Some New Aspects of the Pro-Slavery Argument
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Reviewed work(s):
Source: *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan., 1936), pp. 1-14
Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2714540
Accessed: 09/03/2012 13:22

THE JOURNAL
OF
NEGRO HISTORY

Vol. XXI—January, 1936—No. 1

SOME NEW ASPECTS OF THE PRO-SLAVERY ARGUMENT*

Among the accepted truisms of Southern history is the contention that the rise of the Abolition movement in the North caused the South to turn to the defense of slavery. In the midst of the sectional controversy, Southerners constantly asserted that their own insistence upon the validity of slavery was due to Abolition agitation. In 1843, George Tucker proclaimed that "the efforts of Abolitionists have hitherto made the people in the slaveholding states cling to it [slavery] more tenaciously. Those efforts are viewed by them as an intermeddling in their domestic concerns that is equally unwarranted by the comity that is due to sister states, and to the solemn pledges of the Federal compact."[1] This view has continued to be accepted, with even such critical historians as Charles and Mary Beard declaring that "the immediate effect of the anti-slavery

*An address delivered in Chicago on the occasion of the celebration of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, September 10, 1935.

[1] George Tucker, *Progress of the United States in Population and Wealth*, Richmond, 1843, 108.

clangor was a consolidation of forces and a searching of minds and hearts for an effective answer. Clearly the hour for apologetics had arrived and human intelligence was equal to the occasion.'"[2]

Despite such unanimity of testimony, the assertion that the pro-slavery argument was an answer to Abolitionism will not stand the light of examination. A cursory glance at Southern polemics before Garrison will suffice to show that all of the features of the pro-slavery argument were already in circulation before the Garrisonian crusade was launched, while an examination of the situation in the South in the period before the fiery *Libertor* came to shock the Planter's sensibilities will indicate that the movement grew out of definitely Southern conditions and that if Garrison had never lived it would have been desirable for the Southern planters to have invented him.

Textually, the pro-slavery argument developed with the spread of slavery on the American continent. The first chapter of the argument was written when slaves were introduced to the American colonists. Unknown to English law and practice, slavery needed a rationalization for its existence. Among a people whose ideology and idiom was that of the Church and the Bible, it was but natural that the explanation of a new labor system should be couched in the language of Christianity. Slavery was a blessing to the African because as a result he was brought into contact with Christianity and given the hope of eternal salvation. Throughout the colonial period the conversion of slaves was advocated in royal instructions to colonial governors and sought through the activities of the Anglican clergy. Pious pirates who could plunder the Spanish main in behalf of Protestantism need have no scruple against bringing black savages from pagan darkness to the portals of Paradise. The defense of the traffic in the name of mis-

[2] Charles A. and Mary Beard, *Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1927), I, 703.

sionary zeal was as old as the slave trade, and far antedated Garrisonian Abolitionism.[3]

The second chapter of the pro-slavery argument developed out of a situation quite similar to that which finally called for the complete formulation of the Southern viewpoint. For three-quarters of a century after the establishment of Jamestown, the English settlers in the new world failed in their Christian duty to purchase the ebony cargoes of the mercantile missionaries of the slave trade. During that period, the labor supply of Virginia and Maryland was furnished by indentured servants from England and the continent. In those years, the first settlers and those possessed of native shrewdness or political influence obtained the best hands of the river bottoms and began to develop the plantation system. Indentured servants, at the end of their indentures, were forced into the back country where poorer soil and the inaccessibility of their lands made them easily exploited by the nascent planter aristocracy, who, through Governor Berkeley and the council, were able to dominate Virginia society. The control of these tidewater planters, however, was frequently threatened by the grumblings of the restive people of the back country. With their control endangered by these exploited people, the planters took steps to prevent the addition of more discordant elements to the colony's population. In 1670, the Colonial assembly passed an act forbidding the importation of criminals—"felons and other desperate villains"—into the colony.[4] But the measure was too late. Six years later came the movement which the planters had dreaded. Bacon's rebellion almost destroyed the planter aristocracy and confirmed their worst fears of the indentured servant. To escape the menace of the

[3] J. C. Hurd, *Laws of Freedom and Bondage* (Boston, 1858), I, 160-163; M. W. Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607-1783* (Chicago, 1931), 27-31; cf. also, John Fiske, *Old Virginia and Her Neighbors* (Boston, 1897), I, 15-16.

