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VOCATION
IN THE
AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Reading Packet 3: Broken Work and Slavery

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VOCATION IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

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THE SLAVE SOUTH: AN INTERPRETATION

EUGENE D. GENOVESE

The Problem

TWO interpretations of antebellum Southern society have, for some years, contended in a perplexing and unreal battle. The first considers the Old South an agrarian society fighting against the encroachments of industrial capitalism; the second considers the slave plantation merely a form of capitalist enterprise and suggests that the differences between Northern and Southern capitalism were more apparent than real. These two views, which one would think contradictory, are sometimes combined in the thesis that the agrarian nature of planter capitalism, for some reason, made coexistence with industrial capitalism difficult. None of these interpretations is convincing. Slavery and the rule of a special type of agrarians, the planters, characterized Southern society, which despite superficial resemblances to Northern was anti-bourgeois in structure and outlook.¹

The first view cannot explain why some agrarian societies give rise to industrialization and some do not. A prosperous agricultural hinterland has generally served as a basis for industrial development by providing a home market for manufactures and a source of capital accumulation; and the prosperity of farmers has largely depended on the rise of industrial centers as markets for foodstuffs. In a capitalist society, agriculture is one industry among many, and its conflict with manufacturing is one of many competitive rivalries. There must have been something unusual about an agriculture that generated violent opposition to the agrarian West as well as to the industrial Northeast.

¹ For a succinct statement of the first view see Frank L. Owsley, "The Irrepressible Conflict," in *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand* (New York, 1930), p.74. One of the clearest statements of the second position is that of Thomas P. Govan, "Was the Old South Different?" *Journal of Southern History*, XXI (Nov., 1955), p. 448.

The second view, which is the more widely held, stresses that the plantation system produced for a distant market, responded to supply and demand, invested capital in land and slaves, and operated with funds borrowed from banks and factors. This, the more serious of the two interpretations, cannot begin to explain the origins of the conflict with the North and is intrinsically unsatisfactory. The reply to it will be the burden of this article.

Slavery and the Expansion of Capitalism

The proponents of the idea of "planter capitalism" draw heavily, wittingly or not, on Lewis C. Gray's theory of the genesis of the plantation system. Gray defines the plantation as a "capitalistic type of agricultural organization in which a considerable number of unfree laborers were employed under a unified direction and control in the production of a staple crop."² The plantation system is here considered inseparably linked with the international development of capitalism. Gray notes the plantation's need for large outlays of capital, its strong tendency toward specialization in a single crop, and its commercialism; and he argues that these are features that appeared with the industrial revolution.

In modern times the plantation often arose under bourgeois auspices to provide industry with cheap raw materials, but the consequences were not always harmonious with bourgeois society. Colonial expansion produced three diverse patterns: (1) the capitalists of the advanced country simply invested in colonial land — as illustrated by the recent practice of the United Fruit Company in the Caribbean; (2) the colonial planters were largely subservient to the advanced country — as illustrated by the British West Indies early in the nineteenth century; and (3) the planters were able to win independence and build a society under their own direction — as illustrated by the Southern United States.

In alliance with the North, the planter-dominated South broke away from England, and political conditions in the new republic allowed it considerable freedom for self-development. The plantation society that had begun as an appendage of British capitalism ended as a powerful, largely autonomous, aristocratic civilization,

² *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (2 Vols.; Gloucester, 1958), I, p. 302.

although it was tied to the capitalistic world by bonds of commodity production. The essential element in this distinct civilization was the planter domination made possible by the command of slave labor. Slavery provided the basis for a special Southern economic and social life, special problems and tensions, and special laws of development.

*The Rationality and Irrationality
of Slave Society*

Slave economies manifest irrational tendencies that inhibit economic development and endanger social stability. Max Weber, for one, has noted four important irrational features.³ First, the master cannot adjust the size of his labor force in accordance with business fluctuations. In particular, efficiency cannot readily be achieved through the manipulation of the labor force if sentiment, custom, or community pressure makes separation of families difficult. Secondly, the capital outlay is much greater and riskier for slave labor than for free.⁴ Thirdly, the domination of a planter class increases the risk of political influence in the market. Fourthly, the sources of cheap slave labor are usually exhausted rather quickly, and beyond a certain point, costs become excessively burdensome. Weber's remarks could be extended. For example, planters have little opportunity to select specifically trained workers for special tasks as they arise.

There are other telling aspects of this economic irrationality. Under capitalism the pressure of the competitive struggle and the bourgeois spirit of accumulation direct the greater part of profits

³ *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York, 1947), pp. 276 ff. The term "rational" is used in its strictly economic sense to indicate that production is proceeding in accordance with the most advanced methods to maximize profits.

⁴ This simple observation has come under curious attack. Kenneth M. Stampp, for example, insists that the cost of purchasing a slave forms the equivalent of the free worker's wage bill. See *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956), pp. 403 ff. That equivalent, however, is to be found only in the cost of maintaining the slave through the year. The initial outlay is the equivalent of part of the capitalist's investment in fixed capital and constitutes what U. B. Phillips called the "over-capitalization" of labor under slavery. Surely, the cost of maintaining a slave is only a small part of the free worker's wage bill; but the difference in their productivity is probably much greater than the difference in their cost.

back into production. The competitive side of Southern slavery produced a similar result but one that was modified by the pronounced tendency to heavy consumption. Economic historians and sociologists have long noted the high propensity to consume among landed aristocracies. No doubt this difference is one of degree, and the greater part of slavery's profits also find their way back into production; but the method of reinvestment in the two systems is substantially different. Under capitalism profits are largely directed into an expansion of plant and equipment, not labor; in a word, economic progress is qualitative. In slave societies, for economic reasons as well as for those of social prestige, reinvestment of funds takes place along the same lines as the original investment — in land and slaves; that is, economic progress is quantitative.

