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## "A Monstrous Inconsistency": Slavery, Ideology and Politics in the Age of the American Revolution

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**“A MONSTROUS  
INCONSISTENCY”: SLAVERY,  
IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN THE  
AGE OF THE AMERICAN  
REVOLUTION**

**F**ROM THE OPPOSITE ENDS of American history has come the belief that the democratic philosophy on which the nation has been founded and built contained an irreversible and irresistible momentum. In the United States, Gunnar Myrdal contended during World War II, the contradiction between the facts of racial oppression and the philosophy of the Declaration of Independence would ultimately resolve the race question. Myrdal's optimism sprung from his belief that the nation had “the most explicitly expressed system of general ideals” of any country in the Western world. The “American Creed,” centered around the twin ideals of equality and liberty, was understood and accepted by all Americans. At its essence, then, the black image in the white mind was a problem in the heart of America, a profoundly felt moral conundrum, a genuine American dilemma, and therein lay America's best hope for ameliorating and ultimately abolishing race-based inequality.<sup>1</sup>

During the Revolutionary Era the natural rights philosophy with its universalist assertion that all men had a natural right to be free seemed to argue strongly for an end to Negro slavery. In his study of the origins and meaning of black debasement in America, Winthrop Jordan argued that white Americans of the Revolutionary generation could hardly escape the realization that they were indulging a monstrous inconsistency when they insisted on liberty for themselves while denying it to a largely black group in their very midst. Even before

<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Vol. I (Harper and Row, 1944), Intro., Ch. 1; John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: the Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 249-250.

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the Declaration of Independence, Quaker antislavery advocates were crying out the theme of inconsistency. However, the chorus of black and white indignation was given a real fillip by Jefferson's eloquent digest of the natural rights philosophy in 1776. The effect, easily overlooked, was the secularization of equality. This momentous shift, as Jordan noted in his 1968 study, carrying forward the optimism that Myrdal had expressed a generation earlier, was destined to have the most far-reaching effects upon white attitudes toward blacks. For Americans of the eighteenth century, the shift served to dramatize just how flagrantly slavery violated the new ideal of a society composed of equal individuals, and therefore of individuals who should be set free.<sup>2</sup>

But what of the period between? Was there not, as legend would have it, an interlude of redeeming virtue in the mid-nineteenth century when white Americans, inspired by antislavery crusaders, put aside their racism, rededicated themselves to their ideals of equality and waged a heroic war for freedom and a temporarily successful campaign for racial equality after the war?<sup>3</sup>

Historians, Edward Hallett Carr has reminded us, are a part of history; and the point in the procession at which they find themselves determines their angle of vision. To put it less exaltedly, the writer's "cultural moment", the "climate of opinion" in which he writes, goes a long way in explaining why fashions in historical interpretation come and go. Myrdal, writing on the eve of the Allied victory over totalitarianism, was clearly too optimistic. For the better part of a century and a half, white Americans had managed to contain the contradiction between the facts of racial oppression and the philosophy of the Declaration of Independence. The American dilemma, whose external manifestations Myrdal examined so exhaustively, was not centered in the hearts and minds of white Americans. Before the legal changes wrought by the civil rights movement, most non-blacks would probably have been quite content to see *de jure* segregation in the South and *de facto* segregation in the North continue more or less indefinitely. And the history of race relations in the nation following the crusade to abolish Jim Crow forces the realization that the "second reconstruction" has resulted in no great revolution in race relations. Despite all the physical evidences of a change in race relations post 1954, the white soul has not been revolutionized. The experience of the past three decades has taught us that bodies are more easily mixed than are minds.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Penguin Books, 1969[1968]), Ch.7, "Self-Scrutiny in the Revolutionary Era."

