Ideology and Race in American History

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T HE notion of race has played a role in the way Americans
think about their history similar to that once played by the
frontier and, if anything, more durable. Long after the notion of
the frontier has lost its power to do so, that of race continues to
tempt many people into the mistaken belief that American
experience constitutes the great exception in world history, the
great deviation from patterns that seem to hold for everybody else.
Elsewhere, classes may have struggled over power and privilege,
over oppression and exploitation, over competing senses of justice
and right; but in the United States, these were secondary to the
great, overarching theme of race. U. B. Phillips once wrote that
the determination to preserve a white man's country was the
central theme of Southern history.[1] Today, chastened by the
failed hopes of the civil-rights era and genuinely appalled at
the ironic turn of events that has seemed at times to give the
Ku Klux Klan as much standing in California and Michigan as
in Georgia or Mississippi, many humane individuals would re-
gretfully extend Phillips's dictum. The determination to keep the
United States a white man's country, they would say, has been
the central theme of American, not just Southern, history. Racism
has been America's tragic flaw.

Questions of color and race have been at the center of some of
the most important events in American experience, and Americans

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continue to live with their ugly and explosive consequences. It would be absurd and frivolously provocative to deny this, and it is not my intention to do so. It is my intention to suggest that Americans, including many historians, tend to accord race a transhistorical, almost metaphysical, status that removes it from all possibility of analysis and understanding. Ideologies, including those of race, can be properly analyzed only at a safe distance from their terrain. To assume, by intention or default, that race is a phenomenon outside history is to take up a position within the terrain of racialist ideology and to become its unknowing—and therefore uncontesting—victim.

The first false move in this direction is the easiest: the assumption that race is an observable physical fact, a thing, rather than a notion that is profoundly and in its very essence ideological. A recent newspaper article about the changing composition of the population of Washington, D.C., included the following statement: "The Washington area's population of races other than white or black, meaning mainly Asians, tripled between 1970 and 1977. Recent statistics equivalent to those for racial groups are not available for Hispanics, *who are an ethnic group rather than a separate racial category.*"[2] What makes Hispanics an ethnic group, while blacks, whites, and Asians are racial groups? Presumably, the fact that, while they share a language (no one, surely, would suppose that Hispanics all share a single culture), they do not comprise a single physical type and they originate from different countries. But, on that reasoning, black and white Americans constitute an ethnic group: they are originally from different countries, they certainly do not all look alike, but they share a language.* What about Asians? They are not of a single physical type and they, too, come from different countries. Adhering to common usage, it is hard to see how they can be classed as either a single race or a single ethnic group: they do not all share either a language or a culture.

Then what about blacks? They do not look alike; they came originally from different countries, spoke different languages, and had different cultures. In the heyday of the Atlantic slave trade, both traders and their customers understood that the cargoes of

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* There comes to mind in this connection the marvelous line in the movie *Little Big Man,* when the old Indian speaks of the freedmen as "the black white men."

the slave ships included Africans of different national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Slave-buying planters talked in voluble, if no doubt misguided, detail about the varied characteristics of Coromantees, Mandingoes, Foulahs, Congoes, Angolas, Eboes, Whydahs, Nagoes, Pawpaws, and Gaboons. Experienced buyers and sellers could distinguish them by sight and speech, and prices would vary accordingly.[3] Black people, in other words, were initially no more a racial group than Hispanics. In the era of the slave trade a social fact—that these people all came from the same exotic continent and that they were all destined for slavery—made the similarities among them more important, in principle, than the differences. Their subsequent experience in slavery, particularly in its mainland North American form, eventually caused the similarities to overwhelm the differences in reality as well.[4]

The fallacy of regarding race as a physical fact may be more likely to receive open expression in the columns of a newspaper than in careful scholarly work, but in moments of mental relaxation, historians often embrace it tacitly. Few, perhaps, would be as bald in this regard as Harmannus Hoetink, who speaks of "somatic norm images" as a psychosocial force that determines human behavior.[5] Still, in discussing the earliest contact between Englishmen and Africans, Winthrop Jordan lays great stress on the Englishmen's reaction to the Africans' color: "Englishmen actually described the Negroes as *black*—an exaggerated term which in itself suggests that the Negro's complexion had powerful impact upon their perceptions. Even the peoples of northern Africa seemed so dark that Englishmen tended to call them 'black' and let further refinements go by the board. Blackness became so generally associated with Africa that every African seemed a black man."[6] There is no reason to doubt that such a striking contrast in color would arrest the attention of Englishmen encountering it for the first time. But surely other circumstances account more powerfully than the psychological impact of color as such for the fact that the English did not tarry over gradations in color. Not the least was the fact that with all their variations in appearance, these people were all inhabitants of the same strange and distant continent. Jordan's own statement concerning the North Africans suggests that the Englishmen's generalization was based as much on geography as on color. Jordan returns to much firmer ground when he remarks: "The Negro's color . . . . served as a highly visible label identifying the natives of a distant continent which

for ages Christians had known as a land of men radically defective in religion."[7] Had some of these same dark-skinned, exotic strangers been indigenous to, let us say, a remote corner of Europe upon which Englishmen suddenly and inadvertently stumbled after their first visits to Africa, the difference in geographic origin alone would probably have led the English to attach significance to—and therefore take verbal notice of—variations in appearance that, in the context of the African continent, seemed to them insignificant.

Ideas about color, like ideas about anything else, derive their importance, indeed their very definition, from their context. They can no more be the unmediated reflex of psychic impressions than can any other ideas. It is ideological context that tells people which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to take for granted in translating the world around them into ideas about that world. It does not bother Americans of the late-twentieth century that the term "black" can refer to physically white people, because an ideological context of which they are generally unaware has long since taught them which details to consider significant in classifying people. And the rules vary. Everyone knows, or at least every black person knows, that there are individuals who would be unhesitatingly classified as black in Louisiana or South Carolina and just as unhesitatingly "mistaken" for white in Nebraska or Idaho or the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. According to a story that is probably apocryphal but nonetheless telling, an American journalist once asked the late Papa Doc Duvalier of Haiti what percentage of the Haitian population was white. Duvalier's answer, astonishingly enough, was "Ninety-eight percent." The startled American journalist was sure he had either misheard or been misunderstood, and put his question again. Duvalier assured him that he had heard and understood the question perfectly well, and had given the correct answer. Struggling to make sense of this incredible piece of information, the American finally asked Duvalier: "How do you define white?" Duvalier answered the question with a question: "How do you define black in your country?" Receiving the explanation that in the United States anyone with any black blood was considered black, Duvalier nodded and said, "Well, that's the way we define white in my country."

Even in the limiting case of the earliest contacts between Europeans and Africans, when by definition the context was least

elaborated, people made use of whatever reference points fell readily to hand in assimilating the new experience. To this process Biblical tradition, folk superstition, and the lore of the ages certainly contributed. But the key reference points are most immediately given by the social circumstances under which contact occurs. People are quicker than social scientists sometimes believe to learn by experience, and much slower than social scientists usually assume to systematize what they have learned into logically consistent patterns. They are thus able to "know" simultaneously what experience has taught and what tradition has instilled into them, even when the two are in opposition.[8] The proposition that attitudes are "discrete entities" that can be isolated from each other and analyzed on their own is the bane of attempts to understand the reaction of people to one another (and, for that matter, of attempts to understand much else in the realm of human affairs).[9]

The late Walter Rodney's study of the upper Guinea coast demonstrates that the Portuguese who wanted to do business in the area had to and did come to terms with the sovereignty of the African potentates they encountered. In other words, they came to terms with the Africans' actual superiority from the standpoint of political power—that most fundamental of realities. Learning to live and function in a world dominated by that reality, they also of necessity eventually learned to appreciate some of the cultural nuances of societies in which they were fully aware of being tolerated guests. Even if they were capable of speaking, then or in retrospect, in terms of superiority over their African hosts, they knew better. Or, more accurately, they simultaneously believed and did not believe in their own superiority, and were not greatly troubled by the contradiction. They were capable, as are all human beings, of believing things that in strict logic are not compatible. No trader who had to confront and learn to placate the power of an African chief could in practice believe that Africans were docile, childlike, or primitive. The practical circumstances in which Europeans confronted Africans in Africa make nonsense of any attempt to encompass Europeans' reactions to Africans within the literary stereotypes that scholars have traced through the ages as discrete racial attitudes.[10]

