

Introduction

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Whatever their views of the American Revolution, whether they advance economic, social, constitutional or political interpretations to explain its occurrence, most historians would agree that the Declaration of Independence began by stating a belief to which most Americans were sincerely attached. The inconsistency of its expression within a slave society, within a society proportionately more wedded to slavery than at any other time in its history, and about to embark upon the greatest ever territorial expansion of that institution, has been obvious to all historians of the period. It was equally obvious to contemporaries. The essay which follows is an attempt to explain the impact of that contemporary recognition. How far was it possible to reconcile Revolutionary pretensions with the continued existence of slavery, and what was the cost of such reconciliation to white American society? Reconciliation was, after all, a two-way process. It did not simply involve a rationalization of slavery and a coherent attempt to understand its significance; it also involved a reconsideration of the egalitarian imperatives of the Revolution. And it led to an interest in, and an emphasis upon, race as the nexus of the problem.

Few studies of late eighteenth-century America have failed to touch upon the ambivalence of a libertarian revolution occurring within a slave society. The only justification of the present work, therefore, is the belief that they have not adequately explored the relationship which existed between Revolutionary theory and practice on the one hand, and the operation of a slave system on the other. Nevertheless, the ground to be covered is by no means virgin soil. No historian can come to the topic without some awareness of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Slavery, race and the American Revolution

probing studies of other authors, particularly of David Brion Davis and Winthrop D. Jordan.¹ Nor can he afford to ignore the suggestive comments of Eugene D. Genovese.² My indebtedness to other authors is revealed, however inadequately, in the notes to the main text, but a brief survey of some aspects of the arguments of Davis, Jordan and Genovese is necessary in order to establish the starting point of the present work and to indicate the nature of the questions it explores.³

Perhaps the most valuable contribution which David Brion Davis has made in this context lies in his demonstration that slavery had never easily been accommodated within Western society. The duality of the slave as both person and object had always been productive of tension. The development of an explicit antislavery mood and movement was many-faceted and was intimately tied up with religion, with the progress of science and of secular philosophy and with economic change. Religion was undoubtedly of primary importance among the early inspirations of antislavery and common to all the religious sources of antislavery was the idea of sin. The concern with sin had been greatly sharpened by the Reformation and had been transmitted to subsequent generations of Protestants. But notions as to what constitutes sin alter over time as does the scale in which sins might be ranked. The commercial and capitalist developments of the seventeenth century in Great Britain and elsewhere helped to shape those notions: they helped to push covetousness and greed toward the top of the scale of sins. And yet, as Eugene D. Genovese has pointed out, modern slaveholding arose from the expansion of Europe, from the expansion of world markets which that epitomized and from the corresponding tendency toward commercial exploitation and the search for profits. It was paradoxical that the advance of capitalism in Western Europe should lead to social retrogression elsewhere; that it should promote the development of slavery in the Americas and help to revive serfdom in Eastern Europe.⁴ As a consequence of these developments, slavery came to symbolize for some the venal nature of greed and acquisitiveness.

As capitalism appeared to promote greed, so there developed with it an ethic tending to ameliorate that tendency. Philanthropy served to offset acquisitiveness. But philanthropy was itself open to the objections that it might undermine the work ethic and the social order which capitalism had engendered and upon which it seemed to depend. By virtue of its exotic nature, however, and because of its dis-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

tance from Europe, American plantation slavery could safely be regarded as a legitimate object of philanthropic benevolence. It could serve as a surrogate for many of the evils of the commercial and industrial revolutions, evils such as the displacement of peasants and the growth of absentee ownership. Nor would the work ethic be eroded by attacks on slavery, as their effect would be merely to replace the whip with the goads of hunger and necessity. Thus religion and capitalism merged to produce an ethic of benevolence upon which the emergence of antislavery thought heavily rested. This development was largely accomplished in England within the confines of a religion which proved able to absorb rationalistic attacks in a way in which the French church could not manage. The church had adapted to the Newtonian universe by concentrating upon the harmony of man's place in the natural order at the expense of emphasizing his subjection to God and the necessity of suffering. As Arminian thought developed in New England and the Middle Colonies in the 1750s, the benevolence of the Almighty and a belief that his ultimate concern was with human happiness were the dominant themes. But they were not peculiarly American themes. And yet there was suffering in the world. If the self-regulating Newtonian universe was not to be a soulless mechanism, this suffering clearly had to serve a purpose. Religious-minded men in England came to share with philosophers in France and elsewhere by the mid-eighteenth century the view that man's history was progressive. Suffering and evil could thus be seen as necessary steps toward some future good. It was the development of a philosophy of benevolence, of the idea that God pursued his object of stimulating happiness not by coercion but through freedom of will, of the idea of history as progressive, which made it possible to attack American slavery as un-Christian, inhumane and ripe for change.

