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The Legacy of Slavery and the Roots of Black Nationalism

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AMERICAN RADICALS have long been imprisoned by the pernicious notion that the masses are necessarily both good and revolutionary, and by the even more pernicious notion that, if they are not, they should be. The principal task of radical historians therefore has too often been to provide the masses with historical heroes, to make them aware of their glorious tradition of resistance to oppression, and to portray them as having been implacably hostile to the social order in which they have been held. This viewpoint now dominates the black liberation movement, which has been fed for decades by white radical historians who in this one respect have set the ideological pace for their liberal colleagues. It has become virtually sacrilege—or at least white chauvinism—to suggest that slavery was a social system within which whites and blacks lived in harmony as well as antagonism, that there is little evidence of massive, organized opposition to the regime, that the blacks did not establish a revolutionary tradition of much significance,

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and that our main problem is to discover the reasons for the widespread accommodation and, perhaps more important, the long-term effects both of the accommodation and of that resistance which did occur.

In 1831 Nat Turner led a slave revolt on which has hung most of the legend of armed black resistance to slavery. Of the 250 or so revolts chronicled and analyzed in Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*,¹ Turner's has pride of place and was described by Aptheker as a "cataclysm." Yet, when we look closely, this revolt, like the total history of such revolts, recedes in importance and magnitude. As many of Aptheker's critics have pointed out, most of the 250 revolts probably never happened, being the imagination of hysterical or self-serving whites, insignificant plots that never matured, or mere local disturbances of a questionable nature. Of the three major revolts, one, Denmark Vesey's, was crushed before it came to fruition; only Gabriel Prosser's in 1800 and Turner's reached impressive proportions. Even so painstaking and thorough a scholar as Aptheker has been unable to discover firm evidence of a major revolt between 1831 and 1865. As for Turner's, less than one hundred slaves joined. A revolt of this size would rate little more than a page or two in a comprehensive work on slave revolts in Brazil. To cite only two outstanding examples, runaway slaves in the Brazilian Northeast organized their own colony, Palmares, and waged a 65-year struggle for autonomy with as many as 20,000 people.² During the first four decades of the nineteenth century there were a series of violent and extensive risings in Bahia, culminating in the great Muslim-led holy war of 1835.³ We need not dwell on Haiti, as the record of Jamaica, Cuba and other countries is also impressive. Even if, as Aptheker suggests, news of many smaller risings was suppressed, the effect would have been to prevent the accumulation of a tradition to encourage and sustain revolt-prone slaves. On balance, we find the absence or extreme weakness of such a tradition.

There were many reasons for this extreme weakness. First, we need to consider the kind of Africans brought here. It has long been falsely assumed that, since slave traders mixed their cargoes, all parts of the hemisphere received similarly mixed

bags. But Brazil, for example, received large numbers of Angolans and Congolese, whose military, religious and cultural traditions made them especially difficult to control.⁶ Brazil also received a large number of Muslim slaves from Upper Guinea who proved intractable everywhere in the hemisphere. The United States, on the other hand, largely drew its slaves from those portions of Lower Guinea which had a population previously disciplined to servitude and domination. Ironically, these Africans were, in some respects, among the most advanced in technical culture.

Second, the slave trade to the United States came to an end in 1808, although illegal importations continued to trickle in; in contrast, the trade to Cuba and Brazil continued well into the nineteenth century. The presence of large numbers of newly imported Africans can generally be correlated with incidence of revolt. In the United States the great majority of slaves during the antebellum period had been born and raised on Southern plantations. Their ranks received little reinforcement from newly enslaved and aggressive Africans.

Third, a review of the history of Brazil and the Caribbean suggests that an important ingredient in the development of revolts out of local disturbances was the division of the whites into warring factions and the general weakness of the state apparatus. Together with these conditions went the general influence of geography in relation to state power. Where suitable terrain was combined with a weak state, runaway slaves could and did found maroon colonies, which directly fomented revolts and kept alive a tradition of armed resistance. With minor qualifications, these conditions did not exist in the United States.

Fourth, a substantial revolt presupposed the formation of ideology and leadership. In Brazil and the Caribbean two circumstances combined to encourage both: the cultivation of sugar led to the establishment of plantations averaging perhaps 200 slaves or more, and the size of the white population was small. As a result the blacks could keep alive much of their African culture or could develop a syncretized Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Cuba culture, which militated against the loss of identity and which could, under proper conditions, nurture resistance

movements. Apart from Islam, non-Christian religious cults, generally of a syncretized type, played a great role in hemispheric slave revolts. In the United States an imposed Protestantism, when effective, generally kept the slaves docile.

Half the slaves in the United States lived on units of twenty or less; most of the others lived on plantations of fifty or less. Although blacks heavily outnumbered whites in large areas of the South, they were, in general, floating in a white sea. The white planters were residents, not absentees; the non-slaveholders were loyal, armed and disciplined; the country immediately beyond the plantation areas was inhabited by armed whites completely hostile to the blacks. Death, not refuge, lay beyond the plantation. For this reason, among others, blacks often looked to their masters to protect them against the depredations and viciousness of the poorer whites. We may therefore understand how, during race riots like that in Atlanta in 1906, blacks reportedly ran to whites—or at least to some whites—for protection.

