

A Psychoanalysis of Institutional Slavery

1

By Patrice Azi

From the seventeenth century through the end of the American Civil War, The United States committed the most disgusting and degrading crime against humanity: slavery. Institutional slavery ignited the American economy and ultimately became the backbone of our financial system. However, as classical liberalism permeated the United States, slavery was increasingly viewed as barbaric by many Americans. The institution became outdated and financially incompetent but was saved by Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793. The cotton gin greatly increased cotton production, made it more efficient, and provided a context where many more laborers were needed. Consequently, numerous slaves were traded from upper south to the "cotton belt" region of the Deep South.¹

Slavery could have been abolished years earlier in the United States, but racism kept it alive. Many whites did not agree with abolishment on the grounds that white supremacy was natural and blacks were inferior beings. Others asserted there was natural animosity between whites and blacks; therefore a society where the two races lived in peace and as equals was impossible. Slavery was finally abolished immediately after the civil war by the thirteenth amendment to the U.S. constitution in 1865.²

Henry Lewis was interviewed in the 1930s as a part of the Federal Writers project, a program under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal which aimed to provide jobs and decrease the high unemployment rate caused by the Great Depression. Many unemployed

¹ Joseph R. Colin, The American Past: Part One: A Survey of American History to 1877, San Diego: Hoarcourtr Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1987, Chapter 20.

² *Ibid.*

writers were hired to interview the last generation of surviving ex-slaves; to capture their stories before they perished forever.

Lewis lived in the heart of the cotton belt in Pine Island, Texas. He was born in 1835 and belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Bob Cade who owned an additional plantation in Louisiana. His mother, Judy Lewis, was from Mississippi, and he had nine brothers and sisters. Lewis' story is unique yet represents that of an entire generation of blacks: those who were born slaves, lived through the Civil War, and then had to grapple with the reality of freedom- something they previously knew only as an abstract idea. After emancipation, Lewis left his plantation to start a new life. However, he stayed in Texas which remained a racist society.³

Lewis' interview offers tremendous insight into institutional slavery; however, his words must be analyzed with caution. He told his story in the context of a racist environment where fear may have prevented him from expressing his true feelings, and sadly we may never know how he actually felt. But his interview will be assessed as if he spoke the truth, and alternate analysis will be provided when necessary. By discussing antebellum race relations, religion, and the terror which occupied the hearts of black slaves, Lewis' interview illustrates how racism, Christianity, and fear mentally controlled those held in bondage while helping to maintain the institution of slavery in the United States.

³ Interview of Henry Lewis, The Library of Congress: American Memory
http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=163/mesn163.db&recNum=12&itemLink=D?mesnbib:1:./temp/~amem_r2KB:

Slavery did not always exist in North America, and in order to understand Lewis' story, one must know how and why it emerged. Black Africans arrived in the British North American colonies as indentured servants in 1619. They worked an average of seven years and then were set free. After their term of service expired, many purchased property and became active members of society. Nevertheless, within a generation of their arrival, blacks became a slave caste which was brutally controlled and exploited by European colonists.⁴

Slavery replaced indentured servitude as the main source of labor in the British Colonies for many reasons. In the first half of the 17th century, most laborers died after a few years of work in the New World because of diseases such as malaria, typhoid fever, small pox, and influenza. Therefore, it was more economically efficient for plantation owners to pay the relatively cheap price for indentured servants then purchase expensive African slaves. However, death rates sharply declined by the end of the 1700s, making it practical to obtain laborers who would serve as long as possible. In addition, Africans were immune to diseases that annihilated many whites in the semitropical South, so black laborers were a better investment. Many servants ran away, and whites could escape by blending into crowds, but blacks were easily identified. Moreover, White elites were evermore terrified by the threat of a lower class uprising, especially after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. Thus, they used race to divide the poor. As Africans became a slave class, poor whites were given racial supremacy in return for not uniting with blacks. By the early 1700s, institutional slavery was accepted in every colony, and there was a mass