In the South this weakness was fatal for the slaveholding planters. They found themselves engaged in a growing conflict with Northern farmers and businessmen over tariffs, homesteads, internal improvements, and the decisive question of the balance of political power in the Union. The slow pace of their economic progress, in contrast to the long strides of the North, threatened to undermine their political parity and result in a Southern defeat on all major issues of the day. The qualitative leaps in the Northern economy were manifested in a rapidly increasing population, an expanding productive plant, and growing political, ideological, and social boldness. The South's voice grew shriller and harsher as it contemplated the impending disaster and sought solace in complaints of Northern aggression and exploitation.

Just as Southern slavery directed reinvestment along a path that led to economic stagnation, so too did it limit the volume of capital accumulated for investment of any kind. We need not reopen the tedious argument about which came first the plantation, the one-crop system, or slavery. It should be clear that while slavery existed, the South had to be bound to a plantation system and an agricultural economy based on a few crops. The resultant dependence on Northern and British markets and on outside credit facilities and the inevitably mounting middleman's charges are well known. Perhaps less obvious was the capital drain occasioned by the importation of industrial goods. While the home market was retarded, Southern manufacturers had a difficult time producing

in sufficient quantities to keep costs and prices at levels competitive with Northerners. The attendant dependence on Northern and British imports intensified the outward flow of badly needed funds.

Yet, many of the elements of irrationality were irrational only from a bourgeois standpoint. The high propensity to consume luxuries, for example, has always been functional (i.e., socially if not economically rational) in aristocratic societies, for it has provided the ruling class with the façade necessary to overawe the middle and lower classes. We may speak of the slave system's irrationality only in a strictly economic sense and then only to indicate the inability of the South to compete with Northern capitalism on the latter's grounds. The planters, fighting for political power in an essentially capitalist Union, had to do just that.

*Bourgeois and Pseudo-bourgeois Features
of the Slave Economy*

The slave economy had close relations with, and was in a sense exploited by, the capitalist world market; consequently, slavery developed many ostensibly capitalist features, such as banking, commerce, and credit. These features were not *per se* capitalist and played a different role in the South than in the North. Capitalism has absorbed and even encouraged many kinds of precapitalist social systems: serfdom, slavery, oriental state enterprises, and others. It has introduced credit, finance, banking, and similar institutions where they did not previously exist. It is pointless to suggest that therefore nineteenth-century India or twentieth-century Saudi Arabia are to be classified as capitalist countries. Our task is to analyze a few of the more important bourgeois and pseudo-bourgeois features and, in particular, to review the barriers to industrialization, for only by so doing can we appreciate the peculiar qualities of the slave economy.⁵

The defenders of the "planter capitalism" thesis have noted the

5 This colonial dependence on the British and Northern markets was not ended when slavery ended. Share-cropping and tenantry produced similar results. Moreover, slavery at least offered the South a measure of political independence under planter hegemony. Since abolition occurred under Northern guns and under the program of a victorious, predatory, outside bourgeoisie, instead of under internal bourgeois auspices, the colonial bondage of the economy was preserved, but the South's political independence was lost.

extensive commercial links between the plantation and the world market and the modest commercial bourgeoisie in the South and have concluded that there is no good reason to predicate an antagonism between cotton producers and cotton merchants. However valid as a reply to the naive arguments of the proponents of the agrarianism-versus-industrialism thesis, this criticism has unjustifiably been twisted to suggest that the presence of commercial activity proves the presence of capitalism.⁶ Many precapitalist economic systems had well developed commercial relations, but if every commercial society is to be considered "capitalist," the word loses all meaning. In general, commercial classes have supported the existing system of production. As Maurice Dobb observes, their fortunes are bound up with those of the dominant producers, and merchants are more likely to seek an extension of their middlemen's profit than to try to reshape the economic order.⁷

In the Old South extensive and complicated commercial relations with the world market permitted the growth of a small commercial bourgeoisie. The resulting fortunes flowed into slaveholding, which offered prestige and was economically and politically secure in a planter-dominated society. Independent merchants found their businesses dependent on the patronage of the slaveholders. The merchants either became planters themselves or assumed a servile attitude toward the planters. The commercial bourgeoisie, such as it was, was tied to the slaveholding interest, had little desire or opportunity to invest capital in industrial expansion, and adopted the prevailing aristocratic attitudes.

The Southern industrialists were in an analogous situation, although one that was potentially subversive of the political power and ideological unity of the planters. Since the Southern countryside was dominated by large planters and slaves, the home market was retarded. The Southern yeomanry, unlike the Western, lacked the purchasing power to sustain rapid industrial development.⁸ The

6 Govan, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

7 *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1947), pp. 17 f; cf., Gunnar Myrdal, *Rich Lands and Poor* (New York, 1957), pp. 52 ff.

