

In what ways did
slaves respond to
their condition essay



In order to answer this question I will divide this essay into three main parts. The first part will analyse the ways in which slaves responded to, and resisted slavery, as well as providing a bit of historiography to help with this analysis. The second part of my essay will assess the credibility and reliability of much of the evidence I will have discussed in part one. Finally the third section will analyse how circumstances may have limited the range of slave responses to their servitude. In such a broad and wide topic as slavery it will be impossible to include everything in this essay so I will attempt to concentrate on a select number of the most important arguments, in order to form the best debate on each of these. The original and accepted view among most historians and scholars deep into the first half of the twentieth century was that slaves had been generally happy with their condition and had rarely resisted, or even wished to resist slavery.

Ulrich B. Phillips' 'American Negro Slavery' in 1918 perhaps best exemplifies the early twentieth century view of slavery, dominating its interpretation for around the next thirty years. Phillips depicted a plantation system in which slaves were generally contented with their lot and unlikely to resist. Those rare occasions in which resistance did occur were more likely the result of slaves having lazy or criminal characters rather than any legitimate complaint about their condition¹. Twinned with these early views was the idea that slaves were, in fact, incapable of responding and resisting, thus showing their submission to slavery. Phillips described the Negro as suffering from inherited ineptitude, whereas James Schouler saw slaves as being "incapable of deep plots, sensuous, stupid, obedient to the whip, children in imagination.

“ 2 Other historians have presented a slightly different version of the slaves’ inability to respond to slavery. Stanley Elkins compared the system to the Nazi concentration camps of World War Two, infantilizing the inmates with a “ closed system” of slavery that was so cruel and all-encompassing that it rendered the slaves “ sambo-like”, thus making it extremely difficult for slaves to put up resistance. 3. William Styron backs up this interpretation somewhat, declaring that slavery had reduced its victims “ to the status of children...

tranquillized, totally defenseless, ciphers and ants” 4. So therefore one interpretation of slavery, and in particular the early school of thought, saw slaves as generally happy with their condition, submissive, and unlikely to resist either as a result of the inferiority and incapability of the Negro or because of the control the system boasted over the slaves. These points will be put into context in the third part of my essay. However since the 1950’s, or perhaps slightly earlier this analysis began to be revised, with the view that slaves were not content with slavery and never ceased in their struggle against it, resisting in numerous ways. Herbert Aptheker was the first to really openly and effectively challenge the original understanding of slavery with his book ‘ American Negro Slave Revolts’ in 1943 and since then numerous historians and scholars have produced works on slave resistance with Kenneth Stampp’s, ‘ The Peculiar Institution’ in 1956 one of the most noteworthy.

Stampp described the idea of the happy sambo as just a ruse and noted the rebelliousness of slaves in responding to their condition. Insurrection was generally the most serious form of slave resistance, discounting revolution.
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Using the directive that a slave insurrection should include a minimum of ten slaves aiming to obtain freedom, Aptheker claims there were approximately 250 uprisings or conspiracies in American territories, and I will briefly cite a few famous examples. Read about the Louisiana purchase Read Theory Vesey, a former slave drew up a complex plot involving thousands of Negroes in and around Charleston, but again a slave betrayal ended the chances of rebellion. So therefore historians such as Aptheker use the many examples like these above to show that slaves consistently responded to their condition with insurrection plots. However, some have criticised the weakness and limited extent of the slave revolts in America, especially when compared to those in the Caribbean and South America. The largest slave revolt in the United States in Louisiana in 1811 involved around 300-500 slaves. Genovese compares these to slave revolts such as Tacky's rebellion in Jamaica in 1760; which numbered about 1000 slaves, or in Demerara in 1823 where between 10, 000 and 20, 000 slaves on around fifty plantations rose up. 5.

