

Slavery and the Simplisms of Reform

Much of the recent writing on American Negro slavery has tended to describe it from the inside, to treat the slave system as an institution that exercised a profound influence on the lives of those who lived within its limits and hence deserves analysis as an important historical phenomenon. Moreover, historians lacking any impulse to approve the slave regime have found themselves describing it as a remarkably resilient and even successful social formation. As significant as these historiographical developments may be for revealing the nature of human slavery and elucidating the variety of human institutions, they fail to account for one salient characteristic of slavery in the Western experience. The slave system has always been in some sense a "problem." True enough, modern intellectuals have tended to see virtually all human institutions as problems, as obstacles to the achievement of true freedom. No other social arrangement could supply better evidence for this modern attitude than slavery. Yet the history of slavery as a problem has its origins in the beginnings of written discourse. At the same time that it formed the lives of great numbers of human beings, it was perceived as the profoundest of social conundrums.

David Brion Davis began his analysis of this question in 1966 with the publication of *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, which carried the story into the late eighteenth century. In this second offering, he examines the phenomenon in the period of the democratic revolution. The first volume swept across many centuries, yet one felt the immediacy of the problem. In treating the revolutionary age, Davis is more concrete. Although no issue brought forth a more compelling ideological commitment from those who took it up, Davis shows in considerable detail and with unerring skill that the problem of slavery provoked a variety of responses. It may not have been the central issue of the age, but it was surely of critical importance.

The book is about antislavery; supporters of the institution found little reason to view it as a problem. Davis finds the origins of antislavery in the familiar places: the religious perfectionism of such fringe sects as the Quakers, the rationalist libertarianism that descended from Locke, and the ethic of the benevolent man of feeling that later matured into romanticism. The tendency in all of these movements was reductionist, a distinct drift away from the concrete and tentative toward the abstract and absolute. None of them awakened in their followers a firm attachment to existing institutions. They were movements of opposition and slavery was only one of the evidences of social organization against which they set their full force. In time

slavery came to be the major object of their attentions because it was easiest to see in that institution the deprivation of freedom that was apparent in virtually all social arrangements. Freedom could be defined only in opposition to society and hence black slavery became symbolic for the thralldom that society imposed on all men.

Davis is on the side of freedom and antislavery, though he does manifest a certain discomfort in dealing with the simplism of reform. In fact his book is an effort to explain that life is more complicated than most of the characters he treats would have dared believe.

The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823

by David Brion Davis
Cornell University Press \$17.50

"Truth," he writes, "is always framed in ambiguity;... good and evil are always colored by human ambivalence." He concedes that "history is filled with moral ironies." Yet he affirms that we are the beneficiaries of the reformers of the past who called upon the "collective conscience" and broke the "proprieties of the present." "Virtually all significant moral change springs from people who are in some sense deviant...." Davis may be no reductionist in his explanations of the origins of antislavery, but his sympathies rest with the terrible simplifications of modern reform. He invariably defines freedom as external to social order.

The major impulse toward antislavery arose from Christian messianism. Calvinism had long sought social correlations to man's sinfulness, and by the late eighteenth century Quakerism had become a vehicle for the more subversive ideas of Enlightenment reform. The Christian touched by the immediate infusion of grace or the Quaker transfixed by the inner light could assert his new liberty by championing the cause of the oppressed. And what better way could the new American nation find to effect its messianic motto, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, than to emancipate the slaves? The Christian freed by God's grace from the burdens of the world and hence released from the obligations of subordination could scarcely support an institution whose very essence was the subjection of one man by another. The perfectionist sects saw the hierarchical arrangements of historical institutions as the antithesis of God's kingdom. As a consequence slavery assumed the burden borne by the corrupt world in sectarian thinking. It be-

came the primary evidence of worldly corruption.

Still the consequences of Christian perfectionism were ambiguous. The messianic drive led as often to quietism as it did to aggressive reform. In the United States there proved to be no necessary connection between evangelical revivalism and antislavery. Although the revivals of the early nineteenth century greatly stimulated the American attack on the institution, the consequences for the slaves were not the same as the effect on their benefactors. Conversion of the slaves often led to Christian resignation and better slaves, not emancipation. Among slaveholders it induced a spirit of trusteeship which may have alleviated the immediate plight of the blacks but scarcely contributed to their hope for freedom. Most poignant of all, freedom for the slaves did not lead to an increase in Christian fellowship between white and black. Freed slaves were driven from their homes in the South, and in the cities they kept to themselves. Few blacks became Quakers.