[4] W. W. Henning, *Statutes of Virginia, II,* 509-10.

lower classes, the planters had recourse to the slave traders, and soon the African had supplanted the European in the tobacco fields of Virginia. In addition to the obvious advantages of a servant who would not become a competitor, and would not demand political rights, the planters found the Negroes cheaper. The superiority of Negro over white labor from the standpoint of social control, and the economic advantages of a workman who could serve for life were added to Christian duty as arguments for slavery.[5]

A third element was added to the apologetics for slavery with the establishment of the colonies of South Carolina and Georgia. South Carolina was established by planters from Bermuda who brought with them both slavery and the plantation system. Georgia, however, was established without slaves, but it was not long before Oglethorpe's ambitious colonists were petitioning the Trustees to abandon their scruples and permit large landholdings and the introduction of slave labor. In addition to the economy of slavery, which they urged, the distinctive contribution of Georgia and South Carolina to the growing rationale of slavery was the contention that only Negroes could withstand the heat and moisture of the Southern climate.[6]

About the time that Georgia was learning the desirability of slave labor from experience, a change was under way in Virginia. Historians, following the lead of Southern writers, have made much of the fact that the revolutionary generation of Virginians was opposed to slavery. The leaders of this period, however, were not

[5] J. T. Adams, *Provincial Society* (New York, 1927), 104, 196-197; Leonidas Dodson, *Alexander Spottswood, Governor of Colonial Virginia, 1710-1722* (Philadelphia, 1932), 46.

[6] H. B. Fant, "The Labor Policy of the Trustees for Establishing the Colony of Georgia in America," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XVI, 1-16; and David M. Potter, "The Rise of the Plantation System in Georgia," *Ibid.*, 114-135.

drawn from the old tidewater section, but were identified with the western parts of the State, or represented the back country. After Bacon's rebellion ended in defeat, the back country people were leaderless until the Scotch-Irish and Germans filled up the Piedmont and valley sections of the State. Almost simultaneously, the Great Awakening spread among the people of the back country and the frontier. The revival was more than a religious movement, and resulted in giving both organization and leadership to the poorer classes.[7] In conjunction with the Scotch-Irish, these elements were able to challenge the control of the planter aristocracy. Under the leadership of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson the planters were forced to take a subordinate position, while the western and radical elements took Virginia into the Revolutionary War. Part of the reason for the victory of these classes was the declining price of tobacco and of slaves.

Although Virginians fell under the influence of the back country to the extent that enthusiasm for slavery suffered a momentary decline, the equalitarian sentiments of the Declaration of Independence made no appeal to the planters of South Carolina and Georgia. These States entered the Revolution, but they brought no adherence to the democratic theories upon which the struggle was based. Instead, they continually advocated slavery and in the Constitutional convention they forced a compromise which would perpetuate the institution. Not only did the South Carolinians support slavery on the grounds of property rights, but Pierce Butler, speaking in the Convention, declared that slavery was a positive benefit to the nation since the labor of a slave was as much a contribution to the national wealth as that of a freeman. Rutledge of South Carolina further alleged that the New England

[7] W. M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia* (Durham, N. C., 1930), 187ff.; cf. T. M. Whitfield, *Slavery Agitation in Virginia, 1829-1832* (Baltimore, 1930), 3-4.

shippers were benefitted by the slave trade. In general, the delegates from the lower South insisted that since slavery benefitted one portion of the country it must be protected by the Federal government.[8]

This attitude of the South Carolinians soon received another expression with the opening of the first Congress. When Pennsylvania Quakers petitioned Congress for the end of slavery, Jackson of Georgia rose to ask "if the whole morality of the world is confined to the Quakers?" The Saviour, he proclaimed, had permitted slavery. South Carolina's Tucker added to the discussion by pointing out that slavery was Biblically sound. In the discussion which followed, various members of the South Carolina and Georgia delegations justified slavery on Biblical, historical, and humanitarian grounds. So thoroughly did they canvass the situation that writers in the post-Garrison period were only able to add details and elaborations to these early expositions. The pro-slavery argument, in its full outlines, was at least as old as the Congress of the United States.[9]

From the time of this debate in Congress the central point of interest in the development of the pro-slavery argument is not concerned with its textual development but with its spread until it finally received the intellectual assent of the great majority of the Southerners. Fundamentally, the argument, with its exhausting excursion into Biblical exegesis, its search for historical incidents to prove that slavery was the natural lot of man, its comparison of the benefits of bondage with the hazards of freedom, and its glorification of agrarian economics and a patriarchal society became a system of metaphysics which constituted the whole philosophy of Southern life.

