NEW WORLD VISION

Did slavery compromise the image of the New World as an Edenic land?

Viewpoint: Yes. Many intellectuals and statesmen in Europe and the United States believed that the existence of slavery compromised, if not destroyed, the promise of the New World to revitalize and purify civilization and humanity.

Viewpoint: No. Slavery was essential to the economic success of the New World, which was a basic element of the promise America offered.

How were Europeans to reconcile the existence of slavery with the image of America as a land of promise, an earthly paradise? Was the New World to be the setting for the regeneration or the degradation of humanity? For more than two hundred years Europeans did not torment themselves with such questions, remaining largely indifferent to the plight of African slaves and to their own complicity with an evil that they chose to rationalize or evade rather than to confront and resolve.

The problem of slavery had engaged thinkers since antiquity. Only in the eighteenth century, however, did they find it imperative to accommodate the reality of slavery with ideas of morality and progress. By the nineteenth century, as historian David Brion Davis has argued, intellectuals in both Europe and the United States had come to regard slavery as the repudiation of natural law, Christian ethics, progress, enlightenment, reason, and democracy.

Emancipation of the slaves, by contrast, was, in the words of American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, “an event singular in the history of civilization; a day of reason; of the clear light; of that which makes us better than a flock of birds and beasts; a day, which gave the immense fortification of a fact,—of gross history—to ethical abstractions.” Emerson and others of his age believed in the inevitability of moral progress. At the beginning of the twenty-first century people are less inclined to share their views, however much they may appreciate and even admire the effort to recognize slavery as a moral problem implicated in the meaning of America.
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Americans, as historian David Brion Davis has maintained, were and are embarrassed when they recall that a slaveholder wrote the Declaration of Independence (1776) and that slavery was a legal institution in the Thirteen Colonies at the beginning of the American Revolution (1775–1783). During the struggle for independence many American leaders admitted that slavery was contrary to the principles for which they fought, and several reformers warned that the Revolution could not be justified unless Americans rid the land of slavery. The irony of slaveholders fighting for liberty and the rights of man was only part of a larger paradox that historians have seldom understood in its full magnitude and dimensions. The ideology of the American Revolution was grounded in the belief that the United States was a regenerative force, the new hope for a tired world. To fulfill its historic destiny, America had to free itself from the decadence, perversion, and corruption of Europe.

From the time of the earliest discoveries, Europeans had projected visions of liberation and perfection into the vast and, to their eyes, vacant spaces of the New World. Explorers approached the uncharted coasts with vague preconceptions of discovering the mythical Atlantis or El Dorado. Naked savages, living in apparent splendor, freedom, and innocence awakened hopes of what historian Hugh Honour has characterized as a “new Golden Land.” Even Christopher Columbus—as practical, hardheaded, and unsentimental a man as ever was—fell under the spell of the golden-skinned natives whom he encountered living at their leisure amid the bounty of nature. In August 1498, when he lay at anchor in the Gulf of Paria (between Venezuela and Trinidad) during his third voyage to the New World, Columbus wrote that he had arrived on the “nipple” of the earth, which, he thought, reached closer to Heaven than any other part of the world. He believed that the Garden of Eden must be nearby.

A growing literature celebrated America as a natural world, free from the avarice, luxury, corruption, sinfulness, and materialism of Europe. To the promoters of colonizing expeditions America was a virgin land, a place for solving all the problems and satisfying all the desires of life.

In America, they maintained, things would be better, for America was the new Promised Land. This long-held tradition, culled from a mixture of classical and biblical sources, also later helped to shape Americans’ image of themselves as the “New Adam,” a creature unencumbered by the fears, superstitions, and sins of a moldering civilization, a wise innocent dwelling in an earthly paradise. The American was at once the happy farmer, content to enjoy the blessings of a simple rural life, and the adventurous pioneer, expansive and confident of his ability to conquer and improve the world. By the time of the American Revolution (1775–1783) European liberals and radicals looked to America as the only hope for the future of humanity. It was in America, they declared, that social and political institutions were most clearly modeled on the rational plan of nature and God. By reconciling the natural order with human progress, Americans had at last fulfilled the ancient dream of creating “a more perfect union.”