The fact remains, however, that these developments did not require the response of antislavery. There were other ways of looking at the institution of slavery. The idea that progress was inevitable could as easily negate as encourage the reform impulse. The belief in a natural order and equilibrium was supportive of existing institutions and hierarchies as legitimate responses to the environment. Even the most dedicated of early antislavery writers were ready to accept the need for extremely gradual measures of emancipation. Slavery could not easily be accommodated within the Enlightenment conception of free men, exercising freedom of will and choice, and pur-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Slavery, race and the American Revolution*

suings their own enlightened self-interest. And yet there was no denying the status of slaves as property, and the Enlightenment, whether in its Lockian or in its more radical French aspects, made no attack upon private property: rather it saw property as the cement of all civilized societies. The antislavery response, therefore, was a particular and minority reaction to an altered religious and intellectual climate. It was also a response to an altered political and constitutional climate. The Seven Years' War had provoked enormous strains in the relationships between central and local government. The imperial balance of the world had been altered, and the constitutional and political crises which ensued raised the whole question of the meaning and significance of political servitude. Frenchmen and Americans were able to look upon English society and assert that Englishmen were slaves; Americans and Englishmen could look upon the French as slaves. The very term 'slavery' was being modified in its meaning and ramifications. As David Brion Davis has phrased it:

Imperial conflict had suddenly given ideological force to the theories of Montesquieu and to analogies and verbal associations which had become commonplace in eighteenth-century literature.⁵

By 1765 the *Encyclopédie*, the *summa* of the French Enlightenment, included a strong attack upon slavery; Montesquieu had given his name and prestige to an antislavery position; and by 1770 this position was reaching a wider public through the influential *Histoire des deux Indes*, the work of the Abbé Raynal and his colleagues. Although limited in both its platform and appeal, antislavery had become an international concern.

No study of American slavery and antislavery in the eighteenth century would be complete which did not take account of this international backcloth. When Arthur Lee undertook from England in 1764 to defend the American colonists in their struggle with Parliament, he undertook at the same time both to attack slavery and to assault the character of black people. His authorities against slavery were Francis Hutcheson and Montesquieu. Embarking upon a similar course in Massachusetts, James Otis used the arguments of Rousseau and the satire of Montesquieu. A figure like Benjamin Rush was at the very centre of international antislavery and enlightened thought. He studied in Scotland and made the acquaintance there of the leading Scottish philosophers; in Paris he met and later corresponded with the French *philosophes*; in Philadelphia he had close and strong links with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

the Quakers. It was no accident that he was an early spokesman in America against slavery. But one cannot understand the changed response to slavery in the American colonies in the late eighteenth century simply in terms of the international picture.

America was different from Europe. In the first place slavery could not there be looked upon as distant and exotic: on the contrary, it was an important local institution. It was also widespread. In the British mainland colonies it was not yet the Southern institution it was to become. In mid-century, blacks constituted some sixteen per cent of the population of the cities of New York and Newport and as much as eight per cent of the population of Boston.⁶ In Europe it was more often than not the centralized state which initiated reforms to improve the lot of the peasants and serfs in line with Enlightenment ideals. It did so against the objections and resistance of local aristocracies and landowning interests. In America there was no similar situation. Not only was there no centralized state to take up the cause of the blacks, but the landed and slaveholding interests controlled the effective agencies of government. When all is said and done, however, it cannot be maintained that these were the principal differences between Europe and America. The essential difference lay in the way in which Americans regarded themselves and their society. They thought of themselves as being in a special covenant with God. This was not simply a New England attitude. The practice of declaring fast days and days of humiliation was widespread throughout the mainland colonies. As Perry Miller has shown, the practice provided an umbrella of sorts for all aspects of colonial activity. Given the centrifugal tendencies of these provincial and far-flung outposts of empire, it imposed at least some semblance of moral unity.⁷ The Revolutionary struggle with England suggested to many Americans that there was more than a mere inconsistency between the ideals they were propagating and the institution of slavery they succoured: there was a national sin to be purged.

One man above all others was responsible for drawing the lessons and making antislavery a going concern in America – John Woolman. As David Brion Davis has put it:

At first sight it is difficult to understand why Woolman should have been so revered by later antislavery historians. He was not a fearless castigator of sin like Benjamin Lay. He was not a compiler and publicist like Anthony Benezet. He was not an anti-slavery theorist like George Keith,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 *Slavery, race and the American Revolution*

Francis Hutcheson and Montesquieu. His enduring contribution to anti-slavery literature was not an inflammatory tract or an eloquent manifesto, but rather the journal of his own life. For the secret of Woolman's influence was his sense of personal involvement, his ability to see Negro slavery as something more than an abstract institution, his conviction that he shared the profound guilt of all America.⁸

Woolman arrived at his position through religious conviction. But his impact was profound because the crisis with England had prepared an audience. The Revolution made others feel that they too shared the guilt of all America. The extent to which this was so, and the extent and manner in which they were able to come to terms with it, is the subject of the present work.

