

African Americans, Slavery, and Thrift  
from the Revolution to the Civil War

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April 2006

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Notions of thrift played a vital role in the history of race in the United States. The young nation, founded upon the principle of universal human equality, struggled with the fate of peoples it defined as non-white. The discourse of thrift deeply informed these anxious discussions. To many Americans, the virtues of thrift — industriousness, discipline, and self-control — offered a measure of civilization by which non-whites were frequently found deeply wanting. The history of the nation from the Revolution to the Civil War documents the ways that freedom and civic inclusion came to be defined largely in terms of a racialized discourse of thrift. Those thought to embody thrift's antitheses — laziness, improvidence, and profligacy — often found themselves on the margins of a civilization defined in terms of industry and frugality.

This process was most pronounced among Americans of African descent, as black people assumed the preeminent role in discussions of thrift and race in nineteenth-century America. Unlike Native Americans, who were almost universally excluded from American society, African Americans

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At the time of the American Revolution (1775-1783), the thrift ethos lay at the heart of the Founding Fathers' anxious deliberations over the prospects for a new American democracy. The presence of slavery and the example of an oppressed race on American shores combined with notions of thrift to shape revolutionary discourse in powerful ways. American radicals easily equated England's treatment of its American colonies with the practice of enslavement. As the Declaration of Independence put it, King and Parliament had pursued policies toward the colonies evincing "a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism." Chattel bondage offered more than a compelling metaphor for colonists' experience; American revolutionaries struggled against slavery as an actual political condition that was, in their estimation, a startlingly near political possibility for white American colonists. Patriot Josiah Quincy conceded as much in 1774, declaring: "Britons are our oppressors. . . *we are slaves.*"<sup>1</sup> Countless other revolutionaries explicitly equated the oppressions of the British with those endured by slaves — degradations known all too well to the slaveholding fathers of the American republic. No less a patriot than George Washington, himself the owner of several hundred human beings, warned his fellow colonists that to "submit to every Imposition that can be heap'd upon us . . . will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway."<sup>2</sup>

Values associated with thrift stood at the opposite end of slavery's dependence and degradation, and hence associated thrift with freedom. The American Founders were anxious revolutionaries, who posed themselves

governance — the precious fruit of equality? How could a nation that had founded its bloody nascence on the principle of universal human liberty deny that liberty to any among its ranks? No one raising a hand for American liberty could ignore these deep conundrums. British critics spared no opportunity to point out the apparent hypocrisy of the colonials' stand on slavery. "How is it," quipped Samuel Johnson, the English writer and satirist, "that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"<sup>7</sup> The colonists themselves were far too committed to their revolutionary ideology to miss the point. The great paradox of the Revolution was not lost on founders such as John Jay, the New York attorney who penned some of the most eloquent defenses of the young nation. "To contend for our own liberty and to deny that blessing to others," he wrote in 1785, "involv

was expanding, the Revolution inspired no efforts to, for example, trade slaves their freedom in exchange for military service. Instead, slaves took it upon themselves to strike a blow for freedom.

As the war shifted to the southern theater in the early 1780s, slaves availed themselves of the opportunities offered by the chaos of war and fled the plantations. Once the conflict was over, Lower South slaveholders moved quickly to reconstitute their control over their bound laborers. With but few exceptions, they paid little heed to calls for gradual abolition. Instead, they defined Southern interests in terms of slaveholding, and championed their region's right to own slaves. In the Constitutional Convention of 1787, so ardently did they argue their position that they nearly scuttled the fragile national compact.<sup>11</sup> William Loughton Smith of South Carolina argued that "slavery was so ingrafted into the policy of the Southern States, that it could not be eradicated without tearing up by the roots their happiness, tranquillity, and prosperity."<sup>12</sup> The result of delicate sectional negotiations, the final Constitution included clauses permitting an end to the international slave trade, and counting three-fifths of the slave population for purposes of representation in the House of Representatives.

Ideas of thrift played a critical role in the fate of slaveTf 4298cm BT 12 0 0 12 22.2 280.9267676 0 0 0.9267676 22

the civilized, but circumstance rather than color may have determined this; under benign circumstances Africans might conceivably be uplifted to a level of equality with whites. Revolutionary doctor and abolitionist Benjamin Rush attributed the characteristic degradation of slaves not to Africans' innate natures, but to the abuses of slavery itself. Prominently referencing such non-thrifty character defects as idleness and thievishness, Rush argued that "all the vices which are charged upon the negroes . . . are the genuine offspring of slavery."<sup>16</sup> The Revolution thus represented a qualified respite from an already-long history of inveterate racial denigration, but it was one deeply qualified by the presumption of white superiority, and by the looming question of blacks' emancipatability — the potential for their release into a free and self-governing republic.

