

The Evolution of Slavery and Freedom from the 17th century to Emancipation

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The problem of slavery and freedom was central to the foundation of the modern world. The Transatlantic Slave Trade, beginning in the 15th Century and continuing through the 19th century, created the “new world” slave societies in the Americas and led to the racialization of slavery. It played a major role in the rise of capitalism by providing the capital and labor required to fuel the vast market networks based on the commodification of human beings. The trade in human beings created a social order that deepened the ties between slavery and capitalism. The formation of the American colonies in the 17th century was part of this process, as African slavery became the basis of the emerging Southern slave economy. By the 18th century, with the rise of the Age of Revolution, slavery became a problem in the Western democratic countries. The problem of slavery and freedom presented an irreconcilable contradiction for American society, leading eventually to a civil war. The problem then became one that centered on the meaning of freedom and the question of how to justify inequality in a democratic society.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade, Capitalism and the Racialization of Slavery

The Transatlantic Slave Trade, dating from the 15th century to the beginning of the 19th century, created the African Diaspora in the Atlantic World with the capture, enslavement, and dispersal of African people from their homeland. The Transatlantic Slave Trade (TST) begins in the mid-15th century with the Portuguese capturing 240 Africans from West Africa—and taking them to Lagos, Portugal. Marcus Rediker described the transatlantic slave trade as ships that left from a European port with a cargo of manufactured goods to West Africa, where they traded for slaves, then headed to America where they sold slaves on plantations to produce commodities such as sugar, tobacco, or rice. The slave ship, according to Rediker, played a major role in the early stages of capitalism beginning in the late sixteenth century. Drawing from the early work of Eric Williams, in his seminal *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Rediker argues that the TST provided the capital that fueled the industrial revolution in England in the 18th. The slave ship created a microcosm of capitalism, for Africans became human commodities sold on a market for profit, while insurance companies guaranteed the commodities, and accountants kept careful ledgers of profit and loss. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was founded on the degradation of human beings by turning them into commodities to be sold on a market like any other product. The ship was thus “central to a profound, interrelated set of economic changes essential to the rise of capitalism,” he argues, such as the, “seizure of new lands, the expropriation of millions of people and their redeployment in growing market-oriented sectors of the economy; the mining of gold and silver, the cultivating of tobacco and sugar; the concomitant rise of long distance

commerce,” and finally a “planned accumulation of wealth and capital beyond anything the world had ever witnessed.”¹

Slave traders and holders justified their enslavement of Africans by creating ideas of race that defined Africans as less than human and incapable of being civilized. They laid the foundation for racial hierarchy, racist ideas, and capitalism in the modern world, creating a false narrative to justify their barbarous treatment of Africans and Native Americans. The mercilessness and dehumanizing circumstances that defined the Middle Passage led to the enslaved being stripped of their names to become mere numbers in record logs. Slaves became privately owned property traded for profit. The enslaved were advertised in the best way possible to appeal to the buyer as merchants prepared their human commodities for sale. Prior to the sale, slaves were given more food to fatten them up; they were washed, shaved, and lathered in oils to give the illusion of strong, healthy slaves equipped for hardworking labor. The Middle Passage fed the upward social mobility of Europeans.

Arrival in the Americas

Africans and poor Europeans from England, Scotland, and Ireland arrived in the Americas in 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia, to reap benefits of gold the English expected to find; only later did the commodity of tobacco lead to slavery as major labor system to aid in the production of lucrative crops to build the wealth of the British Colonies. Britain rejected the Spanish colonizing practices that sought to dominate and impress into hard labor the native peoples. Tobacco’s profitability fueled the development of slavery in the Chesapeake. In the seventeenth century, European indentured servants worked side by side with Africans and Native Americans to produce commodities for the world market. Thus, enslaved Africans, indentured Europeans, and Native Americans lived and worked together, having sexual relationships that often bore biracial children. Indentured Servants were contracted for seven years, and were entitled after the contract ended to a portion of land. They comprised the chief source of agricultural labor in Virginia and Maryland throughout most of the seventeenth century British Colonies. The high mortality of workers created no great desire for owning a man for a lifetime rather than a period of years, especially since a slave cost roughly twice as much as an indentured servant.² The onerous duties of indentured servitude frequently led to the death of many indentured servants. The declining population, combined with a necessity for a labor force, directed colonists to consider buying African slaves as the most efficient way to secure a labor force. The population of indentured servants diminished significantly due to the escape of white indentures from their short-term masters, but also because indentured servants did not endure the harsh living conditions and died.

