

Slavery: the fuel behind economic deterioration

[Business](#)



“ You can’t hold a man down without staying down with him,” asserted Booker T. Washington in his famous aphorism concerning the peculiar institution of slavery. Although an abundance of his 19th century contemporaries marked this idea as a foolish and false declaration, Washington hosted a very credible theory.

The bondage of African Americans in the southern states of North America, from its birth in 1619 to its slow death in 1865, had indeed held back not only the slaves themselves but also the economy in slave-holding states. Slavery had definitely brought economic progress to the southern, agrarian states of the United States of America. However, the progress was limited. Indeed, the institution of slavery was not the optimal method to spurn economic success. The ideas behind the initiation of slavery, in addition to the imbalanced economy and lack of progress that resulted from slavery, indicate that paid workers who could stimulate the economy would have been more beneficial for the economy in the slaveholding South.

The birth of slavery was not, as many would assume, a response to mass production and the need for labor. The initial labor force in colonial America had been indentured servants or immigrants who became free and entered society as holders of property after a term of service to pay off their debt. Servants included immigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Africa. In order to encourage immigration of more servants and stop rumors of indefinite servitude, definite terms of indenture were being set as a guarantee of a clear future (Elkins, 38-39). However, historian Oscar Handlin portrayed it, “ The Negro never profited from these enactments. Farthest

removed from the English, least desired, he communicated with no friends who might be deterred from following" (Handlin, 211).

Every improvement in the status of the white servant widened the gap between the condition of whites and blacks, dramatizing the significance of color and setting the stage for the perpetual slavery of blacks. States such as Maryland and Virginia codified this idea into law to remove any ambiguities, which established black skin as equitable with the new concept of lifelong servitude (Elkins, 40). The mere fact that perpetual slavery was not established on the basis of economic terms indicates that slavery was not necessary for an economic aspect. The system of indentured servants provided enough labor to suffice all economic endeavors. In fact, slaves were not as hardworking as other immigrants and required extra expenses for their food and shelter. (Gray, 25) If it hadn't been for a new theory of success in the South, slavery might have died out.

Inspired by economic changes in England, Virginian farmers no longer be visualized success as a rise from small beginnings. Success was to be defined as the ability to invest in land, equipment, and labor without limitations (Elkins, 43-44). "A rational man," wrote a South Carolina colonist in 1682, "will certainly inquire, 'When I have land, what shall I do with it? What commodities shall I be able to produce, that will yield me money in other countries, that I may be enabled to buy Negro-slaves?'" (Gray, 352). The time had passed when white servants were preferable to black slaves, for owning black slaves was essential to a reputation of success and wealth in the South. In the system of capitalism which was developing in the South, slavery did not serve to achieve economic progress for small farmers, also <https://assignbuster.com/slavery-the-fuel-behind-economic-deterioration/>

known as yeomen. Slaves simply maintained the plantations of wealthy farmers, which paved the way for dominance of a wealthy class and a small concentration of wealth.

The South, therefore, failed to develop a varied and balanced economy even within agriculture. The minority of slaveholders owned the majority of the optimum farming land, leaving little opportunity for most small yeomen farmers to contribute to the southern economy. Small farmers thus became sustenance farmers, producing enough food only for their family's consumption (Campbell, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage*). Similarly, the dominating group, with no interest in their less wealthy counterparts, produced only expensive goods which were mainly exported to the northern states and Europe. The lack of consumer production prevented a rapid and successful development of transportation and infrastructure.

Highways, canals, and railroads only expanded from local ports to distant areas concentrated with 'high class' planters. This created a lack of stimulation in Southern trade, but instead expanded the less beneficial foreign trade (Burton, 150). The characteristics that defined slavery were the most harmful in creating an imbalanced economy. He [the slave] could neither give nor receive gifts; he could make no will, nor could he, by will, inherit anything. He could not hire himself out or make contracts for any purpose... and thus neither his word nor his bond had any standing in law. He could buy or sell nothing at all...keep no cattle, horses, hogs, or sheep... and could raise no cotton.

(Elkins, 59) Slaves comprised a large portion of the Southern population, yet they did not take part in stimulating the economy of the South. In 1790, slaves made up a third of the Southern population. After the American Revolution, the population of slaves in the South grew from 1.1 million in 1810 to over 3.9 million by 1860. Slaves did not receive any wages and did not have any money to take part in economic consumption.

A system of servants who received low wages would have been able to contribute to the economy, thus stimulating it. In addition, every Southern state, except for Maryland and Kentucky, had stringent laws forbidding slaves from learning to read and write. With such restrictions, a large portion of the population was rendered ignorant, which further limited industry from expanding (Altman, 45-47). It was not only the characteristics of slavery which proved to be detrimental to the South; the slaves themselves were usually problematic. In comparison to servants, slaves didn't have the proper incentives to work. Slaves were driven to work only by punishment, and they resisted responsibilities in innumerable ways.

