

African Americans, Slavery, and Thrift
from the Revolution to the Civil War

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Notions of thrift played a vital role in the history of race in the United States. The young nation, founded upon the principle of universal human equality, struggled with the fate of peoples it defined as non-white. The discourse of thrift deeply informed these anxious discussions. To many Americans, the virtues of thrift — industriousness, discipline, and self-control — offered a measure of civilization by which non-whites were frequently found deeply wanting. The history of the nation from the Revolution to the Civil War documents the ways that freedom and civic inclusion came to be defined largely in terms of a racialized discourse of thrift. Those thought to embody thrift's antitheses — laziness, improvidence, and profligacy — often found themselves on the margins of a civilization defined in terms of industry and frugality.

This process was most pronounced among Americans of African descent, as black people assumed the preeminent role in discussions of thrift and race in nineteenth-century America. Unlike Native Americans, who were almost universally excluded from American society, African Americans challenged the boundaries of inclusion by their very presence. Enslaved African Americans lived among whites, who forced them to perform the menial tasks required by the cash-crop economy of the plantation South. Even nominally free African Americans — particularly those who lived in the Northern states before the Civil War — raised troublesome questions over the limits of citizenship and national inclusion.

The place of African Americans in the nation became a question of central importance in the decades following the nation's birth. The market revolution — the great engine of capitalist transformation that fostered both the bourgeois work ethic of the industrializing North and the "precapitalist" social order of the antebellum South — deeply exacerbated differences among the sections of the country. These economic changes fostered disparate visions of American society. Whereas many in the northern states idealized a social order predicated on the middle-class market values associated with industrialization and urbanization, plantation society in the South developed its own ideal, rooted in capital-rich slaveholders' benign but efficient control over the labor of black slaves and poor whites. These competing ideals of thrift emerged as mutual antagonists; regional identities dialectically defined themselves in opposition to economic and social worlds each saw as inimical to the good society. The Civil War resulted from these tensions, and largely resolved them — in favor of the market-oriented values of the industrializing North. But while Northern visions of market-oriented thrift triumphed over Southern paternalism, the war did very little to extirpate the racial inequalities inherent in them.

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At the time of the American Revolution (1775-1783), the thrift ethos lay at the heart of the Founding Fathers' anxious deliberations over the prospects for a new American democracy. The presence of slavery and the example of an oppressed race on American shores combined with notions of thrift to shape revolutionary discourse in powerful ways. American radicals easily equated England's treatment of its American colonies with the practice of enslavement. As the Declaration of Independence put it, King and Parliament had pursued policies toward the colonies evincing "a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism." Chattel bondage offered more than a compelling metaphor for colonists' experience; American revolutionaries struggled against slavery as an actual political condition that was, in their estimation, a startlingly near political possibility for white American colonists. Patriot Josiah Quincy conceded as much in 1774, declaring: "Britons are our oppressors. . . *we are slaves*."¹ Countless other revolutionaries explicitly equated the oppressions of the British with those endured by slaves — degradations known all too well to the slaveholding fathers of the American republic. No less a patriot than George Washington, himself the owner of several hundred human beings, warned his fellow colonists that to "submit to every Imposition that can be heap'd upon us . . . will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway."²

Values associated with thrift stood at the opposite end of slavery's dependence and degradation, and hence associated thrift with freedom. The American Founders were anxious revolutionaries, who posed themselves as custodians of a tradition of English rights which coveted both liberty and social order, and they viewed habits associated with thrift as vital to the preservation of both. For them, the opposites of liberty were on the one hand luxury, effeminacy, and wastefulness, and on the other poverty, servility, and dependence. John Adams put it well in a letter to his wife Abigail in 1774, worrying that a decade of Parliamentary depredations had created a "universal Spirit of Debauchery, Dissipation, Luxury, Effeminacy and Gaming" in the colonies. "How much servility, Venality And Artifice and Hypocrisy, have been introduced among the Ambitious and Avaricious by the british Politicks of the last 10 Years?" he asked.³ Thrift stood with liberty in the virtuous center between the extremes of luxury and servility, tyranny and anarchy. Benjamin Franklin advocated thrifty values among his famous "thirteen virtues" to cultivate, which included temperance, frugality, industry, and moderation. Such virtues were personal in character, but collective in their effects. Wrote one American Revolutionary, "The public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals; on the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected."⁴ Particularly in a self-governing republic, self-restraint and independence were the watchwords of civic health. "It is easy to see that when republican virtue fails, slavery ensues," Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*.⁵ John Adams echoed this sentiment succinctly in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: "Without virtue, there can be no political liberty."⁶

The racial import of these values of civic virtue became clear as a consequence of the inexorable logic of the Revolution. For if all mankind were created equal, and if government was to serve the interests of those governed, were not African-descended people entitled to the right of self-

governance — the precious fruit of equality? How could a nation that had founded its bloody nascence on the principle of universal human liberty deny that liberty to any among its ranks? No one raising a hand for American liberty could ignore these deep conundrums. British critics spared no opportunity to point out the apparent hypocrisy of the colonials' stand on slavery. "How is it," quipped Samuel Johnson, the English writer and satirist, "that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"⁷ The colonists themselves were far too committed to their revolutionary ideology to miss the point. The great paradox of the Revolution was not lost on founders such as John Jay, the New York attorney who penned some of the most eloquent defenses of the young nation. "To contend for our own liberty and to deny that blessing to others," he wrote in 1785, "involves an inconsistency not to be excused."⁸ This attitude was more common in the northern colonies and states, where the mercantile economy relied upon slavery, but was less apparent in the declining tobacco regime in the Chesapeake and the expanding rice and cotton plantations further south, in low-country Carolinas and northern Georgia.

