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## Eugene D. Genovese: The Mind of a Marxist Conservative

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Few historians have left their mark on a field as decisively as Eugene D. Genovese. The shape of southern history, particularly slavery studies, would look rather different without his substantial corpus. Debates in southern history continue to be framed around the issues first raised or developed by Genovese in his early work on the Old South and slavery. More than any other historian of slavery, he has set the agenda for antebellum southern historiography and bears responsibility for both its strengths and its limitations. Writing from the standpoint of an odd ideological conjuncture—as a self-professed Marxist and an unabashed admirer of southern slaveholders—Genovese’s Janus-faced political loyalties, to use a metaphor he himself has employed, have shaped his work. In this article, I will critically examine the import and influence of his vast scholarship in nineteenth-century southern history, especially of his most significant book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974).

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Genovese began his career with a devastating critique of the South’s slave economy coupled with a flattering rendition of the “civilization” of the planter class. In his first book, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, published in 1965, Genovese argued that slavery had given rise to a distinct premodern, precapitalist society and had impaired the economic development of the South. According to him, the retarding effect of slavery on the southern economy became evident in the failure of the slave South to

industrialize and diversify its economy due to the subordination of town to country and the concomitant lack of a fully developed internal market. Plantation slavery's central and determinative place and the comprador role of manufacturers and industrialists were a testament to the slaveholders' hegemony. The inferior quality of the South's livestock industry and the stillborn nature of southern agricultural reform illustrated the limits of economic development in a society dominated by slavery. The low productivity of slave labor, which, at this point, he attributed to the conditions of southern slavery rather than to the African identity and culture of the enslaved, further doomed the South to economic underdevelopment. The political economy of slavery was thus based on the dominance of the master class and characterized by the crises generated by its overwhelming reliance on slave labor. Faced with economic retardation and soil erosion, Genovese argued, slaveholders insisted on the expansion of slavery to the west and came headlong into confrontation with an equally expansive capitalist North, which inevitably led to secession and the American Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

Genovese's economic indictment of slavery was infused with his sympathy for southern slaveholders as men responsible for the precapitalist, premodern social formation of the antebellum South, a supposed alternative to the triumphant march of capitalism in the Anglo-American world. Like many southern nationalists, he insisted on referring to the Civil War as the War for Southern Independence (presumably independence for only white southerners). According to Genovese, the planter class, as good Hegelians, clung to slavery as the source of its political and cultural identity even though it was an unprofitable institution that made the slave South an economic backwater. Despite several asides on slaveholders' ideology, psychology, and politics, and an interesting conclusion on their decision to secede, the main focus of the different essays that comprise *The Political Economy of Slavery* remained overwhelmingly economic and, as he later acknowledged, somewhat mechanistic. Genovese's later works, rather than his first piece of scholarship, serve as better illustrations of his repudiation of his predecessors' economic determinism and vulgar Marxism.

Genovese overstated the notion that slavery was an economic drag for southern slaveholders in his eagerness to portray them as prebourgeois paternalists rather than profit-hungry capitalists. Slaveholders, he conceded, may have been acquisitive and prone to conspicuous consumption, but they were not motivated by profit maximization. Despite the fact that several economic historians before and since have demonstrated convincingly that slavery was an enormously profitable institution for small and large slaveholders in the short term, Genovese's insight, following Harold Woodman's pathbreaking article showing that the use of slave labor hampered the long-term economic development of the South, still stands. His argument is certainly far more cogent than that of economic historians Stanley Engerman and Robert

Fogel, which portrays slavery as a progressive, capitalist institution.<sup>2</sup> The slave South was predominantly agrarian and rural, and the place it occupied in the world market as a producer of raw materials smacked of dependency. Cotton, to reverse the boast of many antebellum slaveholders, was not king.

Genovese's arguments recast the old historical debate over the profitability of slavery into one that still shapes southern and U.S. history: Were slavery and the antebellum South capitalist, precapitalist, or even anticapitalist? Historians such as James Oakes and Robert Fogel, and more recently, Laurence Shore and Shearer Davis Bowman, have questioned Genovese's formulation that modern racial slavery and capitalism, which is ideally based on free wage labor, were antithetical. They point out that plantation slavery constituted commercial agriculture as it involved the production of cash crops for the world market, thus very much making it a capitalist enterprise.<sup>3</sup>

In answering his critics, Genovese, along with his wife, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, came up with a more nuanced version of his initial position in the *Fruits of Merchant Capital* (1983). They argue that the slave South was *in* but not *of* the capitalist world and that relations of production (slave labor) rather than relations of exchange (the world market in which slaveholders participated) shaped the nature of antebellum southern society. Southern slavery was not feudal or seigneurial, even though it bore a certain resemblance to societies based on notions of lordship and bondage. Nor was it capitalist despite the fact that it involved the international trade of staple crops produced by slave labor. Merchant capitalism gave rise to archaic systems of labor such as racial slavery (and, one might add, the second serfdom of Eastern Europe), but it also created the world market and was responsible for the primitive accumulation of capital in the West, hence its "Janus faced" character. Moreover, merchant capitalism was conservative and parasitic in nature as it existed in premodern societies, such as the slave South, without leading to any qualitative economic change. Addressing the transition-from-feudalism-to-capitalism debate between Maurice Dobbs and Paul Sweezy, who argue over whether external or internal forces led to the transformation to capitalism, the Genoveses come down heavily on the Dobbsian side. Commerce, they insist à la Marx, cannot be mistaken for capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the Genoveses' theoretical insights in the essays on merchant capitalism and the slave economies provide valuable contributions to southern and Marxist historiography. The Old South, they conclude, gave rise to a distinct mode of production based on slavery that was neither feudal nor capitalist. However, they fail to explore fully the contradictions of this peculiar social formation, a society based on an archaic system of labor, which was nevertheless created and sustained by the expansion of capitalism in the West. In Genovese's previous books, southern slaveholders and slave society appear as virtually ideal precapitalist types. Given the

subtler and wide-ranging formulation in the *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, one should expect, even demand, a modified understanding of Genovese's description of southern slavery. Genovese's recent work on the slaveholders' worldview admittedly proves more careful, but it still draws too firm a line between slaveholders' allegedly antibourgeois conservatism and bourgeois conservatism. A modern slave society, as the Genoveses themselves point out all too briefly, is nothing if not a bastard formation reeking of hybridity.