[8] Henry Wilson, *Rise and Fall of the Slave Power* (Boston, 1872-77), I, 43-44, 49-50.

[9] T. H. Benton, *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, I, 208ff.; Henry Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, 61-67.

Two major factors in the period from the first Quaker petitions in Congress to the publication of Garrison's *Liberator* account for the development and spread of the pro-slavery argument. The first of these was the intensification of social stratification in the South after the invention of the cotton gin, and the second was the growth of sectional rivalry within the United States. Both contributed to the necessity for formulating the philosophic concepts upon which plantation society was based.

The immediate effect of the invention of the cotton gin was to increase the value of the slaves which were held in the States of the upper South. Whereas slavery had been regarded for some years as an unprofitable institution, the demand for laborers in the cotton fields soon raised their value and gave to the planters of Virginia a definite economic motive for the preservation and spread of slavery. In addition, it enabled the planter class, through their wealth, to again dominate the government and the social life of their states. The widening gulf between the social classes brought divergence of views on slavery. While the men of the western counties and of the back country continued to adhere to the democratic philosophy of the Revolution, the tidewater slaveholders adopted the more comfortable doctrines of the South Carolinians. In 1807 Representative Early told his colleagues in Congress that "Southern people do not regard this trade as a crime. They are all concerned in slavery. . . . If they considered it a crime they would necessarily accuse themselves. I will tell the truth. A large majority of them do not consider it even an evil."[10] Two years later the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery noted that in the South "hitherto the approving voice of the community and the liberal interpretation of the laws have smoothed the path of duty and promoted a satisfactory issue to our own humane exertions. At present, the senti-

[10] H. Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, 85.

ments of our fellow citizens and the decisions of our courts are less auspicious."[11]

At the same time that the tidewater aristocracy were turning to the defense of slavery, the western sections of the South were giving vent to an increasing restlessness. In Virginia the constitution of 1776 had given the western sections a lesser representation, and while the westerners paid a greater share of the taxes of the State, they received less from the government than the East. The need of the western sections for internal improvements was ignored by the East, while property qualifications for the suffrage bore harder on the Piedmont and Valley than on the tidewater. Demands for reform were frequent, and Virginia's western counties insisted for two decades on a Constitutional Convention which would equalize the burdens and benefits of government. As part of this sectional and social strife in Virginia, the westerners launched an attack upon the slave property of the tidewater planters.[12]

In the rest of the South similar situations existed. Along the frontier region opposition to the aristocracy and a protest against slavery went hand in hand. In East Tennessee Abolition journalism began, and within a few years Benjamin Lundy traveled the mountain regions of Tennessee and North Carolina organizing anti-slavery societies among the lowly. Anti-slavery societies made their appearance in Kentucky in 1808, in Tennessee in 1814, in North Carolina in 1816, Maryland in 1817, and in Virginia in 1823. Of the one hundred and thirty abolition societies in the country in 1827, one hundred and six were in the western parts of the Southern states. Among the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, whose membership was especially strong in the western sections,

[11] Edward Needles, *An Historical Memoir of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1848), 56.