⁴ Conlin, chapter 20.

importation of Africans. By the Revolution in 1775, there were 500,000 slaves in the 13 colonies and all but 50,000 were in the South.⁵

White Americans used racism to justify their enslavement of black Africans. They asserted that blacks were inferior beings who were meant to be held in bondage, and unfortunately, numerous slaves internalized this bigotry. Internalized oppression prevented many blacks from challenging the institution because they perceived their enslavement as the natural order of life. Lewis exemplifies the central role that racism played in controlling slaves by repeatedly referring to his master as a great person instead of condemning him, discussing how slaves were treated as subhuman, and constantly referring to himself and other blacks as “niggers” or “darkies.”

During the interview, Lewis continuously asserts that his master is a good man. He discusses numerous acts of kindness by Mr. Cade such as giving the slaves “plenty good food to eat...good cloths, too, wool for winter and cotton for summer,” and a “Christmas gift and a whole week for holiday.”⁶ Instead of condemning his former master for allowing the slaves to be consistently beaten, Lewis praises Mr. Cade for advising overseers not to beat them too badly. After describing the atrocious punishment that slaves often received, Lewis asserts “Sometime a overseer kilt a nigger, and dey don’t do nothin’ to him cept male him pay for de nigger. But our massa good.”⁷ Cade exercised complete control over Lewis’ life but Lewis never condemns him. His perspective is not unique - he asserts that “All niggers say Cade a good man.”⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Lewis.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

There are at least three possible reasons why Lewis habitually praises his master, all of which illustrate how deeply entrenched racism was in antebellum Southern culture. First, Lewis lived his whole life in a racist society dominated by white people, and it is very possible that he thought white supremacy is natural, because he was unaware of other social contexts. This would explain why he asserted his master did nothing wrong. By his birth in 1835, the slave trade had been outlawed for twenty-seven years. In sharp contrast to those who were taken from Africa and knew what freedom was like, he symbolizes a generation of slaves which only knew freedom as an abstract concept. He never speaks of free black men, probably because he had never seen one. Texas, like many other slave-states, passed laws which forced free blacks to either leave or work in bondage. In 1860, there were 309 slaves in Jefferson County and only one free black.⁹ In addition, Lewis was probably illiterate as were virtually all slaves and could not read about societies where black people lived free and prospered. Since he could not read about other ways of life, it is not surprising that he would take his slave status for granted. If he thought blacks were meant to be enslaved, and whites were meant to own them, then he thought his master was doing nothing wrong. This would explain why he considers “massa good.”

On the contrary, Lewis may believe that all races are intrinsically equal – equally greedy. He may have thought his master was relatively good for a member of the human race which is comprised of self-interested individuals responsible only for pursuing their own interests, even if it entails exploiting others. Most white Southerners could not afford

⁹ History of Jefferson County, TX
http://www.co.jefferson.tx.us/historical_commission/hist.htm

slaves but greatly desired them. Only ten percent of white families owned twenty or more slaves in the South. The Cade family was part of the 0.02 percent of Southern families who owned over one-hundred slaves.¹⁰ They were extremely powerful and symbolized success in the South, thus, Lewis understood that expecting Mr. Cade to either challenge institutional slavery or not partake in it would be unreasonable. Even though Mr. Cade owned other people, slavery was a part of antebellum southern society well before he came into existence. He simply used what advantages he had to succeed. Lewis understood that Mr. Cade did not create the institution of slavery, and expecting him to challenge it or even consider it morally wrong may have been expecting too much. Mr. Cade was lucky for being born part of the dominant race, just as Lewis was unlucky for being born black, and he simply exploited others to get ahead just as people have been doing to each other since the beginning of humanity. Lewis might even acknowledge that if he were white, he may have owned slaves as well.

Additionally, Mr. Cade was probably psychologically conditioned by his milieu to think that owning black slaves was the “right” thing to do; therefore he did what was right in his social environment by having slaves and treating them relatively well. What is right and wrong has no universal answer, and the reply depends on the social context in which the question is asked. Cade did nothing “wrong” in his environment by owning slaves. Lewis may consider his master a good man because he understood why his master owned slaves. He may have sympathized with him and admired him for not being overly cruel.