The consequence of revolutionary ideology on the practice of slavery was profound, if inconsistent. Between 1777 and 1827 every state north of the Mason-Dixon line provided for the gradual, compensated abolition of slavery. Those such as Vermont prepared constitutions that prohibited slavery, while Massachusetts ended slavery through legal fiat. The most important slaveholding states in the North — Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey — passed a series of legislative half-measures that, collectively and over time, provided for the complete freedom of their enslaved populations. Even in the nominally "free" North, however, African Americans confronted grave questions about their characters. The principles of the Revolution might have dictated the inadvisability of continuing slavery in a land of freedom, but they left plenty of room for debating the wisdom of granting freedpeople political equality. Here values associated with thrift assumed great significance, for it was precisely blacks' alleged failings in this realm that seemed to justify their continued enslavement or exclusion. In New Jersey, where slavery was particularly entrenched, arguments against black freedom asserted that African Americans' "deep wrought disposition to indolence and laziness" went hand in hand with their "general looseness of passions and uncontrovertible propensity to gratify and satiate every thirst . . . without attending to the consequences."⁹ To unleash such people upon the body politic would be the height of civic irresponsibility.

The pattern in the North, by which slavery fell hardest where the economy depended on it most, was even more evident in the South, where the institution itself weathered considerable disruption in the course of the Revolution, but did not die. The upper South states of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware witnessed a spate of voluntary manumissions. Some slaveholders sought to put their revolutionary principles into practice through such actions, while others simply wished to rid themselves of the burden and expense of an aging slave population in a declining economy. Regardless of the motives for manumission, the free black population of the upper South exploded in the post-war years, increasing three-fold from 1790 to 1810.¹⁰ Such, though, was slavery's hold on the agricultural economy of the Chesapeake that revolutionary ideology and economic expedience were insufficient to extinguish slavery. And further south, were the cash-crop economy

was expanding, the Revolution inspired no efforts to, for example, trade slaves their freedom in exchange for military service. Instead, slaves took it upon themselves to strike a blow for freedom.

As the war shifted to the southern theater in the early 1780s, slaves availed themselves of the opportunities offered by the chaos of war and fled the plantations. Once the conflict was over, Lower South slaveholders moved quickly to reconstitute their control over their bound laborers. With but few exceptions, they paid little heed to calls for gradual abolition. Instead, they defined Southern interests in terms of slaveholding, and championed their region's right to own slaves. In the Constitutional Convention of 1787, so ardently did they argue their position that they nearly scuttled the fragile national compact.¹¹ William Loughton Smith of South Carolina argued that "slavery was so ingrafted into the policy of the Southern States, that it could not be eradicated without tearing up by the roots their happiness, tranquillity, and prosperity."¹² The result of delicate sectional negotiations, the final Constitution included clauses permitting an end to the international slave trade, and counting three-fifths of the slave population for purposes of representation in the House of Representatives.

Ideas of thrift played a critical role in the fate of slavery in the Revolutionary and Critical periods. Slavery's most ardent apologists claimed that African-descended people lacked the critical qualities necessary to include them among the group of "all men" to whom the Declaration of Independence applied. The innate characters of Africans, it was argued, unfitted them for the critical responsibilities of self-rule. The most well-respected natural philosophers of the day had ascribed to this view before the Revolution. David Hume, for example, suspected that Africans were "naturally inferior to the whites," for they had never attained the features of "civilization" — "no ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences."¹³ According to such influential views, Africans' innate inadequacies amounted to shortcomings in their personal characters. On the eve of the Revolution, an American naturalist proclaimed of Africans that "treachery, theft, stubbornness, and idleness . . . are such consequences of their manner of life at home as to put it out of all doubt that these qualities are natural to them and not originated by their state of slavery."¹⁴ There was little room for the virtue of thrift in such a formulation. Indeed, pre-Revolutionary ideas tended simply to echo the perspectives of European travelers back to the sixteenth century, who had long listed Africans' lack of foresight and frugality among the many deficiencies that rendered them uncivilized.

The social, cultural, and intellectual changes that attended the Revolution raised new possibilities for Africans. The Enlightenment that had spawned the natural rights philosophies of the Age of Democratic Revolution helped create an ambivalent science of race. On the one hand, European philosophes' mania for classifying the natural world placed white people at the top of nature's hierarchy, relegating Africans to a position somewhere between civilized man and savage nature. Eighteenth-century anthropologists regularly claimed, for example, that "the *Penis* of an African is larger than that of an European," and that "Apes and baboons menstruate less than negresses, monkeys still less."¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Enlightenment's stress on the role of environment in the formation of human character — nurture rather than nature — offered Africans some potential means of redemption. True, Africans' characters were largely deficient of all qualities that defined

the civilized, but circumstance rather than color may have determined this; under benign circumstances Africans might conceivably be uplifted to a level of equality with whites. Revolutionary doctor and abolitionist Benjamin Rush attributed the characteristic degradation of slaves not to Africans' innate natures, but to the abuses of slavery itself. Prominently referencing such non-thrifty character defects as idleness and thievishness, Rush argued that "all the vices which are charged upon the negroes . . . are the genuine offspring of slavery."¹⁶ The Revolution thus represented a qualified respite from an already-long history of inveterate racial denigration, but it was one deeply qualified by the presumption of white superiority, and by the looming question of blacks' emancipatability — the potential for their release into a free and self-governing republic.

In the Revolutionary and Early National periods, the discourse of thrift intersected with the discourse of universalism to contest the boundaries of national inclusion. Through the concept of civic virtue, revolutionary discourse racialized thrift, just as thrift helped racialize Revolutionary discourse. Thrift offered a template for considering not simply the question of slavery, but of race as well. Thrift thus lay profoundly at the center of the great paradox of the American Revolution, and perhaps of American history itself: how could a liberty-loving nation become a bastion for racial oppression? Many of the founding generation believed sufficiently in the Revolution's universalism to liberate African-descended people from the galling yoke of slavery. But just as many believed that slaves lacked the qualities necessary to exercise their freedom in ways conducive to the public weal. The racialized discourse of thrift excoriated servitude as dangerously anti-republican, but at the same time it rendered those who had been slaves unfit to wield the precious right of self-rule. In the end, the Revolutionary discourse of thrift helped make slavery an institution "peculiar" to the South, but racism a practice common to the nation.

