THE QUEST FOR FREE LABOR

PRAGMATISM AND EXPERIMENTS IN EMANCIPATION

ELIZABETH ANDERSON

THE AMHERST LECTURE IN PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE 9, 2014

http://www.amherstlecture.org/

The Quest for Free Labor: Pragmatism and Experiments in Emancipation

Elizabeth Anderson

PREFERRED CITATION

Anderson, Elizabeth. "The Quest for Free Labor: Pragmatism and Experiments in Emancipation." *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 9 (2014): 1–44. <http://www.amherstlecture.org/anderson2014/>.

ABSTRACT

Pragmatists argue that we can improve our moral principles by testing them in experiments in living. When all affected parties can participate in the construction and interpretation of experiments in living, systematic moral biases are more likely to be corrected. The abolition of slavery offers a case study in pragmatist methods. All post-slavery societies, including Haiti, Jamaica, and the U.S., experimented with free labor regimes. I explore what these experiments were thought to be testing and how contestation by the freed people over the terms of free labor were critical in shaping social understandings of what freedom meant, and in partially correcting racist perceptions of blacks. In all cases, the participation of freed people led to greater freedom in the emerging labor regimes than would have been established on the basis of the *a priori* moral arguments of many of white abolitionists.

The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy (ISSN: 1559-7199) is a free on-line journal, published by the Department of Philosophy, Amherst College, Amherst, MA 01002. Phone: (413) 542-5805. E-mail: alp@amherst.edu. Website: http://www.amherstlecture.org/.

The Quest for Free Labor: Pragmatism and Experiments in Emancipation

Elizabeth Anderson
University of Michigan

1. Questions of Moral Epistemology

WILLIAM HENRY BRISBANE WAS A BAPTIST MINISTER and slaveholder in Beaufort County, South Carolina, before the Civil War. He edited a proslavery paper, the *Southern Baptist and General Intelligencer*. In 1835 he read a chapter from Francis Wayland's textbook, *Elements of Moral Science*, and was shaken by Wayland's critique of slavery as a violation of slaves' rights to personal liberty.[1] Finding that he could not refute Wayland's argument without rejecting republican principles, he continued to justify slavery on grounds of necessity: the South would be economically ruined and many driven to poverty without it. Yet he was wealthy enough to free his own slaves without bringing ruin on himself. So he offered freedom to his slaves. This could be done safely only if they left South Carolina. Not knowing where to go or how to make a living in the North, they chose to stay with Brisbane, who treated them as if they were free, paying them wages and leaving them to manage his plantation without an overseer. The citizens of Beaufort County ostracized Brisbane for his refusal to defend slavery as right in itself, and for his liberal treatment of his own slaves. He was arrested and jailed, and warned of a planned tarring and feathering. People campaigned against his newspaper

1 Wayland, *Elements of Moral Science*, 213–30.

and stopped attending his sermons. This effectively silenced him, and he became a private man.

Although he still thought slavery justified by necessity, he worried that he had not examined the whole case against it. Abolitionist literature was hard to obtain in the South. Southern post offices refused to deliver abolitionist works. Individuals who travelled South with abolitionist papers risked being lynched. Brisbane decided to sell his slaves to his brother-in-law, and moved to Cincinnati to study abolitionist arguments. Reading Theodore Dwight Weld's popular abolitionist tract, *The Bible Against Slavery*, Brisbane became enraged and wrote six pages of objection to it. His attempt to refute Weld left him convinced that slavery was wrong. Overcome with guilt over selling his slaves, he repurchased them, brought them north, and freed them. He converted to the abolitionist cause and wrote his own best-selling antislavery tract, *Slaveholding Examined in Light of the Holy Bible*. He became a popular abolitionist lecturer, especially valued for his authoritative eyewitness testimony about the cruelties of slavery.[2]

It is tempting to read Brisbane's story as a triumph of pure moral reasoning. Brisbane had been converted to the antislavery cause in exactly the way the abolitionists hoped: by reading their arguments, taking them to heart, and personally freeing his slaves. Yet an examination of his *Slaveholding Examined* raises doubts about Brisbane's reasoning. Proslavery's strongest suit had always been Biblical morality. The Bible nowhere prohibits slavery; it provides legal regulations to support it; and it commands slaves to obey their masters. Abolitionists adopted various strategies in response to this difficulty. One was to interpret the Bible allegorically, rejecting a literal application of its precepts to the present day and insisting on following the spirit rather than the letter of the Gospels. This was the Quakers' position. A second strategy was to argue that the Bible was written by many fallible humans, not all divinely inspired, and that only those parts of the Bible should be accepted that survive scrutiny by the light of independent moral arguments. This was William Lloyd Garrison's position. As a Baptist minister, Brisbane was too much of a Biblical literalist to adopt such heretical strategies. His was to draw a fine conceptual distinction between slavery as upheld

2 Brisbane relates this personal history of his conversion to abolitionism in *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane*.

in the Bible and slavery as instituted in the South. He defined slavery as a form of oppressive involuntary servitude in which the servant lacks redress against being wronged. The Bible, he insisted, while it permitted lifelong bondage by voluntary contract, did not sanction any condition in which the servant lacked redress against oppression.[3]

Slaves in the Apostolic Age would have been surprised by Brisbane's interpretation of their supposed rights against their masters under the laws of the Roman Empire. More importantly, his definition of slavery had important implications for the fate of American slaves. To define the slavery that abolitionists wanted to end was to define the freedom that the slaves would win upon emancipation. Brisbane may have managed to draw a distinction that could, just barely, reconcile abolitionism with a quasi-literal approach to the Bible. But what he needed to get the better of proslavery arguments of his day was not the same as what the slaves needed to attain a morally acceptable post-emancipation status. A labor regime that left open the possibility of lifelong bonded servitude could not deliver what the slaves would regard as real emancipation.

Brisbane's dramatic conversion to abolitionism, while morally commendable and courageous, raises some fundamental questions of moral epistemology. Can *a priori* reasoning among elites be sufficient to arrive at sound moral conclusions concerning the distinction between slavery and free labor? How would society's moral conclusions change if the enslaved participated in drawing that distinction? Might a society's moral reasoning be improved if members from all social positions participated?

I shall explore these questions from a pragmatist point of view. Pragmatists such as John Dewey argue that we should replace the quest for a foundational principle of moral rightness (such as the Golden Rule, the Categorical Imperative, or the Principle of Utility)

---

3 Proslavery writers pointed to numerous Biblical passages in support of their view, including Joshua 9:23, Deut. 20:10–15, Lev. 25:44–6 (God authorizing and regulating slavery), and 1 Peter 2:18, Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22, 1 Timothy 6:1–2 (enjoining slaves to obedience). See Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument," 461–546, for a characteristic Bible-based proslavery tract. Hepburn, *The American Defence of the Christian Golden Rule*, exemplifies the Quaker strategy, arguing that slavery violated the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. Garrison, "Divine Authority of the Bible," 221–29 offers the skeptical strategy. Exod. 21:5–6 and Deut. 15:16–17 license lifelong bondage, as does Brisbane, *Slaveholding Examined*, 12–18.

with methods of intelligently updating our current moral beliefs. Some of these methods – such as testing moral claims for consistency, raising intuitive counterexamples to proposed moral principles, drawing conceptual distinctions to better track normative intuitions, and running thought experiments – are among those already found in the standard toolbox of moral philosophers working in *a priori* mode. However, pragmatists stress the importance of other methods that require empirical inquiry and practical action. A key reason for this is that, while we cannot do without moral intuitions, they can also be biased, apt only for bygone circumstances, or otherwise poor guides to present action. From a naturalistic point of view, moral intuitions are largely, but not wholly, the felt awareness of internalized, socially instituted moral norms and habits. They therefore tend to embody both the wisdom and the limitations of their origins. We need methods to improve our intuitions, not only to rationalize them by means of an internally coherent set of abstract moral principles. Proslavery thinkers had plenty of arguments to rationalize their proslavery intuitions.

Pragmatists offer two broad strategies for intelligently updating our moral principles. First, we can figure out ways to counteract the operation of systematic biases in moral thinking. For example, we know that, in judging questions of justice in which they are interested parties, individuals tend to be biased in favor of their own self-interest. A classic practical way to counteract this bias in real cases is to ask an impartial judge to adjudicate interpersonal claims of justice. While this method is far from perfect, since judges may have identity-based, ideological, or other biases, it at least helps to block biases of purely personal favoritism from affecting judgments of justice in particular cases.

Because individuals occupy different social positions, are affected by different circumstances, and have distinct personal experiences, educational backgrounds, temperaments, personal histories, skills and habits, they are liable to vary somewhat in their biases. These interpersonal differences can be turned into epistemic resources if societies open up their processes of moral inquiry to wide participation. The biases of some can check those of others, if social practices enable this.[4] John Dewey argued that democracy, considered in its broadest sense as a cultural practice of wide participation in inquiry into the solutions of

4 This point applies to scientific inquiry as much as to moral inquiry. On the scientific end, see Solomon, *Social Empiricism*.

problems faced by society, offered the most effective means of improving moral and political practices.[5]

The second broad pragmatist strategy for intelligently updating our moral principles is to test them in experiments in living. The moral principles in question are practical principles, embodied in social practices. We can test our moral principles by putting them into practice and seeing whether we can live with the results. More precisely, pragmatism interprets moral norms as attempted solutions to practical problems that involve calling upon the cooperation and assistance of others.[6] When we put them into practice, we can determine whether they solve the problem they were supposed to solve, with acceptable side effects. The assessment of moral principles thus begins with an instrumental evaluation. But it does not end there. As we gain experience of the effects of a practical implementation of a moral principle, we may come to revise our conception of the problem that needs to be solved. For example, we may add an expectation that the solution enable us to cope with or avoid certain side effects. Or experience with a new practice may enable us to envision new and potentially better ways of life than were imagined or thought feasible before it was implemented. This may lead to a more expansive view of the problem to be solved, and a more ambitious ideal of what would solve it.