¹⁰ Lillian Duck, City College of San Francisco, Spring 2007

However, every explanation I have given for Lewis praising his master may be irrelevant because his words might not express his true feelings. It is important that we assess his words within the context that they were spoken. When interviewed, he had not been a slave for over sixty years, but he was not “free” by modern standards. He still lived in Texas where blacks were treated as inferior beings and offending a white in any way was inviting brutal punishment. In addition, The Ku Klux Klan had a strong presence. They arrived in Texas in September 1920 and by 1922 dominated Jefferson county politics. They controlled the local governments of many Texas cities and counties, the Texas state legislature, and even elected a U.S. senator.¹¹ Their unrivaled political power gave white racists impunity to commit atrocious acts of terror against blacks. Between 1882 and 1968, there were 493 recorded lynchings in Texas – the third most in the nation behind only Mississippi and Georgia. Of those lynched, 352 were black - approximately seventy-one percent.¹² These statistics account for only recorded lynchings, and there is no doubt many more that went undocumented. The interviewer was probably white, as were most interviewers who worked for the Federal Writers Project, and Lewis may have been telling him what Lewis thought he wanted to hear. He may have thought that speaking negatively about his master or any white people, would offend the interviewer, or other whites who would examine the interview. If Lewis spoke negatively about his master, other white people, institutional slavery, or antebellum Southern culture in general, many white Texans would have been extremely offended. As a black man living

¹¹ The University of Texas at Austin: Utopia
<http://utopia.utexas.edu/articles/alcalde/moody.html?sec=history&sub=diversity>

¹² Classroom: The Charles Chestnut Digital Archive
<http://faculty.berea.edu/browners/chesnutt/classroom/lynchingstat.html>

in a racist society dominated by white people, Lewis had to be extremely careful of what he said and did. If his words were passed on to the Klan then Lewis would have been severely punished and possibly killed. Lewis may have continuously praised his master because he thought it was the safest thing to do. If this is true, and he is not saying what he actual felt, his interview is still valuable because it exemplifies the fear that plagued blacks in the South throughout the first half the nineteenth century. However, his words are useless in identifying and understanding the actual thoughts of an ex-slave.

Henry Lewis further demonstrates the harshness of antebellum racism by comparing the status of slaves to that of animals. African Slaves were treated as animals from the beginning of their journey to America. Those who were taken from Africa and sold in America stood on auction blocks while their muscles were felt and teeth were checked like horses. Even after a slave found a home, he or she was always liable to be resold like livestock and ripped away from family and friends. Lewis asserts that slave traders went from plantation to plantation -often kidnapping slaves- before going downtown to sell them. He saw slave traders on many different occasions – each time striking terror into his heart. Lewis explains that they would come through the country with a “herd of niggers just like cattlemen with a herd of cattle.” Indeed, livestock was a primary product on the farms of Jefferson Co. where there were 7,000 cattle in 1839.¹³ Slaves were chained together like wild beasts, and were constantly screamed at and hit. Lewis draws the similarity between the transportation of slaves to the herding of cattle because they were treated equally, and this is clear to Lewis. Slaves were considered property without

¹³ Utopia.

any human rights, and it is this view of black slaves that allowed the slave-traders to justify their utter domination, and degradation of slaves.

