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33966



**THE WORLD
THE SLAVES MADE**

EUGENED. GENOVESE

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ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL

1. My brudder* sit-tin' on de tree of life, An' he yearde when Jor-dan

Var.

roll; Roll, Jor-dan, Roll, Jor-dan, Roll, Jor-dan, roll!

O march de an-gel march, O march de an-gel march; O my

soul a-rise in Heaven, Lord, For to yearde when Jor-dan roll.

2. Little chil'en, learn to fear de Lord,
And let your days be long;
Roll, Jordan, &c.

3. O, let no false nor spiteful word
Be found upon your tongue;
Roll, Jordan, &c.

From W. F. Allen, et al., *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1871).
*[sister, etc.]

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PREFACE

The question of nationality—of “identity”—has stalked Afro-American history from its colonial beginnings, when the expression “a nation within a nation” was already being heard. In recent decades it has re-emerged fiercely in political debates, and it is destined to remain with us, however triumphant “integrationist” or “separatist” tendencies appear at a given moment. Some historians, black and white, interpret the Afro-American experience as a separate national experience; others, black and white, interpret it as a more or less ethnically distinct component of a single regional or national experience. The closer one looks at the quarrel, the clearer it becomes that no such formula can account for so rich and contradictory an experience.

In this book I refer to the “black nation” and argue that the slaves, as an objective social class, laid the foundations for a separate black national culture while enormously enriching American culture as a whole. But that separate black national culture has always been American, however much it has drawn on African origins or reflected the distinct development of black people in America. White and black southerners, however different they may claim to be and in some ways are, have come to form one people in vital respects. As C. Vann Woodward observes, in *American Counterpoint*:

The ironic thing about these two great hyphenate minorities, Southern-Americans and Afro-Americans, confronting each other on their native soil for three and a half centuries, is the degree to which they have shaped each other's destiny, determined each other's isolation, shared and molded a common culture. It is, in fact, impossible to imagine the one without the other and quite futile to try.

Originally, I had planned to explore the theme of nationality throughout the book and to examine its political implications in an epilogue. I have decided, however, to leave the matter for a later date and a more appropriate format. My reading of the evidence as constituting a national thrust—in its objective significance more than as a conscious effort by the slaves—may therefore appear as an *obiter dictum*. Yet I trust that every reader is capable of recasting certain formulations in useful alternative terms. I hope I have shown that the slaves made an indispensable contribution to the development of black culture and black national consciousness as well as to American nationality as a whole. But, knowing that the ambiguity of the black experience as a national question lends the evidence to different readings, I have chosen to stay close to my primary responsibility: to tell the story of slave life as carefully and accurately as possible. Many years of studying the astonishing effort of black people to live decently as human beings even in slavery has convinced me that no theoretical advance suggested in their experience could ever deserve as much attention as that demanded by their demonstration of the beauty and power of the human spirit under conditions of extreme oppression.

The reception accorded by white America to the black people brought here in chains and raised in slavery and under racist oppression has, first and foremost, provided a record of one of history's greatest crimes. I have tried to tell the story not so much of the crime itself, although I hope I have not slighted it, as of the black struggle to survive spiritually as well as physically—to make a livable world for themselves and their children within the narrowest living space and harshest adversity. And if I have tried to present the slaveholders not as monsters but as human beings with solid virtues of their own, my intention has hardly been to spare them condemnation for their crimes. They commanded and profited from an evil social system; whatever the extenuating circumstances, qualifications, and complexities, they remained in the end responsible for what they wrought. But I have also tried to show that, for a complex of reasons of self-interest, common humanity, and Christian sensibility, they could not help contributing to their slaves' creative survival; that many slaveholders even took some pride and pleasure in their slaves' accomplishment; and that they imbibed much of their slaves' culture and sensibility while imparting to their slaves much of their own.

Slavery, especially in its plantation setting and in its paternalis-

tic aspect, made white and black southerners one people while making them two. As in a lasting although not necessarily happy marriage, two discrete individuals shared, for better or worse, one life. I must therefore ask readers to be patient with Book One, Part I, and with some other sections of this volume that treat the masters and other white people much more fully than the slaves and that move abruptly from one general aspect of life to another (for example, from descriptions of social relations to analyses of law and ideology). An understanding of the slaves requires some understanding of the masters and of others who helped shape a complex slave society. Masters and slaves shaped each other and cannot be discussed or analyzed in isolation.

Some of the language in this book may disturb readers; it disturbs me. Whenever "nigger" appears in the sources, it has been retained; moreover, I have used it myself when it seemed the best way to capture the spirit of a contemporary situation. The word is offensive, but I believe that its omission would only anesthetize subject matter infinitely more offensive. In Book Three, Part I—in the section entitled "The Language of Class and Nation"—I have discussed the use of the word by black people themselves.

As for the dialect used in quotations, I have transcribed it from the sources. In many cases whites took down black comments and rendered them as they thought proper. I have not tampered with these sources and assume that every reader can judge for himself or herself the probable accuracy of the rendering.

I have used "black" and "Afro-American" in preference to "Negro" out of respect for what I perceive to be the present preference of the majority of the black community. I have, however, used "free Negro" because it was the most common contemporary term and also because it more accurately captures the color duality of that group as black and mulatto. When discussing the Caribbean, I have followed regional procedure and used "colored" to refer to those who were part white.

So many errors of spelling and grammar appear in the contemporary sources that I have omitted [*sic*] except in a few cases when it seemed necessary. All words in italics have been transcribed from the texts and indicate the original author's emphasis.

E.D.G.

