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0521479940 - Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850 - Volume 1

John Ashworth

Excerpt

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## *Introduction: Class conflict and the American Civil War*

THE experiences of the millions of black Americans who lived in slavery in the United States were extraordinarily varied. Historians have found generalizations difficult. Yet one generalization can be offered. In their millions they disliked being slaves. Abundant evidence exists to show that slaves of all ages, of both sexes, from all parts of the Old South, whether they had attempted flight, insurrection or neither, were united in one sentiment: they wanted to be free. Writing from Liberia in 1857, former slave Daniel Williams reported that in the country which he had made his new home he was able to “enjoy some of that untrammelled liberty, which (as you may well know) my soul has so long and so ardently panted for.” Ten years earlier, Jonathan Thomas, an ex-slave, had been asked about his experiences in Kentucky. He acknowledged that he had been well treated. “‘Nevertheless,’ Thomas said, ‘I had from childhood a great wish to be free.’” This was also the wish of John Anderson who had run away from Missouri to Canada “determined,” according to the interviewer, “to obtain his freedom, which from his youth he seems to have considered his inherent birthright. – He had formed the resolve to sacrifice his liberty only with his life.” It is clear that, for these slaves, good treatment did not reconcile them to their condition. In her autobiography, Rosa Barnwell of South Carolina, also a fugitive, declared that “though I did not suffer from cruel treatment, I preferred freedom to slavery; and this desire to reach a land where whips and chains are not found caused me to leave my former home.” Likewise William Cornish in 1863 recalled that he “always had a hope that someday I should be free.” Cornish too had succeeded in escaping from slavery. James Bradley, on the other hand, had bought his freedom and then moved to Lane seminary. “From the time I was fourteen years old,” he related, “I used to think a great deal about freedom. It was my heart’s desire; I could not keep it out of my mind. Many a sleepless night I have spent in tears, because I was a slave . . . . My heart ached within me to feel the light of liberty.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Daniel Williams to Amos Wade, Aug. 16, 1857 in John W. Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge, 1977), p. 110; *ibid.*, pp. 250, 355, 698, 423, 688.

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Escape from slavery necessarily involved considerable sacrifice and risk; as C. H. Hall put it, when he made his bid for freedom it was “liberty or death.” Self-purchase often required years of grueling labor and involved heart-breaking setbacks. The slaves who achieved their liberation by either of these means were likely to have been driven by a powerful commitment to freedom. But there is ample reason to believe that the same goals were shared by many who simply did not have the opportunity to realize them. William Summerson, a South Carolina steamboatman, was unable to escape until the dislocations of the Civil War occurred. Yet “ever since I knew enough to know right from wrong,” he declared in 1862, “I have wanted to get my freedom, but there was no way of escape.” He added that “slavery walled me in.” Ambrose Headen of North Carolina had to wait for the defeat of the Confederate armies on the battlefields before obtaining his freedom. In his autobiography he recalled that “during all my slave life I never lost sight of freedom.” Freedom “was always on my heart.” It is of course impossible for historians to know the thoughts and feelings of the millions of slaves of whose lives there is now not the smallest trace. Yet the thoughts of James Curry, who related his experiences in the *Liberator* may not have been untypical. Curry spoke of “the longing for liberty, which, from my childhood, had been the prevailing desire of my heart.” Even more poignantly he told his readers how when a slave “I used to wonder why it was that our people were kept in slavery. I would look at the birds as they flew over my head or sung their free songs upon the trees, and think it strange, that, of all God’s creatures, the poor negro only was held in bondage.” It was a bondage of which John Boggs had had experience in the tobacco fields of Maryland. He told the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission in 1863 that he would “rather be in the street, and let the wagons run over me every day, than be in slavery.”<sup>2</sup>

The same commission attempted to find out how widespread among the slaves was the desire for freedom. The following exchange took place between the commissioners and Robert Smalls, an ex-slave who had achieved fame as a war hero and who would later serve in Congress:

Q: Do you think the colored people are anxious for their liberty, and if opportunity offered would help themselves to it?

A: I do, sir . . . .

Q: Were there any societies among the colored people for discussing the questions of freedom?

A: No, sir; . . . [but] they pray constantly for the “day of their deliverance.”

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 416, 699, 744, 140, 135, 423.

