A DIFFERENT VIEW OF SLAVERY: BLACK HISTORIANS ATTACK THE PROSLAVERY ARGUMENT, 1890–1920

John David Smith*

The importance of slavery in the racial thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been vastly understated by scholars.¹ Yet slavery held an unusual attraction for historians, popular writers, editors, and polemicists in these years.² Not since the late antebellum period had so much attention been devoted to the peculiar institution. Many scholars investigated slavery because it fit well into the legal-institutional focus of the new "scientific" history. As early as 1880 a reviewer in The Nation noted that "Slavery takes its turn with other fossil remains in adorning our cabinets of curiosity and of science, and in being studied under the microscope."
³ Other writers identified slavery with such vital issues of their own day as peonage⁴ and wage slavery,⁵ thus giving an enlarged significance to the study of it. Baffled by what they perceived as an insurmountable "Negro problem," most southern whites looked back to slavery to gain some perspective on contemporary racial tensions. They were even more convinced of the "scientific" or biological inferiority of the Negro than their Old South forebears. These writers revived the fundamentals of the old proslavery argument—interpreting slavery as a benign school in which blacks fared better than as freedmen.⁶ By justifying the second class citizenship accorded blacks in these years, southern writers offered an old creed for the New South.⁷

Although the paternalistic interpretation dominated views of slavery during the Progressive Era, it did not go unchallenged. Black historians formed a vanguard for members of their race in assaulting slavery.⁸ But because there was only a handful of professionally trained black historians in these years,⁹ a broad range of other writers—clergymen, social scientists, editors—joined them in interpreting slavery. Negro intellectuals thus assumed the role of historian.

As on other questions, black thought regarding slavery was not a monolith, rather a maze of inconsistencies and contradictions. For example, many blacks stressed the importance of slavery to understanding the contemporary "Negro problem." But others urged members of their race to deemphasize slavery—to look forward to a bright future, not backward to a sordid past.¹⁰ They disagreed on other slavery-related questions as well. Were blacks inherently inferior? How

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*John David Smith teaches history at Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri. A version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, St. Louis, Missouri, 1978. The author gratefully acknowledges critical readings of the manuscript by Thomas H. Appleton, Jr., Raymond F. Betts, Marilee Comfort-Smith, James C. Klotter, Mark E. Neely, Jr., Sylvia Neely, and Charles P. Roland.
sophisticated was ancient African civilization? Was slave treatment cruel? How did the slaves react to captivity? Such influential writers as Booker T. Washington, Kelly Miller, and William H. Councill had mixed reactions to slavery—concurrently denouncing it as an evil and finding benefits in it for the bondsmen. Regardless of conflicting views, a common theme pervaded black thought on slavery. It was considered the severest form of bondage in world history, the consummate sin in the American past. Professor John W. Work of Fisk University could not comprehend "all this latter day talk about the happiness and contentment of the slave." It was "either inexcusable ignorance, or a culpable effort at gross deception; for slavery was horrible in every aspect." With the zeal of the abolitionists, blacks attacked the new proslavery argument and the racism upon which it was based.

Afro-Americans dwelt upon slavery because it constituted the best known and most controversial aspect of their history. Unless the story of slavery was told by blacks, they said, generations born since emancipation would not learn fully of its horrors. And for blacks, too, slavery was laden with parallels to Negro life in early twentieth-century America—Jim Crow and peonage laws, the crop lien and convict lease systems, industrialism and industrial education, American imperialism, and the anti-Negro policies of the Wilson administration. "Slavery is no more," wrote the editor of the Indianapolis Freeman, "but in its stead stalks race, caste, business and commercial ostracism, civil oppression and debarment, political persecution and all the brood of evils that survived the demise of the parent evil."