Palo Alto, California
August, 1973

PART 1

OF THE WILLING AND THE OBEDIENT

If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land:

But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

—Isaiah 1:19-20

ON PATERNALISM

Cruel, unjust, exploitative, oppressive, slavery bound two peoples together in bitter antagonism while creating an organic relationship so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feelings without reference to the other. Slavery rested on the principle of property in man—of one man's appropriation of another's person as well as of the fruits of his labor. By definition and in essence it was a system of class rule, in which some people lived off the labor of others. American slavery subordinated one race to another and thereby rendered its fundamental class relationships more complex and ambiguous, but they remained class relationships. The racism that developed from racial subordination influenced every aspect of American life and remains powerful. But slavery as a system of class rule predated racism and racial subordination in world history and once existed

without them. Racial subordination, as postbellum American developments and the history of modern colonialism demonstrate, need not rest on slavery. Wherever racial subordination exists, racism exists; therefore, southern slave society and its racist ideology had much in common with other systems and societies. But southern slave society was not merely one more manifestation of some abstraction called racist society. Its history was essentially determined by particular relationships of class power in racial form.

The Old South, black and white, created a historically unique kind of paternalist society. To insist upon the centrality of class relations as manifested in paternalism is not to slight the inherent racism or to deny the intolerable contradictions at the heart of paternalism itself. Imamu Amiri Baraka captures the tragic irony of paternalist social relations when he writes that slavery "was, most of all, a paternal institution" and yet refers to "the filthy paternalism and cruelty of slavery."¹ Southern paternalism, like every other paternalism, had little to do with Ole Massa's ostensible benevolence, kindness, and good cheer. It grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation. It did encourage kindness and affection, but it simultaneously encouraged cruelty and hatred. The racial distinction between master and slave heightened the tension inherent in an unjust social order.

Southern slave society grew out of the same general historical conditions that produced the other slave regimes of the modern world. The rise of a world market—the development of new tastes and of manufactures dependent upon non-European sources of raw materials—encouraged the rationalization of colonial agriculture under the ferocious domination of a few Europeans. African labor provided the human power to fuel the new system of production in all the New World slave societies, which, however, had roots in different European experiences and emerged in different geographical, economic, and cultural conditions. They had much in common, but each was unique.²

Theoretically, modern slavery rested, as had ancient slavery, on the idea of a slave as *instrumentum vocale*—a chattel, a possession, a thing, a mere extension of his master's will. But the vacuousness of such pretensions had been exposed long before the growth of New World slave societies.³ The closing of the ancient slave trade, the political crisis of ancient civilization, and the subtle moral

pressure of an ascendant Christianity had converged in the early centuries of the new era to shape a seigneurial world in which lords and serfs (not slaves) faced each other with reciprocal demands and expectations. This land-oriented world of medieval Europe slowly forged the traditional paternalist ideology to which the southern slaveholders fell heir.

The slaveholders of the South, unlike those of the Caribbean, increasingly resided on their plantations and by the end of the eighteenth century had become an entrenched regional ruling class. The paternalism encouraged by the close living of masters and slaves was enormously reinforced by the closing of the African slave trade, which compelled masters to pay greater attention to the reproduction of their labor force. Of all the slave societies in the New World, that of the Old South alone maintained a slave force that reproduced itself. Less than 400,000 imported Africans had, by 1860, become an American black population of more than 4,000,000.⁴

A paternalism accepted by both masters and slaves—but with radically different interpretations—afforded a fragile bridge across the intolerable contradictions inherent in a society based on racism, slavery, and class exploitation that had to depend on the willing reproduction and productivity of its victims. For the slaveholders paternalism represented an attempt to overcome the fundamental contradiction in slavery: the impossibility of the slaves' ever becoming the things they were supposed to be. Paternalism defined the involuntary labor of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction. But, the masters' need to see their slaves as acquiescent human beings constituted a moral victory for the slaves themselves. Paternalism's insistence upon mutual obligations—duties, responsibilities, and ultimately even rights—implicitly recognized the slaves' humanity.

Wherever paternalism exists, it undermines solidarity among the oppressed by linking them as individuals to their oppressors.⁵ A lord (master, *padrone*, *patron*, *padrón*, *patrão*) functions as a direct provider and protector to each individual or family, as well as to the community as a whole. The slaves of the Old South displayed impressive solidarity and collective resistance to their masters, but in a web of paternalistic relationships their action tended to become defensive and to aim at protecting the individuals against aggression and abuse; it could not readily pass into an effective weapon for liberation. Black leaders, especially the preachers, won

loyalty and respect and fought heroically to defend their people. But despite their will and considerable ability, they could not lead their people over to the attack against the paternalist ideology itself.

In the Old South the tendencies inherent in all paternalistic class systems intersected with and acquired enormous reinforcement from the tendencies inherent in an analytically distinct system of racial subordination. The two appeared to be a single system. Paternalism created a tendency for the slaves to identify with a particular community through identification with its master; it reduced the possibilities for their identification with each other as a class. Racism undermined the slaves' sense of worth as black people and reinforced their dependence on white masters. But these were tendencies, not absolute laws, and the slaves forged weapons of defense, the most important of which was a religion that taught them to love and value each other, to take a critical view of their masters, and to reject the ideological rationales for their own enslavement.