<sup>3</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North/South Dialogue* (Oxford University Press, 1983[1964]), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Cell, *The Highest State of White Supremacy*, Ch. 9 *passim*; Edward H. Carr, *What is History?* (Knopf, 1962), 43; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Rela-*

If Myrdal was too optimistic, so too has been our faith in the belief that for a time, in the middle years of the nineteenth century, large numbers of Americans rededicated themselves to their founding ideals. The revisionist scholarship of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods has convincingly demonstrated that the boldly revolutionary aim of racial equality, the so-called "third war aim," was a myth; the outbreak of the Civil War actually *increased* the virulence of Northern and Midwestern racism, for it opened up the prospect of an inundation of both areas by fugitive and liberated slaves. The primary war aims then were the preservation of the Union, and the destruction of the institution of slavery. In the eyes of Abraham Lincoln, and the other anti-extensionists, slavery was a "vast moral evil"—Lincoln's phrase—not because it degraded Negroes, but because it was a blight on the American experiment in popular government and a genuine threat to the preservation of the Union and to what the Union represented and symbolized throughout the world.

If the "interlude of virtue" thesis does not hold for the antebellum period, it is equally a misleading characterization for the dozen years of Reconstruction. It may be true, as Kenneth Stampp has argued, that according equality to ex-slaves was one of the mainsprings of Congressional radicalism, and that the Fourteenth Amendment was passed to protect Negro civil rights. But Stampp also recognized that the Radical position on Negro rights went far beyond what the average white American, North or South, was prepared to accept. Moreover, notes Stampp, the real question remains how the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment *defined* civil rights, and he concluded that *only a minority of the Radicals* regarded the exclusion of Negroes from jury service, or state-mandated anti-miscegenation laws, or even segregation of Negroes in public places and on public conveyances, as a violation of their civil rights. In a word, emancipation did not commit Southerners to a policy of racial equality. Rather, they assumed that the former slaves would be an inferior caste, exposed to legal discrimination, denied political rights, and subjected to social discrimination. They had every reason to assume this because these, by and large, were the policies of most of the northern states toward their free Negro populations and because the racial attitudes of the great majority of Northerners were not much different from their own.<sup>5</sup>

*tions in the American South Since Emancipation* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 521.  
<sup>5</sup> See C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint* (1983), Ch. 5; Jacques Voegeli, *Free But Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago, 1967), 18-29; Stephen B. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myth* (Harper and Row, 1984), 67, 71, 91-93; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction* (Knopf, 1966), 138 ff.; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1980), Ch. 8; Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The*

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However much the American democratic ethos has not functioned as was expected in altering white antipathy toward blacks, we should be depriving ourselves of an important analytical insight if we failed to appreciate how consummate black people have been in exploiting the profound constitutional ambiguities of the American political system. However wide became the discrepancy between professed ideals and reality in America, the founders of the republic established the language, the terms of discourse, the standards of reasonable argument for the future discussion of all social issues in the United States. This fact has made it possible for black Americans to take the moral high ground in their efforts to purge the nation of structural, and in time of attitudinal and behavioral, racism.<sup>6</sup>

If contemporary black leaders have successfully exploited the contradiction between the promise and the reality of America, to what extent, if any, did their eighteenth century forebears, nearly all of whom were slaves, come to see Jefferson's declaration as a black Declaration of Independence? Merely to raise such a question is to presuppose that non-literate groups, including slaves, had an ideology. Although few among the laboring poor expressed ideas systematically in forms that are easily recoverable today, they too had an ideology. Their ideology consisted in their awareness of the surrounding world, their penetration of it through thought, and their reasoned reactions to the forces impinging on their lives. People living in eighteenth-century communities—whether in the cities or in the urban hinterland—linked together as they were by church, tavern, workplace, and family, exchanged views, compared insights, and through their face-to-face associations arrived at certain common understandings of their social situations. They may have comprehended their world imperfectly, but they acted upon reality as they understood it, whether they were university-trained and rich, indentured servants whose unfree status was temporary, or slaves, whose bondage was perpetual.<sup>7</sup>

In asking how Americans of the Revolutionary Era dealt with the contradiction between the ideology of the Revolution, namely the natural rights philosophy which argued that "all men were born free and equal," and slavery, which was the ultimate statement that some were less equal than others, we will have to consider not only the "elite wisdom" of the leaders of colonial society, but also the thought and actions of those in the middle, and those at the bottom of the social order—namely slaves. It will also be well to bear in mind that there was not one, but two, revolutions in America in the eighteenth century: in addition to

*Negro in the Free States*, 1790-1860 (University of Chicago Press, 1961), Chs. 2-5.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Lewis, *The Culture of Inequality* (Meridian, 1978), Foreword.

