**Slavery: By Stanley Elkins**

The idea of Sambo, a complicit, happy, non-violent, often lazy African slave was a plantation type—a creation of the Closed Southern Plantation System. The elements creating Sambo had less to do with ‘cruelty” per se than simply with the sanctions of authority. It must be said that Sambo did not involved every slave on the plantation, embraced well over half the slave population. Two kinds of material will be used in the effort to picture the mechanisms whereby this adjustment to absolute power-an adjustment whose end product included infantile features of behavior-may have been effected. One is drawn from social psychology, and the other from data that has come out of the German concentration camps. It is recognized in most theory that social behavior is regulated in some general way by adjustment to symbols of authority, and that such adjustment is closely related to the very formation of personality.

Let us look first at the experience undergone by several million Jews in the concentration camps from 1940-1945. Their experience contains certain items of relevance to the problem here being considered about slavery. The Jewish experience was analogous to that of slavery and was one in which wide-scale instances of infantilization (becoming childlike in personality) were observed.

The application of the model to the concentration camp should be simple and obvious. What was expected of the man entering the role of camp prisoner was laid down for him upon arrival: Here you are not in a penitentiary or prison but in a place of instruction. Order and discipline are here the highest law. If you ever want to see freedom again, you must submit to a severe training... But woe to those who do not obey our iron discipline. Our methods are thorough! Here there is no compromise and no mercy. The slightest resistance will be ruthlessly suppressed.

Expectation and performance must coincide exactly; the lines were to be read literally, the missing of a single cue meant extinction. The role was pervasive; it vetoed any other role and smashed all prior ones. "Role clarity"-the clarity here was blinding, its definition was burned into the prisoner by every detail of his existence.

In normal life the adult enjoys a measure of independence; within the limits set by society he has a considerable measure of liberty. Nobody orders him when and what to eat where to take up his residence or what to wear, neither to take his rest on Sunday nor when to have his bath, nor when to go to bed. He is not beaten during his work; he need not ask permission to go to the bathroom.

How altogether different was the life of the concentration-camp prisoner! What to do during each part of the day was arranged for him, and decisions were made about him from which there was no appeal. He was impotent and suffered from bedwetting, and because of his chronic diarrhea, he soiled his underwear. His every activity was directed by the SS guards. Indeed, the dependence of the prisoner on the SS guards may be compared to the dependence of children on their parents.... But in this case, survival meant that the prisoner had to play their role perfectly.

Nor was it simple, upon liberation, to shed the role. Many of the inmates, to be sure, did have prior roles, which they could resume, former significant others to whom they might reorient themselves, a repressed superego which might once more be resurrected. To this extent they were not "lost souls." But to the extent that their entire personalities, their total selves, had been involved in this experience, to the extent that old arrangements had been disrupted, that society itself had been overturned while they had been away, a "return" was fraught with innumerable obstacles.

The American slave system and the German concentration camps were both closed systems from which all standards based on prior connections had been effectively detached. To survive either system required a childlike conformity. Cruelty in the slave system was not a primary factor; of far greater importance was the simple "**closedness!'** of the system, in which all lines of authority descended from the master and in which alternative social bases that might have supported alternative standards were systematically suppressed. The individual, consequently, for his very psychic security, had to picture his master in some way as the "good father," even when, as in the concentration camp, it made no sense at all. But why should it not have made sense for many a simple plantation Negro whose master did exhibit in all the ways that could be expected, the features of the good father who was really "good"? If the concentration camp could produce in two or three years the results that it did, one wonders how much more pervasive must have been those attitudes, expectations, and values which had, certainly, their benevolent side and which were accepted and transmitted over generations.

For the Negro child, in particular, the plantation offered no really satisfactory father-image other than the master. The "real" father was virtually without authority over his child, since discipline, parental responsibility, and control of rewards and punishments all rested in other hands; the slave father could not even protect the mother of his children except by appealing directly to the master. Indeed, the mother's own role loomed far larger for the slave child than did that of the father. She controlled those few activities-household care, preparation of food, and rearing of children-that were left to the slave family. For that matter, the very etiquette of plantation life removed even the honorific attributes of fatherhood from the Negro male, who was addressed as "boy"-until, when the vigorous years of his prime were past he was allowed to assume the title of "Uncle."

From the master's viewpoint slaves had been defined in law as property, and the master's power over his property must be absolute. But then this property was still human property. These slaves might never be quite as human as he was, but still there were certain standards that could be laid down for their behavior obedience, fidelity, humility, docility, cheerfulness, and so on. Industry and diligence would of course be demanded. Absolute power for him meant absolute dependency for the slave-the dependency not of the developing child but of the perpetual child. For the master, the role most aptly fitting such a relationship would naturally be that of the father. As a father he could be either harsh or kind, as he chose, but he must be ready to cope with all the qualities of the child. He might conceivably have to expect in this child-besides his loyalty, docility, humility, cheerfulness, and his diligence-such additional qualities as irresponsibility, playfulness, silliness, laziness, and tendencies to lying and stealing. Should the entire prediction prove accurate, the result would be something resembling "Sambo."

