



Liberty Is Land and Slaves: The Great Contradiction

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Liberty is Land And Slaves: The Great Contradiction

We are all familiar with the difficulty of trying to reconcile the stories of liberty and oppression that constitute nineteenth-century American history. One day's lecture celebrates high rates of voter participation, the courage of westward pioneers, economic opportunity, and technological innovation, while the next day's class laments the Cherokee's Trail of Tears and Frederick Douglass's beating along the Baltimore waterfront. Our students have difficulty putting these two narratives together, which accounts for the large number of essays that read: "Despite the fact that the bonds of slavery on African Americans got tighter, that the opportunities for women remained few, and that Native Americans lost most of their lands, Jacksonian Democracy was an era of unprecedented freedom." To be sure, we should be gratified that the social history of the last thirty years has been written into textbooks and state standards and has made it impossible to ignore the experiences of women and people of color. But at the same time, students find themselves forced into intellectual contortions to incorporate this new information into the broader patriotic narrative of liberty that still guides textbook authors, American civic culture, and political discourse.

We want students to know both the stories of liberty and oppression, but we need not require them to choose which one is more important. These two narratives are not mutually exclusive, and as our students are increasingly aware, liberty and oppression existed simultaneously in the nineteenth-century United States. Nonetheless, we now have an opportunity to take students one step further—toward the recognition that liberty and oppression were intertwined, or to use the common academic term, contingent upon one another. It was not just a coincidence that some people in nineteenth-century America had liberty while others did not; rather, some people's liberty depended upon the denial of liberty to others.

In no place was this interrelationship more vivid than in the southern states during the first decades of the nineteenth century, especially when we consider the patterns of economic development that brought

about the market revolution. As in the northern states, a spirit of entrepreneurship and progress made most white male southerners extremely optimistic about their future prospects. These men embraced the pioneering ethos, and, in the space of a few decades, transferred the geographical center of the region from the Chesapeake south and west to Mississippi and Louisiana. They were agricultural innovators, eager to apply the most recent technologies to the cultivation and processing of such staple crops as cotton, rice, and sugar. In sum, southern white men were "men on the make." However, the two key ingredients in

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the southern version of the market revolution came with enormous human costs. The liberty that offered prosperity to southern white men required expansive oppression—the violent appropriation of millions of acres of "frontier" land from the Native American people who possessed them, and the violent

enslavement of millions of African Americans whose labor would transform those lands into profitable plantations.

Before examining the specific contours of southern economic life, it is worth noting that the South often disappears from historians' discussion of the market revolution. Because the market revolution is so often equated with the "transition to capitalism" (i.e., wage labor, urbanization, and factory production), the South's dedication to plantation agriculture and enslaved labor seems to place the region outside of this account of economic development. To some extent, the lack of attention given to economic change in the South is an artifact of the nineteenth century. Thomas Jefferson's explanation for the 1803 Louisiana Purchase—to provide enough land for Americans to spend the next millennium as yeoman farmers—suggests southern resistance to industrial development and a manufacturing economy. By the 1840s, the language of leading slaveholders firmly rejected the bourgeois liberalism taking hold in northern society. Rhetorically, antebellum slaveholders scorned the competitive individualism associated with the marketplace and instead fashioned identities for themselves as feudal lords or Biblical patriarchs enmeshed in "organic" relationships that tran-

scended the cash nexus. With equal vigor, nonslaveholding whites living in upcountry regions denounced market relations and fashioned communities in relative isolation from the emerging cash economy. At the same time, northern opponents of slavery depicted the entire South as economically inefficient and technologically backwards. With an industrializing North as its critic and foil, the South seemed to march along a wholly different path of economic development. Taking slavery's advocates and adversaries at their word, it is easy for historians to presume that the South had no relationship to the economic transformations of the market revolution.

