SLAVERY, RACISM, AND DEMOCRACY

By Theodore William Allen

American Slavery, American Freedom, The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia, by Edmund S. Morgan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975. 441 pp., $11.95.

In his 1972 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, Edmund S. Morgan called upon his colleagues to rally in face of a challenge which he perceived emerging in the anti-white-supremacist resurgence in the field of American history-writing. Morgan drew a line between the challenged (concerned with tracing "the rise of liberty, democracy, and the common man"), and the challengers whose concern, as he saw it, is "the history of oppression, exploitation, and racism." He then recommended a line of defense:

The temptation is already apparent to argue that slavery and oppression were the dominant features of American history and that efforts to advance liberty and equality were the exception, indeed no more than a device to divert the masses while their chains were being fastened. To dismiss the rise of liberty and equality in American history as a mere sham is not only to ignore hard facts, it is also to evade the problem presented by those facts. The rise of liberty and equality in this country was accompanied by the rise of slavery. That two such contradictory developments were taking place simultaneously over a long period of our history,

Theodore Allen, a teacher and former coal miner, is the author of *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race.* He is presently writing a history of the origin of the white-supremacist social control system in this country.

from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, is the central paradox of American history.[1]*

This "paradox" principle is the core of his latest work, *American Slavery, American Freedom.* The book is presented in four parts, themselves called "Books." But it is in Book IV that we find all that is essential to Morgan's contribution to the "rise-of-liberty" cause in American historiography. Book IV, "American Slavery, American Freedom," does not depend upon the logic of the previous three Books ("The Promised Land," "A New Deal," and "The Volatile Society"). Indeed, the reverse order of dependence is apparent, at least to this reviewer; the first three Books seem deliberately fashioned to support the desired predetermined "conclusion," even if this entails ignoring stubborn contrary facts and well-established counter-theses in the field. Here, therefore, our attention will be directed to the culminating and message-bearing Book IV.

Book IV treats of the establishment of racial slavery at the threshold of the eighteenth century; the political economy and social organization of the so-called Golden Age of the Chesapeake in the middle quarters of that century; and the emergence of Jeffersonian constitutional principles from the Virginia experience. It concludes by asserting that slavery made possible the rise of liberty and equality "which enabled Virginians to lead the nation."

Morgan's main message is this: American slavery was a bad thing; American freedom, a good thing. But the two are a paradox, the good thing being predicated upon its coexistence with the bad thing. On the whole, however, the benefits outweighed the disadvantages for "America." The two-chambered heart of his argument is: (1) the system of racial slavery and white supremacy enabled the lower-class "whites" to achieve an upward social mobility, or at least to prosper; and (2) by affording economic security for "whites," the slavery of Afro-Americans made possible, indeed was essential for, the emergence of the notion of equality as the fundamental constitutional principle for the United States.

In spite of its new coat of "paradox" paint, neither the "economic" nor the "political" part of this rationale is original with Morgan. Edmund Burke in 1758 argued that the "whites" in the Southern continental colonies were more "attached to liberty" than were colonists in the North because, in the South, freedom was a

* Numbered notes will be found at the end of the article.

racial privilege.[2] Intellectual and political leaders of Virginia, such as T. R. Dew, Lyon G. Tyler, and Henry A. Wise, took up the theme: the racial slavery of Afro-Americans, they said, made possible and actual "one level of equality" among "whites,"[3] and preserved "white" freedom by affording economic and social advancement to "whites" of the laboring classes.[4] "Wherever black slavery existed," said Wise, "there was found at least equality among the white population."[5] And Tyler wrote: "The poorest white man insisted upon his full equality with the best. . . . [T]he easy acquisition of land contributed to raise many of the poor planters in the social scale and to confirm the independence which they enjoyed."[6]

The distinguishing feature of Morgan's defense of this basic thesis is his attempt to prove it by an economic interpretation of the political history of colonial Virginia. What follows is a fair summary of his argument, I believe, although my terminology in some respects differs from his.

