

Slavery in the United States

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C.L.R. James once said that what Europeans faced as a philosophical question the Americans faced as an empirical one. This was precisely the case with slavery. Locke and Rousseau confronted slavery as an intellectual problem; Jefferson, Calhoun, and Douglass lived it. Slavery was the defining issue of American politics in the nineteenth century. Its legacies—segregation, civil rights, and racial discrimination—have profoundly shaped its twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It was an awful form of human servitude that challenged the very meaning and nature of American freedom itself.

Slavery's influence on American political thought has been profound, though not always recognized. Louis Hartz (1955) famously argued that slavery had very little impact on American political thought due to the pervasiveness of liberal and egalitarian views. The ubiquity of liberal ideas and the absence of feudal institutions reduced class conflict and produced a common, almost unconscious, political philosophy among Americans that emphasizes moral and political equality, individual liberty, and private property. Given this climate, the elitist views of the slaveholders could have no lasting influence.

Hartz was right to an extent: the early U.S. was indeed distinguished by a relative lack of social differentiation, which produced a common American spirit defined by “freedom, initiative, adventure, [and] self-expression, in pursuit of trade and industry” (James 1993, 44). Yet the absence of sharp class stratification was largely due to slavery. The enslavement of Africans made liberal egalitarian views among whites across social classes possible. Jacksonian democracy was also a *herrenvolk* democracy. That is, the Western world's first mass democracy

was a regime that was “democratic for the master race but tyrannical for subordinate groups” (van den Berghe 1967, 18).

Slavery and the Racial Order

Slavery in the U.S. was a dynamic system of struggle between slave and master, Black and white, and North and South. It was a terrible class conflict that shaped the way Americans saw and understood each other. As Ira Berlin writes, “slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations: husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, teacher and student” (Berlin 1998, 8).

In particular, American slavery was a struggle between masters’ attempt to impose “social death” on the slave and slaves’ efforts to seek freedom and build a community. Orlando Patterson (1982) argues that slavery is a system in which the master seeks to strip the slave of all kinship ties and social standing so that the slave is physically alive (and therefore able to labor for the master) but socially dead, belonging to no recognized community and possessing no legitimate genealogy. Slaves resisted this social death in three ways. First, they sought freedom, by purchasing it, suing for it, running away, or rebelling. Second, they sought to make the terms of labor more favorable, through work slowdowns, attempts to shorten the working day, subterfuge, sabotage, maintaining their own livestock or garden plots, participating in markets, or hiring out their labor and keeping a portion of their wages (Berlin 1998). Third, they created their own families and their own culture. While masters sought to impose their rule from sunup to sundown, from sundown to sunup slaves created a community that denied the authority of the master and defied social death (Rawick 1972, Stuckey 1987). Slaves shaped their own customs, religion, dialect, music, economy, and political perspectives, merging African, indigenous, and

European practices into a uniquely and truly American culture. This conflict between “sunup to sundown” and “sundown to sunup,” or between social death and the resistance of the Black community, is one of the fundamental experiences of the American political tradition.

It also produced the racial order. Europeans sat at the top and Africans the bottom of the social hierarchy throughout the Americas. Further, African slavery was the dominant form of labor exploitation in the hemisphere because it was economically cheaper than importing European indentured servants or enslaving the indigenous population, since African slaves were plentiful, cheap, and politically powerless, possessing no “rights of Englishmen” or membership in indigenous communities to appeal to for protection (Morgan 1975). But slavery in the U.S. differed from the rest of the hemisphere in the form of social control used on slaves. In the West Indies and Brazil, for example, slaves were controlled by an intermediate “buffer control stratum” of creoles that stood between them and the planters (Allen 1994, 1997). (Members of this group were generally referred to as “mulatto” or “colored.”) But in the thirteen colonies, poor European colonists were the buffer between master and slave. Their interests and those of the planters converged as poor Europeans demanded—and received—sundry economic, political, and psychological advantages, including the right to own property (including human property), immunity from enslavement, access to public accommodations, and the right to participate in public affairs. In exchange, poor whites gave their tacit or active acceptance to the slave system (Du Bois 1992, Roediger 1991). This cross-class alliance created a “white” racial category, a group distinguished from slaves and those eligible for slavery (generally referred to as “Negroes”) and that enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom and equality while enduring relatively little class conflict (Olson 2004). *Herrenvolk* democracy was the product of this cross-class alliance. The paradox of American history is that the ideals of liberty, equality, and

democracy were built on racial slavery (Morgan 1975). The subordination of some provided the foundation for the freedom of others. The symbiosis of race and democracy forged by slavery has shaped the American political experience to this day.