The slaveholders had to establish a stable regime with which their slaves could live. Slaves remained slaves. They could be bought and sold like any other property and were subject to despotic personal power. And blacks remained rigidly subordinated to whites. But masters and slaves, whites and blacks, lived as well as worked together. The existence of the community required that all find some measure of self-interest and self-respect. Southern paternalism developed as a way of mediating irreconcilable class and racial conflicts; it was an anomaly even at the moment of its greatest apparent strength. But, for about a century, it protected both masters and slaves from the worst tendencies inherent in their respective conditions. It mediated, however unfairly and even cruelly, between masters and slaves, and it disguised, however imperfectly, the appropriation of one man's labor power by another. Paternalism in any historical setting defines relations of superordination and subordination. Its strength as a prevailing ethos increases as the members of the community accept—or feel compelled to accept—these relations as legitimate. Brutality lies inherent in this acceptance of patronage and dependence, no matter how organic the paternalistic order. But southern paternalism necessarily recognized the slaves' humanity—not only their free will but the very talent and ability without which their acceptance

of a doctrine of reciprocal obligations would have made no sense. Thus, the slaves found an opportunity to translate paternalism itself into a doctrine different from that understood by their masters and to forge it into a weapon of resistance to assertions that slavery was a natural condition for blacks, that blacks were racially inferior, and that black slaves had no rights or legitimate claims of their own.

Thus, the slaves, by accepting a paternalistic ethos and legitimizing class rule, developed their most powerful defense against the dehumanization implicit in slavery. Southern paternalism may have reinforced racism as well as class exploitation, but it also unwittingly invited its victims to fashion their own interpretation of the social order it was intended to justify. And the slaves, drawing on a religion that was supposed to assure their compliance and docility, rejected the essence of slavery by projecting their own rights and value as human beings.

FARMERS, PLANTERS, AND OVERSEERS

Half the slaves in the South lived on farms, not on plantations as defined by contemporaries—that is, units of twenty slaves or more. Typically, a twenty-slave unit would embrace only four families. If a big plantation is to be defined as a unit of fifty slaves, then only one-quarter of the southern slaves lived on big plantations.¹ The slaveholders of the Caribbean or Brazil would have been amused by this definition, for their own plantations usually had more than one hundred slaves. For the slaves in those areas dominated by farms, some degree of contact among slaves of different masters compensated for the absence of the big plantation community. But slaves on small farms within the areas dominated by large plantations risked greater isolation unless neighboring planters and slaves welcomed them as guests.

By reputation farmers treated their slaves better than planters did, but this reputation depended on a questionable belief in a

ugh planter (who understood that he had a plantation dependent on a Dinner of Drinking & expecter day, "When a will slight their action cannot be worse than the one of the South), sion, insisted that tried, with some theory to encour

gnathous race is not and a certain speed goes for a number daily labor—about arily imposes upon t they invariably de ivity, in which they rers, insensible and her words, they fall a Ethiopica, charac of body, caused by

e contradictions in e unwilling labor ncentives and act he blacks set their what good work work steadily and to. The work had performance for the was done. But it ial conditions of g about the extent o the growing de In this context we planters for their

patience and good humor with sloppiness, incompetence, and disliking and on the inability of northern and European visitors to understand how they could stand living that way. It is also clear that the planters had few illusions about the damage being done. The slaves could and did work hard, as their African ancestors had before them. The charge of laziness has missed the mark. But they resisted that regularity and routine which became the *sine qua non* for industrial society and which the planters, despite their own rejection of so much of the bourgeois work ethic, tried to impose upon them. The slaves developed their own notion of work and its relationship to leisure, which did suggest some continuing African cultural influence but which was much less specifically African than generally rural, prebourgeois, and especially preindustrial. Despite the wide differences between the world of the Africans and that of the Afro-American slaves, they did have certain features in common, which allowed for some continuity in collective sensibility. The slaves' attitude toward work, time, and leisure undoubtedly arose primarily from plantation life itself, which provided a harsh variant of traditional agricultural community life, just as African agricultural life provided another and much less harsh variant. To the extent that Africa continued to exert an influence in the slave quarters, it reinforced the exigencies of the slave condition itself.

THE BLACK WORK ETHIC

The slaves' world outlook, as manifested in their attitude toward work, has usually been treated as a mechanism of resistance to labor or to the demoralization occasioned by an especially oppressive labor system. Older and openly racist writers like Ulrich Bonnell Phillips or A. H. Stone accounted for it primarily by reference to "Negro traits." Ironically, W. E. B. Du Bois, the one scholar who attacked the question without bias and with sympathetic care, came out closer to the white racists than to the liberals, for he too proclaimed profound cultural differences; but he simultaneously stripped away the racists' distortions and, as it were,

turned their arguments back on them. Any consideration of the question—indeed, any consideration of any question concerning slave life—must begin with a careful reconsideration of Dr. Bois's great work.

Perhaps Dr. Du Bois's best discussion of the black work ethic is the one in *The Gift of Black Folk*:

The black slave brought into common labor certain new spiritual values not yet fully realized. As a tropical product with a sensuous receptivity to the beauty of the world, he was not as easily reduced to be the mechanical draft-horse which the northern European laborer became. He was not easily brought to recognize any ethical sanctions in work as such but tended to work as the results pleased him and refused to work or sought to refuse when he did not find the spiritual returns adequate; thus he was easily accused of laziness and driven as a slave when in truth he brought to modern man labor a renewed valuation of life.

And again:

Many a northern manager has seen the contradiction when, facing the apparent laziness of Negro hands, he has attempted to drive them and found out that he could not and at the same time has afterward seen someone used to Negro labor get a tremendous amount of work out of the same gangs. The explanation of all this is clear and simple: the Negro laborer has not been trained in modern organized industry but rather in a quite different school.¹

Dr. Du Bois located the difference in the attitudes of European and Afro-American workers in the difference between the bourgeois social system of the one and the ostensibly "communitistic" social system of the other. The white worker worked hard not only to avoid starvation but to avoid disgracing himself and his family, whereas the black worker "looked upon work as a necessary evil and maintained his right to balance the relative alluresments of leisure and satisfaction at any particular day, hour, or season."² Ever alert to complexities, Dr. Du Bois suggested that the white worker brought to America the habit of regular toil as a great moral duty and used it to make America rich, whereas the black worker brought the idea of work as a necessary evil and could, if allowed, use it to make America happy.