Sambo had to play his role, but it was a role that he began to believe in because it provided safety and life. Indeed, the social and psychological sanctions of role-playing may in the last analysis prove to be the most useful in understanding the slave’s personality.

But what were the results? The Negro was to be a child forever. "The Negro... in his true nature, is always a boy, let him be ever so old...." "He is... a dependent upon the white race; dependent for guidance and direction even to the procurement of his most indispensable necessaries. Apart from this protection he has the helplessness of a child-without foresight without faculty of contrivance, without thrift of any kind." Not only was he a child, he was a happy child Few Southern writers failed to describe with obvious fondness the bubbling gaiety of a plantation holiday or the perpetual good humor that seemed to mark the Negro character, the good humor of an everlasting childhood.

The role, of course, must have been rather harder for the earliest generations of slaves to learn. "Accommodation," according to John Dollard, "involves the renunciation of protest or aggression against undesirable conditions of life and the organization of the character so that protest does not appear, but acceptance does. It may come to pass in the end that the unwelcome force is idealized, that one identifies with it and takes it into the personality, it sometimes even happens that what is at first resented and feared is finally loved."

Might the process, on the other hand, be reversed? It is hard to imagine its being reversed overnight. The same role might still be played in the years after slavery we are told that it was-and yet it was played to more vulgar audiences with cruder standards, who paid much less for what they saw. The lines might be repeated more and more mechanically, with less and less conviction; the incentives to perfection could become hazy and blurred, and the excellent old piece could degenerate over time into low farce. There could come a point conceivably, with the old zest gone, that it was no longer worth the candle. The day might come at last when it dawned on a man's full waking consciousness that he had really grown up, that he was, after all, only playing a part

**MECHANISMS OF RESISTANCE TO ABSOLUTE POWER**

Interesting, the Sambo personality does not appear as frequently in Latin America as it does in the journals of American plantation owners. Particularly in Brazil, for example, the system had its brutalities. The slaves arriving there from Africa had also, undergone the capture the sale, the Middle Passage. They too had been uprooted from a prior culture, from a life very different from the one in which they now found themselves. There, however, the system was not closed.

Here again the concentration camp, paradoxically enough, can be instructive. There were in the camps a very small minority of the survivors who had undergone an experience different in crucial ways from that of the others, an experience which protected them from the full impact of the closed system. These people, mainly by virtue of wretched little jobs in the camp administration, which offered them a minute measure of privilege, were able to carry on "underground" activities. In a practical sense the actual operations of such "undergrounds" as were possible may seem to us un-heroic and limited; stealing blankets; "organizing" a few bandages, a little medicine, from the camp hospital; black market arrangements with a guard for a bit of extra food and protection for oneself and one's comrades; the circulation of news; and other such apparently trifling activities. But for the psychological balance of those involved, such activities were vital; they made possible a fundamentally different adjustment to the camp. To a prisoner so engaged, there were others who mattered, who gave real point to his existence-the SS was no longer the only one. Conversely, the role of the child was not the only one he played. He could take initiative; he could give as well as receive protection; he did things, which had meaning in adult terms. He had, in short alternative roles, this was a fact which made such a prisoner's transition from his old life to that of the camp less agonizing and destructive; those very prisoners, moreover, appear to have been the ones who could, upon liberation, resume normal lives most easily. It is, in fact these people-not those of the ranks-who have described the camps to us.

It was just such a difference that separated the typical slave in Latin America from the typical slave in the United States. Though he too had experienced the Middle Passage, he was entering a society where alternatives were significantly more diverse than those awaiting his kinsman in North America. Concerned in some sense with his status were distinct and at certain points competing institutions. This involved multiple and often competing "significant others." His master was, of course, clearly the chief one-but not the only one. There could, in fact be a considerable number the friar who boarded his ship to examine his conscience, the confessor, the priest who made the rounds and who might report irregularities in treatment to the procurator; the zealous Jesuit quick to resent a master's intrusion upon such sacred matters as marriage and worship; the local magistrate, with his eye on the king's official protector of slaves, who would find himself in trouble were the laws too widely evaded; the king's informer who received one-third of the fines. For the slave the result was a certain latitude; the lines did not all converge on one man; the slave's personality, accordingly, did not have to focus on a single role. He was, true enough primarily a slave. Yet he might in fact perform multiple roles. He could be a husband and a father. Significantly, because of the “closed system,” these roles had no meaning to the American slave. In Latin America, the slave had open to him such activities as artisan, peddler, petty merchant, truck gardener. Such activities were against the law for Sambo. In Brazil, he could be a communicant in the church, a member of a religious fraternity. These were roles guaranteed by the most powerful institution in Latin America comparable privileges in the American South depended on a master's pleasure. For Latin American slaves, these roles were all legitimized and protected outside the plantation; they offered a diversity of channels for the development of personality. Not only did the individual have multiple roles open to him as a slave, but the very nature of these roles made possible a certain range of aspirations should he some day become free. He could have a fantasy-life not limited to catfish and watermelons; it was within his conception to become a priest an independent farmer, a successful merchant a military officer. The slave could actually conceive of himself as a rebel. Bloody slave revolts, actual wars, took place in Latin America frequently; nothing on this order occurred in the United States.