What, though, was the meaning of slavery in this earthly paradise? In Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indies (Philosophical and Political History of the European Trading Establishments in the Two Indies), published in 1770 and publicly burned in 1781, Abbé Guillaume-Thomas-François de Raynal, the French historian and philosopher, was among the first scholars to attempt an answer to this question.

Like most other thinkers associated with the Enlightenment, Raynal thought slavery contrary to nature. He conceded that relations of subordination and authority had once been necessary to the progress of civilization, but slavery offered evidence only of human greed and selfishness. Raynal believed that the advance of society enhanced rather than mitigated its worst evils. The lust for wealth, power, and luxury, he argued, had corrupted the modern world and brought slavery to entire peoples.

For Raynal, an incomprehensible cruelty and violence had characterized European expansion into the New World from the outset. The early voyages to America had unsettled the European mind and imagination, creating a new breed of men insatiable in their quest for wealth and power. Far from being a land of hope and redemption, the Americas had provided virtually unlimited opportunities for savage exploitation. Although the Enlightenment had improved European morals, the slave trade to the Americas gave constant stimulus to the worst passions and vices of humanity.

Was this result, Raynal wondered, the necessary outcome of American development? He could not easily accept that conclusion. Yet, Raynal conceded, the colonies of the New
World would not have been prosperous without slaves. He summarized his views, writing: “without this labor, these lands, acquired at such a high cost, would remain uncultivated.” As a committed enemy of slavery, his only response was a flourish of despair. “Well then,” he wrote, “let them lie fallow, if it means that to make these lands productive, man must be reduced to brutishness, whether he be the man who buys, or he who sells, or he who is sold.”

Although Raynal recognized that slavery was, from the beginning, intimately bound up with the meaning of the New World, he did not abandon the traditional idea that America was also a land of promise. The inhabitants of the New World, he suggested, although corrupted by slavery, had an opportunity to create a new society based on the principles of reason. If they should one day succeed in ridding the world of the evil that enveloped them, they might become a great people, united in their dedication to advancing the freedom of humanity. After having been devastated by the Europeans, the New World might still rise to prominence and liberate the rest of mankind from oppressive customs, institutions, and practices.
In Raynal’s view, as Davis has argued, the promise of America could never be fulfilled without the abolition of slavery, which was not readily forthcoming. Between the potential mission to save the world and the actual state of corruption there lay an unbridgeable gap. Such an interpretation of the American dilemma carried overtones of the Christian conception of the human condition as sinful but capable of redemption. Raynal, however, had no faith in the power of Christianity to remove this burden of sin, especially since the Roman Catholic Church had long both tolerated and enacted the worst forms of barbarism and inhumanity. His faith in the efficacy of reason was only slightly greater. Were there not, he asked, any inherent forces at work in America that would lead to the eradication of slavery and thus free the land to fulfill its providential mission? Was slavery in America an historical accident, or was it part of the essential and substantive nature of the New World?

Raynal gave no definite answers. He acknowledged that in the ancient world slavery had coexisted with affluence, republican government, and advancing civilization, and that the advent of Christianity had left it unaffected. Slavery had come to an end in Europe only when economic and political conditions favored emancipation. Finally, Raynal pointed out that slavery had been associated with the development of the Americas from the earliest Portuguese and Spanish settlements. He thus implied that slavery was intrinsic to America.

In the end Raynal indicated that slavery would be eradicated only through some cataclysmic upheaval, such as a massive slave rebellion led by a black Spartacus (a slave and gladiator who led a revolt against Rome in 73–71 B.C.E.) who would be an instrument in the hands of God for punishing the blind avarice of Europeans and their descendants who peopled the New World. Raynal’s enthusiasm for such blood atonement revealed his lack of faith in any interior force for gradual emancipation and peaceful reform. America, it seemed, could not realize without agony its promise to redeem the world.

