

From Rebellion to Revolution

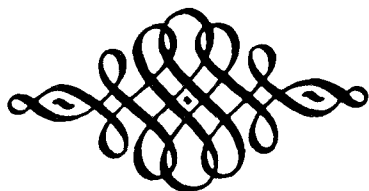


**Afro-American Slave Revolts
in the Making of the
Modern World**

EUGENE D. GENOVESE

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Men must be caressed or annihilated, for they will revenge themselves for small injuries but cannot do so for great ones. The injury that we do to a man must, therefore, be such that we need not fear his vengeance.

Niccolò Machiavelli,
The Prince

A man may perish by the sword, yet no man draws the sword to perish, but to live by it.

James Harrington,
A System of Politics

For Eric Hobsbawm
Our Main Man

Federico,
tú ves al mundo, las calles,
el vinagre,
las despedidas en las estaciones
cuando el humo levanta sus ruedas decisivas
hacia donde no hay nada sino algunas
separaciones, piedras, vías férreas.

Hay tantas gentes haciendo preguntas
por todas partes.
Hay el ciego sangriento, y el iracundo, y el
desanimando,
y el miserable, el árbol de las uñas,
el bandolero con la envidia a cuestas.

Así es la vida, Federico, aquí tienes
las cosas que te puede ofrecer mi amistad
de melancólico varón varonil.
Ya sabes por ti mismo muchas cosas,
y otras irás sabiendo lentamente.

Pablo Neruda

Preface

I

Enslavement in any form has figured as the antithesis of that individual autonomy considered the essence of freedom in modern societies. The revolt against slavery thus emerged as the basic assertion of human dignity and of humanity itself. The power of slavery as a cultural myth in modern societies derives from its antithetical relationship to the hegemonic ideology of bourgeois social relations of production. The dominant liberal and democratic strands of bourgeois ideology demand the responsibility of the individual for himself in the polity, the economy, the society. To be sure, working men and women have largely been excluded from the governance and benefits, but the justification for their exclusion has been compatible with the notion of propertied male individualism rather than in cynical or flagrant violation of it.

In bourgeois theory, freedom emerges as an absolute quality and right of the human being. Unlike some mystical or spiritual right that might be realized only in another life, bourgeois freedom is grounded in the solid here-and-now of absolute property. Those who do not possess external, material resources enjoy a minimal property in themselves, most notably in their labor-power. Marx might call wage-labor

wage-slavery, but his metaphor draws its force from a general acceptance of an ideology that denies slavery as an acceptable social and personal condition.

Precapitalist societies did not readily raise movements of opposition to slavery, for they viewed social participation within one or another notion of society as a totality—normally, a hierarchically ordered community or household. Precapitalist societies have also tended to favor a more complex system of social participation. Less likely than capitalist societies to offer a single acceptable model of social being—the autonomous individual—they were more likely to justify slavery as a form of social being different from alternative forms in degree rather than kind. In this context, revolt against slavery generally took the form of simple revolt against unbearable exploitation or against the overstepping of traditional arrangements. Even the slaves perceived their revolts as external to society—as a withdrawal from society. For a long time, therefore, slave revolts had a restorationist or isolationist, rather than a revolutionary, content.

The objective social character of such early slave revolts should not obscure the deep experience of enslavement—of oppression and exploitation—that binds them to slave revolts in the modern world. Violent confrontation with injustice lay at the core of any revolt against slavery. But the goals of the revolts and the terms in which they were cast changed with the revolutionary changes in the social relations of production and the ideology of European and American society as a whole.

European conquerors introduced slavery into the Americas. The character of slavery bore the stamp of the historical

development and aspirations of its progenitors. Never an independent mode of production or form of government, slavery in the Americas constituted a social formation and a particular set of social relations of production within a declining seigneurial ("feudal") and a rising capitalist mode of production, under the governance of the attendant political relations of property and authority.