8 Twenty years ago an attempt was made by Frank L. Owsley and his students to prove that the Southern yeomanry was prosperous and strong. See *Plain folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1949). This view was convincingly refuted by Fabian Linden, "Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent

planters spent much of their money abroad for luxuries. The plantation market consisted primarily of the demand for cheap slave clothing and cheap agricultural implements for use or misuse by the slaves. Southern industrialism needed a sweeping agrarian revolution to provide it with cheap labor and a substantial rural market, but the Southern industrialists were dependent on the existing, limited, plantation market. Leading industrialists like William Gregg and Daniel Pratt were plantation-oriented and proslavery. They could hardly have been otherwise.

The banking system of the South serves as an excellent illustration of an ostensibly capitalist institution that worked to augment the power of the planters and retard the development of the bourgeoisie. Southern banks functioned much as did those which the British introduced into Latin America, India, and Egypt during the nineteenth century. Although the British banks fostered dependence on British capital, they did not directly and willingly generate internal capitalist development. They were not sources of industrial capital but "large-scale clearing houses of mercantile finance vying in their interest charges with the local usurers."⁹

The difference between the banking practices of the South and those of the West reflects the difference between slavery and agrarian capitalism. In the West, as in the Northeast, banks and credit facilities promoted a vigorous economic expansion. During the period of irresponsible Western banking (1830-1844) credit was extended liberally for industrial development as well as for land purchases and internal improvements. Manufacturers and merchants dominated the boards of directors of Western banks, and landowners played a minor role. Undoubtedly, many urban businessmen speculated in land and were particularly interested in underwriting agricultural exports; but they gave attention to building up agricultural processing industries and urban enterprises, which guaranteed the region a many-sided economy.¹⁰

Views," *Journal of Negro History*, XXI (Jan., 1946), pp. 140-89. Cf., Eugene D. Genovese, "The Limits of Agrarian Reform in the Slave South," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1959, pp. 117-21.

⁹ Paul A. Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth* (New York, 1957), p. 194.

¹⁰ The best introduction to this period of Western banking is the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Carter H. Golembe, "State Banks and the Economic Develop-

The slave states paid considerable attention to the development of a conservative, stable banking system, which could guarantee the movement of staple crops and the extension of credit to the planters. Southern banks were primarily designed to lend the planters money for outlays that were economically feasible and socially acceptable in a slave society: the movement of crops, the purchase of land and slaves, and little else.

Whenever easy credit policies were pursued in the South, the damage done outweighed the advantages of increased production. This imbalance probably did not occur in the West, for easy credit made possible agricultural and industrial expansion of a diverse nature and, despite acute crises, established a firm basis for long-range prosperity. Easy credit in the South led to expansion of cotton production with concomitant overproduction and low prices; simultaneously, it increased the price of slaves.

Planters wanted their banks only to facilitate cotton shipments and maintain sound money. They purchased large quantities of foodstuffs from the West and, since they shipped little in return, had to pay in bank notes. For five years following the New Orleans bank failures of 1837, the city's bank notes were at a discount of from ten to twenty-five per cent. This condition could not be allowed to recur. Sound banking and sound money became the cries of the planters as a class.

Southern banking tied the planters to the banks but, more important, tied the bankers to the plantations. The banks often found it necessary to add prominent planters to their boards of directors and were, in any case, closely supervised by the planter-dominated state legislatures. In this relationship the bankers could not emerge as a middle-class counterweight to the planters but could only serve as their auxiliaries.¹¹

ment of the West, 1830-1844." Columbia University, 1952, esp. pp. 10, 82-91. Cf. also Bray Hammond, "Long and Short Term Credit in Early American Banking," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XLIX (Nov., 1934), esp. p. 87.

¹¹ The bankers of the free states were also closely allied with the dominant producers, but society and economy took on a bourgeois quality provided by the rising industrialists, the urban middle classes, and the farmers who were increasingly dependent on urban markets. The expansion of credit, which in the West financed mining, manufacturing, transport, agricultural diversification, and the numerous branches of a capitalist economy, in the South bolstered the economic position of

The proponents of the "planter capitalism" thesis describe the planters and their society as bourgeois. Although this description is confusing and can serve no useful purpose, let us grant it for the moment. We are then confronted with a bourgeois society that impedes the development of every normal feature of capitalism; but when we realize that the planters were not bourgeois and that their society represented the antithesis of capitalism, these difficulties disappear. The fact of slaveownership is central to our problem. The seemingly formal question of whether the owners of the means of production command labor or purchase the labor power of free workers contains in itself the entire content of Southern life. All the essential features of Southern particularity and of Southern backwardness can be traced to the relationship of master to slave.

The Barriers to Industrialization

If the planters were losing their economic and political cold war with the Northern bourgeoisie, the failure of the South to develop sufficient industry was the most striking immediate cause. Its inability to develop adequate manufactures is usually attributed to the inefficiency of the labor force. No doubt, slaves did not easily adjust to industrial employment, and the indirect effects of the slave system impeded the employment of whites.¹² Slaves were used effectively in hemp, tobacco, iron, and cotton factories but only under socially dangerous conditions. They were given a wide variety of privileges and elevated to an elite status. Planters generally appreciated the potentially subversive quality of these arrangements and were hostile to their extension.

There were other, and perhaps more important, impediments to industrialization. Slavery concentrated economic and political power in the hands of a slaveholding class hostile to industrialism. The

the planters, prevented the rise of alternative industries, and guaranteed the extension and consolidation of the plantation system.