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The full significance of the racialization of thrift became clear during the period of the market revolution in America, which stretched roughly from 1820 to the Civil War. This era witnessed the confluence of several mutually reinforcing processes that collectively amounted to the birth of the modern industrial order. It began with the emergence in America of technological changes that had begun in Great Britain and western Europe, as new materials and new refining processes led to a revolution in manufacturing. New materials and technologies, in turn, led to a revolution in the transportation of goods, people, and ideas across the nation. And the transportation revolution fostered the development of new goods, which were manufactured by new methods.

As production moved from individual homes to centralized establishments, new systems of labor emerged to maximize productive efficiency. Mechanized production, interchangeable parts, the specialization of labor in new manufactories — all had vast social consequences. The most fundamental of these was urbanization. As sites of manufacturing activity and markets for goods and labor, cities grew in size and number. The prevailing system of artisanal manufacture gave way to a new workforce composed of largely unskilled laborers, increasingly supplied from the ranks of displaced craftsmen, rural folk attracted to the urban economy, or European immigrants.

Apprentices once destined to learn their entire craft and open their own shops now stayed in their un- or semi-skilled occupations for life. Entrepreneurial artisans, who once took part in every part of the manufacturing process, became nascent capitalists who managed the labor of others or hired others to do so. Industrialization thus led to the emergence of modern social classes. Workers began to identify themselves through a cultural style which jealously guarded their few workplace privileges and set them apart from the growing middle class, while a rising middle class just as assiduously sought to distance itself from “rough” laborers through “respectable” comportment and conspicuous display of their elevated class status.

The rise of this new middle class transformed the discourse of thrift, supplanting the Revolutionary era’s republican concern with civic virtue with the market revolution’s liberal regard for individual economic virtues. The market revolution celebrated bourgeois life and endowed it with potent cultural authority. Economic development became the progress of civilization, of national material and moral well-being, with whatever tending to aggrandize the one valued as enhancing the other. Popular literature — the articles and stories offered in a spate of new weekly and monthly serials — captured the new ethos. For example, an antebellum history of the Illinois frontier modeled the civilizing process of economic expansion in describing what it saw as the enterprising young people of the state. Whereas an older generation of settlers had been satisfied to live in “old log cabins, go bare-footed, and eat hog and hominy,” the Illinoisans of the 1830s were impelled to enterprise by “a desire to gratify artificial wants.” These wants — better clothing, a new horse, something to display in the home — led people to learn “new notions of economy and ingenuity in business” in order to fulfill them. A self-reinforcing cycle of economy and progress ensued: “This again led to settled habits of enterprise, economy and tact in business, which once acquired and persevered in, were made the cause of a thriftiness unknown to their fathers and mothers.”¹⁷ It was, then, the desire to consume — to improve the material circumstances of life within appropriate moral bounds, a phenomenon which Alexis de Tocqueville called “interest rightly understood”¹⁸ — that led the wise to save, and these personal habits of thrift fostered the economic and hence moral well-being of all.

Antebellum paeans to the virtues of responsible consumption knew few bounds. Commentators pictured thoughtfully-directed desire as the guarantor of political liberty and as the cement that would bind up the social divisions created by industrialization. Satisfying “the sharp necessities of life,” argued Unitarian divine William Ellery Channing, might “chain man to toil” but could also “wake up his faculties, and fit him for wider actions.” The thrift required to satisfy human desires responsibly enhanced the social order by fostering self-control. “Thus freedom,” Channing wrote, “is the end of all just restraint.”¹⁹ According to *The American Whig Review*, thrifty habits would best serve the laborer, who even while engaged in menial work requiring no exercise of intellect may instead use his mind “in digesting and arranging its accumulated treasures,” and thus be carried “onward in the path of eternal progress.” The *Review* closed with a wish, repeated often in the bourgeois literature of the antebellum North, that “industry, diligence, [and] thrift” would grant “every true laborer, whether with head or hand, an honored place as a vital, worthy, [and] precious member of the body politic.”²⁰ Thrift, then, if properly directed, promoted a degree of political and social harmony that would enhance progress and foster the virtues of civilization.

But the virtuous regulation of desire required a delicate balance, for if wrongly directed the impulses that led Americans to thrifty behavior could lead to the corruption of desire, or vice. In his popular 1856 work *The Elements of Morality*, British philosopher William Whewell remarked that “habits of care, with regard to sparing and spending, as may tend toward Poverty and Privation, are reckoned as Virtues: such virtues are *Economy, Frugality*. By these, a man *thrives*, or grows in his possessions; he is *thrifty*.” But over-zealousness or neglect could transform any virtue into a vice. “Though wealth may be desired for ends which make the Desire virtuous; the progress of men’s habits is such that, when sought at first as a means, it is afterwards desired as an end. The Desire to acquire money is then unlimited; and is *Covetousness, Avarice*.”²¹ Antebellum moral advisors suggested the dangerous proximity of healthy desire, which drove men to thrifty lives, to unhealthy desire, which produced immorality. The *Democratic Review*, for example, distinguished “high ambition” from “mere idle vanity,” declaring that while the former produced “great and noble deeds,” the latter led only to “indolence and sloth.”²² This was the great moral crime of the industrial revolution; idleness threatened the entire civilization built on market values. Work, its opposite, was not “a mere provision for animal wants,” as *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* put it in 1858. Rather, labor was “a great auxiliary to the moral and spiritual interests of life,” the means through which man could exercise his “higher attributes” in a manner “ordained by the Creator.” In short, the work that led to thrift reflected the highest spiritual aspirations of man: self-culture.²³

