Slavery in the United States

John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau confronted slavery as an intellectual problem; Thomas Jefferson, John C. Calhoun, and Frederick Douglass lived it. This is what led C. L. R. James to say that what Europeans faced as a philosophical question, the Americans faced as an empirical one. Slavery was the defining issue of American politics in the nineteenth century. Its legacies—segregation, civil rights, and racial discrimination—have profoundly shaped its twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Slavery's influence on American political thought has been no less profound, though not always recognized. Louis Hartz (1955) famously argued that slavery had little impact on American political thought due to the pervasiveness of liberal and egalitarian views. The ubiquity of liberal ideas and the absence of feudal institutions reduced class conflict and produced a common, almost unconscious, political philosophy among Americans that emphasizes moral and political equality, individual liberty, and private property. Given this climate, the elitist views of the slaveholders could have no lasting influence. Hartz was right to an extent: The early United States was indeed distinguished by a relative lack of social differentiation, which produced a common American spirit defined by "freedom, initiative, adventure, [and] self-expression, in pursuit of trade and industry" (James, 1993, p. 44). Yet the absence of sharp class stratification in the United States was largely due to slavery. The enslavement of Africans helped to entrench liberal egalitarian views among whites across social classes. While earlier scholars such as Hartz believed that slavery had little to do with American democracy, most scholars today argue that slavery, race, and freedom were intimately connected in American history. This paradoxical relationship has profoundly shaped American political theory.

Slavery and the Racial Order

American slavery was a struggle between masters' attempts to impose "social death" on the slave and slaves' efforts to seek freedom and build a community. Orlando Patterson (1982) argues that slavery is a system in which the master seeks to strip the slave of all kinship ties and social standing so that the slave is physically alive (and therefore able to labor for the master) but socially dead, belonging to no recognized community and possessing no legitimate genealogy. Slaves resisted this social death in three ways. First, they sought freedom, by purchasing it, suing for it, running away, or rebelling. Second, they sought to make the terms of labor more favorable, through work slowdowns, attempts to shorten the working day, subterfuge, sabotage, maintaining their own livestock or garden plots, participating in markets, or hiring out their labor and keeping a portion of their wages (Berlin, 1998). Third, they created

their own families and their own culture. While masters sought to impose their rule from sunup to sundown, from sundown to sunup slaves created a community that denied the authority of the master and defied social death. Slaves shaped their own customs, religion, dialect, music, economy, and political perspectives, merging African, indigenous, and European practices into a uniquely and truly American culture. This conflict between "sunup to sundown" and "sundown to sunup," or between social death and the resistance of the black community, is one of the fundamental experiences of the American political tradition.

It also produced the racial order. Europeans sat at the top and Africans the bottom of the social hierarchy throughout the Americas. Further, African slavery was the dominant form of labor exploitation in the hemisphere because it was economically cheaper than importing European indentured servants or enslaving the indigenous population, since African slaves were plentiful, cheap, and politically powerless, possessing no "rights of Englishmen" or membership in indigenous communities to appeal to for protection. But slavery in the United States differed from the rest of the hemisphere in the form of social control involved. In the West Indies and Brazil, for example, slaves were controlled by an intermediate "buffer control stratum" of creoles that stood between them and the planters (Allen, 1994, 1997). (Members of this group were generally referred to as mulatto or colored.) But in the 13 colonies, poor European colonists were the buffer between master and slave. Their interests and those of the planters converged as poor Europeans demanded—and received—sundry economic, political, and psychological advantages, such as the right to own property (including human property), immunity from enslavement, access to public accommodations, and the right to participate in public affairs. In exchange, poor whites gave their tacit or active acceptance to the slave system (Du Bois, 1992; Roediger, 1991). This cross-class alliance created a "white" racial category, a group distinguished from slaves and those eligible for slavery (generally referred to as Negroes) and that enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom and equality while enduring relatively little class conflict (Olson, 2004). The paradox of American history is that the ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy were built on racial slavery. The subordination of some provided the foundation for the freedom of others. The symbiosis of race and democracy forged by slavery has shaped the American political experience to this day.

Slavery in the New Republic

Slavery dominated the political debates of its era. The revolutionary generation's relation to slavery was complex and conflicted regarding its morality and necessity. The struggle for independence made many patriots aware of a contradiction between their demand for liberty and their ownership of slaves. After the revolution, George Washington privately expressed support for the gradual abolition of slavery and freed some of his slaves on his death. Thomas Jefferson had moral objections to slavery as well, though he was also one of the first people to suggest that black people are by nature inferior to whites. James Madison, like Jefferson, favored gradual abolition followed by colonization of black people to Africa.