The Portuguese engaged in early missionary activities among the Africans, understandably taking special pains with those leaders whose cooperation was essential. (In attenuated form this

activity continued in the context of the slave trade.) Europeans whose contact with Africans occurred on a different basis—and the Portuguese as their basis changed—naturally made a different synthesis of their contradictory notions about Africans. Though the comparison with the Portuguese might have warned him against such a conclusion, Winthrop Jordan takes the absence of early missionary activity by the English in Africa to be a consequence of color. To emphasize the point, he contrasts Englishmen's missionary ambitions with respect to the American Indians with their indifference toward missionary work among the Africans. Passing rather lightly over the very important differences in the social context within which Englishmen confronted Africans in Africa and Indians in America, he concludes that "the distinction which Englishmen made as to conversion was at least in some small measure modeled after the difference they saw in skin color."[11]

It would of course be foolhardy to argue that the Englishmen failed to notice the difference in color and general appearance between Africans and American Indians. The question, however, is whether it is proper to consider this a cause of their different course with respect to the one people and the other. The fact is that when Englishmen eventually went to Africa on an errand similar to that upon which they arrived in America—namely, settlement, in direct collision with the territorial and political sovereignty of African peoples—they engaged in missionary activity far more grandiose than anything they had directed at the hapless Indians. And the results were far more momentous.[12] In this case the difference is attributable, not to attitudes about color, but to a notable difference between the nineteenth century and the seventeenth. For by the nineteenth century the colonial endeavor involved plans for the African populations that would have been seriously compromised by their extermination; specifically, the creation of zones of imperial influence that would exclude rival European powers, the creation and enlargement of markets for the output of metropolitan industry, and the provision of wage labor for mines and estates. These plans would be better served by the annexation of African sovereignty than by its obliteration.[13] Thus the field for missionary work was not prematurely foreclosed by the disappearance of the potential targets.

The idea one people has of another, even when the difference between them is embodied in the most striking physical char-

acteristics, is always mediated by the social context within which
the two come into contact. This remains true even when time-
honored tradition provides a vocabulary for thinking and talking
about the other people that runs counter to immediate experience.
In that case, the vocabulary and the experience simply exist side
by side. That is why travelers who knew Africans to come in all
colors could speak of "black" Africans; why traders who enjoyed
"civilized" amenities in the compounds of their African patrons
could speak of "savage" Africans; why missionaries whose ac-
quaintance included both Muslim and Christian Africans could
speak of "pagan" Africans; and (later) why slave owners who lived
in fear of insurrection could speak of "docile" Africans. An
understanding of how groups of people see other groups in
relation to themselves must begin by analyzing the pattern of their
social relations—not by enumerating "attitudes" which, endowed
with independent life, are supposed to act upon the historical
process from outside, passing through it like neutrinos to emerge
unchanged at the other end.

The view that race is a biological fact, a physical attribute of
individuals, is no longer tenable. From a scientific standpoint,
race can be no more than a statistical description of the char-
acteristics of a given population—a description, moreover, that
remains valid only as long as the members of that population do
not marry outside the group.[14] Any attempt to carry the concept
further than that collapses into absurdity: for example, a child
belonging to a different race from one of his parents, or the well-
known anomaly of American racial convention that considers a
white woman capable of giving birth to a black child but denies
that a black woman can give birth to a white child. With a few
well-publicized exceptions, no one holding reputable academic
credentials overtly adheres to the view that race is a physical fact.
But echoes of this view still insinuate themselves into writing on
the subject. Perhaps scholars assume that since the lay public has
historically considered race to be a physical fact, this is therefore
a good enough working definition to use when trying to under-
stand their ideas and behavior. A telltale sign of the preoccupation
of historians, sociologists, and others with a physical definition of
race is the disproportionate concern of the field of comparative
race relations with the incidence and treatment of mulattoes, as
though race became problematic only when the appearance of the
people concerned was problematic. While it is undeniable that this

line of inquiry has yielded some useful information, it is also not hard to sympathize with Marvin Harris's impatient comment upon the obsessive attention given it by some scholars.* Important as these questions may be in their own right, concentration upon them becomes an obstacle to clearer understanding if it obscures the fact that race is a complicated and far from obvious concept, even when—perhaps especially when—it appears most physically precise.

Let us admit that the public, composed by and large of neither statisticians nor population geneticists, cannot have held a scientific definition of race. But neither can they, being human (that is, social) creatures, have held a notion of race that was the direct and unmediated reflex of a physical impression, since physical impressions are always mediated by a larger context, which assigns them their meaning, whether or not the individuals concerned are aware that this is so. It follows that the notion of race, in its popular manifestation, is an ideological construct and thus, above all, a historical product. A number of consequences follow. One of the more far-reaching is that that favorite question of American social scientists—whether race or class "variables" better explain "American reality"—is a false one. Class and race are concepts of a different order; they do not occupy the same analytical space, and thus cannot constitute explanatory alternatives to each other.[15] At its core, class refers to a material circumstance: the inequality of human beings from the standpoint of social power. Even the rather diffuse definitions of applied social science—occupation, income, status—reflect this circumstance, though dimly. The more rigorous Marxian definition involving social relations of production reflects it directly. Of course, the objective core of class is always mediated by ideology, which is the refraction of objective reality in human consciousness. No historical account of class is complete or satisfying that omits the ideological mediations. But at the same time, the reality of class can assert itself independently of people's consciousness, and sometimes in direct opposition to it, as when an artisan who considers himself a cut above the work-

* "It is time that grown men stopped talking about racially prejudiced sexuality. In general, when human beings have the power, the opportunity and the need, they will mate with members of the opposite sex regardless of color or the identity of grandfather." *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York, 1964), pp. 68–69.

ing class is relegated to unskilled labor by the mechanization of his craft, or when a salaried technocrat who thinks he is part of the bourgeoisie suddenly finds himself thrown out of work by the retrenchment of his enterprise.

Race, on the other hand, is a purely ideological notion. Once ideology is stripped away, nothing remains except an abstraction which, while meaningful to a statistician, could scarcely have inspired all the mischief that race has caused during its malevolent historical career. The material circumstance upon which the concept purports to rest—the biological inequality of human beings—is spurious: there is only one human species, and the most dramatic differences of appearance can be wiped out in one act of miscegenation. The very diversity and arbitrariness of the physical rules governing racial classification prove that the physical emblems which symbolize race are not the foundation upon which race arises as a category of social thought.[16] That does not mean that race is unreal: All ideologies are real, in that they are the embodiment in thought of real social relations. It does mean that the reality underlying racial ideology cannot be found where the vocabulary of racial ideology might tempt us to look for it. To put it another way, class is a concept that we can locate both at the level of objective reality and at the level of social appearances. Race is a concept that we can locate at the level of appearances only. A material reality underlies it all right, as must be true of any ideology; but the underlying reality is not the one that the language of racial ideology addresses. Since this distinction has important implications for understanding the role of race in American history, I shall return to it later in more detail. But the general theoretical point bears emphasizing: because class and race are not equivalent concepts, it is erroneous to offer them as alternatives to each other; and because any thorough social analysis must move simultaneously at the level of objective reality and at that of appearances, it is self-defeating to attempt to do so.

