

Slavery and the American South

Essays and Commentaries by

ANNETTE GORDON-REED

PETER S. ONUF

JAMES OAKES

WALTER JOHNSON

ARIELA GROSS

LAURA F. EDWARDS

NORRECE T. JONES, JR.

JAN LEWIS

ROBERT OLWELL

WILLIAM DUSINBERRE

STERLING STUCKEY

ROGER D. ABRAHAM

Edited by

WINTHROP D. JORDAN

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI

Jackson

WID-LC

E

441

.P68

2003

SEP 17 2004

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member
of the Association of American University Presses.

Copyright © 2003 by University Press of Mississippi

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 4 3 2 1



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Porter L. Fortune, Jr. History Symposium (25th: 2000: University of Mississippi)

Slavery and the American South : essays and commentaries / by

Annette Gordon-Reed . . . [et. al.] ; edited by Winthrop D. Jordan.

p. cm — (Chancellor's symposium series ; 2000)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57806-581-X (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Slavery—Southern States—History—Congresses. 2. African
Americans—Southern States—History—Congresses. 3. Southern States—
History—Congresses. I. Gordon-Reed, Annette. II. Jordan, Winthrop D.
III. Title. IV. Series.

E441.P68 2003

306.3'62'0975—dc21

2003002100

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

565396

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction ix

ANNETTE GORDON-REED

Logic and Experience: Thomas Jefferson's Life in the Law 3

Commentary: Peter S. Onuf

JAMES OAKES

The Peculiar Fate of the Bourgeois Critique of Slavery 29

Commentary: Walter Johnson

ARIELA GROSS

Reflections on Law, Culture, and Slavery 57

Commentary: Laura F. Edwards

NORRECE T. JONES, JR

*Rape in Black and White: Sexual Violence in the Testimony
of Enslaved and Free Americans* 93

Commentary: Jan Lewis

ROBERT OLWELL

*The Long History of a Low Place: Slavery on the South Carolina
Coast, 1670–1870* 117

Commentary: William Dusingberre

STERLING STUCKEY

*Paul Robeson and Richard Wright on the Arts
and Slave Culture* 147

Commentary: Roger D. Abrahams

Notes 177

Contributors 213

Index 215

triumph of free labor and the intrinsic inferiority of slave labor, classical theory still points us to some of the defining elements that distinguished slavery from free labor. The incentive structure *was* fundamentally different. Direct domination profoundly shaped the way slaves worked, the way they related to those for whom they worked, and even the way slaves interacted with one another. To be sure, classical political economy could not see that a careful balance of economic rationalization and physical coercion could make slavery profitable, even for centuries. But it did see that the social relations of slave society could not be understood from the simple observation that the masters made a lot of money.

This was the conclusion that Abraham Lincoln finally came to. He had very little to say about slavery before the 1850s. The available fragments of his early thinking suggest that he accepted the classical theory of slavery's economic inferiority. But after the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, when he began to speak of slavery at length, Lincoln never claimed that free labor was *economically* superior, nor did he evince any faith in its inevitable demise. In this he parted company with his fellow Republican, William H. Seward. To be sure, Lincoln understood the profound difference between slavery and free labor, and he could articulate those differences with piercing clarity. But for Lincoln, the political economy of slavery was immoral not because it wrecked the southern economy, but because it took from the mouths of enslaved men and women the bread they had earned. For this reason above all others, slavery was simply wrong. Absent the power of classical political economy, Lincoln's argument would have carried no weight.

* * *

Commentary

WALTER JOHNSON

James Oakes's extraordinary paper takes up two of the most important questions in the historiography of slavery: first, the relationship between

slavery and what the paper terms "bourgeois" economic thought, and second, the relationship between slavery, economy, and nineteenth-century ideas about race. Indeed, what are perhaps the key terms in defining our understanding of the intellectual history of American slavery—market, race, and region—are here taken up, reworked, and redefined in ways that seem to me to be quite illuminating. Through the critique of slavery, Oakes argues, the exegetes of capitalist social relations were able to make "free" labor (at least in the North and at least for whites) seem like a fact of life. Everywhere the critique of slavery went, the celebration of "free" labor was sure to follow.

The paper begins with a particular strain of Adam Smith's economic thought: the idea that because slaves derived no direct benefit from their own work they were less productive than (self-interested) free laborers and could be governed only by violence. Oakes traces that idea through a series of appropriations, repetitions, and reformulations, which gradually elevated the idea of the superior efficiency of free labor to a theory of history: the idea that free labor would inevitably replace slavery. This strand of "bourgeois" political economy, Oakes notes, served the founding generation as a sort of anti-political politics: if the everyday workings of the market could be counted upon to accomplish the historical task of overthrowing American slavery, then there was no reason to try to accomplish through politics what would eventually be accomplished through economics.