As Genovese deduces, " in sheer numbers and power the whole record of the slave revolts in the Old South did not equal this drama". 6. Therefore Genovese has questioned whether the slave insurrections in America should be seen as so pathetic that they could hardly be considered as revolts at all, thus questioning the slaves' response to their condition in this form. Slaves who ran away to their freedom represented what is often described as the second most serious response to slavery. Aptheker estimates that hundreds of thousands succeeded in gaining liberty by flight with W. B.

Hesseltine approximating as many as 2000 slaves a year escaping between 1830 and 1860 along the Underground Railroad. 7. The Underground Railroad, a secret network of safe houses and anti-slavery activists who helped slaves escape to freedom, was just one of a number of get out clauses for slaves. The others include fleeing to armies during war, for example Britain, France, and the Union army, or taking flight to countries or areas under the (supposed) control of, for example, the Mexicans, Spaniards, and Canadians. There are countless other ways that slaves responded to their condition, of which only some I can mention. Stealing was possibly the most common form of resistance, followed closely by arson.

8. The extent of arson can be exemplified in Virginia, between January 1850 and May 1851 where there were at least seven reported convictions of slaves for this offence. Poisoning a master and their family was also a common transgression, and in fact a number of states, such as South Carolina in 1751 and Georgia in 1770, passed laws enacting the death penalty for slaves found guilty of attempting to poison white people. Strikes, self-mutilation, complaining to a master about an overseer, or even fighting and murdering those in these positions, are just a few of many other responses by slaves to their condition. 9.

However Genovese has virtually discounted these kinds of day-to-day resistance as notable responses of slaves to their condition, hinting at whether they can be considered responses at all. For Genovese, only insurrection and running away to freedom represented genuine resistance that challenged the power of the regime. 10 Day to day resistance such as those listed above generally implied accommodation to slavery and so <https://assignbuster.com/in-what-ways-did-slaves-respond-to-their-condition-essay/>

therefore Genovese has questioned whether these weaker forms of responses should be discounted altogether. When studying slave responses to their condition, there are a number of important considerations that need to be made with regards to evidence. Herbert Aptheker stressed about twenty years ago in 'In Resistance' that there is a need for a much more exhaustive investigation on slave responses in the form of day to day resistance.

Aptheker is particularly critical of evidence and sources regarding sabotage, strikes, and slowdowns, " Very little attention, except cursory notice has been given... although the literature is sparse, the subject is rich".

10. So therefore this supposed shortage in evidence of day-to-day resistance could be crucial when analysing these forms of responses by slaves and may lead to premature conclusions. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has expanded this grievance of a lack of research to that regarding the resistance of slave women. Most relevantly though the argument includes some extremely useful considerations on evidence regarding the whole of the early period of slave writing. Fox explains how most of the early sources on slave responses are white and that in assessing it, it is imperative to recognise the white assumptions imposed on white perceptions. Therefore Fox concludes that these white commentators may have missed many examples of female resistance because they did not expect them.

11. Similarly, this argument can help question the evidence of the early slave writers who spoke of slaves as content, docile and submissive, partly perhaps because the majority of these early writers were whites with pre-

conceived views on slavery and Negroes. There are a number of other key considerations to be made regarding evidence of slave responses. The first of these is that resistance posed by slaves, at the time of its occurrence, was very often exaggerated and distorted for political reasons.

For example, in the presidential campaign year of 1800, the Federalists made use of the Gabriel Plot to claim that Prosser and the slaves had been influenced by Democratic ideas associated with the French and American Revolutions. Federalist newspapers published letters allegedly from South Carolina claiming of an impending rebellion there involving between 700 and 6000 Negroes. The Republican press branded the story as “wholly false” and Aptheker confirms there being no evidence whatsoever pointing to an uprising. 12. Another example of the exaggeration and distortion of evidence for political reasons is during the election years of 1856 and 1860, where accounts of slave resistance were probably exaggerated to stir up anti-Republican hysteria and to forge Southern unity at a time where sectional problems were at a critical stage. For example in Texas there are far fetched accounts of the total destruction by incendiaries of town after town.

