A Turbulent Voyage

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The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery:
Some Interpretations of Their Significance
in the Development of the United States
and the Western World

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Every people, every race, has passed through a stage of slavery. That which ought to be a commonplace of history has been obscured, corrupted and ignored by the injection of slavery into a modern and advanced society like the United States. It would be not only inextricably confusing but impossible to attempt any summary of the infinite varieties of slavery in past ages. However, it is useful to bear in mind two of these varieties. The first is the systematic breeding and selling of their own children into slavery by the backward peoples of Northern Europe. They traded with the highly developed civilization of Rome, even when Rome was ruled by the papacy. The second is the oft-repeated sneer that the magnificent civilization of ancient Greece was based on slavery. Slavery did not help to build the social order of Greece that laid the foundations of Western civilization in so many spheres. Rather, it was the growth of slavery which ruined ancient Greece.

Furthermore, the term "slave" did not then have the meaning it has had since the African slave-trade to the Americas. The slaves in the mines of Greece were cruelly exploited, but in Athens itself slaves could become educated and officials in the city administration, and could attend the ritual performances of the dramatic festivals. As late as the fourth century B.C., when the democracy was on the decline, Plato complained that the concept and practices of democracy were so deeply ingrained in Athenian society that not only the slaves, but the very horses and dogs walked about in the streets of Athens in a manner that proclaimed their democratic rights.

Today it would be impossible to examine the most important of all phases of slavery, African slavery in the American continents, without having some view of the slavery in

Africa itself before the Europeans established the Atlantic slave-trade, and the African slavery which was the result of that trade. African slavery before the European slave-trade was internal For the most part it was also patriarchal. Thirty years ago, I summarized African civilization and the effects of the European slave-trade as follows:

> . . . In the sixteenth century, Central Africa was a territory of peace and happy civilization. Traders travelled thousands of miles from one side of the continent to another without molestation. The tribal wars from which the European pirates claimed to deliver the people were mere sham fights; it was a great battle when half a dozen men were killed. It was on a peasantry in many respects superior to the serfs in large areas of Europe, that the slave trade fell. Tribal life was broken up and millions of detribalised Africans were let loose upon each other. The unceasing destruction of crops led to cannibalism; the captive women became concubines and degraded the status of the wife. Tribes had to supply slaves or be sold as slaves themselves. Violence and ferocity became the necessities for survival. The stockades of grinning skulls, the human sacrifices, the selling of their own children as slaves, these horrors were the product of an intolerable pressure on the African peoples, which became fiercer through the centuries as the demands of industry increased and the methods of coercion were perfected . . .

Within recent decades an immense amount of research has been done on pre-European Africa. Not only does that analysis still hold its ground, but there has been added to it a conception of pre-European African history which stresses the intellectual achievements of the postwar world. In a study done for UNESCO on *Race and History,* Claude Lévi-Strauss, after a recognition of the "richness and audacity of the aesthetic invention" of primitive peoples turns to Africa:

> The contribution of Africa is more complex, but also more obscure, for it is only at a recent period that we have begun to suspect the importance of its role as a cultural melting pot of the ancient world: a place where all influences have merged to take new forms or to remain in reserve, but always transformed into new shapes. The Egyptian civilization, of which one knows the importance for humanity, is intelligible only as a common product of Asia and of Africa and the great political systems of ancient Africa, its juridical creations, its philosophical doctrines for a long time hidden from the West, its plastic arts and its music which explored methodically all possibilities offered by each means of expression are equally indications of an extraordinarily fertile past. The latter besides is directly attested. to by the perfection of the ancient techniques of bronze and of ivory which surpass by far all that the West was practicing in those spheres in the same period.

Neolithic man tilled the soil, domesticated animals, invented and used tools, and lived a family life subject to certain social regulations. Claude Lévi-Strauss believed that this was the decisive moment in the history of human civilization. However, he is prepared to admit that there has been one other fundamental change in the life of civilized man. The Industrial Revolution, bringing mechanical power into use, altered the conditions of life and created a new type of society.

We can see this most dramatically in the two most important concerns of civilized man, war and revolution. Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon each would have understood what the others were trying to accomplish on the field of battle; their strategy and tactics would have been much the same. But the moment we examine the American Civil War, military conflict breaks entirely out of the limits in which it had remained for thousands of years. The reason was the introduction of mechanical power—in the form of the railway—into war. Armies could now be five times as large as before. This larger army, with its rapidity of movement, upset the industrial and the social structure of the
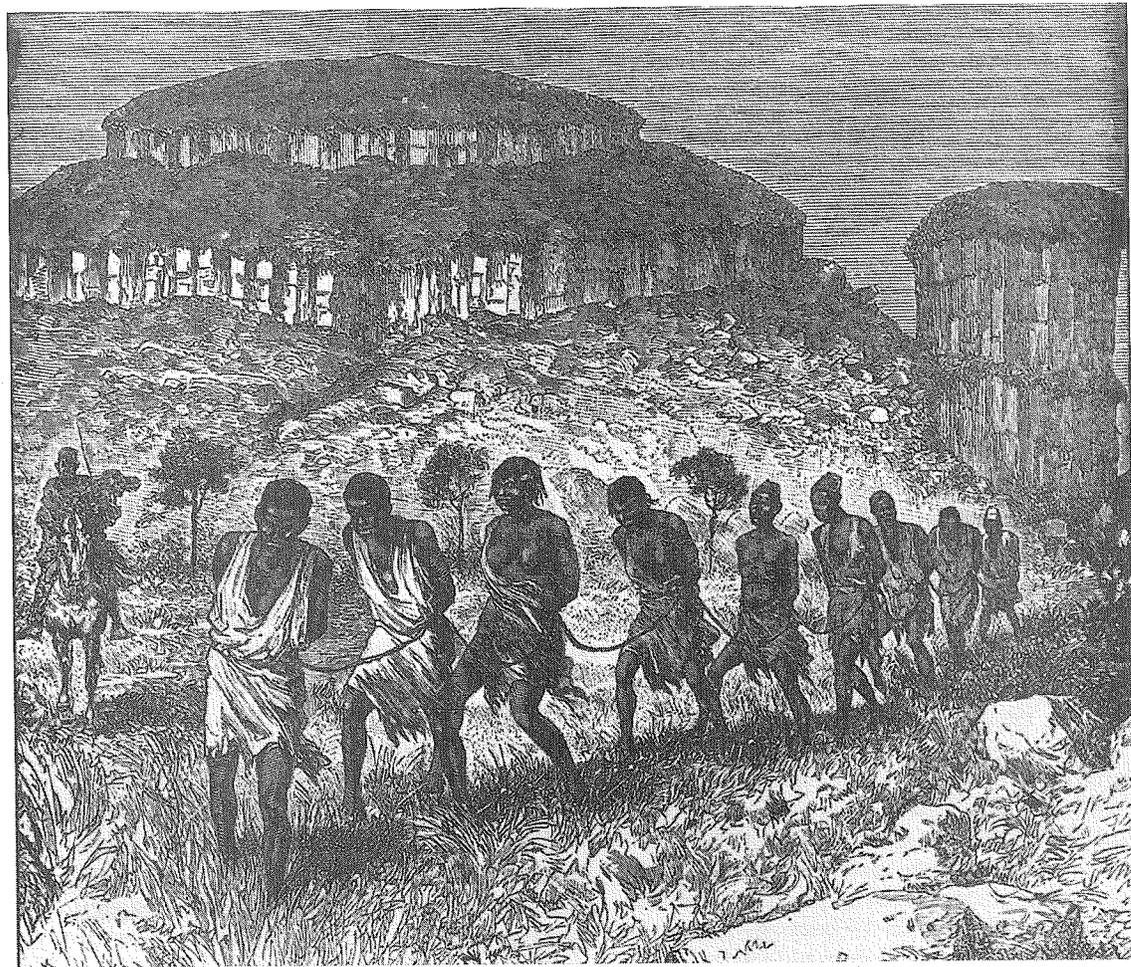
nation. Today, a little more than a hundred years later, the development of industrial power imperils the very continuation of civilized life.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

It is the move to large-scale industry and the accumulation of great numbers of men in factories which is the starting point and the basis of Marx's theory of socialist revolution, and the contemporary nightmare of social destruction. There is no question today that the resources which initiated and established this epoch-making change in human life resulted from the Atlantic slave-trade and the enslavement of Africans in the Americas. Jean Léon Jaurès, in his history of the French Revolution, a work which is a landmark not only in the history of the Revolution, but in the writing of modern history, comments wistfully: "Sad irony of human history . . . The fortunes created at Bordeaux, at Nantes, by the slave-trade, gave the bourgeoisie that pride which needed liberty and contributed to human emancipation." But Jaurès, whose thought represented the quintessence of Social Democracy, was here limited by his preoccupation with parliamentary politics. Gaston-Martin, in his *L'Ere des*

Négriers, makes it clear that nearly all the industries which developed in France during the eighteenth century had their origin in goods or commodities destined either for the Coast of Guinea or for America. It was the capital gained from the slave trade which fertilized what became the Industrial Revolution. Though the bourgeoisie traded in many things, everything depended on the success or failure of the traffic in slaves. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams has demonstrated that it was in slavery and the slave trade that the power originated which created modern industry in England, making it the workshop of the world.