The civil war phase of Bacon's Rebellion* exposed the vulnerability of the system of bourgeois social control in Virginia. The orderly pursuit of maximum profits on the basis of tobacco monoculture and the plantation system therefore required the development of new methods of social control. The plantation bourgeoisie, headed by the land-grabbing elite, solved the problem by switching to a basic plantation labor force drawn from Africa, as lifetime, hereditary, unpaid bond-laborers. The ruling class simultaneously moved to eliminate the proletarian component among the European-American population by reducing the importation of European bond-laborers, and by promoting the once-rebellious propertyless European-American laboring people to the status of small landowners, until finally "there were too few free poor to matter." (p. 386) On the basis of common property interests, the

* In 1676 there occurred in Virginia the largest rebellion ever, in any English colony prior to the American Revolution, known to history as Bacon's Rebellion, after the name of its main leader (until his death), Nathaniel Bacon, Jr. It began in April as a quarrel within the ranks of the plantation bourgeoisie over "Indian policy"—not *whether* to pursue a genocidal policy toward Virginia Indians, but merely over the question of at what rate it was to be done—but was transformed from a primarily anti-Indian crusade of the sub-elite planters, into a civil war in which the bond-laborers, African and English, and the landless freedmen, just "out of their time," the two groups constituting the proletarian majority of the colony's population, played an increasingly important role. These rebels were fighting, not for the demands of the sub-elite, but for their own class demands, and above all for an end to chattel bond-servitude.

petty bourgeoisie could be politically attached to the plantation bourgeoisie as a buffer social-control group against the slave proletarians, in a political system based on the English bourgeois revolutionary principles of "equality as the soul of liberty."

Morgan thus presents a picture of the emergence of a closed social class system in which the division into propertied and propertyless classes coincided with the division between those of European ancestry only and the others, of non-European ancestry of any degree.

In the West Indies a system of bourgeois social control was indeed established in which the division of society according to transatlantic ancestry did coincide with the division into social classes. For reasons too extensive for discussion here, preference for promotion to the petty bourgeoisie was given to workers of European ancestry, no less than in Virginia. But the proportion of European laborers in the West Indies was so reduced that the buffer-social-control group was necessarily composed of persons of varying degrees of African ancestry.

In the continental plantation colonies, however, the matter was not so simple. In 1676 half of the economically active (tithable) European-Americans in Virginia were bond-laborers and another one-eighth were propertyless freemen.[7] A century later this proletarian proportion of the European-American population, though reduced, was still over forty percent.[8] This was the limit of proletarian promotion to the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. *For the rulers of the continental plantation colonies, therefore, the problem was not that there were not enough workers of only European ancestry, but that there were too many.*

It was that circumstance which accounted for the primary emphasis upon "race" that characterized the system of social control in the continental colonies. Propertied classes, petty bourgeois and bourgeois, do not need special motivation to unite around their interests vis-à-vis the propertyless and exploited. Primary emphasis on "race" becomes the pattern only where the bourgeoisie cannot form its buffer social-control group without the inclusion of propertyless European-American workers. If, in the continental plantation colonies, there had really been "too few free poor to matter," as Morgan says, then those few would have been relegated to social irrelevance, as indeed happened in the West Indies, and the "white race" would have been unnecessary.

In Morgan's view the turn to slavery was an economic inevitability, but racism was the result of a deliberate decision, a decision, furthermore, which might not have been necessary.

(Chapter XV) The plantation bourgeoisie, he says, deliberately decided to foster racism among European-American workers by conferring racial privileges on them (pp. 332-333, 344), for fear that "freemen with disappointed hopes should make common cause with slaves of desperate hope." (p. 328) In these observations about racism and the system of racial privileges conferred on European-American poor, Morgan says much that serves the class-struggle interpretation of the origin of racism. From the standpoint of its own ruling-class interests, we may gather from Morgan, the plantation bourgeoisie was acting rationally in this matter; Bacon's Rebellion had placed the necessity for a racist policy beyond doubt: no racism, no slavery.

Then why does Morgan insist that this ruling-class fear of proletarian unity was exaggerated, and that slavery might have come to Virginia without racism? Perhaps it is because the idea of rebellion-prone "freemen with disappointed hopes" clashes with the concept of "too few free poor to matter," so important to Morgan's argument. That might also explain why he ignores the work of Jackson T. Main which revealed that in spite of the "Golden Age," the proportion of landless European-Americans in Virginia was greater afterwards than before; plantation farming left increased economic inequality and diminishing wealth in its wake; and European-Americans of the laboring classes were worse off in Virginia than in New England.[9] If the European-American free poor did not matter any more as a potential source of rebellion, it was not because they were too few, but because, alienated by "race" privileges, they had emerged a divided self, as "white" workers.