The evolution of and the racialization of slave labor developed such that by the end of the 17th century, African slavery had become the major labor force. Laws in seventeenth century colonial Virginia revealed how slave-owners defined slavery—as well as how the law defined class relationships in society. These laws represented an early attempt by slave owners to mask over class conflict by enslaving Africans. For example, in 1630 Hugh Davis, a white man in the

¹ Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: a Human History*. Penguin, 2011, p. 43 .

² Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery, American Freedom: the Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. History Book Club, 2005, p. 212

Virginia colonies, had an affair with a Black woman. The Virginia Assembly ordered that Hugh Davis was “to be soundly whipt before an assembly of Negroes & others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christianity by defiling his body in lying with a Negro.”³ Thus early on, white was associated with purity and godliness, black with being uncivilized and heathen.

In 1662, a law established that the status of a child followed that of the mother, thus ensuring the perpetuation of slavery among Africans, and allowing slaveholders to rape their women slaves without fear of losing their property in children. Barbara Fields argues that this law was created to prevent the erosion of slave-owner’s property rights that would result if the offspring of free white women impregnated by slave men were entitled to freedom.⁴ Virginia’s system of indentured labor began to manifest some shortcomings that helped prepare the way for its replacement by black slavery.

The role of baptism played a fundamental role in the evolution of slavery in the British Colonies in the Seventeenth Century. Indentured servants eventually became free, thus creating a lower class that was not under the direct control of the planters.⁵ Baptism and the Christian conversion it conferred had been an accepted route to freedom in the English Atlantic during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁶ Africans in Colonial America used this political comprehension as the impetus for their pursuit of freedom. Christianity was associated with freedom, and many slaves and indenture servants took advantage of this safety valve. This created a problem, for how would petty labor be exploited if servants became Christians? The Virginia assembly answered this loophole with a 1667 law establishing “the conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom; that diverse masters, freed from this doubt, may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity by permitting children, though slaves, or those of greater growth if capable to be admitted to that sacrament.” The avowed object was to encourage masters in Christianizing their slaves by eliminating the danger of losing a slave through his conversion. But the effect, whether intended or not, was to remove the most powerful motive for a slave to wish for baptism.⁷

The only path to freedom, however, rested in the will of the master to grant freedom to his slaves. For example, a 1672 law made it legal to wound or kill enslaved Africans who resisted arrest, and if killed, provided compensation to the slave-owner. This indicated the relationship between slavery and the state. The reinforcement of power and custom created a society based on the exploitation of labor, capital, and greed. The laws of Virginia and Maryland, as well as those of the colonies to the south, increasingly gave masters the widest possible power over the slaves, and also, the prohibition of interracial marriage and the general restriction of slave status to nonwhites, codified slavery and enhanced the slave-owners’ power

³ Higginbotham, A Leon. In *The Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: the Colonial Period*. Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 23.

⁴ Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America *New Left Review*, Vol. I, No. 181. (May/June 1990), pp. 107 by Barbara J. Fields

⁵ Fredrickson, George M. *White Supremacy: a Comparative Study in American and South African History*. ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005, pp. 62.

⁶ Goetz, Rebecca Anne. *Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, pp. 86.

⁷ Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom*, pp. 231

over their slaves.⁸ These laws signified the early stages of defining class in America as it related to slavery and freedom.

