

hemisphere. No other slave population in the New World even maintained its numbers, much less grew, through natural increase. Every other slave society had fewer people of African origin at the time of emancipation than the numbers of slaves they imported; the United States had nine times the numbers imported.<sup>11</sup>

This remarkable phenomenon seems to cry out for comparative examination. And indeed, several hypotheses have been advanced to explain the net reproductive growth of the United States slave population in contrast to the net decline of all others. For most slaves in the West Indies and South America, life was nasty, brutish, and short. Climatic conditions and disease took a higher toll of black lives there than in North America. Food, clothing, medical care, and the material necessities of life were less abundant. The pace and nature of labor on tropical sugar and coffee plantations was quite literally "killing" compared with work on cotton and tobacco fields in the United States.

Moreover, the slave economies in the Caribbean and South America flourished while the slave trade was still open, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Slaveowners considered it cheaper to import more Africans (two thirds of them males) and

work them to death than to create an environment in which slaves could raise families. In the United States, by contrast, the slave economy reached its height in the nineteenth-century cotton kingdom after the African slave trade ended in 1808. The cut-off of imports made planters dependent on natural reproduction for the maintenance and increase of their slave "stock." It was in the slaveowner's interest to encourage good health and a high birth rate among slaves.

In tropical slave societies the sex ratio among both blacks and whites was never equal; consequently many male slaves were not able to form families and many female slaves became concubines of masters, whose lighter-skinned descendants were more likely over time to disappear into the white population than in the United States. Ironically, although Spanish and Portuguese legislation provided some legal protection for slave marriages while the United States did not, de facto slave marriages and families were more common in the United States. And from an early period, the sex ratio among both slaves and whites was almost equal in the United States.

To some degree all of these explanations for the radical difference in New World slave demographics seem valid. What we need is a historian of George Fredrickson's skill to sort out these variables, weigh their relative explanatory power, and evaluate their implications for the post-slavery experiences of African-American peoples of the hemisphere. It is all the more lamentable, therefore, that fate has deprived us of such insights from this fine historian. □

One important comparison between the United States and other Western Hemisphere slave societies is alluded to a few times in these essays but not systematically described or analyzed. From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, European nations enslaved some eleven million Africans and exported them to their New World colonies. Of this number, fewer than 500,000—less than 5 percent—were brought to the parts of North America that became the United States. Slavery may have been the skeleton in the North American closet, but it was a mighty small skeleton at first. Four million enslaved Africans went to the Caribbean islands and almost five million to South America, principally Brazil, which received almost eight times as many slaves as North America. Haiti imported twice as many as British North America, and Jamaica almost twice as many. Tiny Barbados received almost as many Africans as all of the region that became the United States.

Yet by 1860 the four and a half million African-Americans in the United States, slave and free, were about one third of the total in the entire

<sup>11</sup>See Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), especially Chapter 1; C. Vann Woodward, "Southern Slaves in the World of Thomas Malthus," in *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Race in the North-South Dialogue* (Little, Brown, 1971).