

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

**THE CHOICE OF SLAVERY**

AN ESSAY IN

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From its earliest colonizations, the New World was affected economically, socially, and politically by the incorporation of the slave trade. To some degree the institution of slavery was bound to various economies in the New World, at least until the American Civil War. Slavery, however, was not alone, for indentured servitude was another means of cheap labor. This shows the varying degrees of cheap labor, which has since remained a principle of capitalist economics. Socially, slavery differed in its impact. Some viewed it as a continuation of a patriarchal system of white fathers over those seen as ignorant and inferior human beings. With others, it was seen as a debasement of humanity and religion in every way. Slavery was no different when viewed under the political lens, for even politics attempted to reconcile freedom and equality with slavery and inferiority. These points all show that the lens whereby slavery was and is viewed determines the degree of enslavement it was, not on those being sold, but on those engaging in its patronage. The narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass help to show how slavery enslaved the white people economically, socially, and politically, but that this enslavement was entirely voluntary, as opposed to the forced slavery upon the black people.

When the economics of slavery are discussed, it is often shown that the institution of slavery was involved in almost every significant commercial enterprise in the New World, including sugar, tobacco, and cotton. What this fails to address, however, is the degree of slavery required to engage in these profitable pursuits. By comparing the treatment toward slaves in Africa to those in the New World, it can be seen how the white masters in the western hemisphere enslaved themselves to a system of greater cruelty than required. Olaudah Equiano's account of African slavery differs greatly from the scenes he witnessed in the West Indies. Slaves in Africa did "no more work than other members of the community, even their masters; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs" (Equiano, 26). In the West Indies, the brutality was increased exponentially, and Equiano would later ask, "Are slaves more useful by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes, than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you--No" (Equiano, 224). Indeed, it is the question that encircles the economic benefits

of slavery. The white masters of the New World chose a different approach to slavery, but they were not involuntarily bound to such a system, for had they treated their slaves more humanely, they may have been blessed with "peace, prosperity, and happiness" (Equiano, 226).

The argument that better treatment would have led to greater prosperity is also flawed in some ways, as pointed out by the feelings of Frederick Douglass. When his master taught him skills to be able to prosper in ways allowing time for leisure, he observed "that whenever [his] condition was improved, instead of its increasing [his] contentment, it only increased [his] desire to be free" (Douglass, 99). However, his contentment in his improved condition did prove to increase his wages, of which he was "compelled to deliver every cent" to his master (Douglass, 99). It must, therefore, be asked if a contract of limited servitude could not have yielded the same benefits. Slavery brought high revenue to those who owned slaves, but the costs of keeping such slaves from dreaming of freedom were extremely high, and still did not prevent attempts of escape or rebellion. Whites voluntarily labored to keep the institution of slavery as it was, but it was also possible for the same economic prosperity to accompany other forms of cheap labor, especially those that contracted periods of service rather than lifelong subjection.

In addition to attaching itself to the economic structure of the New World, slavery created a dilemma within white social society as to its moral implications. There were those who argued that slavery was a burden on the social behavior of the whites, and that it demeaned them in every way. Others, however, argued that slavery was a patriarchal system wherein whites nurtured the inferior race. This is usually questioned by the violence found amongst the slave-controlling rulers, but even more interesting is to whom this violence was directed. Equiano noted that he "had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shewn towards [the] blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular [he] saw, [...] flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute" (Equiano, 75). Instances of brutality are often explained by comparing the need for a father to discipline his son,

but brutality on whites themselves dismisses this argument and shows the social consequence of engaging in such a practice. In addition, although whites attempted to incorporate familial depictions of slave owners as fathers over ignorant children, slavery did nothing less than separate families. When he had arrived in the New World, Equiano saw how "without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again" (Equiano, 87). This debasement of the social character of African families could have been avoided, yet whites chose to disregard their own religious tenets pointing to the sanctity of family relations. Even as slavery persisted, whites could have chosen not to separate black families, but this posed a problem to the "divide and conquer" mentality that dominated white fears of slave rebellions. As further uprisings were broadcasted throughout the New World, the desire for separating familiarity amongst blacks was perpetuated, thus enslaving whites to a social construct that could possibly have been avoided.