Antislavery Quaker John Woolman of New Jersey reached similar conclusions. Woolman declared that God had opened the New World and, as with Israel of old, had blessed his chosen people with abundance and freedom. Instead of being humbled by their success and grateful for their bounty, they had succumbed instead to greed and had become absorbed in the pursuit of luxury and power. If Americans continued to be unfaithful to their high calling to redeem the world, Woolman prophesied, they and their descendants would surely face the awful retribution of God’s justice.

Virginia statesman Thomas Jefferson recoiled from this vision, perhaps because he feared it would come to pass. “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just,” Jefferson wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia (1785), “that his justice cannot sleep forever: that considering numbers, nature, and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference!” In this famous passage from Query XVIII, Jefferson’s rational control over the problem of slavery broke down. Like Woolman, he predicted a servile revolt instigated by God. Jefferson here appealed not to the serene Deity of the Enlightenment but to the Old Testament God of Wrath.

According to Jefferson, the slaves, although a distinctly inferior people, were an alien and menacing presence in America. They had the potential to destroy the beautiful harmony of his image of America as an earthly paradise. Jefferson believed that all virtue came from the land. “Those who labor in the earth,” he asserted, “are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” If this assessment were true, then the slaves who worked the land had logically to be at least as virtuous as their masters, and perhaps more so. Jefferson could not make this concession, nor could he conceive of the slaves as linking their masters to the soil. The blacks were too different ever to enable the masters to project an image of themselves as bound to the soil through their slaves. As a consequence, Jefferson regarded blacks as obstacles that stood between their masters and the earth, which, it bears repeating, was for him the source of all virtue.

At the same time, the masters demanded absolute obedience from their slaves, who, in essence, were extensions of the master’s will. Jefferson, though, wrestled with the notion that the masters had rendered themselves dependent upon their slaves, not only for their material welfare, which originated from slave labor, but also for their definition of themselves as masters. The identity of the master as a master depended on the willingness of the slaves to acknowledge him as master. Subtly, unwittingly, yet unmistakably the logic of this relation opened the possibility that the slaves had some measure of autonomy and independence and were not simply the instruments of their master’s will.

Jefferson sensed the problem. The masters of slaves were not self-sufficient or independent, which for Jefferson were two of the characteristics that ensured a virtuous people and a healthy
Jefferson had to confront the unpleasant prospect that his beloved Virginia, America, and the entire New World were as corrupt and as evil as Europe. Americans did not live in harmony with nature as God intended but attempted to dominate not only nature but human nature through their exploitation of the slaves. In the end Jefferson’s intuition about the future was as apocalyptic as the expectations of Raynal and Woolman, and utterly confounded his vision of the New World as an earthly paradise. In Notes on the State of Virginia Jefferson was nearly prophetic about the end that the Confederacy would meet in the Civil War (1861–1865) when Union soldiers devastated the Southern New Canaan.

—MEG GREENE, MIDLOTHIAN, VIRGINIA

Viewpoint: No. Slavery was essential to the economic success of the New World, which was a basic element of the promise America offered.

The presence of slavery did not confound the image of the New World as an earthly paradise, though it did complicate that vision. One of the earliest attempts to reconcile the reality of slavery with the image of the New World as a paradise came from Virginia planter Robert Beverley, whose remarkable work, The History and Present State of Virginia, was published in London in 1705. Beverley offered an ecstatic and sensuous vision of the garden of Virginia. The second part, titled “of the NATURAL Product and conveniences of VIRGINIA; in its Unimprov’d STATE before the English went thither,” is a fertility hymn in praise of the waters, fish, fowl, soil, vegetation, herbs, and grains of Virginia.