- ¹² Slavery impeded white immigration by presenting Europeans with an aristocratic, caste-ridden society that scarcely disguised its contempt for the working classes. The economic opportunities in the North were, in most respects, far greater. When white labor was used in Southern factories, it was not always superior to urban slave labor. The incentives offered by the Northern economic and social system were largely missing; opportunities for acquiring skills were fewer; and in general, productivity was much lower than in the North.

planters feared a strong urban bourgeoisie, which might make common cause with its Northern counterpart. They feared a white urban working class of unpredictable social tendencies. In general, they distrusted the city and saw in it something incongruous with their local power and status arrangements. The planters were unwilling to assume a heavy tax burden to assist manufacturers, and as the South fell further and further behind the North in industrial development, increasing state aid was required to help industry offset the Northerners' advantages of scale, efficiency, credit relations, and business reputation.

Slavery led to the rapid concentration of land and wealth and prevented the expansion of a Southern home market. Instead of providing a basis for industrial growth, the Southern countryside, economically dominated by a few large estates, provided only a limited market for industry. Data on the cotton textile factories almost always reveal that Southern producers aimed at supplying slaves with the cheapest and coarsest kind of cotton goods. Even so, local industry had to compete with Northern firms, which sometimes shipped direct and sometimes established Southern branches.

William Gregg, the South's foremost industrialist, was aware of the modest proportions of the Southern market and warned manufacturers against trying to produce exclusively for their local areas. His own company at Graniteville, South Carolina, produced fine cotton goods that sold much better in the North than in the South. Gregg was an unusually able man, and his success in selling to the North was a personal triumph. When he had to evaluate the general situation confronting Southern manufacturers, he asserted that he was willing to stake his reputation on their ability to compete with Northerners in the production of "*coarse cotton fabrics*."¹³

Some Southern businessmen, especially those in the border states, did good business in the North. Louisville tobacco and hemp manufacturers sold much of their output in Ohio. Some producers of iron and agricultural implements sold in nearby Northern cities. This kind of business was precarious. As Northern competitors arose and the market shrank, Southern producers had to rely on the nar-

13 William Gregg, *Essays on Domestic Industry* (first published 1845; Graniteville, S. C., 1941), p. 4. Original emphasis.

row and undependable Southern market.¹⁴ Well before 1840 iron manufacturing establishments in the Northwest provided local farmers with excellent markets for grain, vegetables, molasses, and work animals. During the ante-bellum period, and after, the grain growers of America found their market at home. America's rapid industrial development offered farmers a magnificently expanding urban market, and not until much later did they come to depend to any important extent on exports.

To a small degree the South benefited in this way. By 1840 the tobacco manufacturing industry began to absorb more tobacco than was being exported, and the South's few industrial centers provided markets for local grain and vegetable growers. Since the South could not undertake a general industrialization, few urban centers arose to provide substantial markets for farmers and planters. Apart from Baltimore and New Orleans, the slave states had no large cities, and few reached the size of 15,000. Southern grain growers, except for those close to the cities of the free states, had to be content with the market offered by planters who preferred to specialize in cotton or sugar and buy foodstuffs. This market was limited by the restricted rations of the slaves and was further narrowed by limited transportation. It did not pay the planters to appropriate state funds to build a transportation system into the back country, and any measure to increase the economic strength of the back-country farmers was politically dangerous to the aristocracy of the Black Belt. The farmers of the back country remained isolated, self-sufficient, and politically, economically, and socially backward. Those grain-growing farmers who could compete with producers in the Upper South and Northwest for the plantation market were in the Black belt itself. Since the planters did not have to buy from these local producers, the economic relationship greatly strengthened the political hand of the planters.

¹⁴ Consider the experience of locomotive, paper, and cotton manufacturers as reported in: Carrol H. Quenzel, "The Manufacture of Locomotives and Cars in Alexandria in the 1850's," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXII (April, 1954), pp. 182 ff.; Ernest M. Lander, Jr., "Paper Manufacturing in South Carolina Before the Civil War," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXIX (April, 1952), pp. 225 ff.; Adelaide L. Fries, "One Hundred Years of Textiles in Salem," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXVII (Jan., 1950), p. 13.

The General Features of Southern Agriculture

The South's greatest economic weakness was the low productivity of its labor force.¹⁵ The slaves worked indifferently. They could be made to work reasonably well under close supervision in the cotton fields, but the cost of supervising them in more than one or two operations at a time was prohibitive. Without significant technological progress productivity could not be raised substantially, and slavery prevented such progress. Of greatest relevance, the impediments to technological progress damaged Southern agriculture, for improved implements and machines were largely responsible for the dramatic increases in crop yields per acre in Northern states during the nineteenth century.

Although slavery and the plantation system led to agricultural methods that depleted the soil, the frontier methods of the free states yielded similar results; but slavery forced the South into continued dependence upon exploitative methods after the frontier had been pushed further west and prevented reclamation of worn-out lands. The plantations were much too large to be fertilized easily. Lack of markets and poor care of animals by slaves made it