The overwhelming majority of historians show a curious disinclination to deal with the seminal role played by the slave trade and slavery in the creation of what distinguished Western civilization from all other civilizations. As far back as 1847, Karl Marx stated in very aggressive terms what modern civilization, and in particular the United States, owed to the enslavement of black people from Africa. Karl Marx, in 1846 in his polemical work *The Poverty of Philosophy*, made slavery in the United States the center of his comprehensive uncovering of the fires which stoked Western civilization.

> Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have not cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery . . . and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.
>
> Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe North America off the map of the world, and you will have anarchy—the complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations.
>
> Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have

been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.

Fifty years after Marx's statement, an American historian, a young man twenty-four years of age, tackled the question. In 1954, looking again at his doctoral dissertation written for Harvard University in 1896, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870*, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, in an apologia of two and a half pages, three times expressed his regret that when he was doing the work he had not had the benefit of any acquaintance with the works or theories of Karl Marx. Yet with his own independent, if youthful, judgment Dr. Du Bois here showed himself as far in advance of American historiography as he was to show himself in other spheres of American life.

First of all, the title of the book could be misleading. The actual attempt at suppression (1807–1825) is treated as late as Chapter Eight. What we have here is a history of the slave trade and slavery in the United States. It is true that the very first sentence of the monograph, as he calls it (197 pages of text and 98 pages of appendices), declares that he proposes to set forth the efforts from early colonial times until the present to limit and suppress the trade in slaves between Africa and America.

He first separates the Planting Colonies (the South) from the Farming Colonies (New Jersey), and then moves into the period of the Revolution. He notes that from about 1760 to 1787, there is a "pronounced effort to regulate, limit, or totally prohibit the traffic." Chapter Six deals with the Federal Convention and the spirit of compromise leading each state (i.e., in the South) to deal with the question of slavery as it pleased. Then comes a most interesting chapter where we see at work the same mind which in *Black Reconstruction in America* linked the emancipation of the slaves in 1865 to the Paris Commune in 1871, and the black struggle for freedom in 1935 to the world-wide struggle against fascism and for colonial emancipation.
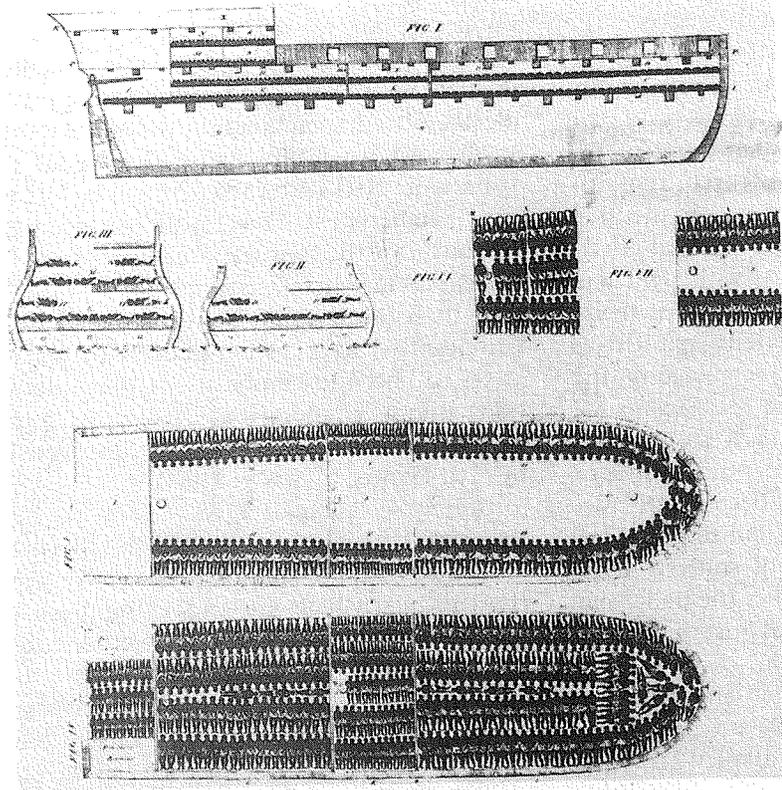
Detailed drawing of a slave ship, showing traders how to make the most efficient use of space in carrying their cargo.

Young Du Bois heads the chapter "Toussaint L'Ouverture and Anti-Slavery Effort, 1787–1807." The Haitian Revolt sharpens the debate for and against slavery in the U.S.A. It is "the main cause of two laws" and soon was "the direct instigation to a third." But despite the combined efforts of fear and philanthropy, the profits of trade won in the end.

Du Bois is pretty certain that it was the Haitian Revolution and its influence which was one of the main causes of the suppression of the slave trade by national law. But to the apathy of the federal government is now added "The Rise of the Cotton Kingdom 1820–1850." He concludes with a chapter on "The Lesson for Americans." The Constitutional Convention had avoided the issue when it had been possible to do something about it. "No American can study the connection of slavery with United States history and not devoutly pray

that his country will never have a similar social problem to solve, until it shows more capacity for such work than it has shown in the past." The last sentence of the text is even more clearly a product of moralistic thought. "From this we may conclude that it behooves nations, as well as men, to do things at the very moment when they ought to be done."

THE SOCIAL AND MORAL EFFECTS OF THE SLAVE TRADE

We can only estimate the numbers involved, but it is certain that the slave trade shifted many millions of Africans from their homeland. A conservative estimate is that 15,000,000 Africans landed after crossing the Atlantic; but some estimates give 50,000,000 and some go even higher. Further, the mortality rate on the voyage to the Americas was often high, and in

addition some were killed in Africa in the raids and wars conducted to get slaves, and some died while waiting to be sold or shipped.

Effectively (and officially) the slave trade lasted three centuries, from about 1550 to 1850. Its period of greatest activity began after the middle of the seventeenth century. There have been many arguments about the effects of the trade on the African economy and population. We know it led directly to nineteenth-century colonialism in Africa and the accompanying degradation of the Africans. But an important area of research remains uninvestigated, which we can only mention here. What were the social and moral effects of slaving on the Africans who bought and sold slaves—what did they think of it themselves? What have been the long-term effects on the African peoples who remained on the continent? Our sources and scholarship are almost entirely Western, and Western thinking has governed our assessment, regardless of whether our standards have been overtly racist or antipathetic to slavery. But surely one of the most important areas of study is what Africans themselves thought of the trade, and what effect it had and perhaps lingeringly continues to have on Africa itself.

Scholars continue to argue about the effects on those taken into slavery. A plateau was reached in 1959, when Stanley Elkin examined the basis for what he called the "Sambo" stereotype of North American slave character. One of the most important bases of his argument is that the capture, voyage, sale, and adjustment to the new environment of the Africans may have created a "shock" that stripped them of their former personalities and rendered their cultural background meaningless.

Most revolts came either at the point of embarkation or between that time and actual sailing. Gaston-Martin catalogues several slave revolts on board ships, and says that he discovered fifty references to revolts, or about one every fifteen trips, in his studies of Nantes slaving. (Nantes is a French seaport.) He adds

that there were almost certainly many revolts which were never recorded, and he comments that they were very likely accepted as a normal hazard of the trade. Some revolts even took place at sea, where the slaves would perish even if they overcame the crew, for they had no idea of how to steer the ships. Ships' logs record the ferocity of these revolts. Usually they failed, with only a few slaves and crew members dead; sometimes the death toll went as high as forty or fifty. Rather than be taken again some blacks drowned themselves. Many crew members died. A few revolts did succeed, in which case the crew was usually massacred, sometimes merely taken captive.

In these revolts, captains accessed the most Europeanized slaves as the leaders—for some slaves had been to Europe at one time or another. Informers among the slaves existed from time to time; but when they were discovered by their fellows, they were killed.

One writer quotes a 1788 account saying the blacks were always on the lookout to rebel or escape. "Insurrections are frequently the consequence, which are seldom suppressed without much bloodshed. Sometimes these are successful and the whole ship's company is cut off." Basil Davidson himself adds, "When they failed to revolt before they reached the Americas, they revolted there." Of the slaves, he writes, "The best and strongest took the first or second chance to resist or revolt; the rest endured. But endurance did not mean acceptance."