Morgan believes that there was even less danger of rebellion from Afro-American laborers than from European-American laborers. Since the Africans came to Virginia "already enslaved," the plantation bourgeoisie was spared, he says, the "tricky" business of enslaving them; and once enslaved, they were never allowed those "rising expectations" of eventual freedom which, in Morgan's view, is the fuel of insurrectionism in the poor and oppressed. The plantation bourgeoisie's frequently expressed fears of rebellion by Afro-American bond-laborers, he argues, were greatly exaggerated. "No white person was killed in a slave rebellion in colonial Virginia," he writes. "Slaves . . . [were] less dangerous than free or semi-free laborers." (p. 309)

But this is a line attached at only one end, and therefore it cannot hold. Except in Bacon's Rebellion, no "white person"

was killed by rebel "free and semi-free laborers," either! And in that struggle they fought side-by-side with "slaves" for land and freedom from bondage. A commander sent to reduce the rebels to obedience to the king, came to one rebel strongpoint and found "four hundred English and Negroes in arms." They forced him to promise, in writing in the name of the king, "freedom from their slavery" under the threat, as he later reported, of "shooting me or cutting me in pieces." Even then, one hundred of them refused to give up their arms, among them being eighty Africans and twenty English.[10] Morgan notes this fact in passing. It is the more curious, therefore, that he pins so much of his argument on the idea that "slaves" were not ready to rebel.

The historian's world has been shifted in its orbit by the force of anti-white-supremacist national liberation unleashed by the Second World War. In days that are gone, traditional historians would have scorned Morgan's assertion that "racism was the answer" of the plantation bourgeoisie to the threat of labor solidarity. Today, too, the writings of a host of historians who insist on "natural" or *a priori* racism as essential to explaining racial slavery (writers such as Winthrop D. Jordan, Carl N. Degler, and Alden T. Vaughan), reflect efforts such as Morgan's to explain racism in terms of the conflict of social classes. In those respects, Morgan deserves credit, in my view, for laboring, along with other historians such as Lerone Bennett, Jr., Oscar and Mary Handlin, and Timothy H. Breen, to bring historiography of the American colonial period into the new day.

Yet the effect of Morgan's "paradox" thesis is no less an apology for white supremacy than the "natural" racism argument. He sets out to meet the "challenge" of those who, in his opinion, overemphasize slavery and oppression in American history. Yet, at the end of it all, he writes, "Racism made it possible for white Virginians to develop a devotion to . . . equality . . . and enabled Virginians to lead the nation."

Then, as if shying at his own conclusion, Morgan suggests the speculation that perhaps "the vision of a nation of equals [was] flawed at the source by contempt for both the poor and the black." But, what *flaw?* If racism was a flaw, then "the rise of liberty" would have been better off without it—a line of reasoning which negates the paradox. On the other hand, if racism made "the rise of liberty possible," as Morgan's paradox would have it, then racism was not a flaw of American bourgeois democracy, but its special essence. Does not his "paradox" contain in itself the very "challenge" which he seeks to refute?

NOTES

1. Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom, The American Paradox," *Journal of American History* (June 1972).
2. Edmund Burke, *Writings and Speeches,* 12 vols. (London, 1803), vol. 2, pp. 123-124.
3. Thos. R. Dew, *An Essay on Slavery* (Richmond, 1849), p. 99.
4. Dew, *A Digest of the Laws, Customs, Manners, and Institutions of the Ancient and Modern Nations* (New York, 1853); cited in James C. Hite and Ellen J. Hall, "The Reactionary Evolution of Economic Thought in Ante-Bellum Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* 80 (1972), p. 484.
5. Congress *Globe,* 1841-42, p. 173; cited by Lyon G. Tyler, *William and Mary Quarterly,* ser. 1, vol. 6 (1897-98), pp. 202-203.
6. Lyon G. Tyler, in book review, *William and Mary Quarterly,* vol. 25 (1916-17), pp. 145-146.
7. E. B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York, 1932), p. 136. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom,* pp. 404, 421. Thomas Ludwell and Robert Smith letter to Charles II, June 18, 1676, Bath Mss. (Coventry Papers, Longleat House, vol. 77, f. 128. American Council of Learned Societies British Mss. Project [Library of Congress]).
8. Jackson T. Main, "The Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* vol. 41, p. 248, n. 21.
9. Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 42, 47, 54-57, 61. Main, "The Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," pp. 257-258. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom,* pp. 404, 421. Greene and Harrington, p. 136.
10. Bath Mss. (Coventry Papers, vol. 77, ff. 301-302), "Grantham's Account."