The residency of the planters and their hegemony across the South gave American slavery its particular quality and especially set it off from Caribbean slavery. Between the Revolutionary War and the War for Southern Independence the treatment of slaves, defined as day-to-day conditions of life (housing, food, rigor of work routine, leisure time, incidence and character of corporal punishment) improved steadily and perceptibly. Although manumission was made increasingly difficult and escape from the system was sealed off, the harsh slave codes were steadily tempered by community sentiment and the interpretations of the state supreme courts. During the late antebellum period steady pressure built up to reform the slave codes in order to protect slave family life and to check glaring abuses of the slave's person. The purpose and effect of this amelioration in practice and at law was not to pave the way to freedom, but to consolidate the system from within and without. Like all liberal reformism it aimed to strengthen the social system.

For the planters these trends formed part of a developing world view within which paternalism became the specific manifestation of class consciousness. Paternalism did not mean

kindness or generosity or love, although it embraced some of each; essentially it meant a special notion of duty and responsibility toward one's charges. Arbitrary power, harshness toward disobedience, even sadism, constituted its other side. For our immediate purposes, paternalism and the trend of treatment are especially noteworthy in confronting the slave with a world in which resistance could be quickly, severely and legitimately punished, whereas obedience placed him in a position to benefit from the favor of a master who more often than not had a genuine interest in his welfare. The picture of the docile and infantilized Sambo, drawn and analyzed so brilliantly by Stanley M. Elkins, is one-sided, but he is not far from the mark when he argues that the Southern regime greatly encouraged acceptance of and dependence upon despotic authority.⁶ Elkins errs in thinking that the Sambo personality arose only in the United States, for it arose wherever slavery existed. He does not err in thinking that it was especially marked and extensive in the United States, where recourse to armed resistance was minimal and the tradition of paternalism took such firm root.

To say that slaves generally accommodated is not to say that they were so dehumanized as to be incapable of all forms of protest. Historians are quick to claim rebelliousness every time a slave broke a plow or stole a hog, but at least some room might be left for lack of initiative, thoughtlessness, stupidity and venality. Yet, we do know of enough instances of deliberate acts of day-to-day resistance to permit us to speak of a strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction and hostility, the manifestations of which require analysis.

One of the more prominent and irritating habits of recalcitrant slaves was stealing. Plundering the hog pen and the smokehouse was an especially happy pastime. Radical and liberal historians have taken particular delight in insisting that slaves might "steal" from each other but only "took" from their masters. After all, their labor being unpaid, they only took that which was rightfully theirs. I can understand this viewpoint from liberals because I can understand almost anything from liberals; I cannot understand it from Marxists. Since Marxists regard all surplus value as deriving from unpaid labor

time, we ought, by the same logic, to be delighted every time a worker commits robbery at his plant. I do not wish to discuss the general problem of ethics in relation to class oppression, but I do insist that the encouragement given by the slave system to thefts had dangerous effects on the slaves themselves. The slaves understood the link between conventional morality and the civilized behavior of the whites; by rejecting that morality they registered a protest, but they simultaneously underscored their own isolation from that standard of civilization. Few masters got upset over slave thefts. They expected their slaves to steal, and by doing so, the slaves accepted their master's image of themselves.

Southern folklore abounds with charming stories of slaves outwitting masters by behaving like black versions of the Good Soldier Schweik. The trouble is that too often the masters enjoyed being outwitted in the same way that a tyrannical father sometimes enjoys being outwitted by a child. Every contortion necessary to the job implied inferiority. It proved the slave a clever fellow; it hardly proved him a man. It gained a few privileges or crumbs but undermined self-respect and confirmed the master's sense of superiority. The postslavery tradition of obsequiousness, indirection and the wearing of a mask before white men has played a similar role in the South ever since.

Arson and the mishandling of tools stand out as more positively rebellious acts. As expressions of frustration and resentment they are understandable, and might, in a general context of rebellion, have had considerable social value. As it was, they amounted to individual and essentially nihilistic thrashing about. With luck a few slaves might do enough damage to ruin a planter, in which case he would be forced to sell out and perhaps have to break up slave families and friendships. Advocates of the philosophy of "burn-baby-burn," whether on a Mississippi plantation in the 1850's or in a Northern ghetto in the 1960's, would do well to bear in mind that of necessity it is primarily the blacks who get burned. On occasion a slave took direct action against a particularly unpleasant master or overseer and killed him. For that manly act he would, if lucky, be hanged.

As we review these actions, which by no means exhaust the range, we find the formation of a tradition of recalcitrance but not revolution, action but not politics, dim awareness of oppression but not cumulative, ideological growth. Thus, whereas most slaves came out of slavery with a psychology of dependence conditioned by paternalism, the most active spirits came out having learned little more than that they could get away with individual acts of undirected, misdirected or naively directed violence. What was missing was that sense of group consciousness, collective responsibility and joint political effort which is the essence of a revolutionary tradition.

The formation of class leadership presents another side of this development. Legend has it that house slaves and drivers, by virtue of their special positions, arrayed themselves on the side of the master against the field hands, who as the most oppressed were of course the most revolutionary and pure. Examination of plantation documents casts grave doubts on this legend. Few plantations were big enough to carry a staff of servants large enough to constitute a separate caste. Even then the social life of the plantation proved too enticing for them to maintain total separation. With much of their everyday world conditioned by contacts with field slaves, they could ill-afford to be wholly on the side of the whites. The range of behavior was wide, but there were many instances of identification and sympathy.

