

Slavery Then And Now

Henry George

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A broad-minded and warm hearted lady, the daughter of a man who did good service in the anti-slavery cause, at a time when to stand up against slavery was to incur obloquy and reproach, takes exception to some expressions she has met with in THE STANDARD, in which the results of that system of industrial slavery which comes from making private property of land are spoken of as in some respects even worse than that system of chattel slavery which prevailed in our southern states. She says:

In one particular only was the condition of the chattel slave better than that of the most degraded of the wage workers of today—he had fresh air, but that was owing to the fact that he was an agricultural laborer, and worked neither in mines nor in factories. In every other respect his state was worse. That it was not utterly intolerable was owing to individual benevolence; to the fact that men are often better than their class. The alleviations of industrial slavery are owing to the same cause. Witness the hospitals, asylums, reformatories, schools and charitable societies of all kinds, besides the private help which all but a selfish few of the rich extend to their poorer neighbors. The fact that much, perhaps most, of this aid comes originally from the pockets of the beneficiaries is true of both systems of slavery, and the fact that justice is preferable to charity is as true in the case of the black man as in the case of the white.

But let us put aside for a few moments the question of the material surroundings and physical condition of the two classes of slaves; let us think of them as human beings, not as animals; let us compare their mental and moral status, the chances for growth of their minds and souls. You yourself, advocating a higher standard of living for the wage worker, remind us that we “do not live by bread alone.” The law provides for the education of the industrial slave; the law provided for the ignorance of the chattel slave; the law encourages religious societies for the one, forbade them for the other: the law protects the domestic rights of the first, denied that the second had any. Industrial slaves may associate, they may travel, they may agitate for their betterment. You will see from the extracts I will give later how impossible this was for the black slave of the south.

Then my correspondent goes on to recall that the experience of sugar and cotton planters proved it more profitable to use up a gang of negroes every seven or eight years than to work them moderately, and to quote the colonial laws of South Carolina which prohibited the working of slaves for more than fifteen hours a day, from the 25th of March to the 25th of September, or for more than fourteen hours a day for the rest of the year. She quotes the law of Louisiana, which declared that the master must give the slave one linen shirt and a pair of pantaloons in summer, and one linen shirt, a woolen shirt and a pair of pantaloons in winter, and for food a bag of salt and a barrel of Indian corn, rice or beans every month, while the law of North Carolina provided that a slave should have a quart of corn every day. She also quotes the law of Georgia, which gave the county courts authority to provide for infirm slaves suffering from neglect of their owners and to recover costs from the owners, calling attention to the fact that information had to be given by a white man and evidence taken of white men, and that if the judges granted relief that they could not prove was absolutely needed they had to pay it themselves. She quotes other laws of various states which show: That in some of them for some time only a pecuniary

fine was inflicted for the killing of a slave; and that where the killing of a slave was made murder, exemption was made in the case of a slave dying under “moderate correction,” (which was defined to be “whipping or beating with a horsewhip, switch or small stick, or by putting irons on or confining such slave;”) or in case of any slave resisting his lawful owner or master, or of any outlawed slave. That a slave could be outlawed for running away and concealing himself, or for “killing a hog or other animal of the cattle kind” in order to sustain life. That for striking any white man, except in defense of his master or overseer or their property, a slave could be punished at the discretion of the justice for the first offense, and in some states for the second offense, and in others for the third offense, he could be condemned to death. That if a slave was found beyond his master's plantation without a written permission any one might inflict twenty lashes on him, and if he resisted, kill him. The same punishment might be inflicted if seven slaves were found walking or standing together in a road without a white man. That the punishment of whipping was prescribed if a slave was found carrying a weapon, hunting with dogs, harboring a runaway, loosening a boat or selling any article without a specific ticket from his master. She points out that no colored man could give evidence against a white man, so that any barbarity could be safely inflicted upon a slave if white men were not present. That except in Louisiana, where, under the civil law there was some small restriction upon the separation of families, husband could be torn from wife, and child from mother. That laws were enacted in many of the states to discourage the manumission of slaves, and that the most savage penalties were pronounced against the publishing or circulating of anything having a tendency of exciting slaves or free persons of color to insurrection or resistance.

