. Very few of his 58 Ph.D. students worked on slavery. But many rose to prominence, pursuing subjects as varied as family life and murder, antimodernism and feminism, labor and law.

The mentor they encountered as students was an austere and intimidating figure with a flowing dark beard who looked like the philosopher William James. His praise felt like hitting a grand slam. His criticism could bring tears. His approach to history, rooted in high-stakes moral problems and the power of ideas, helped to inspire a flowering of cultural history and foreshadowed today’s border-spanning “transnational” scholarship. It now animates a younger generation, as Davis’s disciples train their own students in his mold.

“Knowing David Davis was the best thing that ever happened to me in the academy and in my professional career,” says Jackson Lears, a cultural and intellectual historian at Rutgers.

How did this shy man—who founded no school of scholarship, projected little personality in the classroom, and practiced the then-unfashionable craft of intellectual history—become such an academic guru?

**T**he answer to that question begins in the 1960s, when a populist turn electrified history. Scholars democratized the field by reconstructing the lives of ordinary people who had been left out of the story. They called this movement “social history.” Its methods were often quantitative; its mantra, “History from the bottom up.” Intellectual history, once prestigious, got shunted aside as the out-of-touch domain of elites.

Davis helped a new group of scholars bring ideas and meaning back into the story. He did it by developing a more grounded way to write about ideas, the product of his unique biography.

Davis experienced the extremes of history firsthand in a way few present-day academics have. In the fall of 1945, on a troopship bound for Europe, he was handed a club and ordered to descend into the hold to stop the “jiggaboos”—blacks—from gambling. “In this highly segregated army,” he writes in his new book, “I had never dreamed there were any blacks on the ship.” He found hundreds, squeezed together and almost naked. It felt like a slave ship.

Later, as an Army security policeman in postwar Germany, he was called out in battle gear to the scene of a bloody shootout—a dance club where black and white American soldiers had fought over blacks’ dating German girls. He saw concentration-camp survivors and rubble cities that “smelled of death.” He arrested a Polish soldier for raping a 6-year-old German girl.

Writing home in 1946, in a letter Davis would later share with his graduate students, the 19-year-old informed his parents that he intended to pursue history because he hoped an understanding of the past might “make people stop and think before blindly following some bigoted group to make the world safe for Aryans, democrats or Mississippians.”

What Davis gave many of his students was more elusive than a research agenda. It was a quality of mind.

By the 1950s, though, Davis had become “increasingly dissatisfied” with his education, as the professor recalled years later in a lengthy talk at Yale about his career. As a graduate student in Harvard’s History of American Civilization Program, he encountered intellectual history that followed the flow of various “isms,” like Romanticism and rationalism. What excited Davis was a more concrete method:

studying specific moral problems to trace fundamental cultural and intellectual changes.

He started with killing. In 1957, Davis published *Homicide in American Fiction: A Study in Social Values, 1798 to 1860*. This mashup of canonical authors and forgotten pulp earned a deadly review from Jacques Barzun, who skewered the young scholar, as Davis remembered it years later, as a “key example of how our graduate schools were going to hell.”

Davis’s next crack at studying moral problems earned a Pulitzer Prize. By 1966, when he published *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, the first book in his trilogy, the civil-rights movement had awakened a new consciousness of slavery. Davis’s study followed the story way back—to a time before slavery had become associated with black people—to explain the “profound transformation in moral perception” that led a growing number of Europeans and Americans to see the horror of the institution. He excavated the ideas used to justify slavery from Aristotle to Christianity to John Locke, who, according to Davis, was the last major philosopher who found a way to defend human bondage. And he traced the roots of antislavery sentiment in Enlightenment philosophy and evangelical faith.

With the trilogy’s second volume, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, published in 1975, Davis won more awards and the awe of the growing group of students waiting outside his office amid the Gothic arches and leaded glass of Yale’s Hall of Graduate Studies. “Every graduate student walked around like [the book] was the monolith from *2001*,” recalls Edward L. Ayers, a 70s-era Davis student who is now president of the University of Richmond. “It was just like, *Oh, Lord, look at this thing*. It was this great imposing monument that seemed to loom over our daily experience.”