Despite their moral qualms, the revolutionary generation built slavery into the founding documents. Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence contained a paragraph condemning the slave trade, decrying King George for waging a "cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him," but Southern delegates excised it from the final version. The 1787 Constitution is careful to never mention slavery by name but it clearly protects it in several clauses, including the infamous "three-fifths clause" in Article I.2, which stipulates that the population of a state shall be determined by counting all "free persons" in addition to three-fifths of "all other Persons." This clause augmented the South's representation in Congress and their apportionment of taxes and implicitly sanctioned slavery. Other clauses protected the slave trade until 1808 (Article I.8), guaranteed federal support to masters in capturing fugitive slaves (Article IV.2), and guaranteed federal protection against slave insurrections (Article IV.4). Debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the Constitution barely touched on slavery, suggesting that both sides took its existence for granted.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 wiped out any moral objections masters had regarding

slavery. In 1800, 11% of the slave labor force worked on the cotton crop. By 1850, two thirds of them did, as Southern plantations supplied the raw material devoured by the hungry machines of the Industrial Revolution. By 1860, over 90% of Britain's cotton came from the U.S. South. The rise of "king cotton" transformed slaveholders' ambivalence about slavery into an obdurate defense. Whereas many planters in the revolutionary generation lamented slavery as a necessary evil, antebellum slaveholders argued that it was a positive social good. James Henry Hammond (1858), for example, argued that all civilizations require a "mudsill" class to perform its menial labor. The genius of Southern civilization is that it has found an "inferior race" to do this work. By compelling one race to perform labor "naturally" fitted to it, slavery eliminates class conflict within the other race and thereby produces free political institutions.

Slavery not only sustains republicanism, John C. Calhoun insisted; it also civilizes Africans. Africans are savages who practice cannibalism, worship satanic spirits, and are sexually licentious. Slavery, Calhoun argued, has saved the black race from this barbaric origin. "Never before has the black race of Central Africa . . . attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually . . . This . . . is conclusive proof of the general happiness of the race, in spite of all the exaggerated tales to the contrary" (McKitrick, 1963, pp. 12–13).

Scientific Racism

The emergence of scientific racism arose in tandem with the intensification of slavery. In the eighteenth century, whites tended to view African Americans as alien and unassimilable but believed that the natural and social environment was the cause of black inferiority. But with the rise of king cotton, theories of Africans' innate, biological inferiority began to hold sway (Fredrickson, 1971). The eighteenth-century notion of slaves as childlike (thus implying the ability to "mature") gave way to the notion of Africans as subhuman. Scientists conducted various experiments and measurements, such as measuring skull size, evaluating the quality of earwax, and measuring the angle of facial profiles, to determine the biological capabilities of the various races. Unsurprisingly, nearly all of these experiments concluded that Caucausoids were intellectually and physically superior to Negroids, Mongoloids, and other supposed racial categories. Some of the theorists of scientific racism in this era, most notably Joseph-Arthur, comte de Gobineau (1915), would influence Nazi philosophy.

The Antislavery Movement

Prior to the 1830s, most antislavery organizations urged a slow, gradual end to slavery, and many of them supported the colonization of freed slaves to Africa. But in 1831, a slave rebellion led by Nat Turner struck fear into the heart of the South, weakening much of that sort of antislavery sentiment. And earlier that year, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing *The Liberator,* which would become the leading newspaper for a new brand of abolitionism. Turner and Garrison led the shift from a Southern-based, white, conciliatory and gradualist abolitionism to a Northern-based, biracial, militant movement. Many of the leaders of this new movement were upper-class whites, but its support (financial and political) came from the grass roots, particularly free black communities and white communities in New England and in then Western states like Ohio. Considered alongside the efforts of slaves themselves, this new abolitionism was a black freedom movement with biracial participation.

Garrison provided much of the intellectual framework for this movement. He argued that slavery was a sin and that slaves should be freed immediately and unconditionally, without compensation to slaveholders. *Immediatism* became the touchstone of the modern abolitionist movement. Garrison and his followers employed a strategy of "moral suasion" to end slavery. They believed that slavery had so corrupted the entire political system that seeking to overthrow it through electoral politics would only end up compromising abolitionism. Slavery was a sin that damned the nation and required repentance. Moral suasion, or the transformation of public opinion, was the means by which abolitionists would persuade their fellow citizens of the evils of slavery and the need to abolish it.

The Garrisonians also railed against racial prejudice. The constitution of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (founded by Garrison in 1832), for

example, declared that "a mere difference of complexion is no reason why any man should be deprived of any of his natural rights, or subjected to any political disability" (Ruchames, 1963). Garrisonians argued that eradicating racial prejudice was essential to creating an egalitarian society freed of sin. This principle, however, was held unevenly among white abolitionists. Indeed, antislavery sentiment in the North was often also violently anti-black. "Death to Slavery! / Down with the Slaveholders! / Away with the Negroes!" went one popular slogan in 1861 (quoted in Fredrickson, 1971, p. 189). Even as they opposed the slave power, many whites feared that racial equality would threaten their privileged standing. And even Garrison occasionally acted paternally toward black people (who were nevertheless fervently devoted to him). Regardless, racial equality was a central tenet of radical abolitionist political thought from Garrison to Frederick Douglass to John Brown.