In Georgia a law forbade any congregation or company of negroes to assemble themselves contrary to the law regulating patrols. And every slave taken at such meetings might, by order of the justice, without trial, receive on the bare back twenty-five stripes with switch, whip, or cowskin. In South Carolina the police were forbidden to break into any place of religious meeting before nine o'clock, provided a majority of the assembly were white persons; if not, every slave present was liable to twenty-five lashes of the cowskin. A planter of San Domingo objected that the belief in a future state should be taught the negroes, as “such knowledge is apt to render them intractable, averse to labor, and induces them to commit suicide on themselves and their children, of which the colony, the state and commerce have equal need.” The legislature of Virginia passed a law in 1831, by which any free colored person undertaking to preach or conduct any religious meeting, by day or night, might be whipped not exceeding thirty-nine lashes, at the discretion of any justice of the peace. The same penalty fell upon any slave or free colored person who attended such meetings; and any slave who listened to any white preacher in the night time received the same punishment. The same law prevailed in Georgia and Mississippi. A master might permit a slave to preach on his own plantation, but only to his own slaves. North Carolina in 1831 passed a law which began: “Whereas, teaching slaves to read and write has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion,” therefore, etc, “teaching a slave to read or write, or giving or selling to a slave any book or pamphlet shall be punished by thirty-nine lashes if the of lender be a free black, or with imprisonment, at the discretion of the court; if a slave, the offense is punishable with thirty-nine lashes on his or her bare back on conviction before a justice of the peace.” Georgia and Louisiana had similar laws. In Virginia, Georgia and North Carolina white persons teaching any colored persons to read or write, gratis or for pay, were to be punished by imprisonment or by fine of ten to five hundred dollars.

My correspondent concludes by saying: The question of the abolition of property in man

and private property in land are one, but in the condition of society the grosser form of evil is first swept away. Never, had chattel slavery remained in force, could the wage slave of to-day have drawn the attention of the world to his wrongs? And it behooves him to remember this, for he was not always and everywhere in favor of freeing his black brother from bondage.

With this I heartily agree. So long as the monstrous wrong which permitted one man to treat the person of another as his property was sanctioned by law and public opinion, it was hardly to be expected that public attention could be called to the monstrous wrong which permits one man to treat as his exclusive property the element on which and from which other men must live, if they are to live at all. The abolition of chattel slavery was not only a necessary preliminary to the abolition of industrial slavery, but by calling attention to first principles and stimulating the sense of natural rights, it gave an impulse which is now beginning to take shape in the anti-poverty movement—a movement which has for its aim the equal freedom of all men. And in these days when ignorance and selfishness so bitterly oppose the further advance of the spirit of liberty, despite the wrongs and horrors of negro slavery, it is well to remember that it not long since had not only the passionate support of the people of the south, but was acquiesced in by the great majority of the people of the north as well.

The coarse, brutal form of slavery which makes labor itself a subject of property is only advantageous to the owner where population is sparse and land is open. Where the available land is all “fenced in,” where there is a body of disinherited men, who, though their right to their own power of labor is legally acknowledged, have no right to anything upon which that power of labor can be exerted have no right, in fact, to as much of the earth as they may stand on or lie down upon, save as they buy from week to week or month to month permission to use it—then the possession of the passive factor of production, land, gives as efficient and much more economical a command of the active factor, labor, as the actual legal ownership of men, with all its incidental powers of restraint and punishment. Thirty years ago the owner of a thousand slaves in Georgia or Mississippi would be at this time of the year enjoying himself in a northern watering place or in Europe, living in luxurious idleness upon the difference between what the labor of his slaves produced and what he was obliged to return to them in the way of food, clothing, shelter, medical attendance, overseers to keep them at work, and expenses of recapture if they ran away. Chattel slavery has now been abolished in the United States, but men of the same kind are living in luxury at watering places or in Europe, without doing any work themselves, by virtue of the ownership of city lots, agricultural lands or mineral resources, for the use of which they levy toll upon the produce of labor. In the one case as in the other products and services are obtained without the giving of products or services in return. To extort the labor for which he gave no return and which enabled him to live luxuriously without doing any work, the slave owner of 1857 had the power to flog, to iron and to pursue with bloodhounds. The land owner of 1887 has no need of these powers, for he has all that is necessary in the power of eviction, and how sufficient is that power, where population becomes somewhat dense and land is all “fenced in,” we may see from what it means in such countries as Ireland, where a sentence of eviction has, with little, exaggeration, been said to mean a sentence of death.