While Davis has brilliantly illuminated the intellectual context in which serious consideration of slavery and antislavery began, Winthrop D. Jordan has no less brilliantly illuminated the network of prejudices and the intellectual context within which serious consideration was given to the character of the Negro. Jordan's object in *White Over Black* is the study of racial attitudes and their functional significance in terms of race relations. In pursuing this line of investigation he has quite deliberately eschewed a strong institutional approach. Thus the institution of slavery does not occupy the centre of the stage and sometimes, indeed, hardly appears on it at all. For much of the story he has to tell this would seem to be perfectly legitimate, and it allows Jordan finally, for example, to defuse the old debate as to whether slavery was the precursor of race prejudice or vice versa. But it is not an approach which can be pursued without a certain degree of tension and ambiguity.⁹ This ambiguity is particularly serious and distorting when Jordan discusses the American Revolution. Noting that the antislavery activity of this era owed its energy to a variety of sources, chief among which was religion, he suggests that it produced a recognition that Americans were prejudiced; that this prejudice arose from the differences of physique and character between blacks and whites; and that it was the principal obstacle to emancipation. The solution to the problem which was proposed by advocates of antislavery was the environmentalist argument that slavery was the cause of the Negro's allegedly inferior character and that the abolition of slavery would permit him to establish his inherent equality. Jordan asserts that 'the flowering of environmentalism was one of the major historical developments of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

second half of the eighteenth century'.¹⁰ It was promoted by the Revolutionary struggle with England as a result of Americans thinking of themselves as Englishmen at the same time that they began to realize that they had created a rather different society. They had done so, they were led to argue, by virtue of the influence of the American environment. Given that the character of the Negro had become a central point in the debate over slavery, it was within the environmentalist framework that the debate was pursued. The Revolution was a turning point, says Jordan, because it saw the introduction of the nature *versus* nurture controversy which has plagued race relations ever since. He goes on to imply further that it was in the ambiguity of the American as Englishman, rather than in slavery or antislavery, that the development of racism had its firmest roots. His argument is worth quoting at some length:

Among the many reasons why Americans assumed an environmentalist posture, the need both to embrace and repudiate their own Englishness was one of the most compelling . . . To assess the nature of the American people was to assess the Negro by implication, simply because Negroes lived in America . . . In itself, the quest for a national identity laid down no principles concerning Negroes, but by pressing the question of who Americans were, it raised the question whether Negroes were truly American . . . Usually, assessments and answers concerning the Americanness of the Negro were veiled and less than completely conscious: they have to be looked for embedded in such diverse fields as the antislavery movement, the ideology of the late rebellion, and the achievements of American natural scientists. Occasionally, however, answers were required not by a half-recognized urge to attain integral national identity but in the most obvious manner by a specific question posed directly by creation of a genuine national government: the most clearcut instance was that the first federal naturalization law applied to 'white' foreigners only. Insofar as American nationalism involved consciousness of Englishness, it provided a negative answer – the Negro was *not* an American – basically because he could not even look like an English American. On the other hand, Americans had of necessity to reject Englishness. Hence no final answer was to be found in nationalism itself. Moreover, the prevailing view that Americans were Englishmen remodeled by New World conditions tended to throw the whole question of the Negro's Americanness into the lap of the American environment, where natural philosophers pondered it cautiously and arrived at strange conclusions.¹¹

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The argument here is clear and logical; it is also an example of *a priori* rather than of historical reasoning, and Jordan does little to convince us that it does, or does not, correspond with historical reality. As he points out, his argument is built up from scattered evidence, but the source of that evidence is rather more significant than he suggests. It matters that much of it came from 'the antislavery movement, [and] the ideology of the late rebellion'. By virtually ignoring the institution of slavery here, Jordan is led to describe as a clear-cut example something which could equally logically be explained in other terms. Thus the reason for the application of the first naturalization law to 'whites' only was that incoming blacks were either slaves or potential allies of slaves. It was not because blacks lived in America that an assessment of their character had to be made: it was because they lived in America as slaves. The questions before the American people were not simply abstractions; they had to do with possible changes in the social order, changes seemingly of some magnitude.