<sup>7</sup> Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (abridged ed., Harvard University Press, 1986[1979]), Preface.

that which resulted in America's independence, there was the crucial Constitutional revolution which gave the American people a system of government unlike any existing anywhere before. For better or worse, both revolutions were destined to impact significantly on black-white relations far into the nation's future.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult in reflecting on the Revolutionary Generation to know which is more remarkable—that a nation whose population included hundreds of thousands of slaves and whose leadership included slaveowners could have chosen to found its claim to independent nationhood on the proposition that all men were created equal, or that a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal could have permitted the institution of slavery to endure in its midst throughout the Revolutionary period, and far beyond.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the implications of paradox expressed in the previous paragraph, there was nothing novel about the freedom and independence of some men depending upon the coerced labor of others. There is nothing notably "peculiar" about the "peculiar institution," as Orlando Patterson, David Brion Davis, and Edmund S. Morgan have recently reminded us. "Slavery," notes Patterson, "has not only been ubiquitous but turns out to have thrived most in precisely those areas and periods . . . where our conventional wisdom would lead us to expect it least . . ." Americans are understandably distressed when they seek to explain how a Jefferson, one of the most articulate defenders of their freedoms, was himself a large-scale, and largely unrepentant, slaveholder. We assume that slavery should have nothing to do with freedom; that a man (or a culture) who

<sup>8</sup> Robert Palmer reminded us a generation ago that the closing half of the eighteenth century was truly "The Age of the Democratic Revolution," a time when Western Civilization on both sides of the Atlantic "was swept . . . by a single revolutionary movement" that was "essentially 'democratic'." "Democratic," as Palmer made clear, was not to be understood to embrace the universality of suffrage, a criterion of democracy that still lay in the future; rather, it was "a new feeling for a kind of equality, or at least a discomfort with older forms of social stratification . . ." Palmer's study focused on the political consequence of the democratic ferment when pressure from the lower orders began questioning the justice or reasonableness of the established, largely aristocratic order. But inexorably, as existing political authority was undermined, the reverberations, like the after-shocks of an earthquake, were felt throughout the social order variously altering economic and social arrangements, personal attitudes, and moral sensibilities. Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge* (Princeton University Press, 1959), Ch. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765-1820* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), see esp. Ch. 2, "Slavery in the Ideology of the American Revolution."

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holds freedom dearly should not hold slaves without discomfort.<sup>10</sup>

It is essential to acknowledge at the outset that the full magnitude of the paradox between Lockean ideals and social justice is left unmeasured if the contradiction is focused too narrowly on the rise of liberty and equality on the one hand, and the perpetuation of slavery on the other. Had Lockean dicta been applied to all human beings in British North America on the eve of the Revolution, and had all been permitted to enjoy the natural and legal rights of freemen, it would have been necessary to alter the status of more than 85 percent of the population. In law and in fact no more than 15 percent of the Revolutionary generation was free to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness unhampered by any restraints except those to which they had given their consent.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the overriding consideration centers on the conflict, or seeming conflict, between human bondage and the ideology encapsulated in the phrase, "All men are created equal." It is this aspect of the contradiction which many have come to recognize as "the central paradox of American history."<sup>12</sup> It was and remains a paradox central to the American experience not only because the men who came together to found an independent United States either held slaves or were willing to join hands with those who did. The centrality of paradox goes beyond antithesis; slavery, as it developed in the United States, was more than the antithesis of freedom. Slavery, the ultimate denial of freedom, was reserved for a single group—those with black skins; moreover, the loss of freedom was almost certain to last a lifetime, and the condition was heritable. These special circumstances, circumstances unique to the black

