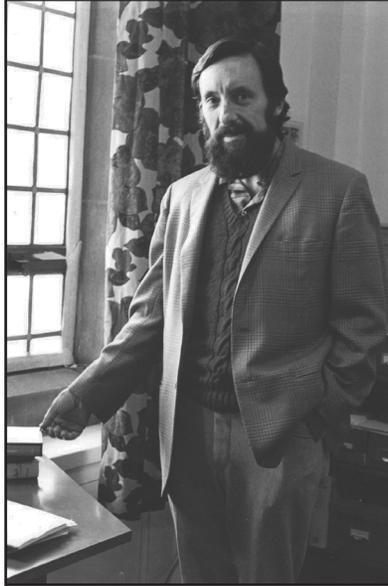

DAVID BRION DAVIS



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As the United States engages in a long-overdue reckoning with slavery and racism, it owes a profound debt to David Brion Davis. Davis was the Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University and the founding director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. As a scholar, author, teacher, mentor, and conference organizer, Davis helped awaken the academy to the centrality of slavery in the making of the modern world, the emergence of new notions of racial identity, the birth of consumer societies, and the rise of new conceptions of liberty and equality. His scholarship not only demonstrated slavery's enormous influence on American politics, economics, and culture but laid bare slavery's enduring legacies, evident in the persistence of racism, racial inequalities, and the economic underdevelopment of many societies that had suffered from slavery.

In a series of magisterial books, which received every major scholarly prize, Davis placed slavery in sweeping global and comparative historical perspective. This revealed that the institution of slavery had been accepted for millennia, virtually without question, in almost all parts of the world. Davis also underscored the wrenching irony of slavery's importance in the very historical eras most closely associated with economic, intellectual, and scientific progress, such as classical Greece and Rome, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. His scholarship revealed many unsettling facts: how dependent European settlement and the development of the New World was on slave labor; how the U.S. government, between the presidencies of Washington and Lincoln, was dominated by pro-slavery interests; and how slave-grown cotton not only fueled textile mills in England and New England, but helped underwrite the growth of the United States' banking, insurance, meatpacking, and shipping industries.

Davis's greatest scholarly contributions lay in tracing how slavery came to be viewed as an intolerable moral evil; how attacks on slavery inspired struggles for workers' rights, women's rights, movements for peace, and the abolition of corporal punishment; and how slavery was connected to the growth of industrial capitalism and European imperialism. His great works addressed the problem of moral perception, how and why a longstanding social evil became defined as a social problem at a particular historical moment, and the problem of social praxis, how shifting perceptions led to collective action. He was especially interested in how attacks on slavery challenged and transformed longstanding attitudes toward the Bible, law, consent and contract, labor, and gender roles.

As a cultural and intellectual historian, Davis's books focused on ideas, values, emotions, perception, and meaning. However, he rejected

the notion that ideas could be treated as free-floating entities that can be studied apart from their social, economic, and political settings. To connect economic and political interests and the realm of ideas, Davis invoked the concept of ideology, which he did not regard as a deliberate distortion of reality or a façade for material interests. Rather, ideology provided the conceptual lens through which historical actors perceive the world around them.

At a time when social history was ascendant, Davis trained several generations of graduate students, including such influential figures as Edward Ayers, Mia Bay, Robert Forbes, Karen Halttunen, Casey King, Jackson Lears, Anne Rose, Joan Shelley Rubin, Jonathan Sarna, Barbara Savage, Amy Dru Stanley, Christine Stansell, John Stauffer, Tamara Plakins Thornton, David Waldstreicher, and Sean Wilentz. He taught his students to apply the insights of the new cultural and intellectual history to subjects as disparate as the origins of the urban working class, the social norms of mid-19th-century middle-class Americans, the lives and culture of urban working-class women in the early republic, anti-modernist ideas in the era of industrialization, and the history of ambition, families, handwriting, and middle-brow culture. As a mentor, he never expected his students to follow in his footsteps.

Davis's route into the study of slavery and abolition was convoluted and embodied the theme of contingency that runs through his scholarship. Born in 1927 in Denver, Colorado to self-taught novelist and journalist Clyde Brion Davis and Martha Wirt Davis, a writer, artist, and pianist, his childhood was peripatetic. He grew up in Denver, Seattle, Buffalo, Denver, Carmel, Beverly Hills, and Manhattan. As a teenager, Davis attended five high schools (including a vocational school) where he didn't have a single Black classmate.

Drafted into the U.S. Army in World War II, Davis trained for the invasion of Japan, and, after the war's sudden end, served as a military police officer in war-ravaged Germany. Several incidents left an indelible imprint on Davis, such as seeing Black soldiers confined in the hold of a segregated Army troopship, witnessing the racism of white soldiers, and encountering Holocaust survivors. Those searing experiences prompted him to ponder the human capacity for evil and the possibility of moral redemption, and convinced him to study history. As Davis wrote to his parents in October 1946:

I've been thinking over the idea of majoring in history, continuing into post-graduate research, and finally teaching, in college, of course, and have come to some conclusions which may not be original, but are new as far as I'm concerned. It strikes me that

history, and proper methods of teaching it, are even more important at present than endocrinology and nuclear fission. I believe that the problems that surround us today are not to be blamed on individuals or even groups of individuals, but on the human race as a whole, its collective lack of perspective and knowledge of itself. That is where history comes in.