13. As well as exaggeration and distortion of evidence, it was also a common practice of the South to censor news of slave resistance, especially rebellions and insurrection. For example in December 1808 the Virginia Council advised Governor John Tyler not to inform the legislature of a current slave conspiracy as conferring this situation would increase slave spirits of insurrection, not only in Virginia but elsewhere too. 14.

Newspaper reports on slave resistance were often incomplete or absent altogether for this very reason. Therefore this complicates the historian's job of finding evidence of slave resistance, as he or she will often have to refer to government archives, personal letters and diaries, journals, and court records in order to ascertain the whole story. Furthermore, censorship of evidence means that there may have been many more instances of resistance and rebellion that we do not know about because contemporaries never reported them. However, in the rebellions that we do know about, there is already enough evidence that can be questioned.

For example in the Gabriel Conspiracy, there is great debate as to how many slaves were involved in the conspiracy. At the trials, one witness said as few as 2000, another as many as 10, 000, whereas a third plumped in the middle and said 6000. The confusion was further fuelled by the Governor of Mississippi Territory who believed there to be fifty thousand. Numbers are always a contentious issue when reviewing evidence on slave rebellion.

Another example of this is during the Turner Rebellion when there is conflicting evidence as to how many blacks were killed during the uprising. The editor of the Richmond Whig at the time estimated the number to be around 40, whereas 'The Huntsville, Alabama, Southern Advocate' of October 15th 1831 declared that over one hundred Negroes had been killed. 15. In fact there appears to be what Genovese calls a "paucity" of direct evidence concerning slave revolts and resistance. Even Aptheker himself admits on numerous occasions in 'American Negro Slave Revolts' of sketchy and unreliable evidence regarding a number of revolts. For example, during a supposed slave plot in South Carolina in 1730, Aptheker admits to there

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being only a single contemporary account on the conspiracy, a letter written in Charles Town.

Also, the hysteria of 1741 in New York City, caused by accusations that slaves had conspired to poison and kill their masters twelve months earlier, has been questioned by Aptheker as a possible hoax or an unaccountable mob delusion. 16. The city proceedings as a result of this hysteria cast, as Aptheker described, “grave doubts as to their reliability.” So therefore the fact that even Aptheker, someone who Genovese has criticised for exaggerating and over estimating the incidence of noteworthy insurrection¹⁷. Has questioned the evidence of some slave revolts definitely puts into doubt the credibility and reliability of many of these.

However, there is little doubt that a number of circumstances limited the range of responses by slaves to their condition, although to what extent this was so, is up for debate. Eugene Genovese, in ‘Roll Jordan Roll’, has explained the effect paternalism had on slave responses. ‘Paternalism’ was the word Genovese used to explain the master-slave relationship, which in basic terms encouraged masters to be both cruel and kind, to the extent that the slaves were not to be seen as just property, but were allowed to retain many human values such as their own religion, and holidays at Christmas. However, paternalism meant slaveholders stayed closer to their slaves, especially on the plantations, and this made it extremely difficult for slaves to plan any resistance, especially group resistance. Kenneth Stamp somehow seems to back this up when he observed, “This intimacy meant constant scrutiny by whites and drastically reduced contact with fellow blacks” ¹⁸.

As a result, resistance was often restricted to defensive and individual forms as it limited the collectiveness of slaves as a class. Paternalism created a tendency for the slaves to identify with a particular community through identification with its master¹⁹. Therefore reducing the possibilities for identification with other neighborhoods. In fact Genovese even goes as far as saying, this reciprocal relationship in which slaves retained certain human values, may have actually created for many, conditions worth living in and therefore prevented many slaves from resisting and revolting.