<sup>10</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 1982), Preface, pp. vii-xiii. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1966), Ch. 2; David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford University Press, 1984), Intro., Part II, Ch. 4; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1975). Of the Virginia Dynasty Morgan writes, "whatever their complicity in the preservation of slavery [they] cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called depraved." Writing of the affinity between slavery and republicanism, he says: "Virginians may have had a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like. Aristocrats could more safely preach equality in a slave society than in a free one. Slaves did not become levelling mobs, because their owners would see to it that they had no chance to." *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>11</sup> For a chilling account of how ordinary working-class Americans responded to the revolutionary slogans of liberty and freedom, see John van der Zee, *Bound Over: Indentured Servitude and American Conscience* (Simon and Schuster, 1986); also, Linda G. DePauw, "Land of the Unfree: Legal Limitations on Liberty in Pre-Revolutionary America," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 68 (Winter 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 4.

population, imbued the loss of freedom with a distinctive psychological dimension. Those enslaved lost far more than their physical freedom: they had become social non-persons. As Patterson has observed, "slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory."<sup>13</sup>

Despite a long and distinguished tradition of scholarly writing dealing with the Revolutionary era, historians tended to ignore the paradox more frequently than they attempted to resolve it. However in the last quarter century the revolution in slavery studies has produced a large number of distinguished studies, many of which have considered the matter of paradox frontally. One insight which emerges from this body of work is that it is naive to assume, as intellectuals and ideologues are inclined to do, that the actual behavior of a people will be determined by a "climate of opinion" that celebrates enlightenment and singles out a particular practice, such as slaveholding, as a vestige of barbarism. In *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765-1820*, Donald Robinson argued that the era of the American Revolution, despite its rampant, almost boundless idealism, had little impact on the half million blacks enslaved at the time. "No important political leader with a national, or a 'continental,' outlook expressed or exerted himself publicly against *chattel* slavery at a time when concern about *political* slavery was at white heat." Despite the gradual elimination of slavery from northern states, and notwithstanding the animadversions of a few moralists, poets, intellectuals, and reformers who had come to regard slavery as an unmitigated evil, "political leaders . . . abstained from criticizing chattel slavery and, above all, from trying to act against it."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5. The root evil of slavery, as Carl Degler has well reminded us, is not to be explained by emphasizing its exploitative nature. The enormity of slavery, in psychological terms, lies in the perpetual denial of a number of very specific freedoms, including the freedom of movement; the freedom to choose one's occupation; education, or the freedom from ignorance. Slavery also denied freedom of religious choice and access to public information; it denied the right to refuse work. And, to repeat, these psychologically damaging denials not only lasted a lifetime, they were automatically imposed on all slave posterity. See Carl Degler's "The Irony of American Negro Slavery," in *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery*, Harry P. Owens, ed., (University of Mississippi Press, 1976), 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics*, Ch. 2 *passim*. Robinson's thesis is that "*political*" leaders (his emphasis), dismissed the relevance of the Revolutionary ideology and its relation to chattel slavery: "a sermon here, a pamphlet there, a college commencement debate, and a handful of petitions [from blacks] to the Massa-



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How could men who were engaged in a great and inspiring struggle for liberty fail to act on the inconsistency between their professions and endeavors in that contest and their actions with respect to their slaves? How could the Founding Fathers have failed to see how the application of their doctrines celebrating the rights of man required an abolition of slavery?<sup>15</sup> One reason why Negroes benefited less than other groups by the "social movement" touched off by the American Revolution is encapsulated in the aphorism: "politics is the art of the possible; reform the art of the desirable." Colonial leaders exempted chattel slavery from their critique of political slavery because the movement for independence, which was their primary concern, required it. John Adams, himself in the thick of the Revolutionary effort for independence, remarked that the biggest problem that confronted colonial leaders was to get thirteen clocks to strike at once. His observation reminds us of just how early the strains of sectional discord manifested themselves in our history. If Adams and his fellow