Several problems emerged towards the late 17th century that led to the racialization of slavery—a rising younger class of slaveholders demanding land, problems with indentured servants, Native Americans defending their lands—and the role of African Slavery solidification in Virginia occurred in 1676 with Bacon’s Rebellion, an armed rebellion against Virginia settlers led by Nathaniel Bacon. The fundamental root of the rebellion was Governor William Berkeley's refusal to retaliate against numerous Indian attacks on frontier settlements. It came about because of the struggle over access to land—resulting in the creation of landownership for white indentured servants and enslavement for Africans. This began the evolution towards a slave society based solely on Africans. The ruling planter class turned from white indentured servitude to African slavery because of their fear of disgruntled whites joining forces with enslaved Africans to their challenge dominance. Moreover, the slave-owning class did not want to elevate the white indentured servants: the objective was to make the poor, landless, white servants complimentary members of the power structure—to persuade them that having white skin was more important than their economic interests. By the early 1700s, racial slavery created a social order that intertwined every level of the New World.

The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution

The Age of Revolution illuminated the inherent contradiction of slavery and freedom as the American colonies fought for their independence, drawing from the Enlightenment ideas of natural rights and self-government. John Locke, in his essay “Concerning Human Understanding”, argued that humans had natural inalienable rights that superceded man-made rights—that all humans, regardless of status, shared the natural rights of Life, Liberty and Property, and if the government failed to perform this basic duty, the people had the right to overthrow it. The Enlightenment thinkers saw human beings as basically good and rational and with the capability of changing their circumstances. Taken together, this major shift in the Western worldview privileged the idea of freedom over slavery, rendering slavery in need of defense. Yet, the Enlightenment produced contradictions of its own, as philosophers wrote racist books and created a pseudoscience to justify white supremacy rooted in slavery. Kendi, in *Stamped From the Beginning* argued, “Racist ideas clouded the discrimination, rationalized the racial disparities, and defined the enslaved, as opposed to the enslavers, as the problem people”.⁹ White indentured servants and enslaved Africans became familiar with Lockean principles, and sued for their freedom based on the concept of a “natural right to liberty”. Thomas Jefferson, perhaps the leading 18th century American Enlightenment thinker, symbolized the fundamental contradictions personified in Enlightenment ideas. Jefferson wrote the most articulate defense of liberty in the renowned Declaration of Independence, stating all men were created equal. Paradoxically, he wrote this while a slave-owner. Jefferson illustrated, perhaps more than any

⁸ Genovese, Eugene D. Roll, Jordan, Roll, *The World the Slaves Made*. Pantheon Books, 1974, pp. 31

⁹ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Nation Books, 2016, pp. 82.

other American, the problem of slavery and freedom, for he fought openly to defend an institution no longer defensible in the Western World.

Jefferson offered incongruous statements regarding slavery as he wrestled with the problem of slavery and freedom. For example, in a court case in 1769, Jefferson said that under the “laws of nature, all men are born free.”¹⁰ Jefferson asserted his political dissidence to British Colonialism in the Declaration of Independence saying, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Who did these “inherent” unalienable rights apply to? The American Colonists—tired of the oppressive legislation by the British Crown—went to war with Britain and won in 1783 independence. What did independence mean for African slaves in the former British Colonies? What did a new liberal bourgeois democratic society look like for Africans? How would the question of slavery be resolved? The American Revolution laid the foundation for a new government and US Constitution—but the question of slavery was revisited, an issue that remained central to the foundation of the new nation.

Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia (1781)*, introduced a bill to end slavery in Virginia whilst concurrently saying black people were inferior. Jefferson argued that blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, were inferior to European Americans in the endowments both of body and mind. “It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications.”¹¹ Jefferson went further in his *Notes on the State of Virginia (1781)* saying, “black men preferred white women over their own, just as orangutans prefer black women over their own, they did not feel pain and that they required less sleep.”¹² Toward the end of Jefferson’s life he said, “we have the wolf by the ears, we cannot hold him and neither can we let him go.” Jefferson asserted this belief during the time the boundaries of the new nation were growing through Westward Expansion, and economically, as the industrial North and slave-centered agricultural South were becoming financial vanguards of the American economy. Jefferson was struggling with contradictions in bourgeois democratic theory to possess slaves; however, he as well as other slaveholders still needed slaves for labor.