Genovese's ability to make bold and innovative interventions in long-standing historical debates perhaps becomes most evident in his brief foray into the field of comparative slavery. At times, this comes at the cost of historical specificity and clarity. For instance, the first part of his second major work, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (1969), is a rather confused rendition of the seigneurial types of slavery in northeast Brazil and the antebellum U.S. South and the more capitalist-oriented slavery of the West Indies, Cuba, and the coffee plantations of southern Brazil. In his attempt to develop a systemic analysis of different kinds of slavery in the Western Hemisphere based on their relations to their mother countries and plantation management, Genovese neglects the specific histories of these disparate areas, which makes his overall argument less comprehensible. In contrast, Genovese clarified the standards historians use when comparing North American slavery with Caribbean and Latin American slavery in a short but brilliant essay titled "The Treatment of Slaves in Different Countries: Problems in the Application of the Comparative Method." We must distinguish between the material treatment of slaves, arguably better in the United States, with access to freedom and citizenship rights, and the social and cultural conditions of slaves, which many historians, starting with Frank Tannenbaum, used to portray Latin American slavery as more benign than its northern counterpart.<sup>5</sup> Genovese's article gives us points of comparison without the accompanying absurdity of designating racial slavery in any part of the Western Hemisphere as benevolent or "better."

Despite an initial and oft-quoted disclaimer that "slavery must be understood primarily as a class question and only secondarily as a race or a narrowly economic question," Genovese develops a racial typology of New World slave societies based on class, caste, and "race relations," or, rather, the strength of racism. Genovese states that racism was strongest in slave societies with a bourgeois orientation and an "Anglo-Saxon" Protestant heritage. He then goes on to argue that racism in the U.S. South, which presumably had a precapitalist slave society, became more virulent after the abolition of slavery. This might very well be true, but it also absolves the Old South too quickly of the brutal racialism that undergirded its two-caste slave society and that constituted its legacy for the postbellum era. Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, Genovese takes somewhat of a middle position in the ongoing race-versus-class controversy in southern history. He situates racism in the overall nature

of a particular slave society and its class structure. In this sense, his understanding of “race” is historically contingent and more sophisticated than that of historians who argue that race wiped out class divisions in the slave South. Many of Genovese’s critics, however, accused him of neglecting the racial component of modern slavery, a shared characteristic of all New World slave societies.<sup>6</sup>

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Genovese, of course, is best known for his magnum opus on slavery in the Old South, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, rather than for his work on comparative slavery. It is highly ironic that Genovese, who has been called a “Marx for the Master Class” and who makes no attempt to disguise his fondness for southern slaveholders, has written one of the most influential books on slaves and slave culture. Like many other historians who contributed to the renaissance in slavery studies in the 1960s and 1970s, he sought to understand the lives, community, family, religion, and culture of the slaves. Despite emerging as one of the most penetrating scholars of slave culture, Genovese came to appreciate its richness relatively late and was probably influenced by the work of other historians such as George Rawick, Vincent Harding, Sterling Stuckey, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). In an early essay, he had argued, with typical over-statement, that “slavery and its aftermath left the blacks in a state of acute economic and cultural backwardness, with weak family ties and the much-discussed matriarchal preponderance,” and again that “slavery and its aftermath emasculated the black masses; they are today profoundly sick and shaking with convulsions.”<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, Genovese revised these unresearched assessments of African American culture under slavery even though he retained the frameworks of nationalism and paternalism to understand slave culture and slavery, respectively.

Genovese distinguished himself from other historians of slavery by situating his study of slaves in the master-slave relationship. In a trenchant critique of the “new social history” that encompassed slavery studies, he and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese condemned historians for studying the lower classes in isolation, for leaving politics out of the study of history, and for their uncritical borrowing of social science methods that produced static, ahistorical, and antiquarian histories. They insisted that history is “primarily the story of who rides whom and how,” updating the traditional Marxist assertion that class conflict is the motor force of history. The Genoveses argued that “radical-left” historians, unfairly lumped together with the bourgeois antiquarians and social science faddists, were guilty of glorifying the masses. These allegedly liberal historians in radical disguise stressed the autonomy of the social and cultural lives of the lower classes in order to make up for the paucity of serious political resistance among them.<sup>8</sup> While the Genoveses’ point is well taken, Genovese himself owed much to these historians’ notion of culture as resistance, as his evocative discussion of slave culture in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* makes clear.