The American slave system, compared with that of Latin America, was closed and circumscribed, but like all social systems, its arrangements were less perfect in practice than they appeared to be in theory. It was possible for significant numbers of slaves, in varying degrees, to escape the full impact of the system and its coercions upon personality. The house servant the urban mechanic, the slave who arranged his own employment and paid his master a stipulated sum each week, were all figuratively members of the "underground." Even among those working on large plantations, the skilled craftsman or the responsible slave foreman had a measure of independence not shared by his simpler brethren. Even the single slave family owned by a small farmer had a status much closer to that of house servants than to that of plantation labor gang. For all such people there was a margin of space denied to the majority, the system's authority structure claimed their bodies but not quite their souls.

It is of great interest to note that although the danger of slave revolts was much overrated by touchy Southerners; the revolts that actually did occur were in no instance planned by plantation laborers but rather by Negroes whose qualities of leadership were developed well outside the full coercions of the plantation authority-system. Gabriel, who led the revolt of 1800, was a blacksmith who lived a few miles outside Richmond; Denmark Vesey, leading spirit of the 1822 plot at Charleston, was a freed Negro artisan who had been born in Africa and served several years aboard a slave trading vessel; and Nat Turner, the Virginia slave who fomented the massacre of 1831, was a literate preacher of recognized intelligence. Of the plots that have been convincingly substantiated (whether they came to anything or not), the majority originated in urban centers.

For a time after the Civil War, a Negro elite of sorts did emerge in the South. None of them were plantation slaves. Many of its members were Northern or Canadian Negroes who moved south after the war and had never been in slavery. Their education and their independent attitude gained for them immediate favor and leadership. The plantation slaves, however, seldom became a leader. Nat Turner and Denmark Vessey were among the very few who did.

**The World the Slaveholder Made: By Eugene Genovese**

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 references to the other. Slavery rested on the principle of property in man - of one man's appropriation of another person as well as the fruits of his labor. By definition, 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 today. But slavery as a system of class rule predated racism and racial subordination in world history and existed without them. Racial subordination need not rest on slavery. As the history of modern colonialism demonstrates, 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 Importance of Paternalism**

The Old South, black and white, created a historically unique kind of paternalist society. . . .

Like every other paternalism, Southern 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. Increasingly, the slaveholders of the South resided on their plantations and by the end of the eighteenth century had become an entrenched ruling class. Paternalism developed between master and slave because of the close living conditions on the plantation and was reinforced by the closing of the African slave trade, which compelled masters to pay greater attention to the health and reproduction of their labor force. Of all the slave societies in the New World, that 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 million.

Significantly, paternalism was accepted by both masters and slaves, but each saw it in radically different ways. 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. Ironically, the maters' 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.

In the Southern slave system, paternalism undermined class solidarity among the oppressed by linking them as individuals to their oppressors. A lord (master or patron) functioned as a direct provider and protector for each individual or family, as well as for 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. . .

In order for paternalism to work, 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.

Inadvertently, 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, for the Southern slaves, Paternalism became a doctrine different from that understood by their masters. In their world view, slaves used the Paternalistic system to forge a weapon of resistance against the white assertion that slavery was a natural condition for blacks, and that blacks were racially inferior, and that black slaves had no rights or legitimate claims of their own.

Thus, the slaves, by accepting paternalism, 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.

**Paternalism and Religion**

Besides paternalism, two other institutions also protected blacks from the dehumanization of slavery: The Black Church and the Slave Family. Perhaps, most surprising to the southern white population was the use that slaves put religion as a method of preserving self-esteem and helping them accommodate their lives to slavery without sacrificing their integrity as human beings. While Christianity was established to assure their compliance and docility, slaves utilized religion as another method to protect their own rights and value as human beings. The slaves' religion developed into the organizing center of their resistance within accommodation; it reflected the hegemony of the master class but also set firm limits to that hegemony. Not often or generally did it challenge the regime frontally. It rendered unto Caesar that which was Caesar's, but it also narrowed down considerably that which in fact was Caesar's.