While Lewis explains how whites treated blacks as animals, he exemplifies the internalized racism of many antebellum black slaves with his frequent use of the word Nigger. In modern America, the terms “colored” or “black” refer to one who has dark skin and is of African decent, but “nigger” has both a different denotation and connotation. It means dark skinned, inferior, and sub-human. Lewis describes slaves who are herded around in chains as a “herd of niggers just like cattle.” When he speaks of his master’s popularity among the slaves he says, “all niggers say Cade de good man.”¹⁴ In the antebellum South, the word “nigger” was used by both races to refer to blacks. It was accepted and used by members of both races, and did not necessarily interpreted as a pejorative term. At the same time, the oppression, enslavement, and degradation of black people was acceptable as well. It was taken for granted that whites were superior to blacks. Many even believed that white people were doing blacks a favor by enslaving them because blacks were perceived by many to be mentally inferior and not capable of participating in society as the equals of whites. The word nigger metaphorically represents the enslavement of black people in the United States and the racist beliefs necessary for their enslavement. Many black-slaves internalized the belief of white superiority/black inferiority, and this is symbolized by Lewis’ constant use of the word nigger to refer to him and others. In subsequent generations, African Americans rejected the word Nigger because of its close connection to slavery, racism, the emasculation of black males, and sadly, their internalization of these beliefs.

¹⁴ Lewis.

Just as racism was used to mentally control slaves, Christianity was used for the same purpose. This form of mental control is not particular to nineteenth century institutional slavery in North America, but has been used since the early days of the Roman Empire. When Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313AD which legalized Christianity, he claimed to see a cross in the sky which said “conquer.” No one dared question him because he spoke the words of god and therefore new the road to heaven. When Charlemagne was crowned the first emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 800AD by the Pope, he systematically annihilated everyone who rejected Christian doctrine. Many supported his conquests because he represented god – the all powerful entity that determines who enters the wonderful, eternal heaven.¹⁵

Fifteen hundred years after Constantine, Christianity was being used to mentally manage blacks held in bondage. One of the most effective means for controlling Black slaves was to assert that god intended them to be held in bondage because of their race so they should be grateful to their masters for taking them in. This caused many slaves to praise their masters instead of challenging them. In contrast to those slaves who obeyed their masters out of fear, many Christianized slaves saw obedience as a moral obligation to enter the wonderful kingdom of heaven. This made it much easier for whites to control their human property.

Numerous masters let their slaves practice Christianity, but closely monitored what biblical passages they received. Whites made sure that slaves heard nothing that undermined slavery. Lewis says that blacks and whites did not attend church together but

¹⁵ Donald Kagan, *The Wester Heritage: Volume One: To 1740*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2007.

“de white folks go in the mornin’ and us go after dinner”¹⁶ so slaves remembered that the two races are not even equal in the eyes of god. Masters often took their slaves to church when the preacher gave a sermon based on biblical stories such as that of Hagar: “the angel of the Lord said unto her, return to Thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.”¹⁷

It is with good reason that masters monitored the biblical messages that their slaves received, for those who read the bible on their own formed their own interpretations which often justified escape or other challenges to the institution. Henry Lewis illustrates how Christianity was used to control slaves by exemplifying how it gave him a false sense of hope, and a reason to accept his subhuman status in society.

Mental control was more effective than ruling solely by force. If a slave knew that slavery was wrong and did not revolt only because of fear of the ramifications, then he or she turned on their master as soon as the opportunity arose. Ruling solely by brute power increased the probability of revolt, insolence, and desertion. Many held in bondage did not challenge their masters because they were told that hard work and obedience was the way to enter eternal paradise.

Lewis illustrates how Christianity kept numerous slaves compliant by giving them a false hope of one day going to heaven. During the interview, Lewis sings a song that he and his companions would chant: “ My knee bones achin’ - My body’s rackin’ with pain, I calls myself de chile of Gawd – Heaven am my aim- ...I’s a long time on my way – But

¹⁶ Lewis.

¹⁷ Conlin, chapter 20.

Heaven am my home.”¹⁸ The song symbolizes Lewis’ thoughts about being a slave. He is more content with enduring back breaking work in the fields for many hours a day - for someone else’s financial benefit - because he thinks he will one day be in heaven. He was psychologically conditioned to think that obedience was morally good because it makes God happy. If a slave feels that obedience and hard work is their ticket to heaven then they have no reason to think institutional slavery is wrong and have no reason to confront it. This makes the master’s work easier by greatly decreasing the probability of their slaves challenging them in any way. Sadly, there is no reason to believe that heaven exists. There is no reason to believe that heaven is anything but a fantasy thought up by a group of ignorant men a long time ago. Thus, there is good reason to believe that Lewis wasted his life laboring for another man’s financial benefit. He was kept illiterate, kept ignorant, brainwashed, and prevented from actualizing his full potential as a human being.