2. The Problem of Civilization and the Definitions of Slavery and Free Labor

LET US NOW TURN to how a pragmatist approach illuminates the conflicts over slavery and freedom during the age of emancipation. As Brisbane's case shows, we are interested in the question not only of how people came to see slavery as unjust, but of how they came to an understanding of the shape of the labor regime that ought to replace it.

---

5 See especially Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems;* Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*; and Dewey, "Creative Democracy." I offer an account of how this works in "The Epistemology of Democracy."

6 In this lecture, I am interpreting "morality" in the narrow sense as concerned with adjudicating interpersonal claims concerning what we owe to each other. Moral principles aim to resolve interpersonal disagreements about such obligations, to determine a fair division of socially necessary labor among society's members, rules for fairly selecting individuals to serve different economic roles, and so forth.

Begin with a consideration of the problem that people thought slavery was needed to solve. For the purposes of this lecture I shall focus on one central problem, which I shall call the problem of civilization. Civilization was understood as an advanced stage of society involving a sophisticated state including laws, courts, civil servants, and military; a complex economy including commerce, manufacturing, finance, and professions; and highly developed cultural institutions including churches, the arts and sciences, publishing houses, newspapers, schools, and universities. Civilization requires an advanced division of labor, in which a substantial portion of adults is wholly devoted to occupations other than producing the basic means of subsistence. To sustain such occupations, the producers of the means of subsistence, mainly food, must produce a surplus beyond what they need to support themselves and their families. The problem of civilization is therefore the problem of establishing a labor regime that would induce mainly agricultural laborers to produce a surplus, and a distributive regime that would distribute that surplus to the occupants of non-subsistence occupations.

Today the solution to this problem seems obvious: why not just pay people to produce more than they need to survive? To most elites before the rise of the abolition movement, this proposal was not feasible. They were convinced that subsistence workers had such rudimentary material desires, and found labor so distasteful, that they would quit the moment they had produced enough for their own basic needs. Pay them higher wages, and they will only quit work sooner, since they could then reach their subsistence income goal with less labor. "The institution of slavery is a principal cause of civilization" – indeed, "the sole cause."[7] Economists represent this view in terms of a backward-bending supply curve of labor.

The theory of the backward-bending supply curve of labor both reflected and rationalized the pervasiveness of force in the labor regimes of the time. Before the mid-eighteenth century, 95 percent of the world labor force worked under some form of involuntary servitude, including not just slavery but also serfdom, indentured service, apprenticeship, debt peonage, military impressment, corvée, workhouses for the poor, penal service, or other forms of coercion, including the wife's labor for her husband. Labor markets, a prerequisite for truly free labor, barely existed, given the existence of anti-enticement laws, which forbad employ-

7 Harper, "Slavery in Light of Social Ethics," 551.

ers from offering jobs to workers already under contract with a different employer. Even the workers who were called "free" at the time would not be so regarded today: if they were under contract, they were not free to quit, and unemployment was defined as the crime of vagrancy, punishment for which was forced labor.[8]

The joint supposition of the backward-bending supply curve of labor and the moral necessity of solving the problem of civilization could at most justify forced labor, not slavery. Slavery was more oppressive than other forms of forced labor in four ways. First, slaves were subject to extreme physical violence. While flogging and beating were common tools of labor coercion, slaves suffered more systematically and grievously from violence than other workers. Second, slaves were the property of their masters, legally classified as chattel, comparable to livestock. Third, this implied that slaves lacked legal personhood, which entailed a set of legal disabilities known as "civil slavery": inability to own property, make contracts, sue or be sued, or testify against their masters or other free persons in court. Fourth, slaves had no rights to family integrity: spouses and children could be sold to different masters; family members had no rights to live together or see one another; marriages had no legal force; parents had no authority over their children. Slaves had no rights to form any personal relationships. Their entire social existence was subsumed under the totalitarian power of their master. Slavery was thus a form of "social death."[9]

Given the substantial normative differences between slavery and other forms of involuntary servitude, it is remarkable that proslavery thinkers failed to notice that the argument from civilization could at most justify lesser forms of forced labor. Some proslavery thinkers obscured this difficulty by claiming that American slavery recognized the master's property in the slave's labor alone, and not in the slave's person. Others argued that American slaves enjoyed the status of rights-bearers to whom slaveholders owed completely reciprocal duties, akin to the relation between wards and guardians. The most common strategy was to appropriate radical labor advocates' complaints of "wage slavery," and argue that virtually all

---

8 See Orren, *Belated Feudalism*, ch. 3, who describes the common law of master and servant that governed labor regimes not only in the U.S. but all common law countries well into the nineteenth century. Continental European labor regimes were hardly freer. As Seymour Drescher notes, "On the eve of the age of revolution, freedom, not slavery, was the world's 'peculiar institution'" (*The Mighty Experiment*, 14).

9 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5–6.

non-self-employed workers were *de facto* slaves, the only difference being that wage slaves had no guarantee of employment and hence subsistence from a master, and so were worse off than chattel slaves.[10]

Abolitionists, too, were not united around a common definition of slavery, and so were divided over what kind of freedom should be secured for the slaves by emancipation. Brisbane's arguments suggest a state that I shall call "minimal abolition": abolish the four legal features of slavery that distinguished it from other forms of servitude, but tolerate oppressive labor regimes effected by contract. In practice this solution imagined that, upon emancipation, the freed people would continue to work in gangs on the plantations, producing cash crops under the dominion of an overseer. The organization of labor would remain just as it was under slavery, except that the whip would be replaced by the contractually determined wage as the principal incentive to labor, workers could not be bought and sold, and they would have rights to marry, keep custody of their children, and live together as families. State officials in most post-emancipation societies, including Haiti, the British West Indies, and the United States generally favored this model of minimal abolition, although in the U.S. there was considerable disagreement among officials over the proper labor regime for freed people.

At the other end of the abolitionist spectrum lay the Republican ideal of free labor. On this view, to be a completely free worker was not to have an employer at all. It was to be one's own boss, to be self-employed. This was the ideal that animated the Republican Party before the Civil War. Most Republicans held this aspiration for white men alone, and opposed slavery not on behalf of the slaves, but because they feared that slavery denied white men effective access to opportunities for self-employment. However, radical Republicans, free blacks, and newly freed people hoped that emancipation would enable blacks to realize this radical free labor ideal for themselves. In practice, this solution imagined that most freed people would acquire title to enough land to become a self-sufficient yeoman farmer or

10 Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters*, 24; and Christy, "Cotton is King," 314, exemplify the "labor alone" strategy. Hughes, *Treatise of Sociology*, 167, offers a "mutual obligation" strategy on top of the "labor alone" one. Harper, "Slavery in Light of Social Ethics," 590, 569–72, 585–7; Hammond, "Letters on Slavery," 131–9; and Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* 10–18, illustrate the "wage slavery" strategy.

at least an independent peasant proprietor. Freed people in all post-emancipation societies aspired to this ideal.[11]

The quest for free labor in the post-emancipation eras of all former slave societies took place through a contest between these two conceptions of abolition, carried out not only in the form of moral arguments, but through legislation and litigation, political and military campaigns, labor action, negotiation of contracts between landowners and freed people, and other practical means. In Haiti, after a brief attempt to impose a labor regime akin to serfdom, the freed people achieved a peasant society, albeit one that entailed their exclusion from political affairs and submission to exploitative taxation. In Jamaica, a mixed regime emerged by midcentury, with some freed people managing to establish their own self-sufficient farms, others combining farming on small plots with plantation labor, and others consigned to the plantations. In the United States, the dominant outcome in the cotton-growing regions of the South was sharecropping, which, as we shall see, represented a compromise between minimal and radical abolition.

3. Racialized Slavery and Objectification Bias

WE HAVE SEEN THAT, even if its premises were granted, the argument from civilization did not prove enough to justify the institution of chattel slavery. At most, it justified some lesser form of involuntary servitude. Proslavery writers evaded this problem by blurring the lines between slavery and other types of forced labor regime.

The argument from civilization, if accepted as a justification for chattel slavery, also had a tendency to justify slavery's extension beyond its actual scope in the Americas, where it was limited to blacks. Some proslavery thinkers flirted with the idea that white workers as well as blacks should be enslaved. George Fitzhugh was the only proslavery writer who positively affirmed that conclusion, although others came close.[12] To justify the racial limita-

---

11 Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*; Foner, *Nothing but Freedom*, Kindle loc. 252–6.

12 See Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* 85, 211, 215; Hammond, "Speech in the Senate, March 4, 1858," 71 ("In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life … [which] constitutes the very mud-sill of society …."); Hughes, *Treatise of Sociology*, 270 ("The Free-labor form of society, must be abolished; it must progress to the form of mutual-insurance or warranteeism." "Warran-

tion, advocates of slavery resorted to racist premises. Most commonly, they argued that the backward-bending supply curve of labor peculiarly applied to blacks, whom they characterized as naturally indolent and, unlike whites, not motivated by the desire to improve their economic standing through hard work and accumulation of wealth. Thomas Dew epitomized the standard view: "Negroes … are not actuated by that principle which inclines more civilized men … to work after the necessaries of the day have been procured …. Their industry and freedom … [are] entirely incompatible."[13] They also argued that blacks were peculiarly fit for the grueling, mindless drudgery of cash crop production in hot climates, unfit for occupations requiring superior intelligence, initiative, and skill, and incapable of competing successfully with whites if left free to fend for themselves.[14]

Many proslavery writers went even further, arguing not only that blacks were fit for forced, menial labor, but that they were not harmed by the harsh treatment and deprivations of slavery. They insisted that blacks did not care about freedom, feel degraded by flogging, or want to learn how to read, that they lacked family affections and so were indifferent to the breakup of families by sale, and that, due to their licentiousness and lack of honor, black women were not harmed by subjection to their masters' sexual advances. These claims followed the pattern set by Thomas Jefferson, who, while he acknowledged that slavery was unjust, nevertheless supplied the essential materials whites needed to offer an unequivocal defense of it, once the enthusiasms of natural rights theory faded after the American revolution. Racist claims that Jefferson asserted as "suspicion only" soon hardened into utter certainty: that blacks lust after but do not love their women, that their afflictions are "less felt, and sooner forgotten" than those of whites, that they are inferior to whites in mind and body.[15] Proslavery thinkers concluded that blacks "furnish the very material out of which

teeism" was Hughes's euphemism for his idealized notion of slavery.).