When Beverley considered “the Husbandry and Improvements of the Country,” the development of farms and plantations, he nearly described ecstasy. To blend the delights of nature and plantation, Beverley found a memorable symbol in the summerhouse of William Byrd I, his father-in-law. Beverley wrote:

Have you pleasures in a Garden? All things thrive in it, most surprisingly [sic]; you can’t walk by a Bed of Flowers, but besides the entertainment of their Beauty, your Eyes will be saluted with the charming colors of the Humming Bird, which revels among the Flowers, and licks off the Dew and honey from their tender Leaves, on which it only feeds. . . . Colonel Byrd, in his Garden, which is the finest in that Country, has a Summer-House set round with the Indian Honey-suckle, which all the summer is continually full of sweet Flowers, in which these Birds delight exceedingly. Upon these Flowers, I have seen ten or a dozen of these beautiful Creatures together, which sported about me so familiarly, that with their little Wings they often fann’d my Face.

In his desire to describe the harmony of Virginia as a natural and improved garden, Beverley fashioned a poetic image of the plantation summerhouse and almost totally ignored the concrete details of plantation life. Yet, in Beverley’s evocation originated the idea that the plantation was at the center of the Garden of the New World. The glimpse of a planter such as Byrd seated amid the honeysuckle and the hummingbirds in that faraway summer foreshadowed the image of the plantation situated in the timeless South, a secure world redeemed from the ravages of time and history, a place of both independence and permanence.

At the time Beverley published The History and Present State of Virginia, the significance of the plantation as a symbol of the independence and permanence that characterized the South was only beginning to emerge in literature and thought. The transformation of this natural paradise into “paradise improved” occurred specifically in the mind and imagination of William Byrd II of Westover.

Byrd was among the most prominent Virginia planters during the first half of the eighteenth century. In three letters Byrd clarified the image of Virginia as a New World garden. Lately returned from what proved to be his last journey to England, Byrd wrote to his old friend the earl of Orrery in 1726 to explain the benefits of life in Virginia, about which he had only one reservation:

Besides the advantage of a pure air, we abound in all kinds of provision without expense (I mean we who have plantations). I have a large family of my own, and my doors are open to everybody, yet I have no bills to pay, and half-a-crown will rest undisturbed in my pockets for many moons together. Like one of the patriarchs [of the Old Testament], I have my flock and herds, my bondmen and bondwomen, and every sort of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on everyone but Providence. However, though this sort of life is without expense, yet it is attended with a great deal of trouble. I must take care to keep all my people [his slaves] to their duty, to set all the springs in motion, and to make everyone draw his equal share to carry the machine forward. But then ‘tis an amusement in this silent country and a continual exercise of our patience and economy. . . . Thus, My Lord, we are happy in our Canaans if we could but forget the onions and fleshpots of Egypt.

In Byrd’s letter to Lord Orrery he presented a vision of an earthly paradise realized exclusively
in the plantation society of Virginia. That society he identified with Canaan, the promised land of Exodus. The plantations of Virginia were “New Canaans,” which offered complete salvation from a land (Europe) in which the allure of evil was as oppressive as it was ubiquitous. The most significant aspect of Byrd’s vision, however, was his identification of this new way of life with the master’s supervision of “bondmen and bondwomen.”

As historians Stanley M. Elkins and Edmund S. Morgan have shown, there was nothing “natural” about the introduction of slavery into the colonial South. Slavery had no necessary connections with either a tropical climate or the crops grown in such a locale. In Virginia, Maryland, and the other North American colonies where slavery took root and flourished, the climate was hardly tropical, and the staple crop, tobacco, could be grown as far north as Canada. Nor had slavery in the past been limited to a particular people or defined by skin color. Even the planters of seventeenth-century Virginia had preferred white laborers from England, Scotland, and Ireland to black slaves from Africa.