The laws to which my correspondent refers as recorded evidence, direct or inferential, of the atrocities of chattel slavery, were necessary parts of the system which gave to one man a right to compel another man to work for his benefit. The slave had to be kept in ignorance, had to be restrained in his liberty of association and movement, had to be denied the right to resist or to testify against a white man, and the master had to be given powers of coercion, whose abuse was

testified to rather than prevented by provisions against maiming, etc, in order to enable the owner of his power to labor (for it was this, and not the person, that the apologists of slavery declared to be the essential subject of ownership), to keep and utilize his property.

But in the form of slavery which results from the monopolization of land no such laws are needed. It is not necessary that the master should compel the slave to work for him, for the slave is driven by his own necessities to sue for permission to work. It is not necessary to provide precautions against his running away, and to make provision for his capture and return, any more than it is to stimulate his industry by the lash, when what the slave most fears is that he may be discharged. The difference between the two systems is precisely that between the method of highwaymen who should compel travelers at the pistol's mouth, or by personal violence, to give up all they had, and the gentler, but quite as efficacious method which might be adopted on a desert road of taking possession of the only well, and leaving the travelers when they came up, the liberty either to die of thirst or to give up all they had for access to water.

If the degradation and cruelty inseparable from the system of chattel slavery seem more striking, it is because the connection between wronger and wronged is closer and more easily recognized. In the master overworking or underfeeding the slave, whipping, chaining or chasing him with bloodhounds; in the slave trader separating husband or wife, or tearing child from mother, or in the slave girl compelled to yield to brutal lust, we recognize the suffering of one individual as the direct result of the wicked greed or passion of another individual, but the degradation and suffering which result from the system of appropriating labor by making property of the passive instead of the active factor of production, seem at first sight to be due, either to the faults of the sufferers themselves, or of their class, or to general causes which we no more associate with conscious human action than we do earthquakes, storms or droughts.

But whoever will trace effect to cause will see in prison and almshouse and brothel and lunatic asylum, in drunkenness and wife beating and baby farming; in the squalor of city slums and the dreary life of the struggling farmer and of the laborer who half the year is a tramp, in low wages and fierce competition for employment; in children forced to work in factory or coal breaker when they ought to be at play, and in all the vice and crime and bitter suffering that flow from poverty and the dread of poverty, the results of the wrong which makes that element on which and from which all must live the private property of some.

So far as the satisfaction of material needs go, the ordinary condition of the chattel slave of the south was better than that of large classes of so-called free laborers. The power of the owner to overwork, underfeed or maltreat the slave was modified not only by individual benevolence, but by selfish concern for the maintenance in good condition of a piece of valuable property, and by the sense of responsibility and proprietorship, and, in many cases, of attachment, which resulted from the directness of the relation. The chattel slave was lodged more wholesomely than are large numbers of free people in New York; he was not habitually underfed as are large classes of free people in European countries; the mortuary returns of the south did not contain a column for deaths by sheer starvation as do those of the richest city of the world.

If the fact that there were on the statute books of some of the slave states laws prescribing a minimum ration shows at least the recognition of a danger that the chattel slave might not get enough to eat, what do the poor laws of Great Britain and the public and private provision that is made in our free states to keep people from starving indicate?

If the fixing in slave codes of a legal maximum for the day's work of the chattel slave indicated a danger that the cupidity of the master might overwork him, what do the laws in

restraint of the labor of freeborn women and children indicate in regard to the tendencies of industrial slavery? Is it not a fact that free farm-laborers and even free farmers work, when the season permits, as long, and even longer, than the maximum allowed by these slave laws. and that for a bare living? Is it not a fact that in our cities and manufacturing districts men and women can be hired for the bare living which constituted the wages of the slave to work to the extreme limit of human endurance? Do not our various inspection laws testify to the notorious fact that the employers of free labor find it cheaper to use it up and hire fresh labor than to go to the expense of making sanitary provisions and guarding against accidents to life and limb? Is there an occupation so deadly or so dangerous that free laborers cannot be found to engage in it for wages that give only a bare living? If laborers had been worth twelve or fifteen hundred dollars apiece the building of, our new aqueduct would hardly have cost so many lives.