The doctrines of the inner light and the individual experience of conversion had a secular analogue in the principle of self-sovereignty derived from the humanist image of man. The major ideas of the age of revolution rested on the Lockean conceptions of possessive individualism and a contractual social and political order. These seminal concepts justified the emergence of the industrial society of the nineteenth century, and the Quakers pioneered in its development. The principles that led them to oppose slavery were closely related to the attitudes that placed them at the center of the most significant processes of modernization.

This troubles Davis. The Quakers had an ingenious way of combining high principle and utility. The humanitarian ethic required the condemnation of the slightest signs of overt cruelty and was unrelenting in exposing the ways in which society masked its imperfections. The Quakers "helped to create a moral climate in which a highly ethical purpose could disguise the effects of power. Although eighteenth-century Quakers were not responsible for the consequences of a nineteenth-century free labor market—or for the consequences of British efforts to stamp out the slave trade in the heart of Africa—they unwittingly drew distinctions and boundaries which opened the way, under guise of moral rectitude, for unprecedented forms of oppression." One might question Davis' assumptions about the nineteenth-century labor market or the brutality of British imperialism; but no matter, the irony is nicely put. Quaker industrialists took a major role in dismantling the old order,

and then they became rich by organizing the human wreckage into an orderly and productive population. Davis manifests the conventional anticapitalism of modern liberals; he does not question the fundamental validity of eighteenth-century humanitarianism.

In eighteenth-century thought the nexus between the sovereign individual and an ordered society can be found in the idea of contract. Davis sees a certain level of tension between the autonomous individual and the rational order constructed on the basis of contract, which may in fact have existed. Any sort of order, even that posited on the freely made decision of the individual, is bound to impinge upon the sovereignty of the separate entities making it up. One might safely wonder, however, whether the tension does not point up the flaw in individualist thinking. The Quakers did not, as Davis seems to contend, employ sovereign individuals in their factories. They did not create an order from detached individuals who contracted for their labor. Rather they brought together people whose traditional attachments had been greatly abused but who sought to renew those formations as human beings invariably do. Contractual agreements are never pristine. They are always encrusted with legal and customary meaning. The tension was not between the individual and a rational order constituted on the basis of a volitional contract but between a traditional ordering of life and those few individuals who like the Quakers believed it possible to abstract themselves from social experience.

It should not be surprising that the same people who opposed the slave system worried about work discipline and ef-

iciency in the factory system. Slavery was the antithesis of the self-sovereignty that should have supplied the motivating force for the new industrial society. Support for this new arrangement of life did not contradict the individualist assumptions that formed the root of modern industrialism. Had it been possible to detach human beings totally from traditional associations, no problem would have arisen in organizing the industrial system. But this was not possible, and the new order had always to combat the tendencies of past social arrangements to persist and new ones to form in patterns that proved detrimental to efficient production. Slavery possessed many of the characteristics—hierarchy, deference, coercion, wastefulness—that reformers found unacceptable in the preindustrial world.

Traditional life dissolved slowly in the age of revolution and never completely disappeared. Slavery persisted into the nineteenth century in the New World and the English abolished it in the empire only when it could no longer claim economic justification. Davis is adept at showing how the totalist ideas of the reformers suffered qualification in the face of an obdurate institution. The famous Somerset case of 1772 did less than abolish slavery in the British Isles. Reformers found it more prudent to attack the slave trade than to insist upon the immediate eradication of the system. Not until the second quarter of the nineteenth century did opposition take the highest ground. In the United States the revolutionary generation compromised on the issue of slavery. By indirection the Constitution sanctioned it in the three-fifths clause, and it took twenty years to halt

the slave trade. Although the founding generation worried much over the problem, slavery advanced into the nineteenth century with a brighter future than it had possessed for more than a generation. It would be another sixty years before the reformers would have their way.