Like other scholars of the new social history of slavery, Genovese also sought to correct Stanley Elkins's portrait of U.S. slavery as a closed, unchecked, vicious system of oppression that resembled Nazi concentration camps and psychologically emasculated its victims. Elkins had argued that the lack of strong institutions such as the state and church and a strong heritage of individualism and unrestrained capitalism made slavery in the United States more exploitative than in any other part of the New World. Unlike slaves in Latin America, bereft of their African culture and exposed to a highly racist and oppressive form of slavery, slaves in the United States became imitative, servile "Sambos," a slave personality type that Elkins claimed predominated in the slave South. Interestingly, subsequent scholarship on naming practices among southern slaves reveals *Sambo* to be the African name for a second son. Rich in psychological theory but lacking in virtually any primary historical research, Elkins's thesis was attacked by a broad group of historians, who instead highlighted black cultural achievement under slavery. In fact, Elkins deserves credit for single-handedly inspiring modern scholarship on the lives and culture of slaves in U.S. history.

But it was Genovese who came up with an alternative interpretive framework for understanding southern slavery. In a complete reversal of Elkins, Genovese argued that slaveholders' precapitalist paternalist ideology allowed room for the growth of a vibrant slave culture and in material terms produced the least harsh form of slavery. But the slaves' cultural survival extracted a heavy price from them as they were forced to accommodate to slaveholders' paternalism and therefore failed to develop a tradition of revolutionary resistance to slavery. Unfortunately, the Elkins-Genovese dichotomy has presented historians of U.S. slavery with a Hobson's choice. We either accept Elkins's view of slavery as a totalitarian institution and the concomitant one-dimensional and ahistorical picture of all slaves as imitative "Sambos," or we follow Genovese's paternalism thesis if we want to stress the creation of African American culture under slavery.<sup>9</sup>

In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Genovese defined paternalism as a set of mutual responsibilities or duties and customary "rights" for masters and slaves, unlike relations between employers and workers in a capitalist society governed by an impersonal cash nexus. Genovese did not argue that paternalism did not involve exploitation or brutality or that it made slavery a benign institution. But he did imply that the relationship between master and slave mediated by a sense of personal responsibility was less harsh than capitalist relations and openly admired various facets of slaveholders' paternalism that allowed and even encouraged the formation of black families and culture. According to Genovese, paternalism bound masters and slaves in a mutual web of obligations and rights and helped slaves to assert their humanity in a system that negated it, albeit as inferior dependents. It also enabled masters to ameliorate the worst excesses of slavery and see their slaves as part of their families

and households. A resident planter class and the relatively early prohibition of the African slave trade in 1808 accentuated southern slaveholders' paternalism because it encouraged a personal relationship between master and slave and because it compelled slaveholders to pay attention to the reproduction of their slave labor force.<sup>10</sup> For Genovese's numerous critics, paternalism simply constitutes the latest version of the southern moonlight-and-magnolias myth of slavery given academic respectability by U. B. Phillips, one of the first serious historians of slavery but an apologist for the institution and an overt racist to boot. The fact that Genovese owes his thesis of paternalism to Phillips and has made no attempt to disguise his admiration for Phillips has, of course, confirmed this assessment in the minds of many. While Genovese's paternalism thesis offers a far more theoretically sophisticated rendering of the master-slave relationship and is shorn of Phillips' blatant racism, he does reiterate many of the latter's conclusions on the nature of southern slavery. Some of Genovese's terms of comparison, such as correlating the conditions of the working poor in England with those of southern slaves—a case of comparing apples with oranges, some would say—are those of slaveholders and southern defenders of slavery. There are no known instances of wageworkers, no matter how degraded their condition, selling themselves and their posterity into slavery. Perhaps the biggest problem with Genovese's interpretation is that it takes what is prescriptive and what he admits is a “self-serving” class ideology seeking to rationalize and legitimize slavery, as descriptive of the institution's reality.

Ideology, of course, forms a part of historical reality, but it is nonetheless one version of it.<sup>11</sup>

Genovese's paternalism thesis is hence closely linked to his notion of the slaveholders' ideological and cultural hegemony. Well versed in the traditions of Marxism, Genovese was influenced by theorists such as the great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the British school of neo-Marxist scholars including Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson, all of whom rejected reductionist versions of Marxism that emphasized the primacy of the economic and instead argued for the importance of studying ideology, culture, and class consciousness. Gramsci had developed the notion of hegemony, or the ideological domination of the bourgeoisie in Western civil society through seemingly independent institutions, to complement and complicate the orthodox Marxist understanding of the bourgeois control of production and the state. Genovese deserves credit for introducing the concept of hegemony to American historiography: he employed it to characterize the rule of the planter class in the slave South in his early writings, and it underlay his interpretive framework in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. But his use of hegemony makes far more sense in the context of white society, even though the slave South was institutionally underdeveloped when compared to modern Western democracies, than it does for that of the slaves. The pervasiveness of proslavery sentiments among church leaders, newspaper editors, and politicians gives ample proof

of slaveholders' ideological and political domination in the Old South. And even here, the limits of slaveholders' hegemony in nonplantation areas of the region, especially in the upper South, are evident.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the blatantly coercive nature of slavery and the slaves' relative isolation from the political and public world makes Gramsci's concept of hegemony at best tenuous in explaining the master-slave relationship. In a chapter on the hegemonic function of slave law, Genovese therefore argues that Southern courts were forced to acknowledge the humanity of slaves despite their meager and non-existent rights in the formal law codes of the South. While Genovese, following Willie Lee Rose's notion of the "domestication" of antebellum slavery, is certainly right to point out that most southern states did away with the barbaric excesses of the colonial slave codes except during slave insurrection scares, the legal disabilities that slaves faced remained severe. "Equality before the law," a legal fiction that encapsulates the hegemonic function of law in bourgeois society, has no parallel in slave law, which ensured the opposite, and the instances of procedural fairness for slaves and light punishment of whites accused of slaves' murder hardly provide an equivalent. For example, the rape of a slave woman did not exist in southern legislation, with the exception of a law passed in Mississippi as late as 1860 which made the rape of a black female child a punishable offence and under which no cases were ever prosecuted. And it was not the protection of the law but the strict subordination of slavery that made mob violence in the antebellum South unnecessary, with exceptions again occurring in particular historical moments, such as the aftermath of Nat Turner's rebellion.