Revolts might also take place in coordination with attacks by Africans on the ship or shore "warehouse." Around 1760, the Diane was attacked by Africans while the captives revolted. The French crew was captured and ransomed by Europeans who later handed them over to a French ship. The Diane was lost. The Concorde underwent two revolts. During the first, forty-five blacks disappeared; in the second a coordinated attack between revolting slaves and a party from land destroyed the ship and killed all the crew but one.
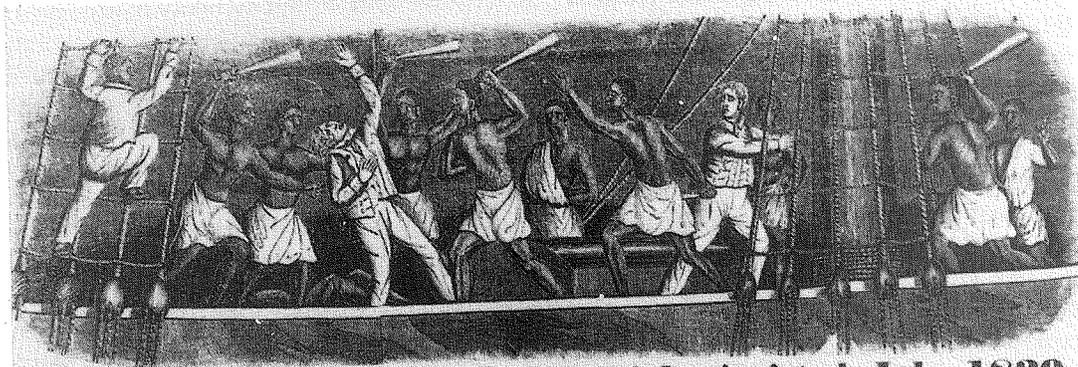
Death of Capt. Ferrer, the Captain of the Amistad, July, 1839.

Don Jose Ruiz and Don Pedro Montez, of the Island of Cuba, having purchased fifty-three slaves at Havana, recently imported from Africa, put them on board the Amistad, Capt. Ferrer, in order to transport them to Principe, another port on the Island of Cuba. After being out from Havana about four days, the African captives on board, in order to obtain their freedom, and return to Africa, armed themselves with cane knives, and rose upon the Captain and crew of the vessel. Capt. Ferrer and the cook of the vessel were killed; two of the crew escaped; Ruiz and Montez were made prisoners.

Once the ship had sailed, the danger of revolt was greatly diminished. Suicides were frequent among slaves who could not bear their misery or stand the idea of enslavement. Some slaves threw themselves overboard during the voyage, and there are many reports of slaves dying of nostalgia either en route or in the Americas. To combat nostalgia and simultaneously give the slaves an early recovery period from the first stage of the voyage, which was invariably the worst stretch for them, about one fifth of the Nantes slavers out of Guinea would stop off for four to six weeks at islands in the eastern Atlantic. Here the slaves could rest, get fresh food, and rebuild the strength they had lost during the first stage of the voyage. Sometimes a high rate of sickness would prompt a ship to make a stopover. "Already isolated from the continent, the Negroes, in spite of a few examples of revolts, seem less antagonistic than on land; returned to good physical condition, they better endure the two or three months at sea separating them from the American islands."

Epidemics were frequent and could kill up to half to two thirds of the cargo. The most common illnesses were scurvy, diarrhea, and various skin diseases. Insurrections, as we have seen, were still an occasional threat, and if the attempt failed masses of slaves might commit suicide together rather than submit to recapture. The mortality rate varied considerably from voyage to voyage and year to year. This is reflected in a list of mortality rates among slaves traded by Nantes shippers between 1715 and 1775. The rate ranged from 5 to 9 percent in sixteen years; from 10 to 19 percent in twenty-two years; 20 to 29 percent in fourteen years; and was 34 percent in 1733. In 1751, the year of the greatest slaving activity on the records, 10,003 Negroes were traded and 2,597 died, giving a mortality rate of 26 percent. For the total period from 1715 to 1775, 237,025 slaves were shipped and 35,727 died, giving a mortality rate of 15.1 percent.

After leaving the African coast and any stopovers, the "middle passage" began, lasting normally two or three months, though large ships might occasionally make the trip in forty days. The slaves could still die or commit suicide, though if there had been a stopover for "refreshment," the number of these deaths declined. But other dangers and the length of the middle passage eclipsed the earlier problems. Storms and calms were equally dangerous—the former because it could sink a ship, the latter because it could extend a voyage beyond the range of provisions. Pirates were a constant threat, and the frequent European wars put many enemy ships on the main sea lanes. As with the gathering of captives, a slaver's life, from his point of view, was not an easy one, and expenses could be disastrous. The degree of profit had to be calculated after several voyages, averaging out likely single losses against long-term gains. Whatever the problems, the trade was so extensive that it surely must have been profitable overall.

Treatment of the slaves on board depended a great deal on the captain. But if slavers were not systematically cruel, they were not at all benevolent.

A few writers emphasize that captains were normally not excessively cruel, for it was in their own interest to bring into port as large a live shipment as possible. but when we say "excessively," we are certainly speaking in relative terms. The slaves were never well treated; they were crowded into pens too small to stand up in. The slavers' basic doctrine was that the blacks would obey only in the face of force and terror. Fear of the slaves was the permanent psychological feature of slaver, slave trader, and slave owner. The captives were kept in irons throughout the voyages; the whips would be used for the most trivial purposes. And revolts were brutally punished. Normally only a few suspected ringleaders and examples were executed; but the manner of execution involved torture. *few executions*

Upon arrival at his destination, the slaver first had to be cleared with health authorities. The inspectors were often bribable—indeed, they often refused clearance unless bribed. Sometimes they would demand that the captain disinfect his ship—buying the disinfectant in the colony, of course. A local governor who feared the captives might be dangerous could quarantine the ship under pretext of fearing a health problem. And genuine epidemics existed often enough to make genuine quarantine a necessity.

Next came port taxes. In the French colonies, Louis XV decreed that the island governors should receive a 2 percent ad valorem gratuity, half for themselves, half to be split by the two lieutenant governors. In fact this gratuity system was often used as the basis for extortion of much higher amounts. Captains who protested too much could find themselves in jail.

Official cheating of slaving captains was common, even when forbidden by royal edict. Large fees could be extorted for such things as anchorage, legal costs, registration of documents, and so on. And of course if the captain had to make calls at several ports, these expenses all were multiplied.

Captains normally tried to give their slaves refreshment to prepare them for sale. When they did not have time, they doped the slaves to give them as healthy an appearance as possible. Slavers would first get rid of their worst-looking slaves at a low price. Many speculators were prepared to take a chance on buying such slaves and hoping they would survive, reckoning a one-third survival rate as satisfactory. The slaver would receive about what he had originally paid for them.

Sometimes the sale might be held up until a propitious moment, especially if there was a glut on the slave market. Either the captain or the company's agent would handle the sale, sending out leaflets to announce the time and place, and the time when the "merchandise" could be inspected. The seller would divide his slaves up into lots of about three or four, grouping them in a way that would bring the highest bidding. The auction would either be done in the usual way—taking competing bids until the highest was reached; or else bidders would be allowed each to make one bid for an entire lot.

If the sales were transacted on board, there was a reasonable chance of suicide by some of the slaves; if on land, there was a reasonable chance of escape. Here, again, we have evidence that at least some of the slaves were not so shattered at this point that they had lost all sense of personality.
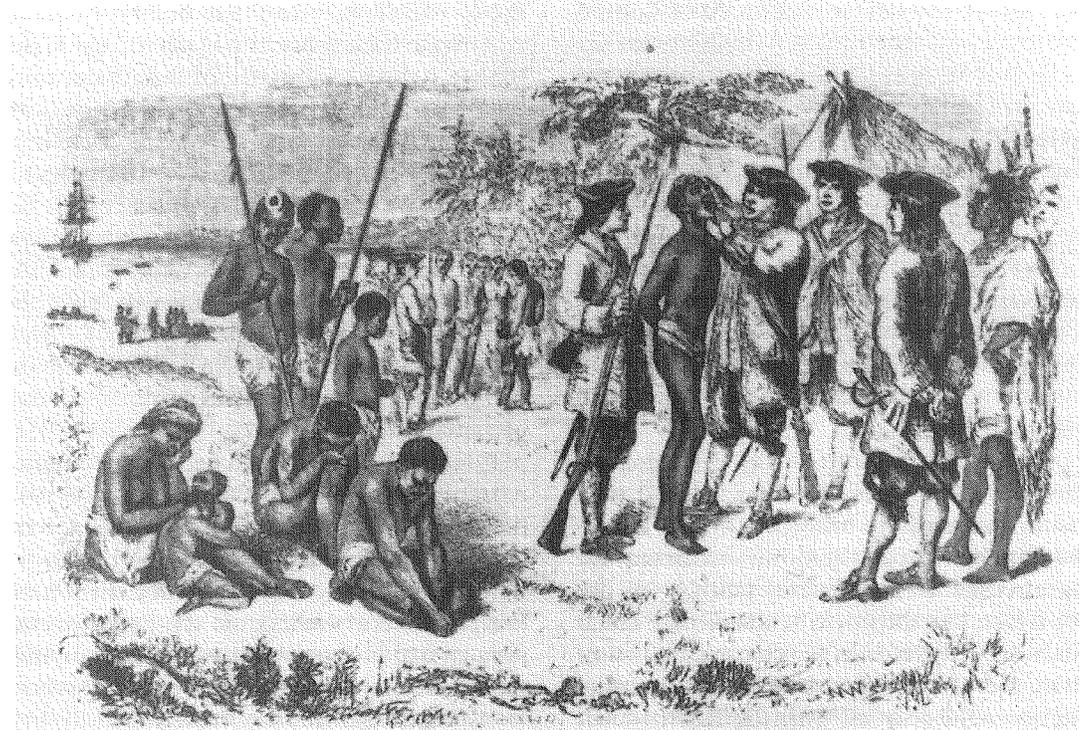
Slaves captured in raids were examined for fitness and hardiness (above). Depletion of Africans by slavers destroyed customs, cultures and mores to such an extent that Africa still has not recovered from its effects. This drawing (below) reveals the parting of mother and daughter, and a child at the breast of its mother. When the slave trade was drawing to a close, slave breeding became the method by which more slaves were propagated.