[12] Charles H. Ambler, "History of West Virginia," *American Historical Review*, XV, 764.

there was a widespread opposition to an institution which was, according to the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1818, "a gross violation of the most precious and moral rights of human nature, as utterly inconsistent with the law of God . . . and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ."[13] By the close of the 1820's there was a definite alignment of western anti-slavery elements against the tidewater slaveholders.[14]

Serious though this division of classes was to the slaveholder, it was complicated by the fact that in the years after Jefferson's assumption of the Presidency there was an increasing rivalry between the North and the South for the control of the government. In 1803 New England opposed the purchase of Louisiana, partly on the grounds that it would give a new area in which slavery could expand. In the following years, the New Englanders opposed the Southern and western war of 1812, and demanded a tariff which was anathema to the Southerners. In 1820, the Missouri compromise gave further evidence of the opposition of the North to the expansion of Southern institutions. In this situation the planters faced the danger of an alliance of the North with the West either under the formula of Clay's American system or under the leveling enthusiasms of Jacksonian democracy. With such alliance against them the Lords of the Manor would be ruined both economically and socially.

Faced with the necessity of protecting both their property and their social and political control, the slaveholders strove to obtain unity within their section. Two methods of action developed through the years. The one was a vicious attack upon the North and especially the New Englanders, and the other was the pro-slavery argument. Through the first, the planter class appealed to the pro-

[13] A. B. Hart, *Slavery and Abolition* (New York, 1916), 160-161.

[14] *Life, Travels and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy,* by his children (Philadelphia, 1847), 218.

vincialism of their poorer neighbors, and through the second they attempted to substitute the sense of racial superiority for the mounting class consciousness of the non-slaveholders.

In order to accomplish the first of these objects, the Southern leaders lost no opportunity to place the onus of the sectional controversy upon the alien Yankee. After the Missouri Compromise an increasing "irritability" on the part of the Southerners in Congress was noted, and anti-slavery writings were frequently denounced. The South, asserted South Carolina's Congressman Drayton in 1828, would "rather endure all the calamities of civil war . . . than parley for an instant upon the right of any power than our own to interfere with the regulation of our slaves."[15] Observers from the North noted the Southern jealousy of the North, and the editor of the *New England Review* called attention to the "abuse heaped by Southern demagogues upon New England."[16] But perhaps the best of the sectional diatribes of the pre-Garrison period was the product of the pen of Robert James Turnbull of South Carolina. Writing under the name of "Brutus" he deplored the tendency of northern State legislatures to "pour forth the phials of their wrath" against the "Fundamental Polity" of the Southern States. "Domestic servitude is so intimately interwoven with our prosperity," declared "Brutus," "that to talk of its abolition is to speak of writing us out of our civil and political existence."[17] It is evident from the attitude which the slaveholders were taking that Garrison's announcement of his uncompromising hostility to slavery played directly into the hands of those who would at-

[15] W. H. Smith, *A Political History of Slavery* (New York, 1903), I, 25-35.

[16] Alice Adams, *The Neglected Period of Anti-Slavery in America, 1808-1831* (Boston, 1908), 113ff.

[17] William Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery* (Boston, 1853); Alice Adams, *op. cit.*, 117.

tribute the attack on slavery to outside interference. In truth, the exact opposite of this generally accepted idea may be true. It is conceivable that the Southern determination to defend slavery by an attack upon the North may have caused anti-slavery men to despair of gradual emancipation and join with Garrison in a demand for immediate and uncompensated abolition!

Appeals to local patriotism, however, were but part of the tactics of the planters. More significant were the efforts made to obtain unity of sentiment among all classes. Violence and coercion played its part in this movement, while public meetings attempted to whip up the semblance of cooperation. In Virginia when a Norfolk lawyer denounced slavery in a newspaper article he was accused of wanting to produce another San Domingo and a meeting appointed a committee to report on the state of the local police. In 1827 an anti-slavery meeting in Smithfield, Virginia, was stopped on the grounds that the law did not specifically permit meetings for such a purpose.[18] In 1825 a young South Carolinian cancelled his subscription to the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* on the grounds that neither his health nor the successful prosecution of his profession would permit him to receive so dangerous a publication.[19]

That the planters were afraid of the common people of the South is borne out by a pamphlet by Z. Kingsley, a native of Florida. Agriculture, said Kingsley, was the foundation of Southern life, and agriculture was dependent upon the "perpetuation of that kind of labor which now produces it and which seems best adapted, under all circumstances, to render it profitable to the Southern Capitalist." To Kingsley's mind, the slaves, in addition to being happier, were "equally virtuous, moral, and less corrupted than the ordinary class of laboring whites."

[18] Adams, *op. cit.*, 112.