There has been a lot of hokum concerning psychoanalysis, but I think the basic principle of probing into the past, especially the hidden and subconscious past, for truths which govern and influence present actions, is fairly sound. Teaching history, I think, should be a similar process. An unearthing of truths long buried beneath superficial facts and propaganda; a presentation of perspective and an overall, comprehensive view of what people did and thought and why they did it. When we think back into our childhood, it doesn't do much good to merely hit the high spots and remember what we want to remember—to know why we act the way we do, we have to remember everything. In the same way it doesn't help much to teach history as a series of wars and dates and figures, the good always fighting the bad, the bad usually losing. Modern history especially, should be shown from every angle. The entire atmosphere and color should be shown, as well as how public opinion stood, and what influenced it.

Perhaps such teaching could make us understand ourselves. It would show the present conflicts to be as silly as they are. And above all, it would make people stop and think before blindly following some bigoted group to make the world safe for Aryans or democrats or Mississippians.

As an undergraduate philosophy student at Dartmouth in the late 1940s, and as a doctoral student in Harvard's program in American culture, Davis felt slavery was largely ignored. It was treated as a marginal facet of American history, an inefficient, backward system of labor that would have soon faded even in the absence of the Civil War. The conflict itself was regarded as a needless, avertable tragedy, brought on by abolitionist fanatics and Southern extremists, or as a struggle for regional economic and political power that had little to do with the morality of slavery and that paved the way for the triumph of Northern capitalism. Professor Davis only began to sense the signal importance of slavery when, in the spring of 1955, he became acquainted with Kenneth Stampp, whose study of slavery in the antebellum South, *The Peculiar Institution*, laid bare the horrors of this system of forced labor.

During his military service, Professor Davis identified his religious identity with the letter “N,” for “none.” But even as a young scholar, he regarded the study of history as a moral enterprise and considered history without an ethical dimension as antiquarianism. His first book, *Homicide in American Fiction* (1957), a study of how American writers responded to the prevalence of murder, dueling, lynching, and mob violence from the late 18th century to the Civil War, underscored his engagement with enduring philosophical issues: human evil, moral responsibility, the nature of insanity, and the social causes of crime.

In stark contrast to many contemporary historians, Professor Davis attached great weight to religion, recognizing that religion was the vehicle through which most people in the past made sense of the world and their place in it. Religious belief was as important in his personal life as it was in his scholarship. A quarter century after he left military service, he married Toni Hahn Davis in a Jewish ceremony, raised his children in a Jewish home, and, many years later, converted to Judaism at the age of 60 and had a bar mitzvah at the age of 80.

Nuance, balance, penetrating insight, literary (and personal) grace, and an insistence on the importance of contingency, irony, and ambiguity are the hallmarks of Professor Davis’s scholarship. By transcending the simplistic “theses” that had dominated the study of slavery—the Phillips thesis, the Williams thesis, the Elkins thesis—he compelled future researchers to address the subject in all its complexity.

It is sometimes suggested that Davis viewed antislavery as a weapon deployed by various elites to legitimate wage labor as a marker of freedom and progress and to advance imperialist expansion. His actual view is far subtler: it is that the meaning and implications of abolition varied markedly depending on context. Antislavery could be both pro- and anti-capitalist and pro- and anti-colonial at various times and places.

He was among the first white scholars to emphasize the crucial contributions made by Black people, working-class whites, women of all classes and races, and other historically marginalized opponents of slavery, as well as the significance of the Haitian revolution to slavery’s ultimate abolition. Davis was also acutely aware of the pivotal role of politicians, government bureaucrats, and public opinion that would absorb and translate radicals’ moral concerns into legislation and policies. To think that social change depends solely upon radicals at the margins of society, rather than as a sustained and often fraught interaction between radicals and those in the seats of power, is, he understood, to indulge in wishful thinking.

As a historian, Professor Davis sought to confront the most horrifying aspects of our collective past and to understand how people as intelligent as us could participate in the most shocking acts of evil. Although his scholarship focused on people's capacity to dehumanize others, this never led to cynicism or despair or to a repudiation of our shared heritage. If slavery was, as he demonstrated, central to the rise of the West and defended for centuries by Western culture's leading theologians and philosophers, that made its overthrow all the more deserving of our respect and gratitude.

I should not conclude without a few personal reflections. As a graduate school advisor, Professor Davis was a true mentor who transformed my life. He was an inspiration, a role model, and a beloved father figure who stood by me and my classmates long after we completed our dissertations. I know no equivalent to his intellectual humility, modesty, or generosity. An astute and acute observer of politics, the arts, and literature, who personified the value of intellectual life, Davis was also a beloved husband and father, whose love for his wife and children was only matched by his pride in their accomplishments. It is hard to imagine a more appropriate or richly deserved tribute to his life and work than the White House ceremony in 2014, at which President Barack Obama presented him with the National Humanities Medal "for reshaping our understanding of history."

Following World War II, West Germans coined the tongue-twisting term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to describe the wrenching process of coming to terms with the Nazi past. Confronted with the horrors of the Holocaust, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* entailed a lengthy and painful process of wrestling with the demons of German history through reflection, remembering, and moral reckoning. Only then would a new generation of Germans truly be free from the burden of historical guilt. There is no precise English equivalent to the word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and its insistence that past evils must be faced and overcome before one can move forward. Certainly, Americans would benefit from such a process of self-analysis. David Brion Davis's scholarship will be seen, in the years to come, as a critical step in that process.

Elected 1983

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