In reality, the South experienced its own market revolution in the early nineteenth century and figured prominently in the broader *national* history of capitalist development in the United States. This second point has only recently gained the attention of scholars, especially in the context of debating slavery's lasting consequences and the controversial issue of reparations. American capitalism—its manufacturing, its banking, its shipping, its property laws—is impossible to imagine with slavery removed from the equation. The owners of Massachusetts textile mills were not buying raw cotton from farmers in nearby Concord. Rather, the slave-grown cotton of the American South fed factory production both in New England and old England. As the economic historian Robert Fogel has argued, southern cotton provided “the essential raw material for hundreds of thousands of factory hands in the North and Europe. It provided employment for several million other workers in transportation, in handicrafts, and in wholesale or retail trade” (1). The ready-made shoes produced in towns like Lynn often ended up on the feet of slaves in Mobile. The wealth of southern planters flowed into New York banks, which in turn loaned capital to northern entrepreneurs. Northern shipping and insurance interests participated in the movement of slave-grown commodities throughout the Atlantic, and sometimes profited on the trade in slaves themselves. Although slavery was a regional practice, it was a central institution in the national market revolution. This is one reason why historians now increasingly describe the early United States as a coherent “slaveholding republic.”

As a region, however, the South also had its own distinctive economic transformation. The basic statistics of southern economic growth are compelling. Although its labor force remained in chains, the southern states had developed the world's fourth largest economy by 1860, with iron production and railroad mileage comparable to France, Germany, and Austria-Hungary. Only in comparison with the northern states or with England did southern industrial development seem slow. More importantly, by 1820 southern cotton already was the nation's most valuable crop and its export value would top \$191 million in 1860. Cotton production stood effectively as the *raison d'être* of the entire plantation system. White Americans held nearly four million



The growth of the Cotton Belt spurred the internal slave trade, which historians now term a “Second Middle Passage” and is depicted here in “Gangs of Slaves journeying to be Sold in a Southern Market,” by W.H. Brooke and F. Holl. (J.S. Buckingham, Esq., *The Slave States of America*, vol. 2. [London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1842].)

slaves in 1860 not because they were experimenting with a paternalistic social order but because they were interested in coercing black-skinned labor to produce staple crops with a high cash value that could be sold on the open market. Fundamentally, slavery was a form of labor exploitation—one that proved remarkably profitable to the owners of other human beings.

Short-staple cotton transformed the southern economy. Although Eli Whitney's 1793 invention of the cotton gin usually receives credit for reviving plantation slavery after the demise of the eighteenth-century tobacco economy, the voracious demand for cotton from British textile producers deserves equal attention. Southerners saw the market open and responded by rushing to import as many slaves as possible before a Constitutional ban took effect. Indeed, in the twenty years between the Constitution's ratification and its prohibition in 1808 of slave imports, southerners imported 240,000 men, women, and children—nearly as many as had been brought to all of British North America in the previous century and a half. This massive influx of new slaves shaped African-American culture and community as well as the economic prospects of aspiring planters.

The cotton economy already was humming by the War of 1812 when the capture of New Orleans made the Mississippi River the essential conduit for slave-grown cotton entering Atlantic commerce. But the defeat of the British also gave the United States new opportunity to exert its power over Native Americans who occupied frontier lands in northwest Georgia and the soon-to-be states of Mississippi (1817), Alabama (1819), and Florida (ceded to the United States in 1819). Known to American Indians as “Sharp Knife,” Andrew Jack-

son spent the two decades before his presidency fighting against the Creeks, Cherokees, Seminoles, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. Just after the end of his administration, these so-called “five civilized nations” would be removed west of the Mississippi River. Long before the famous removal of the Cherokees from Georgia in the 1830s, Jackson had forced the Indian nations of the Southeast into multiple land cessions. In the 1814 Treaty of Fort Jackson, for example, the Creeks gave up some 23 million acres of land to the United States; such lands rapidly became the farms of white settlers and the new plantations of the cotton frontier.

Land and slaves provided a potent recipe for economic success. For white southerners, then, the promises of American citizenship and the contours of their liberty hinged upon the dispossession and exploitation of others. To acknowledge this is not merely to debunk the celebratory history of American pioneering; rather it recognizes the contingent relationship between liberty and oppression in American history. As the historian Edward Countryman has observed: “The glory did not come free. It had a price, and Americans ought to be comfortable enough with ourselves to recognize that the price and the glory can not be pried apart” (2).