The slavery which these pioneer black historians described clashed dramatically with the romanticized plantation school of the white proslavery apologists. Blacks objected forcefully to the tendency among whites to write the history of slavery solely from the perspective of the master class. In 1898 W.E.B. DuBois charged that whites devoted sufficient attention to the legal side of slavery, but of the slave himself, of his group life and social institutions, of remaining traces of his African tribal life, of his amusements, his conversion to Christianity, his acquiring of the English tongue—. . . of his whole reaction against his environment, of all this we hear little or nothing, and would apparently be expected to believe that the Negro arose from the dead in 1863.

Blacks also criticized specific white scholars. For example, Thomas N. Baker, a black clergyman, condemned the treatment of slave women in the writings of James Ford Rhodes and Joseph A. Tillinghast. These historians, accused Baker, were "so prone to 'Jim Crow' the Negro, that they feel they must use a 'Jim Crow' logic in discussing him." Carter G. Woodson was one of several Afro-Americans who lashed out against Edward B. Reuter's The Mulatto in the United States. This openly racist study blamed slave females for inviting miscegenation. According to Woodson, Reuter's book signaled "the return of the ante-bellum proslavery philosopher disguised as a scientific investigator." And blacks did not fail to attack Ulrich B. Phillips, the foremost student of slavery of his day. In 1913 DuBois laced into what he termed Phillips' arrogant, proslavery statements.
Five years later he branded Phillips' "curiously incomplete and unfortunately biased" book, *American Negro Slavery*, a blatant "defense of an institution which was at best a mistake and at worst a crime." Reviewing the same volume, Woodson accused Phillips of being unable "to fathom the negro [sic] mind"—not comprehending "what the Negroes have thought and felt and done."24

Slavery obviously had a different, more immediate meaning for these black writers than for whites. Indeed, a few black historians knew slavery from first-hand experience while all had felt the stares born of prejudice and discrimination. Observing with disgust the proscription and inequalities of Jim Crowism, and the exclusion of blacks from Progressive Era reforms, many blacks looked backward to slavery to explain Negro degradation in America. They considered an understanding of the peculiar institution necessary to guard future generations from re-enslavement.25 Blacks used slavery—their special history—as a tool to lash out against Progressive racism. In the process they prefigured the focus and conclusions of much recent scholarship.

Blacks tackled the proslavery argument head on when they challenged the assertion that they were members of an inferior race and hailed from a backward continent. Drawing on the writings of anthropologist Franz Boas,26 they advanced the idea of fundamental racial equality. Afro-Americans welcomed Boas' argument that the differences between whites and blacks were "exceedingly small as compared with the range of variability found in either race."27 What had previously been assumed to be racial characteristics, he said, were actually the result of many inter-related factors—environmental as well as hereditary. Boas' influence is found in the writings of black men from all walks of life, including historians, sociologists, editors, clergymen, and physicians.28 "The unity of the human race is no longer a disputed question," concluded journalist T. Thomas Fortune in 1896.29 To a reviewer in the *A.M.E. Church Review*, Boas' work demonstrated that "the Negro is endowed with capabilities, that color is no badge of mental ability among human beings."30

Blacks also adopted Boas' findings that in antiquity their African forebears had a highly developed civilization.31 Edward A. Johnson, a lawyer and amateur historian, commented that "all the science and learning of ancient Greece and Rome was, probably, once in the hands of the foreparents of the American slaves."32 Afro-Americans with as contrasting perspectives as Washington and DuBois were among the earliest writers who used Boas' anthropological findings to challenge myths of African backwardness and to popularize the beauty and significance of slave culture.33 In numerous articles Monroe N. Work argued that Africans were among the world's first people to smelt iron and to develop agricultural implements. They established military organizations, trade centers, courts, archives, and produced skilled art work.34 By arguing that slavery and contact with Caucasians was a backward step for the Africans, Negro historians turned the tables on the apologists for slavery. DuBois, for example, charged the planters—not the Africans—with "inhumanity, barbarism and the methods of the jungle."35
Although some black historians did refer to slavery as a school, most found the analogy repulsive. That Negroes were content as slaves, they said, was a white man's myth—the propaganda of those who could not free themselves from treating the Afro-American as a child. Richard T. Greener, the first black graduate of Harvard, condemned the slavery/school analogy, mocking the lessons the slaves allegedly received from bondage:

