

Lazy, Violent, and Inhumane:

A Look Into Some of the Ways in Which Slavery Influenced White Southerners

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Introduction

The institution of slavery in America has had a deep and lasting effect on the South. In many ways, slavery was the foundation of Southern life. Without slavery, the South could not have experienced such economic prosperity, and without the racialization of slavery, white Southerners could not have enjoyed the benefits of such economic prosperity. England, along with the other European countries, used race and slavery in conjunction with one another to rationalize and legitimize the degree of exploitation needed to develop colonies in the West. Although some of the earliest documentation of US history demonstrates that, for a time, both white and black people could be considered indentured servants, this system of servitude could not support the expectations of the Mother Countries. Following the example of Portugal,² England began enslaving Africans and racializing the age-old institution of slavery. The emergence of chattel slavery in America was perfected to maximize capitalist interests. As opposed to its predecessor, chattel slavery was much more exploitive and inhumane because people became the property of their owners. Europeans drew vivid racial distinctions in various ways in order to place social value upon slaves, and thus black people. By regarding some people as inferior to others, chattel slavery was normalized, and as a result, white Southerners became the inheritors of slavery's profits. White Southerners felt an urgent necessity to use any available

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 13.

method of protecting their profit by controlling slaves from resisting. Ultimately, through centuries of oppression and exploitation, slavery made white Southerners lazy, violent, and inhumane.

Lazy

Without a doubt, the institution of slavery bred laziness amongst white Southerners. From the very beginning of the first effective settlement of in the American colonies, African and African-American slave labor built the foundation of the US colonies. Due to the colonies' total lack of infrastructure, required as signifiers of imperial authority and Western civilization, the land needed to be built from the ground up. For this reason, in colonial America, slaves built the homes and buildings, boats and ships, tools, and everyday necessities of life³. In America, unlike other places in the New World, there lacked easily exploitable resources. When it became apparent that there was no gold to be found in the colonies, England and English settlers redirected their focus to producing long-term agricultural crops.⁴ As a result, slavery became the method of choice for capitalists gains. For the owners of production, free labor was the ultimate way to achieve maximum profitability.

Not only were slaves responsible for the production of the cash crops that would be the backbone of the Southern economy, they were also forced to build nearly every aspect of the country. Slave traders sought out Africans with specialized skills to complete specialized work. For example, slave traders were aware that slaves from certain geographical regions possessed different exploitable skills and trades. Skilled slave laborers worked, "as artisans, doing carpentry, bricklaying, and other skilled work necessary for building and maintaining plantations

³ Horton and Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

and towns.”⁵ Additionally, slaves were also forced to do domestic work, thus deeming *women’s work* now *slave work*.

Due to the fact that Southern states had more slaves than the Northern states, slave labor is responsible for much more Southern infrastructure than they are in the North.⁶ While it is true that the North had a fairly dense black population in certain areas, such as the coasts and some more major cities, throughout the South, slavery much more commonplace, and therefore, embedded into every inch of society.⁷ Due to lower slave populations in the North, white owners often had no choice but to work alongside slaves, though likely not as strenuously. The abundance of free labor led slavery to become the driving economic force within the South. For poor white Southerners, free labor was too difficult to compete with; for wealthy white Southerners, paying for labor was futile if one could get it for free. This sort of mentality consumed the South and as a result, field work and hard physical labor became beneath the white man. In the South, the white man did not have to work, he did not have to pay for labor, and yet he reaped all the benefits of slave labor—naturally, this bred laziness.

Violent

Perhaps the most common consequence of slavery was the normalization of violence in the South. Slavery made Southerners violent in countless ways. When a slave would not comply with orders, a slave was whipped or beaten in some form. If a slave did not work hard enough, fast enough, or long enough, a slave could be beaten. If a slave did not perform sexual favors or if he/she resisted rape and/or coerced sex, a slave could be beaten.⁸ If a slave refused to beat

⁵ Horton and Horton, 43.

⁶ Ibid., 43

⁷ Ibid., 42

⁸ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written by Herself (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), Chapter V-VI, 44-58.

another slave, they were subject to a beating. Slaves were valued property and slave owners had a vested interest in able black bodies, however, violence was condoned and normalized in order to strike a balance between an able-bodied slave and an obedient slave community. In fact, because the value of slaves was solely fiscal, murder, the most extreme form of violence, was permitted so long as the property was replaced.