15 Contemporary evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the productivity of slave labor was low. For a discussion of the relevant problems see my "Limits of Agrarian Reform in the Slave South," *loc. cit.*, chapters I and II. Exact measurement of slave productivity is not possible, for the data necessary for the calculations are not available. Nevertheless, from time to time someone tries to measure it anyway. Algie Simons and Lewis C. Gray made unsuccessful attempts earlier in the century, and recently, two Harvard economists, Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyers, rediscovered their method (apparently without knowing it) and presented an elaborate and thoroughly useless paper: "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South," *Journal of Political Economy*, LXVI (April, 1958), pp. 95-130. This is not the place to subject their views to detailed criticism, but one or two observations may suffice. They measure productivity by dividing the cotton crop by the number of slaves within certain age limits. To begin with, I think they use the wrong age and price data, but let that pass. There are two troubles right at the start. This method assumes that the proportion of the cotton crop raised by white farmers in 1830, 1840, 1850, etc., was constant. There is not a shred of evidence for this; it is doubtful, and it cannot be verified. Secondly, it is well known that when cotton prices fell, some slaves were diverted to non-staple production. Thus, the assumption that in any two years the same proportion of slave force worked in the cotton fields is simply wrong. In addition, the authors use a great many statistical tricks, such as "rounding off" figures. In one key instance rounding off makes a 4 per cent increase look like a 20 per cent increase. But these matters must be pursued elsewhere and at another time.

impossible to accumulate sufficient manure. The low level of capital accumulation made the purchase of adequate quantities of commercial fertilizer unthinkable. Proper crop rotation could not be practiced, for the pressure of the credit system kept most available land in cotton, and the labor force could not easily be assigned to the required tasks without prohibitive costs of supervision. The general inefficiency of labor thwarted most attempts at improvement of agricultural methods.¹⁶

The South, unable to feed itself, was caught in a series of dilemmas in its attempts to increase production of nonstaple crops and to improve its livestock. An inefficient labor force and the backward business practices of its ruling planter aristocracy were among the greatest difficulties. When planters did succeed in raising their own food, they also succeeded in depriving local livestock raisers and grain growers of whatever market they had. The stock raisers of the back country could not market their produce in the North because of the high costs of transportation.

The planters had little capital with which to buy improved breeds and could not guarantee the care necessary to make such investments worthwhile. Stock raisers too lacked the capital, and if they could get it, the investments would have been foolhardy without adequate urban markets.

Thoughtful Southerners, deeply distressed by the condition of their agriculture, made a determined effort to remedy it. In Maryland and Virginia significant progress was made in crop diversification and livestock improvement, but this progress was contingent on the sale of surplus slaves to the Black Belt. These sales provided an income that offset agricultural losses and made possible investments in fertilizers, equipment, and livestock. The concomitant reduction in the size of the slave force facilitated the problem of supervision and increased labor productivity and versatility. Even so, the income from slave sales remained an important part of the gross income of the planters of the Upper South. In other words, the

¹⁶ For a more detailed treatment of the problem of soil exhaustion see Eugene D. Genovese, "Cotton, Slavery and Soil Exhaustion in the Old South," *Cotton History Review*, II (Jan., 1961), pp. 3-17; for a more extensive treatment of the attempts of the South to improve its agriculture in general see my "Limits of Agrarian Reform in the Slave South," *loc. cit.*

reform was incomplete and could not free agriculture from the destructive effects of the continued reliance on slave labor.

The reform process had several contradictions, the most important of which was the dependence on slave sales. Surplus slaves could be sold only while gang-labor methods continued to be used in other areas. By the 1850's the deficiencies of slavery that had forced innovations in the Upper South were felt in the Lower South. Increasingly, planters in the Lower South were exploring the possibilities of reform. If the deterioration of agriculture in the Cotton Belt had proceeded much further, the planters would have had to stop buying the slaves of Maryland and Virginia. They would have had to look for markets for their own surplus slaves. Without the acquisition of fresh cotton lands there could be no general reform of Southern agriculture. The entire Southern economy was moving steadily into an insoluble crisis.

The Ideology of the Master Class

The planters commanded Southern politics and set the tone of social life. Theirs was an aristocratic, antibourgeois spirit with values and mores that emphasized family and status, had its code of honor, aspired to luxury, leisure and accomplishment. In the planters' community paternalism was the standard of human relationships, and politics and statecraft were the duties and responsibilities of gentlemen. The gentleman was expected to live for politics and not, like the bourgeois politician, off politics.

The planter typically recoiled at the notions that profit is the goal of life; that the approach to production and exchange should be internally rational and uncomplicated by social values; that thrift and hard work are the great virtues; and that the test of the wholeness of a community is the vigor with which its citizens expand the economy.

The planter was certainly no less acquisitive than the bourgeois, but an acquisitive spirit is compatible with values antithetical to capitalism. The aristocratic spirit of the planters absorbed acquisitiveness and directed it into channels that were socially desirable to a slave society: the accumulation of land and slaves and the achievement of military and political honors. Whereas in the North people were impelled by the lure of business and money for their

own sake, in the South specific forms of property carried with them the badges of honor, prestige, and power. Even the rough parvenu planters of the Southwestern frontier — the “Southern Yankees” — strove to accumulate wealth in the modes acceptable to plantation society. Only in their crudeness and naked avarice did they differ from the Virginia gentlemen. That is, they were a generation removed from the refinement that follows successful primitive accumulation.

The basis of the planter’s position and power was his slaveownership. It measured his affluence, marked his status, and supplied leisure for social graces and aristocratic duties. The older New England bourgeoisie, in its own way, struck an aristocratic pose, but its wealth was rooted in commercial and industrial enterprises that were being pushed into the background by the newer heavy industries arising in the West, where bourgeois upstarts took advantage of the newer, more lucrative ventures like the iron industry. In the South few such opportunities were opening. The parvenu differed from the established planter only in being cruder and perhaps sharper in his business dealings. The road to power was via the plantation. The older aristocracy kept its leadership or made room for men in the same enterprises.