However, it may be argued that Christianity played a positive role in Lewis’ life. He was held captive as was his family, and challenging his master would most likely have ended in disaster. If he was an atheist and did not believe in heaven or god, but thought he had just his life here on earth, then he may have been extremely unhappy. He may have lived an abysmal life in complete misery because having no heaven to look forward would have forced him to concentrate on his life as a slave. He could have grown desperate and revolted or ran away which would probably have ended with him getting caught and severely beaten and/or killed. Even if there is no heaven, the hope of one gave him something to look forward to and kept him happy in a context where he could have easily lived a very miserable life. To verify that Christianity played a positive role in

¹⁸ Lewis.

Lewis' life, all one needs to do is recall Pascal's wager: If there is a god then Lewis will certainly go to heaven, and if there is not a god then at least he was given a reason to be happy, and upon death Lewis ceased to exist so anything that happened prior is irrelevant as far as he is concerned.

Additionally, it may be good that Lewis was not allowed to read the bible and form his own interpretations. It might be good that his master filtered the biblical messages he received to psychologically condition him as an obedient and efficient slave. Many slaves who were religious and literate read the bible on their own and were able to form their own interpretations. This often resulted in slaves challenging the institution. Although it is generally considered heroic that one held in bondage would fight for his freedom, it most often ended badly. This is illustrated by Nat Turner, a slave in Southampton, Virginia. He was literate – which was unusual among slaves – and read the bible. He formed his own ideas on the words of god. In September 1831, he saw a solar eclipse which he took to be a message from god which inspired him to revolt with the ultimate goal of freedom. He went from plantation to plantation in Southampton building a small group of rebel slaves and taking the lives of about sixty whites. His fight for liberty was noble; however the uprising was quickly suppressed. After about six weeks of hiding, he and his comrades were rounded up and forty of them, including Turner were hanged. As a result, other blacks, many of whom were innocent, were beaten and killed by angry and frightened whites. Nat Turner was able to read the bible and form his own interpretations, but this just caused him to create a false hope. It was his belief that god supported his quest for freedom that gave him the courage to rebel. Ultimately, his

religious ideas ended with him and many other blacks being killed. Had he never read the bible, he would have never created the false idea that he was supported by an all powerful entity and many lives could have been spared. Maybe by being kept illiterate and ignorant, Lewis was able to avoid the fate of Turner.¹⁹

While religion and racism played a major role in mentally controlling slaves, so did fear. Many plantation owners and overseers scared slaves into working more efficiently. Those who ran away or did not work hard enough were brutally punished to serve as an example to prevent them from repeating their mistakes and to deter others from following in their footsteps.

A central reason that Southerners sought to strike fear into the heart of slaves was to prevent an uprising. The white South was extremely fearful of slave revolts, not just because of Nat Turner's rebellion, but because of many others as well. There was a plotted uprising in Richmond, Virginia in 1800 led by a black named Gabriel Prosser which included as many as a thousand slaves. Additionally, in 1822 a free black man named Denmark Vesey was accused of conspiring to murder whites in Charleston, North Carolina.²⁰ There were numerous reported plots, many of which were probably figments of white imaginations, but several where very real.