The ideology which converted some premises about the superior motive and creative power of free-labor liberalism into an axiom of historical development had an important racial corollary which made it possible for proponents of slavery to take it on board. This was the idea that African Americans were incapable of participating in the economic revolution that was transforming the world around them.¹ And in the thought of these pro-slavery converts to the bourgeois critique of slavery (and the moderate antislavery thought of many others) this exclusion was itself framed as being beyond politics—as a matter of history. That history could be ancient (as it was in the case of Thomas Dew who, in Oakes's words, argued "centuries of African tyranny combined with generations of enslavement in America had inculcated in African

Americans habits of idleness and dissipation that could never be undone"). Or it could be natural (as it was in the case of Samuel Cartwright who argued that the "Negro or Prognathous race" processed oxygen less efficiently than did whites and thus had to be forced into labor in order to attain physical equilibrium). Indeed, it could be metaphysical (as it was in the case of countless pro-slavery divines who found justification for slavery in the word of God). All such arguments culminated in making black slaves unfit for freedom: the epochal transformations of the world in the image of free-labor liberalism theorized by "bourgeois" economists came to a screeching halt at the color line.

And yet, as Oakes points out, it was the phenomenal, new-world-making power of black labor which provided what was perhaps the strongest argument against the "bourgeois" critique of slavery: if slavery was so much less efficient than free labor, and black workers so inferior to white ones, why was it that so many slaveholders seemed to be making so much money? Here, at least, the exegetes of free-labor-liberalism-and-black-inferiority-as-history had to admit the importance of local variation and temporal circumstance. Some followed Adam Smith to the fitful recognition that there was a human capacity beyond self-interest—"pride" he called it—which led slaveholders to keep employing slaves because they enjoyed the domination of those who were less-powerful than themselves. Others, like Smith again, emphasized the peculiar natural capacity of some crops—notably sugar and tobacco—to provide profits so great that they were able to sustain the slave mode of production beyond its natural life. Still another group, like William Harper, noted that, whatever the many virtues of free labor elsewhere in the world, in "warm climates" like that of the American South slavery alone could sustain economic growth and civilization; they noted that the cultural and economic life of American slavery provided an exception to the laws of history—the exception, in a sense, that proved the rule.

Oakes's paper, then, suggests the ways that, through the terms of "bourgeois" political economy, much of the analysis of American slavery was transposed into a set of terms which placed the institution beyond the pale of political action. These terms could be quite various. They could translate into the quiescent diffusionism of members of the

founding generation whose faith in the world-historical power of free-labor led them to regard the early years of the interstate slave trade in a particular way. They viewed that trade not as the essence of an obscene synthesis of economic expropriation and human domination but as a hopeful step on the way to a better future in which blacks would be diffused so widely across the map that it would be possible to emancipate them. They used a set of racial terms of reference which excluded African Americans from what many of the leading thinkers of both North and South regarded as the front-edge of historical progress—liberation through “free” labor. Finally, they used a vocabulary which naturalized both the industrial capitalist development of the North and the slave economy of the South as regional phenomena. Or, put another way, Oakes has here traced the historical process through which historical development of the North came to be characterized in terms of the market while that of the South was characterized in the terms of culture.² Oakes’s paper, that is, outlines the process by which the discussion of an institution that was by its nature historical, political, and economic was euphemized into a set of terms that were ahistorical, racial, and regional.

As I see it, the paper makes at least three significant contributions to our understanding of American slavery. First, it excavates a rich and forgotten vein of writings about slavery and economy and sustains its argument that the “bourgeois” critique of slavery provided framing premises not only for many of slavery’s critics but for some of its defenders. In so doing it sharpens our understanding of the meaning and mutual interaction of the key terms in the intellectual history of American slavery: race, region, slavery, and capitalism.

Second, it provides a way of thinking through the relationship of slavery and race—of economy and ideology—in a set of terms that make sense at the level of everyday life. Within the historical architectonics of the entanglement of American slavery and American freedom, of democratic revolution and racial domination, of liberalism and racism, Oakes’s piece helps us to see the way to a smaller set of building blocks. He provides a detailed and sequential account of how various thinkers drew on existing ideas about race in order to resolve specific intellectual

problems posed by the bourgeois critique of slavery.³ He has, that is, provided us with an outline of the everyday history of how the categories that shaped and defined slavery were articulated and promulgated, of how intellectuals involved in debates used, redefined, and spread a wider set of ideas about slavery, race, and the market.