The drivers, or slave foremen, present an even clearer case. These men often dominated the everyday life of the plantation. On the whole masters trusted them more than they trusted their white overseers; overseers came and went after a year or two, but drivers usually stayed on in positions of authority for many years. Masters relied on their drivers to tell them if an overseer was too lax or too harsh and if the hands respected him. Rarely did a planter take his overseer's word against that of a trusted driver. Some drivers undoubtedly were themselves severe taskmasters who lorded it over their fellow slaves, but drivers, too, had no social life apart from that of the slave quarters and had to live with the others. In general, they compromised as best they could between the master to whom they had pledged loyalty and to whom they were indebted for

special favors, and the slaves who constituted their everyday fellows. Often the driver stood as a protector or interpreter between slave and master or overseer. Drivers and house slaves often, although certainly not always, comprised a leading stratum in the eyes of the blacks as well as in the eyes of the whites.

In the Caribbean these privileged slaves led revolts; in the United States they served as agents of accommodation. Toussaint L'Ouverture was only the most prominent of insurrectionary leaders who had been trained to leadership within the system. The problem in the United States was not that the system did not create such privileged strata, nor that these strata were more docile or less courageous than those in the Caribbean. The problem was that the total environment reduced the possibilities for successful insurrection virtually to zero, and therefore made accommodationists out of the most high-spirited slave leaders. When the mass exodus from the plantations took place during the War for Southern Independence, drivers and house slaves often led their people to the Union lines. Not docility but lack of a tradition of armed resistance conditioned their leadership.

Potential recruitment of insurrectionary leaders was hampered by many other circumstances, of which three are especially noteworthy. For reasons already indicated little anti-Christian religious sentiment could develop. Religion (Islam, voodoo, or Afro-Catholic syncretisms) proved to be an essential ingredient in slave cohesion and organized resistance throughout the hemisphere, but in the United States the enforced prevalence of Protestant Christianity played an opposite role. The second group of potential leaders recruited from all strata were those who had sufficient strength, daring and resourcefulness to flee. The runaways are black folk heroes, with good reason, but they also drained the best elements out of the slave class. In much of Brazil and the Caribbean runaways had nowhere to go except into the back country to form maroon colonies, the existence of which encouraged slave disorder and resistance. Finally, the free blacks and mulattoes in the United States had little opportunity for self-development and rarely could or would provide leadership to slaves. Elsewhere in the hemisphere, where whites were relatively few, these free blacks and mulattoes were

needed to fill a wide variety of social and economic functions. Often they prospered as a middle class. In some cases, feelings of racial solidarity or, as in Haiti, the racist stupidity of the whites, led them into partial identification with the cause of black freedom. Thus, with the exception of a rare Nat Turner, black leadership fell to those whose position within the plantation itself encouraged accommodation and negated the possibilities of effective political organization.

The War for Southern Independence brought these tendencies to a head. The staggering truth is that not one full-scale slave revolt broke out during a war in which local white police power had been drastically reduced. In only a few isolated cases did slaves drive off their masters and divide the land among themselves. Many, perhaps most, struck for freedom by fleeing to Union lines at the first opportunity. The attitude of the slaves toward the federals varied, but the great majority welcomed them with an adulation, trust and dependence that suggests the full force of the old paternalism.⁷ Many blacks, free and slaves, Northern and Southern, entered the Union Army, where despite humiliating discrimination they gave a creditable account of themselves in action.

For all that, the record of the slaves and ex-slaves during the war constituted a disaster. Having relied previously on the protection and guidance of their masters, they now threw themselves on the mercies of the Union Army. As might be expected, untold thousands died in and out of virtual concentration camps, countless women were raped by Union troops, black soldiers generally found themselves used as menials or cannon fodder. Many decent and selfless white and black abolitionists accompanied the Union Army South and earnestly worked to educate and organize the freedmen; they deserve all the praise and attention historians are now heaping on them. The fact remains that no black movement and only a weak black leadership emerged from the war.

As the war years passed into the period of Reconstruction, these patterns were reinforced. The blacks could and did fight for their rights, but rarely under their own leadership. When they offered armed resistance under competent leadership they did well enough, but mostly they relied on the leadership of

white politicians, or on the protection of federal troops, or on the advice of their own inexperienced leaders who in turn relied on whites. As Vernon Lane Wharton has observed, "The lesson learned was that the Negroes, largely unarmed, economically dependent, and timid and unresourceful after generations of servitude, would offer no effective resistance to violence."⁸ When Whitelaw Reid asked black school children what they would do if someone tried to reenslave them, most responded that the troops would not permit it. No wonder Northern public opinion asked contemptuously in 1875 why a black majority in Mississippi constantly had to call for outside help.