It is worth noting that even after slavery was abolished, slavery continued to make Southerners violent. For example, because slave masters had vested interest in keeping their slaves able-bodied for profit, the abolition of slavery eradicated that incentive, leaving no deterrent against violence. For the wealthy white Southerner, the fact that black people were no longer their property led to increased violence. As a result of abolition, poor white folk felt justified in their participation in racialized violence, due to their perceived competition with freed blacks for resources and opportunities to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Therefore, the institution of slavery not only created and maintained a climate of violence in the South, but it is also responsible for escalated and legitimized violence against black communities long after its abolition.

Inhumane

In addition to lazy and violent, the white Southern population was plagued with inhumanity as a consequence of their dependence on slavery, manifesting in a plethora of ways. In Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of a Slave*, Douglass tells of a woman who exemplified the cruel nature of southerners: Mrs. Auld, the mistress of one of Douglass' masters. Having been a working class woman herself without a working knowledge of the slave-master relationship, Mrs. Auld was a very kind hearted woman when the two first met. Douglass recalled that she had been unlike any other white person he had encountered; she had an energy about her that made

Douglass feel at ease and comfortable. However, her continued exposure to slavery was accompanied by a growing exposure to brutality and inhumanity. A woman who had once taught her slave the alphabet became the antithesis of kind hearted. “That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage;” Douglass recalled of Mrs. Auld, with a “voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; her angelic face gave way to that of a demon.”⁹ And while Mrs. Auld’s reaction to slavery is a perfect example of how the brutality of slavery turned people cold, heartless, and inhumane, her transition is unique. Most Southerners, growing up with an intimate knowledge of the atrocities of slavery, were not nearly as ignorant as Mrs. Auld. For the white Southerners who benefited off of the institution of slavery, there were everyday mechanisms of control used in order to enforce and maintain their superiority over black people.

Perhaps one of the most inhumane and brutal of these practices was the separation of slave families and communities. Separation and the fear of separation were mechanisms employed by slave owners in order to validate and maintain the commodification of black people. From the time that people were kidnapped and stolen from their homelands in Africa, to the moment African-American babies were born enslaved, the white man had torn apart their families. As was the case with Venture Smith. Despite marrying his wife Meg and fathering a child, about a month and half after the child’s birth, Venture was sold to a new slave owner.¹⁰ Frederick Douglass also experienced separation from his family, which Douglass described as commonplace. He wrote, “frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, it’s mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed

⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 28.

¹⁰ Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America* (New London: 1798), 18.

under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor.”¹¹ Douglass cannot imagine any purpose for this other than to destroy the family bond between mother and child. Even being separated from one’s slave community was akin to being separated from one’s family. In many ways, collective familial connection within the slave community was central to the African-American identity. As Michael Gomez describes in *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, “deep bonds of affection transcended ethnic ties, forming one foundation for the eventual movement to race, a path chosen by rather than for Africans.”¹² For the slave communities of early America, separation was one of the utmost severe forms of control utilized by slave masters. The use of separation and the threat of separation as a tool of oppression exemplified the degree to which Southerners devalued and dehumanized black people. These practices equated slaves with farm animals, who could just as easily be sold off.

While separation from one’s family and community were imminent threats, this was only one kind of separation employed by Southerners. Another form of separation was through the separation of African people from their culture. In another inhumane effort to control slaves, slave masters separated slaves from cultural practices such as their language, names, dietary habits, ritual and religious ceremonies, just to name a few. Separation from such practices were viewed as an “important symbol of a masters power to deprive captives of their former identities, an indication of the totality of the master’s authority.”¹³ White Southerners used and abused slaves so severely that it becomes clear that the animalistic and inhumane people of this era were not the enslaved, but the white people who enforced, maintained, protected, and benefited off of the dehumanizing and savage institution of chattel slavery.

¹¹ Venture Smith, *Native of Africa* (New London: 1798), 2.

¹² Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of the African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 14.

¹³ Horton and Horton, 20.

Conclusion

Slavery influenced white southerners in a slew of atrocious ways. The white man used slavery and practices of slavery in order to control a whole population of people needed to maximize capitalist gains. Without slavery, the white elitists and the thriving economy of the US would not and could not have been as successful as it grew to be today. Slavery and the unrelentless effort needed to maintain the institution of slavery drove Southerners to become lazy, violent, and inhumane. For centuries, the white man benefited off of enslavement, and as a result, the severity to which laziness, violence, and inhumanity have influenced white people has been deeply embedded in American history, long after abolition. With minimal searching, one can find countless examples of everyday life here in 2019 that clearly indicate that the influences of slavery are still very much felt today.

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