13 Dew, "Abolition of Negro Slavery," 229–30. See also Christy, "Cotton is King," 324; Hammond, "Letters on Slavery," 145–8; and Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* 261.

14 Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument," 520; Hammond, "Speech in the Senate, March 4, 1858," 71; and Dew, "Abolition of Negro Slavery," 237.

15 Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia 11," Query 14.

slaves ought to be made," were docile and cheerfully submitted to their masters, "happy, content, [and] unaspiring."[16]

Whites' justifications for slavery are notable in two ways. First, they acknowledged that masters owed duties to slaves.[17] They insisted that slavery benefited the slaves, that the features of slavery that whites would find harmful did not harm blacks, and that slaves would be worse off if freed – reduced to destitution and perhaps even starvation, from inability to compete with whites.[18] These rationalizations reflect a background acknowledgment that slaves are morally considerable persons, entitled to have their welfare count in moral evaluations of the slave system. Second, the felt need to justify slavery as in blacks' interests induced an astonishing distortion in the way racist whites perceived blacks. How could they have seriously supposed that blacks did not suffer from whipping, rape, family breakup, extreme contempt, and grueling, relentless labor? How could they have supposed that blacks had no desire to improve their material condition, no aspirations for freedom, no desire to learn, no love of family?

In their contorted reasoning, we may detect the systematic operation of *objectification bias*. Objectifying a group involves three steps:

---

16 Harper, "Slavery in Light of Social Ethics," 594; and Hammond, "Speech in the Senate, March 4, 1858," 71. See also Harper, "Slavery in Light of Social Ethics," 575–6, 593, 577, 580–4, 585; Hammond, "Letters on Slavery," 132; and Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* 17.

17 Eugene Genovese offers copious evidence from slaveholders' diaries, letters, and other private sources that this was not just propaganda; *American* slaveholders, at least, sincerely thought of themselves as discharging moral duties to care for their slaves (*Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pt. 1, sec. 5–6). The Supreme Court's claim that "the civilized portion of the white race" had long regarded blacks as "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" (*Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393, 407 (1856)) accurately reported neither how whites publicly justified their treatment of blacks, nor how they consciously thought of their moral relations to their slaves.

18 Tucker, *Dissertation on Slavery*, Kindle loc. 588; and Schmidt and Wilhelm, "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," 133–46. In the eighteenth century, some slaveholders such as Thomas Jefferson recognized slavery as a violation of blacks' rights, and resorted to justifying it as a measure of white self-defense against miscegenation and race war. See Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia 11," Queries 14, 18. As the age of Enlightenment faded, proslavery thinkers became more adamant that slavery was good for the slaves, either absolutely or in comparison with freeing them.

1. *Viewing* a group in terms of its service to one's desires (or the desires of one's group);
2. *Enforcing* that view by placing the group in a subordinate role, in service to one's desires;
3. *Representing* the group as *inherently fit* for that subordinate role, and *unfit* for superior roles.[19]

The third step incorporates a cognitive bias known as the fundamental attribution error: attributing a person's observed behavior to their supposedly innate dispositions to behave that way, instead of to the external circumstances in which the person is placed.[20] Objectification is a kind of iatrogenic fundamental attribution error, where the perceiver or the perceiver's group causes the target's behavior by constraining the target's circumstances.

Proslavery thinkers' moral justification of racialized slavery expressed whites' racial objectification of blacks. They *viewed* blacks in terms of what they wanted blacks to do for them: primarily, grow cash crops (such as sugar, coffee, cotton, and tobacco) suitable for tropical and subtropical climates, secondarily, to fill other servile occupations. They *enforced* this view by enslaving blacks and forcing them to labor in menial jobs. To rationalize this treatment, they *represented* blacks as inherently fit for slavery and menial work, and inherently unfit for freedom.

It may seem incredible that whites' perceptions of blacks could have been so grossly distorted as to suppose that they did not suffer from the abuses whites heaped upon them under slavery. Were they simply making claims they knew were false, to deflect criticism from abolitionists? I think not. Racism was profoundly embedded in whites' minds. Given their Christian moral beliefs and their acknowledgment that blacks were human beings, made in God's image, descended like whites from Adam and Eve, with souls eligible for salvation, they could not simply argue that blacks were morally of no account.[21] But people find it al-

19 Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified."

20 Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings."

21 Polygenist theories, according to which blacks were a distinct and inferior species or subspecies to whites, were only just beginning before the Civil War, and were largely rejected by Southerners, who stuck with Biblical morality and rejected scientific theories inconsistent with Genesis. See Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery*, 16, 206–7.

most impossible to accept that a practice upon which their whole society depends, on which their status, material existence, and way of life is based, is evil. The motive to see oneself as fundamentally good by the lights of one's own moral standards is very powerful. Cognitive dissonance moves people to rationalize their conduct so as to conform to this self-assessment. And slavery had been an accepted practice in Christian states since antiquity. Thornton Stringfellow expressed the common astonishment of antebellum Southern whites at the abolitionists' arguments that slaveholding was a sin in the eyes of God: if this were really true, how could it have taken seventeen centuries for Christians to have figured this out?[22]

Further biases reinforced their belief that blacks were better off under slavery than freedom. Confirmation bias is the tendency to focus on evidence that confirms the beliefs one already has.[23] Proslavery thinkers relentlessly focused on adult American slaves' material standard of living, particularly with respect to food, shelter, medical care, and security of support in economic recessions, old age, and infirmity. Security of basic subsistence was the one criterion of well-being for which a passable case could be made that American slaves were better off than several classes of very poor free workers in the North and in Europe. Slavery advocates neglected the other dimensions of well-being, such as personal liberty, the rights and dignity of legal personality, and family integrity, where free workers were better off.[24]

Power creates further biases. Occupying a position of unaccountable power tends to lead to ignorance of and indifference to subordinates' interests. The latter fill a role in which they are required to serve one's own interests, not the other way around. Why bother to investigate subordinates' real interests?[25] In addition, whites often had difficulty reading blacks' emotions in their faces. Jefferson complained of the "eternal monotony … that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race."[26]

---

22 Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument," 519.

23 Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias."

24 Eugene Genovese offers an illuminating discussion of this issue in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, I.1.4. A similar case for material standards could not be made for slaves in Brazil and the Caribbean, who were worked so hard and provided so little that they could not sustain their populations.

25 Fiske, "Controlling Other People," 621–8.

26 Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia 11," 50.

Slaves often went to great lengths to hide their emotions from slaveholders and overseers. Adam Smith criticized whites for concluding from this that blacks had no deep feelings. He argued that they were "impenetrable" because their customs demanded stoic virtue: in Africa, they could gain nothing from revealing their suffering, but had to show that they could bear up under terrible pain. This was a function of circumstance, not innate differences. Far from denigrating Africans as unfeeling brutes, Smith argued that their stoicism should be admired.[27] It is easy to see, however, how whites with a stake in slavery would interpret the stony visage of a slave being whipped as a sign of insensibility rather than supreme self-command.

Frederick Douglass argued that similar conditions to those that Smith attributed to Africa were established by slaveholders, and explained why slaves hid their feelings from their masters:

> The man, unaccustomed to slaveholding, would be astonished to observe how many foggable offenses there are in the slaveholder's catalogue of crimes; and how easy it is to commit any one of them, even when the slave least intends it.… A mere look, word, or motion, a mistake, accident, or want of power, are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied with his condition? It is said, that he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out.[28]

Douglass's account illustrates how objectification bias worked. Slaveholders wanted slaves to be satisfied with their lot, and whipped them whenever they showed dissatisfaction. Hiding distress to avoid punishment, the slaves thereby behaved in ways that slaveholders interpreted as indifference to the indignities and deprivations of slavery.

Slavery worked in even more insidious ways than simply forcing slaves to hide their true feelings. To some degree its norms were internalized by slaves themselves. Eugene Genovese

---

27 "There is not a negro from the coast of Africa who does not possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes … to wretches … whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished" (Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, v.1.19).

28 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 260.

argues that whites' massive self-deception in thinking that they were benevolent paternalists to helpless slaves was encouraged by black attitudes that "embraced much more than dissembling," which were rooted "in a genuine intimacy." Many slaves expressed gratitude to masters who treated them "kindly" – that is, less abusively than they were entitled to treat them within the institution of slavery. By infantilizing their slaves – depriving them of education and autonomy, enforcing material dependency, and encouraging drunkenness and dissolution during the Christmas holidays, to make them feel they were unfit for freedom – masters cultivated a psychological dependency in their slaves that made them slavish – submissive, obedient, humble, timid – and thereby confirmed their view that blacks were fit to be slaves, a view that slaves themselves sometimes accepted.[29]

No one was more acutely aware of the ways slavery caused blacks to behave in ways that reinforced white racial objectification than abolitionist David Walker:

> Have we, in consequence of oppression, nearly lost the spirit of man, and, in no very trifling degree, adopted that of brutes?… How could Mr. Jefferson but have given the world these remarks respecting us, when we are so submissive to them, and so much servile deceit prevails among ourselves – when we so meanly submit to their murderous lashes …?[30]

Walker also understood what it would take to overcome this bias: "unless we try to refute Mr. Jefferson's arguments respecting us, we will only establish them."[31]

---

29 Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 134. For additional evidence of slaves' internalization, see generally pp. 123–149, although Genovese stresses that slaves' acceptance of slavery was highly conditional and reflected a distinct perspective from their masters. Laurence Thomas argues that gratitude can be induced even in the context of oppressive institutions in "American Slavery and the Holocaust," 203–4. On infantilization, see Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*: "All the license allowed, appears to have no other object than to disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom, and to make them as glad to return to their work, as they were to leave it" (255).

