

II - Equality, Slavery, Violence, Citizenship

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(Yale)

Slavery in classical Western philosophy originated as a substitute for killing a vanquished enemy – for John Locke, for example, slavery was a state of war suspended, wholly outside the social compact. One could say that slavery was a state of suspended living death, or social death, since the slave might revolt or be killed at any time. In his landmark book, *Slavery and Social Death*, the Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson shows in great detail that two of the constituent elements of human bondage have been violent domination and systematic dishonor.

Yet Patterson, for all his insights and empirical comparisons, does not see that the antithesis of such slavery is not liberty, but *equality*. Violence and dishonor – dehumanization, contempt, depersonalization – have all been instruments for establishing or maintaining inequality (or, one might add, reversing inequality – the last becoming first by humiliating or destroying the first). Chattel slavery was the extreme point on a spectrum of inequality, short of torture and homicide, which can be seen as the obliteration through pain of another human center of consciousness. In this sense, enslavement and death are related to Pierluigi D'Oro's remarks on the American's dominion over nature and subjection and extermination of the Indians. According to Robert Parker, a soldier on Sullivan's expedition, «Even the fish may yet become subservient to the [white] inhabitants of this delightful country».

From this perspective, the essence of equality can be found in genuine respect for the full personhood of the Other; in a renunciation of any attempts to dominate, instrumentalize, dishonor, or treat other persons as objects. Obviously, such equal relationships are always difficult and are also made virtually impossible by great disparities in wealth and power. But I agree with Michael Merrill* that the idea that equality consists of the *same* income, the *same* kind of work and life – is a straw man, usually a bogey-man image of leveling used by counterrevolutionaries.

* Merrill, with A. Riosa and C. Pavone, participated in the Symposium's opening Roundtable on «The Struggle for Suffrage» which introduced the question of the relations between perceived or acknowledged rights, the meaning or felt sense of «citizenship» and the role of violence as people seek or suffer power from the late 18th to the late 19th centuries [Editor's note].

In the United States, slavery was related to equality in very complex ways, especially after the massive slave revolt in St. Domingue, which was heartily justified by a few Federalists like Theodore Dwight and a few Northern Republicans like Abraham Bishop, to say nothing of many free blacks and slave artisans. At the time of the Missouri crisis when virtually all the later antislavery and proslavery arguments were being hurled back and forth in Congress, John Quincy Adams was deeply shocked by a conversation with John C. Calhoun, when both were walking away from a conference with the President. Calhoun frankly avowed the thesis that the slavery of blacks was a positive good because it would guarantee equality among whites. Even the most destitute whites, according to Calhoun, would always feel superior to slaves, and take pride in belonging to a superior race. This strategy of using racial ideology to divide black and white workers can be seen in embryonic form in the colonial period – as I suggested in a book fifteen years ago. Marcus Rediker points to the way white fears were substantiated by maritime-port city and tavern culture, where blacks and whites of the most disreputable kinds were found mingling. Yet by the so-called Jacksonian period, a pervasive racism made it easier to play America's distinctive game of anti-elitism. Almost everybody now denounced some kind of elite – so «despite my hard-earned wealth, I'm really a man of the people».

No one played this game more skillfully than Abraham Lincoln. And Lincoln's skill should not make us too cynical. I'm sure Lincoln genuinely believed by 1856 that the United States was founded on one basic idea or principle, the idea of equality (not liberty). In his speeches Lincoln merged «created equal» with equal worth and equality before the law – all should have an equal chance in each generation to use the talents with which they were endowed. And this dream [myth?] of equality was mortally threatened by the expansion of racial slavery, by violence, dehumanization and corruption engendered by slavery.

As I've indicated, there were close psychological and symbolic ties between enslavement and the kind of ritual killings described by Sergio Bertelli* – castration, dragging and the dismembering of corpses, etc. Such ghastly acts became commonplace during the New York City Draft Riots of 1863, when white mobs butchered blacks. For the mobs, such ritualized killings conveyed a sense of group cohesion and equality – as in Paris at the Champs de Mars and in St. Domingue – where slaughter was carried out both by whites and blacks. But this was a temporary and basically illusory psychological experience. There was no institutional basis for equal respect and treatment – indeed, one can cite numerous examples of regeneration through violence leading only to further violence and degeneration.

Still, I'm struck today by the extremely low mortality in most 18th century riots and, with the exception of St. Domingue, most slave revolts led to few

* Sergio Bertelli was commenting on the theoretic aspects of Paolo Viola's paper on the rites of cannibalism in the French revolution. [Editor's note]

fatalities until they were crushed by the authorities, who often resorted to mass executions. It's clear that slaves exercised much restraint, as in Barbados in 1816 and Demerrara in 1823.

In the 20th century, despite the exsample of the display of Mussolini's corpse and a few others, slaughter has become incresingly privityzed, as in execution chambers, or confined to war. For many modern Westerners, the sight of a corpse has become almost as rare as the sight of a slave. Lethal violence is quickly covered up, blood is washed from the streets of Beijing - much like our various hidden forms of oppression. Even the Nazis, in the most horrifying mass exterminations in recorded history, placed murder within the framework of hidden death camps and bureaucratic euphemisms.

A final point regarding Robin Blackburn's excellent paper, which suggests how slaves and emancipation had been blocked out from the French as well as the American Revolutionary traditions, even from the American Civil War. Since Robin covers so much, I don't mean it as a criticism when I simply call attention to the way the issue of backbreaking plantation labor has been blocked out of the picture. I agree that the French emancipation decree of 1794 was a crucial breakthrough in the history of antislavery, but in Revolutionary France remarkably little thought was given to the kind of labor that would replace slavery. In England and the United States one must recognize the crucial importance of free-labor ideology in antislavery thought, but still there was an abstract, formalist character to emancipation laws and edicts. Western nations needed a formal end to slavery - but still unresolved was the question of equality or dehumanizing oppression for marginalized labor, especially in tropical regions.