Slavery in the New Republic

Slavery dominated the political debates of its era. The Revolutionary generation's relation to slavery was complex and conflicted regarding its morality and necessity. The struggle for independence made many patriots aware of a contradiction between their demand for liberty and their ownership of slaves. After the Revolution, Washington privately expressed support for the gradual abolition of slavery and freed some of his slaves upon his death. Jefferson had moral objections to slavery as well, though he was also one of the first persons to suggest that Black people are by nature inferior to whites (Jefferson 1984). Madison, like Jefferson, favored gradual abolition followed by colonization of Black persons to Africa.

Despite their moral qualms, the Revolutionary generation built slavery into the founding documents. Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence contained a paragraph condemning the slave trade, decrying King George for waging a "cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him," but Southern delegates excised it from the final version. The 1787 Constitution is careful to never mention slavery by name but it clearly protects it in several clauses, including the infamous "three-fifths clause" in Article I.2, which stipulates that the population of a state shall be determined by counting all "free persons" in addition to three-fifths of "all other Persons." This clause augmented the South's representation in Congress and their apportionment of taxes, and implicitly sanctioned slavery. Other clauses protected the slave

trade until 1808 (I.8), guaranteed federal support to masters in capturing fugitive slaves (IV.2), and guaranteed federal protection against slave insurrections (IV.4). Debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the Constitution barely touched on slavery, suggesting that both sides took its existence for granted.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 wiped out any moral objections masters had regarding slavery. In 1800, eleven percent of the slave labor force worked on the cotton crop. By 1850 two-thirds of them did, as Southern plantations supplied the raw material devoured by the hungry machines of the industrial revolution. By 1860, over ninety percent of Britain's cotton came from the U.S. South. The rise of "king cotton" transformed slaveholders' ambivalence about slavery into an obdurate defense. Whereas many planters in the Revolutionary generation lamented slavery as a necessary evil, antebellum slaveholders argued that it was a positive social good. James Henry Hammond (1858), for example, argued that all civilizations require a "mud-sill" class to perform its menial labor. The genius of Southern civilization is that it has found an "inferior race" to do this work. By compelling one race to perform labor "naturally" fitted to it, slavery eliminates class conflict within the other race and thereby produces free political institutions.

Slavery not only sustains republicanism, John C. Calhoun insisted; it also civilizes Africans. Africans are savages who practice cannibalism, worship satanic spirits, and are sexually licentious. Slavery, Calhoun argued, has saved the Black race from this barbaric origin. "Never before has the black race of Central Africa... attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually... This... is conclusive proof of the general happiness of the race, in spite of all the exaggerated tales to the contrary" (McKittrick 1963, 12-13).

George Fitzhugh went further than most of his fellow slaveholders to claim that slavery is an appropriate condition for all the poor, regardless of race. “Domestic slavery must be vindicated, in the abstract, and in the general, as a normal, natural, and *in general*, necessitous element of civilized society, without regard to race or color” (Fitzhugh 1857, 347). But as one might expect, Fitzhugh’s argument did not go over well among poor white Southerners. The notion of white equality and Black inferiority, as expressed by William L. Yancey, was much more popular: “Your fathers and my fathers built this government on two ideas: the first is that the white race is the citizen, and the master race, and the white man is the equal of every other white man. The second idea is that the Negro is the inferior race” (quoted in Fredrickson 1971, 61). This *herrenvolk* egalitarianism overwhelmed Fitzhugh’s class elitism and secured a consensus between planters and poor whites. Vice President of the Confederacy Alexander H. Stephens expressed this consensus in his famous “Cornerstone Speech” of 1861: “Many governments have been founded on the principles of subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were, and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature’s law. With us, all the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eyes of the law. Not so with the Negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system” (Stephens 1861).

Scientific Racism

The emergence of scientific racism arose in tandem with the intensification of slavery. In the eighteenth century, whites tended to view African Americans as alien and unassimilable but believed that the natural and social environment was the cause of Black inferiority. But with the

rise of king cotton theories of Africans' innate, biological inferiority began to hold sway (Fredrickson 1971). The eighteenth-century notion of slaves as childlike (thus implying the ability to "mature") gave way to the notion of Africans as subhuman. Scientists conducted various experiments and measurements, such as measuring skull size, evaluating the quality of earwax, and measuring the angle of facial profiles, to determine the biological capabilities of the various races. Unsurprisingly, nearly all of these experiments concluded that "Caucasoids" were intellectually and physically superior to "Negroids," "Mongoloids," and other supposed racial categories. Some of the theorists of scientific racism in this era, most notably Arthur de Gobineau (1915), would influence Nazi philosophy.