Many travelers commented on the difference in material conditions from one side of the Ohio River to the other, but the difference in sentiment was seen most clearly by de Tocqueville. Writing before the slavery issue had inflamed the nation, he remarked that slavery was attacking the Union “indirectly in its manners.” The Ohioan “was tormented by the desire of wealth,” and would turn to any kind of enterprise or endeavor to make a fortune. The Kentuckian coveted wealth “much less than pleasure or excitement,” and money had “lost a portion of its value in his eyes.”¹⁷

Achille Murat joined de Tocqueville in admiration for Southern ways. Compared with Northerners, Southerners were found to be more impulsive, frank, clever, charming, generous, and liberal.¹⁸ The planters paid a price for these advantages. As one Southerner put it, the North led the South in almost everything because the Yankees had quiet perseverance over the long haul, whereas the Southerners

¹⁷ *Democracy in America* (2 Vols.; New York, 1948), I, p. 395.

¹⁸ *America and the Americans* (Buffalo, 1851), pp. 19, 75.

had talent and brilliance but no taste for sustained labor. Southern projects came with a flash and died just as suddenly.¹⁹ Despite such criticisms from within the ranks, the leaders of the Old South clung to their ideals, their faults, and their conviction of superiority. Farmers, said Edmund Ruffin, could not expect to achieve a cultural level above that of the "boors who reap rich harvests from the fat soil of Belgium." In the Northern states, he added with some justification, a farmer could rarely achieve the ease, culture, intellect, and refinement that slavery made possible.²⁰ The prevailing attitude of the aristocratic South toward itself and its Northern rival was ably summed up by William Henry Holcombe of Natchez: "The Northerner loves to make money, the Southerner to spend it."²¹

At their best Southern ideals constituted a rejection of the crass, vulgar, inhumane elements of capitalist society. The planter simply could not accept the idea that the cash nexus was a permissible basis for human relations. Even the vulgar parvenu of the Southwest embraced the plantation myth and refused to make a virtue of necessity by glorifying the competitive side of slavery as civilization's highest achievement. The planters did identify their own ideals with the essence of civilization and, given their sense of honor, were prepared to defend them at any cost.

This civilization and its ideals were profoundly antinational in a double sense. The plantation was virtually the only market for the small nonstaple-producing farmers and was the center of necessary services for the small cotton growers; thus, the paternalism of the planters toward their slaves was reinforced by a semi-paternal relationship between the planters and their neighbors. The planters were, in truth, the closest thing to feudal lords imaginable in a nineteenth-century bourgeois republic. The planters' protestations of love for the Union were not so much a desire to use the Union to protect slave property as a strong commitment to localism as the highest form of liberty. They genuinely loved the Union so long as it alone among the great states of the world recognized that localism had a wide variety of rights. The Southerners' source of pride was

19 J. W. D. in the *Southern Eclectic*, II (Sept., 1853), pp. 63-66.

20 *Address to the Virginia State Agricultural Society* (Richmond, 1853), p. 9.

21 Diary dated Aug. 25, 1855 but apparently written later. MS in the University of North Carolina Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.

not the Union as such, nor the nonexistent Southern nation; it was the plantation, which they raised to a political principle.²²

The General Crisis of the Slave South

The South's slave civilization could not forever coexist with an increasingly hostile, powerful, and aggressive Northern capitalism. On the one hand, the special economic conditions arising from the dependence on slave labor bound the South, in the colonial manner, to the world capitalist market. The concentration of landholding and slaveholding prevented the rise of a prosperous yeomanry and of urban centers. The inability to build urban centers, in turn, restricted the market for agricultural produce, weakened the rural producers, and dimmed hopes for agricultural diversification. On the other hand, the same concentration of wealth, the isolated, rural nature of the plantation system, the special social psychology engendered by slaveownership, and the political opportunity presented by the separation from England, converged to give the South considerable political and social independence. This independence was primarily the contribution of the slaveholding class, and especially of the planters. Slavery, while it bound the South economically, granted it the privilege of developing an aristocratic tradition, a disciplined and cohesive ruling class, and a mythology of its own.

Aristocratic tradition and ideology intensified the South's attachment to economic backwardness. Paternalism and the habit of command made the slaveholders tough stock determined to defend their Southern heritage. The more economically debilitating their way of life, the more they clung to it. It was this side of things — the political hegemony and aristocratic ideology of the ruling class — rather than economic factors that prevented the South from relinquishing slavery voluntarily.

As the free states stepped up their industrialization and as the westward movement assumed its remarkable momentum, the South's economic and political allies in the North were steadily isolated.

²² No genuine Southern nationalism was possible, for the bonds of commodity production did not link every part of the region with every other part. Each state's transportation system was designed to connect the Cotton Belt with the export centers. The back country was largely closed, and the typically capitalist road-railroad network was missing even in the Cotton Belt.