The Age of Revolution laid the foundation for the continuing contradiction and debate of the slavery question. This conflict presented itself with the creation of a bourgeois democratic society in Northern America. The Declaration of Independence ignited the debate over slavery by emphasizing the equality between all men and by guaranteeing the rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, substituted for property. The word “slavery” was never mentioned in the United States Constitution. It was clear, the men who wrote the Constitution sought by every elusion, and almost by subterfuge, to keep the acknowledgment of slavery out of the rudimentary form of government.¹³ Independence translated into freedom from British colonialism to reap the benefits of African slavery and the newly acquiesced land for more labor and lucrative commodities. How would the question of slavery be answered?

¹⁰ Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 91

¹¹ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

¹² Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

¹³ B., Du Bois William E. *Black Reconstruction: an Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860 - 1880*. Russel & Russel, 1935, pp. 4

The issue of slavery was central to the Constitutional Convention in 1789. The issues of proportional representation and states' rights, both questions rooted in maintaining the slaveholders' powers, emerged to the forefront of debate. The founding fathers from the beginning struggled over how best to protect slavery while creating a democratic government. These debates and the solutions reflected the conflicting economic interest in the new republic. For example, In *Stamped from the Beginning*, Kendi noted "Massachusetts abolitionist and future vice president Elbridge Gerry insisted that Blacks were property and played the same role as cattle or horses did in the North. Why, he argued, might the South be able to count slaves and the North not be able to count its horses and oxen?"¹⁴ The conflict resulted in the creation of the Three Fifths clause declaring the South to count slaves as three-fifths of a person strictly for representation in Congress and the Electoral College. This compromise was the most abhorrent, dehumanizing statute codified in the US Constitution. James Madison rejected monarchy of any kind and chose instead the creation of the Electoral College as a way to check the democratic nation and its relationship to slavery. This clause enabled the slaveholding South to wield disproportionate power in Congress even though they had a curtailed population size. A conservative, compromised document, the Constitution actually confirmed the dominant power of the slaveholders. The Constitution's infamous "three-fifths of a man" provision gave southern politicians control over federal politics for the next seventy years.¹⁵ The three-fifths compromise legally institutionalized and resuscitated the dehumanization of the enslaved.

The compromises the Founding Fathers made in 1789 had a profound impact on the evolution of American democracy, as noted by the distinguished historian W.E.B. Dubois, who argued in *Black Reconstruction* that "the true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy. What were to be the limits of democratic control in the United States? If all labor, black as well as white, became free—were given education and the right to vote—what control could or should be to set to the power and action of these laborers?"¹⁶ Dubois described how slavery underwrote the new democratic society, realizing what was at stake for the new nation if all people—regardless of race—were treated equal. How would a nation survive if all of its citizens had a voice in the social, political, and economic decisions in American society?

Antebellum Slave Society

American society after 1789 grew along the lines drawn in the Constitution. Northern society developed as one based on industry, while the South became one based on slave labor. However, the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made cotton a global commodity and fueled the need for slave labor. In 1787, Congress agreed to abolish the international slave trade of Africans to the United States. Cotton made slave labor more essential, but the Northern economy, though one based on free labor and a market economy, was nonetheless deeply connected to southern slavery—banks, merchants, insurance, etc. As the North began to experience the advent of industrialization with the rise of textile industry, the northern factories made cloth out of the cotton harvested by slaves. Northern ships shipped cotton, and Northern insurance companies

¹⁴ Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, pp. 116

¹⁵ Smith, Chip. *The Cost of Privilege: Taking on the System of White Supremacy and Racism*. Camino Press, 2007, pp. 36-37

¹⁶ W.E.B Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 13

financed it. As a result, the North depended on the Southern slave society to produce cotton as it grew economically as an industrial society. Slavery provided the capital for an industrializing America.

The slave South faced several challenges as it entered the 19th Century. The Haitian Revolution, led by Toussaint Louverture, was the first and only successful slave revolution in the Western Hemisphere. This was a war between the Africans in Saint Domingue (current day Haiti) and the French Army. This revolution ended with Haiti being declared independent from France and the Louisiana Purchase, opening more space for the expansion of slavery. Over the next few decades, slaveholders marched their captives onto the new western lands, terrorizing them into planting new cotton and sugar fields, sending the crops to Northern and British factories, and powering the Industrial Revolution.¹⁷ The independence of Haiti sparked major debates about whether black people were inferior, whether blacks could achieve freedom on their own, and more importantly, it sparked similar revolts among other black majority black colonies throughout the Western Hemisphere. This terrified slave owners who feared their own slaves might follow the Haitian path.