The implication of the present work is that Jordan's emphasis is misplaced. Environmentalism was of secondary rather than of primary importance, and it was slavery rather than antislavery which provided the main impulse toward a conscious and articulate investigation of the Negro's character. The Revolution laid bare an apparent inconsistency between the slavery of blacks and the freedom of whites at the same time that it revealed the extent to which both had taken firm root in American society. Antislavery was thus only one among many responses to the problem. Proslavery, flight from a slave society, religious and scientific rationalizations, environmentalist arguments – these were other possible solutions. For some there was no solution: the problem was quite literally intractable.

Jordan's misplaced emphasis appears, partially at least, to derive from his attempt to cover a long time span and from his failure adequately to take account of institutional factors. By stressing continuity rather than discontinuity he has given his work coherence but in the process he has been led to misstate, and understate, the impact of the Revolution. The object of this book is to suggest that the Revolution was a crucial stage in the development of the debate over slavery and race; that it promoted a real concern over the nature and significance of slavery; and that out of that concern grew a consciously racist society. The process, furthermore, was direct rather than tangential; that is, it was not dependent on the kind of inter-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

mediary agency which Jordan proposes. That there were indirect routes to the same target cannot be denied; that they were primary can.

One author who has suggested that the Revolution was a decisive moment in the development of American slavery is Eugene D. Genovese. He has not fully explored his own suggestions, however, and as they stand his theories are in some need of modification. Genovese argues that there were three crucial stages in the development of slavery in the United States. The American Revolution was the first, he says, for it paved the way for the slaveholders to acquire full regional power because the central government was weak. The second stage 'was the formulation of the positive-good proslavery argument, which signaled the maturation of the ruling class and its achievement of self-consciousness'.¹² The third was the decision to secede.

The argument that the Revolution paved the way for the acquisition of full regional power by the slaveholding class hardly bears investigation. Can it legitimately be argued that the federal union of 1787 which grew out of the Revolutionary ferment provided a weaker central government than that previously provided by the British Empire? Local interests had already achieved a substantial measure of independence and autonomy by the third quarter of the eighteenth century. There were external restraints, of course, but it is doubtful whether they were more restrictive than those imposed by the federal constitution. Nor did the collapse of the British mercantilist empire pave the way for a greater economic autonomy of the planter class: it was to remain tied to external merchants, whether of British, Yankee or New York origin, throughout the ante-bellum period. Probably the only major question of immediate concern to slaveholders *qua* slaveholders over which the planter class was thwarted by the British connection was that concerning the prohibition of the slave trade into Virginia. That was a recent demand and if persisted in it might well eventually have been granted; South Carolina and Georgia were, after all, more logical places in which to seek a market for slaves. The achievement of independence and the creation of a new national entity tied the slaveholding South into a system founded on the belief that slavery was wrong in principle. That Southern slaveholders perceived this as at least a potential threat to their interests was made manifest from the very beginning by frequent lapses into sectional posturing and voting; at a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09877-9 - Slavery, Race and the American Revolution

Duncan J. MacLeod

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Slavery, race and the American Revolution

later stage it was to result in successive crises and the diversion of Southern political energies at the national level into a quest for control of the machinery of national government. If slaveholders had acquired full regional power they did not behave in a manner which suggested that they were aware of the fact. The significance which the present work attaches to the Revolution is rather different to that attributed to it by Genovese. The argument here is that the Revolution revealed strains and inconsistencies within slaveholding society and accentuated them. It demonstrated in dramatic fashion the gulf which existed between slavery and freedom and it forced the slaveholding class to seek some kind of reconciliation between the two. The nature of that reconciliation produced in the South a distinctive perspective upon the Revolution and its meaning, and it set in progress that development of a positive-good proslavery argument which Genovese sees as the evidence for the maturation of a ruling class.

Genovese has made his greatest contribution to an understanding of this era not in his specific references to the Revolution but in his assertion that the development of the South received a unique and momentous thrust from the closing of the slave trade at the very start of the great cotton boom.

The geographical expansion of cotton created new opportunities for the expansion and consolidation of the slaveholding class itself and simultaneously for the maturation of its world view . . . The frontier cotton boom, with its derived demand for slaves, tied the slaveholders of all regions into a single regional ruling class, not withstanding all the antagonisms remaining to divide them into different factions and parties.¹³

Genovese emphasizes that this development exerted economic pressures for the consequential development of a patriarchal and paternalistic pattern of slaveholding. The need to produce a creole slave force tended inevitably in this direction. The regime which emerged was less cruel and materially oppressive than had hitherto been the case; it was a regime in which planters came to recognize a degree of interdependence between slave and master and which provided the basis for the reasonings, at a later moment in time, of such men as George Fitzhugh. By stressing personal as well as labour relationships, of course, the system tended to be psychologically even more demanding of the slaves.

That there is much truth in this view of events cannot be denied,