

# The Modernisation of Slavery

By FRANK DUPUIS



**THE CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS** of President Lincoln's emancipation of the negro slaves have been universally acclaimed as though the whole world now accepts the principle of personal freedom, the right of every man to himself, and the exercise of his natural powers at his own risk.

No prominent leader of opinion, however, has noticed the inconsistency of some spokesmen who, together with the demand for civil rights, asked President Kennedy to provide more work for coloured citizens. As slaves they did not suffer from unemployment. Evidently that scourge is now regarded as a natural consequence of freedom. This is remarkable because if early man had appeared before givers of work had been hatched, mankind could never have survived. It looks as if the military victory of the North did not entirely answer the Southerners' case. If one's regard for liberty is anything more than a desire to be on a bandwagon that no-one opposes, it should be worth while re-examining the Southerners' case. Lincoln himself said that "a man who will not examine both sides of a question is dishonest."

The Southerners claimed, in effect, that some people (in this case the white plantation owners) are endowed by nature and/or education with more wisdom and virtue than others (in this case the negro slaves): therefore the former have the right to direct the work and decide the wages and other conditions of life of the latter, and it is to the advantage of the latter to accept such direction rather than try to rely on themselves. Slavery was necessary to prevent any misguided negroes from running away to free land where they would have no guidance or protection. And as there would be no authority or capitalists to provide them with work they would have starved.

Contemporary records show that the Southerners could produce much evidence of care-free, happy, slaves, well-fed, well-housed, entertained and content. Indeed those planters who owned good land and were therefore wealthy would have been foolish indeed if they had not ensured good labour relations. It was not, of course, possible to compare such conditions with what the slaves might have done for themselves with similar advantages of land, previously accumulated capital, and experience; or how their character and intelligence might have developed in the process. But the principle of paternalism, now universally accepted, dismisses such a comparison as irrelevant. It might be objected that the planters' case ignored the universal experience that power corrupts. But modern

opinion, which entrusts the control of man's natural and spontaneous efforts at producing and exchanging to rulers and monopolists, similarly ignores that universal experience.

"A large Virginia estate," says Washington Irving, "was a little empire. The planter reigned supreme; his steward was his prime minister." As this community made its own laws, it affords a valid comparison, on the principles of government, with a modern state. The details this writer gives us show that, translated into modern terms, the little empire was an intelligently-ordered welfare state, with a planned economy maintained by a hundred per cent income tax; a socialist community where the inhabitants worked not for private profit but for the good of all, as determined by authority. In addition to providing all welfare services, housing, etc., authority planned the export drive (of cotton) to obtain the foreign currency (for authority to use at its discretion), and co-ordinated the internal industries to serve the plan. It achieved the ultimate in welfarism—complete economic security for all the inhabitants, based on the regulations of authority. As the inhabitants, like the masses in general today, were primarily concerned with immediate material things, it would have been strange if on the wealthier estates they had not been on the whole content with their lot.

The economic arrangements, by natural sequence, conditioned the minds of the slaves to accept their surroundings. The planters provided "free education" on most modern lines, designed exclusively to produce artisans (or technologists) and subordinate overseers (or minor executives), and wasted no time on efforts to develop independence of character or the habit of unfettered enquiry. If any slave had desired to give a more liberal education to his children, the hundred per cent income tax would not have allowed him to provide it. Economic conformity entails mental conformity. Provided he stipulated that education must be regarded as a collective, and not a personal, service, the planter would probably have been quite safe to have put the type of education desired to popular vote. The contented materialists would not have seen the purpose of studying "useless" subjects. And the danger of fostering a spirit that demanded reasons before obeying instructions (likely to disrupt any centrally-directed economic plan) would have been avoided. Any slave unwilling to delegate his thinking to others, or who regarded the production of material things not as an end in itself but

as a means to provide leisure for higher development, would have had no alternative but to conform.