Although many attempts were made to prevent familiarity between the slaves, the whites needed to incorporate a system of balance regarding slave liberties to prevent insurrection. Frederick Douglass' narrative shows how insurrection was prevented through a social system involving the holidays between Christmas and New Years' Day. Freedom from labor was granted during this period, but, as Douglass argues, "they do not give the slaves this time because they would not like to have their work during its continuance, but because they know it would be unsafe to deprive them of it. This will be seen by the fact that the slaveholders like to have their slaves spend those days just in such a manner as to make them as glad of their ending as of their beginning. Their object seems to be, to disgust their slaves with freedom, by plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation [through] various plans to make him drunk." (Douglass, 75). To keep slaves under subjection, whites enslaved themselves to a social structure allowing occasional freedom, only to prevent blacks from seeking permanent liberty. Socially, the principles of freedom espoused in the Declaration of Independence were compromised, and unless whites gave up the institution of slavery, this deception of liberty would continue.

Slavery was deceptively defined politically as well, and left whites with a division in the debate that would ultimately be solved in a civil war. Discussions between members of the Continental Congress can be pointed to as examples of such divisive ideas, but many individuals who witnessed its practice discussed the politics of slavery. After having served faithfully to one of his masters, Equiano was promised by numerous friends he had acquired in the British military that his service had fulfilled his contract as a slave. There were many in the boat's crew who claimed it was unlawful for Equiano's master to sell him, yet the sale came. When Equiano argued against the unlawful sale of his person, he pointed to the numerous times he "had heard a lawyer and others at different times tell [his] master so. [...] It was very extraordinary that other people did not know the law as well as [his master]," he thought (Equiano, 177). What were the laws regarding slavery, and how did politics view the slave? By the time of the American Constitution, many states pushed for gradual emancipation, recognizing the importance of gradually freeing those who had served under such a system, but even these "emancipation" laws in the late 18th Century enslaved the whites to an allowed continuation of the institution well into the 19th Century. The principles in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights pointed to the need for freedom and equality, but Americans simply did not allow for the immediate fulfillment of these principles, whether it was for economic or political stability.

The political stability that was in danger by the freeing of slaves was more than just the separation of the union between the states. It was the stability of individual power in the political arena that was threatened. Douglass' narrative significantly compares black slavery and this enslavement of the political class when discussing a particular plantation. Douglass observed many slaves who sought duties relating to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, which they saw as being ruled by a benevolent owner. "The competitors for this office sought as diligently to please their overseers, as the office-seekers in the political parties seek to please and deceive the people. The same traits of character might be seen in Colonel Lloyd's slaves, as are seen in the slaves of the political parties" (Douglass, 13). How did Douglass see these political elites as slaves? Being a man who sought abolition from every political force, he witnessed the enslavement of

political leaders to the demands upon them, whether they were demands of their constituents or of special interests that required their deceiving of the people. The fear of losing union between the states coupled with the fear of the loss of individual power enslaved the political classes to ignore the Nation's principles of freedom and liberty while supporting an ignorant slave-holding class. By the end of his narrative, Douglass understood this well, when he spoke of a friend he met who "better understood the moral, religious, and political character of the nation, -than nine tenths of the slaveholders in Talbot County, Maryland" (Douglass, 114-115). Politically, the nation was divided, but this was by a willful choice of the political leaders to ignore their own Constitutional principles and leave the answers to such difficult questions to their forbears.

The end of the slavery debate was decided by war wherein hundreds of thousands of Americans died. It was not a necessary war, as some have argued, but was entirely voluntary. It was the choice of the early leaders of the New World to incorporate and perpetuate slavery. It was the choice of the first Congress of the United States to leave the economic, social, and political questions of slavery unanswered in favor of unifying the nation. Finally, it was the choice of the Southern States to secede from the Union. By the time of the Civil War, the South's economy was dependent on its slave-holding class, the social structures promoting continued slavery were in place, but the political stage was endangered with the election of Abraham Lincoln, one who sought to prevent the expansion of slavery in the West. Without all factors, economic, social and political, being in bondage to the institution of slavery, perhaps the South had no choice but to secede from the North, in order to protect its livelihood. The quotations from the narratives of Equiano and Douglass discussed in this paper are just a few of many which show how the New World enslaved itself to the institution of slavery. Despite these decisions, many opportunities emerged to abandon the practice and establish superior institutions that espoused principles of prosperity, equality, and liberty, all with the ability of succeeding in economic, social, and political goals.