The introduction of slavery also was not a matter of legal precedent. English colonists who settled in the Chesapeake Bay region had no legal category comparable to “slave.” Slavery had existed for centuries, but nothing in these earlier forms of bondage compelled slavery to develop in North America. In crucial respects, then, the colonists did not import slavery from elsewhere but re-created it in America. When colonial Virginians committed themselves to slavery, they broke with their own past and, as evinced in Byrd’s letter to Lord Orrery, sought to incorporate slavery into the myth of the New World as earthly paradise. At this stage the effort was comparatively painless, involving no more than the invention of a literary image of slave society as a patriarchal garden in which a kind, benevolent, and wise master presided over his “people” amiably at work in the tobacco fields or the Big House.

As the population of “Ethiopians” increased, however, Byrd became conscious of the growing difficulty of assimilating slavery into the vision of the New World as earthly paradise. In 1736, ten years after he had written to Lord Orrery, Byrd confided to another correspondent, the earl of Egmont, that slaves

Byrd also feared that masters who had to discipline large numbers of slaves would from time to time have to be severe with them. This necessity, he wrote to Egmont, was “terrible to a good-natured man, who must submit to be either a fool or a fury.” The most dreadful prospect that Byrd envisioned was servile insurrection. This possibility led him to wonder whether Parliament should not consider the abolition of slavery or at least a ban on the further importation of slaves into the North American colonies.

These concerns, although evident in Byrd’s writing, did not become overriding considerations for him. He belonged to a world in which slavery had become a necessity—a world in which men equated necessity with destiny. Accepting that slavery was indispensable, Byrd continued to explore the relation of slavery to the image of the New World as earthly paradise. The most significant evocation of this image came in a 1736 letter to Peter Beckford of Jamaica. Byrd tried to entice Beckford to visit Westover, probably hoping to sell him some land:

We live here in Health & in Plenty, in Innocence & Security, fearing no Enemy from Abroad or Robbers at home. Our Government too, is so happily constituted that a Governor must first outwit us before he can oppress us. . . . Our negroes are not so numerous or so enterprising as to give us any apprehension or uneasiness nor indeed is their Labour any other than Gardening & less by far what the poor People undergo in other countries. Nor are any crueltys exercised upon them, unless by great accident they happen to fall into the hands of a Brute, who always passes here for a monster. . . .

Perhaps the most important aspect of Byrd’s letter is his description of the role of the slaves. They were the gardeners in this “New World Garden” of Virginia. Yet, Byrd declared that there were not many slaves and they rarely suffered harsh treatment. Compared to the situation in Jamaica, Byrd’s observations were accurate. In making such pronouncements, however, he concealed that the number of slaves in Virginia was rapidly increasing and that, as a result, their rights and status were declining.

Byrd’s recognition that in the plantation garden the slaves, not the master, were accorded the role of gardeners remains one of the most momentous insights into the intellectual and cultural history of the South. Byrd rehearsed poetically an anxiety that was already beginning to haunt Virginia planters during the first half of the eighteenth century. European peasants actually and imaginatively belonged to the land. They were under the control of the landlord whom they served, but he did not exercise absolute power over them. The landlord had an obligation to protect and nurture both the land and the people whom God had entrusted to his care.
While I write, the youth come fresh in my way. Dear young people, choose God for your portion; love His truth, and be not ashamed of it; choose for your company such as serve him in uprightness; and shun as most dangerous the conversation of those whose lives are of an ill savour; for by frequenting such company some hopeful young people have come to great loss, and been drawn from less evils to greater, to their utter ruin. In the bloom of youth no ornament is so lovely as that of virtue, nor any enjoyments equal to those which we partake of in fully resigning ourselves to the divine will. These enjoyments add sweetness to all other comforts, and give true satisfaction in company and conversation, where people are mutually acquainted with it; and as your minds are thus seasoned with the truth, you will find strength to abide steadfast to the testimony of it, and be prepared for services in the church.