There is much that is wise as well as humane in Dr. Du Bois's point of view, and it seems incomprehensible that it should so long have been ignored, if only because it raises so many questions of

kind that now threaten to tear the country apart generationally as well as racially. Santayana, with whom Dr. Du Bois studied at Harvard, once wrote: "Certain moralists, without meaning to be moral, often say that the sovereign cure for unhappiness is work. Unhappily, the work they recommend is better fitted to dull pain than to remove its cause. It occupies the faculties without rationalizing the life."³ Notwithstanding the great merit of Dr. Du Bois's interpretation, its historical specifics cannot go unchallenged. The blacks may indeed be seen as "a tropical product with a sensuous receptivity to the beauty of the world." Despite appearances, there is nothing mystical here—merely a proper concern for the impact of physical environment on the historically developed, collective sensibilities of peoples. But, Dr. Du Bois made a costly error in assuming that white European workers came to the United States after having internalized the Puritan work ethic, and he thereby drew attention away from the central character of the slave experience and moved it to the African experience, which was only a special case in the general immigrant experience.

The immigrants who filled the ranks of the unskilled labor force during the nineteenth century came, to a great extent, from peasant societies with a rural work ethic reinforced by Roman Catholicism. The Sicilians and East Europeans who followed did not bring the maxims of Benjamin Franklin with them. Each wave of immigrants had to undergo a process of acculturation that meant a harsh struggle to break down an established set of values and the slow inculcation of those values we associate with specifically industrial discipline. Moreover, as E. P. Thompson has so well demonstrated, the English working class itself had arisen from the countryside amidst the bitter contention of rival value systems in general and work ethics in particular. Thus, the contribution of Africa came not from some supposed communistic tradition but from its particular participation in a much broader tradition that we associate with most agrarian peoples. But whereas the Europeans found themselves drawn into an industrial system that slowly transformed them into suitable industrial workers, the Africans found themselves drawn into a plantation system that, despite certain similarities to an industrial setting, immensely reinforced traditional values and also added elements of corruption and degradation.

The African tradition, like the European peasant tradition, addressed hard work and condemned and derided laziness in any

form.⁴ Not hard work but steady, routinized work as moral duty was discounted. In this attitude African agriculturalists resembled preindustrial peoples in general, including urban peoples. The familiar assertion that certain people would work only long enough to earn the money they needed to live was leveled not only against day laborers but against the finest and most prestigious artisans in early modern Europe.⁵

Olmsted reported that the slaves could be and often were driven into hard, unremitting toil but that they responded with a dull, stupid, plodding effort which severely reduced their productive contribution.⁶ The slaves, he added, "are far less adapted for steady, uninterrupted labor than we are, but excel us in feats demanding agility and tempestuous energy." Olmsted's argument became standard among postbellum employers who were trying to rebuild with a labor force of freedmen. As one farmer in North Carolina told John Richard Dennett in 1865, "You know how it is with them—for about three days it's work as if they'd break every-thing to pieces; but after that it's go out late and come in soon." Ironically, this distinction parallels precisely the one made by proslavery ideologues who wished to describe the cultural differences between themselves and the Yankees. It is also the distinction made by scholars in describing the position of southern blacks who went north to cities like Chicago during the twentieth century.⁸

What did the blacks themselves say? Isaac Adams, who had been a slave on a big plantation in Louisiana, recalled that most of the blacks remained there when the Yankees emancipated them. "But," he added, "they didn't do very much work. Just enough to take care of themselves and their white folks."⁹ Frank Smith, an ex-slave who went north from Alabama to Illinois, complained: "I didn't lak de Yankees. Dey wanted you to wuk *all de time*, and dat's sump'n I hadn't been brung up to do."¹⁰ Colin Clark and Margaret Haswell may have a point when they argue, in *The Economics of Subsistence Agriculture*, that subsistence laborers will overcome their attachment to leisure and work steadily once they have been brought into contact with communities and values strong enough to stimulate their wants.¹¹ But powerful cultural resistance to any such tendency must be overcome, and the projected outcome of such a confrontation is not inevitable. In part the outcome must depend on the extent to which the more traditional group has organized itself into a community rather than continuing as a

conglomerate of individuals and on the extent to which assimilation to the more economically advanced community is blocked by discrimination.

The slaves' willingness to work extraordinarily hard and yet to resist the discipline of regularity accompanied certain desires and expectations. During Reconstruction the blacks sought their own land; worked it conscientiously when they could get it; resisted being forced back into anything resembling gang labor for the white man; and had to be terrorized, swindled, and murdered to prevent their working for themselves.¹² This story was prefaced in antebellum times when slaves were often allowed garden plots for their families and willingly worked them late at night or on Sundays in order to provide extra food or clothing. The men did not generally let their families subsist on the usual allotments of pork and corn. In addition to working with their wives in the gardens, they fished and hunted and trapped animals. In these and other ways they demonstrated considerable concern for the welfare of their families and a strong desire to take care of them. But in such instances they were working for themselves and at their own pace. Less frequently, slaves received permission to hire out their own time after having completed the week's assigned tasks. They were lured, not by some internal pressure to work steadily, but by the opportunity to work for themselves and their families in their own way.¹³

Many slaves voluntarily worked for their masters on Sundays or holidays in return for money or goods. This arrangement demonstrated how far the notion of the slaves' "right" to a certain amount of time had been accepted by the masters; how readily the slaves would work for themselves; and how far the notion of reciprocity had entered the thinking of both masters and slaves.