Genovese introduces paternalism to correct the blatant deficiencies of southern law in this respect. According to him, the "dual function" of slave law included a realm outside legislation—individual slaveholders' paternalism, the appeal to public opinion that condemned brutality toward slaves, and a host of "customary rights" that slaves claimed thanks to the Faustian bargain they had struck with slaveholder paternalism. For instance, he argues that many slaveholders, and especially their children, taught slaves to read and write in defiance of the law, though historians estimate that barely 5 percent of the slave population was literate on the eve of emancipation.<sup>13</sup> Only if we accept Genovese's claim that slaves accommodated to slaveholders' paternalism to create a livable world for themselves can we accept his argument for the latter's ideological hegemony over the former.

Without a doubt, Genovese's discussion of slave life and culture in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* is the most extensive to date. Widely researched but also wide-ranging in its use of theorists, philosophers, black intellectuals, and activists to prove a point or move an argument along, Genovese's book, however much one may disagree with its interpretive schema, must be seen as a tremendous achievement of historical scholarship and imagination. Genovese evokes the daily texture and feel of slave life like

few other scholars on slavery do, and his descriptions of soul food, celebrations, and harvest times have a literary quality that not many historians can match. At the same time, we can accuse Genovese of presenting us with a rather romantic view of slavery in these chapters, a tendency that he has criticized in the works of other radical historians. While Genovese's extended analysis of the black work ethic is original to him, his examination of the black family, language, and naming practices builds on the work of his colleagues and reaches the same conclusions.

At various points, however, Genovese's study of slave culture is hampered, rather than facilitated, by the author's attempt to fit it within his paternalist framework. For example, Genovese's initial attempt to argue that slaves identified with the "aristocratic" ethos of slaveholders and their "white folks" is not very convincing. The ideas of paternalism and slaveholders' ideological hegemony, which apparently tied slaves as individuals to their masters and hampered collective solidarity, exist in uneasy tension with descriptions of slave culture and a worldview that allowed slaves to limit the oppressions of slavery and question the legitimacy of their enslavement. This tension becomes most apparent in his brief and contradictory conclusion to the book: "By developing a sense of moral worth and by asserting rights, the slaves transformed their acquiescence in paternalism into a rejection of slavery itself, although their masters assumed acquiescence in the one to demonstrate acquiescence in the other." And this tension cannot be reconciled by the dialectic of accommodation and resistance that Genovese presents to us because, for him, slaves' resistance was confined to the conditions of slavery, while their accommodation was to paternalism as a whole, an ideology that justified slavery. Here thesis (accommodation) and antithesis (resistance) do not make a synthesis, and no dialectical *Aufhebung* (resolution) emerges as thesis submerges antithesis.<sup>14</sup>

This tension becomes even more apparent in Genovese's occasional use of a nationalist interpretation to understand slave culture. In fact, the unproblematic and uninvestigated coexistence of slaveholder paternalism and black nationalism in the book makes little sense, since the latter should surely have nullified or severely limited the effects of the former. To attribute a sense of nationalism to the slaves implies independence and autonomy in slave culture, much more so than detailed descriptions of slave culture and family do. Many critics have charged that Genovese here either suffers from an acute case of historical presentism (he was writing during the Black Power or black nationalist phase of the civil rights movement) or that the asides on nationalism exist merely to deflect potential black criticisms of the book. Genovese has only himself to blame for these accusations because the brief parts on nationalism in the book have a "tagged-on" quality about them. Unlike paternalism, the nationalist nature of slave culture is not analyzed thoroughly or followed through in the book's various arguments. Here Genovese is guilty of the same lapse he accuses other scholars of, the failure to develop the "black-nationalist interpretation

of the black experience in the United States.” He misses a golden opportunity to come up with a cogent analysis of the political and ideological nature of slave culture and to reevaluate his broader argument on the extent to which slaves accommodated to paternalism. This becomes clear during the aptly termed “moment of truth” in the Civil War when slaveholders were forced to confront their slaves’ utter rejection of slavery and their much-vaunted paternalism. But here, after some telling examples of the slaveholders’ world turned upside down, Genovese’s argument quickly degenerates into a recounting of the apparently many more instances of slave loyalty and identification with “white folk” and the “Big House.” Proximity to Union army lines and risks involved in running away, rather than any sense of loyalty to their “white folks,” probably guided the behavior of seemingly loyal slaves.<sup>15</sup>

The strengths and problems in Genovese’s examination of slave culture become most evident in his rightly acclaimed section on African American Christianity. Religion lies at the heart of the book and of the world the slaves made. Interspersed with quotations from the Bible, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* has a biblical or at least a grand church history quality to it. Genovese places his discussion of black religion in the context of the history of Christianity, cutting an impressive swath across Western history. His discussion of syncretism in slave religion of the Western Hemisphere, of Obeah, Myalism, and Vodun, remains without a peer in U.S. history. His careful examination of the process of African American conversion in the South, of African Americans’ creation of a “folk religion” based on strong African spiritual antecedents, the place of conjure in black religion, the style of worship, funeral practices, and the role of the black preacher make the book one of the best examinations we have of African American Christianity under slavery. Along with Albert Raboteau, Vincent Harding (who unlike Genovese stresses the revolutionary potential of African American Christianity), and Sterling Stuckey (who drew attention to the African ring shout and who, unlike Genovese, questions the extent of slaves’ Christianization), Genovese is responsible for revealing the centrality of the black religious experience under slavery.