The Negro has no tears to shed over that 'wonderful school of slavery, under Providence,' so often quoted. He is no such hypocrite as to go through the pretence of believing that slavery is ever a good, a necessary, or beneficial school. Much less does he grant that any phase of that school, at any stage, affected him morally, socially, or physically except adversely, while he does know from bitter experience, how utterly phar[is]ical, how absurdly hypocritical, and how thoroughly unchristian the entire system was in practice, example and influence.36

A year later Professor J.W.E. Bowen seconded Greener's critique of the school of slavery. Bowen, the son of a slave, received a Ph.D. from Boston University and taught historical theology at Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta. In his judgment, slavery was a "pit of seething, reeking and nauseating corruption"—"a dehumanized and bestialized thing"—where blacks were "worked like dumb, driven cattle, . . . crushed with the iron hoof of oppression and repression; [and] whipped, torn, bleeding, in body, mind and soul." Blacks, charged Bowen, must challenge the whites' version of slavery as the halcyon days of purity and moral power for the Negro. What sort of school, asked Bowen, taught by the slave driver's whip and bloodhounds?37 Bowen, Greener, and other blacks agreed that the intellectual and religious qualities Negroes possessed emerged in spite of, not because of, slavery.

Afro-American historians found the slavery/school analogy vulnerable to two specific criticisms. First, conditions under the peculiar institution were deplorable. Slave life was degrading—designed to diminish self-respect and growth in the bondsmen.38 Almost uniformly these writers complained that the slaves were systematically overtasked—they were underfed, forced to live in hovels, dress in rags, and submit to dehumanizing tortures.39 Ex-slave Frederick Douglass disagreed with the proslavery theory that considerable give-and-take characterized the master/slave relationship. "The master is always the master," quipped Douglass, "and the slave is always the slave."40 Blacks agreed that the modicum of care which the slaves received resulted from the masters' financial, not humanitarian, interests. Even Booker T. Washington, who pointed repeatedly to the educational benefits of slavery, admitted that the bondsmen toiled under poor conditions. Drawing upon his own recollections as a slave, the Tuskegeeian recalled vividly his "miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings," his insufficient food and clothing, his "bed of rags," his coarse flax "tow" shirt. Another ex-slave, Dr. William A. Sinclair, recalled that life in thralldom was "gruesome and unholy," barbaric, "brutalizing," and "debasimg." Like Sinclair, Carter Woodson described the punishments meted out to slaves as "crude and abusive."41
But blacks considered miscegenation the most heinous subject offered in the slavery/school curriculum. Slave owners not only raped black women at random, but destroyed the racial integrity of the black race. Woodson blamed the extensive miscegenation in the Old South on the lust of the master class. He charged white historians, "ashamed of the planters who abused helpless black women," with "trying to minimize the prevalence of this custom."

Black historians assailed a second bulwark of the proslavery school: that without the guidance of slavery, postwar Afro-Americans were reverting to barbarism. Negro authors admitted that slavery did teach the bondsmen some lessons—lessons in blind obedience, servility, hatred, and humiliation. But these were lessons to be unlearned. H.T. Kealing, editor of the A.M.E. Church Review, blamed slavery for a long list of deficiencies in blacks—shiftlessness, intemperance, intolerance, extravagance, and improvidence. He maintained that slavery taught blacks to be sloppy, unreliable workers and to be dishonest in their dealings with blacks as well as whites. Other black writers complained that slavery instructed the Negroes to despise and disrespect one another; to fear spies in their midst, who, like in the days of bondage, would betray their secrets to the whites. In the opinion of Benjamin G. Brawley, Dean of Morehouse College, slavery left a legacy of contempt for labor. Washington often referred to this theme, urging his students at Tuskegee, and Negroes in general, to distinguish the "vast difference between working and being worked."