Third, in describing how the idea of southern regional and geographical distinctiveness was ultimately used to blunt the force of "the bourgeois critique" by insulating southern slavery from the supposedly inexorable transformative force of "free labor," Oakes has provided a nuanced account of the history of the idea of "the market" in American history generally. In the United States the central premise of Smithian economics, the idea that "the market" was itself an historical force that stood outside of and had a motive force apart from "culture," was mapped onto the division between North and South. Thus northern industrialists could claim that their version of the proper relation between capitalist, worker, time, and wage was in fact an immutable fact of nature rather than a culturally specific argument. Thus they could broadly gesture at the slavery practiced by their southern neighbors and in the same gesture gloss over the distinction between "free" labor (i.e. the freedom to work for a wage) and "freedom" itself. And thus southern defenders of slavery could contend that the system of domination and exploitation over which they presided was, in essence, cultural rather than economic.

What I missed in this extraordinary paper was a better sense of the setting from which these ideas emerged. I sometimes had the feeling that I was reading a transcript of one of the greatest—at least from the perspective of an intellectual historian of slavery—dinner parties ever thrown: Benjamin Franklin, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson on one side of the table, James Henry Hammond, Thomas Roderick Dew (and also George Fitzhugh) on the other. Oakes is at the head of the table as a good-humored host, insistently posing the question that guides the discussion—"but what about the evidence of slavery's productivity, how do you account for that?" I must admit to a sense of pique at not having been invited to the party, but once I realized that Laurence Shore was the only other historian invited to the gathering

I didn't feel so bad. Nevertheless, if part of the paper's promise is the vision of a much more rigorous account of the way that ideas about capitalism, slavery, race, and region were spread over time and space, it seems to me important to be as specific about the historical setting of that process of transmission.

I have in mind three groups of settings. First of all, I think that the paper might profit from more attention to the historical conjunctures which shaped the uses (and abuses) of ideas about capitalism, slavery, and race. For instance, the urgency of William Harper's 1838 claim that western civilization would end with slavery—"Can any sane mind contemplate such a result without terror?" he wrote—would both resonate with and refine Oakes's argument if it was placed in the context of West Indian Emancipation in 1834 and the end of the period of "apprenticeship" in 1838. Indeed, it would be interesting to try to trace the place of the West Indian example, which was widely reported in North American newspapers at the time, in all subsequent United States discussions of what would happen if slavery ever ended.⁴

Secondly, I have in mind the rhetorical or forensic context of these arguments: who, specifically, were these writers arguing with and what, specifically and concretely, were they trying to achieve when they mobilized the "bourgeois" critique. If one of the very great promises of the paper is to point the way to the everyday processes by which ideas about capitalism, slavery, and race were reformulated and reproduced, it seems important to me to replace the polite but insistent voice of James Oakes with a more detailed account of what questions those who made the arguments were trying to answer when they made them and who was asking.

Thirdly, I have in mind the physical setting. For example, many of these arguments seem to reflect at the level of abstract argument the sort of juxtaposition of themes—gross domestic product, historical growth, agricultural practice, management strategy, biological racism—that characterized the table of contents of slaveholding periodicals like *DeBow's Review* or the *Southern Agriculturalist*. Given the importance assigned to the unlikely juxtapositions that characterize "print capitalism" in recent work on how people who have never met one another imagine

themselves into national and regional solidarities, it seems worth thinking about the physical setting of these arguments (i.e. in a journal, in a state house, etc.) as being itself an element of the hold an argument might have upon its audience.⁵ There is one great exception to everything I have just said about the silences in the paper, of course, and that is Oakes's discussion of the Virginia slavery debate of 1832: it occurred in the immediate aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion, it pitted a largely slaveholding group of easterners against a largely nonslaveholding group of westerners, and it occurred in the physical premises of the Virginia State House. The sudden disruptive appearance of Nat Turner at the dinner party, I think, brings the rest of the paper into sharper focus.

With Nat Turner in mind, let's return for a moment to Adam Smith. The version of "the market" that the "bourgeois" critique of slavery elevated to a revealed principle of historical progress was a very specific one. There appears to have been little of Smith's idea that "man" was possessed by an innate capacity to truck, barter, and sell. Nor is there much explicit about the "invisible hand" of macroeconomic distribution in these writings. Now it may be said that these ideas are immanent in the historical teleology of the "bourgeois" critics. But it must be equally acknowledged that the element of "bourgeois" political economy from which their arguments explicitly embarked was the question of labor discipline—of how workers could, on the scale of incentives that ran between the threat of starvation and the promise of shareholding, be convinced that working for someone else was the right thing to do (or as the "bourgeois" critics themselves would have it, in their own best interest).⁶ The "bourgeois" critique of slavery, that is, emphasized the producer over the consumer and the internal dynamics of the character of human motivation rather than the external questions about the nature of macroeconomic distribution. To put it another way: the "bourgeois" critique of slavery brought the question of slave agency (and thus, in our terms, of slave resistance) to the center of history.