The churches in the Southern States supported slavery, and those in the North for a long time at least condoned it. (William Lloyd Garrison found every church hall in Boston closed to him. Only a room owned by a group of "infidels" was available.) It would be unjust to assume that their members were all hypocrites. If in one's religious views one reverses the order of Micah\* and puts charity or almsgiving before justice, it is easy to see how a wealthy estate, managed by a man of generous disposition, could be regarded as Christian charity in action. It would escape notice that all the planter gave was originally taken by compulsion from the products of the people's labour, just as it now escapes notice that all welfare benefits are obtained in the same way. Church-going supporters of the welfare state often do not examine the justice of the taking that must always precede the giving.

The American civil war had its counterpart in Great Britain in the contest of ideas between the independent-spirited radical Free Traders and the paternalist Tories. The outcome of the experiment in liberating trade and the higher wages in Britain than were to be found in more paternalist countries, had convinced most Englishmen that ordinary folk, relying on their common sense, were quite capable of providing for themselves, however humbly, without the guidance of persons professing to be qualified to control and protect them. This confirmed their confidence in natural rights and the dignity of man. They supported the North both in words and in generous action.

(The Federal navy's blockade of the southern ports cut off the raw material of the British cotton industry and caused severe distress and unemployment. Yet, at a moment when things looked black for the North, operatives and manufacturers sent a deputation to President Lincoln assuring him of their unwavering support. After Lincoln was dead the U.S. Government imposed a heavy duty on Lancashire goods, to protect the American cotton industry.)

To the old fashioned Tories, however, an estate like that of Mount Vernon, described by Washington Irving, represented their ideal of intelligent, virtuous, landlords protecting grateful and happy tenants. It seemed as natural to them, as to public opinion today, that the land owner should enjoy the rent produced by the labour of the users of land.

The most striking aspect of common opinion today is the acceptance of paternalism as the prime function of government. Those who under the title of "progressives" claim to be the modern radicals are foremost in advocating paternalist measures as the answer to social problems—all such measures, of course, requiring increasing confiscation of the products of the individual's labour, leaving authority, as in the planter's little empire, to decide the distribution of wealth. (The fact that the rich may have more taken away from them is irrelevant.) The chairman

\* "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

of an assembly of United Nations' experts summarised the accepted view. "We must feed, care for and shelter people, but we must also give them work on a larger scale."\* This might have been a southern planter discussing policy with his steward. When General Lee eventually surrendered he might have consoled himself with the reflection that a hundred years afterwards the ideas he fought for would be generally accepted throughout the world.

Some people (in this case politicians and experts) are now supposed to be endowed with more wisdom than ordinary folk and are therefore accepted as capable of directing the work and lives of the latter; and the latter accept this direction in the belief that they are incapable of relying upon their own efforts. The slaves had to accept this perforce. People today accept it under the forms of allegedly "free" education and other so-called free welfare benefits. And now there is no free land to which a rebel might escape.

It remains, however, to explain why the planters' little empires encountered none of the characteristic problems of modern democracies, such as unemployment, inflation, the crippling expense of providing roads, housing, schools, etc. But the little empires differed in one fundamental respect from modern democracies—all the land was nationalised.

The planters' horse-sense told them that land was the basic economic factor. They obtained the land first, the slaves afterwards. If the planter had owned all the labour and all the capital, but another person had owned the land, the planter would have encountered all the difficulties of democratic paternalism. For every field, barn, office, housing estate, hospital and road, he would have had to pay rent up to the limit of his capacity, and the land owner might at any time raise his demands beyond that capacity. Then the planter would have been unable to apply his labour; he would have been left with a formidable problem of unemployment and the question of how to feed his slaves. If he had had the power of debasing the currency, this would have enabled him momentarily to offset the rise in rent; but as soon as the effects of a further rise became apparent more inflation would be necessary. His operations would present the same features as the stop-go economy of modern states.

If before the civil war the United States Government had had the will and the power to impose a hundred per cent tax on land values the course of history might have been different. Experience of the application of this tax in only a very minor degree shows that it has a tendency to sub-divide large estates, on which there is almost always some land unused or under-used. Faced with the problem of paying tax on this land the planters would have been obliged to sub-let it to free tenants, and as the free producer, unlike the slave, would apply all his intelligence as well as his physical force to production, the planter with

\* *Daily Telegraph*, January 31, 1963.

his slaves would have fallen behind in the race. To maintain slaves instead of allowing them to maintain themselves would have been a handicap, not an advantage. Slavery would have withered away.

