

# Racism in antebellum south

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



A society which professed the ideals of freedom, equality and democracy, the institution of slavery was considered a blot. These sentiments found their way in the “ Declaration of Independence”, ‘ North-West Ordinance’ and the ‘ Constitution’. But slavery retained its status. In order to understand racism in the antebellum south, it is necessary to look at the background that produced slavery and racism afterward. The economic system of the South was based on agriculture which was not possible without the assistance of the laborers.

The non-availability of cheap labor and impracticability of the wage-earner system led to the adoption of the institution of slavery. The tobacco growing colony of Virginia found the Negro slave to be cheap, most dependable and efficient. As a result soon the system was adopted by other colonies. This led to slave trade and the European private individuals engaged themselves in this trade. In 1649 there were only slaves but within next two decades their number rose to 2000 in the state of Virginia.

A very inhuman treatment was meted out to these slaves but soon laws were passed to regulate the relation between slave and master. Mostly these laws favored the master and his right. The terms of the indenture were enforceable by the courts and no slave was allowed to leave the master. The runaway servants were compelled by law to go back to the original master. So, economic compulsions interpreted the relationship of slavery as a master-slave relationship that was further rooted into the social and intellectual life of America. Later on it was structured into the legal system.

In the whole scenario, slaves acted as economic instruments and this subordination was characterized only by commercial necessities. Stamp (1970) clearly indicates the role and importance of these harsh treatment in slavery, “ Without the power to punish, which the state conferred upon the master, bondage could not have existed. By comparison, all other techniques of control were of secondary importance. ” (p. 146) Stamp also points out that although there existed a little incentive system and it work out but most slaveowners were of the view that;

Now, I speak what I know, when I say it is like ‘ casting pearls before swine’ to try to persuade a negro to work. He must be made to work, and should always be given to understand that if he fails to perform his duty he will be punished for it. (Stamp, p. 171) Racism and its various manifestations remained a dilemma in American history and it had effects of intellectual and institutional life. Prolonged working hours for slaves, ruthless and harsh punishments were norm of the day.

Douglass in his autobiography “ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself” illustrates remarkable instances of harsh and brutal treatment of the slaves by their white masters. His accounts manifests that these brutalities were both physical and psychological. In the early nineteenth century, two phenomenon, democracy and capitalism, changes the course of events and the socio-psychological pattern of American life. In the context of racism, theses two phenomenon seem juxtaposing each other but reality was different as both helped dissolving old institutions.

Some scholars look at the activities of the church in totality with other social forces has singled out the Catholic spirit as the dominant force that compelled the Southerners to retreat to old practices and social patterns and slavery was one of them. Douglass also shows resentment about Christianity as it plays a paradoxical role. On one and Christianity propagates the ideals of equality and fraternity whereas on the other hand individuals Christians believes in the institute of slavery and treat their slaves harshly.

Additionally, he uncovered the duplicity of the Church by depicting the instances of support of Church for the slave owners and their behaviours. McPherson 1982 has singled out the Catholic spirit as the dominant force that compelled the Southerners to retreat to old practices and social patterns and slavery was one of them. Elkins (1959) illustrates a very brutal effect of racism on the slave life in his work *Slavery; A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. He provides a deep insight into the level and intensity of control that masters had over their slaves.

The psychological effect of this control on Negro personality and its individual and collective consequences. Although in the Southern American states their economic conditions were better comparatively but they were negated these essential rights. The negation distorted their psychological being, hampered their psychological development and they were reverted to child-like behavior. To illustrate the psychological effect, Elkins says that harsh pattern of slavery in the South brought into being a typical Negro personality that was commonly known as Sambo.

Sambo denotes to a personality prototype that was characterized by childlike behavior. This infantilism (as Mr. Elkins calls it) was a result of absolute negation of individual rights and ultimate powerlessness. He further compares it with Nazi concentration camp, where harsh treatment and absolute powerlessness over every action had reduced the Jews to infantilism. Sambo'[ism] is not something inherent and it is not a racial or cultural product as no Sambo is found among the Afro-American slaves of Latin America. The docility and childishness only come from harsh treatment of slaves on the North American territories.

Racism had also deep impact on the slave families and its members. 19th Century rural antebellum family was a protrusion of slave-master relationship that affected all facets of American socio-cultural life. The narrative of Frederick Douglass describe that interracial relationships between a slave woman and male master were common but these relationships never got any social or religious sanctity. Douglass portrayal of his mother clearly indicates the relationship with her master provided no solace to him but rather aggravated her pathos and miseries.

It further manifest that such relationships were not based on any mutual warmth but were a manifestation of ' gratification of their (masters) wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable". (p. 166) The slave child, production of this relationship, was not entitled to any privileges or rights, socially or legally. So it was quite likely that " the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the conditions of their mothers" (p. 167) These slave children were also deprived of maternal affection as " it [was] a common

custom, in the part of Maryland..., to part children from their mothers at a very early age.