Lewis' experience as a slave was probably shaped by living in a post Turner plantation context where fear of insurrection among agricultural estate owners was at its height. This may be why Lewis witnessed such brutal acts of punishment carried out

¹⁹ Conlin, chapter 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

against his fellow slaves. In the interview, Lewis vividly describes a time when he witnessed the atrocious disciplining of other slaves. Lewis explains:

“I seed some slaves in chains and I heard of one massa what had de place in de fence with the hole cut out for de nigger’s neck. Dey hist up de board and de nigger put he head through de hole and den dey beat him with a lash wit holes bored in it and every hole raise de blister. Den he bus’ dem blisters with de handsaw and dey put salt and pepper in de bucket water and ‘noint dem blisters with de mop dip in de water.”²¹

Many slaves either witnessed or were the victims of extremely vile punishment similar to that described by Lewis. Witnessing and experiencing brutal penalties kept slaves obedient by keeping them fearful of the possible consequences. It did not prevent all from challenging the institution, but prevented many from running away, revolting, or insolence. Those who did run away and were caught, or did not work hard enough were made examples of so as to keep other from repeating their mistakes. In addition, there was always the possibility of being killed. Lewis asserts that overseers would sometimes kill slaves and suffer little punishment for doing so. The fear of death is enough to make most people do almost anything.

Slaves’ lives were made more miserable because the punishment was often arbitrary. Slaves were constantly terrified because punishment was rendered not only for erring but also if the master or overseer was not in a particularly good mood. Lewis asserts that masters and overseers rendered brutal punishment “...when dey in a ticular bad humor...”.²² In the eyes of a master or over overseer, being in a bad mood may be a good reason to punish a slave. However, to a slave this punishment is random and unpredictable.

²¹ Lewis.

²² *Ibid.*

Arbitrary punishment both caused and illustrates many problems within institutional slavery. First, it reduced the control that slaves had over whether they were punished or not. They therefore felt less control over their own lives because they were living at the whims of another person. This made slaves unhappy, fearful, and more likely to resist; therefore arbitrary cruelty was not in the master or slave's best interest. On the contrary, if masters punished brutally but with reason, their subjects knew how to avoid trouble and had more control over their lives. The more control a slave had over his or her life, the happier they were and the less likely they were to challenge the master. Mr. Cade must have known that giving slaves some freedom kept them happier because that's exactly what he did. Lewis asserts "Old massa have de big field 'vided in trac's and each slave could have a part and raise what he wabt, and old massa buy de crop from de slave. He purty good to his slaves..."²³

However, the fact that whites arbitrarily committed such violent atrocities against black slaves illustrates the bizarre ramifications of racism. If whites had viewed blacks as their equals, they would not have been able to dehumanize them in such a harsh manner. Racism allowed whites to view blacks as sub humans and dehumanize them in atrocious ways. Many of the humanity crimes that whites committed against black slaves would not have occurred if blacks were viewed by society as people instead of inferiors to the white race.

The fact arbitrary cruelty of plantation owners and overseers exemplifies the consequences of giving people too much power over the lives of others. This is not just shown in American slavery, but throughout history. If you give one group

²³ Lewis.

of people complete control over another, then they are bound to viciously abuse their power. That is why it is never good to give humans too much authority over others.

Henry Lewis' interview tells the story of one of the many billions of humans who have graced this planet. But more specifically, he gives us deep insight into the atrocious institution of slavery which dominated American society for hundreds of years and is the direct cause of numerous social problems in the modern United States. Black Americans are disproportionately in jail, under the poverty line, and not in school. Although African Americans make up only 12.3 percent of the national population, they account for 46.3 percent of prison inmates. While only 7.5 percent of white persons live in poverty, 22 percent of blacks do. In addition, the median household annual income for a white family is 56,442 dollars while it is only 34,192 for black families- a staggering 22,250 dollar difference.²⁴ In order to understand contemporary institutional racism we need to study the context in which it emerged. Lewis describes a more brutal and overt racism. That which plagues many people of color today is harder to identify and articulate but it is just as present. Lewis offers great insight into a crucial point in American history from a perspective that needs to be recognized and understood. In illustrating the how religion, racism, and punishment maintained institutional slavery Lewis broadens the context in which we can analyze and assess the problems of the current African American community.

²⁴ Andrew Hacker, Two Nations: Black and White Separate, Hostile, Unequal, New York: Scribner, 2003, p. 21, 111, 224.