They worked at slower speeds, damaged machinery, feigned sickness, and purposely destroyed crops. Slaves often argued with their masters and overseers, and stole crops, livestock, and valuables. Subtly or overtly, enslaved African Americans found ways to sabotage the system that trapped them (PBS, Antebellum Slavery). In contrast, approximately twenty-four million immigrants arrived in the United States in the late 1800's, and there was no shortage of immigrants even in earlier years. Many immigrants worked, saved their low wages and were able to diversify Northern industry.

For example, John Jacob Astor emigrated from Germany in 1784 with no money.

He worked hard with ideas of future success, learned multiple skills, and died in 1848 as one of the richest men in the world. Of course, not every immigrant became so rich, but most applied diverse skills to earn money and live comfortably (Sowell, 121). Free states, which did not depend on slavery, had healthy economies. In comparison to the parochial mindset of the South, the North developed a varied economy in which immigrants and servants aided progress. The Southern slave states, which were dominated by wealthy farmers, wrongly disregarded the progress experienced in free northern states.

During a trip down the Ohio River in the early 1830's, with the slave state of Kentucky on his left and the free state of Ohio on his right, French bureaucrat Alexis de Tocqueville describes, Upon the left bank of the Ohio River, labor is confounded with the idea of slavery, upon the right bank it is identified with that of prosperity and improvement; on the one side it is degraded, on the other it is honored; on the former territory no white laborers can be found...on the latter no one is idle, for the white population extends its activity and its intelligence to every kind of employment. Thus the men whose task it is to cultivate the rich soil of Kentucky are ignorant and lukewarm, whilst those who are active and enlightened either do nothing or pass over to the state of Ohio, where they may work without dishonor. (Tocqueville, 416) As explained by Tocqueville, slavery retarded the mindset of a southern farmer, which in turn prevented farmers from attempting to expand the economy of the South. The South, he explains, brought

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ignorance, dishonor, and a lack of varied intelligent activity through slavery. Furthermore, the free state of Kansas, which had the same climate and agricultural setting as other slave states, was able to flourish without the institution of slavery. Kansas based its economy on paid immigrants to expand labor.

On October 12, 1888, the Topeka Daily Capital Newspaper stated, “ In wheat, Kansas can beat the world.” Farming communities emerged in rural areas and developed mills, elevators, bread companies, and bakeries. This extensive industry allowed Kansas to develop certain technologies, which aided their food yields and farm production. Thus it may be understood that immigrants and paid servants, who were successful in both Northern and Southern free states, could have aided the expansion of the economy of slave states (Kansas Historical Society, Kansas: The Breadbasket). In addition to Kansas, great plantations in Brazil, Santa Domingo, and Cuba were established without the southern institute of slavery.

Slavery did not carry such precise standards as “ *durante vita*” or lifelong servitude in Latin America, where slaves had the right to purchase their own freedom, acquire property, and have free days on Sundays and holidays. These free days gave servants the opportunity to work for themselves to accumulate money and buy their freedom. The Spanish code also provided that slaves be allowed two hours each day to work in occupations for their own advantage. “ I am accustomed, stated a delegate to Cortis of Cadiz in 1811, “ to seeing many [blacks] engaged in all manner of careers” (King, The Colored Castes and American Representation in the Cortes of Cadiz). Free

slaves had the same rights as native Brazilians, and they took immediate part in public and professional life (Elkins, 66-70).

This system would have been more beneficial for the South for two reasons. First, it would have allowed for the circulation of wealth, giving room to diversify and expand the economy. Second, a softer version of slavery would have resulted in an abolition movement similar to the movement in South America, which was without violence, bloodshed, and civil war, elements that characterized American destruction. Another way in which slavery was harmful to Southern economy is the overwhelming dependence the South had to place on slaves as their sole labor force. Slavery halted the industrial progress of the Confederate states. The Union developed eighty percent of United States industry, enabling them to produce weapons and other war necessities, which the Confederacy could not compete with.

In addition, the Southern wealth was placed in land and slaves, neither of which was considered liquid, easily accessible money. The Confederacy's difficulties in feeding and clothing their men, producing ample ammunition, and building and maintaining roads and transportation are all credited to the South's over-emphasis on a slave-based culture. After the war, once slavery was abolished, the economy of the South had collapsed. With their land destroyed and their sole form of labor freed, the Confederacy was left clueless and destroyed (Engs, Slavery in the Civil War Era). One cannot challenge those who believe that slavery created large wealth for slave-holding states.

The wealth stimulated by slavery, however, was concentrated only within a select few and was not easily accessible. Had the South developed a mitigated version of slavery, similar to those in the North, the West, and in Latin America, it would not have stumbled over its success. There would have been more participation in the economy by all classes, paving the way for industrial progress and transportation as it had done elsewhere. This would have diversified Southern wealth, and possibly altered the outcome of the Civil War. Slavery was the identity of the South, the life of the wealthy planter, and the fuel behind the economy that eventually led to Southern destruction.

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