Payment was rarely in cash. Often it was on credit, and defaulted payments were frequent. Apparently noncash payments accounted for over half of the sales for Nantes slavers. At the start of the French and Indian War, they were owed 15,000,000 pounds. In order to stay on in the islands and collect their money, captains would frequently send their ships home under command of their first mates.

A second method of payment was either in merchandise or by deposit transfer at home. Most French planters kept bank accounts in France, and captains seem to have been good judges of which ones to trust. The most common method, certainly, was exchange of commodities. Either the buyer would give his goods to the seller directly, or else the buyer would write out I.O.U.'s which the captain would

quickly spend on the island, buying up goods to bring home. The captains suffered some loss on the merchandise in this way—but presumably they more than made up for it when the commodities came to be sold in Europe, where they commanded very high prices.

This, then, was the slave trade. It was not easy on the slavers or on the slaves. It is notable that probably as many crew members as slaves died during the voyages. African leaders, if not ordinary free Africans, often willingly collaborated in the trade; and if they and the Europeans were out to get what they could from each other, and prepared to cheat each other where possible, it remains those who were actually enslaved who suffered the greatest miseries and hardships, and who died in vast numbers.

THE SLAVE'S LIFE

Who were the slaves? They came for the most part from West Africa, these slaves who had been stolen and taken from their homes and brought virtually nothing with them, except themselves. The slaves not only could not bring material objects with them, they could not easily bring over their older social institutions, their languages, and cultures. Coming from a large area of West Africa in which dozens upon dozens of distinct peoples lived, with their own languages, social relations, cultures, and religions, these Africans were jumbled together on board the slave ships, "seasoned" by the middle passage and then seasoned again in their first years in the New World.

For the slave brought himself; he brought with him the content of his mind, his memory. He thought in the logic and language of his people. He recognized as socially significant that which he had been taught to see and comprehend; he gestured and laughed, cried, and held his facial muscles in ways that had been taught him from childhood. He valued that which his previous life had taught him to value; he feared that which he had feared in

Africa; his very motions were those of his people and he passed all of this on to his children. He faced this contradictory situation in a context into which he was thrown among people of different African backgrounds. All Africans were slaves, slaves were supposed to act in a specific way. But what was this way? There was no model to follow, only one to build.

The slave from Africa was denied the right to act out the contents of his mind and memory—and yet he *had* to do this. How was this contradiction resolved? What were the new forms created in the context of slavery?

A new community was formed; it took its form in the slave quarters of the plantations and the black sections of the cities. In the United States, this community developed its own Christian church, one designed to meet the needs of slaves and Afro-American freedmen in the New World. It had its own system of communication based on the reality of the plantation. It had its own value system, reflective of the attitudes of African peasants, but at the same time owing its allegiance to dominant American modes. It had its own language patterns, because of the isolation of the plantation system from steady European linguistic influences. West African words and speech patterns were combined with the speech of the eighteenth-century Scotch-Irish.

This black community was the center of life for the slaves; it gave them an independent basis for life. The slaves did not suffer from rootlessness—they belonged to the slave community, and even if they were sold down the river they would find themselves on new plantations. Here, people who shared a common destiny would help them find a life in the new environment.

Each plantation was a self-sufficient unit. The slaves worked at all the skills necessary to maintain the plantation in working order and keep at a minimum the expense of importing necessary items from England. Slave blacksmiths manufactured everything from nails to

plowshares. Coopers made the hoops around the tobacco barrels. The clothing they wore was turned out by slave shoemakers, dyers, tanners, and weavers. The slave artisan moved from one task to another as the need arose.

Skilled labor also took the slave off the plantation. Black pilots poled the rafts laden with tobacco from the tributaries of the river to its mouth, where the ship was anchored; black seamen conducted the ferries across Virginia's rivers to transport new settlers. Many planters found it more profitable to hire out their skilled black workmen for seventy-five to two hundred dollars a year. This black craftsman living away from the plantation was allowed seventy-five cents a week as his allowance for food and board. When the colonies engaged in their war with England for independence, all imports from the mother country ceased, Crude factories were started and slaves were used to work them; also, out of the mines they dug lead, a necessary ingredient in the manufacture of bullets.

The tedium of tobacco cultivation was worse than the exhaustion of simple physical labor. Cotton, which succeeded tobacco as the plantation's output, had to be chopped with great care when the young plant had no more than three or four leaves.

Overworked field hands would take off to the nearby weeds or swamps where they would lay out for a time. At night they would steal back to the slave quarters for food and information about what the master intended to do about their absence. In the swamps of the eastern section of North Carolina, runaways were employed by black lumbermen or the poor whites and could raise their own children for a time. The master, who didn't know the hideouts as well as the slaves did, let it be known through a word passed on to the slave quarters that he was prepared to negotiate for less work and no whippings if only his precious laborers would return.

The slaves fought to set their own tempo and rhythm of work. Says Frederick Douglass:

There is much rivalry among slaves, at times, as to which can do the most work and masters generally seek to promote such rivalry. But some of them were too wise to race each other very long. Such racing, we had the sagacity to see, was not likely to pay. We had times out for measuring each others strength, but we knew too much to keep up the competition so long as to produce an extra-ordinary days work. We knew that if by extra-ordinary exertion, a large quantity of work was done in one day, the face becoming known to the master, the same would be expected of us every day. This thought was enough to bring us to a dead halt whenever so much excited for the race.

There was very little of the slave's life that he could call his own. In the slave quarters at night there was a lowering of the mask that covered the day's labors. Bantering and mimicry, gossiping and laughter could be unrestrained. House servants regaled other members of the "row"—some of whom had never set foot in the big house—with tales of "master" and "missus," would "take them off" in speech and gesture so faithful that the less privileged would shake with laughter.

Besides the oppression of the master himself, his laws and his overseers, the slaves were oppressed by their limited knowledge of the world outside the plantation. Masters felt that a slave who learned how to read and write would lose his proficiency at picking worms off tobacco leaves or at chopping cotton, so thoroughly had slavery separated thought and feeling from work. But the capacities of men were always leaping out of the confinements of the system. Always with one eye cocked toward the door, the slaves learned how to read and write, thus they attained that standard—besides the accumulation of money, tobacco, cotton, and lands—by which society judged the standing of its members. The Bible was the most readily available book; its wide and varied use by the slave would have made the founders of Christianity proud. It was a course in the alphabet, a

first reader, and a series of lessons in the history of mankind.

The capacities of men were always leaping out of the confinements of the system. Written passes, which slaves were required to carry on their person when away from the plantation, could be made up by those who had learned how to read and write. Deciphering the alphabet opened new avenues to the world. A primary achievement of the slaves as a class is that they fashioned a system of communication—an illegal, underground, grapevine telegraph which would stand the test of an emergency.

REBELLIONS AND ESCAPE

When hostilities broke out between the thirteen colonies and the King of England, the British field commander in the South offered freedom to every slave who would enter his army. In Virginia alone, thirty thousand fled their labors; the bitter comment of a slaveholder points up this situation: "Negroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves; it will run several hundred miles in a fortnight." There was such a large proportion of slaves in the state, that South Carolina did not even dare enter the War of Independence for fear of what its laboring force would do. It lost twenty-five thousand nevertheless. Across the South every fifth slave fled toward the British army.

An independent national state was being set up by an American Congress. The very air became filled with expressed passions of human rights, liberties, dignity, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. One of its effects on the slaves was seen on the night of August 30, 1800. Over one thousand slave rebels gathered some six miles from Richmond, capital city of Virginia, the state which was to produce four of the first five American Presidents. All through the spring of that year the slaves prepared their own arms, including five hundred bullets, manufactured in secret. Each Sunday

for months, Gabriel Prosser entered the city, noting its strategic points and possible sources of arms and ammunition. Their plan was to proclaim Virginia a Negro state. If the merchants of Richmond would yield their fortunes to the rebels their lives would be spared and they would be feted at a public dinner.