The institutions of enslavement introduced by Europeans varied in their particulars from place to place throughout the colonies. The stage of historical development within the country of origin at the moment of initial colonization and of the institution of colonial government had a decisive impact upon the shape of colonial institutions, including the regional form of slavery. I have discussed the world-fashioning action of the master classes in *The World the Slaveholders Made*, in which I have sketched the historical context of modern slavery and, by extension, of the revolt against it. The initial impetus for colonization, whether that of a class, a segment of a class, or a government, frequently left a decisive imprint upon colonial institutions. The country of origin's form of government, as well as its religion, intersected with the level of development of the world market and the colony's actual or potential relationship to it in such a way as to favor a particular form of slavery. Frequently, market possibilities combined with scruples about, or impediments to, the enslavement of one's own people or of indigenous colonial peoples accounted for the systematic adoption of black slavery as the preferred form of labor.

Once a slave system had been inaugurated, however, it could be modified either by changing economic opportuni-

ties or by the perceived need of the masters to establish some form of social hegemony to mitigate or legitimate the brute economic exploitation. As I have argued at length in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, the slaves never constituted a blank slate in this process. The successive waves of Africans brought with them as many commitments to and preconceptions of justice and legitimacy as their captors did. And they fought tenaciously, by all available means, including the ultimate confrontation of revolt, to enforce their own view of social relations. The slave societies that resulted from these continuing struggles bore distinctive features and embedded—even when they did not openly manifest—their own specific history of class confrontation and hard-won compromise.

These regional slave societies all took root and grew within an economic context determined by the prevailing European mode of production. And with due respect for the special cases of England, the Netherlands, and their respective colonies, that mode of production was, at the genesis of the American slave systems, seigneurial. The seigneurial mode of production that spawned the expansion cannot be equated with that of hey-day medieval seigneurialism. Internal crises had already permitted commercial capital and the absolute state to make significant inroads. In France, Spain, and Portugal, commercial capital nonetheless remained parasitic and fed off the prevailing seigneurial social relations of production, as even the most vigorous absolute state did. The dazzling achievements of the various monarchies never freed them from their symbiotic relationship with the seigneurial ruling classes. Nor could those ruling classes decisively free themselves from their ideologically and legally hedged re-

lations with their own laboring classes without sacrificing the essence of their privileged position in their national community.

Just as colonization promised a multitude of economic advantages external to the precariously balanced national social system, so slavery appeared to offer, in one case after another, a means of rationalizing the social relations of production. But the various slaveholders, whatever their particular religious and cultural sensibilities, never intended that rationalization to impinge upon the traditional legitimization of their own status, nor upon their privileged access to property and authority. Rather, *grosso modo*, they expected their ownership and exploitation of slaves to buttress their position as seigneurs. If they could live with the distinct economic advantages of being modern *feudataires*, they rarely aspired to become capitalist entrepreneurs. And the vicissitudes of their continued symbiotic relationship with the denizens of commercial capital, who lubricated their operations and fed off their profits, confirms the persistent seigneurial context of their undertaking.

Even English colonization had its earliest roots in a pre-capitalist economic and social system. But the first great bourgeois revolution owed its origins to the same phenomena that produced the colonization and swiftly altered the larger legal and economic framework of its development. The great wave of slave imports into the Anglo-Saxon colonies occurred at almost the same moment as the Glorious Revolution, which confirmed the triumph of bourgeois individualism in the mother country. This transformation reinforced the ability of the Anglo-Saxon colonists to hold other men as

absolute bourgeois property. To the extent that they sought to cast this naked exploitation as a viable social order, they turned to older seigneurial norms appropriate to relations between peasants and lords, rather than toward the barely emerging norms appropriate to free labor.

The history of slavery and of slave revolts in the Americas corresponds roughly to the transition from seigneurialism to capitalism. And like that protracted and portentous transition, slavery in the Americas cannot be reduced to any simple model. As a set of social relations of production embedded in a dominant mode of production, it must be apprehended by that nuanced vision which should inform any understanding of the historical role of commercial capital. For like commercial capital, with which it was so clearly associated, slavery in the Americas remained a rationalization of parasitism. Capable of extraordinary efficiency within a given conjuncture, it nonetheless represented a developmental dead end. Ideologically, it combined traditional and progressive elements in an uneasy and contradictory synthesis that inevitably conflicted with one or more elements of the emerging bourgeois ideology.