What captivated historians most about the book was a section “that sought an explanation for the rise of abolitionism in the realm of social relations, not simply

ideas,” Eric Foner writes in a review of Davis’s new book that will appear in *The Nation*. Davis highlighted how British Quakers and other Dissenters were closely linked to both abolitionism and the early Industrial Revolution. He suggested that the denunciation of bondage legitimated wage labor at a time of what Foner describes as “deeply oppressive conditions in English factories.”

“This was not a conspiracy theory, as some interpreted it—a capitalist plot to use the slavery issue to deflect attention away from the situation of the working class—but an analysis of the social functions, sometimes unintended, of abolitionist ideology,” Foner writes. “The book stimulated a wide-ranging and fruitful debate about capitalism’s relationship to the emergence of modern moral sensibilities.”

**D**avis’s writing on those unintended functions of abolitionist ideology captures something of the sensibility that shapes his students. What he gave many of them was more elusive than a research agenda. It was a quality of mind.

Consider the career of Jackson Lears. As a graduate student at Yale in the 70s, Lears was fascinated by the tensions of American life at the close of the 19th century, a rapidly industrializing “age of confidence” that seemed pervaded by “undercurrents of doubt and even despair.” Lears’s book *No Place of Grace* (1981) focused on antimodern critics, like Henry Adams and Charles Eliot Norton, who worried that society had become overcivilized. Antimodernists turned to medieval and Oriental sources in search of intense physical and spiritual experiences and sought self-sufficiency in the Arts and Crafts movement.

Yet even as these affluent and educated Americans protested modernity, they were also its products and beneficiaries. Their agenda “melded with the corporate-sponsored consumer culture that was coming to characterize life in 20th-century America,” Lears writes in an email. The antimodern quest for intense experience, he

concludes, “unwittingly served to strengthen the emerging regime of routine work punctuated by purchased leisure.”

“It was because of Davis’s influence that I became sensitized to the whole notion of ambivalence,” says Lears. “He showed a lot of us how to come to terms with the tensions and contradictions in the people we were studying.”

As Lears and others entered the history profession, dissatisfaction with social and intellectual history led scholars to explore a middle ground. From social history, says Lears, there was a turn toward consciousness and culture; from intellectual history, a turn toward society and everyday life. That middle ground is where cultural history was born.

Cultural history, which flowered in the 1980s and 90s, looked beyond just words and ideas. Scholars studied how people create meaning in technology, objects, commerce, and rituals. Davis helped inspire that turn, says Lears, who went on to write books about advertising and luck. Davis showed a way to study ideas without severing them from everyday life.

“In his view, people act because of the values that they hold, the ideals that they’re pursuing, the fantasies they cling to,” says Steven Mintz, a former Davis student, now at the University of Texas at Austin, who has written histories of childhood and family life. “You can’t distinguish behavior from ideas. What he’s trying to do is revitalize intellectual and cultural history and show that it’s not irrelevant or elitist or confined to some group that social historians were not interested in. And it would really be his students” who “helped make this bridge from social history to American cultural history.”

The Davis stamp is invisible to most readers. His students, on the other hand, spot his themes and approaches throughout one another’s books. They see them in the intellectual history that Wilentz gave to the pre-Civil War working class (*Chants*

*Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*). And in Christine Stansell's history of antebellum working-class women (*City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*). And, nowadays, in the younger generation of historians that they themselves have trained: scholars like Scott Sandage, at Carnegie Mellon, who wrote *Born Losers*, a history of failure, and Jonathan Levy, at Princeton, author of *Freaks of Fortune*, about the emergence of risk.

**T**he fruits of this Davis diaspora occupy several shelves in the living room of the professor's house, a short drive from Yale's campus. On a recent afternoon, Davis swipes his cane at the books' spines. "It's really remarkable how diverse they are," he says. And that's pretty much all he'll say on the subject.

Davis seems allergic to discussing his own influence. Asked about his approach to mentoring students, Davis says only that he would meet with them often and "read very carefully their chapters." ("Carefully" doesn't begin to capture the exactitude of this professor, who could read a student's assertion that something was new only to scrawl back, "What about the Bible?")

Even in his heyday, Davis never insisted that students treat him as a great man. He didn't project a public persona in class and didn't look entirely happy to be there, says Stansell, a 70s-era Davis student. With American history riled by flamboyant scholars who mesmerized crowds with denunciations of one another—think Herbert Gutman and Eugene Genovese—Davis was different: shy, quiet, a bit ill at ease.