If we are to accept the notion, outlined above, of the importance of the specific historical context in which the arguments that made up

the "bourgeois" critique of slavery were deployed, reworked, and reproduced, then we can begin to see the way to a history in which enslaved people's resistance to slavery—slowing down, acting out, running off, rising up—was, in fact, a central element of the formation American modernity. Indeed, once we see enslaved people's agency as the central problematic of the "bourgeois" critique of slavery, we can begin to see the extent to which the categories that emerged from that debate (as well as from other debates held in other settings) were born of a colossal erasure—the erasure of African-Americans ideas, desires, and politics as a motive force of history. In the formulation of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the idea that slaves had a fully theorized and occasionally articulated version of events which led them to behave the way they did was, for both slaveholders and their bourgeois critics, an "unimaginable" history.⁷ It was within the comfortable confines of this hole in their own imaginations that they developed their ideas about the motive power the market, the waged character of freedom, the biological character of race, and the social and cultural salience of geographical space that have shaped our nation to this very day.

native Virginia. Toward the end of his essay Dew praised the state legislature and the city of Richmond for their recent support of internal improvements projects. They would "revolutionize the financial condition of the Old Dominion, and speed her on more rapidly in wealth and numbers, than she has ever advanced before." He foresaw the growth of towns and cities in eastern and southern Virginia, drawing in free laborers from the North and diffusing their influence throughout the countryside. Plantations would give way to "gardens" that would feed the swelling population of the towns and cities. And so, without the assistance of dangerous and impractical schemes for the abolition of slavery, slavery would eventually give way before the natural progress of free labor. As a defense of slavery this was nothing if not peculiar.

31. David Christie, "Cotton is King: or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy," in E. N. Elliott, ed., *Cotton is King, and Proslavery Arguments*. . . . (Augusta, Ga., 1860), 19-267.

32. James Henry Hammond, "Hammond's Letters on Slavery," in *The Pro-Slavery Argument*, 147.

33. William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," in *The Pro-Slavery Argument*, 47, 67.

34. "Hammond's Letters on Slavery," in *The Pro-Slavery Argument*, 121. Sounding like none other than Benjamin Franklin, Hammond then listed the various expenses of slave labor: "besides the first cost of the slave, he must be fed and clothed, well fed and well clothed, if not for humanity's sake, that they may do good work, retain health and life, and rear a family to supply his place. When old or sick, he is a clear expense, and so is the helpless portion of his family. No poor law provides for him when unable to work, or brings up his children for our service when we need them."

35. Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," in *The Pro-Slavery Argument*, 67, 89. Emphasis added.

36. Samuel A. Cartwright, "Slavery in the Light of Ethnology," in Elliot, ed., *Cotton is King*, 699.

37. Ibid. 109-10.

38. Quoted in Shore, *Southern Capitalists*, 19.

39. Ibid.

Notes to "COMMENTARY"

by Walter Johnson

1. Other important considerations of the racialized character of discussions about the capacity of emancipated slaves to function in a "free" labor economy include Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market Revolution in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), and Thomas Holt, "An Empire Over the Mind: Emancipation, Race, and Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South" and Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Ideology and Race in American

History," both of which are in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Race, Region, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York, 1982).

2. The opposition between the capitalist North and the culturalist South has been a persistent feature of the literature on antebellum slavery. Much of this seems to me to emerge out of the insistence of American historians on trying to figure out what it was that Marx said about slavery (damn little) rather than turning the question around and asking what slavery says about Marx. Why, for instance, writing the first volume of *Capital*, would he choose a bolt of linen as the object out of which to generate his (magnificent) critique of the "commodity fetishism" rather than a bolt of cotton? Thinking from the standpoint of slavery, it seems an astonishing evasion, one which allowed for the generation of an account of "capitalism" which reduced relations of exploitation to those experienced by industrial workers in Europe, and, in the same motion, reduced the history of mercantile (and financial) capital in which slavery played such an important world-historical role. Oakes' earlier work, particularly *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York, 1982), but also *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York, 1992), seemed to me to play into this polarity (capitalism v. slavery) by simply reversing it—arguing that the South was, in some way, at bottom, capitalist. The move here is much more interesting. By focusing on the historical process by which a set of ideas about work, motivation, and history were spread and then applied to the North, Oakes is treating capitalist ideology as being itself a cultural formation—a set of ideas about the nature of right and reality that were related but not reducible to underlying economic structures and exploitative social relations. Thinking this way, the idea of "capitalism" itself can be seen as an ideology of domination.

3. See Thomas C. Holt, "Marking Race: Race-making, and the Writing of History," *American Historical Review* 50 (1995): 1–20.

4. See Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992).

5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

6. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1978) and Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*.

7. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995).

Notes to "REFLECTIONS ON LAW, CULTURE, AND SLAVERY" by Ariela Gross

1. For examples of this scholarship, see generally Lois G. Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century