

## Let's Share the Blame

Like others of their ilk, these authors unfairly castigate the slave owners of the Deep South. Being descended from such people, I resent this. Enlightened and merciful slave owners often took good care of their most valuable possessions, that is, their house slaves, and even of their field hands. As the pre-Civil War apologist George Fitzhugh claimed, many treated their chattel slaves better than Northern textile owners treated their mostly Irish factory workers. When financially squeezed, they laid off these workers with no compensation and no place to live. They often did not even bother to feed them. In *Time on the Cross* (1974), my good friend Eugene Genovese agreed with Fitzhugh, claiming that Southern slaves were better fed than peasants in South Italy and Sicily.

The cruelest treatment occurred in Africa. Other blacks first violently enslaved their victims in chains. Then, they marched or canoed them down to the coast. There, the abused awaited in dungeons to be sold to British, and after 1808, mainly to Yankees under whom they experienced the unspeakable Middle Passage. After 1808, most were landed in Cuba, where they recuperated and were "broken in," i.e. taught a few words of English, and maybe taught to plow. Their arrival on Southern plantations, of which 250,000 were smuggled in after 1808, was a relative improvement over the two previous stages.

Eric Williams, the former Marxist president of Trinidad and Tobago, made sweeping claims in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) that slavery in the Caribbean started modern capitalism with sugar. Sugar remained the premiere crop until overtaken by North American cotton around 1820. Napoleon once quipped "Does the world turn on a barrel of sugar?" His Continental

System was failing because the Spanish and the Russians were more interested in sugar than destroying Great Britain. Napoleon's quartermasters were also buying cloths manufactured in Britain because they were so cheap.

Beckert, Sven and Seth Rockman. *Slaveyr's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Karp, Matthew. *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders of American Foreign Policy*. Harvard University Press, 2016.