American abolitionists quickly embraced immediatism, but the strategy of moral suasion sat uncomfortably with some of them, and in 1840 the movement split. The catalyst for the split was a debate over the participation of women in the movement: The Garrisonians welcomed anyone's participation so long as one shared a commitment to immediate, unconditional emancipation. Reformist abolitionists, however, insisted on following norms of decorum in political deliberation—such as prohibitions on women's participation in public affairs—so as not to offend public sentiment and distract attention from the antislavery cause. Unlike the Garrisonians, who argued that slavery was but the worst of many sins in the United States, reformist abolitionists held that American society was fundamentally moral and just, except for slavery, and advocated an electoral strategy for abolition. After the split, they formed their own party, the Liberty Party, which pulled some support away from Democrats and Whigs but fared poorly overall and folded into the Free Soil Party in 1848. Meanwhile, abolitionists such as Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, and the later Frederick Douglass shared the radicalism of the Garrisonians but also supported the Constitution and electoral participation. In the 1850s, several of them would support John Brown's raid on a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in a plan to free and arm slaves throughout the South.

The Garrisonians became even more radical after the split. They urged disunion, calling for the North to secede from the South because, they argued, slavery depended on federal support; the removal of such support would lead to slavery's collapse. Garrison attacked the Constitution as "a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell" for protecting the slaveholders' interests, while Wendell Phillips called for Northerners to break up "the whole merciless conspiracy of 1787." Stephen Foster and Parker Pillsbury disrupted church services in congregations that refused to oppose slavery. Garrisonians' speeches, newspapers, and the slave narratives they published aroused opposition to slavery through shame, anger, guilt, and pity, as well as rational argument. The Garrisonians explicitly distinguished their more zealous approach to antislavery from those of politicians such as Abraham Lincoln, who was personally opposed to slavery but at first did little to abolish it because for him preserving the Union came before all else. Garrisonians castigated this perspective. It perpetuates slavery, they maintained, because placing priority on preserving the Union requires making compromises with slaveholders, which ultimately strengthens their power. The Garrisonians adamantly rejected any sort of compromise or moderation regarding slavery.

This fanatical, uncompromising dedication to freedom and equality is the radical abolitionists' distinctive contribution to American political thought. Their focus on individualism, inalienable rights, political equality, and self-reliance have led some to see them as the highest expression of bourgeois liberalism in an emerging industrialized nation (e.g., Hartz, 1955). Yet there was a deeply radical character to the abolitionists that spilled over the boundaries of liberalism. The Garrisonians, in particular, were not afraid to follow their principles to their radical conclusions. Their belief in individual liberty led them to struggle for free speech and a radical democracy in which all people have the right to participate in public affairs. As Martin Delany put it, "No people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the *ruling element* of the country in which they live" (Foner, 1998, p. 88). Their belief that all people are created equal led them to fight racial prejudice, advocate women's emancipation, and support the labor movement. Their demand for

immediate emancipation led them to attack the church for its complicity with slavery, condemn the Constitution as a proslavery document, call for the breakup of the United States, and welcome civil war. Their openness to new ideas led many of them to radical social and personal experimentation, including vegetarianism, alternative medicine, and nudism. They challenged patriarchal relations in the private and public spheres, and they crafted new forms of religious worship. In short, the abolitionists' radical views regarding slavery and racial equality led them to reimagine the American ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy.

Indeed, the radical abolitionists were revolutionaries, for their politics threatened the stability of the nation. Unlike trade unionism, prison reform, temperance, or other reform movements of the time, abolitionists' demand for unconditional emancipation with no compensation to slaveholders threatened the entire structure of the American political economy. As James argues, immediatism meant "to tear up by the roots the foundation of the Southern economy and society, wreck Northern commerce, and disrupt the union irretrievably" (1993, p. 89). By attacking slavery, abolitionists undid the arrangements that kept the Union together. As the brief but suggestive history of radical reconstruction indicates, this unraveling made possible not just a liberal society, but perhaps also a radically democratic one (Du Bois, 1992).

Slavery and Contemporary Political Thought

Hartz wrote that the curious thing about slaveholder thought is that it had virtually no impact on American political thought. Equally curious is the uneven impact slavery has had on mainstream contemporary political theory. Slavery is in the background of nearly all black political thought in the United States, influencing its work on power, identity, solidarity, political strategy, gender, and more (e.g., Dawson, 2001). Yet outside this field there is surprisingly little on slavery in the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought. (Exceptions include Charles Mills's [1997] analysis of race and the social contract tradition and a cottage industry on Alexis de Tocqueville's views on race.) Slavery and abolition are even less contemplated in contemporary political theory. Few democratic theorists, for example, read the abolitionists (or the slaveholders) to think through debates in the discipline such as between recognition and redistribution, liberalism and communitarianism, deliberative and agonistic democracy, the nature of power, or the role and value of postmodernism. The uneven influence of slavery in contemporary political thought—and the continued contortions of a democratic nation that has not completely let go of its past—suggest that there is much work to be done on slavery in the United States and its relation to political theory.

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See also Liberalism; Slavery in Greek and Early Christian Thought

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