Whilst on this issue, it is important to analyze just how the slaves' lack of collectiveness limited the range of responses. The upshot of this can be seen clearly during the Gabriel Conspiracy. James Sidbury uses the term "crosscutting" to describe the tension among slaves' individual class, race, gender, status, nativity, and religious positions. In 1800 Gabriel excluded women from the conspiracy and also debated long and hard with his allies whether to spare Quakers, Methodists and Frenchmen. Furthermore, it was two slaves who alerted their master to the plot, a Negro who turned the fleeing Gabriel over to the authorities, and several co-conspirators that turned the state's evidence. ²⁰.

So, therefore, the Gabriel Plot is a great example of the considerable lack of collectiveness among many slaves and slave communities and the detrimental effect this had on slave responses. However this lack of solidarity among blacks is by no means a universal opinion. Susan Davis, an ex-slave from Missouri said slaves studied how to protect each other and many leading slaveholders agreed, for example Judge Green of the

Tennessee State Supreme Court said in 1844 that slaves who betrayed
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fellow blacks would become “ an object of aversion” among Negroes. 21.

Nevertheless, there appears little doubt that there was a considerable lack of collectiveness among the slaves, at least on a class level, thus limiting the range of slave responses quite significantly. There were many methods adopted by slaveholders that seriously limited the chances of slaves responding.

One such claim is that masters used methods to psychologically make slaves feel inferior and thus lessen the chance of them resisting. Aptheker explains how it was drummed into slaves from cradle to grave that they were the accursed of God, and the descendants of Cain. Religious techniques were used to prove this theory to slaves. For example, it was common among clergymen in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to preach to slaves that God has chosen for them to be slaves and that they must be submissive and obedient or else they will suffer eternal damnation in hell. The command, “ what faults you are guilty of towards your masters and mistresses, are faults done against God himself” was extremely common.

22. Slaves were also often given hope by being told that they would be rewarded in heaven if they accepted their punishment as slaves without resistance. So these psychological methods were often very important in convincing slaves not to rebel. Stanley Elkins has described the slaveholders’ control of mass behavior as a key factor in limiting the range of slave responses. Elkins compared the psychological impact on the individual of slavery to that of individuals who survived the Nazi holocaust.

Concentration camps were a modern example of a rigid system controlling mass behavior, and although the comparison can only be used for limited purposes, Elkins claims that a slave type must have existed as a result of the attempt to control mass behaviour, thus we have the literary stereotype of “Sambo”. 23. As explained in the first part of my essay, this Elkins believes prevented many slaves from resisting. There were numerous other tactics adopted by slaveholders to limit the range of slave responses.

These include the refusal to teach slaves to read and write, out of the fear that it would boost any chances of resistance, for example running away, and poisoning masters. Frederick Douglass gives many examples of this in his ‘ Narrative of the Life of an American Slave’. He explains how Mr Auld forbade his wife to teach Douglass by saying, “ if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him...

e would at once become unmanageable... discontented and unhappy” 24.

Another method of the slaveholders, also exemplified by Douglass in his narrative, was the tactic of softening up the slaves every now and then with rewards and pleasures. For example, slaves were occasionally given, holidays, such as at Christmas, or monetary awards for good behavior, and it was also made known of the possibility for slaves to purchase their freedom. Therefore as a result this all created hope among the slaves and may have convinced many not to resist. So overall, three main conclusions can be drawn. The first regards how slaves responded to their condition and forms two main possibilities.

The early slave writers such as Ulrich Bon Phillips saw slaves as submissive, docile and incompetent, whereas later historians such as Herbert Aptheker saw them as responding in numerous ways, ranging from insurrection to day-to-day resistance. The second conclusion to draw is that when considering the question of slavery, there is a lot to bear in mind with regards to evidence. Exaggeration, distortion, censorship, and scantiness of evidence are all possibilities with any slave literature, and must be examined before assessing the reliability and credibility of the source. The final conclusion to make is that there were many circumstances that may have limited the range of responses, such as 'paternalism', the lack of collectiveness among the slaves, and the methods of the slaveholders.

There are also many more that I was unable to include. The consequences of these circumstances all differ depending on your view from the first conclusion.