chusetts legislature—in the context of the swirl of events and flood of publications that heralded the American Revolution—show the marginal consideration given to Negro slavery by a people who thought of little else, publicly, but the political slavery that threatened to engulf them." Robinson's thesis, as we hope to demonstrate in the following pages, can be faulted on at least three levels. First, his formulation significantly understated the *number* of antislavery publications, an important consideration in its own right; secondly, Robinson's thesis pays far too little attention to the intellectual and cultural changes which we associate with "The Age of the Democratic Revolution" (see note 8 above), changes which were increasingly straining the traditional system of values, most especially the growing faith in the possibility of moral progress. Pragmatic politicians may have found ways of rationalizing the contradiction—but not without strain. Finally, it would be a serious mistake to jump to the conclusion that because moral and philosophical strains did not result in the abolition of slavery across the board, that the moral blitzkrieg therefore had little or no impact on black people beyond assuaging hurt. Such a conclusion, by riveting attention on "what was done to Africans," blinds us to the possibilities of "what the transplanted Africans were able to do for themselves."

<sup>15</sup> These questions were raised over a half century ago by J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1926); see especially Ch. 1, "The Revolution and the Status of Persons," 3-26; also, Frederick B. Tolles, "The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement: A Re-evaluation," *American Historical Review*, 60 (1954), 1-12. Tolles concludes that despite thirty years of whittling, "the Jameson thesis is still sound"; another re-examination of the social consequences of the Revolution is Colin Bonwick, "The American Revolution as a Social Movement Revisited," *Journal of American Studies*, 20 (December, 1986), which argues that by 1800 the Revolution had transformed ideological expectations thereby drastically altering the basis on which social and political authority could be exercised. *Ibid.*, 355.

Northerners had expressed criticism or misgivings about slavery in the Southern colonies, the alarm of Revolution might never have gone off at all. In times of crisis men have been known to accept glaring inconsistencies and the Revolution fits just about everyone's definition of a "genuine crisis."<sup>16</sup>

It also needs to be remembered, it certainly was not forgotten by eighteenth century politicians, that the natural rights philosophy—for all its emphasis on individual liberty—was profoundly ambivalent. The ideology spoke at great length about men being created equal; but it also laid great store in the right of property, one of the three "sacred" and "inalienable rights" apotheosized by John Locke and other Enlightenment figures. Eighteenth century science had concluded that Negroes were, like whites, *homo sapiens*; but this conclusion did not conflict with the reality that Negroes were men, "persons," who were legally property, and had been since the 1660's, if not earlier. In the colonial ideology the right of property was central, and there was hardly a man in all the colonies who would not have seen a serious problem in calling for an end to property in slaves without consent or compensation. The absence of any clear disjunction between what are now called "human" and "property" rights formed a massive roadblock across the route to the abolition of slavery.

We also need to make a deliberately conscious effort to appreciate the eighteenth century mind for what it was. It requires an act of genuine imagination for us to re-enter the Revolutionary era, so immense is the cultural chasm which separates "us" from "them." However latently utilitarian, however potentially liberal, and however enthusiastically democratic the Founders may have been, they were not modern men. The Founders, at least the Federalists among them, clung tenaciously to and believed passionately in the tradition of civic humanism. That tradition, which embraced a host of values transmitted from antiquity, dominated the thinking of nearly all members of the elite in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world. The essence of civic humanism was disinterestedness—public service engaged in by a leisured gentry for the common good. Unlike their opponents, the anti-Federalists, who believed

<sup>16</sup> The two principal elements of the Revolution were the attainment of independence and the founding of a new republic. "A revolution can never be considered as complete," Enos Hitchcock insisted in 1788, "till government is firmly established—and without this[,] independency would be a curse instead of a blessing.—These jointly were the great object of the American Revolution." A third component of the Revolutionary experience was the network of social changes, all of which contributed materially to the context of Revolutionary change. Among these, the emancipation of blacks was just beginning to impact on social consciousness. See Catherine E. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Temple University Press, 1976), 210-211. The Enos Hitchcock quotation is from *ibid.*, 210.