The slaves responded to moral as well as economic incentives. They often took pride in their work, but not necessarily in the ways most important to their masters. Solomon Northrup designed a better way to transport lumber only to find himself ridiculed by the overseer. In this case it was in the master's interest to intervene, and he did. He praised Northrup and adopted the plan. Northrup comments: "I was not insensible to the praise bestowed upon me, and enjoyed especially, my triumph over Taydem [the overseer], whose half-malicious ridicule had stung my pride."¹⁴

From colonial days onward plantation slaves, as well as those in industry, mining, and town services, received payments in money

and goods as part of a wider system of social control.¹⁵ These payments served either as incentive bonuses designed to stimulate productivity, or more frequently, as a return for work done during the time recognized as the slaves' own. Many planters, including those who most clearly got the best results, used such incentives. Bennet H. Barrow of Louisiana provides a noteworthy illustration, for he was a not a man to spare the whip. Yet his system of rewards included frequent holidays and dinners, as well as cash bonuses and presents for outstanding work. In Hinds County, Mississippi, Thomas Dabney gave small cash prizes—a few cents, really—to his best pickers and then smaller prizes to others who worked diligently even if they could not match the output of the leaders. In Perry County, Alabama, Hugh Davis divided his workers into rival teams and had them compete for prizes. He supplemented this collective competition with individual contests. In North Carolina at the end of the eighteenth century Charles Pettigrew, like many others before and after him, paid slaves for superior or extra work.¹⁶

The amounts sometimes reached substantial proportions. Captain Frederick Marryat complained that in Lexington, Kentucky, during the late 1830s a gentleman could not rent a carriage on Sundays because slaves with ready money invariably rented them first for their own pleasure. Occasionally, plantation records reported surprising figures. One slave in Georgia earned fifty to sixty dollars per year by attending to pine trees in his off hours. Others earned money by applying particular skills or by doing jobs that had to be done individually and carefully without supervision. Amounts in the tens and even hundreds of dollars, although not common, caused no astonishment.¹⁷

The more significant feature of these practices, for the society as a whole if not for the economy in particular, was the regularity—almost the institutionalization—of payments for work on Sundays or holidays. Apart from occasional assignments of Sunday or holiday work as punishment and apart from self-defeating greed, not to say stupidity, which led a few masters to violate the social norm, Sunday was the slaves' day by custom as well as law.¹⁸ The collective agreement of the slaveholders on these measures had its origin in a concern for social peace and reflected a sensible attitude toward economic efficiency. But once the practice took root, with or without legal sanction, the slaves transformed it into a "right." So successfully did they do so that the Supreme Court of Louisiana ruled in 1836: "According to . . . law, slaves are entitled to the

produce of their labor on Sunday; even the master is bound to remunerate them, if he employs them." Here again the slaves turned the paternalist doctrine of reciprocity to advantage while demonstrating the extent to which that doctrine dominated the lives of both masters and slaves.¹⁹

Ralph Ellison writes of his experience as a boy: "Those trips to the cotton patch seemed to me an enviable experience because the kids came back with such wonderful stories. And it wasn't the hard work which they stressed, but the communion, the playing, the eating, the dancing and the singing."²⁰ A leading theme in the blues tradition of black "soul" music is "Do your best." The emphasis in both performance and lyrics rests not on the degree of success but on the extent and especially the sincerity of effort.²¹ Underlying black resistance to prevailing white values, then, has been a set of particular ideas concerning individual and community responsibility. It is often asserted that blacks spend rather than save as someone else thinks they should. But the considerable evidence for this assertion must be qualified by the no less considerable evidence of the heartbreaking scraping together of nickels and dimes to pay for such things as the education of children, which will generally draw Anglo-Saxon applause, and the provision of elaborate funerals, which generally will not but which for many peoples besides blacks constitutes a necessary measure of respect for the living as well as the dead.

The slaves could, when they chose, astonish the whites by their worktime élan and expenditure of energy. The demands of corn shucking, hog killing, logrolling, cotton picking, and especially sugar grinding confronted the slaves with particularly heavy burdens and yet drew from them particularly positive responses.

With the exception of the Christmas holiday—and not always that—former slaves recalled having looked forward to corn shucking most of all.²² Sam Colquitt of Alabama explained:

Next to our dances, de most fun was corn-shucking. Marsa would have de corn hauled up to de crib, and piled as a house. Den he would invite de hands 'round to come and hope shuck it. Us had two leaders or generals and choose up two sides. Den us see which side would win first and holler and sing. . . . Marsa would pass de jug around too. Den dey sho' could work and dat pile'd just vanish.²³

Some ex-slaves remembered corn shuckings as their only good time, but many more said simply that they were the best. Occasionally a sour note appeared, as when Jenny Proctor of Alabama

said, "We had some co'n shuckin's sometimes but de white folks gits de fun and de nigger gits de work."²⁴ For the vast majority, however, they were "de big times."