For the moment, let us notice a more obvious consequence of recognizing race to be an ideological and therefore historical product. What is historical must have a discernible, if not precisely datable, beginning. What is ideological cannot be a simple reflex of physical fact. The view that Africans constituted a race, therefore, must have arisen at a specific and ascertainable historical moment; and it cannot have sprung into being automatically at

the moment when Europeans and Africans came into contact with each other. Contact alone was not sufficient to call it into being; nor was the enslavement of Africans by Europeans, which lasted for some time before race became its predominant justification.[17] Prejudice and xenophobia may be transhistorical, but their subsumption under the concept of race is not. As Christopher Lasch pointed out many years ago, the idea of the Negro took time to become distinct "from related concepts of nationality and religion —from the concepts of African, heathen, and savage." It was, he argued, "at the very point in time when large numbers of men and women were beginning to question the moral legitimacy of slavery" that the idea of race came into its own. [18]

There is surely disturbing matter to ponder in the simultaneous appearance of antislavery sentiment and racialist ideology. But the roots of this grim coincidence are not to be sought in the exclusive realm of race relations.[19] They are rather to be sought in the unfolding of bourgeois social relations, and the ethos of rationality and science in which these social relations were ideologically reflected. Bourgeois "rationality" tore loose from "natural" categories the task—which all societies carry out in some form—of identifying and classifying differences among people. The latter had to be recreated from scientific first principles, with the enterprise of classification and identification now subordinated to the practical business of disciplining—and, if need be, institutionalizing—deviance and nonconformity. Not race alone, but a whole edifice of "forms of institutionalized segregation" arose: the asylum, the school (a place of isolation for children, now defined as radically distinct by nature from the adult population), and the bourgeois family itself (redefined as a refuge from society and built around an "exaggerated consciousness of sexual roles").[20] Race is a product of history, not of nature. And as an element of ideology, it is best understood in connection with other elements of ideology and not as a phenomenon sui generis. Only when set next to contemporary ideas having nothing to do with race can ideas about race be placed in the context of the ideological ensemble of which they form a part.

To treat race as an ideology, and to insist upon treating it in connection with surrounding ideologies, is to open up a vast realm of further complications. Ideologies offer a ready-made interpretation of the world, a sort of hand-me-down vocabulary

with which to name the elements of every new experience. But their prime function is to make coherent—if never scientifically accurate—sense of the social world. Therefore, new experience constantly impinges on them, changing them in ways that are diabolically difficult for the detached observer, let alone the engaged participant, to detect. The standard and now nearly automatic formula according to which ideas "have a life of their own" needs to be handled with caution. Ideas live only in the minds of men and women and cannot escape the contagion, so to speak, of the material world these men and women inhabit. They seem to have a life of their own in that, providing a ready-made vocabulary for the interpretation of new experience, they subtly (and sometimes grossly) prejudge the content of the interpretation. But new experience constantly exerts a reciprocal influence. A vocabulary stays alive only to the degree that it names things people know, and, as Michael T. Taussig has recently remarked, to the extent that these things are ritually verified in day-to-day social practice.[21] There would be no great problem if, when the things changed, the vocabulary died away as well. But far the more common situation in the history of ideologies is that instead of dying, the same vocabulary attaches itself, unnoticed, to new things. It is not that ideas have a life of their own, but rather that they have a boundless facility for usurping the lives of men and women. In this they resemble those creatures of horror fiction who, having neither body nor life of their own, take over the bodies and lives of human beings. The history of racialist ideologies provides excellent examples. Take the case of an antebellum planter whose sense of racial superiority over the slaves embraced the belief that they could not survive—would literally die—outside the tutelage of the master class. Emancipation was bound to change such an individual's ideology fundamentally, even if it failed to change the language in which he expressed that ideology. He could not fail to notice that the freedmen were not dying out, either figuratively or literally. Whether or not he took explicit cognizance of the fact, his consciousness would reflect the reality that what had once seemed a necessary and immutable relation—slavery—had now in fact changed. But since he would continue to speak the language of racial superiority, an incautious historian might easily infer that the ideology had not changed, and might even extrapolate all manner of unwarranted conclusions to the effect that the planter's

ideology was independent of the institution of slavery. It would be only a short slide from there to central themes, and the start of race on a full metaphysical career.

Of course there are complications within the complications. Since attitudes are not discrete entities and people have no innate compulsion toward logical consistency, it would not be hard to show that the same planters who believed in their slaves' incapacity also knew—and believed—the contrary.[22] Precisely because ideologies consist of contradictory and inconsistent elements, they can undergo fundamental change simply through the reshuffling of those elements into a different hierarchy. Ideological change that occurs in this fashion may easily pass undetected, with very serious consequences. Failure to attach due importance to exactly this kind of change accounts for recent erroneous assertions that Southern society has, in its fundamentals, experienced no important discontinuity.[23] Just in itself, the change in the way planters compelled the labor of their black subordinates—and thus, necessarily, in their view of these subordinates—signaled a momentous discontinuity; and that is to say the least and to speak of only one part of the Southern population.[24]

There is something profoundly unsettling in the contemplation of a change immense in scope and purchased at great cost, yet so ambiguous that it is impossible to say with full conviction whether it is a change for the better or for the worse. This probably accounts for historians' great reticence about recognizing that the abolition of slavery worked an important change in racialist ideology. Once recognize that a change took place, and the disheartening next step is to realize that what replaced the racialism of slave society was, in its different way, just as repulsive—perhaps more so. It may be marginally comforting to assume that racialist thinking must be one of those primordial flaws of the human psyche, a sort of background noise of the mind, against which even revolutionary upheavals may not prevail. The search for some such slender refuge seems to be the unspoken basis of so many historians' slowness in seeing that although there was no appreciable decline or mitigation of racialist thinking, there was a decisive shift in its character. There is, after all, a profound difference in social meaning between a planter who experiences black people as ungrateful, untrustworthy, and half-witted slaves and a planter who experiences black people as undisciplined,

irregular, and refractory employees.[25] Such a significant change in reality as experience could not but be recorded in reality as consciousness. Was it an improvement? That question is a very blunt instrument to employ in a situation calling for delicate tools. The view that the slaves could live only in slavery implied both a radical devaluation of their human dignity and the acceptance of an obligation to provide them a minimum of subsistence and animal comfort. The collapse of this view represented at once a grudging, backhanded concession to the freedmen's human dignity and the transfer of their subsistence to the realm of violence and social warfare. Something was gained; but, just as surely, something was lost.

It is easy enough to demonstrate a substantial continuity in racial "attitudes."[26] But doing so does not demonstrate continuity of racial ideology. Attitudes, as I have already argued, are promiscuous critters and do not mind cohabiting with their opposites. Indeed, they sometimes seem to be happier that way. Thus, a historian looking for continuity in attitudes is likely to find it regardless of the set of attitudes selected, provided he is sufficiently imaginative in his construction of what constitutes evidence for the existence of an attitude. A text proposing that Negroes, being the product of a separate creation, are not human may be taken as evidence of one sort of attitude. But laws holding slaves morally and legally responsible for their own criminal conduct must be taken as evidence of a contrary attitude.[27] In the end we cannot resolve the problem quantitatively, by the addition of example and counterexample. We can resolve it only by posing the question "What kind of social reality is reflected—or refracted —in an ideology built on a unity of these particular opposites?"

Of course in any society more complex than the primal horde, there cannot be a single ideology through which everyone apprehends the social world. In any event, what might appear from a distance to be a single ideology cannot hold the same meaning for everyone. If ideology is a vocabulary for interpreting social experience, and thus both shapes and is shaped by that experience, it follows that even the "same" ideology must convey different meanings to people having different social experiences. To suppose otherwise is to take another false step onto the terrain of racialist ideology. To suggest, for example, that classes of people whose position in, relation to, and perception of the world and society

differ in every other fundamental have a common bedrock of ideological assumptions about black people is to betray the illusion that beliefs about race are a biological product rather than the creation of men and women in society. Historians ask us to do something very like this when they call upon us to believe that great planters, small land- and slaveholding farmers, nonslaveholding yeomen, poor whites, town merchants and artisans, and urban factors all shared a belief in "white supremacy," which thus constitutes the central theme of Southern history.[28]

White supremacy is a slogan, not a belief.[29] And it is a slogan that cannot have meant the same to all white people. Those who invoke it as a way of minimizing the importance of class diversity in the South overlook this simple but basic point. In fact, the unity of Southerners' belief in white supremacy is more often taken for granted than argued in its own right, because it cannot withstand serious analysis. To the extent that white supremacy summarized prejudices of color, how can it have meant the same for different classes of whites, who had different experiences with blacks? A planter's deep conviction of superiority over his slave—so deep that it seldom required actual statement—permitted him to regard with casual indifference a level of intimacy with his house and body servants that might have shocked the fastidiousness of a New England abolitionist ostensibly believing in the equality and brotherhood of man. On the other hand, a hill-country white farmer, superficially sharing the same conviction of superiority, might feel insulted to the point of homicide upon finding himself unexpectedly jostled by a slave in a crowded market square. And white artisans who petitioned local and state authorities for the exclusion of slaves and free blacks from craft employment made a more ambiguous comment than they realized or intended upon the dogma of white superiority.