Black preachers, who served as the major slave leaders, 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 paternalism ideology itself. Nevertheless, Religion served as another method of sheltering the slave personality from the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

In fact, Black religion, emerged as the slaves' most formidable weapon for resisting slavery's moral and psychological aggression. Without it or its moral equivalent, "day-to-day resistance to slavery" might have been condemned to the level of pathetic nihilism, incapable of bridging the gap between individual action against an oppressor and the needs of the collective for self-discipline, community élan, and a sense of worth as a people rather than merely as a collection of individuals. With it, the slaves were able to assert manhood and womanhood in their everyday lives and were able to struggle, by no means always successfully, for collective forms of resistance in place of individual outbursts.

However much the slaves, as Christians, felt the weight of sin, they resisted those perversions of doctrine which would have made them feel unworthy as a people before God. Their Christianity strengthened their ties to their "white folks" but also strengthened their love for each other and their pride in being black people. And it gave them a firm yardstick with which to measure the behavior of their masters, to judge them and to find them wanting. The slaves transformed the promise of personal redemption, prefigured in the sign of Judas, into a promise of deliverance as a people in this world as well as the next. Through tests of flood and fire they laid the moral and spiritual foundations for the struggle of subsequent generations of black Americans to fulfill that prophecy they have made their own:

Indeed, slaves worshiped with great enthusiasm. Religion, after all, provided a ready refuge from their daily miseries and kindled the hope that one day their sorrows might end. Planters actually encouraged religious observances among their slaves hoping that exposure to Christian precepts might make their laborers more docile, less prone to run away, and more cooperative and efficient workers. But slaves turned biblical scriptures to their own purposes forging a theology that often emphasized the theme of liberation. It was easy for them to see, for example, in the figure of Moses a useful model for their own dreams; like the Israelites, they too were ready to cross a River Jordan into a promised land of freedom. The religious services held in the quarters provided slaves with so many positive experiences that, even as they were being exploited, they managed bravely, but perhaps not too surprisingly, to feel that they were free within themselves. In this way slaves began to achieve a degree of liberation well before Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union soldiers arrived bringing them the news.

**Family and the Slave Community**

Besides Religion, slaves also used their strong belief in family life to buffer the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Antebellum southern slaves lived in family units. The one- or two-room cabins located in the slave quarters usually housed one family each, although more than one family occasionally occupied one shelter. Here in the small, cramped indoor spaces, in the yards surrounding each cabin, and in the unpaved streets, slave families tried to fashion a private life for themselves that allowed each member to be more than a slave. They courted and married, bore babies and raised children, all actions that imparted meaning to their lives. In 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, about half of all slaves were younger than age sixteen; nearly one-third were under the age of ten. Rather than to act solely in the role of slave, men, women, and children defined themselves as mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles—human beings who experienced life within families despite hardships difficult for modern people to imagine.

Men knew that they might have to part from their wives and children, but that knowledge did not engender indifference so much as a certain stoical submission to that which had to be endured. Under painful conditions, many did their best even while others succumbed. Upon being sold, fathers would invariably charge a male friend with responsibility for looking after his family, and always in the absence of a father, some male would step in to help raise a boy to manhood. Significantly, so powerful was the belief in family ties, when the Civil War ended, men crisscrossed the South to reclaim their families and to assert authority over their children.

**Slave Resistance**

With Paternalism, religion, and family as institutions of support, blacks showed their contempt for slavery in many ways. Indeed, nothing expressed the hostility blacks showed toward the Peculiar Institution as clearly as slave resistance.

The slaveholders established their hegemony over the slaves primarily through the development of an elaborate web of paternalistic relationships, but the slaves participation in that hegemonic system reflected deep contradictions, manifested in the dialectic of accommodation and resistance. The slaves' insistence on defining paternalism in their own way represented a rejection of the moral pretensions of the slaveholders, for it refused that psychological surrender of will which constituted the ideological foundation of such pretensions. By developing a sense of moral worth and by asserting rights, the slaves transformed their acquiescence in paternalism into a rejection of slavery itself, although their masters assumed acquiescence in the one to demonstrate acquiescence in the other.

Those slaves whose disaffection turned into violence and hatred - those who resisted the regime physically - including slaves who make stealing almost a way of life, killed their overseers and masters, fought back against patrollers, burned down plantation buildings, and ran away either to freedom or to the woods for a short while in order to effect some specific end, as well as those who took the ultimate measures and rose in revolt.

Significantly, the slaves who unambiguously chose to fight for or fly to freedom represented a new quality. They remained a small portion of the total, but their significance far transcended their numbers. The maturation of that new quality, so vital to the health and future of the black community, depended upon those less dramatic efforts in the quarters which produced a collective spiritual