

Political and economic development essay

[Sociology](#), [Immigration](#)



During the antebellum era, Americans vigorously debated the limits of freedom for poor whites, Indians, immigrants, women, and slaves. Discuss these controversies and how they erupted from the social, political, and demographic changes of this era.

Introduction:

Although most of the Negro population was enslaved in the antebellum era this did not mean that there wasn't any form of debate regarding their freedom which was a great preoccupation for many whites of the upper classes. Naturally enough the plantation class did not want their slaves to be freed so there was an intense debate on this score with the result that there was consistent conflict between the North and the South on these issues with the eventual result of the Civil War but one must also not forget the situation in which poor whites and Indians found themselves as indentured servants. Constitutional rights seemed not to apply to negroes however even with the new Constitution. Suffrage was still based intrinsically on property rights and those who did not own property or who had a certain level of income did not qualify for the vote which was inherently unfair.

The United States developed considerably both politically and economically in the antebellum years. The growth of the population meant that several new states joined the union and since most of them came from the South, political power especially in the Senate was controlled by the Democrats who were very much in favour of keeping slavery. The economy especially in the cotton sector was also booming for the South which became a powerful power broker in debates and other issues such as the Missouri compromise. However with the rise of industrialization in the North and centre of the

country, slavery became less important although the Kansas-Nebraska Act still kept this institution in force. The next big question was immigration which fuelled the economic boom especially in heavy industry and mining. However the new Republicanism which was approaching and which culminated in the election of President Lincoln was also another boom for capitalism.

Slavery as an institution in the antebellum South

Slavery was a most despicable institution in the United States and as everyone seemed to accept it until it boiled down to a Civil War, the Deep South lorded it over millions of black Africans who suffered greatly and terribly due to their exposure to slavery. In this book, Linda Brent recounts the life of Harriet Jacobs, a young woman slave who has an extremely powerful narrative to share and she begins with the discovery that she was a slave at six years of age. This was due to the fact that young children were not inherently exposed to slave life at so early an age so they were not so affected by the institution. But that immediately dawned upon them when they were more than six years old as then they suffered all the horrors and injustices of a slave life with all its trials and tribulations. Jacobs' childhood was a happy one as her household was inherently a kind one but as she was then sold and her master was unkind and quite a despot who worked his slaves to death. She then suffered unduly and was consistently abused and tortured and even made to work in the fields from dawn to dusk without any form of respite. This situation continued to prevail so her years of childhood appeared nothing less than a distant memory. This example is typical of the

debate which became second nature after the Dredd Scott case where a slave was regarded as being three fifths human.

Women and slavery

Women were very much involved in the slavery question especially on the abolitionist side. In the North, women formed societies to assist runaway slaves and to help educate them and all this led to a general outcry against slavery which culminated in the Civil War. Slave women were themselves affected by all this as most of them now found a new independence in their ways and customs which could not be expressed whilst they were suppressed into slavery. Naturally enough, there were women, especially those from the Southern states who resisted all efforts to end slavery as they were comfortable enough in their own cosy situations with their slaves helping them live the life of queens. However American women eventually played a hugely important role in the slavery question and were also instrumental in the efforts to end it completely. Slavery as a scourge was always there and women played a huge part in making this disappear for ever. However even white women were disadvantaged although the Second Great Awakening put them in churches. Also they worked in factories for pennies usually averaging only 80 dollars a year which were starvation wages. However women were also given a sort of exalted status as domestic goddesses which made them part and parcel of the house and this was their castle.

Slaves were human beings like everybody else and thus had every right to fall in love accordingly. Yet the way that their life was led obviously made it quite difficult for them to fall in love and to have a normal family. The main

issue was the fact that slaves were sometimes sold at auctions after their owners decided to sell them or were deceased and this broke up families on a regular basis. So love could not be an issue when slaves were simply treated as chattel and property which could be disposed of at any whim. Several authors cite several instances in the book where slaves are sold and mothers and fathers end up with different owners with the resultant situation that families are broken up and love is rent apart or torn asunder.

Love between slaves was a regular occurrence although this was obviously fraught with risks and danger. There were several instances where slaves risked life and limb to go over from one plantation to another to visit their loved ones and this obviously created huge problems if these were discovered. Naturally enough there were instances where slaves were caught and the punishment meted out to them was rather terrible with floggings and whippings ending up with some slaves even dying of their wounds. Love was certainly a long way away in the life of a slave and nothing much could change in this respect.