"He was always on task," says Stansell. "He never got distracted with unnecessary bickering or points of conflict. He always wanted, you felt, to get to the truth. And that made him an immensely attractive teacher."

Technically, Davis has been at the task of writing his latest work since the 70s. But he put the project aside, publishing some eight other books between the second and third volumes of his trilogy. He managed to complete the series despite four bad falls



—drilling was required to drain blood from his head—and a recent diagnosis of multiple myeloma.

Because one of those intervening books was a big survey, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, Davis felt free to be more selective in the last volume of his trilogy. The result is a book that feels more personal and essayistic than its predecessors.

“I focused on some major subjects that have had far too little understanding and attention paid to them,” Davis tells me. Above all, the colonization movement: the consensus among so many whites in the United States that slaves could never be free unless black people were settled in Africa or elsewhere. Even major black leaders, down to Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, took up this theme.

*The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* “reflects how scholarship on slavery has evolved, partly under the impact of the first two works in this trilogy,” Foner writes in his *Nation* review. Scholars, he continues, increasingly put black rather than white abolitionists at the heart of the story. And they now see slave resistance as critical to abolition: Davis, “following in the wake of recent scholarship, makes blacks’ role as historical actors and catalysts of emancipation far more central than in the previous volumes.”

So now that he’s finished, what does Davis hope that readers will take from his trilogy?

He picks up a copy of the new book from a box on the floor of his study and begins to read aloud from the epilogue in a scratchy voice, one vocal cord strained from a problem that may be related to his myeloma. Even now, after all these years, the story still seems to astound him.

Early in the American Revolution, in 1776, black slavery was legal, and in some ways thriving, throughout New England and even Canada—and all the way down to

Argentina and Chile. In the 1780s, the first antislavery groups were founded in London, New York, Philadelphia, and Paris. In 1833, Britain freed nearly 800,000 colonial slaves. And in 1888, one century after those first antislavery groups emerged, Brazil became the last place in the New World to outlaw the practice.

“We need to keep this in mind as a way that we can make moral progress,” Davis says. “Evil things can be overcome.”

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### **Davis's Acolytes**

David Brion Davis mentored multiple generations of prominent historians. Some notable students, and the year they received their Ph.D.'s:

**1967**

**Lewis C. Perry**, professor emeritus of history, Saint Louis University

Author of: *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860*

**1974**

**Joan Shelley Rubin**, professor of history, University of Rochester

Author of: *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*

**1979**

**Jackson Lears**, professor of history, Rutgers University

Author of: *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*

**Karen Halttunen**, professor of history, University of Southern California  
Author of: *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*

**Jonathan D. Sarna**, professor of American Jewish history, Brandeis University  
Author of: *American Judaism: A History*

**Steven Mintz**, professor of history at University of Texas at Austin  
Author of: *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*

**Christine Stansell**, professor of history, University of Chicago  
Author of: *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present*

**1980**

**Sean Wilentz**, professor of history, Princeton University  
Author of: *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*

**Edward L. Ayers**, president, University of Richmond  
Author of: *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1864*

**1990**

**Amy Dru Stanley**, associate professor of history, University of Chicago  
Author of: *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation*

**1993**

**Mia Bay**, professor of history and director of the Center for Race and Ethnicity, Rutgers University

Author of: *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas About White People 1830-1925*

**1994**

**David Waldstreicher**, professor of history, Temple University

Author of: *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820*

**1995**

**Barbara D. Savage**, professor of American social thought, University of Pennsylvania

Author of: *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion*

**1998**

**Robert Bonner**, professor of history, Dartmouth College

Author of: *Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South*

**Leslie A. Butler**, associate professor of history, Dartmouth College

Author of: *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and the Transatlantic Liberal Reform*

**1999**

**John Stauffer**, professor of English and of African and African American studies, Harvard University

Author of: *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*

**2010**

**William Casey King**, executive director of the Center for Analytical Sciences, Yale University

Author of: *Ambition, A History: From Vice to Virtue*

*Correction (2/5/2014, 8:55 a.m.):* The list of Davis's students originally included two references to "Dartmouth University." The correct name of that institution is Dartmouth College. The text has been updated to reflect the correction.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

OPINION



Marc Parry

Marc Parry wrote for *The Chronicle* about scholars and the work they do. Follow him on Twitter [@marcparry](#).

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