By these bourgeois standards of thrift, African Americans were doomed to, at the least, obsolescence in the industrial economy. Nearly completely free by 1827, northern blacks once deemed too deficient in civic virtue to participate equally in the political life of the North were now frequently deemed too deficient in market virtue to participate equally in the economic life of the North. Carrying forward older generalizations about blacks’ inherent natures, respectability’s standard bearers found free blacks deeply wanting in their capacity to properly regulate their desire. According to white critics, free blacks simply failed to respond rationally to the market’s system of incentives and rewards. “The negro,” complained a Connecticut newspaper, “can supply all his physical wants without industry, and beyond the supply of his immediate physical wants, he has little inducement to look.”²⁴ Rather than seek the self-culture necessary to improve their lives, blacks were charged with being satisfied with the minimum. In 1837, delegates to a state constitutional convention in Pennsylvania argued for the disfranchisement of blacks on these grounds, declaring that northern African Americans were “engaged in no business that requires even ordinary capacity, in no enterprises requiring talents to conduct them. The mass are improvident, and seek the lowest avocations, and most menial stations.”²⁵

Some ascribed African Americans’ alleged aversion to the material benefits of bourgeois life a consequence of their time in bondage. “Those who have just emerged from a state of barbarism or slavery have few artificial wants,” declared some Connecticut whites in 1834. As a result, blacks were “regardless of the decencies of life, and improvident of the future.”²⁶ French observer Alexis de Tocqueville agreed, writing that for the freed slave “independence is often . . . a heavier burden than slavery,” for in freedom, “a thousand new desires beset him, and he has not the knowledge and energy necessary to resist them.” As de Tocqueville intuited, virtue in market culture required

internal discipline, but masters maintained order through external controls. Desire and passions were “masters which it is necessary to contend with,” he wrote, but the slave “has learned only to submit and obey.” As a consequence, “liberty destroys him.”²⁷

Unsurprisingly, free African Americans bristled at this depiction of the race. Throughout the northern states, wherever black people enjoyed sufficient liberty and opportunity to organize themselves to resist oppression, they issued streams of counter-speech designed to refute the calumnies uttered against them. The result was a rich body of protest thought that fueled the efforts of white abolitionists and polarized the national debate over slavery. In newspapers, sermons, pamphlets, public celebrations, and conventions, prominent African Americans in the antebellum North responded directly to the claims of blacks’ detractors, arguing that African Americans were indeed capable of imbibing the civilizing influences of the market economy.

They spoke in terms deeply reminiscent of antebellum apostles of market virtue. “Commerce is the pioneer of civilization and intelligence,” declared a national convention of African Americans in 1853. “It gives a field apace for essential, refined morality.”²⁸ Like William Ellery Channing, they spoke of the great significance of self-improvement. In 1847, a national convention of African Americans put it eloquently: “Mental culture” — the “growth,” “expansion,” and “development” of intellect — was a “primeval duty” that had been “bestowed upon us by the Almighty.”²⁹ In literally thousands of similar utterances, African-American leaders urged their people to embrace the virtues of bourgeois life. Black newspapers like *Freedom’s Journal*, the nation’s first, promised to “dwell . . . upon the general principles and rules of economy,” frequently running didactic essays on the subjects of “Thrift” and “Economy.”³⁰ A later New York newspaper, the *Colored American*, typified these calls to embrace market virtues, urging readers to “cultivate honesty, punctuality, propriety of conduct, and modesty and dignity of deportment,” as well as “untiring habits of industry, the dint of perseverance,” and “rigidness of economy.”³¹

The virtues of bourgeois life held special resonance for the African-American public figures. These were precisely the qualities blacks were claimed to lack, and it was on the basis of this deficiency that prejudicial social policies — slavery in the South, disfranchisement and exclusion in the North — were justified. Antebellum blacks’ analysis of their dilemma and its solution stemmed directly from understandings of thrift they shared with whites. The core of their complaint was that black people were too frequently viewed as inherently and irrevocably degraded. Black leaders conceded that African Americans were merely human, and as poor and excluded people, they confronted their own moral challenges. But they charged prejudiced whites with exaggerating the immoral conduct of a few. Wrote one black commentator of free African Americans: “Every indecorous act on their part is used as a weapon by the pro-slavery spirit of the age against the cause of freedom, . . . to show that the colored people are not fit for freedom.”³² The worst consequence of this phenomenon was that all African Americans became tainted with the vices of the minority. Wrote another: “Any exhibition of vice or folly on the part of a single individual among them, is often taken as an evidence of the moral degradation and inferiority of the whole people.”³³ Furthermore, prejudice in this form contradicted the promises of a marketplace presumed to be neutral, and thus imperiled

market culture as a whole. “Vice and virtue are . . . treated with equal disfavor by our oppressors,” charged Frederick Douglass. “In many of the Northern States of the Union, a low, idle, vicious white man stands higher in the social and political scale of society, than the most refined and virtuous colored man can do.”³⁴ To black abolitionist Charles Remond, such a system — wherein “virtue may not claim her divinely appointed rewards” — seemed “well calculated to make every man disregardful of his conduct, and every woman unmindful of her reputation.”³⁵

The solution most antebellum black leaders proffered relied deeply upon the workings of the market economy. If the charge against blacks was that they lacked market virtues, then the answer was that they must provide “practical evidence to the contrary.”³⁶ To black leaders, a bourgeois concern with self-regulation offered the most potent means of breaking the cycle of oppression and returning the nation to (what they presumed to be) its race-neutral first principles. The values of thrift, economy, and gratification delay — in short, everything encapsulated by the word *thrift* — resonated among black leaders precisely because they offered individual character as a space of uncontested authority that could help change white minds. “We have to act an important part, and fill an important place . . . in the work of emancipation,” intoned black editor Samuel Cornish. “On *our* conduct and exertions much, very much depend.”³⁷ Through their own actions, behavior, and comportment, African Americans could rebut the racist claims that held them back. “I think,” wrote Austin Steward, “that our conduct as colored men will have a great bearing on the question that now agitates this land. . . . Let it be shown that we as a people are religious, industrious, sober, honest and intelligent, and my word for it, the accursed system of Slavery will fall, as did Satan from Heaven.”³⁸