The blacks sealed their own fate by relying on the protection of others. The Republican Party, the Union Army and the Freedman's Bureau all took on the role of protectors, but, if anything, the new paternalism proved much more flimsy and more insincere than the old. The best illustration may be found in the history of the Republican-sponsored, largely black militias. Ex-slaves, urged on and even threatened by their women, who were generally more militant than the men, responded to the calls of Republican governors and filled the ranks of state militias, which were put to effective use in guaranteeing Republican electoral victories. In several instances, especially toward the end of Reconstruction, militia units opposed each other on behalf of rival Republican factions. In the most appalling of these instances, the so-called Brooks-Baxter War in Arkansas in 1874, the Republican machine so discredited itself that the Democrats soon rode back to power. As Otis A. Singletary has sardonically observed, "The Negroes had been called to arms to fight in behalf of two white claimants for the governorship, as a consequence of which the Negro was eliminated as a political factor in Arkansas."⁹ In Mississippi the radical governor, Adelbert Ames, called the blacks to arms in 1875 to counter Democratic violence, and then lost his nerve and disarmed them in return for a worthless pledge from the opposition. Significantly the black politicians in his party almost unanimously opposed using the black troops in a showdown. The militia movement failed because it faced greater force, but no less because its leaders were never willing to see

it steeled in battle, especially in defense of specifically black interests.

In other respects the Reconstruction experience followed parallel lines. In the famous Sea Island experiment the blacks placed their trust in white generals, some of whom meant well and tried hard but could not prevail in the face of Washington's duplicity. When the old plantation owners returned with federal support, the blacks protested but ultimately accepted defeat without recourse to arms. Here, as with the militias, the masses seem to have been well ahead of their leaders. Demands for resistance were heard, anti-white feeling was manifest and the desire for land grew apace, but the leadership proved timid or mortgaged, and action independent of whites was deemed impractical. Black Congressmen and state legislators rarely fought for basic black interests and even opposed disfranchisement of ex-Confederate whites. With no powerful separate organizations and paramilitary units, without experience in leading their masses, they temporized and collapsed. Their fault did not lie in having coalesced with Northern whites, but in having coalesced from a position of weakness, without independent demands, organization and force. The masses moved sharply to the left and expressed an intense desire for land, but the old pattern persisted; they could not cut loose from accommodating leaders and from dependence on the ultimate authority of the whites. They did not so much demand, much less fight for, land, as they hoped it would be given them as a Christmas present.

The black leaders saw the duplicity of their white Republican allies, but had nowhere to go. Most had been Northerners or privileged Southern mulattoes; their links with the masses had never been firm. When election time arrived they swallowed their doubts and frustrations and, with the best of intentions, lied to their people. Without adequate traditions and without confidence in their masses they made the best deals they could. This lying carried on an old habit. Every slave, at some time or other, would outwit the white folks by pretending to be stupid or docile; unfortunately too often he simultaneously outwitted himself. When carried into slave leadership, it was generally impossible to outwit the whites without also out-

witting the blacks. During the war, for example, the respected black pastor of a Baptist Church in Virginia offered a prayer for the victory of Confederate arms. Subsequently he was berated by his deacons for betraying the cause of the slaves, but he pacified them by saying, "Don't worry children; the Lord knew what I was talking about."¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the Lord did, but the good pastor apparently never wondered whether or not his flock did also.

Some of the Reconstruction leaders simply sold out. As a distinguished South Carolina planter noted, they promised their people land and mules at every election but delivered only offices and jobs for themselves and their friends.¹¹ (Any resemblance to the War on Poverty is not of my making.)

Slavery and its aftermath left the blacks in a state of acute economic and cultural backwardness, with weak family ties and the much-discussed matriarchal preponderance. They also left a tradition of accommodation to paternalistic authority on the one hand, and a tradition of nihilistic violence on the other. Not docility or infantilization, but innocence of organized effort and political consciousness plagued the black masses and kept plaguing them well into the twentieth century. As a direct result of these effects and of the virtually unchallenged hegemony of the slaveholders, the blacks had little opportunity to develop a sense of their own worth and had every opportunity to learn to despise themselves. The inability of the men during and after slavery to support their families adequately, and especially to protect their women from rape or abuse without forfeiting their own lives, has merely served as the logical end of an emasculating process.

The remarkable ascendancy of Booker T. Washington after the post-Reconstruction reaction must be understood against this background. We need especially to account for his enormous influence over the black nationalists who came after him. Washington tried to meet the legacy of slavery on its own terms. He knew that slavery had ill-prepared his people for political leadership; he therefore retreated from political demands. He knew that slavery had rendered manual labor degrading; he therefore preached the gospel of hard work. He knew that slavery had undermined the family and elementary

moral standards; he therefore preached the whole gamut of middle-class virtues and manners. He knew his people had never stood on their own feet and faced the whites as equals; he therefore preached self-reliance and self-help. Unhappily, apart from other ideological sins, he saw no way to establish self-reliance and self-respect except under the financial and social hegemony of the white upper classes. Somehow he meant to destroy the effects of paternalism in the long run by strengthening paternalism in the short run. It would be easy to say that he failed because of this tactic, but there is no way to be sure that the tactic was wrong in principle. He failed for other reasons, one of which was his reliance on the paternalistic, conservative classes at a time when they were rapidly losing power in the South to racist agrarian demagogues.

Washington's rivals did not, in this respect, do much better. The leaders of the NAACP repeatedly returned to a fundamental reliance on white leadership and money. Even Du Bois, in his classic critique of Washington, argued:

While it is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group, he cannot hope for great success.¹²

The differences between these militants and Washington's conservatives concerned emphases, tactics and public stance much more than ideological fundamentals. The differences were important, but their modest extent was no less so. The juxtaposition of the two tendencies reveals how little could be done even by the most militant without white encouragement and support. The wonder is that black Americans survived the ghastly years between 1890 and 1920 at all. Survival—and more impressive, growing resistance to oppression—came at the price of continuing many phases of a paternalistic tradition that had already sapped the strength of the masses.