Years of abolitionist and free soil agitation bore fruit as the South's opposition to homestead legislation, tariffs and the like clashed more and more dangerously with Northern needs. To protect their institutions and to try to lessen their economic bondage the slaveholders slid into violent collision with Northern interests and sentiments. The economic deficiencies of slavery threatened to undermine the planters' wealth and power. Such relief measures as cheap labor and more land for slave states (reopening the slave trade and territorial expansion) conflicted with Northern material needs, aspirations, and morality.²³ The planters faced a steady deterioration of their political and social power. Even if the relative prosperity of the 1850's had continued indefinitely, the slave states would have been at the mercy of the free, for the South could not compete with the capitalist North in population growth, capital accumulation, and economic development. Any economic slump threatened to bring with it an internal political disaster, for the planters could not rely on their middle and lower classes to remain permanently loyal.²⁴

When we understand that the slave South was neither a strange form of capitalism nor an indefinable agrarianism but a special civilization built on the relationship of master to slave, the root of its conflict with the North is exposed. The internal contradictions in the South and the external conflict with the North placed the slaveholders hopelessly on the defensive with little to look forward to except slow strangulation. The only hope was a bold stroke to complete their political independence and to use it to provide an expansionist solution for their economic and social problems. The ideology and social psychology of the proud planter class made surrender or resignation to gradual defeat unthinkable, for its entire civilization was at stake.

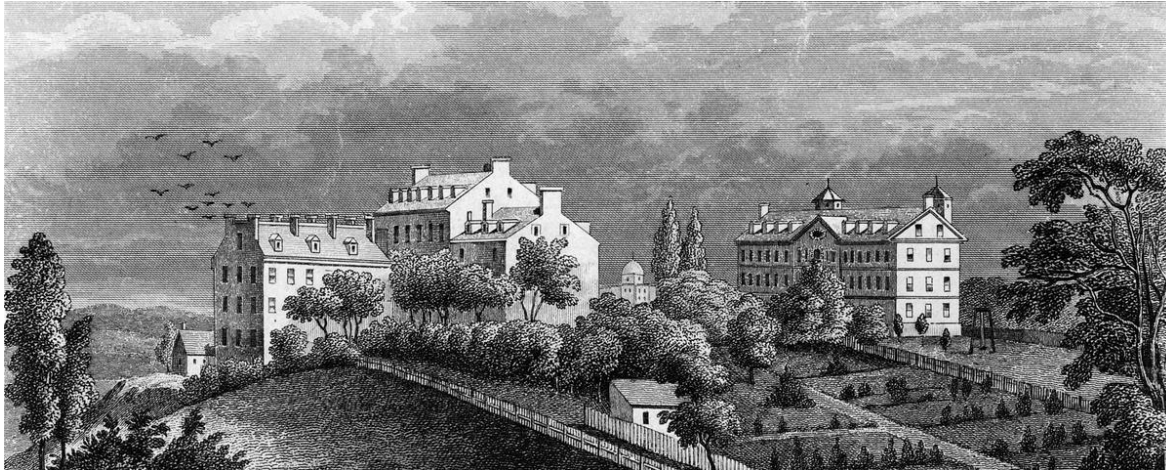
The Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn

²³ These measures were opposed by powerful sections of the planter class itself for reasons that cannot be discussed here. The independence of the South would only have brought the latent intra-class antagonisms to the surface.

²⁴ The loyalty of these classes was real enough but unstable. For our present purposes let us merely note that Lincoln's election and federal patronage would—if Southern fears were justified—have led to the formation of an anti-planter party in the South.

Sins of the Past and Hope for the Future

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“Oh honey, my family’s been working for the Church for a *long* time.”

I knew from the playful twinkle in her eyes, the seriousness on the rest of her face, and the way she said “long” that she didn’t mean her mother had been the parish secretary before her. She meant her family had been working for the Church for a very, very long time — and not by choice.

I had just met a descendant of slaves. I, a Maryland Province Jesuit and alumnus of Georgetown University, was standing face-to-face with a woman whose biological forebears were the slaves of my spiritual forebears. I don’t think my jaw dropped, but my heart certainly fell.

In 1838 The Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus sold 272 men, women, and children. Prior to that sale, slaves had been used to maintain plantations that helped support and finance the activities of Maryland Jesuits, including the operations at Georgetown. Jesuit leaders eventually concluded, however, that slaves were no longer an economically viable model for maintaining operations.

As a result, these 272 people were sold for \$115,000, which is the equivalent of approximately \$3 million today. Some of the money of the sale was used to pay off construction debts at Georgetown, and so helped to keep the school open. Several decades later and for unclear reasons, two buildings at Georgetown were named after the two Jesuits who organized the sale.¹

I’ve known Georgetown and the Maryland Jesuits owned slaves for a while. I first learned about it from a Jesuit I met in college.

After I entered the Jesuits, that same Jesuit took my fellow novices and me on a tour of the part of Maryland where the Society of Jesus first came to what became the 13 original colonies. We learned about the Jesuits’ participation in a voyage across the Atlantic driven by a desire for religious tolerance, the early efforts of Maryland

Catholics to peacefully coexist with local Native Americans, and how the Maryland Jesuits not only survived the Universal Suppression of the Society of Jesus but managed to come out of it a full nine years before the Suppression was officially lifted by the Pope. We got to visit the longest continually-operating Catholic parish in the country and a number of original missionary outposts dating back to the 17th century.² Finishing that tour I felt like I was standing on the shoulders of giants. I was proud.

As an alumnus of Georgetown University I was even prouder. My alma mater looms large in the history of the Jesuits in that region, and when I learned how Georgetown can trace its roots all the way back to 1634 I was all set to declare Georgetown the oldest university in the country. (#sorrynotsorry, Harvard!)