If prejudice constituted a violation of market principles, only proper market behavior could offer a solution. The discourse of thrift offered African Americans a means of changing white minds that lay within the market order itself. The key was to work properly — to conserve blacks’ energies, only to invest them in aims likely to produce the highest returns in liberty and equality. “If we would be men and command respect among men, we must strike for something higher than sympathy and perpetual beggary,” wrote one black editor. Charity did not foster elevation and independence in men, but rather “has a tendency to make them indolent and stupid.”³⁹ Blacks had to change their relationship to the market, African-American leaders said; they had to attain a position of power within the market that would let them command the equality they were owed. “Society is a hard-hearted affair,” wrote Frederick Douglass. “The individual must keep society under obligation to him, or society will honor him only as a stranger and sojourner.”⁴⁰ Time and time again, prominent African Americans called for blacks to act in such a way as to make whites as dependent upon blacks as blacks were upon whites. Wrote one black editor: “Self-respect induces all equals to respect those who belong to their order, interest impels them to cultivate good understanding with those whose assistance may at any moment be necessary to preserve life or property.”⁴¹ In practice, this strategy meant rising up out of the lowest rungs of the economy and scaling the hierarchy of labor. The black national convention of 1853, which dedicated an entire committee to this very problem, loudly proclaimed that “commerce leads to respectability.”⁴² Others echoed the claim over and over again, urging non-elite blacks to move from the vice-filled

cities into the countryside, to take up skilled trades, and become cogs in the machinery of American business.

Black leaders' reliance on the discourse of thrift as a strategy for obtaining equality offered one commanding benefit: agency. For African-American leaders, the great value of moral reform lay precisely in the promise of agency it offered every single African American, regardless of status or condition. "Each one for himself, must commence the improvement of his condition," wrote Samuel Cornish. "It is not in mass, but in individual effort and character, that we are to move onward to a higher elevation." As a class, African Americans might not control much, but they could always control themselves. "I possess nothing but moral capability," Boston's Maria Stewart once said. God, wrote one black minister, "holds man responsible only for his moral conduct in the formation of his moral character, and on nothing more in his own existence has he control."⁴³ While liberal ideology may have inhibited blacks from developing a more sophisticated understanding of the structural economic forces underlying their plight, it offered the individual as an uncontested space for exercising personal agency. Ultimately, this was the best the discourse of thrift could offer. While self-cultivation may or may not eradicate prejudice, it was worth pursuing as its own reward.

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The political abolitionists of the 1840s and 1850s — those who developed into the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln — molded a potent critique of slavery out of their faith in the virtues of the liberal marketplace. Black activists and white abolitionists operated on the margins of public culture, vilifying Southern slavery as above all sinful — a message that resonated among some evangelical reformers of the age, but was more likely to earn its adherents the title of "crack-brained fanatics." Later generations of political antislavers employed the values of thrift to fashion critiques of slavery that could appeal to the moderate center of the Northern electorate. Thrift framed the issue of slavery in such a way that an entire mass political party could rise and even thrive with an antislavery message. With the election of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency in November 1860, this came to pass. And of course it was the election of Lincoln, an antislavery Republican, to the White House that spurred Southern fire-eaters to their victorious campaign to launch a pre-emptive revolution against the incursions of liberal democracy and the free market, and secede from the Union. But the success of Republicans' thrift-based ideology was predicated on an appeal to masses who were overwhelmingly prejudiced. And while Republicans successfully portrayed slavery as a threat to the self-interest of white Northerners, they did little to root-out the innate racism of American life — a problem that became all-too-apparent after the Civil War was over.

By standards of Northern thrift and industry, Southern society appeared backward and antiprogressive. Unitarian minister Elhanan Winchester Reynolds described the difference between the free and slave States, the former displaying "thrift, refinement, intelligence, order, and the tender charities that spring from Christian culture," while the latter manifested "indigence, brutality, ignorance, incipient anarchy, and heathen cruelty."⁴⁴ Historian Eric Foner, in his study of free labor

ideology in antebellum America, has documented the myriad counts on which antebellum Republicans found the South wanting in prosperity. William Seward, through his Southern travels, found “exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly-neglected roads, and, in every respect, an absence of enterprise and improvement.”⁴⁵ Other Republicans spoke of the South’s “lack of invention and resource,” its “inefficiency and irresolution,” and the “sameness of poverty and unthrift” that beset the region.⁴⁶ Few left any question as to the source of the South’s retrograde economy. “Such has been the effect of slavery,” pronounced Seward,⁴⁷ while New Hampshire jurist Nathaniel Upham attributed the South’s poverty to its “thriftless, improvident system” of labor.⁴⁸ Slavery’s critics emerged even in the South, where a few outspoken dissidents like Hinton Helper ascribed the region’s backwardness “to the same cause that has impoverished and dishonored us in all other respects — the thriftless and degrading institution of slavery.”⁴⁹

Economic critiques of slavery, infused as they were with the discourse of thrift, owed slavery’s blighting effects to its violation of principle tenets of market society. Most obviously, slavery offered little positive incentive for the slave to labor industriously. The lash kept slaves at work, but did little to enhance their morals. In a work on political economy, George Tucker, the Virginia politician and philosopher, stated the case clearly: “The slave, not being stimulated to industry by the expectation of receiving the fruits of his own labor, is likely, from the love of ease so natural to man, to work less willingly, with less energy, and to avoid the toil when he can.”⁵⁰ The slave simply had no stake in the system he labored under. “However much of revenue he may produce,” wrote one Republican, “his own share will be strictly limited to the necessities of life.”⁵¹ In such a system, why should anyone labor? The moral degeneration of slaves followed directly from slavery’s failure to offer positive incentives to labor. “The instinctive feelings of the slave,” continued Tucker, “impel him to extraordinary expense and waste. He is therefore generally thievish, careless, and improvident.”⁵² Slavery thus made blacks incapable of participating responsibly in market society, instead rendering them improvident, thievish, and thriftless. Wrote Helper: “Where a system of enforced servitude prevails, it is very apt to beget loose notions about the obligations of paying for anything.”⁵³ According to this view, the consequence for masters was just as grave as for the slave. Slavery produced “pride, indolence, luxury, and licentiousness,”⁵⁴ consigning the slaveowners themselves to “idleness” and “vicious indulgences.”⁵⁵

