

about the combined contributions of experiences, practices, and narratives relating to the Dutch Atlantic slave trade.

Furthermore, in the introduction the editors describe how, since the last decade, the centrality of the WIC and MCC in the historiography of the Dutch slave trade has been displaced in favor of a more contextualized approach, incorporating new research on the private trade. However, many of the chapters in the volume focus heavily on material from the MCC and WIC archives, centering their business and management practices rather than stressing the relative institutional unimportance of these companies. Here the contribution of the volume could have been more strongly foregrounded by pointing toward the fact that these chapters offer interesting new insights from that material and demonstrate that much work remains to be done on the role and operation of these companies. It might have been more impactful overall to present the chapters more generally as contributing to various subfields of research, even as they share the common denominator of working on topics that are Dutch, Atlantic, and focussed on the slave trade.

By and large, the work contained within the book is valuable and speaks to a variety of ongoing debates. Scholars working on the history of slavery and the slave trade will find welcome contributions in this volume, and for that reason it is worth adding to one's collection.

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Rose Mary Allen et al. (eds), *Slavery and the Dutch State* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2025). 490 pp. ISBN 9789087284787.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52024/opyh4124>

*Slavery and the Dutch State* starts out with the acknowledgement that the Netherlands now recognizes that the country's relationship with slavery is a "very painful, important, and until recently underexposed part of our shared history" (p.11). In this edited volume, the editors and contributors examine the socioeconomic, political, and societal contexts in which Dutch involvement in slavery emerged and evolved. In addition, *Slavery and the Dutch State* traces both the immediate and long-term consequences of slavery in the Netherlands and in the societies subjected to Dutch colonial rule. This volume broadens its

analytical lens beyond state policy alone. The contributors examine the perspectives and degrees of agency of enslaved men and women, colonial administrators, merchants, planters, and their respective descendants. Ultimately, *Slavery and the Dutch State* is not confined to historical interpretation, reconstruction or explanation; it also seeks to open a normative and civic conversation. As the former Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte put it, the book is '*not a full stop, but a comma*' (emphasis added) in the ongoing dialogue about slavery and its enduring consequences.

*Slavery and the Dutch State* is best understood precisely in this way: as a comma, an invitation to continue the dialogue and to pursue questions that remain unresolved. Yet, while admirable, the normative tone and conclusions in some of the chapters occasionally sit uneasily alongside the more empirically grounded contributions. This normativity, at times, closes down interpretive space where further analytical openness might have been more productive. Yet this tension is also one of the volume's strengths. It reflects the broader challenge of writing histories of slavery that are at the same time rigorous, critical, and socially engaged. Rather than offering a definitive account, the collection succeeds in mapping a field in motion.

Throughout the volume, various mini-chapters are included, providing new perspectives, methodological insights, and conceptual entry points that enrich the broader narrative. They function not merely as supplements, but as integral interventions opening up alternative angles of interpretation and introducing innovative sources and approaches.

The volume is structured around four sections. The first section on current issues covers the contemporary political, societal, and cultural debates surrounding slavery and its afterlives, including questions of public memory, education, commemoration, and reparations. It outlines the ways in which the history of slavery continues to shape present-day institutions and discourses, situating academic inquiry within a broader landscape of public engagement and policy-making.

The second section turns to slavery, its abolition, and its afterlives, tracing the complex and often uneven transitions from systems of enslavement to forms of "free" and coerced labor. It examines the political, economic, and social transformations of the nineteenth century and beyond, highlighting continuities as much as ruptures, as well as exploring how the legacies of slavery persisted in institutions, labor regimes, and cultural expressions long after formal emancipation.

The third section broadens the scope geographically by examining Dutch colonial slavery in a global perspective. It brings together case studies from across the Atlantic world, Africa, and Asia, highlighting the diverse forms that slavery and coerced labor took within different regional contexts of the Dutch empire. By situating these experiences comparatively, the section underscores both the interconnectedness of Dutch imperial practices and the local specificities that shaped systems of exploitation, resistance, and survival.

The fourth section turns to the early formation of slavery and colonialism, examining how the institutional, political, and economic foundations of Dutch involvement in slavery were established from the late sixteenth century onward. It highlights the role of the state, private interests, religious institutions, and emerging colonial networks in shaping and legitimizing systems of unfree labor, thereby tracing the deeper roots of practices that would later expand across the Dutch empire.

Taken together, several chapters illustrate both the analytical breadth and diversity of the volume. Pepijn Brandon shows slavery's deep integration into Dutch financial systems, linking credit, investment, and state power. Ellen Klinkers highlights how abolition often replaced slavery with new forms of coerced labor, stressing continuity rather than rupture. Arthur Weststeijn shows that slavery was foundational to early Dutch state formation, embedded in legal and institutional structures. Valika Smeulders, finally, reveals how art and visual culture normalized colonial hierarchies. Together, these chapters span economic, political, and cultural analysis, illustrating both the volume's breadth and its core claim: that slavery was not peripheral, but structurally embedded in Dutch society and its long-term development.

*Slavery and the Dutch State* is a book of many faces. On the one hand, it offers an accessible and wide-ranging introduction to the history of slavery in the Netherlands. On the other, it is unmistakably a call to action directed at a broad set of stakeholders, not least Dutch academia. This dual character is not incidental. The volume is explicitly linked to a formal knowledge agenda for 2025-2035 and emerges from a state-commissioned investigation, intended to lay the groundwork for a broader, cross-institutional research program. In this sense, the book is not merely interpretive but also programmatic.

In any case, *Slavery and the Dutch State* rewards careful engagement, but the interested reader should approach it not as a definitive account,

but as an invitation – an invitation to question, to expand, and to contribute to a field that is still very much in formation. The book is a comma, in a dialogue that is ongoing, contested, and necessarily unfinished. This book will become a cornerstone in that dialogue.

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Elwin Hofman, Magaly Rodríguez García, and Pieter Vanhees (eds), *The Business of Pleasure. A History of Paid Sex in the Heart of Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024). 181 pp. ISBN 9789462704107.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52024/5sjtd428>

*The Business of Pleasure. A History of Paid Sex in the Heart of Europe* aims to tell the story of the sex trade in Belgium over nearly a thousand years, paying special attention to the voices and profiles of the women (for most part) who sold sex. The volume covers the history of prostitution: its regulation, practices and practitioners from the Middle Ages to the present. It is the English translation of the Dutch original, *Seks voor geld. Een geschiedenis van prostitutie in België*. While the English translation claims to discuss prostitution in the heart of Europe, it is still very much a Belgian history, surveying prostitution mostly in present-day Belgium, particularly in Brussels and Antwerp with an additional chapter on regulation of prostitution in Belgian Congo.

The individual contributions fit nicely together, in such a way that the volume reads more like a monograph than an edited collection. In chapter 1, Jelle Haemers describes the medieval bath houses, *stews*, and a tolerated sex trade. In chapter 2, Elwin Hofman discusses the increasingly stricter view on prostitution in the wake of the Reformation. Selling sex was banned in some cities, although the authorities had little luck or interest in enforcing it. In chapter 3, Pieter Vanhees discusses the era following the Napoleonic Wars, when French laws and a system of regulated prostitution with frequent medicinal checks were introduced to prohibit the spread of disease. Chapter 4 by Amandine Lauro discusses the regulation, and in part creation, of prostitution in Belgian Congo. Chapter 5 returns to mainland Belgium where Magaly Rodriguez Garcia describes increasing concerns with the sex trade, leading to an ineffectual abolition in 1948; and chapter 6