The conflict between Washington and Du Bois recalled many earlier battles between two tendencies that are still with us. The first has accepted segregation at least temporarily, has stressed the economic development of the black community and has advocated self-help. This tendency generally prevailed

during periods of retrogression in race relations until the upsurge of nationalism in our own day. Washington was its prophet; black nationalism has been its outcome. The second has demanded integration, has stressed political action and has demanded that whites recognize their primary responsibility. Frederick Douglass was its prophet; the civil rights movement has been its outcome. Yet, the lines have generally been blurred. Du Bois often sounded like a nationalist, and Washington probably would have thought Malcolm X a madman.¹³ This blurring reflects the dilemma of the black community as a whole and of its bourgeoisie in particular: How do you integrate into a nation that does not want you? How do you separate from a nation that finds you too profitable to release?

To probe the relationship between this past and the recent upsurge of the black masses requires more speculation and tentative judgment than one would like, but they cannot be avoided. Let us, at the risk of being schematic and one-sided, select several features of the developments of the last few decades and especially of the recent crisis for such analysis. In doing so let us bear in mind that the majority of blacks today live outside the South; that they are primarily urban, not rural, in all parts of the country; that whole cities are on the way to becoming black enclaves; that the problem increasingly centers on the urban North and West.¹⁴ Let us bear in mind also that the only large-scale, organized black mass movements until recently have been nationalist. Garvey commanded an organization of hundreds of thousands; the Muslims have tens of thousands and influence many more. No integrationist organization has ever acquired such numerical strength; none has ever struck such deep roots in the black ghettos.

Garvey's movement emphasized blackness as a thing of beauty, and struggled to convince the black masses to repudiate white leadership and paternalism. The pompous titles, offices, uniforms and parades did and do evoke ridicule, but their importance lay, as Edmund David Cronon says, "in restoring the all but shattered Negro self-confidence." There was enormous ideological significance in Garvey's delightful description of a light-skinned mulatto opponent as "a white man passing for Negro."¹⁵

A decisive break with the white man's church, if not wholly with his religion, has formed a major part of black nationalist thinking. In view of the central role of anti-Christian ideology in the slave risings of Brazil and the Caribbean and the generally accommodationist character of American Christianity, this has been a rational response to a difficult problem. Garvey tried to organize his own African Orthodox Church. The Islamic tendency, including Elijah Muhammed's Nation of Islam, has followed the maxim of Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Movement, "Before you can have a God, you must have a nationality." Garvey's Black Jesus and Muhammed's Allah have had many attributes of a tribal deity. Of special importance in Muhammed's teaching is his decidedly un-Islamic denial of an afterlife. In this way Black Muslim eschatology embodies a sharp reaction against accommodationist ideology. The tendency to turn away from the white man's religion has taken many forms, including conversion to Catholicism ostensibly because of its lack of a color line. In Catholic Brazil, on the other hand, an equivalent reason is given by blacks who embrace Protestantism.¹⁶

Black Protestants in the United States have largely attended self-segregated churches since Reconstruction. With the collapse of Reconstruction these churches, especially in the South, played an increasingly accommodationist role, but they also served as community centers, protective agencies, marriage counseling committees and leadership training schools. As objective conditions changed, so did many ministers, especially the younger ones. One of the great ironies of the current struggle for integration has been the leading role played by ministers whose training and following have been made possible by segregated organizations. The experience of the Protestant churches and their anti-Christian rivals brings us back to slavery's legacy of accommodationist but by no means necessarily treasonable leadership, of an absence of collective effort, of paternalistically-induced dependence and of emasculation. Theoretically, a militant mass leadership could have arisen from sources other than enforced segregation; historically there seems to have been no other way.¹⁷

The first difficulty with the integrationist movement arises

not from its ultimate commitment, which may or may not be desirable, but from the determined opposition of the whites, whose hostility to close association with blacks recedes slowly if at all. Integration may only mean desegregation, and outstanding black intellectuals like Killens and Baldwin insist that that is all they want it to mean; it need not mean assimilation. In fact, however, the line is difficult to hold, and segregationists probably do not err in regarding one as the prelude to the other. In any case, de facto segregation in education and housing is growing worse, and many of the professed goals of the civil rights movement look further away than ever. Communities like Harlem face substantially the same social problems today as they did forty years ago.¹⁸ I need not dwell on the worsening problem of black unemployment and its implications.