But white supremacy was not simply a summary of color prejudices. It was also a set of political programs, differing according to the social position of their proponents. Prejudices fed into them, naturally; but so far from providing a unifying element, they were as likely as not to accentuate the latent possibilities for discord. After all, Northern free-soilism and proslavery expansionism might both be regarded as expressions of white supremacy: the one wishing to keep blacks where white farmers need not come in contact with them, the other wishing to keep blacks where white

masters could have ready access to them when needed. It is clearly fruitless to think of racial prejudice as the common denominator of action when that prejudice led one group of whites to insist heatedly on their right to take black slaves wherever they wanted to, and another to insist just as heatedly on their own right to set limits on the areas where black slaves could be taken.[30]

Obviously, the free-soil movement as such had no significant following in the South. But it had a counterpart. The Southern back country was full of independent yeoman whites who had no use for slaves or their owners. Many were from families that had moved into the back country to escape the encirclement of the plantation and create a world after their own image. That image, we are beginning to learn, was vastly different in most important respects from the one after which the planters created their world, and the yeoman surrendered it only with great reluctance and after a bitter struggle.[31] In spite of the potential power of their numbers in a formally democratic polity, they did not challenge the effective dominance of the planters as long as they were largely left alone to live their own life in their own way. But, according to one scholar, the great planters' apprehension lest these people discover an affinity with the free-soil Republicans was the central dynamic of the secession movement in Georgia. It is at all events beyond question that they were everywhere slow to support secession and quick to evince disaffection with the war.[32]

The slogan of white supremacy was never sufficient to place the social and political ideology of the yeomen and poor whites at one with that of the planter class. From the democratic struggles of the Jacksonian era to the disfranchisement struggles of the Jim Crow era, white supremacy held one meaning for the back-country whites and another for the planters. To whites of the back country, it meant the political predominance of white-county whites or their spokesmen—in other words, the political predominance of their own kind. To the planters, it meant the predominance of black-county whites—in other words, of their own kind. The tension between these diametrically opposed positions might at times be dormant, but never absent, for it arose from political aspirations that the two groups did not share. In the antebellum era the tension might surface over the issues of ad valorem taxation or the apportionment of representation in state legislatures. During and after Reconstruction, it was likely to surface over such ques-

tions as public schools, laborers' liens, fencing reform, debtors' relief, and homestead exemption. In North Carolina, for example, conservatives dared not make a frontal assault on the Reconstruction constitution, because of the popularity of many of its provisions among ordinary whites. Nor could they publicly display their private grounds of opposition to the constitution: its "tendency . . . to put the powers of government into the hands of mere *numbers.*"[33]

It is, of course, the job of the politician to advance a slogan that conceals underlying differences of ideology, or program in the interests of electoral victory. To some extent the Southern Democratic party succeeded in doing this with its slogan of white supremacy. But this has to be stated carefully and with much qualification. Independent challenges to the Democrats' power remained endemic in the South until the end of the nineteenth century, when the disfranchisement movement put a stop to them. At that moment, the Solid South came into being. In no sense, however, did its emergence represent a harmonization of the planters' standpoint with that of the yeoman and poor whites. To the contrary, it represented a political victory of the former over the latter. Poorer whites tended to oppose disfranchisement, despite the trappings of white-supremacist ideology with which it was proclaimed. They understood that they were to be its unstated secondary victims; and so they became.[34]

It would be silly and unproductive to pose the issue here as one of deciding whether class or race factors were more powerful. Each class of whites had its particular variety of racialist ideology. Moreover, the superficial resemblance among them—namely, the fact that in all of them, blacks were the victims—made it easier for the Democrats and their spokesmen to forge them into a spurious ideological unity. But racial ideology constituted only one element of the whole ideology of each class. And it is the totality of the elements and their relation to each other that gives the whole its form and direction; not the content of one isolated element, which in any case is bound to be contradictory. The racialism of the rich black-belt Democrats was annexed to an elitist political ideology that challenged—sometimes tacitly and sometimes openly—the political competence of the subordinate classes as a whole.[35] And it was armed with the political resources, violent if need be, to carry its program into effect. The racialism

of yeomen and poor whites was annexed to political ideologies hostile to the elitist pretensions of the black-belt nabobs and, at least potentially, solvent of some of the grosser illusions of racialism. The moments, rare though they are in comparison with the entire sweep of Southern history, when such whites managed to accept temporary alliances with blacks, testify to the potential. But arrayed against the superior wealth, education, connections, and technical sophistication of the black-belt patricians, these whites needed the greatest possible unity of all the potential forces of opposition. The objective situation alone threw up formidable obstacles to the necessary unity.[36] Racialism threw up others.

The most important of these obstacles is not the one that comes most readily to mind: a mental block in the path of actions that violated the conventional color line. Racial prejudice is sufficiently fluid and at home with contrariety to be able to precede and survive dramatic instances of interracial unity in action.[37] The most important obstacle thrown up by racialism is the fact that it formed a narrow one-way bridge, which allowed potential support to straggle over to the side of the Democrats while offering little scope for movement in the opposite direction. Patricians stood a better chance of attracting support among the common people than the common people did of attracting support from the patricians. The racialism of the black-belt elite, after all, carried with it the luster of victory. That of the white common people became ever more tightly bound up with the rancor of hard blows and final defeat, as they watched the basis of their proud independence eroded by economic and social forces with which they were finally unable to cope. Their rancor became pervasive in the cultural atmosphere of the South and lent itself to demagogic manipulation by politicians seeking to turn it to electoral advantage. But it could never be fully assuaged; quite the contrary. Arising from a bleak day-to-day experience to which the slogans and rituals of white supremacy offered no material solution, that rancor only grew larger the more it was fed.

White supremacy, once disentangled from metaphysical and transhistorical trappings, cannot be the central theme of Southern history. It never was a single theme, and it never led to consensus on a single program. Accepting that does not require dismissing race as an ideological delusion which is therefore unreal: once acted upon, a delusion may be as murderous as a fact. Nor does

it require entering into a tendentious and ultimately empty disputation as to the relative benignity or malignity of various racialist ideologies, or into the quantitative assessment of their degree of racism. A racialist ideology harnessed to a ruling-class will, intention, and capacity to dominate both blacks and whites may be characterized by a patronizing tolerance, while that of a rednecks' movement to unseat their white masters may be virulent and homicidal.[38] Naturally, the victims cannot be neutral between two such ideologies or their human representatives, and neither can the historian. But practical choice and historical explanation are not the same. Historical analysis cannot distinguish these positions as "more" and "less" racist. Rather, they represent the different shape of the space occupied by racialism in different ideological ensembles. To think of them as different quantities of the same ideological substance is fundamentally mistaken.

At the same time, the historian cannot afford to abdicate critical judgment when confronting the unattractive cultural forms of those who are themselves victims of exploitation. Refusing to brand the rednecks' culture as more racist than the planters' does not mean that one should ignore its ugly consequences out of deference to its dissident or oppositional undertones. There may be charm in quilting bees and logrollings, in the various traditions of mutuality and reciprocity, and (for some) in country music. But there is also a somber side to that culture, not unrelated to the first: for example, the personal violence and the do-it-yourself justice of the necktie party. Those inclined to romanticize, sentimentalize, or take vicarious comfort in the flowering of cultural forms among the oppressed which challenge their subordination— as if, somehow, what has been lost politically has been regained on a higher (cultural) level—would do well to remember that these autonomous cultural forms need not be gentle, humane, or liberating. Where they develop apart from a continuing challenge, politically articulate and autonomous, to the real structure of power, they are more likely to be fungi than flowers.

If white supremacy is not the central theme of Southern, let alone American, history, there remains the task of accounting for the prominence of questions of race and color in so many of the most important events in American history. The question becomes simpler and less susceptible to mystification once the ideo-

logical essence of the notion of race is clear. Ideologies are the eyes through which people see social reality, the form in which they experience it in their own consciousness. The rise of slavery, its growth and dispersal, and its eventual destruction were central events in American history. The various ideologies in which race was embodied became the form in which this central reality found distorted reflection in people's consciousness.