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society was best thought of as a heterogeneous mixture of many different classes or orders of people, Federalists believed in a hierarchy of ranks, a social order of uneven and unequal parts made up of gentlemen and everyone else. It is easy for us today to cavalierly dismiss the Founders as anti-equalitarians, as sexists, even as racists. But in so doing, are we not guilty of viewing the past through the eyes of the present; of judging a social/political culture vastly different from our own on the basis of values which have evolved over the past two hundred years? American society of the post-Revolutionary generation, as Gordon Wood has convincingly argued, would belong to the heirs of the anti-Federalists who spoke for the emerging world of equalitarian democracy. The actual power-brokers of the Revolutionary era on the other hand, men who believed—rightly or wrongly—that they were caught in the grips of a genuine “excess of democracy” crisis, concluded that equalitarianism was the rock on which republican government would almost certainly come to an end. Such an ideology conceded little ground for any sort of social engineering.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the transforming social revolution which Anglo-Americans of the second half of the eighteenth century lived through, a revolution which brought radical changes simultaneously in demography, economics, politics and law, ideology and psychology, ethics and aesthetics, made men acutely conscious of the need to preserve social order. Even if the enormous practical problem of compensating slaveowners at something approaching full market value for their slaves could have been solved (in reality this was utterly beyond the capacity of colonial economies), the ultimate question remained: what was to be done with the freed slaves? Or, a thought never far from the minds of those who lived in a slave society—what might the emancipated slaves do to their former owners? We need to know a good deal more about the fear of slave conspiracy and the role of slaves in the struggles between the Patriots and Tories. The current state of our knowledge is sufficient to warn us that it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the “restiveness,” as it was called, of the black population. Philosophical inconsistency pinched harder when slaves began to speak the language of natural rights!<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Gordon Wood, “The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution,” *National Forum*, 64 (Fall, 1984), 5-8. I am grateful to Professor Wood for allowing me to draw upon a work in progress entitled “Interest and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution.” See also, Forest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (1985), Chs. 1-4.

<sup>18</sup> See Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The Great Negro Plot in Colonial New York* (The Free Press, 1985); Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Louisiana State University Press, 1979), Ch. 1; Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (Oxford University Press, 1972), Ch. 5; and

In light of the above, one may well doubt whether inconsistency was a pressing concern for those—the patriot lawyers and politicians—who formulated the elite wisdom of their day. Whatever their domestic or private views might have been, it seems clear that these were moderated by a concern for southern sensibilities, for property rights, and for public order. There was, then, no automatic connection between a defense of natural rights and the imperative that slavery be abolished;<sup>19</sup> and whether the exigencies of the times justified or even required the compromises that were made may be argued endlessly. The point we should not lose sight of in all this, is that slavery—at least in the abstract—was repugnant to the whole spirit of the Enlightenment. Which is to say that the ideology of the American Revolution cannot be divorced from the momentous question of race.<sup>20</sup> The *desire* for consistency, the concern about America's behavior squaring with America's aspirations, was more than a matter of empty rhetoric. The fact that people can comfortably and conveniently compartmentalize seemingly contradictory ideas does not mean that the ideas should be dismissed as mere epiphenomena. There can be no doubt that in the 1770's and beyond, a growing number of American writers—including political leaders—were becoming sensitive to the inconsistency of holding Negro slaves while resisting a British plot to enslave the colonies.<sup>21</sup> Through-

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Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (Knopf, 1974), 308-326. The point, as Genovese, Jordan, and others have noted, is *not* that the insurrectionary tradition in the U.S. paled by comparison with the situation in the Caribbean and Latin America—there were reasons enough to account for the differences—but that there was enough of an American tradition to keep slaveowners and non-slaveowners alike extremely anxious and very uneasy. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Vintage, 1972, 1974), 587-660 and Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (1968), Ch. 3.