Even where progress, however defined, occurs, the frustration of the black masses deepens. The prosperity of recent decades has widened the gap between blacks and whites even of the same class. The rise of the African peoples has inspired blacks here but has also threatened to open a gap in political power and dignity between Africans and Afro-Americans.¹⁹

The resistance of whites and the inflexibility of the social system constitute only half the problem. A. James Gregor, in an article published in *Science & Society* in 1963, analyzes an impressive body of sociological and psychological literature to demonstrate that integration under the disorderly conditions of American capitalist life more often than not undermines the development and dignity of the participating blacks. He shows that the problems of the black masses, in contradistinction to those of the bourgeoisie, become intensified by an integration which, in the nature of things, must pass them by. As Gregor demonstrates, black nationalism has been the political reply of these masses and especially of the working class. Similarly, in his honest and thoughtful book, *Crisis in Black and White*, Charles E. Silberman analyzes cases such as that in New Rochelle, in which poor black and rich children had the wonderful experience of integrating in school. Why should anyone be surprised that the experiment proved a catastrophe for the black children, who promptly lost whatever ambition they might have had.²¹

When liberals and academics speak of a "crisis of identity," they may sometimes merely wish to divert attention from the prior fact of oppression, but, by whatever name, that crisis exists. Slavery and its aftermath emasculated the black masses; they are today profoundly sick and shaking with convulsions. It does us no good to observe, with Kardiner and Ovesey, that a psychology of oppression can only disappear when the oppression has disappeared.²² It does us no good to admit that the sickness of white racism is more dangerous than the sickness it has engendered. We face an aroused, militant black community that has no intention of waiting for others to heal themselves. Those who believe that emasculation is the figment of the liberal imagination ought to read the words of any militant leader from David Walker to W.E.B. Du Bois, from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, from Robert F. Williams to Malcolm X. The cry has been to assert manhood and renounce servility. Every outstanding black intellectual today—Killens, Baldwin, Ellison—makes the point in one way or another. Let me quote only one, Ossie Davis on the death of Malcolm X:

[Negroes knew] that Malcolm—whatever else he was or was not—*Malcolm was a man!*

White folks do not need anybody to remind them that they are men. We do! This was his one incontrovertible benefit to his people. Protocol and common sense require that Negroes stand back and let the white man speak up for us, defend us, and lead us from behind the scene in our fight. This is the essence of Negro politics. But Malcolm said to hell with that! Get up off your knees and fight your own battles. That's the way to win back your self-respect. That's the way to make the white man respect you. And if he won't let you live like a man, he certainly can't keep you from dying like one.²³

Is it any wonder, then, that Dr. King could write, almost as a matter of course, that the blacks of Birmingham during the summer of 1963 shook off 300 years of psychological slavery and found out their own worth?²⁴ It is no less instructive that his aide, the Reverend Wyatt T. Walker, denounced as "hoodlums" and "winos" those who responded to the attempt on

King's life by attacking the white racists. King himself put it bluntly when he pleaded that the black militant be allowed to march and sit-in, "If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence."²⁵

King and his followers apparently believe that concerted action for integration can cure the ills engendered by slavery and subsequent oppression and break down discrimination at the same time. In one sense they are right. Their greatest achievement has been to bring order and collective effort to a people who had learned little of the necessity for either. But King must deliver victory or face grave consequences. As we have seen, not all slaves and freedmen yielded meekly to the oppressor. Many fought, sometimes with great ferocity, but they generally fought by lashing out rather than by organized revolutionary effort. It would be the crowning irony if the civil rights movement has taught just enough of the lesson of collective effort to guarantee greater and more widespread nihilism in the wake of its inability to realize its program.

More and more young black radicals are currently poring over Frantz Fanon's psychopathic panegyric to violence. Fanon argues that violence frees the oppressor from his inferiority complex and restores his self-respect.²⁶ Perhaps, but it is also the worst way to do either. Black Americans, like colonials, have always resorted to violence without accomplishing those goals. A slave who killed his overseer did not establish his manhood thereby—any wild animal can kill—he merely denied his docility. Violence can serve Fanon's purpose only when it is collective and disciplined—that is, political—but then it is precisely the collective effort, not the violence, that does the healing.²⁷

The legend of black docility threatens to betray those who perpetuate it. They are ill-prepared for the yielding of one side of the slave tradition—accommodation and servility—to the other side—antisocial and nihilistic action. The failure of integration and the lawlessness to which the blacks have for so long been subjected and subject combine to produce that result. James Baldwin and Malcolm X, especially in his remarks on the prestige of the ghetto hustler, have each warned of

this danger. Bayard Rustin has made a similar point with gentle irony:

From the point of view of motivation, some of the healthiest Negro youngsters I know are juvenile delinquents: vigorously pursuing the American Dream of material acquisition and status, yet finding the conventional means of attaining it blocked off, they do not yield to defeatism but resort to illegal (and sometimes ingenious) methods. They are not alien to American culture.²⁹

Those historians who so uncritically admire the stealing of hogs and smashing of plows by slaves might consider its modern equivalent. In the words of Silberman:

There are other means of protest, of course: misbehaving in school, or dropping out of school altogether; not showing up for work on time, or not showing up at all (and lying about the reason); breaking school windows or ripping telephone receivers out of outdoor phone booths; or the oldest form of protest of all, apathy—a flat refusal to cooperate with the oppressor or to accept his moral code.³⁰

Black nationalism, in its various manifestations, constitutes a necessary response on the part of the black masses. The Muslims, for example, have understood the inner needs of the working-class blacks who have filled their ranks and have understood the futility—for these people at least—of integrationist hopes. Their insistence on the forcible assertion of a dignified, disciplined, collectively responsible black community represents a rational response to a harsh reality.³¹ We need not dwell on what is unrealistic, romantic or even reactionary in the Nation of Islam or other nationalist groups; they are easy to see. Ralph Bunche, in his radical days, Gunnar Myrdal and many others have for years pointed out that the idea of a separate black economy is a will-o-the-wisp and that the idea of a separate territory is less than that. Yet I am not sure how to answer Marc Schleifer who in 1963 asked whether these goals were less realistic than those of equality under capitalism or a socialist revolution in the foreseeable future.³² I am not sure,

either, that Malcolm X, Harold W. Cruse and Stokely Carmichael have not been wiser than their Marxist critics in demanding black ownership of everything in Harlem.³³ Such ownership will do little toward the creation of a black economy, but many of its advocates are easily bright enough to know as much. The point is that it may, as Malcolm X suggested, play a decisive role in the establishment of community stability and self-respect.