Southern slave society experienced several slave revolts in the first half of the 19th century, beginning in 1800 when Gabriel Prosser planned a large rebellion in Richmond, Virginia. Inspired by the Haitian Revolution, Gabriel Prosser planned to kill all slaveholders who blocked his revolt. However, the rebellion failed due to betrayal amongst members in the revolt. This led to stricter laws against both free and enslaved blacks and the hanging of the members involved in the planned attack. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a slave in Charleston, South Carolina, planned a slave rebellion against the white slaveholders. Similar to Gabriel Rebellion it ended with the betrayal amongst the rebellious slaves. In 1831, Nat Turner planned a slave Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. This slave rebellion was on a continuum of planned slave rebellions in the United States inspired by the Haitian Revolution. This was one of the largest and deadliest slave uprisings in U.S History; however, it was dismantled after a few days. The revolts in the American South were unsuccessful for several reasons: lack of organization, lack of weapons, and betrayal amongst members. But more importantly, the federal government backed the slave-owning class, sending in federal troops when necessary. Nat Turner's Rebellion took place a year before the Virginia Legislature debated ending slavery in 1832. Turner's Rebellion caused greater fear amongst the Virginia Legislature, and the debate ended with no call for emancipation, but a decision to erase any resistance to slavery.

The other issue slave-owners faced was issue of state versus federal rights as revealed in the tariff issue and nullification crisis in South Carolina. This issue was caused by the introduction of protective tariffs for the raising of money of the United States. The South saw these protective tariffs damaging to their economy, because they had to pay higher prices on goods the South did not produce. In 1828, John Calhoun, Vice President of the United States at the time, wrote his *South Carolina Exposition* saying that tariffs were unconstitutional and he expressed his doctrine of nullification. The essence of the nullification crisis argued a state could refuse to recognize or enforce a federal law passed by the United States Congress. The Nullification crisis of 1833 ended with the reassembly of the South Carolina convention and the rescinded ordinance of nullification. The nullification crisis was the catalyst to the "states' rights" ideology as well as the on-going political struggles between the state and the federal government.

¹⁷ Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*, pp. 133

Westward expansion over the antebellum South showed the continuous contradiction of slavery as the size of America grew. In 1820, a problem emerged when the state of Missouri requested for admission as a slave state. At the time, the United States had an equal divide between slave and free states. The admission of Missouri as a slave state would augment the sectional divide amongst the North and the South. Thus, Maine was admitted as a free state. The Missouri compromise of 1820 had a provision for the abolishment of slavery above the 36°30'N, except for Missouri. The compromise solved an immediate problem for slavery at time but the question of slavery would continue to be reassessed as the United States expanded to the west.

Eugene Genovese, in *Roll, Jordan Roll*, argued that the abolition of the international slave trade changed the dynamics of the slave South and forced a new relationship between the master and slave. Slaves in the antebellum South often tested the legitimacy of their master displaying the contradiction of total domination. Paternalism as defined by Genovese was an organic relationship between masters and that slaves based on dependency and reciprocity. The masters interpreted paternalism as self-deceptively wanting happiness for their slaves. The slaves resisted paternalism by fighting for their right to think and act as autonomous human beings.¹⁸ Slave-owners needed slave labor to survive, thus creating a kind of dependency they sought to mask over by forging the ideology of paternalism. In the slave-owners' view, their slaves were children who needed care. The slaveholders saw it as their duty to take care of their slaves; they interpreted this form of "benevolence" as a way of doing their good deed. However, slaves understood masters' dependency on them and used it to their advantage. Genovese also saw paternalism as the relations of super-ordination and subordination. Its strength as a prevailing ethos increased as the members of the community accepted—or felt compelled to accept—these relations as legitimate.¹⁹ The antebellum Southern slave society was always in a process of negotiation along class relationships. But, how did the slave-owning class obtain the consent of slaves to their enslavement, or did they? This is not merely a process of complete vertical domination over slaves, but rather a function of what Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci calls "hegemony". Gramsci argued that a ruling class reached maturity when it achieved the consent of its subjects to be governed. However, behind this consent lay state violence and coercion. The dominant slave-holding class achieved hegemony when it no longer needed brute force to govern. A key issue in achieving consent rested on the law. The law is the ultimate force that is used to shape the terrain and profess the ruling class' legitimacy. As an illustration, the Compromise of 1850 and Fugitive Slave Act drew slaveholders, non-slaveholders, and even abolitionists into the world of slavery. The Compromise of 1850 was compromise to settle the enduring dispute between the slave holding south and the Northern Free-Soilers regarding the problem of slavery. The provision also rewarded officers who caught runaway slaves with a bonus or promotion for their work—simultaneously punishing officials who did not arrest alleged runaway slaves. Coercion enabled the slave owning class to force subordinate classes to accept its legitimacy, whereas consent persuaded the master class to adhere to the ad hoc de facto laws. To the extent that the intellectuals fail to create hegemony, the ruling class falls back on the state's coercive apparatus, which disciplines those who do not consent.²⁰