In the Revolutionary and Early National periods, the discours

Apprentices once destined to learn their entire craft and open their own shops now stayed in their un- or semi-skilled occupations for life. Entrepreneurial artisans, who once took part in every part of the manufacturing process, became nascent capitalists who managed the labor of others or hired others to do so. Industrialization thus led to the emergence of modern social classes. Workers began to identify themselves through a cultural style which jealously guarded their few workplace privileges and set them apart from the growing middle class, while a rising middle class just as assiduously sought to distance itself from "rough" laborers through "respectable" comportment and conspicuous display of their elevated class status.

The rise of this new middle class transformed the discourse of thrift, supplanting the Revolutionary era's republican concern with civic virtue with the market revolution's liberal regard for individual economic virtues. The market revolution celebrated bourgeois life and endowed it with potent cultural authority. Economic development became the progress of civilization, of national material and moral well-being

But the virtuous regulation of desire required a delicate balance, for if wrongly directed the impulses that led Americans to thrifty behavior could lead to the corruption of desire, or vice. In his popular 1856 work *The Elements of Morality*, British philosopher William Whewell remarked that “habits of care, with regard to sparing and spending, as may tend toward Poverty and Privation, are reckoned as Virtues: such virtues are *Economy, Frugality*. By these, a man

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internal discipline, but masters maintained order through externa



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market culture as a whole. "Vice and virtue are . . . treated with equal disfavor by our oppressors," charged Frederick Douglass. "In many of the Northern States of the Union, a low, idle, vicious white man stands higher in the social and political scale of society, tha

cities into the countryside, to take up skilled trades, and become cogs in the machinery of American business.

Black leaders' reliance on the discourse of thrift as a strategy for obtaining equality offered one commanding benefit: agency. For African-American leaders, the great value of moral reform lay precisely in the promise of agency it offered every single African American, regardless of status or condition. "Each one for himself, must commence the improvement of his condition," wrote Samuel Cornish. "It is not in mass, but in individual effort and character, that we are to move onward to a higher elevation." As a class, African Americans might not control much, but they could always control themselves. "I possess nothing but moral capability," Boston's Maria Stewart once said. God, wrote one black minister, "holds man responsible only for his moral conduct in the formation of his moral character, and on nothing more in his own existence has he control."<sup>43</sup> While liberal ideology may have inhibited blacks from developing a more sophisticated understanding of the structural economic forces underlying their plight, it offered the individual as an uncontested space for exercising personal agency. Ultimately, this was the best the discourse of thrift could offer. While self-cultivation may or may not eradicate prejudice, it was worth pursuing as its own reward.

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The political abolitionists of the 1840s and 1850s — those who developed into the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln — molded a potent critique of slavery out of their faith in the virtues of the liberal marketplace. Black activists and white abolitionists operated on the margins of public culture, vilifying Southern slavery as above all sinful — a message that resonated among some evangelical reformers of the age, but was more likely to earn its adherents the title of "crack-brained fanatics." Later generations of political antislavers employed the values of thrift to fashion critiques of slavery that could appeal to the moderate center of the Northern electorate. Thrift framed the issue of slavery in such a way that an entire mas.12 Tm /Ty2 1 Tf ( such a way that an en) Tj ET Qq 0 en

ideology in antebellum America, has documented the myriad counts on which antebellum Republicans found the South wanting in prosperity. William Seward, through his Southern travels, found "exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly-neglected roads, and, in every respect, an absence of enterprise and improvement."<sup>45</sup> Other Republicans spoke of the South's "lack of invention and resource," its "inefficiency and irresolution," and the "sameness of poverty and unthrift" that beset the region.<sup>46</sup> Few left any question as to the source of the South's retrograde economy. "Such has been the effect of slavery," pronounced Seward,<sup>47</sup> while New Hampshire jurist Nathaniel Upham attributed the South's poverty to its "thriftless, improvident system" of labor.<sup>48</sup> Slavery's critics emerged even in the South, where a few outspoken dissidents like Hinton Helper ascribed the region's backwardness "to the same cause that has impoverished and dishonored us in all other respects — the thriftless and degrading institution of slavery."<sup>49</sup>