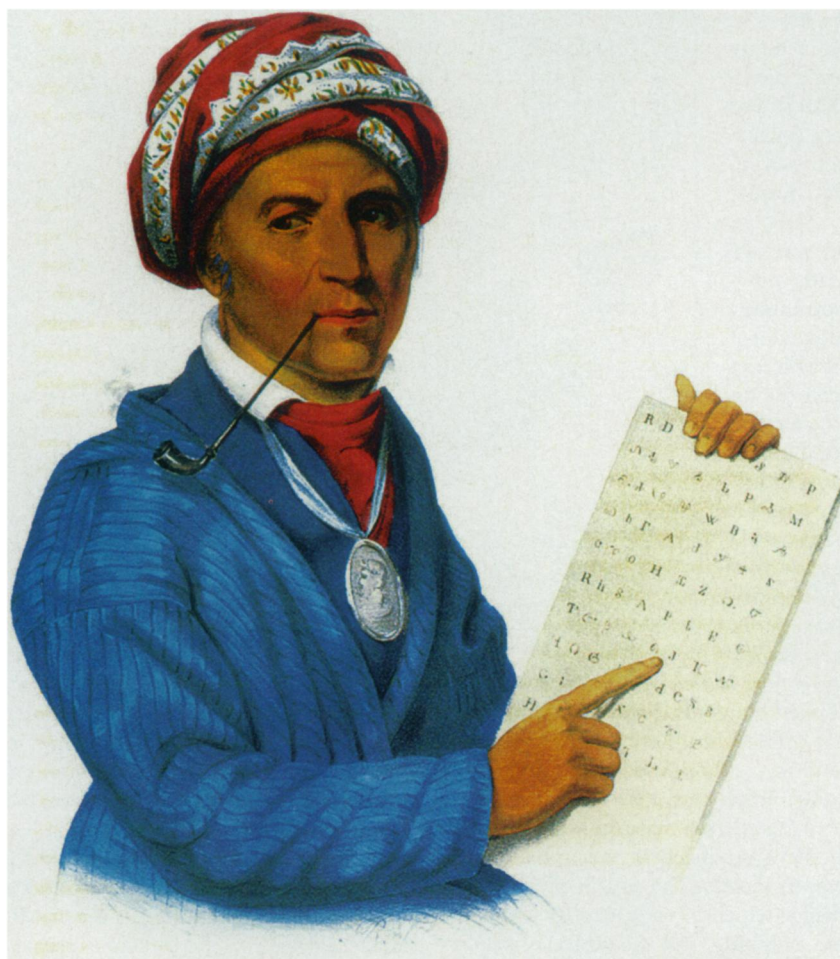
We can begin to get a sense of those costs when we examine the experiences of enslaved African Americans on the cotton frontier. Well before orderly fields with neat crop rows appeared on the landscape, there were trees, marshes, swamps, and more trees. Clearing the land was a backbreaking task that had to precede planting cotton. The narrative of pioneering necessarily looks different when the brave men and women taming the wilderness were slaves. Under these frontier conditions—before the establishment of large plantations—slaves rarely lived in the kinds of separate quarters that would later provide them a modicum of autonomy. In the early years of settlement, they lived alongside their owners, a proximity which made subordination more direct, relentless, and personal.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the market revolution in the South was the huge market in slaves themselves. Although slaveholders contended that their world was uncorrupted by the cold calculus of the marketplace, the fact is that slaveholders partook in the ultimate form of human commodification: buying and selling human beings. To create a market in people required an extensive legal code and in places like New Orleans, it generated a culture of scheming and conniving

that rivaled anything found along New York’s Erie Canal. By a recent account, cotton cultivation in the newly opened lands of the Southeast propelled upwards of one million slaves into the marketplace. During the 1810s, one-in-five Chesapeake slaves was sold to a new owner farther South. Historians are beginning to conceptualize the interstate slave trade as a “Second Middle Passage.” Just as the original Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean had thrown men, women, and children from different ethnicities, religions, and regions together and resulted in a synthetic African-American culture, the forced relocation of slaves from the eastern seaboard reshuffled the deck again. The interstate slave trade shattered the cultural resources of family and community that Chesapeake slaves had created for themselves over the previous century. Thrown together among strangers in a place like frontier Alabama, enslaved men and women struggled to reconstruct the institutions that insulated them from the worst depredations of their masters.