The Antislavery Movement

Calhoun argued that slavery preserves republican institutions—so long as the South is not bothered with abolitionists' meddling. But the abolitionists intended to meddle with the Slave Power, and they did meddle. Prior to the 1830s, most antislavery organizations urged a slow, gradual end to slavery and many of them supported the colonization of freed slaves to Africa. But in 1831 a slave rebellion led by Nat Turner struck fear into the heart of the South, weakening much of that sort of antislavery sentiment. And earlier that year, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing *The Liberator*, which would become the leading newspaper for a new brand of abolitionism. Turner and Garrison led the shift from a Southern-based, white, conciliatory and gradualist abolitionism to a Northern-based, biracial, militant movement. Many of the leaders of this new movement were upper class whites, but its support (financial and political) came from the grass roots, particularly free Black communities and white communities in New England and in western states like Ohio. Considered alongside the efforts of slaves themselves, this new

abolitionism was a Black freedom movement with biracial participation (Quarles 1969).

Garrison provided much of the intellectual framework for this movement. He argued that slavery was a sin and that slaves should be freed immediately and unconditionally, without compensation to slaveholders. “Immediatism” became the touchstone of the modern abolitionist movement. Garrison and his followers employed a strategy of “moral suasion” to end slavery. They believed that slavery had so corrupted the entire political system that seeking to overthrow it through electoral politics would only end up compromising abolitionism. Slavery was a sin that damned the nation and required repentance. Moral suasion, or the transformation of public opinion, was the means by which abolitionists would persuade their fellow citizens of the evils of slavery and the need to abolish it.

The Garrisonians also railed against racial prejudice. The constitution of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (founded by Garrison in 1832), for example, declared that “a mere difference of complexion is no reason why any man should be deprived of any of his natural rights, or subjected to any political disability” (Ruchames 1963). Garrisonians argued that eradicating racial prejudice was essential to creating an egalitarian society freed of sin. This principle, however, was held unevenly among white abolitionists. Indeed, antislavery sentiment in the North was often also violently anti-Black. “Death to Slavery! / Down with the Slaveholders! / Away with the Negroes!” went one popular slogan in 1861 (quoted in Fredrickson 1971, 189). Even as they opposed the Slave Power, many whites feared that racial equality would threaten their privileged standing in the *herrenvolk* democracy. And even Garrison occasionally acted paternally toward Black people (who were nevertheless fervently devoted to him). Regardless, racial equality was a central tenet of radical abolitionist political thought from Garrison to Frederick Douglass to John Brown.

American abolitionists quickly embraced immediatism, but the strategy of moral suasion sat uncomfortably with some of them, and in 1840 the movement split. The catalyst for the split was a debate over the participation of women in the movement: the Garrisonians welcomed anyone's participation so long as one shared a commitment to immediate, unconditional emancipation. Reformist abolitionists, however, insisted on following norms of decorum in political deliberation—such as prohibitions on women's participation in public affairs—so as not to offend public sentiment and distract attention from the antislavery cause (Kraditor 1989, Mayer 1998, Stewart 1976). Unlike the Garrisonians, who argued that slavery was but the worst of many sins in the U.S., reformist abolitionists held that American society was fundamentally moral and just except for slavery and advocated an electoral strategy for abolition. After the split they formed their own party, the Liberty Party, which pulled some support away from Democrats and Whigs but fared poorly overall and folded into the Free Soil Party in 1848. Meanwhile, abolitionists such as Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, and the later Frederick Douglass shared the radicalism of the Garrisonians but also supported the Constitution and electoral participation (Stauffer 2002). In the 1850s several of them would support John Brown's raid on a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in a plan to free and arm slaves throughout the South.