¹⁸ Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp.148

¹⁹ Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 6

²⁰ Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (April/May 1975), pp. 353 by Thomas R. Bates

The end of slave trade shaped the emerging antebellum slave society—that often tested the limits of hegemony, and slaves used their pre-political ideology to dismantle the fundamental contradiction of slavery. On balance, the revolts made a substantial contribution to the amelioration of the material conditions of slave life. The closing of the Trans-Atlantic trade, with its attendant rise in the price of labor, compelled the slaveholders to adopt measures designed to guarantee the productivity and reproduction of their labor force.²¹ Paternalism in the American South laid the fundamental contradiction of slavery that slaves used as a tool for their own political and social mobility. The constant negotiation of the social terrain between the master and the slave led to a debilitating social slave system that constantly had to be defended. Throughout the antebellum period in the American South, slaves remade their cultural and political worlds through constant negotiations with their masters.

Antebellum South, Paternalism, Revolution

The ending of the international slave trade forced Southern slaveholders to rely on their slave society to reproduce themselves and also led to more residential slave-owners. This provision also required slaveholders to live on their plantations. In Eugene Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution*, he states paternalism implied considerable living space where slaves created stable families, developed a rich spiritual community, and attained a measure of physical comfort.²² What did this mean for a Southern slave society that depended on the labor of slaves to elevate its class? The closing of the TST, the political crisis of ancient civilization, and the pressure of an ascendant Christianity had converged in the early centuries of the new era to shape a seigneurial world in which lords and serfs (not slaves) faced each other with reciprocal demands and expectations.²³

The contradiction of slavery appeared in the laws and court cases as the antebellum South matured in the master-slave relationship. This is not merely a process of the master class failing to assert its vertical dominance over property, nor is it a product of the masters failing to care for their property—but rather what Steven Hahn argues is a function of slaves contesting the wills of their owners, forging complex ties to each other, etching out time and terrain that they could claim for themselves, turning privileges won into rights to be defended. Hahn argued blending the rituals of reciprocity into ostensible acts of deference and submission, the slaves transformed as well as resisted the Southern system of slavery.²⁴ In these laws and court decisions lay the fundamental contradiction of slavery. A slave could kill a white man in self-defense and escape conviction provided that his own life stood in clear and imminent danger. In a celebrated 1791 case in Virginia, Moses, a slave, had killed his overseer and escaped conviction. The court accepted the testimony that Moses had served honestly and faithfully and that he had killed only when the overseer tried to kill him.²⁵ What does this say about the evolution of slavery in the new nation? What does this say about the fragility of the inherent contradiction of slavery? A

²¹ Genovese, Eugene D. *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*. Louisiana State University Press, 1992, pp. 113

²² Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, pp. 6

²³ Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, pp. 4

²⁴ Hahn, Steven, *A Nation under Our Feet Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 33

²⁵ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 34

century before that in Virginia under British colonialism, according to the Virginia Slave Codes, slaves were prohibited from lifting a hand against a white person even in self-defense. Thus, paternalism exposed itself within the previous law. This court case shows the humanization of slaves in the antebellum South, but as Genovese argued, it discredited the essential philosophical idea on which slavery rested, and simultaneously, bore witness to the slave's ability to register the claims of their humanity.²⁶