On the night appointed for the march a heavy rain had fallen, making the road into Richmond impassable. The delay gave the stunned authorities an opportunity to mobilize themselves. Some forty slaves were arrested and put on trial. They revealed no names of other participants. Some estimates placed the extent of the rebellion at ten thousand slaves, others put the figure as high as sixty thousand. The demeanor and remarks of the prisoners on trial—Gabriel: "I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken and put on trial by them. I have adventured my life to obtain the liberty of my countrymen . . ."

In this early period the slave who ran away was most often a skilled craftsman, a man with confidence of making his way in the world. As described by a newspaper advertisement of the day:

Run away from the subscriber's farm, about seven miles from Anapolis, on the 8th instant; two slaves Will and Tom; they are brothers. Will, a straight tall well-made fellow, upwards of six feet high, he is generally called black, but has a rather yellowish complexion, by trade a carpenter and a cooper, and in general capable of the use of tools in almost any work; saws well at the whip saw, about thirty years of age. When he speaks quick he stammers a little in his speech. Tom, a stout well-made fellow, a bright mulatto, twenty-four years of age, and about five feet nine or ten inches high; he is a complete hand at plantation work and can handle tools pretty well . . . they have a variety of clothing, and it is supposed they will not appear abroad in what they wear at home. Will writes pretty well, and if he and his brother are not furnished with passes from others they

will not be lost for them, but upon proper examination may be discovered to be forged. These people it is imagined are gone for Baltimore as Tom has a wife there. . .

Except in a general way he could not be sure of the direction of his travels, guiding himself by the stars and by the moss which grew on the shady side of the trees. In earlier days the safest places of concealment were the nearby swamps, the neighboring Indian tribes and Spanish Florida. The long military arm of the slavocracy eventually reached into all these temporary outposts of freedom and incorporated them into slavery. Then soldiers returning from the War of 1812 brought the news that slavery was outlawed in Canada. The route of flight began to cut across the Kentucky mountain ranges and the Atlantic seacoast.

John Parker, a free black man from Ripley, Ohio, considered it below his dignity to ask any white man how to conduct slaves to freedom; he was responsible for the successful passage of one thousand runaways, but left no memoirs as to how he carried out his work.

In later years the work of the scout took him into the Deep South rather than await the knock on the door. On her expeditions, Harriet Tubman would take the precaution of starting on Saturday night so that they would be well along their journey before they were advertised. Harriet often paid another black person to follow the man who posted the descriptions of her companions and to tear them down. The risks of taking along different types of people in one group had to be considered. Babies were sometimes drugged with paregoric. She sometimes strengthened the fainthearted by threatening to use her revolver and declaring ". . . you go on or you die . . . dead (N)egroes tell no tales . . ."

As with practical people everywhere, everything was done with the materials at hand. An iron manikin in front of the home of Judge Piatt marked an interrupted station; the judge was hostile to the activity, but his wife was an enthusiastic undergrounder. A flag in the hand

of the manikin signaled that the judge was not home and that his house had become a temporary station on the road. For disguise one runaway was provided simply with a gardening tool placed on his shoulder. He marched through town in a leisurely way like a man going to work somebody's garden, left the tool in a selected thicket at the edge of town, and proceeded on his way.

The Underground Railroad in the period of the 1840's grew so saucy that it advertised itself publicly as the only railroad guaranteed not to break down. Multiple routes were the key to the practical success of the railroad. It all came into being after the period of the Founding Fathers had definitively come to an end. The men of education, the leading figures of the Revolution, Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hancock, Hamilton, Lafayette, and Kosciusko, all expressed opposition to slavery in their private conversations and correspondence. But their chief fear was that pushing antislavery to the fore might permanently divide the country into antagonistic sections.

Washington accurately described the sentiment in certain parts of the country after he himself had lost a slave in New England. "The gentleman in whose care I sent him has promised every endeavor to apprehend him; but it is not easy to do this when there are numbers who would rather facilitate the escape of slaves than apprehend them when they run away."

In the early formation of the Underground Railroad, another group whom the runaway touched with his fire was the Quakers. When they arrived in America to escape persecution, the prosperous trade in slaves corrupted even the most tender of consciences. Not being interested in politics, and prohibited by religious belief from being diverted by the theater, sports, or drink, the Quakers became highly successful businessmen and farmers. The Quakers were prominent and influential people and could afford to rely on the letter of the law which in Northern states had declared slavery illegal.

Having established the principle, effective organization for antislavery work came naturally to a group whose life had been drawn tightly together for hundreds of years as a religious sect. By 1820 there were some four thousand fugitive slaves in the Quaker stronghold of Philadelphia and all advertisements for runaways disappeared from Pennsylvania newspapers.

Free blacks, Quakers, and New Englanders, linked up to each other, conducted the Atlantic coast route of Underground Railroad operations Men of a different stamp initiated a section of the western route. At the turn of the century the back-country farmer of Virginia and the Carolinas suffered much from the poverty of his land. The state legislatures were in the control of coastal planters and their lawyers; new government taxes and old debts magnified his poverty. He freed himself of all these burdens by migrating westward into the wilderness.

The slaves who accompanied this first great tide of migration, which depopulated Virginia of two hundred thousand people, were as scattered as their masters. On the early frontier there was less consciousness of their slave status. They helped in the household chores, building cabins and protecting them from Indian attack. Often they were the boatmen, whose arrival was as welcome in the settlement as the ringing of a postman in a modern apartment house.

The runaway slave heightened the powers of the popular imagination. Here was a figure who not only fled oppressive institutions, but successfully outwitted and defied them. And his flight was to the heart of civilization, not away from it; he was a universal figure whose life was in turn adventurous, tragic, and humorous.

The runaway, freed from the disabilities of slavery, was in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century coming into close contact with another highly specialized group of people—the intellectuals. The thinking of in-

tellectuals is characterized by the fact that they view matters whole and in general, however one-sidedly and abstractly. This jamming up of two diverse elements—the black man who supposedly had no civilization in the range of his existence, and the white intellectual in whom society had placed the whole heritage of civilization—produced those works that reminded people who gave thought to the slave held in bondage that they were themselves intimately bound with him for life.

THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

The antislavery movement was produced by the specific relation of blacks and whites during the first third of the nineteenth century. It is a fantastic phenomenon climaxed by the central phenomenon of all American history, the Civil War. Writers offer various explanations, but after a certain amount of reflection it becomes clear that abolition must be seen as an absolutely necessary stage in making America a distinct civilization, rather than just one more piece of boundaried territory in the mosaic of the world's geography.

Abolition is the great indicator of parallel movements before the Civil War and after. History really moves when the traditionally most civilized section of the population— in this case New Englanders representing the longest American line of continuity with the English tradition of lawful sovereignty— joins as coequals with those without whose labor society could not exist for a day—in this case the plantation chattel. Otherwise, history stays pretty much the same, or worse yet, repeats itself. Such was the case of the independent lay preachers in the Great English Revolution, who joined with the apprentices and day laborers; the French intelligentsia in conjunction with peasants and slum proletarians of royalist France; the Russian intellectuals meeting on certain grounds with factory workers under a Czar. In all these instances history moved forward with lasting impress.

Abolition, itself an important instance of democracy, took upon itself the extension of a certain practice and mode of national behavior. Much of the mode of national behavior was based upon regional considerations—the great potential for abolition was the Southern slave in flight to freedom from plantation labor. Then there was the firmest base of abolition extant, the free black communities of Northern city and town. New York City, for a time, provided heavy financing. Garrison's Massachusetts was becoming an antislavery fortress and the rest of New England followed, in various degrees. Children of New England had settled in the fine agricultural flatlands of Ohio and upstate New York; a momentous development as "free soil" was prepared to clash with slave expansion appetites. Pennsylvania housed an antislavery diffused with Quakerized quietist feelings.

Without the self-expressive presence of the free blacks in the cities, embodying in their persons the nationally traumatic experience of bondage and freedom, antislavery would have been a sentiment only, a movement remote and genteel in a country known as impetuous and volatile. The bulk of subscribers to Garrison's *The Liberator* were blacks in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. It was the publicity surrounding the revolt of Nat Turner which guaranteed that Garrison, the white advocate of immediate abolition, would become a household word. The independent conventions of free blacks were anterior to the rise of Garrison and his friends. The succession of slave personalities delivered by the Underground Railroad would eventually lead to black political independence from Garrison himself.

Ohio was the scene in the 1840's of the "Hundred Convention"—political life as daily fare, with regional figures turning into nationally representative ones: Douglass, the self-emancipated slave by way of Baltimore; Garrison, who hardly had left New England before except to visit neighboring New York or far-off merrie old England; these two together spoke themselves hoarse and into general exhaustion. This now-settled middle frontier, this venerable Old Northwest, was clamoring to hear about the state of the nation from true figures of national stature, since nothing more was heard from the doughfaces in Congress sitting on the hundreds of thousands of petitions pleading for justice to the slave, and discussing the role of free settlers in a democracy.