A number of circumstances collaborated to bring this about. The rise of slavery itself on the North American mainland was not in essence a racial phenomenon, nor was it the inevitable outcome of racial prejudice.[39] But it was a problem. As David Brion Davis memorably demonstrated in the first of his volumes on the subject, slavery has always been a problem, for it is based on a self-evident existential absurdity: that one human being can be a simple extension of the will of another.[40] And, as Davis has demonstrated yet more memorably in the second of his volumes on the subject, slavery became even more of a problem in the Age of Revolution. The way societies think about compelling labor develops along with the modes in which they actually do compel labor, both responding to those ways and helping to define, and thus change, them. The view that no one will work for someone else unless compelled to by force arises authentically in a society in which those who work for others in fact do so under direct compulsion. The view that people will not only work for others voluntarily, but work more efficiently for having volunteered, arises authentically only in a society in which people are, first of all, free to volunteer, and second, "free" of the material resources—land, tools, guaranteed subsistence—that might permit them to refuse without going hungry. (This is the famous "double freedom" by which Marx ironically defined the condition of the proletarian.) By the Age of Revolution, English society and its American offspring fell somewhere between the two: the assumption that the individual is the proprietor of his own person was not so all-pervasive as to appear the very bedrock of common sense, but it had advanced sufficiently to make bondage a condition calling for justification and to narrow the basis on which such a justification might rest. Slavery by then could be neither taken for granted nor derived from self-evident general principles. Proslavery and antislavery publicists, Davis argues, unconsciously col-

laborated in localizing that basis to the slaves' presumed incapacity for freedom, an incapacity that crystallized into a racial one with all its subsequent pseudobiological trappings.[41]

Slavery thus became a "racial" question, and spawned an endless variety of "racial" problems. Race became the ideological medium through which people posed and apprehended basic questions of power and dominance, sovereignty and citizenship, justice and right. Not only questions involving the status and condition of black people, but also those involving relations between whites who owned slaves and whites who did not were drawn into these terms of reference, as a ray of light is deflected when it passes through a gravitational field.[42] The great federal compromise, embodied in the new Constitution, placed slavery at the head of the nation's agenda; and there it remained, try as statesmen would to displace it, until its abolition. As long as it remained, so did the racial form of the social questions to which it gave rise. And when the hour eventually struck for its abolition, that set of questions, too, inevitably arose in racial form. Having defined blacks as a race, contemporaries could not think through problems involving them in any other terms. And, having built the institution of slavery around that definition, contemporaries could not resolve the problems of slavery and its liquidation except by confronting the definition.

It follows that there can be no understanding the problems arising from slavery and its destruction which ignores their racial form: recognizing that race is an ideological notion and that not all white Americans held the same ideology does not mean dismissing racial questions as illusory or unreal. It does not follow, however, that attention to the racial form alone will shed light on the ulterior substance of these problems. There is perhaps no better illustration of this fact than Reconstruction. If ever a period seemed in its very essence to concern race relations, it is Reconstruction. The most obvious embodiment of its work—the constitutional amendments abolishing slavery, admitting black people to citizenship, and forbidding the denial of suffrage on the basis of color or previous condition—might, in a sense, have been designed to define the race problem out of existence.

But the problem that has plagued the study of Reconstruction, at least since the "Birth of a Nation" school lost pre-eminence, has been to explain why these amendments failed to accomplish some

of the simplest things that their plain language seemed to entail. The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, but not coercion: peonage flourished well into the twentieth century.[43] The Supreme Court soon interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment out of existence, at least insofar as the rights of black people were concerned. The Fifteenth Amendment functioned for a time—imperfectly—in those states that underwent congressional Reconstruction. But the Supreme Court eventually discovered that while forbidding the denial of suffrage, the amendment did not require its extension.

The American legal system works in large part on casuistry, and courts and lawyers had little trouble proving, at least to their own satisfaction, that the original intent of the Reconstruction amendments was exactly what they had reduced it to by the turn of the century. But the problem is not so easily resolved. Congressional Republicans as a group no more intended the Fourteenth Amendment to protect corporations from the beginning than they counted on the distinction between forbidding the denial of something and mandating its extension. The fact is that, divided and contentious, they provided a clumsy, undermanned, underfinanced, and finally inadequate machinery to accomplish a task whose limits they themselves could not clearly define. But historians have the benefit of hindsight. If, employing hindsight, we consider the actual accomplishments of the Reconstruction amendments—as opposed to the noblest hopes and intentions of those who fought for their enactment—we may be able to specify the limits of that task in a way that contemporaries could not. The Reconstruction amendments asserted the supremacy of the national state and the formal equality under the law of everyone within it. In so doing, they eliminated competing bases of sovereignty (such as the relation of master and slave) and set forth in the organic law that there was one and only one source of citizenship, that citizenship was to be nationally defined, and that the rights, privileges, and immunities deriving from citizenship arose from the federal Constitution.

Such were the formal accomplishments of Reconstruction and such, I would contend, the substance of its historic task. This task may seem a limited one in human terms, but it was by no means small or unimportant. It involved defining the nature of the United States as a nation-state.[44] In short, it was the representation in legal form of an enterprise of national unification—the same

one that was taking place nearly simultaneously in other nations of what was to become the capitalist world: Japan, Germany, Italy. And it was an enterprise of bourgeois democracy, the establishment of national unification on the basis of a system of formally free labor mediated through the market.[45] In nineteenth-century America, any such enterprise would necessarily be racial in form: the obstacles to be cleared away derived from the attempted secession of a region in which a society founded upon racially defined slavery claimed separate sovereignty. The problems of black people occupied center stage for a time both because the institutions to be swept away involved them and because those doing the sweeping away discovered that they needed the freedmen's help in order to accomplish their ends.

But the ends of Reconstruction were not necessarily those of the freedmen themselves. It was much more fundamental to the historic task of Reconstruction to define the proper relation of the Southern states to the national government, and of the citizen to the national government, than it was to supervise relations between the ex-slaves and the ex-masters. (The Freedmen's Bureau thus closed up shop well before the formal end of Reconstruction.) Abraham Lincoln said as much openly and insistently at the beginning of the war, when he forswore any intention of tampering with slavery and rebuffed those among his generals who seemed to move beyond this position. Later, of course, it became clear that tampering with slavery was the only way to achieve the more limited objective. That in turn came about in no small part because, by their own determined actions—running to Union lines, serving in the army, or simply slowing down the pace of work— the slaves placed their freedom on the agenda. The Republican party provided the machinery through which the nationalist task of Reconstruction was accomplished: those scholars who have argued that the chief motivation behind most of what the Republicans did was partisan advantage reveal no more than this. By the usual processes of jockeying, trimming, and yielding to expediency, the system of partisan politics itself taught Republicans which parts of the freedmen's agenda were essential to their own, and which were not.

Republicans eventually discovered that their objectives did not necessarily entail revolutionizing relations between the freedmen and their former masters. But those are not the terms in which

this discovery usually presented itself to their consciousness. What they typically experienced—that is to say, the way ideology usually interpreted their experience to them[46]—was that the freedmen had disappointed them by failing to live up to their responsibilities. They were shiftless, were not dependable wage workers, failed to respond like civilized people to wage incentives. They were the dupes of unscrupulous allies and the helpless victims of murderous opponents, and in either case were to blame for their own victimization. As often as not, perhaps more often than not, racial incapacity was the explanation for these supposed failures. Persuaded finally that the freedmen had proven unworthy of freedom, the Republicans contented themselves with the formal accomplishments of Reconstruction and left the freedmen to make the best deal they could with their former masters. Only a few outnumbered voices consistently (and ineffectually) demanded full, forcible protection of the freedmen's substantive rights; and the few abortive efforts along these lines—for example, the Lodge Election Bill of 1890—were pitifully disproportionate to the magnitude of the force arrayed against the freedmen.[47]

However the Republicans may have perceived the situation through the veil of racial ideology, their frustration with the freedmen had nothing to do with color. Complaints about undependable work habits echo and re-echo in the sources concerning the freedmen—and, for that matter, the antebellum free blacks. But they have also appeared again and again, in every part of the world, whenever an employer class in process of formation has tried to induce men and women unbroken to market discipline to work in exchange for a wage.[48] The planters, indeed, made the same complaints about the people whom they contemptuously labeled crackers, rednecks, sandhill tackeys, and the like. Northern employers made similar complaints about the behavior of their immigrant employees, and frequently accounted for that behavior in racial terms—a practice that eventually acquired academic respectability.[49]

Those Northerners who became missionaries, teachers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, and—perhaps most important of all—planters in the South after the Civil War[50] believed very genuinely that, in offering the freedmen a chance to become free wage laborers, they were offering them a wonderful boon. But the freedmen knew what they wanted, and it was not to substitute

one kind of master for another. They wanted their own land and the right to farm it as they chose. And their choice was likely to disappoint those eager to reconstitute the staple economy: most found bizarre the white folks' preoccupation with growing things that no one could eat.[51] A deep misunderstanding, which reflects a real if at the time unappreciated difference in class standpoint, caused the authors of Reconstruction to offer with a great flourish a gift that the freedmen did not want, and to interpret as perversity or racial incapacity the latters' refusal to accept the gift with gratitude.