However, Genovese’s most valuable insight that Christianity imparted to the slaves a “protonational black consciousness” or a “black nationalist sensibility” remains unexplored even in the chapter titled “Religious Foundations of the Black Nation” ostensibly devoted to this idea. Instead, the essentially apolitical and non-revolutionary nature of black Christianity and its accommodation to slaveholder paternalism frame his analysis and conclusions on slave religion. Genovese argues that while black Christianity gave slaves an alternative sense of self-worth and a way to resist the dehumanization of slavery, it lacked a prophetic, messianic, and millennial tradition and therefore could not act as a revolutionary ideology. Southern slaves developed a salvationist rather than a retributive understanding of Christianity. The life-affirming, “this worldly” nature of their African religious heritage led slaves to

reject notions of original sin and asceticism that may have engendered a revolutionary Christianity. Theologically, as John Jentz has pointed out, no necessary connection between the two exists. Indeed, one could argue that liberation theology in Central America contained tenets similar to those held by the slaves—an identification with the suffering of Jesus and a belief in the spiritual superiority of the poor. Genovese presents little evidence for his assertions that African American Christianity lacked a millennial and prophetic tradition. In fact, he spends considerable time explaining away the prophet Nat Turner, the slaves' longing for a Moses-like messiah (Moses was alternatively Jesus or a white deliverer like Lincoln instead of a black revolutionary like Turner), their sense of themselves as the chosen people, the children of Israel, and their millennial conception of emancipation as the Day of Jubilo.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps African American Christianity, like Western Christianity as a whole, encompassed accommodation to the social order and revolutionary resistance at different historical moments. It is Genovese's attempt to deny any element of political resistance to African American Christianity that seems troubling and rings hollow after his perceptive though somewhat dualistic discussion of the Christian tradition.

Genovese's reliance on paternalism and the concept of the slaveholders' ideological hegemony over their slaves is most problematic when it comes to his arguments on slave resistance. While he is undoubtedly correct in stating that the slave South did not witness the large and numerous slave revolts that shook other slave societies in the Western Hemisphere, this fact perhaps had far more to do with the objective conditions on the ground—as Genovese points out here and in his somewhat underestimated but valuable book on slave revolts, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (1979)—than with the slaveholders' hegemony. It hardly comes as a surprise that slave societies with large black majorities and plantations counting over a thousand slaves each would produce bigger and more frequent slave revolts than a slave society with an armed white majority, more moderate slaveholding units, and a smaller black population. Genovese clearly acknowledges this, but he then goes on to use the frequency and size of slave revolts to buttress his argument about slaves' accommodation to slaveholder paternalism in the Old South. It is in his later book on slave revolts and *marronage* that Genovese once again blazes a new path in historical interpretation by looking at the "restorationist" quality of slave revolts before the Haitian Revolution and their "revolutionary" quality thereafter. His typology of slave revolts by goals and ideology still offers the most cogent model we have for understanding slave rebellions in the Western Hemisphere today. Building on the work of the great C. L. R. James, he reminds us in the book's inspired afterword that slaves, rather than slaveholders, were the true exemplars of the Age of Revolution and the radical egalitarianism he has come to deplore of late.<sup>17</sup>

The section on slave resistance in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, by contrast, remains mired in paternalism and some debatable conclusions. In analyzing lesser forms of slave opposition, such as day-to-day resistance to slavery, lying, stealing, dissembling, deliberately breaking tools, and hurting livestock, Genovese characterizes them as “apolitical” and “prepolitical” forms of resistance possibly accommodationist in nature as they acted as an outlet for slave discontent without challenging the system of slavery. Even if we accept Genovese’s characterization of the prepolitical nature of individual acts of resistance, it does not follow that these actions merely constitute a kind of accommodationism that has no significance in the long history of resistance. As some recent scholars have pointed out, small acts of resistance tend to build solidarity in an oppressed group or class, preparing them for larger acts should the opportunity arise. And acts like stealing, which fed into the slave South’s underground black economy, commanded the attention of southern state legislatures due to their potential for political subversion. Even more susceptible to criticism is Genovese’s highly questionable claim that slaves felt demeaned by their own behavior because they accepted slaveholders’ standards of morality. As good Christians, Genovese asserts, slaves saw stealing from and lying to their masters as immoral behavior. The argument that slaves may have had their own notions of moral economy and an alternative set of values does not impress him. Here, the idea of the slaveholders’ cultural hegemony over the slaves certainly carries Genovese beyond the limits of scholarly discretion and into a sort of psychohistory that historical evidence hardly supports.<sup>18</sup>

And while Genovese offers full-bodied and original descriptions of preachers, slave drivers and foremen, “mammies,” and house slaves, the slave rebels, resisters and runaways are dismissed as merely nihilistic, individualistic, and destructive of the slaveholding community’s norms in a one-sided portrait. Genovese also views running away, perhaps the most ubiquitous form of slave resistance in the South, as draining away instigators of potential slave rebellions, missing what one historian has called its “political significance.” Presumably, without slave runaways, there would have been no fugitive slave controversy between the North and South, an important steppingstone to the Civil War, nor black abolitionists of the caliber of Frederick Douglass. Fugitive slaves, Charles Sumner once said, were the “true heroes of our age.” And during the Civil War, slave runaways forced the Lincoln administration to address the issue of slavery and together with northern abolitionists and radical republicans, hurried the president and the North along the road to emancipation. The political import of running away both before and during the Civil War was nothing short of the complete destruction of slavery.<sup>19</sup>