The descriptions that have been preserved provide essential clues for an understanding of plantation life and its work rhythms. According to Robert Shepherd of Kentucky:

Dem corn shuckin's was sure 'nough big times. When us got all de corn gathered up and put in great long piles, den de gettin' ready started. Why, dem womans cooked for days, and de mens would get de shoats ready to barbecue. Master would send us out to get de slaves from de farms round about dere. De place was all lit up with light-wood knot torches and bonfires, and dere was 'citement plenty when all niggers get to singin' and shoutin' as dey made de shucks fly.²⁵

An ex-slave from Georgia recalled:

In corn shucking time no padderollers would ever bother you. We would have a big time at corn shuckings. They would call up the crowd and line the men up and give them a drink. I was a corn general—would stand out high above everybody, giving out corn songs and throwing down corn to them. There would be two sides of them, one side trying to outshuck the other. Such times we have.²⁶

White contemporaries provided comments that complement those of former slaves. Fredrika Bremer, one of the more astute and thoughtful travelers to the South, wrote that corn shuckings "are to the negroes what the harvest-home is to our [Swedish] peasants."²⁷

Certainly, the slaves had some material incentives. The best shuckers would get a dollar or a suit of clothes, as might those who found a red ear. But these incentives do not look impressive and do not loom large in the testimony. Those plantations on which the prize for finding a red ear consisted of a dollar do not seem to have done any better than those on which the prize consisted of an extra swig of whiskey or a chance to kiss the prettiest girl. The shucking was generally night work—overtime, as it were—and one might have expected the slaves to resent it and to consider the modest material incentives, which came to a special dinner and dance and a lot of whiskey, to be inadequate.

The most important feature of these occasions and the most

important incentive to these long hours of extra work was the community life they called forth. They were gala affairs. The jug passed freely, although drunkenness was discouraged; the work went on amidst singing and dancing; friends and acquaintances congregated from several plantations and farms; the house slaves joined the field slaves in common labor; and the work was followed by an all-night dinner and ball at which inhibitions, especially those of class and race, were lowered as far as anyone dared.

Slavery, a particularly savage system of oppression and exploitation, made its slaves victims. But the human beings it made victims did not consent to be just that; they struggled to make life bearable and to find as much joy in it as they could. Up to a point even the harshest of masters had to help them do so. The logic of slavery pushed the masters to try to break their slaves' spirit and to reconstruct it as an unthinking and unfeeling extension of their own will, but the slaves' own resistance to dehumanization compelled the masters to compromise in order to get an adequate level of work out of them.

The combination of festive spirit and joint effort appears to have engaged the attention of the slaves more than anything else. Gus Brown, an ex-slave from Alabama, said simply, "On those occasions we all got together and had a regular good time." The heightened sense of fellowship with their masters also drew much comment. Even big slaveholders would join in the work, as well as in the festivities and the drinking, albeit not without the customary patriarchal qualifications. They would demand that the slaves sing, and the slaves would respond boisterously. Visitors expressed wonder at the spontaneity and improvisation the slaves displayed. The songs, often made up on the spot, bristled with sharp wit, both malicious and gentle. The slaves sang of their courtships and their lovers' quarrels; sometimes the songs got bawdy, and the children had to be hustled off to bed. They sang of their setbacks in love:

When I'se here you calls me honey.

When I'se gone you honies everybody.

They sang of their defeats in competition:

You jumped and I jumped;

Swear by God you outjumped me,

Huh, huh, round de corn, Sally.

and of their victories:

Pull de husk, break de ear
Whoa, I se got de red ear here.

But the songs also turned to satire. White participation in the festivals was always condescending and self-serving, and the slaves' acceptance of it displayed something other than childlike gratitude for small favors. They turned their wit and incredible talent for improvisation into social criticism. Occasionally they risked a direct, if muted, thrust in their "corn songs," as they came to be called.

Massa in the great house, counting out his money,
Oh, shuck that corn and throw it in the barn.
Mistis in the parlor, eating bread and honey,
Oh, shuck that corn and throw it in the barn.

More often, they used a simpler and safer technique. Ole Massa was always God's gift to humanity, the salt of the earth, de bestest massa in de whole wide worl'. But somehow, one or more of his neighbors was mighty bad buckra.

I

Massa's niggers am slick and fat,
Oh! Oh! Oh!
Shine jes like a new beaver hat,
Oh! Oh! Oh!

Refrain: Turn out here and shuck dis corn.

Oh! Oh! Oh!
Biggest pile o' corn since I was born,
Oh! Oh! Oh!

II

Jones' niggers am lean an po'
Oh! Oh! Oh!
Don't know whether they git 'nough ter eat or no,
Oh! Oh! Oh!²⁸

Blacks—any blacks—were not supposed to sass whites—any whites; slaves—any slaves—were not supposed to sit in judgment on masters—any masters. By the device of a little flattery and by taking advantage of the looseness of the occasion, they asserted their personalities and made their judgments.

A curious sexual division of labor marked the corn shuckings. Only occasionally did women participate in the shucking. The

reason for the exclusion is by no means clear. Field women matched the men in hard work, not only in picking cotton but in rolling logs, chopping wood, and plowing. Yet at corn shuckings they divided their time between preparing an elaborate spread for the dinner and taking part in quilting bees and the like. As a result, the corn shuckings took on a peculiarly male tone, replete with raucous songs and jokes not normally told in front of women, as well as with those manifestations of boyish prancing associated with what is called—as if by some delightful Freudian slip—a "man's man."

The vigor with which the men worked and the insistence on a rigid sexual separation raise the central question of the slaves' attitude toward work in its relationship to their sense of family and community. The sense of community established by bringing together house and field slaves and especially slaves from several plantations undoubtedly underlay much of the slaves' positive response, and recalled the festivities, ceremonies, and rituals of traditional societies in a way no office Christmas party in an industrial firm has ever done. And corn shucking, like hog killing, had a special meaning, for at these times the slaves were literally working for themselves. The corn and pork fed them and their families; completion of these tasks carried a special satisfaction.