The black struggle for equality in America has always had two tendencies—integrationist and separatist—and it is likely to retain both. Since a separate economy and national territory are not serious possibilities, the struggle for economic integration will undoubtedly be pressed forward. For this reason alone some degree of unity between the civil rights and nationalist tendencies may be expected. The black bourgeoisie and its allied stratum of skilled and government clerical workers will certainly continue its fight for integration, but the interest of the black workers in this fight is, at bottom, even greater. At the same time there will clearly be serious defeats, as well as some victories, and the slogan "Freedom Now!" may soon turn to ashes.

The cumulative problems of past and present nonetheless demand urgent action. The assertion of black hegemony in specific cities and districts—nationalism if you will—offers the only politically realistic hope of transcending the slave heritage. First, it seems the only way for black communities to police themselves, to curb antisocial elements and to enforce adequate health and housing standards, and yet break with paternalism and instill pride and a sense of worth. Second, it seems the best way to build a position of strength from which to fight for a proper share of jobs and federal funds as a matter of right not privilege. Black nationalism may yet prove to be the only force capable of restraining the impulse to violence, of disciplining black rebelliousness and of absorbing the nihilistic tradition into a socially constructive movement. If this seems like a conservative rendering of an ostensibly revolutionary movement, I can only answer that there are no ingredients for a successful, independent black revolution, and that black nationalism can ultimately go only a few steps further to the left than the white masses. The rise of specifically black cities, counties and dis-

tricts with high quality black schools, well paid teachers, as well as political leaders, churches and community centers, could and should uproot the slave tradition once and for all, could and should act as a powerful lever for structural reform of the American economy and society.

I do not offer these remarks as a program for a black movement, for the time is past when white men can offer programs to black militants. They are, happily, no longer listening. But I do submit that they are relevant to the formation of a program for ourselves—for the American left. If this analysis has merit, the demands of the black community will increasingly swing away from the traditional appeal to federal power and toward the assertion of local and regional autonomy. Even now Bayard Rustin and others warn that federal troops can only preserve the status quo. I should observe, further, that the appeals to Washington reflect the convergence of two powerful and debilitating traditions: slave-engendered paternalistic dependence and the growing state paternalism of white America. Let us admit that the naive fascination of leftists for centralized power has, since the 1930's, greatly strengthened this tendency. With such labels as "progressive" and even "socialist," corporate liberalism has been building what William Appleman Williams has aptly called a nonterroristic totalitarian society. Yet American socialism has never even posed a theoretical alternative. When Professor Williams called for a program of regional and local reassertion and opposition to centralization, he was dismissed by most radicals as a Utopian of doubtful mental competence. We may now rephrase his question: How do we propose to support an increasingly nationalistic black radicalism, with its demands for local hegemony, unless we have an ideology and program of opposition to the centralization of state power?

The possible courses for the black liberation movement include a total defeat in an orgy of violence (we ought to remember that there is nothing inevitable in its or our victory), a compromise with imperialism in return for some degree of local rule or the integration of its bourgeois strata, and the establishment of black power on the basis of a developing opposition to American capitalism. Since its future depends to a great extent on the progress of its integrationist struggle for a

place in the economy, the black community must for a while remain well to the left of the current liberal consensus by its demands for public works and structural reform. But reform could occur under the auspices of an expansion rather than a contraction of state centralization, and the most militant of the black leaders may have to settle for jobs and local political control in return for allegiance to a consolidating national and international empire. The final result will be decided by the struggle within white America, with the blacks playing the role of an increasingly independent ally for one or another tendency. Notwithstanding some offensive and pretentious rhetoric, the advocates of black power have judged their position correctly. They are determined to win control of the ghettos, and we would be foolish not to bet on them. The use to which they put that power, however, depends not on our good wishes or on their good intentions, but on what they are offered as a *quid pro quo*. For American socialism the black revolt opens an opportunity for relevance that has been missing for decades. What we do with that opportunity, as the leaders of SNCC have rather rudely reminded us, is our problem, not theirs.

FOOTNOTES

1. Aptheker, Herbert, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943, 1963).
2. Carneiro, Edison, *O Quilombo dos Palmares, 1630-1695* (Sao Paulo, 1947).
3. Cf., Abbé Ignace Etienne, "La Secte musulmane des Malès du Brésil et leur révolte en 1835," *Anthropos*, IV (1909), 99-105; 405-415.
4. Cf., esp. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (2nd ed., rev.; New York, 1963), which deserves to rank as a classic of Marxian historiography but has been largely ignored, perhaps because of the author's Trotskyist politics.
5. For example, Palmares was established by Angolans. See "Carta do Governador Fernao de Souza Coutinho . . ." in Ernesto Ennes, *As Guerras nos Palmares* (Sao Paulo, 1938), pp. 133-138, Nina Rodrigues, *Os Africanos no Brasil* (3rd ed., Sao Paulo, 1945), Ch. III.
6. Elkins, Stanley M., *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), esp. Ch. III.
7. Wiley, Bell Irvin, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865* (New Haven, 1965; first pub., 1938), esp. pp. 14-15.
8. Wharton, Vernon Lane, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1900* (New York, 1965; first pub. 1947), p. 190.