Genovese’s questioning of the political nature of black resistance extends even to slavery’s aftermath. According to him, the severe lessons in dependence and paternalism imbibed by slaves under slavery compromised their ability to develop an

effective political leadership after the Civil War. Not until the twentieth century did a truly independent African American leadership emerge, he claims. Subsequent work on Reconstruction has demonstrated quite the opposite. The quick rise of independent black politics during Reconstruction leads us to question the extent to which slaves ever accepted the paternalist bargain. Indeed, as perhaps the most consistent and avid adherents to the tenets of American republicanism, former slaves revealed the complexity of the black political tradition in the nineteenth century, which encompassed not only their proto-nationalism but also the radicalism of Western revolutionary ideology that slave rebels, northern free blacks, and abolitionists had evoked in their struggle against slavery.<sup>20</sup>

An examination of the reception of Genovese's masterpiece in the scholarly community suggests an interesting paradox. While reviewers and critics have pointed to numerous flaws in his study, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* remains the most influential synthetic work on southern slavery. Historians of slavery have taken issue with Genovese for not paying sufficient attention to change over time and regional differences within the South, for drawing most of his evidence from the large plantations on the South Atlantic seaboard, for virtually ignoring the non-slaveholding yeoman majority, for failing to examine the importance of the domestic slave trade, for ignoring the racial dimension of southern slavery, and most tellingly, for slighting the importance of the use of force and compulsion in slavery. Whippings, as Genovese also admits, remained ubiquitous on southern plantations and farms, and, one could add, they constituted the most unambiguous symbol of slave status in southern society. In a reply to his critics, Genovese admits a "weakness in the presentation" of his arguments that might have misled readers to assume that he "underestimate[d] the terrible burden which slavery imposed."<sup>21</sup>

Recent scholarship on slavery seems to be chipping away at the paternalism thesis. One historian has questioned paternalism as an adequate interpretive framework for understanding slavery by drawing attention to the high rates of slave mortality in the rice areas, where absenteeism among planters was common. Paradoxically, this is the area from which Genovese drew much of his data. The most influential book on slave culture today, Michael Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, emphasizes its African antecedents and rejects paternalism as a viable interpretive framework for understanding black religion and culture. Similarly, new work on gender and slavery and the extent of sexual abuse suffered by slave women, which Genovese also discussed, calls into question his notion of slaveholder paternalism. Few women's historians have followed his lead in characterizing these relations as, at times, "seduction" and "loving." Indeed, intimacy and personal contact with the master might have aggravated rather than ameliorated the oppressions of bondage for some slave women.<sup>22</sup>

Books on the interstate slave trade and its dimensions cast a serious shadow

over Genovese's paternalism argument. More than any other single fact, the selling away of over 1 million slaves during the antebellum era from the older seaboard slave states to the southwest, and more in other "local" sales, vitiates the idea of paternalism. Genovese and some other historians of slavery proved far too enamored of slaveholders' legendary disdain for slave traders and their occasional efforts to avoid breaking up slave families to fully comprehend the extent and significance of the domestic slave trade, which mirrored the abuses of the African slave trade. Ira Berlin's recent survey of southern slavery argues that this "Second Middle Passage shredded the planters' paternalist pretenses in the eyes of black people and prodded slaves and free people of color to create a host of oppositional ideologies and institutions that better accounted for the realities of endless deportations, expulsions and flights that continually remade their world."<sup>23</sup>

But no scholar has offered an alternative theoretical framework to comprehend southern slavery since Genovese published his work nearly three decades ago. Most historians today, with a few notable exceptions, emphasize the local and contingent in understanding the nature of slavery instead of attempting to write a new synthesis on southern slavery. In fact, one of the most influential survey textbooks on southern slavery restates Genovese's paternalism thesis by arguing that the relatively small slaveholdings of the antebellum South bred a peculiarly intimate and intrusive form of paternalism, and it goes a step further than he in questioning the slaves' ability to form truly autonomous communities and culture. Genovese's paternalism is that of the large planter, one that allowed room for the development of slave culture and families. Peter Kolchin's paternalist is typically a small resident slaveholder whose ever-present intrusion seriously undermined slaves' cultural and personal space. In either case, it is highly unlikely that southern slaveholders, except perhaps for very small slaveholding farmers who typically owned less than five slaves and worked alongside them, "knew" their field hands and their personal characteristics in the way that they knew their house servants or favored slaves. Genovese, of course, relied on evidence from large plantations to prove his case for paternalism, and it is difficult to believe that most large planters, some of whom owned more than one plantation, had intimate knowledge of a vast majority of their slaves, which might have engendered a sense of personal responsibility. While paternalism might describe aspects of slaveholders' relationships with house servants, slave drivers, and some skilled slaves, it probably did not include the field hands who performed the hard, backbreaking agricultural work of plantation slavery.<sup>24</sup>

. . . . .

Of late, Genovese shows more interest in uncovering and analyzing the thought of proslavery writers, thinkers, and clergymen than in the world of the slaves, which he describes as a "detour in my lifelong special project," the history of the slaveholders.

Genovese's fascination with the mind of the master class and with the defense of slavery can be traced back to his essay on George Fitzhugh, the Virginian proslavery ideologue, in *The World the Slaveholders Made*. Genovese's essay heralded the arrival of historical scholarship on proslavery thought, a body of literature that had lain long forgotten and discredited as unworthy of serious intellectual attention. His analysis rescued Fitzhugh and the proslavery argument from historical obscurity. Genovese did not see Fitzhugh as a representative figure among defenders of slavery but as the most "advanced" in developing the premises of proslavery thought. Hence, while concentrating on Fitzhugh, Genovese convincingly illustrated the conservative nature of proslavery thought, its rejection of revolutionary ideology and the legacy of the Enlightenment, and its critique of liberalism and democracy. He forcefully argued for the distinctive and conservative nature of southern thought, which he saw as a product of slave society and its exigencies.