Davis relies on the ideas of Edmund S. Morgan to explain the success of the slave regime in the new nation and the failure of the Revolution to change the course of history. Morgan begins with the fundamental paradox of the American experience: for more than two centuries the nation with the broadest claims to human freedom denied that freedom to a substantial segment of its population. The answer, it seems, can be gleaned from the paradox itself. It was precisely because of the enslavement of the African that Americans believed it possible to avoid the layered, class society of Europe. Once the blacks were securely fixed on a level below all white men, it became possible to view everyone above as equal. The density of social formations in Europe created a less fertile ground for the cultivation of equalitarianism. Thus the Negro in America served as a surrogate for the historical social accretions that represented oppression to Americans. Davis does not make the point, but could it not be argued that this very paradox explains the eagerness of reformers in Britain and in America to equate the slave system with the society of pre-revolutionary Europe?

Yet the failure of the revolutionary generation can be attributed to a more concrete set of historical circumstances. Davis presents Jefferson as a revealing sample. He could always sound like the most enlightened savant of his day. And

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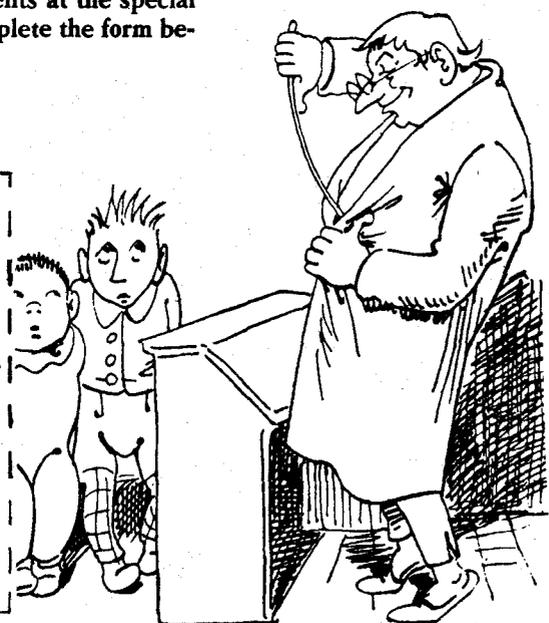
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indeed he was. But he never separated his ideological proclivities from his loyalty to what Davis calls his class. Jefferson was a slaveholder who had known the subordination of the black man all his life. To exact the full logic of his Declaration would be to ask him to deny the deepest affinities of a Virginia planter. Even when he came to see faintly the desirability of ridding the country of slavery, he did not think it possible to act unless he could maintain his credibility among men of similar status. Whatever the revolutionary generation said or believed, the slave system was imbedded in American society. It would be destroyed only when the righteousness of American

belief took on the sanction of fire and sword.

Slavery turned men into things and hence "symbolized the most extreme model of treating men as exploitable objects." Interpreted in this way, a threat to the slave system became a threat to the social order itself, for all social arrangements implied subordination. For man to be other than a thing required that he assume the burden of self-justifying autonomy. Any state short of that pristine condition would necessarily lend credence to what Davis calls "less visible modes of human bondage." One can sympathize with the frustrations of reformers charged with the task of obliter-

ating human society, and one can understand the fears of those who suspected that they might succeed. Slavery imposed a terrible burden on many Africans, but it also supplied the conditions for the creation of a genuine black society. Moreover, the master-slave relationship could be based on more than force and brutality. The promise of autonomy offered none of the social necessities of human existence.

Davis has done more than any other historian to explain the intellectual origins of the antislavery movement. The insight he offers into the dim recesses of reformist thought is at least in part attributable to the intensity of his own belief. □