And now, dear friends and brethren, as you are improving a wilderness, and may be numbered amongst the first planters in one part of a province, I beseech you, in the love of Jesus Christ, wisely to consider the force of your examples, and think how much your successors may be thereby affected. It is a help in a country, yea, and a great favour and blessing, when customs first settled are agreeable to sound wisdom; but when they are otherwise the effect of them is grievous; and children feel themselves encompassed with vexations, which arise from their applying to wrong methods to get a living.

I have been informed that there is a large number of Friends in your parts who have no slaves; and in tender and most affectionate love I beseech you to keep clear from purchasing any. Look, my dear friends, to divine Providence, and follow in simplicity that exercise of body, that plainness and frugality, which true wisdom leads to; so may you be preserved from those dangers which attend such as are aiming at outward ease and greatness.

Treasures, though small, attained on a true principle of virtue, are sweet; and while we walk in the light of the Lord there is true comfort and satisfaction in the possession; neither the murmurs of an oppressed people, nor a throbbing uneasy conscience, nor anxious thoughts about the events of things, hinder the enjoyment of them.

When we look towards the end of life, and think on the division of our substance among our successors, if we know that it was collected in the fear of the Lord, in honesty, in equity, and in uprightness of heart before Him, we may consider it as His gift to us, and, with a single eye to His blessing, bestow it on those we leave behind us. Such is the happiness of the plain ways of true virtue.


It was different, symbolically and legally, with the masters. The slaveholders of the New World owned property not only in land but also in the human beings who worked the land. Thus arose the fear, which racial prejudice compounded, that slavery threatened the source of social order: the rational mind. Masters could hardly attribute the power of reason or imagination to the slaves. To do so would be tacitly to admit that the slaves had minds of their own and were not merely possessions that functioned as instruments of the master's will. If the slaves had their own narrative to recount, their own interpretation of slavery to put forth, they could expose the vision of an early paradise embodied in the plantation society of Virginia and the New World as a fraud.

Confronted with the growing opposition to slavery, the generation of Southern thinkers who came of age in the nineteenth century had either
to reject slavery or embrace it. In time, they committed themselves to a defense of slavery not as a "necessary evil" but as a "positive good," the only reliable basis upon which to establish and preserve a Christian social order in the modern world.

Like many of his contemporaries, South Carolina poet Henry Timrod believed that the slave South would save the world. Slavery, Timrod insisted, provided the model for a humane and Christian social order. During the meeting of the first Confederate Congress, which took place in Montgomery, Alabama, in February 1861, Timrod composed "Ethnogenesis" to celebrate the birth of a nation dedicated to bringing this new world into being. The final stanza best conveys his faith in the redemptive power of slavery:

But let our fears—if fears we have—be still
And turn us to the future! Could we climb
Some mighty Alp, and view the coming time,
The rapturous sight would fill
Our eyes with happy tears!

Not only for the glories which the years
Shall bring us; not from lands from sea to sea
And wealth, and power, and peace, through these
Shall be;

But for the distant peoples we shall bless,
And the hushed murmurs of a world's distress:
For, to give labor to the poor,
The whole sad planet o'er,
And save from want and crime the humblest door,
Is one among the many ends for which
God makes us great and rich!

In "Ethnogenesis" Timrod not only anticipated Southern victory in the coming war but contemplated an exceptional role for the South in history. The powerful forces of nature and the guiding hand of God would serve the cause, enabling Southerners to rout their enemies and establish an enduring civilization that would forever end the torment and distress of the human condition. At the conclusion of "Ethnogenesis" Timrod imagined a vast Southern empire from which war, crime, and poverty had been eliminated and earthly life at last brought to perfection. For Timrod, the slave South was the New Zion.

The existence of slavery thus modified, but did not destroy, the vision of America as an earthly paradise. It took the "mighty scourge of war," as President Abraham Lincoln wrote, to accomplish that.

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