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November 5, 1989

THE PARADOX OF SLAVERY

By C. VANN WOODWARD; C. Vann Woodward's most recent book is "The Future of the Past."

WITHOUT CONSENT OR CONTRACT The Rise and Fall of American Slavery. By Robert William Fogel. 1539 pp. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. \$22.50.

Robert William Fogel's "Without Consent or Contract" is a sequel to, an extension of and a defense of "Time on the Cross," the 1974 book about slavery on which he collaborated with Stanley L. Engerman. The earlier book provoked more interest, outrage and indignation than any scholarly work on American history since Charles A. Beard's "Economic Interpretation of the Constitution" in 1913. Feelings were stirred over both books for much the same reason - those of the public for an apparent assault on national pieties and convictions, those of historians not only for that but also for what they saw as violations of scholarly rules and standards.

Stressing the statistics and methods of quantification, "Time on the Cross" sought to expose and correct the errors of traditional historians about slavery. In place of a Simon Legree or a cavalier fop as the typical plantation master, the book presented a shrewd businessman running a well-managed, efficient and highly profitable enterprise with labor policies that anticipated those of modern industry. Instead of pathetic Uncle Toms or cringing, lazy Sambos, his slaves were diligent, hard-working and very efficient workers - in fact 35 percent more efficient than free Northern farm labor. To all appearances they had adopted or internalized the Protestant work ethic of their master and joined him in pursuit of bourgeois aims and values.

Impossible under the cruel and brutal treatment pictured by the abolitionists and credited by traditional historians, the rational business-labor relations postulated in "Time on the Cross" could only exist under a benign order. And such was the slave system uncovered by the cliometricians. According to the book, the diligent field hand was rewarded by 90 percent of the income he produced and induced to work harder by promise of rewards, privileges and promotions that made the whip largely unnecessary. The benevolent and cheerful order was blessed by strong, stable family life with Victorian morals. It was rarely broken by the sale of members or degraded by white sexual exploitation. By this account, few free-labor forces of Europe and America were so well housed, clothed and fed as the South's slaves. Their treatment was said to explain in part the rarity of slave resistance or rebellion and a rate of population increase unapproached by any other slave population. The South of the 1850's, the authors contended, enjoyed more per capita wealth than any European country save England.

Critical response to "Time on the Cross" was no doubt sharpened by its polemical style and the

strident way in which historians were "corrected," instructed about facts they had long known or findings they knew to be false and lectured about neglecting quantifiable data and methods. But critics also discovered and pointed out numerous lapses in scholarship, errors in fact and breaches in the elemental rules of quantification. Two critics of the book found its casual use of evidence "shocking," and a team of five quantifying historians joined in declaring the work to be "shot through with egregious errors." Some scholars joined in the popular resentment of what was felt to be the moral blindness of the authors. One said that they "averaged out and depersonalized" the slave experience, and another that their book "raises a profound moral issue without treating it as such."

In "Without Consent or Contract" Mr. Fogel has the good judgment to moderate the polemical tone of the earlier work as well as its strident lectures to other historians. In returning to the original economic thesis he tones down some of his previous arguments and avoids repetition of the logic and evidence most discredited by critics. He even admits that "cliometricians may have exaggerated the role of manufacturing and romanticized the economic dynamism of the yeomen." On the whole, however, he sticks to the main points of the original theses and even brings forth new evidence to strengthen them.

So we are still presented with the apparent anomaly of a Southern slave economy that was more productive, more efficient, more profitable and wealthier than the free-labor economy of the North, and slave labor that was diligent, hard-working and far more efficient when used in the gang system than free labor in its own habits. While the "businessman" planter is now described as a "plutocrat," we are assured that "the southern plutocrats were considerably richer, on average, than their northern counterparts" - about twice as rich, in fact - and that they were much more numerous. The regime of the planter plutocrat, moreover, was as benign as that of the planter businessman - as protective and cherishing of slave family integrity, as nurturing of slave health and welfare and as innocent of brutal punishments, of "breeding" for the market and of sexual abuse of slave property. Slave trading was for use, not gain, and accounted for less than 1 percent of planter profits. All this while the per capita income of the South was growing at a rate one-third higher than that of the North, a rate exceeded substantially over a long term only by "a handful of countries."