Frequently, before the child [had] reached its twelfth month, its mothers is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off... (p. 165) The mother-children relations were cordial but they were not allowed to meet quite often as Douglass himself saw his mother five or six times during her lifetime. The relationship never developed as there was very little communication between mothers and their children. These children were also kept ignorant of their birthdates and parentage.

They were also shorn of basic necessities of life like clothing, lodging and nutrition. Furthermore, these slave-children were subjected to amplified hardship as compared with other slaves because they were “ a constant offence to their mistress”. This also highlights that 19th century rural family of New England was not solely patriarchal but women had immense influence in the affair of household. For example, Douglass writes, “ The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feeling of his white wife. (p. 166)

Similarly, relationship with other member of his parental family were used to be harsh and they were used to undergo harsh treatment and whipping by their white brothers quite frequently. There was no intimacy between slave brothers and sisters and their mutual relationship never developed due the absence of a central tie i. e. parentage. On the other hand, it is illustrated that the role of slave woman in the community were limited to heavy toil and

labor at plantations, fulfillment of master's lusts and sexual desires whenever needed.

Their emotional, psychological and mental health was never taken into consideration. The relations of these slave girls and slave children to the community were totally utilitarian and totalitarian as they were used as tool to increase the agricultural production and to satisfy the savage desires and habitual formations of the masters respectively. These slaves were regarded as an entity that was included in their (master's) property rights and were sanctioned by socio-legal system.

So in the wide social perspective, slaves acted as economic instruments and this subordination was characterized not only by commercial necessities but also by psychological phenomenon i. e. to satisfy the human propensities by subjecting them harsh punishments. What were the causes of this inhuman racism? McPherson propagates the idea and is of the view that slavery was institutionalized in the South. In South, slaves were regarded as an entity that was included in their (Southerners) property rights and were sanctioned by legal system.

Mr. Elkins is of the view that economic compulsions interpreted the relationship of slavery as a master-slave relationship that was further rooted into the social and intellectual life of America. Later on it was structured into the legal system. In the whole scenario, slaves acted as economic instruments and this subordination was characterized only by commercial necessities. Whereas McPherson illustrates with many examples that slavery

was not a matter of economics or expediency but it was rooted in the values system of Catholic population of South.

Racism was not restricted to individual or social spheres but it was also inculcated in the governmental system. Although the antebellum history is littered with examples of racial discrimination from the very start of this federation but the Dred Scott case (Scott v. Sandford, 60 U. S. (19 How. ) 393 (1856). ) has its peculiar dimension that still hovers over the social panorama of American state. Dred Scott was the slave of a federal army officer who took Scott along with him in the state of Illinois. That Army officer moved to another territory that was a part of the future state of Wisconsin.

In the meantime Congress had banned slavery by introducing the Northwest Ordinance. Congress expanded the slavery ban to new terrains with the inception of 1802 Missouri Compromise. In the due course the possession of Scott was transferred to someone in Missouri. To avail the chance, Scott sued in federal court to be affirmed free, since he had resided on free soil, having been brought there by his master. A divided Supreme Court (7/2) ruled out his suit petition as declared that he had no right to sue in federal court because he was not a U. S. citizen.

Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote the majority opinion. Taney based his ruling on the facts that free blacks were not citizens because blacks were often debarred from militia service. Taney and his allied counterparts further based their decision on the assumption that original American social compact were only those " who, at that time [of American independence], were recognized as the people or citizens of a State, whose rights and



liberties had been outraged by the English Government; and who declared their independence, and assumed the powers of Government to defend their rights by force of arms. (Id. at 407. )

The new nation's federal militia law of 1792 had enrolled only free white males in the militia of the United States, and blacks had been excluded from the New Hampshire militia. (Id. at 420. ) These facts suggested to Chief Justice Taney that free blacks were not recognized as citizens, since they were not in the militia. Another feature of antebellum slavery was that free colored people used to own slaves of their own race and color.

Stampp says in this regard; " The great majority of these colored slaveowners had merely purchased husbands, wives, or children and were unable to emancipate them under existing state laws. " (Stamp. 1972) Historian Ira Berlin is of the view that; In slave societies, nearly everyone – free and slave – aspired to enter the slaveholding class, and upon occasion some former slaves rose into slaveholders' ranks.

Their acceptance was grudging, as they carried the stigma of bondage in their lineage and, in the case of American slavery, color in their skin. (Berlin, p. 9) Whatever were the legal and constitutional intricacies involved in the decision, this ruling made mockery of the American values of freedom, equality and fraternity. This decision further produced a huge chasm between the white American and Blacks that still exists and haunts the American society more than ever in various sophisticated forms and shapes.

Residential segregation is common today as it was in the early days of American society as Blacks reside in underdeveloped and underprivileged ghettos. The sole reason for that is that economically they are not well off to buy a house in some good residential area or at least rent it. Many trade unions routinely debarred blacks from membership; segregated schools were common in many cities across America. Within the armed forces, for example, blacks served in segregated units or, in the case of the Navy, were virtually excluded.