W.E.B. DuBois held slavery accountable for the lax morals and poor habits characteristic of Philadelphia ghetto blacks who had served as bondsmen in Virginia and Maryland. In his study of Negroes in the Georgia black belt, DuBois concluded that they farmed on exhausted soil, lived in squalor, and frequently suffered separation from their spouses. These conditions, he said, were products of "long custom, born in the time of slavery." "A slave ancestry and a system of unrequited toil," argued DuBois, made these blacks resemble "all ground-down peasantries"—ripe for "crime and a cheap, dangerous socialism."

Of all slavery's many crimes, blacks considered its effect on the Afro-American family to be most grievous. In DuBois' judgment, the planters' major crime was that they "debauched, destroyed, and took from" the African the organized home. Neither the sale of relatives nor the forced concubinage of female slaves was conducive to a stable family life. In 1899 DuBois argued that "with all its shortcomings," the powerful, polygamous, "strictly guarded savage home life of Africa," offered more protection for women than "the promiscuous herding" of the slave plantation. Even though traces of African family institutions persisted, the slaves were raped of their own sex customs and provided with no binding new ones. "Slavery," DuBois continued, "gave the monogamic family ideal to slaves, but it compelled . . . only the most imperfect practice of its most ordinary morals." Paradoxically, "the greatest social effect" of slavery was the substitution of the polygamous Negro home with one "less guarded, less effective, and less civilized."

DuBois concluded that the living arrangements under slavery contributed to the unstable black family in the postwar South. Slave cabins were "dirty one-room
lodges where, crowded like cattle, men slept in dreamless stupor after endless hours of forced and driven toil." The slave quarters evolved, he said, into "filthy hovels" with "no family life, no meals, no marriages, no decency." And the slave home lacked strong paternal leadership. Fathers were denied authority to govern the family. Their wives and daughters were liable to sexual abuse by the whites and any member of the family could be sold at the master's whim. Tragically, lamented DuBois, the emasculated slave husband was a "male guest in the house, without respect or responsibility." Lacking unity or a sense of permanence, the slave family was reduced to a temporary, disjointed "agglomeration of atoms" devoid of force or pride. According to DuBois, such living conditions typified the dehumanizing and destructive effect of slavery on the Africans.50

Many black historians went beyond simply answering the new proslavery argument. They broke fresh ground by focusing on the slaves' responses to captivity. These early black writers celebrated the strength of the Negroes who, unlike the Indians, withstood slavery's cold brutality.51 They identified a black subculture—the slave community—in which members shared a group life. There were gifted slave artisans, talented slave poets, and mysterious slave preachers.52 Black writers found "The Negro Genius" present under slavery despite conditions which would have destroyed the creative instinct in a lesser race. According to Benjamin Brawley, Negroes had an "instinct for beauty" that was strengthened, not diminished by slavery. Woodson's pathbreaking research into the strivings of slaves for education further shattered the stereotype of the bondsmen as mindless, satisfied beings.53

Some Afro-American historians expressed pride that their slave ancestors laid the foundation for black protest and self-help in America. Bondsmen broke their chains—at least symbolically—by seeking refuge in their music, leisure activities, and religious folklore. Slave songs, according to Kelly Miller, were "the first expression of the imprisoned soul of an imprisoned race"—"the smothered voice of a race crying in the wilderness." "They breathed the prayer and complaint of souls overflowing with the bitterest anguish," explained Frederick Douglass. One student of slave culture interpreted the slaves' "ring plays" as a "safety valve, a sweet solace, a blessed forgetfulness" when the hardships of enslavement became too oppressive.54 While some writers described the slaves' faith as a religion of resignation, others portrayed it as a form of dissent—a mode of implicit resistance. Dr. Sinclair, for example, maintained that the slaves "hoodwinked" their masters by singing religious songs "while the words echoed and re-echoed deep down in their hearts" the thirst for liberty. Writing in 1900, DuBois argued that the bondsmen drew upon their religion—Obi worship, exorcism, spells, and blood-sacrifices—to resist slavery. Religion was the slave's weapon against captivity—"the dark triumph of Evil over him." Through song and prayer the bondsmen vocalized their agony and their innermost appeals for freedom.55