The worst atrocities of southern slavery are matched not only by the horrors of the penal contract system which has grown up since emancipation in many of the southern states, but by the revelations that now and again are made of the conduct of prisons and asylums in other states. And in brief chronicles of destitution, suicide, degradation and crime the newspapers of our great cities daily record the bitterest tragedies.

The very fact that the chattel slaves of the south belonged to a distinctly marked and, as they themselves were accustomed to think, an inferior race, and that they were denied education, made them less sensitive to the evils of their lot. Accustomed to live for the day, and without forethought for the morrow, they were exempt from that racking anxiety to keep "the wolf from the door;" that horrible fear of losing a foothold and falling to a lower depth than fortunes so many in the fierce struggle of what is miscalled free competition.

No one who has experienced, or who will take the trouble to imagine, the awful sense of hopeless desolation that overpowers the man or woman out of work, with no money, with no friends to help, and with no prospect of securing employment, can hesitate to admit that the physical torture which the slave owner had in his power to inflict was as a means of coercion hardly more effective than the mental agony to which the industrial slave can be subjected. Consider the oppressions practiced on women who work for a living, and consider why those oppressions are practiced and endured. On the one hand the employer is driven, by the fierce competition of his business rivals, to seek constantly to secure more work for less wages; on the other, the work woman is whipped into submission by the stinging lash of fear, wielded by the specter of helpless want which constantly pursues her. It may well be questioned if southern slavery has any darker pictures than those drawn by Helen Campbell in her "Prisoners of Poverty."

But it is of little profit to compare the two systems of slavery, with any view of deciding which may be the worst. That which is gone was a rude system of robbing labor suited only to a sparse population and low stage of industry; that which is now developing with increase of population and improvements in the arts, is the system on whose overthrow depends the safety of modern civilization. And it is most instructive and encouraging to note that the same powers of press, pulpit, wealth and ignorance which are now arraying themselves against the abolition of industrial slavery arrayed themselves in the same way, and with the same arguments, against the abolition of chattel slavery.

As for the benevolence which alleviated the lot of chattel slaves, and sometimes made it a

happy one, it is capable of doing harm as well as good in its efforts to merely ameliorate the conditions of those suffering under the present form of slavery. As Father Huntington says in his terrible article on tenement house morality, reprinted from the Forum in THE STANDARD of July 2, "an increased number of the hardest workers in the cause of philanthropy are beginning to question whether all our charitable agencies and institutions, by making the lives of tenement house people just not intolerable, may not be actually increasing the evils they are organized to redress."

And it is certain that all forms of eleemosynary relief, even to the fresh air excursions which, originating here, are now being organized in other cities, are largely destructive of the sense of independence and self respect which the chattel slave did not possess, but which is the foundation of all the virtuous of the free citizen.

In its society column the Journal says:

A new and most praiseworthy fad has seized upon fashionable society this summer, or at least the matron portion of it. This is to invite one, two or half a dozen children from the slums of the city to spend a time at their country houses.

The Newport villas are entertaining a number of these little Arabs at the present time, and there are many scattered about at the seats in Westchester and on Long Island. These children are rarely taken into the bosom of the family, as are the Fresh Air Fund excursionists, but are given over to the care of the gardener and his wife and provided liberally with good food, baths and fun.

The venerable John Jay has entertained a small army of these poor mites since spring. Mrs. Jacob Lorillard, who also has a place in Westchester, has opened her doors, and at Newport Mrs. Paran Stevens, Mrs. Frederic Vanderbilt and Mrs. Wilson are a few among the many who have shown their charity in so excellent a way. A groom is generally sent to entertain and watch the small boys, while a maid takes care of the feminine portion of the party. The fashion is a pretty one, not expensive to people of wealth, and commends itself highly to all those who have any idea of what the babies of the poor suffer during the warm weather.

This pleasant and fashionable "charity fad" may enable the rich to still their consciences by imagining that they are really doing something for the poor; but it may also have some other tendencies. It is like taking little chattel slaves out, giving them a taste of freedom, and then returning them to bondage.

Henry George.