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It may be, of course, that Smalls was mistaken or that he was exaggerating. But the opinions he held were shared and expressed by other slaves. According to James Curry the desire for freedom was the slaves' "constant theme." For "no slaves think they were made to be slaves." No matter how "ignorant" their masters kept them, "it is impossible to beat it into them that they were made to be slaves." Curry claimed to "have heard some of the most ignorant I ever saw, say, 'it will not always be so, God *will* bring them to an account'." He was careful to emphasize, however, that when white men were present "no slave would dare to say . . . that he wished for freedom." Ambrose Headen confirmed both the need for secrecy and the prevalence of the aspirations for freedom when he recalled that "we always called freedom 'possum', so as to keep white people from knowing what we were talking about." It was a code which "we all understood."<sup>3</sup>

It is possible that some slaves were content with their situation. Such was not the opinion, however, of James Bradley, who strongly doubted "whether there ever was a slave, who did not long for liberty." It was certainly the case that "slave-owners take a great deal of pains to make the people in the free States believe that the slaves are happy" but, for his part, he "was never acquainted with a slave, however well he was treated, who did not long to be free." Bradley agreed that in front of white men, many slaves would "go so far as to say they would not leave their masters for the world." "But," he continued, "at the same time, they desire liberty more than anything else, and have, perhaps, all along been laying plans to get free." The reason was simple: "if a slave shows any discontent, he is sure to be treated worse, and worked the harder for it; and every slave knows this." Yet as soon as the slaves were "alone by themselves, all their talk is about liberty – liberty!" This was "the great thought and feeling that fills the mind full all the time." Bradley expressed surprise that anyone should doubt the truth of these opinions. "How strange it is," he exclaimed, "that anybody should believe any human being *could* be a slave, and yet be contented!"<sup>4</sup>

Bradley may have been mistaken in assuming that the desire for freedom was universal. Examples can be cited of slaves who declined to be emancipated or even of some free blacks who asked to be enslaved. These examples, however, are few and far between. The problem for the historian, of course, is that no source is entirely impartial. If this generalization can be applied to every subject of historical investigation, it applies with particular force to those connected with slavery. While former slaves had powerful incentives to emphasize the ambitions for freedom of those still

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 376, 135, 744.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 689.

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in bondage, the whites who owned them almost always had equally strong reasons for asserting that their slaves were in every way suited to their condition. And other white observers, as we have seen, were generally not allowed to glimpse the true feelings of the blacks on this most explosive of subjects. Nevertheless modern scholarship has been at pains to emphasize black resistance to slavery. This is a comparatively recent development, dating only from the 1940s and it has resulted in the overthrow of the racist assumptions of the Ulrich B. Phillips school of history, whose members saw no reason to doubt that the slaves were docile and “submissive.” Most scholars would now agree with Kenneth M. Stampp that the slaves “longed for liberty and resisted bondage as much as any people could have done in their circumstances.”<sup>5</sup>

## II

For present purposes, however, it is sufficient to make a more modest claim: that a significant number of slaves would have grasped their freedom eagerly if the opportunity had been presented and that many of these slaves offered resistance of various kinds to their oppressors. Again we may quote Stampp. The rebellious slaves, he argues, “when they could, . . . protested by shirking their duties, injuring the crops, feigning illness, and disrupting the routine.” Such acts were indeed “in part, an unspectacular kind of day to day resistance to slavery.” More spectacular forms of resistance included running away (though this could also be prompted by other motives than a simple resentment of slavery) and, ultimately, insurrection. The relatively small number of servile rebellions in the United States does not seem to have afforded the masters much peace of mind; after the uprising in Santo Domingo they were often haunted by the fear that a new Toussaint L’Ouvverture might rise up in the Old South and slaughter them.<sup>6</sup>

5. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (N.Y., 1956), pp. 9, 92, 140. According to John W. Blassingame, “there is overwhelming evidence in the primary sources, of the Negro’s resistance to his bondage and of his undying love for freedom;” “the slave’s constant prayer, his all-consuming hope, was for liberty;” – *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (rev. ed. N.Y., 1979), pp. 192, 193. See also William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green* (Springfield, O., 1853), pp. 9–14; Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (London, 1853), p. 260. For examples of works stressing black resistance see Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History*, xxvii (1942), pp. 388–419; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (N.Y., 1943); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (N.Y., 1976); Deborah Gray White, *Arn’t I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation* (N.Y., 1985).
6. Stampp, *Peculiar Institution*, pp. 108–109.