While the freedmen were being hustled into the market economy at the well-intentioned (though not always disinterested) initiative of various groups of Yankees, the white yeomanry was also being drawn into that economy: in their case, through a combination of indebtedness and complex changes in law and social usage that followed in the wake of the Civil War. Both groups, as more and more studies make clear, would have preferred a different outcome.[52] Secure tenure of land and peace in which to pursue essentially self-sufficient farming, with only incidental resort to the market, would have suited their desires more than conscription willy-nilly into the world of commercialized agriculture, with its ginners, merchants, storekeepers, moneylenders, and crop liens. There never was much chance that they would get the kind of world they wanted. Since neither the planters nor the various Northerners who collaborated in designing Reconstruction had reason to promote such a result,[53] it could have arisen only through the united efforts of the white yeomanry, the poor whites, and the freedmen. That sort of unity would have required as a minimum precondition the very material circumstances to. which it was prerequisite.[54] Moreover, resting as it would have had to on a much more thorough expropriation of the planters than actually occurred, such a result would have exacted a high cost in violence and suffering, though not necessarily, as Eugene D. Genovese has recently pointed out, a higher cost than had to be paid as it was.[55] Needless to say, it is not a course of events that would invite the endorsement of a modern development economist. The resulting proliferation and entrenchment of smallholdings would have created an even more durable obstacle to the capitalist "rationalization" of Southern agriculture than that created by landlordism and a captive labor force. For

this rationalization eventually required the concentration of land and capital and the expulsion of thousands from the land.[56]

An outcome favorable to the black and white common people is, in short, a might-have-been that probably could not have been. Even so, we may well pause for a moment to consider why not. To do so is to remind ourselves that the "race problem" took its form, not from discrete attitudes, but from the circumstances under which ordinary people had to make their choices. When the Republicans left the freedmen to their own devices, they left them sufficiently detached from their former masters to be largely bereft of the latters' self-interested protection, but not sufficiently detached to bridge the gap between themselves and the yeomen and poor whites. Their vulnerability to economic manipulation and intimidation by landlords made them suspect as political allies of the back-country whites, thus ratifying and reinforcing racialist suspicions. And, still more important, their reduction closer and closer to the status of wage laborers set their political-economic agenda at odds with that of the back-country whites. The latters' grievances were by and large those of farmers whose land and livelihood were threatened by the vicissitudes of debt-ridden commercial agriculture in an era of world depression.

A program combining land distribution with debtors' relief might have permitted both freedmen and yeomen whites to live, for a time, in the essentially self-sufficient peasant manner that both groups seem to have preferred. In time, that life would have been disrupted, though probably not as early as some have assumed. Had the planters lost both possession of their land and control over black labor, there could have been no reorganization of the plantation economy. That, in turn, would have given more breathing space to the white yeomanry. Not just the personnel of Southern agriculture, but its entire economic, social, and political structure would have been rearranged. If black and white yeomen had been free to choose substantial self-sufficiency or production for local markets, they would not necessarily have been sucked at once into the agrarian depression of the 1870s and 1880s which, as E. J. Hobsbawm has pointed out, was "essentially a depression of the staple national and international food-crops."[57]

With a sounder material basis for political cooperation and with their grievances more in phase with each other, the yeomen and the freedmen might have been able to build a workable

alliance. In all likelihood, they would have eventually gone down to joint defeat. But the experience itself would have had to affect racial ideology, acting as it would have upon other elements in the ideology of which race was a part. Prejudice would no doubt have remained. But prejudice is as promiscuous as any other attitude and can make itself at home within a variety of ideologies and political programs. There is just a chance that, set in a context which allowed for a less stunted and impoverished existence for both groups and which provided a basis for political cooperation, it might have taken a less virulent and overwhelming form. And it might one day have mellowed into the sort of ritualized rivalry that allows the French and the English, despite centuries of murderous tribal antagonism, to twit each other with stereotypes that may often wound, but now seldom kill. Speculation, perhaps tainted by wishful thinking, suggests that the racialism of ordinary Southern whites might have changed for the better. Sober and dispassionate logic insists that, at the least, it would have been different.

And, had it been so, where would historians have located the central theme of Southern history? Perhaps they would not then have been beguiled into that fruitless quest in the first place. History does not provide us with central themes—with motors such as "racial attitudes" that propel the historical process forward from without. History provides us only with outcomes; and these, as long as the historical process goes on, must remain provisional. Each new stage in the unfolding of the historical process offers a new vantage point from which to seek out those moments of decision in the past that have prepared the way for the latest (provisional) outcome. It is the circumstances under which men and women made those decisions that ought to concern historians, not the quest for a central theme that will permit us to deduce the decisions without troubling ourselves over the circumstances.

Race is neither the reflex of primordial attitudes nor a tragically recurring central theme. It became the ideological medium through which Americans confronted questions of sovereignty and power because the enslavement of Africans and their descendants constituted a massive exception to the rules of sovereignty and power that were increasingly taken for granted. And, despite the changes it has undergone along the way, race has remained a predominant ideological medium because the manner

of slavery's unraveling had lasting consequences for the relations of whites to other whites, no less than for those of whites to blacks. There are no tragic flaws or central themes in which to take shelter, however reluctantly. There are only acts and decisions of men and women in a society now past, and a responsibility which, because the outcome remains provisional, we are obliged to share with them.

NOTES

1. Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American Historical Review*, 34 (1928), 30–43.

2. Washington *Post*, June 17, 1980 (emphasis added).

3. U. B. Phillips still spoke in their accents when he wrote *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1963), pp. 188–90 (orig. pub. 1929).

4. The process took time, however, and was neither automatic nor even. Ira Berlin explores some of the intricacies of this unevenness in "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society in British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review*, 85 (1980), 44–77.

5. Harmannus Hoetink, *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations*, trans. Eva M. Hooykaas (London, 1967), pp. 120–60. A statement whose crudeness contrasts oddly with the sophistication of the analysis that follows it appears in Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison, Wisc., 1964), p. 28: "At one level, there is the simple and unavoidable fact that major racial differences are recognizable. In every racially mixed society, in every contact between people who differ in physical appearance, there has always been instant recognition of race: it was the first determinant of inter-group social relations." The last statement cannot withstand either historical or ethnographic scrutiny. The first two account for a phenomenon by taking it eternally for granted. When Inuit (Eskimos) distinguished themselves by appearance from Aleuts, or Sioux from Cheyenne, or Chagga from Kikuyu, did this count as "instant recognition of race"? Which differences in physical appearance qualify as "major racial differences"? Any endogamous population will, over time, show physical characteristics enabling others to identify it by appearance. To call all such distinctions racial is to extend the concept so far that, in covering everything, it covers nothing.

6. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (New York, 1977), p. 5 (emphasis in original).