[19] *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 6, 61.

Moreover, Negroes were more productive than whites, and "under a just and prudent system of management, Negroes are safe, permanent, productive and growing property, and easily governed; that they are sober, discreet, honest and obliging, are less troublesome, and possess a much better moral character than the ordinary class of corrupted whites of similar condition." In carrying out his argument, the Floridan laid the foundation for the later work of Fitzhugh by declaring that "slavery is a necessary state of control from which no condition of society can be perfectly free. The term is applicable to, and fits all grades and conditions in almost every point of view, whether moral, physical, or political."[20]

Despite this attitude toward the lower classes, the planters were obliged to appeal to them in the pro-slavery argument. The primary purpose of this exposition was to convince the non-slaveholding whites of the superiority of white over Negro blood. An analysis of the literature of the Southern "defense" will indicate that the fundamental premise of the slaveholders was that Negroes were inferior to whites. Throughout the era of the sectional conflict ministers of the Southern churches searched the Scriptures and compared Hebrew texts to show that God had made the Negroes a subordinate race and ordained them for slavery. In addition, a pseudo-anthropology demonstrated the biological inferiority of the Negro race. In the field of politics, the planters abandoned the principles of democracy, and frankly proclaimed that the Declaration of Independence was designed for white men alone.

Aiding in the process of convincing the non-slaveholders of the desirability of slavery was the economic situation in the South before 1830. The opening up of great regions in the Southwest, suitable for the growing of cot-

[20] Z. Kingsley, *A Treatise on the Patriarchal, or Co-operative System of Society. . . . With its Necessity and Advantages* (n. p. second edition, 1829).

ton and the establishment of the plantation system, made it possible for the poorer classes to migrate to the new lands and become planters. The possibility of joining the ranks of the aristocracy was sufficient to lead yeomen and poor whites to accept the philosophy of the planters before they had obtained the wealth necessary for admission into the charmed society of the Lords of the Manor. In 1828-1829 the Western counties of Virginia, after forcing the calling of a constitutional convention, accepted a compromise on representation and dropped their opposition to slavery because they expected western Virginia to become wealthy and its inhabitants slaveholders.[21] At the same time, the situation in San Domingo and occasional slave insurrections in the South seemed to confirm the planters' thesis of a fundamental hostility between the races and to render slavery necessary as an institution of social control. After the debates in the Virginia legislature following the Southampton massacre the opposition to slavery disappeared in Virginia and the people accepted the philosophy which Professor Dew came forth to expound. William and Mary College in Virginia and the College of Charleston took over the congenial task of educating the young men of the back country and the up country to the ideals of the aristocracy, and the churches which had formerly denounced slavery now gave divine sanction to the institution. So thoroughly did the whites of the South become imbued with the ideal of white supremacy that a recent writer could find ample evidence to substantiate a thesis that the maintenance of white supremacy has been the "central theme of Southern history."[22]

But despite the testimony from poor whites, overseers, and the lesser yeomanry which Professor Phillips mar-

[21] C. H. Ambler, *History of West Virginia* (New York, 1933), 221ff.

[22] U. B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American Historical Review*, xxxiv, 30-43.

shalled to support his thesis, the real central theme of Southern history seems to have been the maintenance of the planter class in control. The pro-slavery argument carried but little promise to the lower classes, yet it sufficed to draw a line of demarkation between the exploited groups of the South. Playing upon the race prejudice which the argument inculcated, the planter aristocrat and his Bourbon successor have been able to remain in control. When the Civil War began, the non-slaveholders of the South did battle to maintain the Southern system of life. Following the war, there was imminent danger that the lower orders might forget race and unite, but the Ku Klux Klan saved the day for the Bourbons. In the nineties, the Populist movement brought whites and blacks of the oppressed classes together, but again the heritage of the pro-slavery argument brought division and eventuated in new constitutions which effectually disfranchised both the Negroes and their potential allies among the poor whites. Occasional lynchings have sufficed to keep burning the flames first kindled by the pro-slavery argument. Only in recent months has depression-born necessity brought tenant farmers of both races to stand shoulder to shoulder against their oppressors. For more than a century, the pro-slavery argument has enabled the planting aristocrats to dominate Southern society.

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