To say that the South had a market revolution

is not to say that slaveholders were capitalists who shared the same outlook as northern factory owners. As the work of scholars like Eugene Genovese has made clear, slaveholders scorned the impersonal and unstable social relations of industrial society. Nonetheless, a liberty centered on land and slaves required a deep immersion in the capitalist marketplace. Slaveholders responded more promptly than they sometimes let on to market signals in terms of their crop allocation and slave purchases or sales. They embraced transportation technologies like steamboats to gain marketing efficiency, even as they argued against



Cherokee artisan and trader Se-Quo-Yah developed an alphabet that helped the Cherokee preserve their heritage while accommodating to the changes accompanying European encroachment. As well as establishing a written language, the Cherokee wrote a constitution paralleling the U.S. Constitution. Thus, in the eyes of white Americans the Cherokee nation was one of the “civilized” tribes of the old Southwest. (Image from Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* . . . [Philadelphia: F.W. Greengough, 1836], courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)

federal internal improvements. From numerous periodicals they gathered information assiduously in order to rationalize production, and they sometimes pursued models of “scientific” management. Planters bought clocks and bells as they attempted to regiment plantation labor. Like their unabashedly liberal peers in the North, slaveholders created a body of law around absolute property rights and individual freedom (albeit only their own). And just as members of the northern middle class constructed their identities through domesticity and consumerism, so too did southern slaveholders engage in a kind of cultural performance of “respectability” through the things they displayed in their homes and on their bodies. The idea of self-making—the notion that a white man could do anything he set his mind to in a nation as free as the United States—was as vital in the nineteenth-century South as in the North. Left unsaid in both regions was that the ability of some members of society to partake in self-fashioning was contingent upon the degradation of other members of society. As David Brion Davis has explained, “the debasement of millions of workers to a supposedly bestial condition of repetitive time appeared to liberate other human beings to take control of their destiny, to ‘remake’ themselves” (3).

Of course, not all whites in the South shared in the liberty that came from owning slaves. In a society where slaveholders dominated politics and monopolized economic power, the majority of white families in the South did not own slaves. In fact, the percentage of white families who owned slaves shrank from 33 percent earlier in the century to 25 percent on the eve of the Civil War. Like the market revolution in the North, economic growth did not offer all participants equal opportunity; instead, it resulted in greater economic stratification.

By many accounts, nonslaveholding whites in the South tried to opt out of the market revolution. Living in upcountry regions, the southern yeomanry practiced variants of safety-first agriculture in which subsistence was the first priority. When possible, these households devoted several acres to a non-edible crop that might sell for the necessary cash to pay state taxes. Yeoman households were not self-sufficient, but rather integrated in neighborhood networks of exchange in which goods switched hands more often than cash. Nonslaveholding whites often were hostile to the market practices of the North and the paternalistic aspirations of wealthy slaveholders. Living in isolation from the outside world offered a viable form of resistance to both (4).

For other nonslaveholding whites, however, slaveholding was an aspiration. And logically so, because owning slaves and growing cotton for market was the surest recipe for economic success in the antebellum South. Land and slaves generated more land and more slaves, not to mention political influence and social respectability. To this segment of the nonslaveholding white population, wealthy planters offered patronage and in return received loyalty. For scholars long interested in how wealthy slaveholders maintained the allegiance of the large majority on nonslaveholding whites, the answer can be found in the simple fact that many who did not own slaves ultimately hoped to do so (5).

To say that the South had a market revolution is not, as one historian joked, to caricature the region as “merely the North with whips and chains” (6). The distinct social relations of slavery could not be reduced to a simple profit motive. However, it seems equally disingenuous to take slaveholders’ protestations of their paternalism at face value. No matter how they conceived of their actions, their system produced cotton for sale using a labor force that was itself a market commodity. Such a system was not itself revolutionary—the South’s economy had centered on export agriculture since the 1620s. But what constituted the South’s market revolution was the extent to which the region’s white male citizens defined their liberty in terms of their economic

prospects. Those prospects centered on land and slaves, and that is why the history of the market revolution in the South must always be understood as contingent. Liberty for some was made possible by oppression for others. □

Endnotes

1. Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 106.
2. Edward Countryman, “Indians, the Colonial Order, and the Social Significance of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (April 1996): 362.
3. David Brion Davis, “Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives,” *American Historical Review* 105 (April 2000): 455.
4. See Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
5. See, for example, James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982) and Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
6. Douglas R. Egerton, “Markets Without a Market Revolution: Southern Planters and Capitalism,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (Summer 1996): 210.

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