Impending war with Mexico was a spur to far-reaching conclusions. The revived National Negro Conventions listened to a proposal for a general strike by the slave laborers of the South, who would act as a human wall barring the United States Army from invading Mexican territory and turning it into a slave planting domain. The proposal lost by one vote.

Sophisticated prejudice tells us that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe is another vast mistake! In impact and implications marking off the hour and the decade of its arrival it rang true; in universal aspect, clear. The average worker competing with the free black man for a job and a place to live, and wrestling with his prejudices all the while, went to see the play and wept upon his identification with the slave runaway. Where formal government failed on the slavery question, people reached for a government which the Greeks had introduced so very many years earlier: that of popular drama—which the city-state then made sure everyone could see for free—so that whatever they thought of politics they could see, through the form of dramatic representation, principles, conditions, and resolutions, and sense from that emotional experience where a whole society was going. Mere political representation was succeeded by a more intense social reproduction, a more popular accurate representation; in book form, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* circulated more widely through the whole of the nineteenth century than any other, with the sole exception of that book of books, the Bible.

And if it was the running debates with Stephen A. Douglas which elevated Abraham Lincoln from the legislator's semiobscurity to national star-fire, who or what besides abolition had initiated the debate, fixing free discussion of nearly obscured cruelties on a Mississippi cotton field as the nation's prime business; set forth the concrete choices, which no mere election could decide, on the future of mid-nineteenth-century America? And if the abolitionists' method had so elevated Lincoln, what shall we say of their achievement in turning each runaway slave, now threatened with kidnapping under a new and permanent sectional compromise, into a monument either to the American's love of liberty or acquiescence to captivity? Before abolition enabled Lincoln to hallow his name, it inscribed Shadrach and Anthony Burns and Dred Scott onto the heavens for the whole world to read the American future through them.

The leading charge against abolition in the 1850's was aimed at its nearly absolute trust in the uninterrupted processes of civilization. The main critique centered upon Garrison and Phillips' endorsing—before civil war broke out—the secession of the South, confident that slavery, separated from federal protection, must die.

THE CIVIL WAR

The Civil War was a corrective of the notorious nineteenth-century optimism which trusted free speech and free press and the industriousness of unchatteled labor to push authoritarianism of every familiar type over that same cliff where the vestiges of feudal relations had been shattered or left to hang for dear life.

Confronted by preslavery compromises which were a source of infinite corruption, abolition gave obeisance to certain eternal principles: themselves corollaries of the civilizing process at a certain stage. Growing transcending morality titled "the higher law" would overwhelm all momentary deviousness, nullify all expedients and prearrangements disguising themselves as pillars of the Federal Union.

Belief in the morality of "the higher law" was hardly an empty absolute, devoid of content and barren of result. It was a driving impetus separating democracy in politics from a growing "hunkerism," mere hankering after public office and governmental seat-warmings which dulled the very sense of social accountability and paled before the historical momentousness of American existence.

The years of Civil War show what might have been done much earlier during the War for Independence itself when this nation was first born, and egalitarian feelings were at a zenith. But then there had been no antislavery organization. The unity of the young nation, monarchies all, had taken a certain turn at the Constitutional Convention and elsewhere, indicating that the semblance of national solidity could be maintained only if the slave kept his back bent to his labor; the North and South, East and West would not divide, and foreign enemies would wait in vain for internal weakness as the signal to spring upon their prey, the New World as distinguished from the old. But national unity excluded the black from independence; national prosperity was guaranteed by subordinating the laborer to his labor. The very existence of abolitionists during the next climactic phase of this very same question—Civil War—simply insured that the slave would not be lost sight of no matter how much the government tried to lose sight of him.

The destruction of the Colonizationists earlier was the main factor staying the hand of the government which wanted to colonize blacks, freed men, even in the midst of, and because of, the tensions of Civil War to avoid disputations as to their American destiny.

On the universal effect of American abolition: it helped free the Russian serf on the other side of the world—but not directly. Indirectly, it is clear enough if we go by stepping-

stone geography. Harriet Beecher Stowe's book was banned in Italy as an incitement to the peasantry. But the leading Russian publication of the intellectual exiles translated the whole work as a free supplement for all subscribers. Keep in mind, too, that from the time of Peter the Great, Russia had been trying to make its way through the front door of world civilization. Add to this a fact of international power politics: When England and France threatened to join the South, Russia shifted its weight to the North. In the middle of the Civil War the Russian fleet showed up in New York harbor, a great ball was thrown and a festive time was had by all. Abolition of serfdom there and of slavery here occurred almost simultaneously.

Something should be said about the white American worker in regard to abolition. Some were antislavery, some were not. Skilled workers, proud of their craft which brought them a measure of independence, were by and large antislavery. The unskilled, fearing possible competition from the blacks, inclined toward neutrality or gave in to caste prejudice. However, skilled or unskilled, the worker in America was an ardent democrat. No matter how much he suspected another man might take his job, he could not develop a great affection for plantation life as the prototype of American life as a whole.

Abolitionists were not only concerned with the rights of blacks, free and slave, they were concerned with their education. The abolitionist created the first integrated education in the United States—including higher education. And when they did not create integrated education they conducted classes and schools for the ex-slaves, schools partially staffed by black teachers. The abolitionists were at the center of the educational reforms and changes of this period in the United States. In schools for Negro children they experimented with improved methods of education.

But more. They fought not only for the emancipation of Negroes and the improvement of the lives of freedmen. They fought for the emancipation of women, their education, and their own self-development. Oberlin College, the first college to accept Negroes in the United States, was also the first college to accept women in the United States, becoming the first coeducational institution of higher learning.

In their struggle for women's rights, a struggle that went on inside and outside of the movement, abolitionists set in motion the liberation of women—and consequently of men. What Margaret Fuller and other great female abolitionists were trying to establish was their right to create relations with men in which they were not in effect the chattel of their husbands through the marriage contract, as slaves were chattel in the grip of property holders.

The abolitionists were involved in a crucial way in the most significant struggles for human emancipation that were going on in the United States: the abolition of capital punishment, prison reform, attacks on established religion in the name of purified religion, work for the rights of new waves of immigrants and better treatment of American Indians, and the movement to abolish war. Though they often differed among themselves, and were very often confused in the way that people are who are going forward, there is a very direct development from the Declaration of Independence to the abolitionists' efforts to Lincoln's understanding that the Civil War was about whether government of the people, by the people, and for the people would perish from the earth.

THE SLAVE COMMUNITY

It must be said that the slave community itself was the heart of the abolitionist movement. This is a claim that must seem most extraordinarily outrageous to those who think of abolitionism as a movement which "was unique, in the sense that, for symmetry and precision of outline, nothing like it had ever previously been seen." The element of order in the bar-

barism was this: the rationalization of a labor force upon which the whole process of colonization depended had the African at its most essential point. If he had not been able to work or sustain himself or learn the language or maintain cooperation in his social life, the whole question of America as a distinct civilization could never have arisen. We might be then talking about a sort of New Zealand or perhaps Canada.

The native American Indian was migratory in his habits and a hunter in his relation with nature. But the slave had to be an African laborer, a man accustomed to social life, before he could ever become a profitable grower of cotton or tobacco—the vital element required before America could claim that it had salvaged something from the wilderness. Something which could be extended to the point where it would win recognition as a landmark in man's emergence from subservience to any laws of nature.

The man who made it possible, and we do not know if he knew he was making it possible, was the transported African. Rationalization of the labor supply was tied in with rationalization of production itself. Planters in Louisiana would weigh the pros and cons of working slaves to death in the hazardous work of the rice paddies as against protecting the slave from excessive labor in order to maintain the interest in him as property. The long letters George Washington wrote on the organization of labor on his plantation represent merely one side. The exchange of letters between Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Banneker, the surveyor of what was to become Washington, D.C., about the propensities and capacities of black people enslaved and otherwise is the other side of the same phenomenon: the recognition that for reasons both clear and obscure the fate of America had depended upon the blacks as laborers. This was to be argued out in the antislavery movement at a higher level, and in the midst of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It is also a seemingly

inescapable fact to everybody, but historians have managed to escape it. That is not altogether a surprise. The writing of history comes about at a period when men think about their activity so as to record it in a more permanent form. To give the slave his actual historical due is to alter one's notion about the course of civilization itself. If, for example, each plantation had to strive to be self-sufficient as a unit, it was the skilled and semi-skilled black who would make it so.

The runaway slave fled to the North without compass or definite point of destination, without being blessed like Columbus by Queen Isabella selling her jewels for the voyage, or like the pilgrims to Plymouth Rock—members of a church soon to make a revolution affecting all of England and Ireland; or like pioneers into the wilderness, trying to set a distance between themselves and civilization. If, as can be later demonstrated, the flight of the runaway slave from the South is seen as setting in motion a whole series of forces, which no other class of people, no mere party or political sect, no church or newspaper could succeed in animating, then the whole configuration of America as a civilization automatically changes before our eyes. The distinguishing feature of the slave was not his race but the concentrated impact of his work on the extensive cultivation of the soil, which eventually made possible the transition to an industrial and urban society.