30 Walker and Garnet, *Walker's Appeal*, 37, 39.

31 Walker and Garnet, *Walker's Appeal*, 26.

4. Early Free Labor Experiments (1): Liberal Hypothesis and Experiments in Living

LET US RECALL THE CENTRAL FEATURES of pragmatism as a moral epistemology. In general, societies are not moved to critical reflection on the moral beliefs instituted in everyday practices except when they come under challenge: when people find their usual practices impossible to continue or at risk of dissolution, or discover that these practices have unforeseen bad consequences, or confront interpersonal disagreements over their legitimacy or their application to cases at hand. Such challenges, if powerful enough, interrupt habits of conformity and prompt practical deliberation. Deliberation begins with the prevailing moral beliefs of society, and seeks methods of intelligent updating. Two important methods are as follows. First, we can ask whether these beliefs reflect moral biases, and undertake actions to block or counteract the operation of those biases. Second, we can consider the interpersonal problem that the prevailing moral practices are trying to solve, and experiment with alternative ways of solving that problem – alternative moral institutions – to see whether they cope with it more effectively. In the course of experimentation, new consequences and possibilities come in view, which may lead us to refine our understanding of the problem that needs to be solved and what would count as a good solution.

Considering slavery in this light, we have identified a core problem it was established to solve: the problem of civilization, of ensuring that a sufficient (and growing) surplus of food is grown to support an advanced (and progressing) division of labor. And we have identified some moral biases its rationale incorporated, the most important of which, for purposes of the current lecture, is whites' racial objectification of blacks: whites' projection onto blacks, as innate characteristics, the dispositions and limitations that would make them fit for slavery, reinforced by the coercion of slavery itself, which forced slaves to act in ways that confirmed whites' desires and ideas of what blacks were good for, and deprived them of the means of transcending the limitations imposed on them.

During the eighteenth century, people began to challenge slavery on the basis of relatively new moral ideas, including alternative interpretations of Biblical morality, claims of natural rights, and ideals of sympathy.[32] A survey of them all is well beyond the scope of this

32 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, provides the most comprehensive account of the new moral ideas that inspired challenges to slavery.

lecture. Here I focus on the key idea that undermined the case for slavery from *inside* proslavery thought. Adam Smith was the key figure.

Smith rejected the widespread belief that force was required to get workers to produce more than subsistence. He famously argued that high wages were the key to high productivity. "The liberal reward of labour … increases the industry of the common people." The desire to improve their condition will spur people to work harder if they are paid more. Free labor is more productive than slave labor, because free workers have the opportunity to gain from producing more than their own subsistence. Landowners choose slaves to cultivate their land not because this is more productive, but because the profits on the crops they grow are high enough to enable landowners to indulge their pride by exercising dominion over their workers, rather than having to persuade them, as they would have to do if their workers were free. Instead of maximizing profits, slaveholders maximize their vanity.[33]

Smith advanced a claim that, if vindicated, would destroy the case for slavery based on the argument from civilization. The early post-emancipation labor regimes were viewed as experiments in living that tested Smith's hypothesis. When Edward Stanley, the British Colonial Secretary, introduced the emancipation resolution of 1833 to the House of Commons, he called it a "mighty experiment" in free labor for the British West Indies.[34] Haiti had already been studied as such an experiment, as it was the first country in the New World to abolish slavery in the aftermath of a massive slave revolt. The United States also conducted several free labor experiments during the Civil War, in plantations occupied by the Union Army as it took over Confederate territory.

From the standpoint of state officials and landowners, these early free labor experiments were testing whether civilization could progress without forced labor. They saw success as hinging on two questions. First, would free labor prove to be more productive than slave labor, as Smith argued? Second, would the slaves prove themselves "fit for freedom" – that is, behave in a civilized manner, as industrious, self-improving, law-abiding workers?

Frederick Douglass ridiculed the idea that emancipation should be regarded as an experiment. This orientation reflected a refusal to accept blacks as rational human beings:

---

33 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 1.8.43.

34 Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 123.

> It is one of the strangest and most humiliating triumphs of human selfishness and prejudice over human reason, that it leads men to look upon emancipation as an experiment, instead of being, as it is, the natural order of human relations. Slavery, and not Freedom, is the experiment; and to witness its horrible failure we have to open our eyes ….[35]

Nevertheless, he understood that whites saw emancipation as an experiment, and that overcoming white prejudice would require blacks to demonstrate their own capacities. Moreover, blacks looked upon emancipation as something of a test, not of their own character but of the character of the societies in which they lived. Their question was: Would emancipation deliver real freedom to blacks?

The terms in which the early post-emancipation labor regimes were being tested were morally loaded: civilization, freedom, forced labor, fitness for freedom. From a pragmatist point of view, this is proper: morally relevant inquiry needs to be framed in the terms that people care about. While these terms are contested, pragmatists argue that their content can be fruitfully refined through reflections on experiments in living. Such experiments generate new information that can improve our conceptions of what the realization of ideals of civilization and freedom would amount to in current conditions.

While experiments in living generate new, morally relevant information, they are difficult both to run and to interpret. They are hard to run, because, unlike laboratory experiments, it is impossible to control for other important factors affecting the outcome. Some of these factors are circumstantial, involving problems in the external environment that affect outcomes independently of the experimental changes being implemented.[36] Others arise internally, from the fact that the participants in the experiment often disagree about its goals,

---

35 Douglass, "The Future of the Negro People of the Slave States," 483.

36 An experiment can be so overwhelmed with adverse circumstances as to render it useless. Such was the case with the free labor experiment Britain ran in Sierra Leone, funded by abolitionists and populated by poor blacks from Britain and Canada (many of whom had been American slaves who had been promised their freedom for defending Britain in the American Revolution). Sited in terrain unsuited to agriculture, governed by an undemocratic, untested, loopy constitution, beset by disease and incompetent white leadership, equipped with supplies that rotted and rusted in the hot, rainy climate, attacked by France as well as the local tribe, it was unable to export crops of any value to the Empire. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 2312–22, 2737–80, 3276–301, 3900–3.

work at cross-purposes, or even seek its defeat. Not only the operation but the interpretation of experiments in living is also often contested, due to background disagreements in values and interests, and differences in perception and reasoning colored by cognitive biases. This section will consider challenges in *running* the early free labor experiments. The next section will consider contests over their *interpretation*.

The key internal conflicts focused on the practical content of freedom in a post-emancipation labor system. To the freed people in all post-emancipation regimes, freedom entailed not being under the subjection of a boss. For the vast majority, this required a realistic prospect of landownership, so that, with a few years of labor at good wages, any black family would be able to save enough to purchase a plot and become a yeoman farmer, or at least a peasant proprietor. For the planters and most government policymakers, freedom meant minimal abolition. They hoped that the plantation system would survive intact, with gangs of workers driven to grueling, relentless labor under the discipline of an overseer. Critical to this goal was continued control over the duration and intensity of freed people's labor, and attempts to limit their independent access to land. In Haiti, Jamaica, and the United States, conflicts between the freed people and planter interests led to different outcomes.

Haiti. A pivotal episode in the Haitian Revolution reveals how sharply the freed people differed from planters and policymakers over the meaning of freedom. The National Convention appointed Étienne Polverel and Léger-Félicité Sonthonax as Civil Commissioners to the colony of Saint-Domingue, to restore order and control over during the slave revolt. Polverel governed the West and South, Sonthonax the North. Both had to offer the slaves freedom to win them to France's side in the ongoing civil war, against the attempts by Britain and Spain to take the colony. In 1794, Polverel promulgated labor policies for the abandoned plantations confiscated by France. He initially set the compensation for the freed people at one third of the net revenue of the plantation, with two thirds going to the owner. He based this rate on a six day workweek. The freed people wanted Saturday off as well – a half day more than what was promised but never implemented by the 1784 reforms to the *Code Noir*. While assuring them that, as free people, they could choose how long they would work, Polverel insisted that they bear the entire cost of their leisure. Since each extra day off cost the planter one-sixth of his profits, if they took Saturday off their share would be cut from one-third to one-sixth of the plantation's net output.

> The freedom of the landowner consists in the ability to have his land worked as he wishes, by whomever he wishes, and in the way that he wishes. He would start by evicting the entire lazy work crew from the plantation and hiring day laborers to work his land. He would no longer have to provide shelter or a provision ground to the field hands.… Africans, now you have been educated. Let us see if you will still choose to rest on Saturday ….[37]

Polverel also rejected women's demands for equal wages and workers' claims to the garden plots their former owners had given them so they could grow their own food. Whereas these plots had been a convenience to slaveholders who were thereby spared the expense of buying food for their slaves, now they were a threat to landowners' control over labor, by offering an outlet to free workers to provide for themselves without having to work on the plantations. While Polverel conceded limited gardens to the workers as a continuation of custom, he rejected their demand for larger plots. Sonthonax also asserted control over nominally free workers by binding field hands to one year contracts, limiting their freedom to change plantations, and allowing punishments for violations of work discipline, including stocks and fines up to the worker's entire salary. Toussaint Louverture's 1801 constitution for Saint-Domingue similarly bound workers to the plantations of their former owners, as did his successors Dessalines of Haiti and King Henri Christophe of the northern Kingdom of Haiti.[38]

Such minimal abolitionist policies did not come close to meeting the freed people's aspirations. Alexandre Pétion, who ruled the southern Republic of Haiti, devised a middle way between minimal abolition and the freed people's desire to own their farms. His system, called métayage, was a sharecropping regime that divided the plantations into family plots and ceded decisionmaking autonomy to the freed people concerning the crop mix and the hours, intensity, and content of their labor. While he forbad the sale of plantations in lots smaller than 30 acres, thereby barring the poorest Haitians from buying land, he also paid his troops with land (for lack of money). Pétion's reforms set in motion a process of devolution that ultimately spread to all of Haiti, due to the determination of the freed people to win

37 Dubois and Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 141.

38 Dubois and Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 139–42, 121–5, 46, 66; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 31.

autonomy through landownership. The breakup of plantations into small plots effectively ended sugar cultivation, which requires large-scale production, in Haiti. Jean-Pierre Boyer, the successor to Christophe and Pétion of a reunited Haiti, was the last leader to attempt to restore sugar production. His Code Rural forced unpaid corvée labor for public works, forbad most rural residents from traveling to cities without a pass or seeking occupations other than farming, and specified regulations, such as bans on farm stands, designed to drive small farmers out of business and into plantation labor. By then, however, ownership of land was so widely distributed that the people successfully resisted the Code Rural. They had transformed Haiti into a peasant economy.[39]