Matriarchs were important to slave owners as they created a sense of balance in the community and provided a sense of calm in assuaging slaves from rebelling. Slaves were also important sources of property for their masters and they had a lot of value with the matriarch perhaps one of the most valued. The fact that the grandmother wanted to put herself up for auction indicated that she was ready to risk the master's wrath by doing so as she would obviously be coveted by other slave owners. In that manner she also was detrimental to her master because she showed him that she was superior to him in the sense that she could command a certain authority

over him although he was her master and technically her superior.

The slave auction was also an important part of the psychology of ownership and this threat made by the matriarch was indicative of the power which slaves could have over their masters. The fact that the matriarch herself wanted to offer herself up for auction was also indicative of her low esteem for her master which obviously manifested herself in her request.

More often than not, this resulted in terrible beatings and violence when the slave was recaptured and in some extreme cases, death was also a result.

These were just some of the risks which William took when trying to escape.

Immigrants as a force for good

Immigration can be said to have been the kernel of American society in more ways than one. The vast differences in races and customs have brought about a sea change in American society which is also constantly and consistently changing. Immigrant women obviously bring with them their particular customs and also their traditions but once these assimilate into American society, most of these are lost. It is important to note however that several nationalities who are now part and parcel of US society still retain their roots to some extent and women are no exception. This is particularly seen in the ways women raise their children which may be completely different from the traditional American way although at times it is rather difficult to resist the pull of capitalism and other materialist values which seem to dominate the United States nowadays. Women provide a consistent and intriguingly changing pattern to American society which changes accordingly and immigrant women are certainly no exception both for the multiculturalism which they bring as well as the intrinsic variety and

innovation which has become part and parcel of American life today – unity in diversity.

A group which was discriminated against as immigrants was the Chinese. In 1860, the Chinese were the largest immigrant group in California. They worked in laundries and restaurants and provided cheap labour.

Unfortunately, many Chinese were beaten because of their nationality and this meant that they were horribly abused as they were only searching for dignity in work.

What made things even more difficult for the Chinese was that if they opted to leave the United States, they could not gain re-entry. This broke up many families as it was very difficult to re-unite with relatives under the Chinese Exclusion Act. Restrictions followed the Chinese Exclusion Act and therefore, the Chinese community remained in the same place and did not grow like the other European communities in the United States did. They had to live within their own community shunned by others. In this way, Chinatown was created. The restrictions included discrimination in housing and other areas. However immigrants were also seen as a force for good and they were introduced into the labour system enabling social and economic growth eventually.

The Indian question

Indians were perhaps the least who were discussed and those who practically suffered the most with most of them being wiped out by the mid-19th century. Indians were seen as an obstacle to growth and expansion on the continent which was always thirsty for expansion by the whites. In a sense the poor whites who permeated American society West of the

Mississippi viewed the American Indian as little more than a pest and who should be eradicated forthwith and this was the eventual result although there was some indication that the more educated classes deplored the treatment of Indians.

The trail of tears was also an important aspect since Indians did not want to move off their lands but the government wanted them to and passed several acts through congress to do this. Also the Cherokee petitioned Congress for the freedom to stay on their lands however without any success. The Indians were pushed further West and this made them feel all the more emarginated.

The situation for Native American women was quite similar with their lot being rather more restrictive and tied to their home. Women had practically no legal rights and they were treated very much as the property of their husbands without any possibility for advancement or intrusion into political affairs. It was a situation which continued to flourish even after independence until the Civil War began changing all this.

Poor whites:

Poor whites usually saw blacks and Indians as their main enemy in acquiring work and some were little better than slaves when compared to the same minorities. However they slowly managed to gain access to good work in the South as time went by chiefly by downtrodding the Negro and keeping him in his place. However this did not mean that they were automatically in a good situation as they still tended to remain poor, in debt and without much opportunities for advancement. Their situation was discussed regularly by politicians who attempted to bridge the gap between blacks and whites by

using racial demagoguery. Class separation between whites was also of some importance as more often than not those who did not have enough income or who were poor were excluded from voting and this made them feel inherently inferior. Thus the social development of poor whites was stunted in the extreme and there were no further opportunities for them either.