These early Negro historians of slavery credited the bondsmen with employing all manners of artful intrigue to protest the indignities of the slave regime. Day-to-day resistance to slavery took various forms—disobeying orders, running away, attacking overseers, organizing secret societies, aiding Union troops—
each revealing the constant desire by Afro-Americans for freedom. Just as they
detailed with pride the Africans' skills as warriors and craftsmen of weapons,
these authors identified a militant spirit in the blacks throughout slavery.\textsuperscript{56} In 1883
historian George Washington Williams asserted that masters remained in constant
fear of slave revolts—the only "safety-valves" available to the slaves. Williams
argued that the small number of slave insurrections resulted not from any fear on
the part of the blacks, but because of a lack of leadership among them. Although
"under-fed and over-worked; poorly clad and miserably housed," slaves rarely
became the "too goodish, too lamb-like, too obsequious" Uncle Tom figure.
"[T]he lion slumbers in the Negro," concluded Williams, and this spirit was
strengthened, not destroyed by enslavement.\textsuperscript{57}

To a few blacks living in the age of Jim Crow rebellious slaves such as Denmark
Vesey and Nat Turner became folk heroes. Historian John Wesley Cromwell,
referring to slave revolts as "a constant menace to the safety and security of
slavery," maintained that before the Revolution alone, approximately twenty-five
insurrections had occurred. Lawyer and civil rights activist Archibald H. Grimké
regretted that despite Vesey's brilliant planning and "underground agitation," his
revolt failed when he was betrayed by a co-conspirator. According to Grimké,
Vesey was a "grand master in the art of intrigue" among the slaves—one who
helped train the bondsmen "in habits of deceit, of deep dissimulation . . . that \textit{ars artium} of slaves in their attempts to break their chains." Similarly, Cromwell
glorified Turner's revolt as an example of the assertive, active Negro. He struck
"to help himself rather than depend on other human agencies for the protection
which could come through his own strong arm."\textsuperscript{58}

Such emphasis upon slave resistance can be misleading. Grimké, for example,
applauded slave insurrection when writing about Vesey, but in another instance,
asserted that the bondsmen were passive, lacking feelings of resentment and
revenge.\textsuperscript{59} Similar complexities and subtleties appear throughout the early black
scholarship on slavery.\textsuperscript{60} On the one hand, these authors celebrated advance-
ments under slavery as proof of the essential strength and equality of their race.
Only an exceptional people, they said, could have withstood the horrors of
American slavery. Yet at the same time, black historians admitted the degradation
of the Negro. They criticized the behavior—subservience, negligence, 
extravagance—which blacks learned as slaves and retained as freedmen.\textsuperscript{61} The
paucity of professionally trained black historians goes a long way toward explain-
ing the contradictory nature of their writings on slavery. Few studied slavery in a
systematic manner, and—understandably sensitive on the subject—Afro-
Americans countered white racism with their own filiopietistic interpretation of
the black past. Propagandists for black advancement in the early twentieth cen-
tury, they were prone to exaggerate the achievements of their race under the
peculiar institution.

Even so, the early black historians of slavery prefigured recent scholarship.
They examined questions and adopted themes that did not become popular among
historians until the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{62} Emphasizing race pride and unity, African
creativity and nationalism, these blacks anticipated the racial mood of the Negro
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Revolution of the 1960s. Years before the appearance of Melville J. Herskovits’ writings, and a half century before John W. Blassingame published The Slave Community, they observed the survivals of African culture and identified a subculture among American slaves. Their research in black folk life—songs, dances, jokes, and religious practices—foreshadowed the recent work of Sterling Stuckey and Lawrence W. Levine. By arguing that the bondsmen actively resisted enslavement and struggled to acquire the rudiments of formal education, these pioneer historians further outlined themes popularized by succeeding generations of scholars. Finally, they shared with later historians a sensitivity to the long-range effects of slavery upon American life.