Furthermore, as the Government would have had a continually increasing source of revenue from land value it would not have been necessary to impose taxes on the products of individual labour. All would have been free

to provide their own welfare services; every parent could have decided his own children's education.

The outstanding, original, characters, on whose example all genuine human progress depends, would have been free to develop in a social atmosphere where all the natural rewards to good conduct were available, and all the natural penalties to misconduct were in operation.

# Mirage Of The Promised Land

by A. HAVILAND-NYE

**THE AMERICAN POOR** are not poor in Hong Kong or the sixteenth century; they are poor here and now. So states Michael Harrington in a lucid description of *The Other America*,\* a poverty between forty and fifty million people midst the affluent society.

It might seem that as the economy of the richest country on earth advances, so the condition of those on the margin will lessen in severity. But the fact is to the contrary; progress to the poor is inverted—a threat rather than a promise—greater technological advance meaning greater poverty. The dejection of the farm and rural labourers, the negroes, migrants and rejects from the working class is extreme. One is shocked to be presented with families in California living in shacks and sleeping on flattened boxes on the floor, and to learn that in certain regions in the mid 1950s some 56 per cent of low income farm families were deficient in one or more basic nutrients in the diet. 70 per cent of the rural poor who did not live on farming suffered this deficiency. These figures are seen in the perspective of a national average of only 20 per cent of income spent on food. Thus hunger prevails midst pastures of plenty.

Poverty is a culture, a way of life and feeling—an interracial misery of a quarter or third of a nation which, despite a fund of statistical data, remains largely invisible. In the pioneer days all were poor, but there was always a will and optimism to improve. From the time of the depressed 1930s the mass of working men banded together and forced the New Deal, seeking progress as the whole economy advanced, and guarding its members with social security. But those who were excluded from this new power, largely because they were in the wrong place in the economy at the wrong moment in history, and either had no need or were unable to join any power group, later got submerged and were unable to pull themselves up and seek the privileges extended to the powerful, simply because they were then the minority. They even found that the benefits of the welfare state were excluded from those who needed them most; they found socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor. Thus submerged they became a new culture—a new class.

It is thus not possible to admonish the poor for being

either too lazy or too bad, and so refuse them help. Further, it is insufficient to transfer them from the slums and give them a measure of temporary well being, for in their culture crime and violence, filth and mental turpitude, are the norm. Their attitudes to education, property, personal relationships and to themselves are the direct result of poverty the whole nature of which must be transformed. This is the dilemma. Michael Harrington submits to fatalism when, because of the facts of political and social life, he sees only massive Federal Government spending to resolve the problem. Yet the other side of this coin is bureaucracy, which he finds an instrument of fear to the other America and a deterrent to aiding them. Through loans for depressed areas, retraining schemes, civil rights for negroes, whose cheap labour is a means of keeping the poor whites down, carefully co-ordinated regional planning, social security and medical care for all, and pensions sufficient to support a dignified old age, he feels that the culture of poverty can for ever be obliterated. Yet is this sort of New Deal not essentially the same as that to which the author attributes the present class of poor emerging from the 1930s—save that he proposes it on a larger scale?

Michael Harrington gives the clue to the real solution without really realising it. The economic system channels increasing wealth to a diminishing few. The average farm hand in 1955 was 110 per cent more efficient than he had been twenty five years earlier. With 37 per cent fewer workers, there was 54 per cent more production, yet, a Senate study concludes, this has not been passed on to the farm hands. At the 1954 census it was found that 12 per cent of farm operatives controlled more than 40 per cent of the land and grossed almost 60 per cent of farm sales. Yet 40 per cent of all commercial farms in the U.S. account for only 7 per cent of sales. Since wages tend to equate in all industries it must be concluded that urban statistics would show similar results.

Is it not ominous that Marx's prophecy that an ever-decreasing minority with an ever-increasing power would cause the fall of capitalism? Nowhere is there more need for the poignantly simple solutions of Henry George.

\* Penguin Special, 3s. 6d.