

The Redeemable South

Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery, Volume I, by Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974. 286 pp. \$8.95.*

Time on the Cross: Evidence and Methods—A Supplement, by Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974. 267 pp. \$12.50.*

TIME ON THE CROSS presents us with a favorable view of the *ancien régime* of the Southern United States, a view arising from an unexpected quarter—economic historians of unimpeachable egalitarian credentials—and resting upon the most massive and systematic accumulation of evidence ever made. In sum, *Time on the Cross* refutes every point in that elaborately constructed negative stereotype of the Old South which brought on the Civil War, motivated conquest and reconstruction, and has more recently supported the glib ascription of current racial problems to “the heritage of slavery.” As a result we must recast certain accounts of good and evil in American history which we had been told were forever closed.

Our recapitulation of the authors’ conclusions must be brief and general, dangerously simplifying the qualifications, sophistication, and specificity of the original, and ignoring temporarily the particular nature of their evidence: According to *Time on the Cross*, the typical standard of living of the nineteenth century Southern slave, measured by life expectancy, birth rate, diet, clothing, housing, and medical care, was not only broadly speaking adequate, but, more important, was superior to what was enjoyed by the black population after slavery and by much of the laboring white

populations of Europe and America then and later. By these measures the Southern United States was the most favorable environment in the New World, and perhaps in the world, for black people. Further, the patriarchal "Victorian" family was the inculcated norm of plantation society: "breeding" was nonexistent, miscegenation was statistically insignificant, and "selling down the river" was a real but infrequent event which may have disrupted no more black families than the westward expansion of the frontier did white families. Plantation labor was not directed chiefly by physical coercion nor was it grudging, unskilled, or inadaptible. Slaves generally were neither rebels, saboteurs, nor skulkers but took an intelligent interest in the economic success of the plantation. Moreover, a greater percentage of slaves was engaged in skilled crafts and managerial functions than was true of blacks long after slavery. The black people of antebellum America were, then, a laboring class not much different from what might be found in many other places and climes. The "slave" system, though erecting obvious barriers at many points, allowed a not insignificant degree of physical and psychological freedom that was often found preferable to the limited alternatives available to blacks elsewhere, and its evils appear less damning when measured against the real conditions (rather than the theoretical virtues) of other contemporary societies. Indeed, it appears that there was a measurable deterioration after slavery in the living standards, life expectancy, real compensation, work skills, and family stability of the black population. In other words, in the destruction of the old regime ground was lost that has only been recovered in this century, for those who destroyed it were better at rending than mending.

Nor was the Old South the backward, poverty-stricken, oligarchical society of hostile polemics, in which not only the slaves but the mass of whites were beyond the pale of civilization. To the contrary, Southern society was dynamic and prosperous. Its ag-

riculture, on both slave plantation and yeoman farm, was more productive and efficient than the Northern. Far from stagnating, the Southern economy expanded at a rate in the late antebellum period that has few equals in history. Southern per capita income was equal to Northern, just as evenly distributed among whites, and higher than that of most of Europe in even recent times. Moreover, the slave received back in a lifetime ninety percent of the income he produced, "well within modern limits of exploitation," according to the authors. Any excess profits of the labor of slaves accrued not to their Southern owners but to worldwide consumers of cotton. In sum, the Old South's day-to-day view of itself as a settled, ethical, paternalistic order, so often derided as an absurd or pathological mythology, had an undeniable basis in reality.

As to the nature of the evidence which supports these findings, *Time on the Cross* is the most conspicuous example to date of "cliometrics"—the describing of the past by generalizations drawn from concrete data, expressed in quantitative terms, and tested for validity according to the formal laws of statistics. Clearly statistics cannot answer questions of value nor satisfy moral absolutists. But, allowing always for an unavoidable ambiguity in defining categories (what is a "skilled" worker?), certain kinds of descriptive and comparative facts can indeed be established more reliably by statistics than by less self-correcting and systematic researches. To put it another way, there is nothing "scientifically" conclusive about "cliometric" assertions, but competently arrived at and understood as averages, they are entitled to credence in establishing the groundwork of given facts from which value judgments ought to proceed. The work in hand has already received extensive methodological scrutiny and will receive more. The net of this scrutiny is to modify minor points, to require further data on some major points, and to change very little the broad thrust of the conclusions. In fact, the book's significant defects are two: the generalizations about the slave

family rest upon insufficient data; and, after they overcame their own skepticism, the authors presented their findings in a way they knew to be deliberately provocative to various academic celebrities. In response, the official purveyors of "black history," who enjoy a large but sensitive vested interest, have reacted typically with abuse, sometimes perfunctorily disguised as argument. (One review concluded that if the South was not inhumanly backward, then it must have been inhumanly efficient; if Southerners were not lazier than Northerners then they must have been more ruthlessly utilitarian. Exactly what facts describe the South is moot, but that, whatever they were, they were evil, is axiomatic. No sensible middling explanation can arise because historic images of the South are merely stage props for moral self-preening.) On the other hand, some scholars, including the authors, have found comfort and constructive hope in the realization that black Americans can recognize in their forebears more sympathetic and successful human beings than the bloodthirsty rebels or dehumanized chattels which their erstwhile advocates have alternatively pictured them to be.

Methodology aside, there are other reasons for accepting the *Time on the Cross* view as essentially correct or at least as more nearly correct than its opposite. It comports with common sense and with the instinctive feelings of those who are familiar with the best cultural survivals of the Old South in its human personalities, white and black. Moreover, it only tells us in different form what our best historians have told us already. Avery Craven understood (1942) that "slavery" amounted practically to a labor system not too different from contemporary "free" labor. Lewis C. Gray in a classic work on Southern agriculture (1933) clearly portrayed the viability of the plantation economy. Frank Owsley,

whose researches (1949) have never been successfully refuted, demonstrated that the Old South was not oligarchical. Howard Floan explained how urban, puritan observers perceived in the South's dispersed and informal society a backwardness that was more apparent than real. (In fact, almost all Northerners and Europeans who were intimately acquainted with the old regime defended it.) C. Vann Woodward has often made the point that the black population was in several respects more depressed in 1900 than in 1860.

Our best reason for accepting this picture of the Old South as essentially true, however, is our instinctive suspicion of its enemies—those who labored not to ameliorate its real evils but to destroy it for exaggerated sins of their own imagining. The Old South, imperfect, archaic even in its own time perhaps, did not deserve the hatred, slander, fire, and sword which it received. One might in fact reasonably request a refocusing of attention from the peculiar South to its peculiar critics. Such a refocusing will tell us much about the intermittent aggressions against the social fabric which have convulsed our larger society, for the irresponsible consciences which eradicated the Old Regime without heeding the consequences in blood, in disaster to the constitutional settlement, or even in the uprooting of the supposed beneficiaries of their zeal, are with us still. Further, in redeeming the South we redeem the nation's past, lately held hostage to guilt by the heirs of those same self-beatified saints. For, after all, that half or more of the founders and early guardians of the republic who arose from the plantation gentry were not really criminals against humanity, and, given the long view of the crimes and follies of mankind, our ancient sin was not nearly so irredeemable as permanently to damn our national enterprise.

Reviewed by CLYDE WILSON