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Phil Withington, University of Sheffield, UK

The semantics of slavery and social relations in England during the long seventeenth century

Abstract:

The adoption in England of the vocabulary of 'slave' and 'slavery' to describe various kinds of dependency and asymmetries of power began in the early sixteenth century; a century later it had become the dominant term of usage, eclipsing traditional terms like 'bondsmen' and 'serf'. As such, the popularisation of the 'slave' terminology coincided almost exactly with processes of commercialisation and marketisation which are known to have placed traditional social relations under intense and, indeed, transformative pressure. Much historiographical attention has been paid to the languages of social description appropriated by contemporaries to account for and legitimise these changes, with historians especially interested in the emergence of the tripartite typology of 'lower', 'middling', and 'better' 'sorts' of people. The relatively new vocabulary of slavery, however, has been largely neglected.

This lecture accordingly uses a range of printed materials and analytical methods to begin to address this lacuna and trace what was an important process of vernacularisation. It is especially concerned to identify the kinds of socio-economic and gendered relations – and tensions – that the language of slavery was used to characterise over the long seventeenth century, as well as the semantic stability (or not) of the vocabulary over time. In so doing, the lecture also begins to assess the impact of colonial developments on vernacular discussions of the social order: not least the institutionalisation of indentured service and racist chattel slavery in the Caribbean and American seaboard.

Bio:

Phil Withington is Professor of History at the University of Sheffield. An expert in early modern Britain and the wider world, he has published extensively on urbanisation and urban culture, the social history of language, and the history of intoxicants. He is currently a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow working on two book projects: one about Europe's first psychoactive revolution, the other on the social history of the English renaissance. It is through both of these projects that he has developed an interest in the history of slavery in early modern England.