Nothing better testifies to the integral role of slavery in the transition from seigneurialism to capitalism—in ideological as well as socioeconomic terms—than the history of the slave revolts. Nor can any other social movement better illuminate the rich and contradictory process whereby the slaves fashioned their own history within the contours of the dominant modes of production. Throughout the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century, the numerous slave revolts followed a generally restorationist course. The various slave

populations with their discrete African and Afro-American cultures rose against the oppression of their European and white-creole masters. In so doing, they drew upon their own cultural identities and collective commitments to reject oppression and to advance alternative social norms. When their path did not lead to bloody defeat and heroic sacrifice of life, it led to a withdrawal from colonial society and to the establishment of maroon societies. This particularism, with its acceptance of social and political heterogeneity, might entail not only the re-creation of traditional communities but even the exploitation of other slaves. It also lent itself to deals with colonial governments or ruling classes that still accepted a hierarchically organized, particularist vision of social order. Thus, prior to the triumph of the capitalist mode of production and a cohesive bourgeois ideology, slaves could use the colonial world, at the margin, to defend their traditional conceptions of their own rights.

The conquest of state power by the representatives of the consolidating bourgeoisie in France decisively transformed the ideological and economic terrain. Nothing changed overnight, but the French Revolution provided the conditions in which a massive revolt in Saint-Domingue could become a revolution in its own right. The brilliance with which Toussaint L'Ouverture claimed for his enslaved brothers and sisters the rights of liberty and equality—of universal human dignity—that the French were claiming for themselves constituted a turning point in the history of slave revolts and, indeed, of the human spirit. Far from passively accepting the hegemony of the ruling class, Toussaint seized and appropriated that hegemony at a transitional moment. Henceforth,

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slaves increasingly aimed not at secession from the dominant society but at joining it on equal terms.

II

Two criticisms of the book's thesis may be anticipated since they have already been raised in private communications from colleagues and comrades. The first comes from the Right; the second from the Left.

First, I am not implying some ideological homogeneity, much less coordination, either before or after the French Revolution, nor the disappearance of restorationist revolts at any point in time. And I freely admit that the mechanics of ideological transmission remain obscure and await intensive research. I do insist that the black demand for the abolition of slavery as a social system was something new and epoch-making; and that it could not have emerged as a world-historical power before the rise of a bourgeois-democratic ideology which itself extended the revolutionary liberal commitment to absolute property. The slave revolts, like so much else, cannot be understood outside the context of a developing world history within which the politics, economics, and ideology of Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia as well, had become inseparable.

Second, I do not deny that the slave revolts foreshadowed the proletarian and anticolonial revolutions of the twentieth century. But in time and place their character was bourgeois-democratic. The argument for continuity with later anti-capitalist movements may be sustained but only at a different level of analysis, and it does not contradict the primary thesis. For reasons beyond the scope of this book but familiar

enough, the overwhelming mass of ex-slaves passed into the rural proletariat or into what Sidney Mintz has called "reconstituted peasantries" or into semi-proletarian, semi-serf social formations. In each case, the bourgeois-democratic revolutions were strangled early; in each case the radicalism of the revolts against slavery passed into anticolonial or anticapitalist movements, although this process must be evaluated with full attention to the conservatism of some of those reconstituted peasantries and to the long political subjugation of, say, the blacks in the southern United States.

C. L. R. James raised this question sharply in his early work, as W. E. B. Du Bois did in *Black Reconstruction*. And in different form it has engaged the attention of Sidney Mintz, José Luciano Franco, and David Brion Davis, among others. It is not surprising that these scholars, all of whom have been deeply influenced by Marxism, should insist on seeing the world whole and on stressing the political implications of their historical and anthropological investigations. The relationship of this book to that extraordinarily complex question would require another book to explore. But I have written nothing that denies the historical continuity of the slave revolts with later social movements—a continuity that does not justify reading the present back into the past.