Jamaica. As in Haiti, government leaders' desire to preserve a plantation economy led to a post-emancipation labor regime that was far from free. Under "apprenticeship," which lasted from 1834–38, the nominally freed people were still required to work for their former masters without pay for 40.5 hours per week, but could bargain for wages after that point. (In the four- to five-month sugar harvest season, the workweek under slavery was at least 80 hours, compared to just under 70 hours the rest of the year.) Special magistrates replaced drivers, and the treadmill replaced the whip as a means of disciplining fieldworkers, most of whom were women. Reports of torture and rape in the prisons where workers were put on the treadmills created a scandal that accelerated the end of apprenticeship.[40]

At that point, colonial authorities and planters focused on importing indentured servants, to depress free workers' wages, and denying them independent access to land, to ensure planter control over their labor. One Parliamentary commissioner investigating the labor question asked a planter, "What you want is this, that at any moment when it suits your convenience you may be able to put your hand upon the labourer?" The planter replied, echoing Polverel, "Undoubtedly; you could not have better expressed my meaning." Because the sugar mills, to be profitable, needed to be run around the clock during harvest season, the planters needed to enforce intense, continuous labor from their workers, which they could not do if the workers were able to farm on their own. The workers, however, preferred market gardening and fruit cultivation, which could be undertaken on small independent farms.

---

39 Dubois, *Haiti*, 59, 103–4.

40 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 56–64.

While they were willing to work on the plantations for wages, they did so voluntarily only to supplement their farm income or to save enough to buy their own farm; otherwise they would work there only when they had no alternative.[41]

Failures of the sugar plantations accelerated after Parliament, persuaded by arguments for free trade, gradually equalized the sugar duties between their own free sugar and much cheaper slave-grown sugar from Cuba starting in 1846. Now there was not enough demand for wage labor to employ the population, while land lay abandoned and open to division and sale. From a mixed economy of large sugar plantations and small farms, Jamaica gradually converted to largely peasant economy by the early twentieth century.[42]

United States. The United States was the only post-emancipation society in which some state officials enthusiastically promoted the freed people's free labor ideal. This occurred because that ideal – of self-employment, mainly as yeoman farmers – was core Republican party ideology. Moreover, during the Civil War, planter interests lacked significant representation in Congress, due to the secession of most of the slave states. The army undertook free labor experiments partly out of necessity: as it advanced on Confederate territory, slaves abandoned their masters to escape to freedom behind Union lines. This created a humanitarian crisis, as the army was not provisioned to support them. At the same time, however, whites loyal to the Confederacy abandoned their farms and plantations and ran in the other direction. This created a dual opportunity, to employ the "contrabands," as the escaped slaves were called, on abandoned farmland, first, to support themselves, the army, and the U.S. Treasury, and second, to demonstrate their capacity for freedom and self-government. The most important free labor experiments took place in Port Royal, South Carolina, near Charleston, and at Davis Bend, Mississippi. Others were conducted along the Mississippi River, at Natchez, Helena, and other locations. The experiments were run under the dual, often conflicting and shifting authority of the army and the Treasury. At Port Royal, a substantial contingent of abolitionists was also heavily involved.

Edward Pierce, appointed by Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase to investigate Port Royal, argued that the workers should be treated "with sole reference" to preparing them

41 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom,* 196, 200, 143, 173–5.

42 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 117–22, 144–5, 161, 145–7.

for "full privileges of citizens." He opposed leasing the plantations, arguing that this would lead to labor exploitation, as the profit motive would lead the lessees to disregard the long-term interests of the workers. Rather, superintendents should be appointed to operate the plantations as guardians of the workers. John Eaton, appointed by General Grant as General Superintendent of Contrabands for the Department of the Tennessee, expressed a similar goal: "To make the Negro a consciously self-supporting unit in the society in which he found himself, and start him on the way to self-respecting citizenship."[43]

The urgent need to put tens of thousands of contrabands to work for their support made leasing impossible to avoid, however, as people were needed to manage the farms. Blacks were not shut out from opportunities for self-management, however. Eaton gave a preference to small lessees, both black and white, over Northern speculators. Labor cooperatives and a communal farm were also tried. Benjamin Montgomery, the slave of Jefferson Davis's brother Joseph, had been left in charge of his master's large holdings at Davis Bend and continued to operate them during the war. To support those blacks unable to work, Eaton taxed the wages of the able. They recognized the justice of providing support for the dependent, and took pride in doing so from their own earnings. They were also glad to pay the tax because Army officers collected it at the time wages were paid, and thereby ensured that white employers paid the full amount promised in their labor contracts.[44]

At Port Royal, Northern speculators played a prominent role in the leasing system. Edward Philbrick, a Boston businessman, leased land on a large scale with the intent of demonstrating the productivity of free labor growing long-staple cotton, the specialty of the region. His vision of minimal abolition was similar to that of his counterparts in the British colonial office: gang labor, managed by an overseer. His workers, however, resisted the system of highly controlled labor carried over from slavery. Merely replacing the whip with the wage was not enough. They demanded autonomy on the job, in the form of a sharecropping system in which each family would manage itself on its own plot. Philbrick was brought to see the wisdom of this alternative, as it was notable for "inspiring the laborers with a degree

43 Pierce, *The Negroes at Port Royal*, 25–26; Eaton and Mason, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 35.

44 Ross, "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men," 218–22; Eaton and Mason, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 146, 127.

of self-reliance." Other antislavery Northern businessmen pronounced the experiment a success in refuting the proslavery argument from civilization. Bostonian John Murray Forbes reported, "All those engaged in the experiment will testify that the Negro has the same selfish element in him which induces other men to labor, and that with a fair prospect of benefit … he will work like other human beings."[45]

Near the end of the war, the United States needed to decide how to dispose of Port Royal lands confiscated from the rebels. General Rufus Saxton, Superintendent of Freedmen of the Sea Islands of Port Royal, along with abolitionist army chaplain Mansfield French and others, promoted "pre-emption": allowing the freed people (along with whites who had remained loyal to the Union) to stake out their preferred claims in lots of twenty or forty acres, and to assert a right of first purchase at the low price of $1.25 per acre. They thought the freed people had a claim of natural right to the land, since their labor had worked and improved it. In addition, since they had been unjustly enslaved, granting them land at low prices was fitting compensation for decades of unpaid labor. Ownership was also necessary to ensure that the freed people were not reduced to peonage by large landowners. Saxton, with dubious legal backing, hurriedly collected land claims and payments from the freed people while French traveled to Washington to persuade Salmon Chase to issue orders supporting these arrangements. Saxton's plan was to become the radical Republican blueprint for Reconstruction.[46]

Philbrick and other Northern businessmen formed an "anti-pre-emption" camp that insisted on selling the land on the free market to the highest bidder. Writing to William Gannett, another white abolitionist who participated in the Port Royal experiment, Philbrick wrote:

> I don't see the justice of the claim to the soil now made on their behalf by Mr. J. A. Saxton and others …. No race of men on God's earth ever acquired the right to the soil on which they stand without more vigorous exertions than these people have made.… I do not believe in the success of a system of selling to any people any property whatever for less than its market value, with a view to confer a lasting benefit upon them.… The immediate ease which such a course would confer would beget idleness and unthrifty habits…. No man

45 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 80, 141.

46 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 274–93.

> appreciates property who does not work for it, on the same terms with those around him.… [By] paying ten dollars an acre … [they] would be taught a feeling of independence more readily than by being made the recipients of charity.[47]

At Port Royal, the dispute was settled by none other than William Henry Brisbane, who returned to his native Sea Islands as a U.S. Tax Commissioner, sent to collect unpaid taxes on abandoned land by selling it off. Brisbane's principled argument for abolition, which was satisfied with its minimal form, shaped his conception of a just disposition of the land. Brisbane and his fellow Tax Commissioners sold most of it at $11 per acre. Some freed people had acquired legal titles before the sale, and some pooled their savings to buy the land collectively at the new price, but most were shut out.[48]

Across the South, the hope of the freed people to acquire their own land was dashed by President Andrew Johnson, who proclaimed an amnesty for the Confederate rebels and restored their property. Even Benjamin Montgomery at Davis Bend, who had legally purchased his former owner's property, was eventually forced to return it when Reconstruction ended.[49]

Minimal abolition was not to define the freedom the freed people won, however. Although most were rendered landless, they strongly resisted a return to the hated gang labor system. They also refused to work as long and continuously as they had been forced to do under slavery. The large-scale reduction of labor supply from the fields forced landowners to increase the compensation they offered to workers. The effect was comparable to a general strike, although it did not require coordination among workers, because every worker had an overwhelming personal incentive to reduce their labor hours. The freed people used their increased bargaining power not only to demand higher wages, but to demand a fundamental change in the organization of labor, to a sharecropping system. Even after many of the gains of Reconstruction had been clawed back at the end of the nineteenth century, blacks still had achieved a significant form of freedom beyond minimal abolition: a limited autonomy in allocating labor hours among fieldwork, childrearing, housework, and leisure, and in supervising themselves. Sharecropping offered substantially less autonomy than leasing, however.

---

47 Philbrick to Gannet, July 8, 1864, in Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal*, 276–7.

48 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 289–97.