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It will be convenient to follow Stamp and term these varied activities, actions and inactions “black resistance to slavery.” This resistance is well known to historians. Or one should perhaps say, it is well known to those historians who have studied the social lives of the slaves. Extraordinary as it may seem, however, it is not well known at all to most students of the economics of slavery, who, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, often write as though slave labor were not given under duress. Still more remarkable, black resistance is virtually ignored by historians who write about the origins of the Civil War. It is one of the claims of this work that, as a result of this omission, all current interpretations of the war are open to serious criticism.<sup>7</sup>

One way to establish causal significance is to ask whether, in the absence of the proposed cause, the event being explained would still have occurred. We may thus pose the following question: if the blacks had happily accepted slavery, would there have been a Civil War? To answer the question we must, of course, imagine an unreal, a counterfactual past. All such “counterfactuals,” as they are termed, are necessarily imprecise and cannot be subjected to empirical testing. To say this, however, is merely to assert the limitations of a purely empirical approach to the study of history. Without pursuing this epistemological question further, we may attempt to justify the use of this particular “counterfactual” by the conclusions which it yields.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the era of the sectional controversy, southerners were troubled by the prospect that an antislavery majority would come to dominate the nation and take action against the peculiar institution.<sup>9</sup> Such was the principal objection to the abolitionists, whose ultimate goal was apparent to all. Would there even have been a demand for immediate abolition if the blacks had been contented under slavery? It seems unlikely. The abolitionists’ task was large enough as it was; if they had not believed that slavery contradicted the wishes of the enslaved, their crusade would have lost much of its passion. The same applies to all those in the Republican party who drew strength from a moral critique of slavery: black support for the institution would have dampened their fervour considerably. Moreover, many of the features of the slave system that most outraged the antislavery forces would have been far less apparent if the blacks had been eager or compliant slaves. Whippings

7. An exception is to be found in the work of James Oakes. See Oakes, “The Political Significance of Slave Resistance,” *History Workshop*, xxii (1986), pp. 89–107, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (N.Y., 1990), pp. 139–193.
8. My thinking on these questions has been shaped above all by Roy Bhaskar. See Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton, 1979).
9. The material in this and the following paragraphs will all be considered at greater length in later chapters. Here my purpose is simply to establish the importance of black resistance to slavery.

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would have been far less frequent, separations of families would not have been used so often as a punishment.<sup>10</sup> I shall also argue that the economic dissimilarities of the two sections would have been far less marked if the slaveholders had not been faced with the constraint of a resistant workforce. It is thus difficult not to conclude that the attacks on slavery would have been much weaker if the blacks had been content in their bondage.

More important, however, it seems likely that, in these circumstances, the southern response to the antislavery movement would have been far less fierce than it was. If the slaves had been content, then abolitionism would have lost most of its sting. Southerners would have been able to look on with some degree of indifference, confident that their slaves would have remained loyal. By the same token, free soil, which threatened to doom the South to permanent minority status within the Union, would have been far less threatening, since it would not have portended emancipation. And in these circumstances southerners would not have needed to take the drastic steps which were taken, especially after 1830, to curtail freedom of speech on the slavery question in the South and to ensure that the federal government remained in the hands of those who were “safe” on the subject. These actions, in turn, fueled northern fears of the “slave power,” fears that played a major role in creating the Republican party.

Indeed it is not too much to say that behind every event in the history of the sectional controversy, lurked the consequences of black resistance to slavery. In the furore over the gag rule it was the South’s vulnerability to abolitionism which prompted the southern militants, while northern hostility both to slavery on moral grounds and to the “slave power” ensured that the question would be enormously controversial.<sup>11</sup> The Mexican war and the crisis that erupted in 1850 had the same roots. All the wrangling which took place over Kansas can be seen in the same light. Most obviously of all, the fugitive slave issue, with all its ramifications, was the product of black dissatisfaction with slavery.

We are thus driven to conclude that black resistance to slavery was a key factor in the Civil War. I shall argue that it was a necessary condition of the struggle, a *sine qua non*. Yet apart from the small number of fugitives who attracted national attention and the leaders of slave insurrections, whose names were equally famous or notorious, the slaves were for the most part unseen players on the political stage. It is, no doubt, for

10. It is possible that the southern states might have taken some action to prevent it, if they had not felt that this might have been the entering wedge for abolition.

11. The nullification crisis, of course, also derived much of its force from the southern fear of abolitionism. The major work on nullification remains William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836* (N.Y., 1965).