The World of the Slaveholders

Slaveholders in antebellum South fashioned their own interpretation of the master-slave relationship. Paternalism for the slaveholders grew out of the necessity to maintain discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation.²⁷ Slave masters understood for this mature relationship to persist, there had to be some form of reciprocity between master and the slave. When the terrain of the Southern slave society was threatened, slave masters exhibited their dominance to show the slaves their self-deceptive benevolent tendencies. Slaveholders fired overseers who treated their slaves too humanely and overseers who treated slaves too severely. Genovese provided an example of how slaveholders sought to protect their slaves. The overseer faced limits who worked slaves beyond their strength, or that inflicted cruel or unnecessary punishment, or failed to see them well fed or kindly taken care of when sick.²⁸ The slaveholders recognized the necessity of protecting slaves from cruel punishment as a means for preventing resistance, if not rebellion. E. N. Elliot, president of Planters College in Mississippi, defined slavery as the duty and obligation of the slave to labor for the mutual benefit of both master and slave, under a warrant to the slave protection, and a comfortable subsistence under all circumstances. It is clear that the problem of slavery had changed since the first century of arrival. This illustrated not merely a process of slave masters showing their gratitude to slaves, nor is it a product of the masters failing to understand their role as the ruling class built on labor—but rather a function of the inherent contradiction of slavery. The master, as the head of the system, had a right to the obedience and labor of the slave, but the slave also has his mutual rights in the master: the right of protection, the right of counsel and guidance, the right of subsistence, the right of care and attention in sickness and old age.²⁹ The world of the slaveholders was a world of contradictions. The slaveholders recognition of the slaves' right to life, explicitly endorsed in the laws against murdering of slaves, both exposed the absurdity of the assertion of a doctrine of total surrender of will and registered their own inability to justify even to themselves the unlimited use of force.³⁰ The contradiction unremittingly appeared the more slaveholders became conscious of their reliance upon their slaves' labor.

The World of the Slaves

Slaves in antebellum South fashioned their own interpretation of the master-slave relationship. The Southern slave population began to reproduce itself naturally sometime around

²⁶ Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, pp. 47

²⁷ Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll, pp. 4

²⁸ Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll, pp. 14

²⁹ Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll, pp. 76

³⁰ Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll, pp. 89

the middle of the eighteenth century, and a structure of kinship relations, expectations, and practices gradually took shape; this was bolstered by the closing of the African slave trade and the prevalence of cotton, tobacco, and grains that weighed lightly on the material conditions of slave laborers.³¹ This enabled slaves to form their boundaries within the system of slavery and to reject the very essence of the social system. Slaveholders were always entitled to the revenue and harvest that slaves produced. But slaves managed to win time for themselves, set loose standards for various agricultural tasks, and avail themselves of opportunities opened by the rhythms governing various crop cultures.³² Slaves understood the process of negotiation between masters and slaves, even when it came to petty production and provisioning. Steven Hahn, in his book *A Nation Under Our Feet*, provided the quintessential example of the relationship when a slave master was trying to buy a few ducks from a slave. John Burnside, master of the Houmas Plantation in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, sought to purchase some ducks from his slave Louis, and pay for them the following day. “Very well, Louis,” Burnside responded with the paternalist prerogative, “if you come tomorrow I’ll pay you.” “No master,” Louis replied, deferentially but firmly, “me want the money now”³³ Louis understood the process of reciprocal obligations between within the master-slave relationship. The system of petty production, provision, and exchange permitted the slaves to enact various rituals of reciprocity that implicitly rejected the condition of enslavement and envisioned, if not insisted on, alternative possibilities.³⁴ The slaves in the antebellum South used their interpretation of this paternalistic relationship and fashioned their vision of the world. However, Steven Hahn argued, petty production, provisioning, and exchange did not, compose a sphere of autonomy under slavery or distinct set of social and economic relations buried within the slave regime. Insofar the reciprocal version developed through the antagonistic struggle between master and slave and became embedded as a central component of the regime itself.³⁵