49 Ross, "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men," 228.

Under state laws across the South, sharecroppers (unlike tenants) were defined as employees, and were subject to daily rounds of managerial supervision by the landowner. The major decisions associated with operating one's own farm – determining the acreage to plant, the crop mix, equipment, and improvements – were determined by monopoly merchant creditors who supplied the seeds, fertilizer, and other goods to the sharecroppers. Dictation of the crop mix oppressed sharecroppers, as merchant creditors demanded an inefficiently high acreage in cotton as opposed to food crops, forcing greater borrowing to purchase food, depressing their income, and reinforcing indebtedness.[50]

5. Experiments in Living (2): Conservative vs. Liberal Interpretations

THE LABOR REGIMES THAT EMERGED in post-emancipation societies depended on the ability of freed people to gain access to land. In every case, however, policymakers and planters tested the outcome based on a conception of the progress of civilization in which the freed people would continue to function as primary producers of cash crops. In their view, Smith's argument for free labor would be vindicated only if free labor produced a higher volume of cash crops than slavery did. The British looked especially closely at sugar. Nearly everywhere, sugar production fell after the slaves were freed. In Jamaica, the most important colony of the British West Indies, sugar production dropped by more than fifty percent, comparing the last years of slavery with the years after equalization of sugar tariffs in 1846 put British West Indies sugar in competition with slave-grown sugar in Cuba and Brazil. In Louisiana, it dropped seventy-five percent. In Haiti, it almost disappeared.[51]

Most white observers interpreted the results from the sugar plantations as a devastating refutation of Smith's view. Sugar production per worker was higher for slave labor than free. The key difference between the two labor regimes lay in the continuity of labor. Once cane ripens in the fields, it must be harvested and processed quickly before it spoils. Cuban slaves were driven to work continuously eighteen hours per day, seven days per week, permit-

50 Mandle, "Sharecropping and the Plantation Economy in the United States South," 125; and Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, ch. 8.

51 Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 148; and Engerman, "Comparative Approaches to the Ending of Slavery," 287 table 1.

ting the refineries to operate around the clock. Free Jamaicans were willing to work in this very taxing and dangerous industry only six hours per day, four days per week. Hence, even though, as Smith claimed, free workers were cheaper to hire than slaves, and more productive per hour, the difference in labor hours overwhelmed the advantages of free labor from the planters' point of view.[52]

The Civil War free labor experiments did not fare much better. The 1862 free-labor long-staple cotton yield at Port Royal was 26 pounds per acre, compared to 137 pounds per acre under slavery. Although other factors affected the 1862 yield, including a two-month delay in planting due to the disruptions of the war, loss of the best seeds (because the army sent the 1861 crop to be ginned in New York, where expertise in seed selection was lacking), conscription of the strongest fieldworkers into the army, and lack of incentive due to workers' distrust of Northern cotton agents, who had defrauded them in 1861, the results did not look good for free labor. Even Philbrick, the most successful northern planter, managed only 90 pounds per acre in 1863.[53]

Similar patterns were found in the five U.S. states where cotton was the primary cash crop. Taking into account *all* crops grown in these states, an index of physical crop production per capita dropped from 100 in 1859 to below 60 from 1872–78, and was still at only 83.9 in 1908. Again, this was mainly a function of a drop in total labor hours. Labor productivity probably increased in the immediate post-emancipation era, but the decline in total hours overrode that effect.[54]

Freed people did not only reduce their total labor hours. Wherever they could, they also shifted much of their labor from cash crop to subsistence crop production. Conservatives interpreted these outcomes as confirmation of the theory that blacks were lazy and had no interest in improving their condition through hard work. Officials in the British Colonial Office viewed Jamaicans' abandonment of plantations in favor of subsistence farming on their own plots as a lapse from civilization back into African barbarism. Historian Thomas Carlyle fantasized that food grew so abundantly in the fertile tropics that he credulously ac-

52 Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 203, 206.

53 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 205–6, 304.

54 Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 259 table F3, 47.

cepted the planters' complaint that the freed people of the West Indies only worked a half hour per day to supply their needs. While this claim was absurd, it illustrates the influence of racism on whites' perceptions.[55] Even (white) abolitionists found the decline in work hours on the Jamaican plantations "a serious embarrassment."[56]

Whites' evaluations of blacks' labor efforts were based on a racist double standard. No free white person had ever been willing to labor at the intensity and continuity that blacks had been forced to work under slavery. This was why planters had enslaved blacks. Least of all were planters willing to labor for their own subsistence.

Black leaders did not only offer an alternative interpretation of the data. They gave an epistemic critique of the dominant discussion, arguing that its conclusion would be unreliable if black voices were excluded. Pompée Valentin, Baron de Vastey, secretary to King Henri Christophe of Haiti, objected to denigrating views of Haitian outcomes: "How can they be competent to judge of our differences, if they hear only the clamor and declarations of one party, without the reply and just complaints of the others?" Similarly, Frederick Douglass, speaking of the conduct of the freed people in the United States, observed that "experience proves that it takes more than one class of people to tell the whole truth about matters in which they are interested on opposite sides."[57]

Why, then, did the freed people dramatically reduce their labor on the plantations? There were three main reasons. First, they shifted much of their labor from cash crops to subsistence crops. For the freed people of the Caribbean, this was a matter of sheer survival. Slaves were literally worked to death. In Saint-Domingue, slaves suffered a 5–10% annual death rate from overwork, malnutrition, brutal treatment, and disease. Similar death rates across the Caribbean and Brazil meant that these labor regimes could be sustained only with continuous imports of new slaves from Africa. Vastey extolled Haiti's new agricultural system as "fitted to our wants and worthy of a free people."[58] He credited the Haitian people's shift to a more diversified crop mix, including corn, barley, oats, and potatoes grown for domestic

---

55 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 146; and Carlyle, *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*, 7.

56 Foner, *Nothing but Freedom*, Kindle loc. 637.

57 Vastey, *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers, Concerning Hayti*, 8; and Frederick Douglass, "Address to the People of the United States," 677.

58 Vastey, *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers, Concerning Hayti*, 54.

consumption, for improving the nutritional status of the population. The population figures vindicate Vastey's assessment. In 1790, Haiti's population was about 500,000, overwhelmingly slave, and falling rapidly in the absence of new slave imports. By 1823, one generation after independence, the population had grown to 800,000, and by 1830 to 935,000, nearly all by natural increase.[59]

In the United States, the sole slave economy that supported a natural increase in the slave population, the freed people still had reasons of sheer survival to reduce field labor. Slave women were worked hard in the fields through pregnancy and the postnatal period, leading to low birth weight (a risk for child mortality), reduced breastfeeding, and child neglect. Hence, slave children suffered about twice the mortality rate as the U.S. average through age fourteen. After emancipation, total black labor hours per capita dropped by 28–37%, to about the same level as other free Americans. Women reduced their fieldwork the most, to spend time taking care of their children. Black children's mortality declined dramatically, from about half dying before age five before the Civil War, to a bit more than one-quarter by the late nineteenth century.[60]

A second reason why black labor effort devoted to cash crop production fell in post-emancipation experiments was that it wasn't reliably paid. In Jamaica by the mid-1940s, free black plantation wages were below subsistence. The freed people had to support themselves by other means. The Civil War free labor experiments also suffered from inconsistency and outright fraud. At Port Royal, Northern cotton agents set a precedent of untrustworthiness by defrauding blacks of promised wages. Even among honest managers, cash shortages led to chronic delays in payment. Authority to run the Civil War experiments was divided between the Union army and the Treasury, which disagreed about wage rates, leading to mid-season alterations in promised wages.[61]

---

59 Dubois and Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 13; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 162; Vastey, *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers, Concerning Hayti*, 53–4; and Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 102.

60 Steckel, "A Dreadful Childhood," 428, 440–1, 450; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 6; and Steckel, "The African-American Population of the United States," 473.

61 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 127, 196–200; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 66; and Eaton and Mason, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 153–4.

The third and most important reason for reducing labor on cash crop production was that the freed people desired autonomy. They wanted to be rid of the oppressive overseers, who demanded a relentless, grueling pace of labor. They wanted to decide how to spend their time and had far better things to spend it on.

The freed people and their radical Republican and abolitionist allies contested the absurdly narrow test of fitness for freedom set by conservatives. Laura Towne, one of the white abolitionists who participated in the Port Royal experiment as a teacher, saw the test as an excuse for oppressive labor management: "they have only changed the mode of compulsion. They force men to prove they are fit to be free by holding a tyrant's power over them."[62] Fitness for freedom should be vindicated through blacks' demonstrating their capacity to successfully participate in the full range of activities deemed suitable for free people. Observers consistently noted the freed people's desire for education. Adults and children alike studied their lessons assiduously. William Gannett observed, "The Negroes … will do anything for us, if we will only teach them."[63] The teachers judged that their ability to learn was on a par with white children. Eaton noted that they eagerly obtained legal marriage when they got the chance, and that this raised their morale. He also appointed black men as sheriffs and judges, observing their shrewdness in judgment. Most importantly from the standpoint of prevailing values, blacks vindicated their claims to citizenship through courageous service as soldiers in the Union Army.[64]

Despite all of this counterevidence, with respect to narrowly economic issues, the dominant white opinion held that blacks had failed the test: Smith's optimism about the productivity of free *black* labor, at least, were refuted. It was true that Smith had not recognized how spectacularly profitable slavery was *to the slaveholder*. Slavery in the Americas was not, as Smith had supposed, a throwback to feudalism, in which the masters neglected profits for the sake of glorying in absolute dominion over their subjects. Slaveholders were as profit-oriented as any employer of free labor.

---

62 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 176.

63 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 86.

64 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 85, 232, 260–66; Eaton and Mason, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 34–5, 165, 208; and Pierce, *The Negroes at Port Royal*, 18.

Yet slavery could be judged profitable *overall* only on a perverted accounting that ignored the costs it imposed on workers and their families. This was hardly in accord with Smith, who asserted that "the property which every man has in his own labour … is the most sacred and inviolable."[65] The free labor regime was compensating workers for the use of their labor, which slaveholders had stolen from them. Slavery in the Caribbean, which depended on constant African imports, involved an additional unaccounted cost to Africans of stealing their children and their childrearing labor. The free-traders' argument in 1846, which won passage of the bill equalizing tariffs for free and slave-grown sugar on the principle of open competition, was therefore inconsistent. Free trade is nonsensical in the absence of background enforcement of property rights. One may as well argue that free trade demands unregulated competition between a manufacturer and a gang of thieves who sell goods stolen from the manufacturer's warehouse.