For all that, the new book contains striking departures from its predecessor. It undertakes to "come to grips with what many scholars see as the unwelcome and ominous paradox" of a system that was "horribly retrogressive in its social, political, and ideological aspects," yet was found to be efficient, prosperous and benign. The missing moral dimension was not satisfactorily supplied in "Time on the Cross," despite its incongruous abolitionist title. "The ultimate issues of this book," we are assured by its author, "are moral issues." (The new book might well have swapped titles with the old.) By confronting these issues resolutely, he believes, we can not only illuminate the past but gain deeper understanding of "the issues of our own time in a new way."

More than half the book is devoted to the antislavery movement and the political struggles leading to the Civil War. This is traditional narrative history, in which quantification plays an insignificant part and innovations are few. Mr. Fogel says he has "endeavored to make it a good

story, one that will be edifying and intriguing to a wide range of readers." Intriguing it might perhaps be said to be. It was "mystics," we learn, who solved the problem of evil producing good. Transcending reason and trusting what they took as divine inspiration, the "mystics," or abolitionists, "declared that slavery was not just a sin, but an extraordinary sin, a sin so corrupting" as to create "an insurmountable barrier to both personal and national salvation."

The familiar story of the antislavery movement begins with the British campaign, to which nothing particularly new is added save by one of the few contributions cliometrics makes to this half of the book. Indexes of Parliamentary votes and sugar prices make it more impossible than ever to defend the old theory that British emancipation was caused by the "defection of capitalists from the ranks of slaveholders." That honor is awarded to the landed gentry, which did "just enough to ensure that the Establishment enjoyed the allegiance of the middle classes and the upper strata of the laboring class."

The abolitionist crusade in America was sparked by the British example but fueled by the excesses of religious zeal created in Yankeeedom by the Second Great Awakening and its frenzies in the early 19th century. Using evangelical fervor and revivalist methods, the abolitionists stressed personal holiness achieved by repentance. Since slavery was "always, everywhere, and only a sin," the remedy was to stop sinning. But at once. As William Lloyd Garrison had it, "No plan was needed to stop sinning." But that did not get slaves very far toward emancipation.

Desperate to advance their cause, antislavery leaders turned to national politics, and, writes Mr. Fogel, that was where moral ambiguities again set in, for the deeper they became involved in politics, "the more they conceded principle to expediency." The story of sectional conflict and politics, from the Missouri Compromise to Lincoln's election, is retold to show the compromises and the sometimes cynical expedients by which Northern nativism against the impoverished millions of immigrants, and even prejudices against blacks, were used to forge a victorious antislavery coalition against the Slave Power Conspiracy and its allies in the North.

The antislavery people supplied an indictment of the South's morality and culture calculated to "abolitionize the North." Their descriptions of "the horrors of southern culture," according to Mr. Fogel, "were analogous to the revivalist's descriptions of the pain and torture" of hell itself. Southern masters not only beat their slaves unmercifully but also their wives. They were filled with "lust for power" as well as "lust for pagan pleasures." Theirs was "an erotic society" that had become "one great Sodom," compared to which a Turkish harem was "a cradle of virgin purity." They and their Northern allies were bent upon "outright enslavement of all white labor" and the reduction of the North to a "conquered province."

In what Mr. Fogel calls "the most massive ideological campaign of the age," this indictment of the South was carried to the North in a deluge of propaganda by abolitionists until it became "routinely published in conventional magazines" and won the support of "such towering figures of belles lettres as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Russell Lowell." In apparent agreement, the author quotes John C. Calhoun as saying that this propaganda would teach the North "a hatred more deadly than one hostile nation ever entertained towards another."