<sup>19</sup> "The American colonists," writes David B. Davis, "were not trapped in an accidental contradiction between slavery and freedom. Their rhetoric of freedom was functionally related to the existence—and in many areas to the continuation—of Negro slavery. In a sense, then, demands for consistency between principles and practice, no matter how sincere, were rather beside the point. Practice was what made the principles possible." David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Cornell University Press, 1975), 262.

<sup>20</sup> We do not wish to leave the impression that the "American Dilemma" emerged during the Revolutionary period. America's destiny has been inextricably interwoven with that of black people from the very first effort of transplanted Englishmen to plant a just republic in the wilderness. How, precisely, racial attitudes related to more general questions concerning labor, prejudice, and social order is brilliantly analyzed by Winthrop D. Jordan in *White Over Black* (1968).

<sup>21</sup> See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard

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out the period, writes David Brion Davis,

slavery appears with metaphorical regularity, as the architectural flaw, the noxious weed in a garden, the hidden disease in an otherwise sound and growing body. Precisely because America was a place of unlimited space and time without bounds, a deformed birth might lead to a monstrous and deformed growth.<sup>22</sup>

One overlooked reason which made it difficult for writers to ignore relevant parallels and relationships between political oppression and Negro slavery was the obvious discontent of blacks themselves. The yearning for freedom and equality was common among those in bondage. During the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, at least three slave systems had evolved on the North American mainland: a non-plantation system in the northern colonies, and two plantation systems in the southern, one in the Carolina and Georgia lowcountry, and the other in the Chesapeake Bay area. The repercussions from the war resonated differently within these three very different slave systems, but none was left unaffected.<sup>23</sup> The absence of white males from the plantations and the general confusion occasioned by the war was a godsend to escape-minded slaves. Thousands took refuge with the Indians; still others, an estimated twenty thousand, left with the British at war's end. As a result of these wartime changes, the slave population of the lowcountry declined precipitously. But many more slaves remained on the old estates working *their* small plots of land and protecting *their* property. Under the direction of black drivers, these slaves reconstituted the plantation order in ways more to their own liking.

The patriot's triumph allowed planters to reassert their authority at war's end. Before long, South Carolina and Georgia reopened the international slave trade, and African slaves poured into the region until the federal prohibition went into effect in 1808. But the new order was not simply a carbon copy of the

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University Press, 1967), 232-45. This work argues that the relevance of the Revolutionary ideology to chattel slavery was too obvious to be missed by contemporaries. The ideological school has come under attack recently, the most sophisticated critique of which can be found in Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (1985), Preface.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (1975), 283. The recurring struggle between pragmatism and ideology has been at the center of the American soul from the first, and is one of the enduring themes of the American experience. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986), Intro.

<sup>23</sup> Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society in British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 85 (1980), 45 ff.

old. Subtle differences in the structure and style of lowcountry life transformed black society. The wartime absence of slaveholders allowed blacks to bolster the traditional supports of slave autonomy in the lowcountry. Drivers gained in autonomy and authority, and slave property holdings appear to have grown larger than ever. Having governed themselves with little pretense of white direction during the war, blacks resisted the imposition of the old controls. The arrival of Africans in large numbers, widening the cultural gulf between master and slave, doubtless reinforced the willingness of planters to leave their slaves alone. Planters would regain their hegemony, but they did so only by conceding an unprecedented measure of autonomy to their slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Befitting its geographic position between the North, where freedom was to overwhelm slavery, and the lowcountry, where black independence grew even as slavery expanded, the Chesapeake region shared in both of these developments. With the Revolution, Maryland and Virginia legislators rewrote manumission laws, and masters—driven by a combination of Revolutionary egalitarianism and economic necessity—freed their slaves in large numbers. The free black population in the region grew rapidly, and by 1790 more than a third of the black freepeople in the nation resided around the Chesapeake.<sup>25</sup>