From this point of view the sexual division of labor, whatever its origins, takes on new meaning. In a limited way it strengthened that role of direct provider to which the men laid claim by hunting and fishing to supplement the family diet. Even the less attractive features of the evening in effect reinforced this male self-image. Nor did the women show signs of resentment. On the contrary, they seem to have grasped the opportunity to underscore a division of labor and authority in the family and to support the pretensions of their men. Slavery represented a terrible onslaught on the personalities and spirit of the slaves, and whatever unfairness manifested itself in this sexual bias, the efforts of male and female slaves to create and support their separate roles provided a weapon for joint resistance to dehumanization.

Hog-killing time rivaled corn shucking as a grand occasion. Consider two accounts from Virginia—one from J. S. Wise's well-known memoir, *The End of an Era*, and the other from Joseph Holmes's account of his life as a slave.²⁹ First, Wise:

Then there was hog-killing time, when long before day, the whole plantation force was up with knives for killing, and seething caul-

drons for scalding, and great doors for scraping, and long racks for cooling the slaughtered swine. Out to the farmyard rallied all the farm hands. Into the pens dashed the boldest and most active. Harrowing was the squealing of the victims; quick was the stroke that slew them, and quicker the sousing of the dead hog into the scalding water; busy the scraping of his hair away; strong the arms that bore him to the beams, and hung him there head downward to cool; clumsy the old woman who brought tubs to place under him; deft the strong hands that disemboweled him.

And now, Joseph Holmes:

Dat was de time of times. For weeks de mens would haul wood an' big rocks, an' pile 'em together as high as dis house, an' den have several piles, lak dat 'roun' a big hole in de groun' what has been filled wid water. Den jus' a little atter midnight, de boss would blow de ole hawn, an' all de mens would git up an' git in dem big pens. Den dey would sot dat pile of wood on fire an' den start knockin' dem hogs in de haid. Us neber shot a hog lak us does now; us always used an axe to kill 'em wid. Atter knockin' de hog in de haid, dey would tie a rope on his leg an' atter de water got to de right heat, fum dose red-hot rocks de hog would be throwed in an' drug aroun' a while, den taken out an' cleaned. Atter he was cleaned he was cut up into sections an' hung up in de smoke house. Lawsie, lady, dey don't cure meat dese days; dey jus' uses some kind of liquid to bresh over it. We useeta have sho' nuff meat.

The slaves enjoyed a special and delightful inducement here, for they could eat as they worked and could display pride in their individual skills within the totality of a community effort. As in corn shucking, they did this work for themselves and poured enthusiasm into it.

Logrollings called forth some of the same festive spirit but came less frequently. They had some direct reference to the slaves' own life when they contributed to building the quarters. Women worked along with the men, and teams competed against each other. In other respects the event had the same style as the corn shuckings. As Frank Gill, an ex-slave from Alabama, recalled:

Talkin' 'bout log rollin', dem was great times, 'ca se if some ob dem neighborin' plantations wanted to get up a house, dey would invite all de slaves, men and women, to come wid dere masters. De women would help wid de cookin' an' you may be shore dey had something to cook. Dey would kill a cow, or three or four hogs, and den hab peas, cabbage, an' everything lack grows on de farm.³⁰

The evidence from the sugar plantations is especially instructive. Louisiana's sugar planters reputedly drove their slaves harder than any others in the slave states. Such reputations are by no means to be accepted at face value, but they certainly drove them hard during the grinding season. Yet, slaves took to the woods as limited and local runaways more often during the spring and summer months than during the autumn grinding season, when the work reached a peak of intensity and when the time for rest and sleep contracted sharply.³¹ Once again, the small material incentives cannot account for the slaves' behavior.³²

The slaves brought to their labor a gaiety and élan that perplexed observers, who saw them work at night with hardly a moment to catch their breath. Many, perhaps most, found themselves with special tasks to perform and special demands upon them; by all accounts they strained to rise to the occasion. The planters, knowing that the season lasted too long to sustain a fever pitch of effort, tried to break it up with parties and barbecues and at the very least promised and delivered a gala dinner and ball at the end. Ellen Betts, an ex-slave from Texas, recalled: "Massa sho' good to dem gals and bucks what curtin' de cane. When dey git done makin' sugar, he give a drink called 'Peach 'n' Honey' to de women folk and whiskey and brandy to de men." Another ex-slave, William Stone of Alabama, said that the slaves were "happy" to work during the sugar harvest " 'cause we knowed it mean us have plenty 'lasses in winter."³³

Still, the demands of the sugar crop meant the sacrifice of some Sundays and even the Christmas holiday. The slaves showed no resentment at the postponement of the holiday. It would come in due time, usually in mid-January, and the greater their sacrifices, the longer and fuller the holiday would likely be. For the slaves on the sugar plantations Christmas did not mean December 25; it meant the great holiday that honored the Lord's birth, brought joy to His children, and properly fell at the end of the productive season.

Cotton picking was another matter. One ex-slave recalled cotton-picking parties along with corn-shucking parties but added, "Dere wasn't so much foolishness at cotton pickin' time." The slaves missed, in particular, the fellowship of slaves from other plantations. An exchange of labor forces on a crash basis sometimes occurred, and ex-slaves remembered precisely those times warmly. The planters had to have their cotton picked at about the

same time and could not easily exchange labor forces. But the neighborly tradition was too strong to be denied entirely, and when a planter fell dangerously behind, others would come to his aid. Unable to take time away from their own work unless well ahead of schedule, friendly planters had to send their slaves after hours to pick by moonlight. The slaves, instead of becoming indignant over the imposition, responded with enthusiasm and extra effort. Many of them later recalled this grueling all-night work as "big times," for they were helping their own friends and combining the work with festivity. Bonuses, parties, and relaxed discipline rewarded their cooperation. Scattered evidence suggests less whipping and harsh driving during the cotton-picking season on some plantations but the opposite on others.³⁴