7. Ibid., p. 20.

8. The fact that the everyday thought of human beings is quite at home with contradiction is readily accessible to commonsense observation. Nevertheless,

some scholars, particularly those of neo-positivist inclination, continue to deny it on principle, often invoking individualistic psychological theories like that of cognitive dissonance. However, no serious observer of human beings in society has been able to avoid confronting the reality, indeed the necessity, of contradiction. Max Weber, a product of the positivist tradition, is explicit: "Neither religions nor men are open books. They have been historical rather than logical or . . . psychological constructions without contradiction. Often they have borne within themselves a series of motives, each of which, if separately and consistently followed through, would have stood in the way of the others or run against them head-on." H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1946), p. 291. A warning along the same lines from writers in the phenomeno-logical tradition may be found in Alfred Schutz, "The Problem of Rationality in the Social World," *Economica*, n.s. 10 (1943), 130–49, and Harold Garfinkel, "The Rational Properties of Scientific and Common Sense Activities," in Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967). In the historical-materialist tradition, the classic statement, unlikely to be surpassed, is Marx's sardonic discussion "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," in *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1976), I, 163–77. A discussion of the same point holding considerable interest appears in Norman Geras, "Marx and the Critique of Political Economy," in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (New York, 1973).

9. "I have taken 'attitudes' to be discrete entities susceptible of historical analysis. This term seems to me to possess a desirable combination of precision and embraciveness." Jordan, *White over Black*, p. viii.

10. Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545–1800* (Oxford, 1970). The same point emerges in more general terms in Curtin, *Image of Africa*, esp. chap. 2.

11. Jordan, *White over Black*, pp. 21–22.

12. By this should be understood not simply numbers of converts, but also consequences of conversion. These, in turn, are not confined to those con-ventionally adduced—for example, the spread of literacy and education and the rise of a class of nationalist *evolués* who could challenge the colonialists on their home ground. An article by Karen E. Fields, "Christian Missionaries as Anti-Colonial Militants," *Theory and Society*, 11 (1982), 95–108, demon-strates that the most important consequence of conversion was that it put an intolerable strain on the colonial regime at its weakest point: the intersection of colonial authority and indigenous legitimacy.

13. This question receives explicit treatment in Karen E. Fields, "Political Contingencies of Witchcraft in Colonial Central Africa: African Culture in Marxian Theory on the State," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16 (1982), forthcoming.

14. Jordan sets this point forth in exemplary fashion in his "Note on the Concept of Race," in *White over Black*, pp. 583–85.

15. Fixation on this artificial dichotomy vitiates the otherwise interesting analysis of William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago, 1978). A recent vacuous example of the consequences of pursuing this

dichotomy is Manning Marable, "Beyond the Race-Class Dilemma," *Nation*, April 11, 1981, an essay that fails to advance beyond the race-class dilemma.

16. The emblems that symbolize race are not always physical. The Lumber River Indians of North Carolina today differ only subtly in appearance from the descendants of the Scots who settled in the same area, though, according to prevailing social usage, the two groups belong to different races. But the Indians adopted English a century before the Scottish immigrants arrived and therefore learned an older form of the language. Today, as a result, "a person's speech sometimes gives a clearer indication as to which racial community he belongs [to] than does his physical appearance." W. McKee Evans, *To Die Game: The Story of the Lowry Band, Indian Guerrillas of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 1971), pp. 30–31. Nothing could more precisely demonstrate that the symbols of race are not its substance, since, whatever anyone may say about physical characteristics, no one can believe that speech patterns are anything but a historical product.

17. David Brion Davis has persuasively located the historical moment when race assumed this role in the Age of Revolution, and has traced with great subtlety the ideological processes through which it did so. See *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, 1975), passim and esp. pp. 299–306.

18. Christopher Lasch, "Origins of the Asylum," in Lasch, *The World of Nations* (New York, 1974), p. 17. The essay dates from 1968.

19. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York, 1971), ponders this coincidence in great depth, but remains largely in the realm of race relations.

20. The quoted phrases are from Lasch, "Origins of the Asylum," whose argument is closely related to those of Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962), and Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1965); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1978); and *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978). Perhaps no one has given more specific and detailed attention to the unfolding of bourgeois "rationality" than Max Weber. But, writing from the terrain of this ideology, he vacillates between according rationality a capital R and questioning it with inverted commas. The tension between these two is one of the most enduring sources of interest in his work. For example, see "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in Gerth and Mills, eds., *From Max Weber*, chap. 11.

21. Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), p. 230.

22. The entire argument of Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974) provides an eloquent demonstration of why this was, and had to be, true.

23. For example, Carl N. Degler, *Place over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (Baton Rouge, 1977).

24. A sensitive treatment of the importance of this change to the masters' view of themselves and of the ex-slaves may be found in James L. Roark, *Masters*

without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York, 1977), esp. chaps. 3 and 4. See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* pp. 97–112.

25. Harold D. Woodman has developed this position with exemplary persistence and eloquence. See "Sequel to Slavery: The New History Views the Postbellum South," *Journal of Southern History,* 43 (1977), 523–54; "Comment" in American Historical Review Forum, "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865–1955," *American Historical Review,* 84 (1979), 997–1001; "Post–Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law," *Agricultural History,* 53 (1979), 319–37; and "The Revolutionary Transformation of the South After the Civil War" (Paper presented at the University of Missouri-St. Louis Conference, February 1978, on the First and Second Reconstructions). It is scarcely possible to overstate the importance of Woodman's forthcoming book, on which the last-named paper is in effect a progress report.

26. Fredrickson, *Black Image,* pp. 321–22, sets forth a list of attitudes on which "widespread, almost universal, agreement existed" from the 1830s on, going so far as to call these attitudes a "creed" accepted by "all but a tiny . . . minority of white spokesmen."

27. In trying to prove that racism was the core of the slaveholders' ideology, Fredrickson lays heavy stress on the prevalence of the first sort of attitude, but totally ignores the second. Genovese demonstrates brilliantly that it is not the one attitude or the other, but precisely the fact of their contradictory coexistence, that constitutes the essence of the slaveholders' ideology, as of their society itself. Fredrickson, *Black Image,* chaps. 2 and 3; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* pp. 25–49.

28. The concept of "herrenvolk democracy" has the curious quality of recognizing the gulf between the world view of the great planters and those of the yeomen and poor whites, only to dismiss it with a shallow formula. The gulf was the product of vastly different social circumstances and was bound to persist as long as these circumstances differed. Political contest determined whose viewpoint prevailed at the level of actual government institutions. Eugene D. Genovese and J. Mills Thornton III have examined this contest and reached opposite conclusions as to which side won. But neither suggests that the gulf itself was or could be conjured away at the stroke of a slogan. See Fredrickson, *Black Image,* p. 68; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978); and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965), and "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," *Agricultural History,* 44 (1975), 331–42.

29. The distinction is not that a slogan is bogus while a belief is genuine. A slogan has the purpose of summarizing different beliefs in such a way as to provide a basis for common political action among those holding these beliefs, in spite of their differences. A slogan that precisely and explicitly stated a particular belief would not be an effective slogan, since it would isolate those holding that belief from potential allies. For example, "Cut government spending and balance the budget" is a slogan that may unite into a coalition those wishing to abolish welfare, those wishing to curtail the military, and

those wishing to dismantle the space program. But the slogan "Cut military spending" would immediately separate the coalition into its constituent parts.

30. Fredrickson has attempted to show that these opposite views actually derive from the same impulse: both bespeak a "desire for racial homogeneity." Free-Soilers sought to accomplish it in reality, while slaveowners sought to accomplish it symbolically, by defining the slaves as outside the human species. *Black Image*, pp. 130–32. A conflict of views which ends in a Civil War leaving 600,000 dead demands discussion at the level of real politics, not symbolism. In any case, Fredrickson appears to have abandoned the attempt; see "Masters and Mudsills: The Role of Race in the Planter Ideology of South Carolina," *South Atlantic Urban Studies*, 2 (1978), 44.

31. A sophisticated, imaginative, and growing body of literature, much of it as yet unpublished, has now established this point in rich detail. Recent examples include Steven Hahn, "The Yeomanry in the Non-Plantation South: Upper Piedmont Georgia, 1850–1860," in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr., eds., *Class, Conflict and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, Conn., 1982); and Hahn's, "The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of Georgia's Upper Piedmont, 1850–1890" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1979); John Schlotterbeck, "Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1850 to 1880: A Case Study of the Impact of Civil War and Emancipation in an Upper South Community" (Paper delivered at OAH annual meeting, San Francisco, April 1980); Grady McWhiney, "The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Alabama Agriculture," *Alabama Review*, 31 (1978), 3–32.

32. Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers"; Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, 1977). The ambiguity of the yeomen's attitude toward both the Confederacy and the war is well documented in such older works as J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 2nd ed., rev. (Boston, 1969), chap. 14; and Clement Eaton, *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South* (New York, 1964), chap. 14, and *A History of the Old South: The Emergence of a Reluctant Nation*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1975), chap. 25. A forthcoming book by Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: Slavery's Demise and the Collapse of the Confederacy*, deals systematically with the position of the white yeomanry in an effort to specify the social reasons for the South's defeat in the Civil War.

33. Otto H. Olsen, "North Carolina: An Incongruous Presence," in Otto H. Olsen, ed., *Reconstruction and Redemption in the South* (Baton Rouge, 1980), pp. 167, 185–86 (emphasis in original). Also see Steven Hahn, "Merchants, Farmers, and the Marketplace: The Transformation of Production and Exchange in the Georgia Upcountry, 1860–1890" (Paper delivered at AHA Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., December 1980); and Hahn's essay in this volume.

34. J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven, 1974), esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

35. Ibid., pp. 250–57.

36. As when, for example, the Colored Farmers Alliance and the white National Farmers Alliance found themselves on opposite sides in a strike, the

former organization comprising the employees of the latter. See David Montgomery, "On Goodwyn's Populists," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (spring 1978), 171–72; Robert McMath, Jr., "Southern White Farmers and the Organization of Black Farm Workers: A North Carolina Document," *Labor History*, 18 (1977), 115–19.

37. For instance, New Orleans witnessed a dramatic interracial general strike and a murderous race riot within eight years of each other. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), pp. 231–32, 351.

38. By the same token, when an upper class loses confidence or feels threatened in its capacity to dominate, it may set aside tolerance and become virulent and homicidal as well. Examples from the anti-abolition mobs to the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations of the Reconstruction period demonstrate that when circumstances warranted, patricians were fully prepared either to carry out violence themselves or to hire it done. See Leonard L. Richards, *'Gentlemen of Property and Standing': Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970), and Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York, 1971).

39. Edmund S. Morgan has shown that plantation slavery was the eventual answer to a social crisis that afflicted colonial Virginia. The origin of that crisis was the planters' loss of control over the white laboring population. See *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).

40. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966). Much of the book, as also much of Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, may be read as a sustained reflection on the way in which the very efforts of slaveholders to affirm this proposition ended by admitting its negation.

41. David Brion Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. The breadth, subtlety, and delicacy of Davis's argument resists hasty or ham-fisted summary. I hope this brief sketch does rough justice, in particular, to the prefatory comments on ideology (pp. 14–15) and to the section "Race and Reality" (pp. 299–306).

42. The furor launched in the South by Hinton Rowan Helper's racialist antislavery tract, which claimed to speak on behalf of the nonslaveholding whites, provides a good illustration.

43. See Pete Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901–1969* (Urbana, 1972).

44. Charles and Mary Beard's argument to this effect provided a generation of scholars with material for hostile review and contemptuous dismissal. Nevertheless, it contains a strong underlying element of truth. The Beards' error was twofold. First, they unwarrantably identified the motives and intentions behind Reconstruction with its ultimate consequences. Second, they understood ideology to be a simple tool for the manipulation of one class by another, rather than what it is: a distorted reflection of social reality that

deceives the supposed manipulator as much as the putative manipulee. Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1930), esp. chap. 18.

45. David Montgomery takes the nationalist content of Reconstruction as primary, and demonstrates that Reconstruction politics largely revolved around different groups' interpretations of and reactions to that nationalism. *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967), esp. chap. 2. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London, 1975), discusses, from a global standpoint, the process of consolidating large territorial nation-states and of abolishing the remaining instances of coerced labor.

46. Lawrence N. Powell, *New Masters: Northern Planters during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New Haven, 1980), offers a revealing look at the moment in which frustrated Yankees acquired that experience at first hand. John G. Sproat, *'The Best Men': Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1968), provides a good critical treatment of the ideology into which that experience typically metamorphosed.

47. Not all Republicans took the low ground of race in justifying the abandonment of the freedmen. Some explained the freedmen's failure to respond as expected by reference to their lack of education, and proposed to remedy this by the provision of schools. However, the assumption that once properly schooled, the freedmen would adopt the Yankees' view of the world was scarcely more realistic than the expectation that the same thing would happen automatically upon emancipation. And the political conclusion thereby deduced was the same as that which others reached by a less well-intentioned route: that the struggle for equality should be postponed until the freedmen were "ready" for it. "Time, education, moral suasion . . . a 'natural' division of southern whites into two parties, [and] bi-racial progress through the economic growth of a 'New South' ": these "abolitionist prescriptions for Negro advancement," to use the phrase of the abolitionists' most persuasive partisan, amount to abandonment when stacked against the stark forms of intimidation, exploitation, and brutality to which the freedmen fell victims. James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, 1975), makes perhaps the strongest case that can be made for the abolitionists.

48. No one has made this point more elegantly than E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, no. 38 (1967), 56–97.

49. Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America," in Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1977). See also John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925* (New York, 1970), esp. chap. 6.

50. Powell, *New Masters,* pp. xii–xiii, estimates that Northern planters were one of the most numerous of the groups active in Reconstruction.

51. Freedmen on the Sea Islands, who did for a time have their own land, showed a reluctance to devote themselves to the production of cotton, something the Yankee entrepreneurs expected them to do automatically. Some

Northerners understood the importance of land to complete the ex-slaves' freedom. But their view did not prevail. See Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York, 1964), esp. chap. 13; and Eric Foner, "Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation, and Reconstruction," in Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980). In any case, it is doubtful that many of these Northerners would have approved of the freedmen's intentions had they fully understood them. It was one thing for the freedmen to have their own land; it was another for them to refuse to grow cotton.

52. Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction;* Hahn, "Merchants, Farmers, and the Marketplace"; Joseph Reidy, "The Unfinished Revolution: White Planters and Black Laborers in the Georgia Black Belt, 1865–1910" (Paper delivered at OAH annual meeting, San Francisco, April 1980). The view that responsiveness to the incentives of the competitive market is an innate characteristic of human behavior stands as an article of faith among many scholars. In fact, such behavior has been a phenomenon limited in both historical time and geographic space. And even where it appears, it does not necessarily take the form predicted by the assumptions of neoclassical market rationality. An important theoretical discussion of this point appears in Witold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System,* trans. Lawrence Garner (London, 1976), pp. 41–44. This work dealing with Polish feudalism has wide relevance for scholars specializing in neither Poland nor feudalism.

53. A few Republicans understood that allowing the freedmen to follow their inclination would probably bring adverse economic consequences, and were prepared to accept this. For example, see Foner, "Thaddeus Stevens," pp. 137–38. Few went as far as the *Nation* editorial that, in admitting that its prescriptions would probably lead to "a great falling off in the cotton crop," warned against "the notion that the great mission of the American people . . . is the production of goods for the market." *Nation,* November 9, 1865. Leslie Rowland kindly brought this item to my attention.

54. According to Jack P. Maddex, one reason for the defeat of the Radical Republicans in Virginia was that because the yeoman whites and the freedmen were in such different material circumstances, their grievances matured at different times. They were therefore unable to function as a purposeful coalition. "Virginia: The Persistence of Centrist Hegemony," in Olsen, ed., *Reconstruction and Redemption in the South,* pp. 113–55.

55. Eugene D. Genovese, "Reexamining Reconstruction," New York *Times Book Review,* May 4, 1980.

56. The appalling human and social costs of this "rationalization," and some of the mechanisms by which it eventually came about, receive consideration in Pete Daniel, "The Transformation of the Rural South, 1930 to the Present," *Agricultural History,* 55 (1981), 231–48.

57. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital,* p. 178. The death of the family farm may well have been inevitable (the view expressed by David Potter in *Division and the Stresses of Reunion, 1845–1876,* (Glenview, Ill., 1973, pp. 186–87); but the timing of its demise has always depended on the economic weight, and thus the political leverage, of the large-scale, commercialized

capitalist sector. Considering the stubborn persistence of agrarian independence and dissidence in a South whose balance of power favored large landowners and their partners and allies, it would be hazardous to belittle the political prospects of a black and white yeomanry possessed of land in a South not dominated by plantations and their economic and political appurtenances.