

Slavery and Slavery*

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People cannot live without land. It is only on land and from the land that human labor can produce anything. Once this is understood, it is easy to see why material progress does not benefit the masses.

Robinson Crusoe took a man called Friday as his slave. Suppose, however, that instead of taking Friday as his slave, Robinson Crusoe had welcomed him as a man and a brother; had read him a Declaration of Independence, and Emancipation Proclamation and a Fifteenth Amendment, and informed him that he was a free and independent citizen, entitled to vote and hold office; but had at the same time also informed him that that particular island was his (Robinson Crusoe's) private and exclusive property.

What would have been the difference? Since Friday could not fly up into the air nor swim off through the sea, since if he lived at all he must live on the island, he would have been in one case as much a slave as in the other. Crusoe's ownership of the island would be equivalent to his ownership of Friday.

Chattel Slavery

Chattel slavery is owning human beings as property. It only grows up where population is sparse. It rarely continues where the pressure of population gives land a high value, for in that case the ownership of land gives all the power that comes from the ownership of people, in more convenient form.

English ships carried Black slaves to America, and not to England or Ireland because in America land was cheap and labor was valuable, while in western Europe land was valuable and labor was cheap. As soon as the possibility of expansion over new land ceased, chattel slavery would have died out in our Southern States. As it is, Southern planters do not regret the abolition of slavery. They get out of the freedmen as tenants as much as they got out of them as slaves.

The New Slavery

A people can be enslaved just as effectively by making property of their lands as by making property of their bodies. By making property of the land instead of the person, much care, supervision and expense are saved. Though no particular slave is owned by a particular master, yet the one class still appropriates the labor of the other class as before.

Managing slaves, in a complex society, is a tedious process. *But by changing the form of slavery, all the advantages can be obtained without any of the disadvantages.*

They no longer have to whip their slaves to get them to work. Want and the fear of want do that more effectively than the lash. They no longer have the trouble of looking out for their employment or hiring out their labor, or the expense of keeping them when they cannot work. That is thrown upon the slaves.

Unable to employ themselves, the nominally free laborers are forced by their competition with each other to pay as rent all their earnings above a bare living, or to sell their labor for wages which give but a bare living. As landowners the ex-slaveholders receive, *as before*, the produce of the labor of their former slaves.

The essence of slavery is the robbery of labor. It consists in compelling people to work, yet taking from them all the produce of their labor except what suffices for a bare living. In all our cities there are, even in good times, thousands and thousands of people who would gladly go to work for wages that would give them merely board and clothes — that is to say, who would gladly accept the wages of slaves.

When population is sparse and land of little value, the institution of private property in land may exist without its effects being much felt. As it becomes more difficult to get land, and the value of land rises, more and more of the earnings of

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labor will be demanded as rent for the use of the land. As rent rises, nothing is left to laborers but wages of slavery — a bare living.

Suppose we did legalize slavery again, who would buy people when people can be hired so cheaply?

Questions:

- 1) Why does Henry George argue that land ownership is more efficient than the ownership of people?
- 2) How does he view the relationship between population and land values?
- 3) Why does he argue that the demise of chattel slavery was inevitable?
- 4) Do you agree with his assessment of waged labor? Why or why not?
- 5) Explain what George means when he says "Humans cannot live without land. It is only on land and from the land that human labor can produce anything."
- 6) If you gave Friday the right to vote, but did not change the land system, would it make a difference in his situation?
- 7) What does the title, "Slavery and Slavery" mean?

Slavery, Land and Capital*

The emancipation of the slaves confronted the South with an economic problem of great magnitude. The labor of the former slaves had to be brought to bear upon the land if the region was to recoup its losses — indeed, if it was to survive.

The former slaves might have been turned into farmer-proprietors by giving them land. Thaddeus Stevens, the leader of northern Reconstruction, advocated the division of the great plantations among the Negroes and the landless whites of the South. "Homesteads to them (Negroes)," he said, "are far more valuable than the immediate right of suffrage (to vote), though both are their due."

Very few Northerners found this an acceptable solution, however, and no Southerner endorsed it as even a possibility. Thus, at the very outset, it was in effect determined that the great majority of the Negroes would have to begin their life under freedom dependent upon others — their former masters, in fact — for the land which would permit them to make a living.

But the landowners, critically short of capital and cash, usually could not afford to hire gangs or freedmen as field workers. The makeshift solution which most readily suggested itself was sharecropping. By parceling out their otherwise useless land to the Negroes and taking a share of the crop, the planters could bring their acres to production without having to find sufficient cash to pay hired labor. The freed slaves, in turn, were given an opportunity to work land under their own supervision and perhaps to sell enough of their share of the crop to be able eventually to buy their own land.

On the surface, this system seemed to signal the breakup of the plantation economy. In all but appearance, however, it was the same old plantation, and even sometimes with the same owner, worked now, however, in small family plots instead of in gangs as under slavery.

A piece of land to farm, however, was no panacea in this capital-poor economy. Small farmer were soon in debt up to their ears to the merchants who provided seed, supplies, and equipment in return for legal claim on the crop. Credit soon became the center of the farmer's life. The merchants were able to use their financial stake as a lever to compel the farmer to produce cash crops only, or, worse yet, a single crop like cotton. The net result was that many small landowners of the South lost their land to their creditors and sank into tenancy.

By 1900, over 45 percent of the region's farmers, both black and white, were tenants — about double the ante-bellum proportion.

Questions:

1. Define: emancipation, sharecropping, credit, panacea, and ante-bellum.
2. Why might Thaddeus Stevens have argued that homesteads would be more important to freed slaves than votes?
3. How does Degler's argument reinforce Henry's George's conclusions?
4. How does Degler's argument differ from Henry George's?

* Adapted from Carl Degler's Out of Our Past, the Forces that Shaped Modern America, pp. 197-199.