The triumph of slavery, the negative recognition that the slave received in every work sphere shows how little the South or skilled workers themselves sometimes could tolerate the black as an artisan. In prebellum America he had to be driven out of trade after trade before the assertion could be demonstrated that the black man is fit for nothing more than brutish labor with its inevitable consequence.

Historically one can now begin almost anywhere to show what civilization meant to the slave as a preliminary to showing what the slaves meant to civilization. The natural

form of organization was the work gang during the day and the slave quarters at night. The large scale of cultivation required for a profitable export crop guaranteed social connections for the slave even if he was isolated from the centers of "civilization" by the rural surroundings.

But the first specific form of slave organization was the fraternal association which was organized to accompany to their permanent resting place those caught up in life's mortal coils. Small coins were saved for accomplishing that occasion in at least minimal style. The slave was no more afraid to die than is or was any other mortal; he was fearful of dying unaccompanied by those with whom he had associated in the fullness of his life.

Given a holiday, that is, an occasion, the slave was, like most working humans up to this day, his own person. It was for naught that the defenders of the planter's way of life feared the effect of Fourth of July oratory. They might just as well have feared the Christianity in Christmas. It was not only intellectually that everything universal in sentiment panicked the "peculiar institution." It was the concentration of people all experiencing the unbridgeable gap between their arduous daily toil and the exceptional holiday from work—with the to-ing and the fro-ing from plantation to plantation, the arrival of guests and the spreading of news—which brought about the system of slave patrollers and written passes across the South.

We are dealing with matters of individual skill and social impulse. Small equivalents of the strike action took place at work. Flight to the neighboring woods, followed by messages trailed back to the work area showed that the blacks knew above all that, even if despised for race, they were necessary—vital to a labor process geared to the agricultural season. Feigning of illness was a commonplace; indeed, one simple definition of the abolition of slavery is that a man or woman need not go to work when incapacitated. This absenteeism may

seem of no great import by itself, but the diaries and records of the slavemasters show it to be a matter of grave concern. Everybody knew what was involved in the work process.

And the blacks knew what was involved in their day of rest. The growth of an autonomous black church draws up a balance sheet on historical Christianity. It is not finished yet, but if Christianity, as some assert, brought the principle of personality into a world that knew no such thing, and in the person of a simple carpenter who later recruited an equally simple fisherman and so on, the climax of that primitive church was the mass joining together of a population considered as so much flesh to be traded and hands to be worked and backs to be bent or broken under the lash. To the whites religion may have meant a buttress to conscience. To the blacks it meant a social experience out of which would come the active principle of personality: the black preacher.

In the more practical workings of the plantation, the slave owners themselves discovered that the position of foreman or driver was one which fewer and fewer whites measured up to in personal stature. So that in the decade before the Civil War there was a wholesale increase in the number of black overseers. Though it did not mean that race prejudice on the part of the slave owners had changed one whit, this problem of supervision was proof of the demoralizing effect black laborers had upon those who not only considered themselves superior to the slave's lot but had the weapons and the authority to put their superiority into momentary practice. Most white overseers went even before the slave system fell into the dust of Civil War. And by a healthy process of circularity, the fictional summations of the type, the Simon Legrees of the world, were portrayed with such effectiveness that it stimulated the movement toward that system which produced such monsters wholesale. The important point of the slave's contribution to civilization is that he recognized and did battle with the slavery system every day before, long

before, white audiences would stare with horror at the representation on stage or in a book.

There is also the matter of the link-ups of the plantation to the outside world. Blacks were the boatmen and teamsters of that day in the South. They would have been the longshoremen as well, but were driven out. Simply by driving the master's coach around they learned of the outside world and brought back information to the slave community. It was known in some of the deepest haunts of the South that there was some kind of underground which would transport a runaway from one hiding place to another if he would but risk the trip.

Indeed, if by virtue of the brutishness and isolation of his situation the slave were himself a brute, how then could he make contact with such varying and even opposing sections of the population as he did? Harriet Tubman had a rapt listener in the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Douglass in governor—and later Presidential candidate—William Seward. William Wells Brown could speak to all size groups, from two hundred to two hundred thousand people across Europe. It was not a matter of dispute about the capacity of the Negro; it was not even the great political debates about the future of America—slave or free. It was something so concrete, so easy to overlook and yet so broad in its consequences: The black man was a social being, in some senses the most highly social product of the United States. This was not necessarily due to skin color, but to the close relation between labor and society that he experienced more than did planters, ethnic immigrants, religious societies, pioneering settlements and their human products, political parties and their candidates.

THE EFFECTS OF BLACKS ON SOCIAL ISSUES

That link of labor and society took on national and even international proportions.

Starting from obscure places which nobody ever heard of or even wanted to hear, it became writ large as the experience of slavery intertwined with everything else—politics, diplomacy, commerce, migration, popular culture, the relation between the sexes, the question of labor and civilization in the future of America as a whole. The black man was not in any popularity contest as to who most represented this new man—this undefined American—who so intrigued the Europeans. He was something more: a self-appointed minister with nothing but experience, social experience, to guide him toward those qualities most universally recognizable in the ordinary people—some of whom are still tied to the land in Europe; some recently incorporated into proliferating industry; some hearkening to the American experience; some settling matters with crowns and courts in their Old World countries. The black man was the supreme example not just of how to rise in the world but of how to raise the world toward his own level. He inherited the Declaration of Independence which the plantation plutocracy mocked. In politics, Frederick Douglass took the Constitution as an antislavery document when his own abolition colleagues, Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison, set the match to it. The runaway slave, Dred Scott, threw the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (and the country as a whole) into confusion on whether slavery was a national or regional issue. The black man was not afraid to declare war on war, for instance the conflict with Mexico over Texas in 1846. He could link himself to movements for temperance in drink or for the right of women to divorce or to the nonpayment of rents by upper New York State farmers.

It was training in social labor which gave blacks the opportunity to increasingly affect all social questions of their day. It was their concrete ability to turn from the faculties used in physical work to the powers of speech and other forms of self-expression which made cer-

tain of the ex-slaves the astonishing figures they were. After he drew two hundred thousand people to hear him in Europe, William Wells Brown then returned to a port near the Great Lakes, between America and Canada, to help fugitive slaves across the water, unite the mere boundaries of national existence. In addition he printed a paper announcing the uniting of families, the successes and sometimes failures of the underground travelers, their adventures and misadventures; and denouncing the "peculiar institution" and all those who would compromise with it, thinking they could thereby escape compromising themselves.

The startling challenge to current notions about civilization was presented by the slaves, as soon as they won the public's ear, on the familiar matter of conscience. The contribution of the blacks was that type of social experience—whether it was lyceum, church, or Underground Railroad—which challenged one set of social institutions with a social impact of a most original kind. Doomed by slavery to impersonality, the ex-slave responded with a personality and personal force that had the most obvious social implications and conclusions. Condemned to seasonal labor, and the rhythm and routine determined thereby, the blacks carried on agitation in and out of season until the body politic came to recognize that the country could no longer survive as it was; could survive only by embarking on an uncharted course of slave confiscation and Southern reconstruction. After having been isolated by slavery in provincial fixity, the runaway traversed national boundaries and oceanic waters. Graded by the abolition movement itself as fit only to tell slavery as an atrocity tale, Frederick Douglass and others insisted on publishing their own political policies. This is a long way from the reflex response to slavery by a disturbed conscience. It is a social impact on all media that distinguishes civilization from barbarism. The impact of the slave labor system upon the South

as a distinct region has a number of aspects clearly visible to this day.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE SOUTHERN PLANTATION

The plantation was an organized community that was part of a larger regional configuration, but given the isolation concomitant with the rural character of slave society, the social stamp upon the individual, particularly the slave himself, guaranteed certain results. The internal economic principle of the plantation was self-sufficiency. To the slavemaster this meant insularity: foreign immigration mainly excluded; missionary society activity suspect (including the riding preachers who would as likely as not be antislavery); no lyceum or lecture circuit on any extensive scale; no compulsory elementary or secondary education; little exercise of the faculty of logical speculation. For a break in the routine of plantation life there were visits to the North, often no further than the river port city of Cincinnati; or politics in the state capital or in Washington, D.C., actually a Southern city.

To a large extent, certain of the above characteristics were true of America as a whole, or at least of its western part. Especially the smaller Southern planters had certain characteristics in common with the yeomanry of the American Northwest: the need to create isolated pockets of white habitation in a land belonging to the Indians, the establishment of paths into the wilderness, the harsh life for the women of the family, the backbreaking toil in wresting some socially productive result from the natural surroundings, and the independence of habit and speech that is the inevitable result in people living under these conditions.

The dialectical set of connections of the South to the old Northwest is both genuinely subtle and profound. Both were agrarian areas, with the Mississippi and other rivers serving as the turnstiles to ports and citified places.