Conservatives' narrow focus on production of cash crops for export – mainly sugar and cotton – was an idée fixe that also contradicted Smith's principles. On his view, the most efficient crop mix was that brought about by producers freely choosing what to grow, responding to incentives on a competitive market. By that standard, the freed people were as rationally market-oriented as anyone else. Their preference for growing varied produce reflected the fact that they could make more money that way. At Port Royal, long-staple cotton production had always been a risky proposition, bringing great fortunes some years, catastrophic losses in others. After the 1861 ginning, which failed to return the best seeds to Port Royal, but rather sold them to distant producers, the Sea Islands lost their competitive edge. Freed people who got the chance to choose their crop mix turned to truck farming because it paid more than cotton. After Reconstruction, observers argued that the stagnation of Southern agriculture was due to its excessive concentration on cotton, an outcome dictated by monopoly merchant creditors who controlled the crop mix to their advantage. Modern economic historians have confirmed that farmers would have prospered more from a more diverse crop mix. Jamaican workers, too, made more money growing varied foods for the local market than working for wages on the plantations. Far from reverting to barbaric bare subsistence

65 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I.10.2.12.

farming, as Carlyle and other racists imagined, Jamaicans preferred already developed land close to markets, schools, and urban amenities, not squatter settlements in the hills.[66]

The advocates of minimal abolition, who insisted that free market principles dictated that blacks would be more productive as wage laborers employed by white plantation owners than as independent farmers, also had not read Smith carefully. Smith argued otherwise: independent workers will be more industrious than wage workers, because they get to keep all the fruits of their labor, rather than having to share it with their employer. Observers in Jamaica and the United States repeatedly confirmed Smith's view with respect to the freed people: the ones who farmed independently were more industrious and more successful than those who worked for wages. Eaton even claimed that black lessees made more money than comparably situated whites, in part because they elicited better work from black employees. As for black wage workers, observers noted, in accordance with Smith's predictions, that they worked harder when they were paid honestly, reliably, and well, and that employers who complained of poor work effort also cheated their workers.[67]

Some whites were of two minds – hopeful for good results from free labor, but still dreading the imagined backward-bending supply curve. This led to contradictory tendencies in the implementation of free labor experiments. Philbrick offered cut-priced goods to his workers, hoping that they would acquire a taste for "civilized" consumption, so that they would be motivated to work beyond subsistence and support Northern manufacturing. Yet he kept wages low to ensure that they would have to work very hard to afford such goods. Whatever such elaborate price-rigging amounted to, it was hardly a matter of allowing the free play of market forces that Smith advocated.[68]

The contradiction inherent in Philbrick's vision reflected a larger contradiction in the ways many white abolitionists thought about freedom for blacks. Slavery was wrong for the ways it attempted to completely subordinate slaves' wills to that of their masters. Eman-

66 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 124–5, 128, 228, 232, 319, 377, 412; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 149–63; and Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 67, 148, 160.

67 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 1.8.47; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 165; Moneyhon, "From Slave to Free Labor," 151–3, 155; Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 377; and Eaton and Mason, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 163–4.

68 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 302–3.

cipation was supposed to free the slaves to follow their own wills, even when they disagreed with what their former masters wanted them to do. But the narrow test of fitness for freedom, defined in terms of a life wholly occupied with continuous, intensive labor on cash crop production for the profit of white landowners, as it was under slavery, showed how deeply racial objectification still shaped whites' judgments of free blacks. It was hard for them to shake off the conception of blacks as existing to serve whites' desires. Even many abolitionists expressed disappointment in the ways blacks chose to use their freedom.[69] Harriet Ware, one of the teachers at Port Royal, encapsulated the contradiction in a letter: "With all their subserviencey, which I am happy to say is disappearing, they have little idea of obedience."[70]

These contradictory attitudes led many whites to apply a double standard in comparing black conduct to white. Economic historians have found that after emancipation, black labor effort in the fields fell to a level on a par with whites. To whites, however, the fall in black labor effort reflected a laziness supposedly inherent in their race. For them, slavery set the normative baseline of work effort for blacks, even though no free person of any race had ever been willing to work at that level. Philbrick worried that blacks would be demoralized and lose their industry if they could buy land at $1.25 per acre and make money quickly – even though he had bought land at that price and quickly made a fortune. Some of his contemporaries wondered if he were similarly demoralized.[71]

Meanwhile, whites who were obtaining land for free out west under the Homestead Act of 1862 were extolled for their industry. This exposed the core contradiction in many whites' judgments: in condemning blacks who acquired their own farms as lapsing into barbarism and sloth, they turned into a vice for blacks what they extolled as an ideal for whites – independent, self-reliant production. Still judging blacks by the normative baseline of racial objectification, they could not see that blacks who managed to own their own farms and work them as intensively as whites, bringing their surplus to market, were manifesting the same virtues.

---

69 Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 366–74.

70 Pearson, *Letters from Port Royal*, 218.

71 Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 6, 45; and Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 312.

6. Pragmatism, Experiments in Living, and the End of Slavery

PRAGMATISM OFFERS TWO WAYS to intelligently update our moral norms. First, we consider the problem that a given moral norm is supposed to solve, and test alternative solutions to that problem in experiments in living. Second, we mobilize the excluded to counter biases embodied in the solutions that are enforced by the powerful. Did the early emancipation experiments enable the intelligent updating of moral norms regarding labor regimes in these two ways?

We have seen that the results of the early free labor experiments were initially disappointing from the perspective of those who hoped to vindicate free labor from the standpoint of the argument from civilization. However, it takes time for societies to settle on the meanings of the experiments they undertake. Although emancipation reduced total crop production, in the longer view it became evident that the progress of civilization did not hang on maximizing the production of cash crops. Production continued after emancipation; only now those who wanted these crops had to pay more for them. And the importance of cash crops to modern economies shrank as their manufacturing capacities advanced.[72] Thus, the productive capacities of society progressed rapidly without having to rely on slave labor. This success of (relatively) free labor so overwhelmed prior achievements that the argument from civilization was not merely decisively refuted; it was largely forgotten.

Even more importantly, the ideal of civilization itself gradually became more inclusive. The revision of ideals in light of new possibilities made evident by experiments in living is a key part of moral progress from a pragmatist point of view. The progress of civilization came to be understood as requiring that more and more people be able to share in its fruits. A society that kept a large part of its population illiterate clearly fell behind others that supported universal literacy; one that barred marriage and destroyed the integrity of families was less advanced than one that supported these institutions for all. From this perspective, slavery came to be seen as itself a kind of barbarism, rather than a pillar of civilization. John Stuart Mill played a pivotal role in advancing this more inclusive conception of civilization, in his reply to Carlyle's notorious tract against free labor.[73] Resistance to the inclusive view could

72 Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 225.

73 Mill, "The Negro Question," 85–96.

not be credibly advanced once it was shown to be feasible, given that proslavery advocates had long acknowledged that all human beings, including slaves, were entitled to moral consideration, and given slaves' active refutation of slaveowners' delusions that they were happy, demonstrated by their repudiation of slavery in flight, narratives, and armed assaults.

What about racial objectification? Did mobilizing blacks to resist racial bias succeed in correcting the extreme racial objectification embedded in racialized slavery? Here we need to take a longer view, and also differentiate cases. Abolitionism was the late fruit of a confluence of a universalist Enlightenment conception of humanity with Quaker and evangelical Protestant universalism founded on the idea that all humans were "of one blood."[74] After emancipation, these moral reform movements faded, while racist ideology became "scientific" and officially adopted by all the imperialist powers. Nevertheless, one can detect *incremental* corrections of racial objectification in its new forms, as applied to some locations more than others.

Haiti. Of all post-emancipation societies, Haiti was subjected to the most racist interpretations, and the most racist treatment by foreign powers. As the only state to achieve emancipation by means of a slave revolt in which nearly all whites were either killed or driven into exile, Haiti was portrayed as the proof of the bloodthirsty savagery of blacks let loose on civilized society. The Haitian Revolution sent shudders across the United States, seemingly confirming Jefferson's prediction of race war if the slaves were to be freed. Its subsequent fall from the richest colony in the Americas to abject poverty and permanent political instability was widely taken by whites to confirm their beliefs that blacks had reverted to slothful barbarism and were incapable of self-government. Baron de Vastey criticized these interpretations:

> Our faults have given strength to the unfavorable disposition of our enemies, and hardened them in their odious prejudices. They are unwilling to ascertain the source of these faults, of which they are the first cause.[75]

74 Goodman, *Of One Blood*.

75 Vastey, *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers, Concerning Hayti*, 37.

There is much truth in Vastey's complaint. The fundamental attribution error is deeply embedded in racist thought, which also refuses to investigate another component of racial objectification – the ways racist practices cause the problems attributed to deficient black character. Under Louverture's Constitution of 1801, Haiti rejected racial distinctions and embraced equality under the law. Genocidal race war was initiated by *Napoleon,* who, aiming to reimpose slavery on Haiti, recognized that this would require elimination of the present inhabitants, who would never accept enslavement, and importation of fresh slaves from Africa. Louverture's successor Dessalines, who drove out or killed the white planters to defeat Napoleon's plan, did not aim to eliminate all whites. He explicitly included whites of German and Polish descent, and white women who were naturalized Haitian citizens and their children, under the protection of his 1805 Constitution – only he declared them officially black, to eliminate racial distinctions among the citizens of Haiti.[76]

After independence, Haiti was refused diplomatic recognition and survived under the shadow of threats of military attack, fear of which led Haiti's leaders to ruinous expenditures on fortifications, which also entrenched the supremacy of the military over civilians. Haiti was able to attain international recognition only by signing a grossly exploitative treaty with France, under which it was forced to borrow 150 million francs at usurious interest rates to compensate the former slaveholders. Haiti's indebtedness only got worse over time, so that half of Haiti's budget went to paying French banks in 1898, increasing to eighty percent in 1914. Gunboat diplomacy extorted many more millions from the Haitians in this period. Whatever Haiti's internal faults, France and foreign powers (including the United States in the twentieth century) were determined to forcibly extract as much wealth from Haiti as it could bear.[77]

If there is a lesson in Haiti, it is that objectified and oppressed people have little chance of correcting the biased perceptions used to justify their oppression if they are too weak and distant to effectively communicate, in practical terms, rival representations. The cases of Jamaica and the United States offer somewhat more hopeful nineteenth-century stories.