Slaves in the antebellum South used religion as an instrument to remove the notion of their dehumanization and their status as God quasi-ordained subordinate. The living history of the church has been primarily a history of submission to class stratification and the powers that be, but there has remained, despite all attempts at eradication, a legacy of resistance that could appeal to certain parts of the New Testament and especially to the parts of the old. For slave masters, this was not the anticipated disposition for the religious indoctrination of slaves. The slave masters sought to teach slaves to be docile and accept their subhuman status. However, the slaves took up the Christian message, blended it with their traditional religion, and forged a moral case for action on behalf of their own freedom.³⁶ White preachers taught slaves they did not have the right to judge their masters, and often fabricated the bible in a way in which God predestined them to serve their master. Moreover, slaves used their own religious practices to create their own interpretation of their spiritual freedom. They seem to have imagined a divine intervention that would end their collective oppression, punish their oppressors, and allow them to build a new order of freedom.³⁷ The religion practiced in the quarters galvanized slaves with a

³¹ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 17

³² Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 22

³³ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 29

³⁴ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 30

³⁵ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 32

³⁶ Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, pp. 103

³⁷ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 47

sense of their own worth before God and man. Genovese noticed religion enabled slaves to prove that no man's will can become that of another unless he himself wills it—that the idea of slavery cannot be realized, no matter how badly the body is broke and the sprit tormented.³⁸ Slaves in the antebellum south—due to their interpretation of the paternalistic relationship—went through a social, cultural, pre-political and spiritual revolution in the pre-civil war period. The slaves also used the church as a meeting ground to discuss local events, resolve disputes amongst slaves, and dispense justice. They had three degrees of punishment [according] to magnitude of the crime.³⁹ They used the privileges they gained from the master-slave relationships and asserted them as rights to be fought for. Slaves used their political mobility through various kinship networks and organized amongst the slave masters and fashioned their own interpretation under the disguise of subservient.

Conclusion

In 1619, white indentured servants and African slaves arrived in the Americas, to accompany the enslaved Native Americans in the economic growth of the British Colonies. The creation of laws underwritten by racist ideas ensured a capitalistic society developed on free labor, coercion and vertical dominance. The slaveholders justified their enslavement of Africans by creating ideas of race that defined Africans as less than human and incapable of being civilized—which laid the foundation for racial hierarchy, racist ideas, race and capitalism in the modern world. The Age of Revolution created a contradiction for slaveholders with the making of a bourgeois democratic free society, built on the liberal ideologies of equality, life, liberty, and property. The construction of the US Constitution exacerbated African slavery and the rise of capitalism in the modern world. Slavery thus became a pressing issue in the American South, and the rest of the country, that could not be ignored. The end of the international slave trade in 1808 fostered a mature master-slave relationship. The ending of the slave trade led to a self-sustaining slave society where slaves had to reproduce in order to maintain labor supply. Southern paternalism reinforced racism as well as class exploitation, but it also allowed slaves to create their own interpretation and pre-political imagination in the antebellum South that assisted them in acquiring freedom. The abolishment of the international slave trade changed the dynamics and forced a relationship between the master and slave. Slaves in the antebellum South often tested the legitimacy of their master displaying the contraction of total domination. The masters interpreted paternalism as self-deceptively wanting happiness for their slaves. The slaves interpreted paternalism by fighting for their right to think and act as autonomous human beings. At the height of the tensions between the North and South over the question of slavery, slaves politically mobilized in making the civil war their rebellion. As Steven Hahn, in his book *A Nation Under Our Feet*, argued, they sensed emancipation and a new order of life might go along with it, and thus felt empowered to turn a rebellion of their own against the authority of the federal government into a rebellion of their own against the authority of their masters.⁴⁰ Newly freed blacks participating in the Union Army, in a fight against their former masters and the federal government—ending with the destruction of slavery—was a revolution. No other nation, in such a short time, rose from dehumanization to holding power. This paper, therefore, argues

³⁸ Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll, pp. 283

³⁹ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 51

⁴⁰ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 64

that the problem of slavery and freedom in the modern world, evolved over time due to persistent black resistance throughout the diaspora, class struggles between the bourgeoisie and ruling class, southern paternalism, and blacks joining the Union Army to fight against the Confederate Army.