The abolitionists' picture of slavery, quite at odds with that of our cliometrician, and the methods they used to destroy slavery, cause "agonizing dilemmas and paradoxes" for an author who set out to resolve moral dilemmas. Antislavery heroes prove "somehow less perfect than one would like heroes to be"; their free labor alternative to slavery was "still brutal and exploitative," and "the leaders of the struggle to improve the condition of free labor were often aligned with the slaveholders, while the abolitionists were often aligned with the foes of the free labor movement." What's worse, "exaggerations of the severity of slavery divert attention from the novel forms of exploitation that replaced it." It is all very confusing, and the author abandons any attempt to present "an emerging scholarly consensus on the moral paradoxes and dilemmas," for no such consensus exists. He can only offer his own solution.

Mr. Fogel finds that the moral crusaders were forced "to compromise principles, join arms with opportunists, accept immoral propositions . . . and deliberately mislead" because "they could vanquish sin only by sinning." On the other hand, "the cause was moral and the intention was virtuous," and the deception "harmed only the slaveholders." The Republicans, "without pandering to northern negrophobia," would have lost the election of 1860. So much for the dilemma. In order to "resolve the paradox," Mr. Fogel has to "cut the tie between economic success (or failure) and moral virtue (or evil)." While "slavery was profitable, efficient, and economically viable . . . it was never morally good." In place of "the indictment fashioned by the winners of the antislavery struggle," he believes that "we need a new indictment," one more up to date.

He offers his own personal and "tentative" moral case against slavery on four counts: it gave one group of people "unrestrained personal domination" over another group, a power that was "by itself profoundly evil and corrupting"; it denied slaves basic economic opportunity; it denied them citizenship and all its rights; and it denied them the rights of "cultural self-identification" and "cultural autonomy." While modern opinion would find these counts unexceptionable, Mr. Fogel is frank to admit that much free labor in the world of slavery here and abroad suffered from some of these same deprivations, and that a majority of abolitionists would have opposed extending to slaves and free labor some of the rights that his new bill of indictment denounces slavery for denying.

Still plagued by paradox, the seeker of firm moral ground resorts in the end to "what-if" speculation - what if there had been no Civil War? Mr. Fogel believes that war was the only way to end slavery in the United States and is willing to grant, therefore, that this country was the only one of 20-odd slave societies unable to find a peaceful way to emancipation. The South of slavery was growing, not diminishing, in confidence and strength, and he speculates that with independence "it would have emerged as a major international power," perhaps "one of the world's strongest military powers." He speculates also that peaceful secession would have indefinitely postponed emancipation in this country, slowed antislavery movements everywhere, strengthened serfdom in the places it lingered and handicapped the struggle for democratic rights for the lower classes in Europe. These are not conclusions derived from econometrics or science, but they persuade him that the results of the Civil War were worth the lives of 600,000 young men.

This reviewer can only hope that he has been able to do justice to this book, but he has reasons to doubt that this was quite possible. He is informed in a publisher's note at the beginning that this is only "the primary volume of 'Without Consent or Contract' . . . a nontechnical summary and interpretation of findings by the director of a research group," and that there are three companion volumes: "Evidence and Methods," "Technical Papers: Markets and Production" and "Technical Papers: Conditions of Slave Life and the Transition to Freedom." Their importance to the volume under review is attested to by innumerable references to them in its notes, references to sources, evidence, authorities, "the full canon of research on slavery and related topics by the contributors" and "extensive discussions of the historiography of the slave system and of the antislavery struggle." The publisher's note says that these companion volumes "are available for those who are concerned." It turns out on inquiry, however, that they are only available in manuscript and will not be printed for several months. It is not the practice of responsible journals to review books not published, nor of reviewers to review books in manuscript. If the reviewer appears to have been in error or the author reviewed to have suffered injustice, it would seem that the publisher must share - and, if acting without the author's approval, perhaps shoulder - part of the blame.

Drawing depicting an abolitionist meeting, commemorating the first anniversary of John Brown's death, being disrupted at Tremont Hall in Boston, Dec. 3, 1860. (From Harper's Weekly, Dec. 15, 1860) (pg. 16)