Some planters congratulated themselves on their success in getting a good response during the critical cotton harvest. Virginia Clay visited Governor Hammond's noteworthy plantation in South Carolina and enthusiastically reported on the magnificent singing and general spirit of the slaves, and Kate Stone was sure that "the Negroes really seemed to like the cotton picking best of all." Henry William Ravenel, in his private journal, made an interesting observation that provides a better clue to the slaves' attitude. Writing in 1865, immediately after their emancipation, he declared that the slaves had always disliked planting and cultivating cotton and would now prefer almost any alternative labor.³⁵ The picking season must have struck the slaves as a mixed affair. It meant hard and distasteful work and sometimes punishment for failure to meet quotas, but also the end of a tough season, prizes for good performances, and the prelude to relaxation and a big celebration. Yet, the special spirit of the season was not strong enough to carry the slaves through the rigors of labor; the whip remained the indispensable spur.

Some anthropologists and cultural historians, noting the tradition of collective work among West Africans, have suggested its continuing influence among Afro-Americans. The Yoruba, for example, ingeniously combine community spirit and individual initiative by organizing hoeing in a line, so that everyone works alongside someone else and yet has his own task. But evidence of direct influence remains elusive, and, as William R. Bascom points out, collective patterns of work abounded in medieval Europe too.³⁶ Whatever the origins of the slaves' strong preference for collective work, it drew the attention of their masters, who knew that they would have to come to terms with it. Edmund Ruffin, the

South's great soil chemist and authority on plantation agriculture, complained that the pinewoods of North Carolina were set afire every spring by inconsiderate poor whites who cared nothing for the damage they did in order to provide grazing land for their few cows. He added that the slaves also set many fires because they intensely disliked collecting turpentine from the trees. This work was light and easy in Ruffin's estimation, but the slaves resisted it anyway because it had to be performed in isolation. "A negro," Ruffin explained from long experience, "cannot abide being alone and will prefer work of much exposure and severe toil, in company, to any lighter work, without any company."³⁷

This preference for work in company manifested itself in a readiness to help each other in field labor. Richard Mack, among others, recalled that he could finish a given task quickly and would then help others so that they would avoid punishment. This attitude, by no means rare, led another ex-slave, Sylvia Durant of South Carolina, to protest in the 1930s, "Peoples used to help one another out more en didn't somebody be tryin' to pull you down all de time."³⁸

Mrs. Durant's lament, common in the testimony of ex-slaves, hints at an anomaly reminiscent of the attitude of the Russian peasants who left the *mir*. The powerful community spirit and preference for collective patterns of working and living had their antithesis in an equally powerful individualism, manifested most attractively during and after Reconstruction in an attempt to transform themselves into peasant proprietors. This particular kind of individualism has also had less attractive manifestations, from the creation of the ghetto hustler and the devil-take-the-hindmost predator to the creation of a set of attitudes that many blacks hold responsible for a chronic lack of political unity. Certainly, the old collective spirit remains powerful, as the very notion of a black "brotherhood" demonstrates, but it does rest on a contradictory historical base. The work ethic of the slaves provided a firm defense against the excesses of an oppressive labor system, but like the religious tradition on which it rested, it did not easily lend itself to counterattack. Once the worst features of the old regime fell away, the ethic itself began to dissolve into its component parts. Even today we witness the depressing effects of this dissolution in a futile and pathetic caricature of bourgeois individualism, manifested both in the frustrated aspirations so angrily depicted in E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* and in violent, antisocial nihilism. But we also witness the continued

power of a collective sensibility regarded by some as "race pride" and by others as a developing black national consciousness.

The slaves expressed their attitude in song. The masters encouraged quick-time singing among their field slaves, but the slaves proved themselves masters of slowing down the songs and the work. They willingly sang at work, as well as going to work, coming from work, and at almost any time. While assembling for field work they might sing individually.

Saturday night and Sunday too
 Young gals on my mind.
 Monday morning 'way 'fore day,
 Old master's got me gwine.
 Peggy, does you love me now?

But whenever possible they sang collectively, in ways derived from Africa but rooted in their own experience. When they had to work alone or when they felt alone even in a group, they "hollered." Imamu Amiri Baraka's extraordinary analysis of the historical development of black music, however controversial, speculative, and tentative it may be judged, remains the indispensable introduction to the subject. He remarks on the roots of the blues: "The shouts and hollers were strident laments, more than anything. They were also chronicles but of such a mean kind of existence that they could not assume the universality any lasting musical form must have."¹⁹ Imamu Baraka traces the spread of hollers during and after Reconstruction when work patterns fragmented; but even during slavery a large portion of the slaves worked in isolation on small farms. Their hollers provided a counterpart to plantation work songs, but ranged beyond a direct concern with labor to a concern with the most personal expressions of life's travail. As such, they created a piercing history of the impact of hardship and sorrow on solitary black men. Their power notwithstanding, they represented a burning negative statement of the blacks' desire for community in labor as well as in life generally. As positive expression, both in themselves and in the legacy they left for blues singers to come, they contributed to the collective in a strikingly dialectical way, for they provided a form for a highly individualistic self-expression among a people whose very collectivity desperately required methods of individual self-assertion in order to combat the debilitating thrust of slavery's paternalistic aggression.

BOOK THREE

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

Yea, though I walk through
 the valley of the shadow of
 death, I will fear no evil: for
 thou art with me; thy rod and
 thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table
 before me in the presence of
 mine enemies: thou anointest
 my head with oil; my cup
 runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy
 shall follow me all the days of
 my life: and I will dwell in the
 house of the Lord for ever.

—Psalms 23:4-6