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this reason that their role has been ignored. Thus while Kenneth Stampp the historian of slavery is, as we have already seen, fully aware of the pervasiveness of black resistance to slavery (and can claim much of the credit for having drawn historians' attention to it), Kenneth Stampp the student of the Civil War and its origins, ignores the subject entirely. Instead he concerns himself with the familiar causes of sectional divergence: economic and cultural rivalries between North and South, the role of agitators in each section, northern majoritarianism clashing with southern minoritarianism, northern predilections for federal power competing with southern attachments to states' rights, northern notions of the "slave power" combating southern images of "black republicanism." I do not in the least intend to deny the significance of any of these factors; indeed these two volumes will pay considerable attention to all of them. For the present it is sufficient to observe that many of them drew their strength from the slavery controversy and the slavery controversy in turn, as I have argued, derived much of its force from the resistance of the blacks to their bondage. In this sense black resistance does not so much compete with as underlie the more familiar list of causal factors. Nevertheless I shall suggest that one can fairly easily imagine a profound struggle over slavery existing in the United States in the absence of many of these factors, and this alone suggests that to ignore black resistance is to present a misleading view of the Civil War and its causes. Nor is Stampp alone in this. In David M. Potter's *The Impending Crisis* and James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* – to name only the two best single volumes on the origins of the Civil War – black resistance to slavery is similarly ignored. One finds in these works ample reference to slavery, but very few references to slaves or the effects of their actions, except where they achieved fame by flight or rebellion.<sup>12</sup>

In both these works the political struggles over slavery in the 1840s and 1850s receive full coverage. This is as it should be. Yet one may again note that a bloody conflict over slavery might well have arisen even if the territorial question, the principal concern of politicians in the 1850s and of the political historians who have studied the decade, had not existed at all. One can imagine a conflict over slavery in, say, Missouri, perhaps in the 1850s, perhaps later, even if there had been no territories to fight over. Indeed if southerners had remained adamant in their refusal to entertain emancipation and if northerners would not have tolerated slavery permanently, then some sort of armed conflict would have been difficult to avoid. In this sense the developments in, for example,

12. Kenneth M. Stampp (ed.), *The Causes of the Civil War* (rev. ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974); David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (N.Y., 1976); James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (N.Y., 1988).

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Kansas, on which political historians have spent much time, should perhaps be seen as channels through which the conflict flowed rather than as fundamental causes in their own right. Yet black resistance to slavery was not of this nature. In this sense, it was a more profound cause of the struggle.

### III

Let us now consider some objections that might be raised to the argument as it has so far been presented. First, it might be objected that black resistance to slavery is of political significance chiefly as it affects pro or antislavery whites and that an exclusive concern with the latter groups is thus appropriate. But such an objection carries little weight for while the premise is true, the conclusion does not follow. Any political history of the Civil War era must necessarily give most space to the whites who took the crucial decisions and who wielded political power. But to do so need not mean denying or ignoring black resistance to slavery. As we have seen, narrative accounts of the events leading up to the war risk overlooking such causal factors and leaving the reader unaware of the role played by the slaves in bringing about the Civil War and thus in attaining their own freedom. For a variety of reasons, black resistance came to pose severe problems for the master class. The masters sought and chose solutions which in effect transferred or displaced these social and economic challenges into the political arena, an arena from which the blacks themselves were entirely excluded. The political conflicts that ensued are of great significance, and will form the subject matter of the larger part of this book. But this is not to deny the enormous importance of the behavior of the slaves.

A more interesting objection might be made along the following lines: black resistance to slavery played a part in the sectional controversy primarily as it constrained or provoked the actions of the slaveholders. But these slaveholders were convinced that the slave was indeed quite suited to his condition. They denied outright that he desired his freedom. Again and again they insisted that their bondsmen and bondswomen were happy and contented and that both masters and slaves were simply acting in accordance with the divine plan. God intended blacks to be slaves and their natures were such as to fit them perfectly for their pre-ordained role. So how can black resistance to slavery be a causal factor if the people through whose actions it supposedly made itself felt believed that blacks been placed upon the earth to be slaves?