Until the Age of Revolution the slave revolts did not challenge the world capitalist system within which slavery itself was embedded. Rather, they sought escape and autonomy—a local, precapitalist social restoration. When they did become revolutionary and raise the banner of abolition, they did so within the context of the bourgeois-democratic revolutionary wave, with bourgeois-democratic slogans and

demands and with a commitment to bourgeois property relations. The transformation of that legacy by subsequent generations is another story.

III

Throughout history slaves have constituted the most oppressed but not generally the most revolutionary of social classes. Historians of the ancient world have commented less on the massive slave revolts of the Roman era than on their infrequency, and some have plausibly argued that the stronger revolutionary impulse came from the nonslave lower classes and strata whose less complete subjugation provided more favorable political, military, and psychological conditions. Accordingly, the legend of black docility in slavery appears the more ironic as well as the more ludicrous, for, so far as the evidence allows generalization, no enslaved people in world history rose in revolt so often or in such numbers or with so large a measure of success. The slaves of the Old South rose much less frequently, in fewer numbers, and less successfully than those of the Caribbean region and South America, but they too made vital contributions to the history of revolt.

This short book makes no attempt to recount the history of Afro-American slave revolts throughout the Western Hemisphere—a story that might require ten large volumes to tell in adequate detail. Rather, it proceeds topically and addresses two main problems: (1) the conditions in time and place favorable to slave revolt and guerrilla warfare, which help explain the infrequency and low intensity of revolts in the Old South relative to those elsewhere; and (2) the place of slave revolts and guerrilla warfare, including the southern,

in the international political movements that were making the modern world during the aptly called Age of Revolution.

I have proceeded on the assumption that the extraordinary scholarship of recent years has finally laid to rest the myth of slave docility and quiescence. Thus, I do not discuss noninsurrectionary forms of resistance nor even such insurrectionary forms as the impressive shipboard revolts in the slave trade. These subjects, important in themselves, bear on the themes of this book, but their inclusion would only extend the text without essentially affecting the argument.

I have decided to risk the ire of my colleagues by omitting the several hundred footnotes that cluttered the first draft. There is little new information here—only an attempt to bring a point of view to bear on materials familiar to specialists and available in the books and articles cited in the bibliographical essay. I have not even cited the sources for the few quotations from plantation manuscripts, narrative slave accounts, and papers in the British Colonial Office, since they provide illustrations but not “proof” of anything. The bibliographic essay, although hardly comprehensive, may nonetheless seem excessive for so short a book; I hope, however, that it will prove useful to nonspecialists.

Those infected with the current rage for sociological order and “structural analysis” will, I fear, be disappointed with the lack of precision in my presentation of the “factors” that conditioned revolt and guerrilla war, and with my decision to follow a literary rather than a model-building course. Several sociologists, most notably Marion Kilson, Orlando Patterson, and Anthony Synnott, have undertaken such model-building and have enormously enriched our understanding

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while doing so. I have read their work with the utmost profit and admiration and wish to express my indebtedness to them. My own general views, independently formulated during the last two decades, more often than not accord with theirs on essential matters. I have not followed their course primarily because I sense a grave danger in overstructuring these historical materials. At bottom, I agree with Herbert Aptheker's blunt remark that the "cause" of slave revolt was slavery. And, as in all my books with the partial exception of the sometimes mechanistic *The Political Economy of Slavery*, I have tried to profit from Machiavelli's argument for the large claims of *fortuna*. No model can do more than heighten our understanding of the probabilities, for slaves anywhere and at any time might take up arms. Since these sociologists have pushed their methods about as far as they can safely go and since the work of Kilson and Patterson is well known, as I hope Synnott's will be when published, I have sought to seize the advantages of an alternative presentation.