

the war years I have found repeatedly, almost monotonously, that when the slaves fled the plantations or else took over plantations deserted by the whites, the drivers emerged as the leaders. Moreover, the runaway records from the North and from Canada reveal that a number of drivers were among those who successfully escaped the South.¹³

There were not, as Genovese points out, many slave rebellions. Perhaps it is surprising that even a few occurred, for, considering the enormous power of the whites, rebellion was suicide. Slavery by definition is stacked heavily against the slaves. As an institution it is inhumane, but like any institution, basically it involves human beings. Slaves, Genovese concludes,

struggled to live as much as possible on their own terms. If their actions were less bombastic and heroic than romantic historians would like us to believe, they were nonetheless impressive in their assertion of their resourcefulness and dignity, and a strong sense of self and community. Had they not been, the fate of black America after emancipation would have been even grimmer than it was. For the most part the best that the slaves could do was to live, not merely physically but with as much inner autonomy as was humanly possible.¹⁴

The Profitability and Benefits of Slavery

Since antebellum days, men have argued about the profitability of slavery as an economic and human system. Arguments usually focus on the questions: profitable for whom—the slave, the slaveowner, the South, or the American economy as a whole? The debate has produced no consensus.

The essence of the economic antislavery argument was that slavery made and kept the South a backward part of the nation. Hinton R. Helper, a North Carolinian, summarized this thesis in the 1850's in his *The Impending Crisis in the South*:

¹³ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 42–43.

... The causes which have impeded the progress and prosperity of the South, which have swindled our commerce, and other similar pursuits, into the most contemptible insignificance; sunk a large majority of our people in galling poverty and ignorance, rendered a small minority conceited and tyrannical, and driven the rest away from their homes; entailed upon us a humiliating dependence on the Free States; disgraced us in the recesses of our own souls, and brought us under reproach in the eyes of all civilized and enlightened nations—may all be traced to one common source, and there find solution in the most hateful and horrible word, that was ever incorporated into the vocabulary of human economy—*Slavery!*

Helper believed that since the close of the eighteenth century, the economic development of the South had fallen steadily behind that of the North. He argued that the South lagged behind even in agriculture—and the reason was slavery. Helper listed three reasons why slavery was economically destructive: (1) slaves were kept in ignorance and were thus unable to develop skills or cope with machines; (2) capital was frozen in slave labor and therefore unavailable for investment in other enterprises; and (3) slavery hindered the growth of a home market for local industry.

Cassius Clay, a Kentuckian exiled from the South because of abolitionist propaganda he published in his newspaper, agreed with Helper. Wrote Clay:

The twelve hundred millions of capital invested in slaves is a dead loss to the South; the North getting the same number of laborers doing double the work, for the interest on the money; and sometimes by partnerships, or joint operations, or when men work on their own account, without any interest being expended for labor. . . .

Lawyers, merchants, mechanics, laborers, who are your consumers; Robert Wickliffe's two hundred slaves? How many clients do you find, how many goods do you sell, how many hats, coats, saddles, and trunks, do you make for these two hundred slaves? Does Mr. Wickliffe lay out as much for himself and his two hundred slaves, as two hun-