9. Singletary, Otis A., *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (Austin, 1952), p. 65.
10. Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, p. 107.
11. Manigault, Charles, "Souvenirs of Our Ancestors & of My Immediate Family," ca. 1873. Ms. in the Manigault Papers, University of North Carolina.
12. Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt, *The Soul of Black Folk* (New York, 1964; first pub. 1903), p. 53.
13. For the period 1890-1915 see August Meier's careful and illuminating *Negro Thought in America: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (New York, 1964).
14. For a perceptive discussion of these trends see Charles F. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White* (New York, 1964), esp. pp. 7, 29-31.
15. Cronon, Edmund David, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, 1955, 1964), p. 174. It was never Garvey's intention to send all blacks back to Africa; he wanted a strong African nation to serve as a protector to blacks everywhere. See esp. the interview with Garvey in James Weinstein, ed., "Black Nationalism: The Early Debate," *Studies on the Left*, IV, no. 3 (1964), pp. 50-58.

The idea of black nationality in America stretches back to the beginnings of the nineteenth century, if not earlier. See esp. Herbert Aptheker, "Consciousness of Negro Nationality to 1900," *Toward Negro Freedom* (New York, 1956), pp. 104-111; also, Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York, 1964), p. 157.

16. Bastide, Roger, and Fernandes, Florestan, *Branços e negros em Sao Paulo* (2nd ed.; Sao Paulo, 1959), p. 254.
17. This recent experience, especially of SCLC, reveals the legacy of the past in other ways as well. Louis E. Lomax has criticized Dr. King for organizational laxness and has related the problems of the SCLC to the structure of the Baptist Church, "The Negro Baptist Church is a nonorganization. Not only is each congregation a sovereign body, dictated to by no one, but it would appear that the members who come together and form a Baptist Church are held together only by their mutual disdain for detailed organization and discipline." *The Negro Revolt* (New York, 1962), p. 86. As a result, according to Lomax, the SCLC is a loose, scattered organization that mobilizes itself only with great difficulty. Lomax makes good points but fails to note the extent to which this weakness flows from the entire history of black America and especially the black South. With justice, one could argue that the remarkable strength of SCLC in the face of this amorphousness is a singular tribute to Dr. King's political genius. He has mobilized masses who are ill-prepared for the kind of puritanical discipline preached by Elijah Muhammed.
18. Osofsky, Gilbert, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York, 1966), p. 179.
19. See the perceptive remarks on these two kinds of gaps in Oscar Handlin, *Fire-Bell in the Night: The Crisis in Civil Rights* (Boston, 1964), pp. 21-22, 53; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston, 1961), p. 45; and James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1964), pp. 105-106.

20. Gregor, A. James, "Black Nationalism: A Preliminary Analysis of Negro Radicalism," *Science & Society*, XXVII (Fall 1963), 415-432.
21. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White*, p. 298. Even under more favorable conditions, as John Oliver Killens has noted, black children in the South often have a feeling of belonging that is undermined when they move north. *Black Man's Burden* (New York, 1965), pp. 84-85.
22. Kardiner, Abram, and Ovesey, Lionel, *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro* (New York, 1951, 1962), p. 387.
23. Davis, Ossie, "On Malcolm X," in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1965), p. 453.
24. King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), p. 111.
25. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White*, pp. 122, 199.
26. Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1965). But see also two good critiques in *Studies on the Left*, VI, no. 3 (May-June, 1966): Samuel Rohdie, "Liberation and Violence in Algeria," pp. 83-89, and esp. A. Norman Klein, "On Revolutionary Violence," pp. 62-82.
27. The warning of so humane and sensitive a man as Killens on this matter is worth quoting:

The advocates of absolute non-violence have reckoned without the psychological needs of Black America. Let me state it plainly: There is in many Negroes a deep need to practice violence against their white tormentors. *Black Man's Burden*, p. 113.

The Muslims understand this very well, as does Dr. King; they try to substitute internal discipline and collective effort for the violence itself.

28. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 35-37; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, pp. 315-316.
29. Rustin, Bayard, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," in F. L. Broderick and A. Meier, eds., *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis, 1965), p. 410.
30. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White*, pp. 47-48.
31. The best study of the Muslims is E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America* (New York, 1964). Elijah Muhammed has demonstrated remarkable awareness of the persistence of the slave tradition, even in its most elusive forms. His denunciation of black conspicuous consumption, for example, correctly views it as essentially a reflection of the mores of the slaveholders and counterposes to it standards that recall those of revolutionary petty-bourgeois puritanism.
32. Schleifer, Marc, "Socialism and the Negro Movement," *Monthly Review*, XV (Sept. 1963), pp. 225-228.
33. For a suggestive theoretical defense of such a demand see Harold W. Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," *Studies on the Left*, II, no. 3 (1962), 12-25; and his subsequent communication in III, no. 1 (1962), esp. p. 70. See also *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, p. 318.