Economic critiques of slavery, infused as they were with the discourse of thrift, owed slavery's blighting effects to its violation of principle tenets of market society. Most obviously, slavery offered little positive incentive for the slave to labor industriously. The lash kept slaves at work, but did little to enhance their morals. In a work on political economy, George Tucker, the Virginia politician and philosopher, stated the case clearly: "The slave, not being stimulated to industry by the expectation of receiving the fruits of his own labor, is likely, from the love of ease so natural to ma

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out-compete fre

coveted American values like thrift. From the start of the abolitionists campaigns of 1830s, the slaveholding South had produced a powerful group of intellectuals dedicated to defending the peculiar institution. Defenses of plantation servitude took many forms, such as the argument that slavery was an ancient human institution sanctioned by Christianity's sacred texts. But Republican critiques of the economic aspects of chattel bondage challenged proslavery apologists to respond in kind. These ideologues reflected the deeply conservative outlooks of the southern economic aristocracy, but to a remarkable degree they relied on the basic presumptions of market society — and particularly its understandings of thrift.

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The alternative to the North's hyper-individualism offered by proslavery conservatives did not negate thrift, but merely reposed it. Thrift remained a central, if fluid, ideal; it was the *content* of thrift that slavery's defenders appropriated and reformulated. Free labor advocates posed the South as thriftless and thus antiprogressive; the fire-eaters claimed that they properly tempered thrift with benevolence, thus avoiding the avarice that made market society so hellish for free laborers. In the North, wrote Fitzhugh, free laborers enjoyed "no domestic affection" from their employers; "no kind mistress, like a guardian angel, provides for them in health, tends them in sickness, and soothes their dying pillow."<sup>77</sup> At the same time that slavery "provides for sickness, infancy and old age," and ensures "homes, food and clothing for all," it also "makes all work" and "permits no idleness."<sup>78</sup> As a result of slaveholders' benign intervention into the political economy, the social tensions that divided Northern society were said to be nonexistent in the South. According to Calhoun, the South was exempt from the "conflict between labor and capital" produced by industrial civilization.<sup>79</sup> Fitzhugh believed that "it is impossible to place labor and capital in harmonious or friendly relations, except by the means of slavery."<sup>80</sup>

Two benign consequences flowed from the social harmony allegedly achieved by slavery. First, and in direct answer to free labor arguments, fire-eaters argued that slavery dignified the labor of whites. Slavery "does not bring all industry into disrepute," argued Fitzghu

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eleven slaveholding states out of the Union that spring had long declared their willingness to stake all in defense of the social order and social harmony they saw as threa



It was critical for the fate of African Americans that emancipation happened as a result of military exigency rather than a revolution in racial sentiments. Though undoubtedly the sectional crisis and Civil War helped "abolitionize" some of the Northern public, little had happened to disrupt the racial prejudice that pervaded both sections of the country. An enormous victory over the sinful and inefficient institution of slavery had been won, but blacks themselves remained mired, it was thought, in their thriftless, slavish habits. Could they become part of a market-oriented society? Would they continue to labor to produce the agricultural products like cotton that were so vital to the industrial economy? The reconstruction of southern labor was a complex affair involving unequal negotiations between many parties: former slaveholders, the Union government, and the freedpeople themselves. Concerned primarily with securing for themselves an exploitable labor force, landholders sought to reconstitute Southern agriculture on terms as close to slavery as they could. Meanwhile, the Union government, eager to convert plantation society to free labor, incanted its mantra of market virtues to slaves with no experience of or desire for them. Most slaves sought only autonomy from the market order that had fueled their enslavement, preferring to work in families and produce food for their own subsistence rather than cotton for the textile market. The res

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concluded: "Let not our Northern friends, then, fear to turn the freedmen over to us."<sup>85</sup> To African American's great misfortu

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1. Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy, Jun., of Massachusetts: By His Son, Josiah Quincy* (Boston, Cummings, Hilliard, & Company, 1825), 451.
2. George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, August 24, 1774, in *The Papers of George Washington: Colonial Series*, W. W. Abbott





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58. Ibid., 57.

59. Ibi

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79. John C. Calhoun, "Speech in the U.S. Senate, 1837," i