

African american history sharecropping

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During the period of slavery, the land was concentrated in the hands of the few, and it was logical for landowners to continue producing agricultural commodities on a large scale using the sharecropping system. Unlike the decentralized system of family sharecropping, wage labor provided a means of maintaining large-scale operations organized through a more centralized system of control.

Consequently, sharecropping, rather than wage labor, came to dominate cotton production in the older regions of the American South.

Along with the non-wage feature of the sharecropping system, these formal and informal controls over labor provide an important basis for distinguishing the noncapitalist mode of labor exploitation in the older cotton-producing areas of the South from developed capitalist forms of production. Under the Southern sharecropping system, the share of the crop appropriated as rent by landowners depended on the amount of land, fertilizer, and farm implements they provided.

The landowner's control over production was not limited to control over capital assets. Rather, the landowner generally determined what crops were to be planted and exercised close supervision over the actual production process (Allen, Jewett, 2004).

Tying labor payments to the finished commodity rather than to specified time periods, sharecropping helped to ensure that laborers would remain for the duration of the production cycle. At the end of this cycle, the landowner often took the crop to market and settlement was made on the landowner's reckoning.

In many ways sharecropping entailed stricter landlord control and supervision than did straight tenancy (Mungazi, Taylor 2001). Sharecropping was a compromise solution for conflict between landowners and laborers. The statistical results show that: “ the output elasticity of sharecroppers is indeed significantly higher than that of owners on all occasions and that of tenants on some occasions” (Garrett, Xu, 2003, 578).

Sharecropping system helped to control black labor in the face of the emancipation. One of the reasons landowners were eventually willing to shift from gang labor to family sharecropping was because they came to recognize the importance of patriarchal authority within those families for ensuring labor discipline.

Unlike landowners who could no longer use the lash on free labor, ‘ fathers’ could legally use corporal punishment to discipline their wives and children in most states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Family sharecropping and the patriarchal authority it entailed helped to bring more female and child labor back into agricultural production.

One major advantage of sharecropping over wage labor was that the former served as a form of crude insurance whereby the cropper and the landowner shared the risk of natural disasters. In contrast, regions that had some of the finest plantation lands and larger plantations, or suffered less devastation from the war, were more likely to be characterized initially by wage contracts that provided landowners with tighter control over labor.

“ Hence, sharecropping may have been the optimal result possible within a sadly narrowed sphere of alternatives, but it certainly was not the

unqualified result of Southern racial prejudices, nor the imposed order of a class elite” (Riddle, 1995, 53). Many sharecroppers tied to a plantation because cotton had a lengthy production time.

Also, landowners across most of the older cotton-producing areas of the South had instituted family sharecropping. Toward that end, share contracts often specified that the sharecropper was equivalent in status to a hired hand in terms of important production and marketing decisions. Also, the high turnover among sharecroppers led to debts (Greenberg, 2004).

In sum, family sharecropping was preferred by freedmen for the very reason that it gave them more autonomy than did gang or squad labor. Personal commitment as well as common household interests also played a role in ensuring labor discipline under family sharecropping, as compared to the impersonal relations between overseers and laborers.

References

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