Most distressing, according to economic critiques of slavery, were the effects of the peculiar institution on laboring white men. If slavery led planters to become idle aristocrats and slaves to become shiftless and indolent, it brought non-slaveholding whites to the very brink of barbarism. The *North American Review*, lauding Irish economist John Elliot Cairnes’s treatise on *The Slave Power*, agreed that the poor whites of the South were “an ignorant, restless, vagrant class, and add almost nothing to the material prosperity of the country,” and this was “the necessary result of the system, social and industrial, under which they live.”⁵⁶ Maine Republican George Weston agreed, arguing that the poor whites of the South “live a semi-savage life, sinking deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with every succeeding generation.” Those who had migrated to the North had “brought more ignorance, poverty, and thriftlessness, than an equal amount of European immigration.”⁵⁷ The point was that because it was cheaper and neglected, slave labor would always

out-compete free labor, and where the two competed, free labor would always decline as a result. Wrote one Republican ideologue: “Free labor languishes and becomes degrading when put in competition with slave labor, and idleness, poverty, and vice, among large classes of non-slaveholders, take the place of industry and thrift and virtue.”⁵⁸ It was not a far leap to conclude that the slavery which debased non-slaveholding whites in the South also threatened laboring whites in the North. The Republican Party found its most appealing message in delineating the menace that slavery allegedly posed to the Northern rank-and-file. Many agreed with the Iowa Republican who declared slavery “a curse upon the poor, free, laboring white man.”⁵⁹

Conspicuously absent in this brand of Republican antislavery were the interests of the enslaved themselves. Abolitionists, in championing the cause of the enslaved, had long earned the ire of a prejudiced society, which often labeled them “nigger lovers” who wished for “amalgamation,” or racial intermarriage. Given the pervasive racism of the day, no mass political party could ever hope to develop a broad-based appeal on the basis of such perceptions. While Republican ranks included some of the earliest and most ardent of the political abolitionists, all were practically-minded enough to understand that only through appeal to the self-interest of the mass of Northern whites was an antislavery politics possible. The Republican coalition succeeded precisely because it embraced a wide range of views on slavery and race, which cohered only in opposing the extension of slavery into the West. This left considerable room for men such as Kentucky’s Cassius Clay, who sought “the highest welfare of the white, whatever may be the consequences of liberation to the African,”⁶⁰ or Pennsylvania’s David Wilmot, who in opposing slavery wished to “preserve for free white labor a fair country” where those of his “own race and own color” could “live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor.”⁶¹

The North that elected Abraham Lincoln in November of 1860 had, in general, little love for black people. To most who voted for it, the Republican Party stood not for racial equality or humanitarian sentiment, but for the constellation of personal character virtues associated with the market liberalism of the industrial revolution in America — with, in a word, thrift. And it was to preserve this racial inheritance of free white men that so many voted for Lincoln — a man who had openly declared his white supremacist principles during his famous debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858. “I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races,” he had said, averring that he was “as much as any other man . . . in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”⁶² Yet this Lincoln was also the Lincoln who would not, when the great conflict came, yield to the fire-eaters of the South. “I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free,” he had stated in his famous “House Divided” speech of June 1858, predicting that “it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.”

* * *

Lincoln’s words reflected just one side of the polarizing political rhetoric of the 1850s. The Republicans were not alone in issuing strident denunciations of those they saw as corruptors of

coveted American values like thrift. From the start of the abolitionists campaigns of 1830s, the slaveholding South had produced a powerful group of intellectuals dedicated to defending the peculiar institution. Defenses of plantation servitude took many forms, such as the argument that slavery was an ancient human institution sanctioned by Christianity's sacred texts. But Republican critiques of the economic aspects of chattel bondage challenged proslavery apologists to respond in kind. These ideologues reflected the deeply conservative outlooks of the southern economic aristocracy, but to a remarkable degree they relied on the basic presumptions of market society — and particularly its understandings of thrift.

The argument began with a claim that most white Northerners would have accepted: black people innately lacked thrift, and hence were characterologically incapable of participating equally in society. George Fitzhugh, the Virginian whose proslavery works included elaborate economic defenses of slavery, noted blacks' alleged thriftlessness as an intrinsic quality of the race: "The negro is improvident; will not lay up in summer for the wants of winter; will not accumulate in youth for the exigencies of age." This thriftlessness was not without larger consequences, for left without direction, "he would become an insufferable burden to society."⁶³ Proslavery Southerners like Fitzhugh delighted in looking to the free North for evidence of the inadvisability of mass emancipation. According to them, Northern experience demonstrated the unelevatability of blacks. David Christy, in the introduction to his proslavery anthology *Cotton is King* (1855), typified this argument, pointing to "the slow progress made by the great body of the free blacks in the North" and absence "of any evidences of improvement in industry, intelligence, and morality."⁶⁴

From such evidence Edmund Ruffin, the fire-eating Virginian who wrote *The Political Economy of Slavery* in 1857, broadly theorized about society's need to regulate the poor. "The lower that individuals are degraded by poverty and want, the lower do they descend in their appreciation of actual and even natural wants," he argued, echoing the popular economic idea that the reasoned pursuit of desire inspired men to virtue, industry, and civilization. Ruffin magnified the dangers posed by those "in the lowest grade" who preferred a "wretched existence to the alternative of steady labor." Enslavement offered the solution, as it would compel the poor to develop "habits of labor" while at the same time uplifting them "not only physically, but morally and intellectually."⁶⁵ In sum, the regulation of those who by choice or innate deficiency refused to participate in the market's system of incentives and rewards would relieve society of the burden of their non-market behavior, secure their labor for those who could make the most of it, and offer the best means of inculcating, to the extent possible, market habits in the poor. Clearly, in this view, slavery was best for Africans. As John C. Calhoun, South Carolina's fierce proslavery orator and politician, declared before the U.S. Senate, "never before has the black race of Central Africa . . . attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually."⁶⁶ Fitzhugh argued that the slave trade removed "the negro" from Africa (and "every brutal vice and crime that can disgrace humanity") to America, where slavery "christianizes, protects, supports and civilizes him."⁶⁷