However, Genovese's attempt to magnify into a full-blown critique of capitalism Fitzhugh's comparison of the conditions of the working classes in the free North and especially in England during the Industrial Revolution with the allegedly better material conditions of the slaves, a favorite tactic among southern defenders of slavery, is questionable. To categorize Fitzhugh's thought as feudal socialism or to argue that he advocated the overthrow of capitalism as an economic system goes too far. It is a classic bourgeois mistake to lump the extreme right with the left when ideologically the two positions are poles apart, as Genovese recognizes. But he reads into Fitzhugh an anticapitalist posture, which comes close to the same political and intellectual error.

Fitzhugh and many proslavery southerners certainly argued that slavery constituted the best system of labor and that it solved the inevitable conflict between capital and labor by aligning the interest of the master with the welfare of the slave. But as true conservatives, they abhorred working-class activism, and Fitzhugh even recommended the enslavement of white workers to achieve de jure what capitalism did de facto. He and those who shared his ideas saw abolition as akin to socialism and advocated an alliance with northern conservatives to keep abolition, labor, and all forms of radicalism in check. Genovese of course deals with this argument, but for him, in the end, it does not compromise the allegedly anticapitalist thrust of Fitzhugh's thought. After the Civil War, Fitzhugh would become an eager proponent of capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

I would refrain from even seeing Fitzhugh and his proslavery cohorts as any sort of anticapitalists. While these men, and a few women, delighted in describing in great detail the misery of the working classes, their fear of labor radicalism and radical democracy outweighed their alleged sympathy for the plight of workers. None of them advocated the overthrow of capitalism, and many saw northern capitalists, and not the working classes, as their natural allies. And this was not a matter of expedi-

ency, but a natural corollary to the inherently reactionary and antidemocratic nature of their thought. In short, they were more antidemocratic than anticapitalist. Like Arno Mayer's never-fading European aristocracy, they could always be found on the side of political reaction. Moreover, southern slaveholders were not as ideologically consistent as we would imagine. They did not hesitate to advocate bourgeois notions such as the right to property as long as it supported their commitment to bound labor. If anything, they saw the defense of slavery as part of the defense of all property and capital. Post-Civil War business magnates and economic thinkers in industrializing America would borrow a leaf from slaveholders' ideology in arguing for the subordination of labor and the restriction of political democracy.<sup>26</sup> And as the history of the transformation to capitalism in the Western world and in the rest of the world reveals, the growth of a market economy and the expansion of political democracy do not prove as compatible in practice as in bourgeois theory. Indeed, the contradictory relationship between capitalism and democracy continues to unfold on a global scale today.

While Genovese's insights into the precapitalist characteristics of southern slave society prove valuable, we must view his argument that southern slaveholders' ideology was essentially anticapitalist as an exaggeration. He has even taken Marx and Engels to task for assuming a "liberal stance" in failing to appreciate the anticapitalist nature of the slave South and for supporting the Union cause during the Civil War. Apparently, we need to admire slaveholders because they were "class conscious, socially responsible, and personally honorable; they selflessly fulfilled their duties and did what their class and society required from them." Marxist scholars, on the other hand, "suffer from their passionate commitment to the cause of Negro liberation and from their hatred of slavery." But by supporting the Union effort and the Lincoln administration, Marx was not inadvertently supporting a bourgeois cause, as Genovese implies; he supported what he appropriately also saw as a workingman's fight. There could be no socialism in America, Marx felt, as long as part of the working class remained enslaved. As far as slavery and the Civil War are concerned, one may, with qualifications, accept Genovese's history—but give us Marx's politics any day.

We can criticize some older Marxist scholars and Marx himself for their unquestioning faith in a progressive history. Certainly, it led Marx to commit some errors in judgment, as in his grudging praise for the introduction of capitalism to the "backward" areas of the world by British imperialism or his construction of a non-existent Asiatic mode of production. Interestingly enough, Genovese has recently endorsed Marx's position in this respect, arguing that "Western imperialism spurred the only genuine social revolutions that Asia had ever experienced," a naive observation that should arouse considerable surprise among most Asian historians. Genovese has always been more critical of radical historians and thinkers such as

Staughton Lynd and Herbert Aptheker, for which he has expressed some genuine contrition, than of the work of southern conservatives such as Phillips, and of late, Lewis Simpson, Richard Weaver, and M. E. Bradford.<sup>27</sup>

If some Marxist historians are guilty of “the insipid glorification” of the masses, as Genovese charges, then we can certainly hold him accountable for romanticizing the slaveholding class of the Old South and their political and ideological heirs, southern conservatives. Genovese’s recent work, which repeatedly argues for the intellectual and political superiority of proslavery writers and thinkers and the southern conservative tradition, veers sharply in this direction. Genovese believes it possible to resurrect southern conservatism as a viable political and intellectual tradition despite its historically tainted image derived from its complicity with slavery and racism. If Genovese’s attempt to argue for a southern tradition divorced from racism and married to the cause of black nationalism—a tradition that would fight the alienation and atomization that is the social legacy of market capitalism—is heroic (if not downright Quixotic), it might also be horribly out of sync with today’s political realities.