One response to this objection would simply be to deny that the slaveholders were speaking the truth. Some historians have argued that the masters were consumed with guilt about their actions and that deep down



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they realized that their slaves ought to be freed. When I discuss the proslavery argument I shall argue against this view. The appropriate response is very different. To say that many of the slaveholders' actions were prompted by black resistance is by no means to claim that the slaveholders themselves identified these prompts correctly. Let us take one or two examples. When the masters railed against the abolitionists, they did not thereby concede that the slave resented his bondage. Instead they claimed that, in the absence of outside influences, he was loyal. But, they charged, when abolitionists poisoned his mind and held out absurd promises of freedom and prosperity, the happy slave of the plantation became the murderous marauder of Santo Domingo. In my opinion we should accept that the masters were, in general, honestly stating their opinions here. Yet to accept their sincerity is not to endorse their judgment. From our own perspective we can instead insist that abolition was a danger to the master because it was impossible to reconcile the slave masses to slavery. Thus the masters – and in this they were no different from most people in most places at most times – failed to achieve a full understanding of the causes of their own actions. Abolition confirmed rather than distorted the ambitions of the slave. Though they did not realize it, the masters, in attacking the abolitionists, were also being driven by the slave's desire for freedom.

The second example is a more subtle one. Another reason for the hatred with which the slaveholders viewed abolitionism derived from their racism. Slaveholders believed that blacks were naturally indolent and intellectually feeble. It followed that abolition, however gradually accomplished, would impoverish the South for ever and doom the blacks themselves, who would simply refuse to work and eventually starve. It also followed that to confer political rights on them would be an act of the greatest folly: blacks simply lacked the capacity for democracy. Once again we may accept the sincerity of these beliefs while, of course, rejecting them and seeking to explain their prevalence. We need to ask why masters believed that so many of their slaves were both ignorant and lazy. There is no need here to attempt a full answer to this question. It is sufficient to note that slaves had an incentive to hide their abilities and their intelligence from their masters, in order thereby to conceal some of their activities. And since so large a proportion of the slaves had no wish to be enslaved, it comes as no surprise that so many of them responded to this incentive and, in consequence, appeared lazy to their masters.<sup>13</sup> Thus

13. An opposite incentive was offered, of course, when masters tried to reward their slaves for industriousness or special skills. But to the extent that the attempt was successful, the image of the lazy and ignorant black man – and this was a major ideological support of slavery in the Old South – was challenged. To make the same point a little differently, the masters too had an incentive to underestimate

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once again the ideas and the behavior of the master reflected black resistance to slavery, even though the master himself failed to perceive it.

Another objection remains to be considered. At the time of the Civil War, slavery had existed in the United States for more than two centuries. Since there is little reason to believe that black resistance was absent in the early years of the slave regime, why should it bring about a war in 1861? To put it somewhat differently: how can a constant factor explain the change from peace to war? The answer, of course, is that it cannot. To recognize this limitation, however, is simply to acknowledge the need for other causal factors, not to deny the importance of black resistance to slavery. Chief among these other factors was the shift to wage labor in the North.

## IV

For most of human history the status of the wage laborer has been an extremely humble one. Americans were heirs to a long and venerable tradition of hostility to wage labor. Some of its first manifestations were in Ancient Greece. Aristotle believed that the virtuous citizens were those “who are freed from necessary services” and explained that “the necessary [and thus non-virtuous] people are either slaves who minister to the wants of individuals, or mechanics and labourers who are the servants of the community.” For Aristotle “no man can practise virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer.”<sup>14</sup>

These attitudes survived in Europe for hundreds of years. According to Christopher Hill, in early modern England wage laborers were held to be inferior to those who possessed even the most minute fragment of land to farm for themselves. From Francis Bacon’s time onwards the word “hireling” was a term of abuse. What most dismayed observers then was what had disturbed them in Antiquity: the dependence or servility of the wage laborer. During the English Revolution Leveller Richard Overton believed that wage laborers had lost their property in themselves and thus were in “a condition of servility,” while a pamphlet of 1660 declared “servants and laborers” to be “in the nature of vassals.” The most radical English thinker of the seventeenth century, Gerrard Winstanley, went further and condemned wage labor, especially on the land, in the most unqualified terms. “Whosoever shall help that man to

the abilities of the slave, in order to justify his continued enslavement. In these ways (and others), the relations between the two impeded the economic performance of the slave. See below, Chapter 2. They also obstructed the formation of a coherent proslavery argument. See below, Chapter 4.

14. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book III Chapter 5, in Richard McKeon, *Introduction to Aristotle* (N.Y., 1947), pp. 587–588.