While antislavery Northerners found it incredible that the brutal institution of slavery depicted by abolitionists could actually civilize the slaves, proslavery apologists had a ready defense, again

fashioned from the values of the North's own market culture. The very system of incentives and rewards that made market culture a civilizing force — rational and moderated self-interest, or DeToqueville's "interest rightly understood" — made slavery a humane and civilizing influence in the lives of the slaves. Fitzhugh put it most crassly, writing that "when slaves are worth near a thousand dollars a head, they will be carefully and well provided for."⁶⁸ Ruffin's subtler formulation had it that slaves' "general good treatment" was "induced by the self-interest of the owners."⁶⁹ In short, thrifty masters treated their slaves humanely. The thrift of masters served as a proxy for the thrift lacking in slaves. According to proslavery ideologues, slaves' isolation from the market was not simply a social necessity, but a great boon to the slaves themselves, who would be protected from the vicissitudes of a market culture all too often grasping, competitive, and ruthless. Fitzhugh, for example, contrasted the economic climate for enslaved blacks, who "luxuriate in corporeal and mental repose," with that for the white Northerners he addressed, whose "capital would soon vanish, if you dared indulge in the liberty and abandon of negroes."⁷⁰

Rooted in this contrast of cultures was a profound critique of Northern market society. Slavery's defenders viewed the free labor economy of the North as a hideous and inhumane alternative to the benevolent paternalism of plantation slavery. As James Henry Hammond remonstrated with Northern capitalists, "your whole hireling class of manual laborers and 'operatives,' as you call them, are essentially slaves."⁷¹ George Fitzhugh repeated this observation in his 1857 treatise, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters*, the subtitle of which referred directly to the free white workers who supplied the labor for Northern industry.⁷² Whereas de Tocqueville complained that desire and passion were "masters" with which slaves had not learned to struggle, Ruffin argued that "extreme want" was for free laborers a far less benevolent overlord. Whereas slavery insulated slaves from the inevitable misfortunes of market society, in the North "the laboring class . . . feels the first and heaviest infliction" of such crises.⁷³ Fitzhugh, too, argued that slavery was more humane than free labor, on the basis that the former provided a haven from the buffets of the market economy: "Capital exercises a more perfect compulsion over free laborers than human masters over slaves; for free laborers must at all times work or starve, and slaves are supported whether they work or not."⁷⁴

Paradoxically, in their malign view of free labor Southern conservatives found common cause with antebellum socialists of the North, who began experiments in communal living as alternatives to the competitive individualism of market society. Ruffin, for one, thoroughly endorsed the socialist conclusion that "that the productive labors of all, if associated, . . . might be made much more productive." What was lacking in the socialists' experiments — which had all met "with signal, and also speedy, failure" — was hierarchy and authority, in the form of "one directing mind, and one controlling will." Add this will, Ruffin wrote, and the utopian community "is thereby converted to the condition of *domestic slavery*."⁷⁵ And utopian the vision was, for it promised an antidote to "the eager pursuit of gain" and the "passion" of "avarice" that conservatives feared was overspreading the nation. The unbridled market did incite invention and industry, but in making man "regardless of his soul" led to a social order that was "low, selfish, atheistic and material."⁷⁶

The alternative to the North's hyper-individualism offered by proslavery conservatives did not negate thrift, but merely reposed it. Thrift remained a central, if fluid, ideal; it was the *content* of thrift that slavery's defenders appropriated and reformulated. Free labor advocates posed the South as thriftless and thus antiprogressive; the fire-eaters claimed that they properly tempered thrift with benevolence, thus avoiding the avarice that made market society so hellish for free laborers. In the North, wrote Fitzhugh, free laborers enjoyed "no domestic affection" from their employers; "no kind mistress, like a guardian angel, provides for them in health, tends them in sickness, and soothes their dying pillow."⁷⁷ At the same time that slavery "provides for sickness, infancy and old age," and ensures "homes, food and clothing for all," it also "makes all work" and "permits no idleness."⁷⁸ As a result of slaveholders' benign intervention into the political economy, the social tensions that divided Northern society were said to be nonexistent in the South. According to Calhoun, the South was exempt from the "conflict between labor and capital" produced by industrial civilization.⁷⁹ Fitzhugh believed that "it is impossible to place labor and capital in harmonious or friendly relations, except by the means of slavery."⁸⁰

Two benign consequences flowed from the social harmony allegedly achieved by slavery. First, and in direct answer to free labor arguments, fire-eaters argued that slavery dignified the labor of whites. Slavery "does not bring all industry into disrepute," argued Fitzhugh, because blacks — assumed to be naturally unfitted for "all skillful pursuits" — were denied all but the lowest reaches of the hierarchy of labor. The rest were left for whites.⁸¹ "We need never have white slaves in the South," he wrote, "because we have black ones."⁸² The second benefit was political stability and, perversely enough, political democracy. The fire-eaters argued that slavery was "the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institution."⁸³ In the *herrenvolk democracy* of the slave South, all free men shared a fundamental level of freedom made possible by the existence of an unfree caste beneath them. So wrote Alexander Stephens of Georgia, who went on to become Vice President of the Confederate States of America: "With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law."⁸⁴

* * *

From 1861 to 1865, these two basic visions of American society clashed. On the one hand was an emerging industrial society committed to a thrift ethos that extolled the potential of the individual to "rise" in society through the cultivation of personal virtues that would create success in the marketplace and the good society for all. On the other was a plantation society, similarly dedicated to a culture of thrift, but which viewed market liberalism with a suspicion bred from the latter's rejection of slavery as a legitimate and progressive form of labor control. Both sides participated in and relied upon liberal markets for their economic life's blood. Where they clashed was not in their estimation of African Americans, whom a majority in each section regarded as hopelessly deficient in the qualities necessary for economic, civic, and social equality, but in their vision of thrift and its benefits, and how society ought best be ordered to achieve them. The Republican Party that swept into the White House in March of 1861 had long declared its opposition to the expansion of a system of labor that it viewed as inefficient and retrogressive. And the Southern fire-eaters who led

eleven slaveholding states out of the Union that spring had long declared their willingness to stake all in defense of the social order and social harmony they saw as threatened by the free labor society of the North.