As the backbone of the Republican Party today, southern conservatism has helped solidify the rule of the very market economy Genovese deplors but now credits for the economic success of capitalism. Rather than the gross inequalities of the market and the rapacious nature of corporate capitalism, he decries “market society,” the so-called bourgeois culture of radical democracy, personal fulfillment, and individual rights. Like many conservatives, Genovese is now drawn to a politics of cultural conservatism combined with a newfound respect for the economic achievements of capitalism. Invoking the South’s legacy of states rights, even though it has been associated with the defense of slavery and segregation, he rails against government “centralization,” the only counterweight the most vulnerable sections of our society have against corporate power. One wonders what Genovese would offer as a solution to the corporate crime wave that has engulfed the United States under the aegis of Republicans and a motley crew of religious and economic conservatives. But it is the “crimes of the left,” by which he means the fallen communist countries of Eastern Europe, and not the crimes of the right, that provoke Genovese, who was once accused of being soft on Stalin. Genovese now admonishes the left to take religion, by which he means Christianity, more seriously.<sup>28</sup>

One need not disagree with Genovese’s political views to note a substantial difference between the creativity and vigor of his early scholarship and his contemporary work. It is perhaps too early to judge his recent scholarship, as we have only suggestive essays to date that will culminate in the publication of his next major book, *The Mind of the Master Class*, to be coauthored with his wife, Fox-Genovese. The best of his recent book-length publications, which contains his lectures and some of his articles, is a slender volume, *The Slaveholders’ Dilemma* (1992), that

vividly describes the permanent tension of a slave society caught in the throes of a modern world. Genovese views antebellum southern thinkers as attempting to solve this dilemma by developing their own vision of progress and modernity based on slavery and the conservative principles of slave society. Here, Genovese's work seems to converge with that of his principal critic, James Oakes. In his latest book, Oakes argues that southern slaveholders' dilemma remained an unsolvable one since they could neither fully reject nor entirely assimilate the political liberalism of their world. In analyzing the thought of antebellum southern thinkers and clergymen such as James Henley Thornwell, James Henry Hammond, Thomas Roderick Dew, William Henry Trescott, Henry Hughes, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, and Benjamin Morgan Palmer, to name a few, Genovese is developing a systematic intellectual biography of proslavery southerners, whom he portrays as articulating the slaveholders' mindset. His work, along with that of Michael O'Brien and Drew Gilpin Faust, has drawn attention to the study of antebellum southern intellectual history and, in the case of Genovese, particularly the study of southern theology.<sup>29</sup>

In numerous articles, the Genoveses have argued that religion lay as much at the center of the slaveholders' worldview as it did for the slaves. In this area, Genovese's scholarship sometimes turns vindicationist to a fault. He has argued in several places that slaveholders "won" the religious controversy over slavery against abolitionists because the Bible clearly sanctions slavery. If we accept that scriptural fundamentalism and biblical literalism are the highest form of theological inquiry, then Genovese is certainly correct. He has proclaimed his own adherence to conservative theology against more liberal interpretations, to the "word" of the Bible versus its "spirit." But Genovese, as he himself admits, wants to have his cake and eat it too. It seems that the theologically conservative proslavery ministers, like their secular counterparts, were also progressive reformers. In *A Consuming Fire* (1998), Genovese takes his view of the progressive nature of proslavery Christianity as far as it can possibly go by drawing attention to southern clergymen's advocacy of the reform of southern slavery, of the legalization of slave marriages and families, and of slave literacy. As Genovese points out, most of these men sought to correct abuses in slavery and to bring it closer to their notions of Christian stewardship. Apparently, southern white ministers concerned about African Americans' "incapacity" to compete in the marketplace were convinced that emancipation would result in the extinction of the black "race."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, these efforts at reform also reveal how much southern slavery would have to change before any effective defense of it could be mounted. The ministers' paternalist concern for the alleged black inability to compete in the marketplace reveals a smug, self-interested racism. And even after all the inculcation in the Christian duties of masters, many of these clergymen succumbed a little too easily to the virulent racism of the postbellum era.

Genovese is too good a historian not to counterpose his generally positive

assessment of proslavery Christianity with the slaves' viewpoint. As he tellingly quotes one black woman, "What white folks did to black folks in slavery times, they won't ever be able to pray it away." The "juxtaposition" of this woman's "unanswerable indictment" and "the slaveholders' remarkable achievement," he says, was the "genuine tragedy of the Old South." One can only hope that he will develop this juxtaposition more than he has so far and give as much room to the slaves' indictment as to the slaveholders' worldview in his future studies. He might also pay heed to Frederick Douglass, who, writing of his own experience under slavery, reserved his greatest disdain for a "pious" master, a Methodist class leader who "found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty." As Douglass memorably wrote,

I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, whichever everywhere surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. . . . The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart broken slave are drowned in religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals of the slave-trade go hand in hand together.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps Genovese has to bear in mind his own admonition. A study of slaveholders, just as a study of the slaves, must be imbedded in the master-slave relationship. One wishes that his very overt new political preferences will not completely subvert his scholarly commitment to dialectics.

For better or for worse, historians of southern history have to grapple with Genovese's scholarship. His analysis of the nature of slave society and African American culture and religion has greatly enriched southern historiography. He has been, no doubt, one of the boldest and most original and insightful historians of slavery and the Old South. Will his forthcoming book on the mind of the slaveholders prove a fitting capstone to a long and distinguished career? Does Genovese's recent repudiation of communism, one that many Marxist scholars have long done, also imply a change in his commitment to historical materialism, a commitment that led him to produce some of the most provocative works in southern and African American history? Or will his questionable fondness for the champions of human bondage and for southern conservatives, which seems to grow instead of dissipating, hamper rather than further his astute scholarship?

## Notes

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