---

76 Dubois and Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 159–66, 168, 193; and Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 290–93.

77 Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, 4–9, 204–5.

Jamaica. James Anthony Froude, a follower of Carlyle, traveled to the West Indies in 1885. Writing in his journal on his Atlantic voyage, he repeated all of Carlyle's racist stereotypes of primitivism and sloth that he expected to see. Yet when he landed, he noticed that the natives, although they preferred to avoid wage labor, worked hard in their own farms. He could find no grounds for complaint. "We, too, only work as much as we like or as we must, and we prefer working for ourselves to working for others." Meeting an accomplished black jurist, he cited him as evidence that, given "the same chances and with the same treatment … distinguished men would be produced equally from both races."[78]

Although Froude was unable to discard the racist ideology that underpinned British imperialism even when faced with counterevidence, Thomas Holt describes his incremental advance as a "prologue" to Britain's turn-of-the-century recognition of the progressive potential of the economic model Jamaican blacks had been building since emancipation: cultivation by independent peasant-proprietors of subsistence crops, plus fruit for export. Britain finally affirmed the capacity of blacks to own and operate their own enterprises, as part of an economically progressing society. While Holt shows that the ideological transformations required to generate this recognition were convoluted, it could not have occurred without the assiduous work of Jamaicans demonstrating its actual viability. Britain was unwilling to concede political self-determination to blacks. But its concession of economic self-determination represented a significant correction of a mode of racial objectification that previously could not concede blacks' capacities for economic autonomy. "Jamaican peasants, defamed as indolent savages by the racial ideologists at mid-century, were apparently reclaimed as self-interested economic actors by the new imperialists of the late nineteenth century."[79]

United States. The end of Reconstruction marked a profound racist retrenchment and retreat from the racial egalitarianism embodied in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Yet, this backsliding did not undo all progress that had been made since emancipation, either in practice or in ideology. The racial objectification needed to justify slavery as a benefit to blacks had been extreme to the point of absurdity.

---

78 Froude, *The English in the West Indies*, 211–12, 124. Thomas Holt has a penetrating discussion of Froude in *The Problem of Freedom*, 312–18.

79 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 317.

Proslavery whites had convinced themselves that blacks were so incapable of taking care of themselves, so childlike and dependent that they would die off if left on their own to compete with whites. Blacks' contestation of attempts to reimpose the functional equivalent of slavery in the form of minimal abolition after the war won them limited autonomy in the sharecropping system. Unable to enforce their view that blacks were unfit for anything better, whites eventually conceded the superiority of sharecropping. Observers noted that sharecroppers worked harder than gang laborers, and were less likely to desert the fields before the cotton had to be picked. Overseers were not needed in the sharecropping system – a concession that blacks were fit for the greater autonomy this system afforded them.[80]

Let us return to the case of William Henry Brisbane. Had emancipation proceeded on the basis of the reasoning of white abolitionists alone, the likely result would have been Brisbane's vision of minimal abolition. This was in fact what he aimed to achieve as a Tax Commissioner in Port Royal. White British abolitionists, too, supported coolie laborers, treated only marginally better than slaves, as an acceptable substitute.[81] Even the black leadership of Haiti tried to impose virtual serfdom on the freed people. The active participation of slaves and freed people in the moral transformation of post-emancipation societies produced different results from those envisioned and rationalized by elites. The freed people won substantially greater autonomy than elites would have otherwise conceded to them. And the uses they made of their freedom forced incremental corrections to the extreme racial objectification that rationalized their subjection. Bit by bit, they won *recognition* from elites of greater capacities than they had acknowledged before.

What can we learn today from this story? *A priori* reasoning by the powerful and privileged, concerning the rights, duties, and powers of subordinates, is systematically unreliable. It is likely to reflect the interests and desires of the powerful more than those of subordinates, and liable to rationalize itself by objectifying subordinates: representing them as fit for service to the powerful, and unfit for higher stations in life. More reliable moral inquiry enlists the participation of all affected parties. It contests people's biases in action, not just in argument. And it tests moral norms in experience, not only in thought experiments. These are

80 Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 95–7.

81 Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, 208.

the fundamental insights of pragmatism as a moral methodology, as important today as in the age of emancipation.

Acknowledgments

I thank participants at the Amherst Lecture in Philosophy, as well as those at the Havens Center for the Study of Social Justice at University of Wisconsin, Madison, where I delivered a later version of this lecture, and colleagues at University of Michigan, including Sarah Buss, Rebecca Scott, and Jamie Tappenden, for helpful comments. Research for this lecture was supported by the American Council of Learned Societies.

Bibliography

Anderson, Elizabeth. "The Epistemology of Democracy." *Episteme* 3, nos. 1–2 (June 2006): 8–22.

Brisbane, William. *Slaveholding Examined in the Light of the Holy Bible*. Philadelphia, 1847.

———. *Speech of the Rev. Wm. H. Brisbane, Lately a Slaveholder in South Carolina: Containing an Account of the Change in His Views on the Subject of Slavery*. Hartford: S. S. Cowles, 1840.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*. 2nd ed. London: Thomas Bosworth, 1853.

Christy, David. "Cotton is King: Or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy." In Elliott, *Cotton is King*.

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966.

Dew, Thomas. "Abolition of Negro Slavery." *American Quarterly Review* 12 (September–December 1832): 189–265.

Dewey, John. "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." In *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, edited by JoAnn Boydston. Vol. 14, *1939–1941: Essays, Reviews, and Miscellany*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.

———. *Freedom and Culture*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939.

———. *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: H. Holt and Company, 1927.

Douglass, Frederick. "Address to the People of the United States, Delivered at a Convention of Colored Men, Louisville, Kentucky." In *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Philip Foner. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999.

———. "The Future of the Negro People of the Slave States." In *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Philip Foner. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999.

———. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855.

Drescher, Seymour. *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Dubois, Laurent. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

———. *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012.

Dubois, Laurent and John D. Garrigus. *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789–1804: A Brief History with Documents*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Eaton, John and Ethel Osgood Mason. *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

Elliott, E. N., ed. *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*. Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott and Loomis, 1860.

Engerman, Stanley. "Comparative Approaches to the Ending of Slavery." *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 2 (August 2000): 281–300.

Faust, Drew Gilpin. *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

Fiske, Susan. "Controlling Other People: The Impact of Power on Stereotyping." *American Psychologist* 48 (1993): 621–8.

Fitzhugh, George. *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters*. Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857.

Foner, Eric. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

———. *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007.

Froude, James Anthony. *The English in the West Indies*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900.

Garrison, William Lloyd. "Divine Authority of the Bible." In *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison*. Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1852.

Genovese, Eugene. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

Goodman, Paul. *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Hammond, James Henry. "Letters on Slavery." In *The Proslavery Argument as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States*. Charleston: Walker, Richards and Co., 1852.

———. "Speech in the Senate, March 4, 1858." *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session. Appendix: 68–71.

Harper, William. "Slavery in Light of Social Ethics." In Elliott, *Cotton is King*.

Haslanger, Sally. "On Being Objective and Being Objectified." In *A Mind of One's Own*, edited by Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993.

Hepburn, John. *The American Defence of the Christian Golden Rule, or An Essay to Prove the Unlawfulness of Making Slaves of Men*. [New York?], 1715.

Hochschild, Adam. *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Holt, Thomas. *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Hughes, Henry. *Treatise of Sociology, Theoretical and Practical*. Philadelphia, 1854.

Jefferson, Thomas. "Notes on Virginia 11." In *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Paul Leicester Ford. Vol. 4. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905.

Mandle, Jay. "Sharecropping and the Plantation Economy in the United States South." In *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers*, edited by T. J. Byres. London: Frank Cass, 1983.

Mill, John Stuart. "The Negro Question." In *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited by John Robson. Vol. 21. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Moneyhon, Carl. "From Slave to Free Labor: The Federal Plantation Experiment in Arkansas." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (summer 1994): 137–60.

Nickerson, Raymond. "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises." *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175–220.

Orren, Karen. *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Pearson, Elizabeth, ed. *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War*. Boston: W. B. Clarke Co., 1906.

Pierce, Edward. *The Negroes at Port Royal: Report of E. L. Pierce, Government Agent, to the Hon. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury*. Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1862.

Ransom, Roger and Richard Sutch. *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Ross, Lee. "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 10, edited by Leonard Berkowitz. New York: Academic Press, 1977.

Ross, Steven. "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men: John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment." *Journal of Southern History* 44, no. 2 (May 1978): 213–32.

Rose, Willie Lee. *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.

Schmidt, Fredrika and Barbara Wilhelm. "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia." *William and Mary Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 1973): 133–46.

Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. 5th ed., edited by Edwin Cannan. London: Methuen and Co., 1904.

———. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Solomon, Miriam. *Social Empiricism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

Steckel, Richard. "The African-American Population of the United States, 1790–1920." In *A Population History of North America*, edited by Michael Haines and Richard Steckel. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

———. "A Dreadful Childhood: The Excess Mortality of American Slaves." *Social Science History* 10, no. 4 (winter 1986): 427–65.

Stringfellow, Thornton. "The Bible Argument, or Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation." In Elliott, *Cotton is King*.

Thomas, Laurence. "American Slavery and the Holocaust: Their Ideologies Compared." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (April 1991): 191–210.

Thornwell, James. *The Rights and Duties of Masters*. Charleston: Steam-Power Press of Walker and James, 1850.

Tucker, St. George. *Dissertation on Slavery With a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It, in the State of Virginia*. Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1796.

Vastey, Pompée Valentin, baron de. *Political Remarks on Some French Works and Newspapers, Concerning Hayti*. London: The Pamphleteer, 1818.

Walker, David and Henry Highland Garnet. *Walker's Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life by Henry Highland Garnet*. New York: J.H. Tobitt, 1848.

Wayland, Francis. *Elements of Moral Science*, 2nd ed. New York: Cooke and Co., 1835.

Weld, Theodore Dwight. *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry Into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights*. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1837.