Other similarities were the suspiciousness toward all those outside the isolated region where one's house and cultivated areas and perhaps hunting grounds were located; the tightness of the family and usually its patriarchal basis; the shortage of monies and credit, such that life frequently remained, generally according to the season, on a subsistence level, with only the holiday season to punctuate with some enjoyment above the everyday standard.

Further, there is the historical connection. All of American settlement, at its origins, proceeded in the same manner for both inland planters and Northern yeomanry, and their pioneering ways continued right up to the Civil War. In that sense Southern rural inhabitants were "these new men," the Americans who so intrigued the European observer often skeptical of America as (1) a civilization and (2) a viable nationality. Thus if the black man has been left out of so many history books, if the controversy over the significance of slavery to the South seemed until very recently a matter of no great moment, it is because a certain aspect of American historical continuity seemed to justify itself and no mere racist conspiracy of silence could accomplish what seems to have been imbedded within that historical aspect. To which must be added the fundamental matter of political organization and the effect of the South on certain basic institutions by which an organized society emerged out of the natural wilderness. The individual planter was conditioned not only by pioneering inland to new territories; he had to become an individualist with a social authority larger than the boundaries of his plantation. The reasons are as follows: The South had been originally colonized by British trading companies licensed by the Crown. The Northern settlements were more likely to be religious colonies or fur-trading outposts. So that from the very start the planter, who had to be in charge of the practical and hazardous work of founding some lasting economic basis

in the New World, was thrown into conflict with the concentrated mercantile capitalism of the metropolitan colonizing land. To put it succinctly, the anticapitalist bias of the Southerner was there from the day of his birth. It was no small thing. The former slave—the supposedly emancipated black—became, for lack of credit, a sharecropper. This happened because all of Southern history had prepared somebody for that role, and the people at the bottom of the social ladder fell into it and remained there, some unto this day. To make up for their embattlement as regards the shortage of capital, the Southerners would compensate with (a) their geography, strategically considered, (b) the fixed position of the main section of the laboring force—the slaves, and (c) a type of politics which would guarantee the viability of (a) and (b).

All these things add up to a "nativist" outlook that is not that of country bumpkins, but one characterized by a sophistication that was constantly changing by the very reason of its taking place in a nineteenth- and late eighteenth-century setting that was becoming rapidly modernized. Slavery is a peculiar institution not only because of its horrors but because it was something-unto-itself. The Southern attitude seems so often a matter of temperament—unformed character expressing itself against a general trend in worldly affairs which opposed the fixed investment of wealth in land and human chattel. In other words, the South produced "personality" rather than minds of singular or original power. But the personalities are of a similar and sustaining force: Patrick Henry, Jefferson, Jackson, Calhoun, Clay, Stonewall Jackson, Tom Watson, Huey Long are personages who will interest the public imagination until possibly they are surpassed by the characterization of the lives of the obscure slaves and indigent blacks. This tends to be the ongoing matter of interest in our own day.

There is a material basis for the Southern production of men and women of outstand-

ing temperamental force. (The fictional Scarlett O'Hara or Blanche DuBois convey that the matter is not limited to the male gender.) Despite all geographical rationalizations, the commodity crops—tobacco, rice, sugar, cotton, and hemp—were not limited to the South by climate. The planters were a class capable of taking over matters of national interest: they had warred against nature, against the Indian; they had warred against the blacks on the plantation, against the British, the French, and the Spaniards. Their experience had a certain cast by virtue of the international nature of their products—human flesh and large-scale commodity crops. Such large-scale experiences do not lead to the production of small-minded men. So they participated in the formation of an original American nationality. The historical claim can be substantiated that they produced more figures of national distinction than did, say, by comparison, the robber barons. All this combines to make the controversy about the impact of slavery on American civilization such a pregnant and vital intellectual confrontation.

Certain mundane matters have to be mentioned at least in a preliminary way. It was the boredom and harshness of plantation life that ensured that not general activity, but politics was the only matter of universal interest and appeal. If the rural character of their life induced in the planters, or at least in some of them, a certain respect for plebeian democracy in other sections of the population, it had to be by the nature of the planter's own setting, an abridged version of popular participation in decision-making. The father of the political party of any mass status in American life was the planter-political philosopher, Thomas Jefferson. The father of popular participation in political office, apart from mere suffrage, was the planter Andrew Jackson. The head of an army having the popular militia as a section of its base was the planter George Washington. Yet the halfway houses to genuine democracy which each of these figures created

remain America's bones of contention unto this day.

What of social vision? The early accomplishments of these men corresponded to the formative period of American nationality. They could not go beyond. The results were imbedded in the American mentality but not anywhere in self-generating institutions. The popular militia is now the not-very-progressive National Guard. The political parties resting on mass suffrage are now in a state alternating between paralysis and crisis. The spoils of office distributed to members of the population are now a source of perpetual scandal and parasitism.

The Southern figures of the mid-nineteenth century vacillated between accommodation and hopeless fanaticism. Clay was a genius of the first order. He could never win actual leadership of the country as a whole, though he was persistent and colorful enough to engage the political attentions of his countrymen. Calhoun was a different sort. He sought to make the American Constitution a protector of the South's position in national life, invulnerable to changing national majorities. And of Jefferson Davis it can perhaps best be said that though he failed in the Southern rebellion, he was saved from hanging by the long tradition of Northern-Southern accommodation—a tradition punctured only by the actualities of the Civil War.

Some of the bobbling of the minds of the planters was due to the very fact that they stood on a tripod of vital revolutions in the then-known Western world: the Puritans in 1642, the War for Independence in 1776, and volatile France of 1789. The Clays and Calhouns lived to consider the realities of the continental-wide European Revolution of 1848. Their situation was one of Anglo-Saxon nativism turning against itself. Immigrant New York might celebrate 1848, Puritan New England might relate revolutionary antislavery sentiments to the wars between Cavaliers and Roundheads, the democratic yeomanry of the

western territories might enjoy the sight of crowns falling all over Europe. The Southern planters had no comparable frame of reference. They stuck by Constitution and Compromise.

And when that did not last they went to war to protect geography. It was not all that simple. The border states which did not produce commodity crops but which had domestic slaves were the geniuses of accommodation right up to the last moment and beyond. The idyllic notion of domestic servitude, patriarchal chatteldom, originates from those Kentucky, Tennessee, upper Virginia, Maryland, and even Delaware manors. If American politics became entwined with a style of life rather than a manner of thought, we have no difficulties discovering why. In short, the Southern position was that of a provincialism entwined with American nationality as a whole, but defenseless against the universal trends of revolutionary democracy of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless the effects of the planters were immense: The location of the nation's capital in the borderline South; the creation and manipulation of national political parties; the fielding of armies and the tradition of militant armed conflict; the specialization of the South in politics as maneuver and divagation; the bias in favor of the notion that agricultural wealth was real, and commercial wealth always fraudulent; the sense of the manor not as parasitic but as a center of human community; the assertion that the concreteness of the manorial community was superior to the impersonality of the large Northern city; the impulsiveness of the Southern personality as more appealing than the social discipline seemingly inherent in industry and commerce; the general linkup with the rural-romantic character of America's past—all of this seems irrevocable and untouchable by general intellectual argument.

The only way to deal with it is by taking up its foundations. The Southern planter could

engage in politics on a much larger scale than many Northerners or Westerners because he was of a leisure class, born and bred—a commander of the fate of men, women, and children of a different color with a more permanently fixed status. Suckled by a black nurse, attended by black servants, often encouraged to sexual experiments in the slave quarters, accustomed to the sight of blacks caring for all business involving manual labor; encouraged, even inspired, by the succession of Southern Presidents, the ambitious Southerner could see politics, even statesmanship, as destiny's decision, and cast himself in the role of fortune's darling. Furthermore, for the isolated manorial communities, politics was the prime form of social communion, whereas in the North religious revivals swept all before them in periods in between political excitement. In today's parlance, the prebellum white planter gives the impression of having found an early answer to the problems of the "lonely crowd" in the solidity of his native tradition, the fixity of his social status and the values of an inherent and irrevocable individualism.

The availability and accessibility of having things always at hand extended itself to the vast virgin lands and the supply of slaves. If capital and credit were in short supply, then the curse was on the head of the mercantilists—be they tyrannical Englishmen or grasping Boston Yankees. Social status had taken on an overweening importance; but even greater was the display of public personality—elections as jousting contests, a codified individualism rather than the self-expansive effluvia of the Northern Transcendentalists.

The rationalizations for the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery, whether borrowed from the Bible or the instances of Greece and Rome, raise a compelling challenge to the whole matter of what indeed constitutes a civilization. It is safe to say that the majority of Western scholars seem to have placed a gloss on the manner and the matter of this case.

Essay/Discussion Questions

1. In reference to the system of chattel slavery, C. L. R. James states: "The capacities of men were always leaping out of the confinements of the system." What does he mean?

2. Discuss the ways in which African slaves resisted the dehumanizing process of chattel slavery. What roles did black women play in this struggle?

3. James argues that white historians largely ignored the contributions that African slaves made to the development of American civilization. In what ways did chattel slaves shape this process?