Nowhere, however, did the events and ideas of the Revolution have greater impact than in the nonplantation slave system that had taken root in the northern colonies. Petitions and other remonstrances from northern slaves appealed to the same principles the colonists were using against Great Britain. "We have in common with all other men," said a typical plea, "a naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever."<sup>26</sup> Such language raised the specter of a rebellion within a rebellion. That such an outbreak did not materialize should not blind us to the

<sup>24</sup> Wood, *Black Majority* (1974), Chs. 11-12; Philip D. Morgan, "The Development of Slave Culture in Eighteenth Century Plantation America," Ph.D. diss. (University College, London, 1977), *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Richard S. Dunn, "Black Society in the Chesapeake, 1776-1810," in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (University Press of Virginia, 1983), Ch. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Petition of slaves from Massachusetts, as cited in Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (1975), 276. For examples of Negro indignation employing the "slavery-is-inconsistent-with-the-Revolution" theme, see, among others, Jordan, *White Over Black* (1968), 269-311; Benjamin W. Labaree, *Patriots and Partisans: The Merchants of Newburyport, 1764-1815* (Norton, 1975[1962]), 34 ff., and Berlin and Randall, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (1983), *passim*.

## "A Monstrous Inconsistency"

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fact that the contradictory nature of the American Revolution impacted significantly both on the structure of black society and on the emerging patterns of race relations in the nation.

If contemporary explanations have any validity, the demise of slavery in the North should not be considered simply on the ground of profits and losses, climate or geography. Abolition sentiment generally ignored these factors and chose instead to emphasize one particular theme: that the same principles used to justify the American Revolution also condemned and doomed Negro slavery.<sup>27</sup> In a mere two generations following the war, a large majority of Northern blacks had made the transition from slavery to freedom; the transition from freedom to equality was not realized, and was to remain a "dream deferred." But the first emancipation was to have an enormous significance for the future. During the Revolution and in the years immediately following, newly freed slaves gave meaning to their new status by adopting new names, establishing new residences, taking new jobs, reconstructing their family lives, calling into being their first recognizable leadership class and, most importantly, forming new communities, with separate institutional infrastructures.<sup>28</sup> The creative restlessness set loose by the Revolution did more than help construct the scaffolding of freedom. Ira Berlin's description of what we might style "transformational acculturation"—whereby contact between cultures results not in the liquidation of one or the other culture, but of their mutual transformation—tells us something not only about black society, but, too, something about how, through their shared experiences, both groups created an American culture and an American character. The separation of the races in America has never been so great as to prevent a steady stream of interaction in which each group has borrowed, if not *pari passu*, on the whole rather liberally from the other.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (University of Chicago Press, 1967), Chs. 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> George A. Levesque, "Interpreting Early Black Ideology: A Reappraisal of Historical Consensus," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 1 (Fall 1981), 269-287; Ira Berlin, "The Revolution in Black Life," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 349-82.

<sup>29</sup> Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society" (1980), *passim*; Nathan Huggins, *Black Odyssey: the Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* (Pantheon, 1977), especially Ch. 3, "Strange New World of Afro-Americanization"; George A. Levesque, "Black Culture, the Black Esthetic, Black Chauvinism: A Mild Dissent," *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, 12 (Winter, 1981), 275-285; C. Vann Woodward, "Clio With Soul," *Journal of American History*, LVI (June, 1969), esp. 17-19. The most fully articulated statement of black/white interaction over time in the U.S. is Joel Williamson's *The Crucible of Race*, 505, 522.

Just as the American Revolution transformed American *and* Afro-American society, so too would it impart a formative and lasting influence on strategies and thought employed to challenge American racism. No one understood this more completely than those black men and women who gained their liberty as a result of the Revolution. In a very real sense, the principles that propelled them from slavery to freedom became central to their lives and those of their children. In fine, it can be said that the Revolution established a new mode of racial thought and set in motion the development of a pattern of argument that was to shape race relations well into the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The manner in which race compounds the classic tension between democracy and equality in America is exhaustively reviewed in Benjamin B. Ringer, *"We the People" and Others: Duality and America's Treatment of its Racial Minorities* (Tavistock Ltd., 1983).