The Garrisonians became even more radical after the split. They urged disunion, calling for the North to secede from the South because, they argued, slavery depended on federal support; the removal of such support would lead to slavery's collapse. Garrison attacked the Constitution as “a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell” for protecting the slaveholders' interests, while Wendell Phillips called for Northerners to break up “the whole merciless conspiracy of 1787.” Stephen Foster and Parker Pillsbury disrupted church services in congregations that refused to oppose slavery. Garrisonians' speeches and newspapers and the

slave narratives they published aroused opposition to slavery through shame, anger, guilt, and pity as well as rational argument. “We have facts for those who think, arguments for those who reason,” Phillips once said, “but he who cannot be reasoned out of his prejudices must be laughed out of them” (Phillips 1863). Labeled fanatics, Garrisonians embraced the term rather than distanced themselves from it. As Abby Kelley said, “We should pray to be preserved in the freshness of our fanaticism” (Sterling 1991, Olson 2007).

The Garrisonians explicitly distinguished their fanatical approach to antislavery from those of politicians such as Lincoln, who was personally opposed to slavery but at first did little to abolish it because for him preserving the Union came before all else. Garrisonians castigated this perspective. It perpetuates slavery, they maintained, because placing priority on preserving the Union requires making compromises with the slaveholders, which ultimately strengthens their power. The Garrisonians adamantly rejected any sort of compromise or moderation regarding slavery. “How has the slave system grown to its present enormous dimensions?” Garrison asked, “Through compromise. How is it to be exterminated? Only by an uncompromising spirit” (Garrison 1854). The Garrisonians sought to mobilize a constituency by awakening consciences rather than through party politics. Believing that adherence to principle was the most expedient course, they repudiated electoral politics, denounced the Union, scorned the South, blasted the church, and defied social decorum in the name of the slave.

This fanatical, uncompromising dedication to freedom and equality is the radical abolitionists’ distinctive contribution to American political thought. Their focus on individualism, inalienable rights, political equality and self-reliance have led some to see them as the highest expression of bourgeois liberalism in an emerging industrialized nation (e.g. Hartz 1955). Yet there was a deeply radical character to the abolitionists that spilled over the

boundaries of liberalism. The Garrisonians in particular were not afraid to follow their principles to their radical conclusions. Their belief in individual liberty led them to struggle for free speech and a radical democracy in which all persons have the right to participate in public affairs. As Martin Delany put it, “No people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the *ruling element* of the country in which they live” (quoted in Foner 1988, 88). Their belief that all men are created equal led them to fight racial prejudice, advocate women’s emancipation, and support the labor movement. Their demand for immediate emancipation led them to attack the church for its complicity with slavery, condemn the Constitution as a proslavery document, call for the breakup of the United States, and welcome civil war. Their openness to new ideas led many of them to radical social and personal experimentation, including vegetarianism, alternative medicine, and nudism. They challenged patriarchal relations in the private and public spheres and they crafted new forms of religious worship. In short, the abolitionists’ radical views regarding slavery and racial equality led them to reimagine the American ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy.

Indeed, the radical abolitionists were revolutionaries, for their politics threatened the stability of the nation. Unlike trade unionism, prison reform, temperance, or other reform movements of the time, abolitionists’ demand for unconditional emancipation with no compensation to slaveholders threatened the entire structure of the American political economy. As James argues, immediatism meant “to tear up by the roots the foundation of the Southern economy and society, wreck Northern commerce, and disrupt the union irretrievably” (1993, 89). By attacking slavery, abolitionists undid the arrangements that kept the Union together. As the brief but suggestive history of Radical Reconstruction indicates, this unraveling made possible not just a liberal society, but perhaps also a radically democratic one (Du Bois 1992).

Slavery and Contemporary Political Thought

Hartz wrote that the curious thing about slaveholder thought is that it had virtually no impact on American political thought. Equally curious is the uneven impact slavery has had on mainstream contemporary political theory. Slavery is in the background of nearly all Black political thought in the U.S., influencing its work on power, identity, solidarity, political strategy, and more (e.g. Dawson 2001). Yet outside this field there is surprisingly little on slavery in the study of eighteenth and nineteenth century political thought. (Exception include Charles Mills's [1997] analysis of race and the social contract tradition and a cottage industry on Tocqueville's views on race.) Slavery and abolition are even less contemplated in contemporary political theory. Few democratic theorists, for example, read the abolitionists (or the slaveholders) to think through debates in the discipline such as between recognition and redistribution, liberalism and communitarianism, deliberative and agonal democracy, the nature of power, or the role and value of postmodernism. The uneven influence of slavery in contemporary political thought—and the continued contortions of a democratic nation that has not completely let go of its *herrenvolk* past—suggest that there is much work to be done on slavery in the United States and its relation to political theory.

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