The contest that ensued demonstrated the might of Northern market society in a long, drawn-out military struggle. The Union boasted a free population almost three times the size of the Confederacy's, with over ten times as many industrial workers, over twice as many miles of railroads, 110,000 manufacturing establishments to the Confederacy's 10,000, well over ten times as much banking capital, nearly as great a preponderance of capital investment, and almost ten times as great a value of annual production. Economically, then, the Union was a powerhouse against which the Confederacy could not hope to compete. Unfortunately for those upon whom the "hard hand of war" fell, the Union initially lacked skilled generals and an effective army in the eastern theater of the war. In addition to general inexperience and widespread command incompetence, Civil War soldiers also confronted the fruits of the industrial revolution in the form of new rifled muskets, which rendered existing military tactics not simply obsolete, but often suicidal. Decisive battlefield actions became rare, and the war stalemated into a protracted struggle of economies and societies, wherein the Union's vast advantages eventually prevailed. But the effort was not simple; on both sides it involved the consideration of revolutionary measures no one would have contemplated before the start of hostilities.

The exigencies of war led both combatants to consider the use of emancipated slaves in their armies, despite pervasive concerns on both sides that thriftless blacks would prove to be worthless soldiers. The Confederacy's stronger ideological commitment to white supremacy delayed its dalliance with emancipation beyond the point at which it could have aided the Confederate cause. The Union embarked on such a path much sooner. As early as 1861, African Americans themselves were turning the tide in favor of black freedom by escaping to Union lines, much as they had taken advantage of the chaos of war during the Revolution to seek their own freedom. Their efforts put the question of slaves' role in the conflict squarely before Union policymakers, who had to decide between violating the sanctity of private property by "confiscating" the slaves, and risking defeat through a lack of critical manpower. As Lincoln eventually became convinced, "We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." The result was Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and Congress' Confiscation Acts, which collectively liberated millions of enslaved African Americans during the war. The recruitment of nearly 200,000 African Americans into the armed forces of the Union proceeded apace, and black soldiers demonstrated in action after action their capacity to fight with or against the best white troops. More importantly, once slaves were freed, it became nearly impossible to imagine the reimposition of slavery. When asked if he would consider revoking his Proclamation in order to bring the war to a speedy, victorious conclusion, Lincoln replied: "I should be damned in time and in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will." In December of 1865, the Union made good on its wartime promise to African Americans: the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, thus ending slavery in America.

It was critical for the fate of African Americans that emancipation happened as a result of military exigency rather than a revolution in racial sentiments. Though undoubtedly the sectional crisis and Civil War helped “abolitionize” some of the Northern public, little had happened to disrupt the racial prejudice that pervaded both sections of the country. An enormous victory over the sinful and inefficient institution of slavery had been won, but blacks themselves remained mired, it was thought, in their thriftless, slavish habits. Could they become part of a market-oriented society? Would they continue to labor to produce the agricultural products like cotton that were so vital to the industrial economy? The reconstruction of southern labor was a complex affair involving unequal negotiations between many parties: former slaveholders, the Union government, and the freedpeople themselves. Concerned primarily with securing for themselves an exploitable labor force, landholders sought to reconstitute Southern agriculture on terms as close to slavery as they could. Meanwhile, the Union government, eager to convert plantation society to free labor, incanted its mantra of market virtues to slaves with no experience of or desire for them. Most slaves sought only autonomy from the market order that had fueled their enslavement, preferring to work in families and produce food for their own subsistence rather than cotton for the textile market. The resulting compromise — sharecropping, which permitted them to live in families but forced them to work cotton — initially reflected the freedpeople’s capacity to exert their agency in a cash-starved and labor-poor economy. As time went on, though, and the federal government’s commitment to racial justice gave way to political expediency, sharecropping became little more than a system of debt peonage, with credit and capital firmly in the hands of local whites who were as committed to the exploitation of labor as they were to white supremacy.

All of this happened with only minimal questioning of the capitalist order that had produced the racialized discourse of thrift. Reconstruction had failed, but defenders of liberal capitalism — who in general had always been willing to sacrifice racial equality for faith in their economy — tended to view the resulting racial inequity as a confirmation of blacks’ inherent deficiency rather than as an inherent flaw in capitalism itself. Blacks had been given a chance, it was reasoned; if they had failed to make the most of it, then they themselves must bear the blame. So Thomas Huxley, a British disciple of Charles Darwin, concluded in the aftermath of Reconstruction: “Whatever the position into which the laws of social gravitation may bring the negro, all responsibility for the result will henceforward lie between Nature and him. The white man may wash his hands of it, and the Caucasian conscience be void of reproach evermore.” The ex-Confederates who swept back into power in the aftermath of Republican rule in the South thus gained in defeat what they had lost in war. Deprived of their slave labor, they nonetheless remained the South’s mater race. And their justifications for the campaign of racial terror they were about to unleash recalled an unreconstructed discourse of thrift all-too-familiar to black ears. “So long as negroes are *contented*,” wrote George Fitzhugh during Reconstruction, “they will have no property, no useful arts, no separate ownership of lands, no law, little or no government, and indeed none of the institutions of civilized life. . . . Yet, properly taken care of and provided for by the white, and educated to proper industrial pursuits, they become the most valuable part of every population, because the most productive.” Fitzhugh proposed that the slaves be returned to their “natural” place, as the forced laborers of thrifty masters who would treat them with their characteristic benevolence. He

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concluded: “Let not our Northern friends, then, fear to turn the freedmen over to us.”⁸⁵ To African American’s great misfortune, and to the nation’s great shame, that is almost precisely what they did.

NOTES

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