And our Jesuit guide taught us more about the slaves. At that point, the best evidence suggested that some of the proceeds of the sale of the slaves had gone to support the expenses of Jesuits in formation.³ I remember immediately wondering if blood money had contributed to the money I had just used to buy lunch. Suddenly my chicken salad sandwich became less appetizing. The recognition that the same religious order that brought Catholicism to this part of the country had chosen to treat human beings as property and were more concerned with economic evaluations than human dignity made me feel that the giants on whose shoulders I stood became noticeably shorter.

However, my pride continued to swell as we visited a small parish that used to be staffed by Jesuits. This parish had originally been founded because the black Catholics in town weren't welcome to pray alongside their white sisters and brothers. A Jesuit, Horace McKenna, came to be involved with this new parish, which eventually culminated in significant involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

When learning about the history of this parish from one of the women who works there, I was immediately struck by the continued vitality of the parish and the pride she and the other women involved there took in both the past and present of their community. And so I asked how long she'd been at the parish.

And then, there I was, speaking with a woman whose ancestors may well have worked on plantations just a few miles from where we stood at that very moment. And those plantations might have been owned by the same men who helped shape the Jesuit and Georgetown history I'd been spending all day feeling so proud of.

I was shocked. I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to say.

While I'm reluctant to speak on behalf of this woman, it didn't seem like she was blaming me for enslaving her ancestors. But it was clearly important to her that I, a Jesuit, know that we shared not only this conversation in the present, but the reality of Jesuit slaveholding in the past.

Meeting this woman has stuck with me ever since that afternoon in June of 2012. I've found myself carrying this question of how to respond to Georgetown and the Maryland Jesuits' history of slaveholding into my prayer and my studies. A philosophy term paper, which required at least as much prayer as academic research, led me to conclude that I needed to become more responsible for the enduring legacy of slavery the day I enrolled at Georgetown University, and even more responsible the day I entered the Society of Jesus.

Over the last couple of years, Georgetown has taken significant steps (<http://slavery.georgetown.edu/>) in investigating and coming to terms with its slave-owning past. Much of the fruit of that work culminates today, April 18th, as Georgetown, along with the Maryland Jesuits, hosts a Liturgy of Remembrance, Contrition, and Hope and

offers a formal apology for its slave-holding past in the presence of descendants of the former slaves. Additionally, the buildings formerly named for the Jesuits who organized the sale will be rededicated and named for one of the slaves sold in 1838 and a freed woman of color who founded a school for black girls in the Georgetown neighborhood.

These actions, while important, do not erase the grave sins of the past. However, if we have any hope of working toward a more just future we have no choice but to honestly and courageously engage the challenging and painful realities we find ourselves facing in the present.

It seems appropriate that Georgetown is taking these actions so shortly after Easter. When Jesus rose from the dead, the scars of his crucifixion didn't magically disappear. On the contrary, Christ's wounds became the starting point of reconciliation with Doubting Thomas. In the same way, our society still bears the scars of slavery and racism, and the only way we too can work towards reconciliation is by recognizing the wounds of those who continue to be marked by the legacy of slavery.

So what do we do about this "legacy of slavery" thing? Is that even real? Didn't slavery end with the Civil War? And if not, the Civil Rights Movement certainly took care of any lingering racial inequality, right? Do we really have to spend time thinking and talking about this?

I think that seeing the on-going impact of slavery causes a lot of us to have the same reaction I had when the woman in Maryland told me she was a descendant of slaves. We get uncomfortable, embarrassed, and don't know what to say. We want to look away. That seems, to me at least, to be an understandable initial reaction. But our reaction cannot stop there.


When the resurrected Christ appeared to Doubting Thomas, I'm sure Thomas felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. But rather than quickly looking away, he took the time to honestly look at and accept the reality of the wounds still evident on Christ's body, even though the event of the Crucifixion was now in the past. The wounds were still there. The wounds are still there. We should follow Thomas' example of not looking away.

Because we follow the wounded and resurrected Christ, we love and serve his wounded people. We know that the suffering and death of Good Friday must lead to the resurrection of Easter. Thus we should not and cannot allow the sins of our past to dictate the way we continue to act in the present and future.

Whether or not you can be present at Georgetown's Liturgy of Remembrance, Contrition, and Hope, I hope we can spiritually join with both my brothers and the descendants of our slaves in remembering the sins of the past, expressing contrition for their impact in the present, and praying in hope that the wounded and resurrected Christ may help us build a better future.

Author's note: Special thanks to Fr. David Collins, SJ for his work as the chairperson of Georgetown's Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation (<http://slavery.georgetown.edu/working-group/>), clarifying the historical details included in this piece, and introducing me to so much of Jesuit history, including this dark chapter.

Image courtesy the Maryland Province (<http://www.mdsj.org/>) of the Society of Jesus.

1. Those interested in a fuller account of this history should check out this timeline (<http://slavery.georgetown.edu/timeline/>). 

2. We also saw the graves of three young Jesuits who were killed when lightning struck the wire mattresses they were carrying across a field in the middle of a thunderstorm. It's somehow comforting to know that mine isn't the first generation of Jesuits to occasionally lack common sense.



3. Subsequent research complicates this picture, as the money from the sale arrived in small increments over the next twenty-five years and was mixed with charitable donations to the Society. Because the Jesuits' philosophical and theological formation took place at Georgetown, young Jesuits would have clearly benefited. However, endowments or trusts were not used in the same way they are today, and so the seed money of the current endowment for Jesuit formation would not have come from the slave sale. Despite this, the idea of a connection between money from the sale of the slaves and my own financial situation remains a chilling thought.



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