

Let's Share the Blame

By William A. Percy

Like others of their ilk, Matthew Karp, Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman unfairly castigate the slave owners of the Deep South in *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders of American Foreign Policy* (2016) and in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of Economic Development* (2016), respectively. Being descended from such people, I resent this. Enlightened and merciful slave owners often took good care of their most valuable possessions, that is, their house slaves, and even of their field hands. As the pre-Civil War apologist George Fitzhugh claimed, many treated their chattel slaves better than Northern textile owners treated their mostly Irish factory workers. When financially squeezed, they laid off these workers with no compensation and no place to live. They often did not even bother to feed them. As my good friend Eugene Genovese noted in *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), "The masters desperately needed the gratitude of their slaves in order to define themselves as moral human beings."

This need for a sense of morality governed the actions of slave owners. Genovese's contemporaries Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman further suggested this claim in *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974). According to Thomas Weiss's review of the book in *Project 2001: Significant Works in Economic History* (2001), "Economies of large-scale operation, effective management, and intensive utilization of labor and capital made southern slave agriculture 35 percent more efficient than the northern system of family farming." Weiss's review summarizes that benevolent owners encouraged stable family units for their slaves; that slaves typically received 90 percent of the income they produced over their

lifetimes; and, that between 1840 and 1860, the level of income, per capita, had increased more in the south than in the rest of the nation.

Like Fogel and Engerman, Genovese suggested that rather than being poorly treated on American soil, the brutal terror slaves experienced occurred elsewhere. Actually, the cruelest treatment occurred in Africa. Other blacks first violently captured and enslaved their victims. In chains, they were marched or canoed down to the coast. There, the abused awaited in dungeons to be sold to British, and after 1808, mainly to Yankees under both of whom they experienced the unspeakable Middle Passage. After 1808, most were landed in Cuba, where they recuperated and were “broken in,” i.e. taught a few words of English, and maybe taught to plow. After their arrival on Southern plantations, it must have come to as a relief to them.

The Marxist president of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams asserted in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) that African slaves in the Caribbean started modern capitalism with sugar. Sugar remained the premiere commodity that slaves produced until it was overtaken by North American cotton around 1820. Napoleon once quipped “Does the world turn on a barrel of sugar?” His Continental System was failing because the Spanish and the Russians were more interested in sugar than destroying Great Britain, which exported it. Incidentally, Napoleon’s quartermasters were also buying cloths manufactured in Britain because they were so cheap.