Despite the important contributions of the early black critics of slavery, white historians in the early twentieth century ignored their arguments. In 1905 one such historian, Walter Lynwood Fleming, remarked disapprovingly that whenever Afro-Americans discussed slavery “we hear the clank of chains and the cutting swish of the lash; the slaves, we infer, hate the whites with a consuming hatred, and the cruel masters endeavor to crush out the human feelings of the black.” 63 Modern scholars, too, have missed the significance of slavery in black thought during the Progressive Era. The early black historians used their study of slavery to attack white racism, to explain Negro degradation in America, and to bolster race pride and Negro solidarity. Unlike their white contemporaries, they portrayed the slaves as real persons with mature, not childlike, emotions, and with human sensitivities. These blacks were writing the history of slavery from the perspective of the bondsmen seventy-five years ago. Theirs was a decidedly different view of slavery; one that years later is not so different after all.


3Review of Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings, in The Nation, XXXI (December 2, 1880), 398. Writing in 1892, Anna Julia Haywood Cooper commented that “after so long a time,” authors “have begun at last to draw subjects and models” from the slaves. A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South (Xenia, O., 1892), p. 179.

4Editorial, “Feudalism or Slavery,” The Independent, LV (April 2, 1903), 805–806; “Slavery in Alabama,” Ibid., (June 11, 1903), 1416–1417; Theodore Roosevelt to James Ford Rhodes, November


Woodson, review of Reuter, The Mulatto in the United States, in Journal of Negro History, IV (January, 1919), 106. Other critical reviews of Reuter’s book by blacks include Jessie Fauset in The
Survey, XLI (March 8, 1919), 842–843; Miller in American Journal of Sociology, XXV (September, 1919), 218–224; and Woodson in Mississippi Valley Historical Review, VII (September, 1920), 175–176.


30William H. Dawley, Jr., “The Mind of Primitive Man,” A.M.E. Church Review, XXVIII (April, 1911), 778. Ex-slave George William Cook noted ironically that masters “maintained that the Negro could not become intelligent, yet much time and money were spent to remove from him the opportunity.” “Is There a Problem?” unpublished manuscript [1905?], George William Cook Papers, Howard University.


35DuBois, “Marrying of Black Folk,” The Independent, LXIX (October 13, 1910), 813. In 1907, Dihdwo Twe, an African studying in America, attacked slavery on similar grounds. According to Twe, the slaves suffered irreparable harm under the degrading influences of the Anglo-Saxon. He noted, for example, how the masters took from the slave his African name, his standards of morality, “the lofty

36Greener, "The White Problem," Indianapolis Freeman, September 1, 8, 1894.


43Woodson, "The Beginnings of the Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks," Journal of Negro History, III (October, 1918), 351.


57Williams, History of the Negro Race in America From 1619–1880 (2 vols.; New York, 1968; orig. pub., 1883), I, 305, 299; II, 82, 545, 547, 548.


60See, for example, Alexander Crummell's unpublished sermons. He was an unflagging critic of slavery, yet Crummell's contradictory statements are apt to confuse. In "The American Negro, Before the War, and Now" [1891], Crummell condemned slavery for denying the bondsmen education. But in "The Discipline of Freedom," n.d., he praised slavery for the discipline which it instilled in the blacks—a trait which Crummell found drastically wanting in the race. Crummell Papers.

61S.P. Fullinwider notes similar tensions and contradictions in the black thought of these years in The Mind and Mood of Black America (Homewood, Ill., 1969), chapters 1–4.

62See Woodson to Archibald H. Grimké, July 29, 1921, and enclosed "Questionnaire on Negro History," Archibald H. Grimké Papers. More than half of the questions concerned such aspects of slavery as the bondsmen's meetings, their garden truck patches, preachers, and teachers.