Book Review/R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

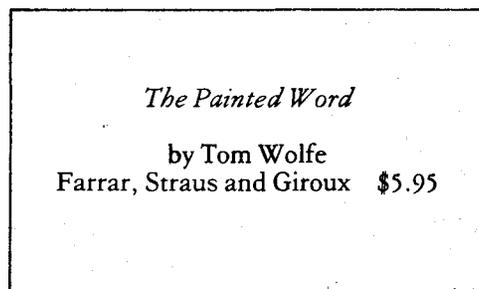
Succès de Scandale

One dark night in early spring of 1975 a desperate howl stabbed the darkness of midtown Manhattan, and for a terrifying moment brave men looked heavenward and maidens clutched their breasts. Even in the porn palaces thoughts momentarily strayed toward Jehovah's credentials as a civil libertarian. What unspeakable devilry was afoot? In an instant a howling cacophony of rejoinders went up all over the island. The ghostly wail was picked up in Scarsdale, and beyond into Connecticut. It was a dreadful night, and contrary to expectations the eerie chorus did not dissolve into the dawn. Quite the contrary: it continued and spread throughout all the literate parts of the Republic. This was not the howl of the noble wolf. No indeed, it was the primitive response of thousands of indignant devotees of Modern Art who had just gotten wind of the April issue of *Harper's*; and from this moment forward—though, truth to tell, I share many of their artistic passions—they go down in my ledger as worthy of rebuke. They have no humor.

It was the April issue of *Harper's* that carried the latest bit of lampoonery by Mr. Tom Wolfe, the Judas Iscariot of Manhattan trendies, and Wolfe's joke has now been published as a book, *The Painted Word*. The howls have risen a thousand decibels. What Wolfe said was that a world that sniggers at Popes and Presidents can also find merriment in the pretensions and misadventures of the world of Modern Art. Obviously the inhabitants of that world disagree.

In *The Painted Word* Wolfe mordantly notes the Modern Art world's pedantry, charlatanism, unwarranted elitism, and weakness for the kind of self-promotion characteristic of reform-minded district attorneys. It is a wonderfully successful joke, and what makes it even more hu-

morous is that it is being analyzed and pondered by art critics all over the Republic as though it were a monograph of the gravest import. Not since Arthur Jensen talked about hereditary I.Q. has a furor of this magnitude arisen. Soon or late the puckish Wolfe will be the subject of one of those critical seminars endowed by the Ford Foundation and inspired by the proposition that the only way to ferret



out the truth is to inter it beneath a monument of sonorous academic sophistries.

Who would have expected that this cosmopolitan world of *avant-garde* artists, art critics, and antibourgeois bourgeois collectors would have so little wit about them? They have been the very first to chortle at the pieties and fatuities of America. In fact some of them have been among the most energetic iconoclasts in the land, and hardly a cranny of American experience has been able to claim sanctuary from their ribald genius. Now Wolfe has laid the joke on them, and not only have they lost their old brag and bounce but in their learned rejoinders one notes a neurotic fussiness. He is in error about the birth of modern art, the critics contend. He missed the conceptual nuances of "flatness." He has hopelessly confused the theories of art critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Poor Wolfe; he is lost at sea in the complicated world of art scholarship and art theory.

This is the gravamen at the center of their howl, and it is in this complaint that they reveal themselves not only to be humorless but to be humorless donkeys. For it is precisely this matter of emphasizing theory over beauty that induced Wolfe to write his book. Is Wolfe lost at sea? The fussy declamations now resounding through the Republic are amusing testimonials to his sense of direction. Oh, of course, the critics say, there was a speck of sham involved in those esoteric theories of the 1960s, there was a little hokum in the experimental art forms that kept popping up at the Museum of Modern Art; but Wolfe is too extravagant, too glib. What is needed is erudition and calm analysis. Hogwash!

Careful analysis, a sober marshalling of the facts: that is one way of setting things aright. But, as William Nolte has said, "It's not the simple truth that sets men free or even causes them to think, but rather the Truth appalled in shocking garments and blown up to epic size." In *The Painted Word* the shocking garments are all about, the frauds are blown up to Wagnerian proportions, and from the cacophony of howls from Culturalati, Inc. one gets the impression that the charlatans are becoming edgy. Quite possibly Modern Art may soon be set free from their moonshine.

I approve of such patriotic toil. I applaud it and roar for more. If, as Hilton Kramer alleges, Wolfe is sounding the call for a revival of philistinism I shall remain vigilant. But the fine quality of serious art has always had a way of enduring. I have no doubt that it will today endure the philistines, for the philistine threat from outside the world of Modern Art is unlikely to be as dangerous to it as the subversion from within that threatened during the late, lamented, 1960s. □