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Book Review: The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925

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Books

The Black Family In Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925

By Herbert Gutman

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Reviewed by Lewis Suggs

Whatever else the civil rights movement of the 1960s may have accomplished or failed to accomplish, it at least liberated Afro-Americans from historical invisibility. Clearly no single area in the American past has received more attention, aroused more passions, and generated more debate and controversy among serious scholars in recent years than the institution of slavery.

Twentieth century scholars of American history have offered two basically different interpretations concerning the effect of slavery on the Black family. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argued persuasively in his 1939 classic, *The Negro Family in the United States*, that slavery destroyed the Black family. Fundamental economic forces and material interests, he said, shattered even the toughest bonds of Black familial sentiment and parental love.

Supporting Frazier in the 1959 comparative analysis, *Slavery: A Problem in American Intellectual and Institutional Life*, historian Stanley M. Elkins, who is white, listed four reasons for the destruction of the Black slave family: sexual exploitation, separation, miscegenation, and restrictive legal codes. In an examination of the urban South, historian Richard C. Wade likewise concluded that, "For a slave, no matter where he resided, a house was never a home. Families could scarcely exist in bondage: The law recognized no marriage." Writing in 1965, Daniel Moynihan echoed Frazier's views and asserted that the pathology afflicting the Black family was one of the legacies of slavery.

Scholars have long debated the Frazier-Moynihan thesis. Historian Carter G. Woodson launched the most successful attack in the 1940s when he published lengthy histories of several Black families in the *Negro History Bulletin*. Still the myths endured. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*, published in 1972, convincingly refuted —point by point—Elkins' thesis. Blassingame described a plantation community in which slaves resisted the psychological impact of the master. He maintained that strong family ties persisted, despite the frequent break-ups resulting from the slave trade. Nevertheless, major questions remained about how precisely this slave community developed, maintained itself over time, and adjusted to the realities of white power and dominance. Still, the critical issue of the slave family was not conclusively resolved. The slave family's relationship to the dominant white family structure, and ways in which freed men and women adapted, transformed, retained, or rejected older forms of family life remained unanswered.

The next major work on slavery is Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll*, published in 1974. "Blacks were struggling," Genovese wrote, "with considerable, if not fully defined success to establish a pattern of family life for themselves." To put it simply, Blacks avoided being degraded and dehumanized by accepting what their masters offered and making it their own. Thus a "paternalistic" compromise between master and slave enabled Blacks to develop a distinctive culture and community of their own. Both Blassingame and Genovese emphasized the slave family as an owner sponsored device to reproduce the labor force and to maintain "social control." Still the question remained: "What did slavery do to Afro-Americans?" In 1974, two Harvard historians took a decidedly quantitative approach in order to "tell it like it was" and to lay to rest the arguments over slavery. They failed.

No scholarly work published in this century has agitated the intellectual community as much as *Time on the Cross*, by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman. Their work is an example of "climometrics" or "econometric history," which uses sophisticated mathematical techniques that depend heavily on the computer for manipulating quantitative data. *Time on the Cross* painted a picture of the slave system different from the customary one; it said that slavery was profitable, slaves were hard workers with an economic stake in the system, and that their living conditions were not as bad as was believed. Fogel and Engerman contended that the overwhelming typical family pattern was mother and father and children living together; moreover, they say, these unions were stable.

But Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, which was published in 1976, breaks sharply with tradition and signals perhaps a new era in the study of Black institutions. Bombarding the reader with a constant stream of statistics and 106 tables and charts, Gutman mounts a massive attack on the popular myths about the Black family. His work may force a rethinking of the slave experience and its meaning to contemporary Afro-American families.

The book's thesis is that two-parent families were the rule in slave society and that a stable family pattern continued among freedmen after Emancipation. In this extraordinary work, Gutman successfully challenges the traditional view that slavery virtually destroyed the Afro-American family. Slaves, Gutman writes, developed their own cultural patterns, often independent of their masters. Blacks had an explicit awareness of kinship ties: children were named after blood kin, and cousins were included in the incest taboo. Slave

women, he says, frequently bore children to one or more fathers before settling down into long marriages. Gutman concludes that no stigma was attached to children born out of wedlock and that marriage was marked by strong fidelity.

Plantation owners, he argues, facilitated slave marriages in order to circumvent flight and rebellion. The slaves had great respect for their elders. They used fictive kin titles ("Aunt," "Uncle") as terms of respect for non-relatives and in order to convert non-kin into a "symbolic slave adult network" with mutual obligation. Kin obligation survived enslavement and was characterized past reconstruction by long marriages, naming patterns and communal care for orphans.

In the century prior to emancipation, Gutman believes that slave domestic arrangements and kin networks drew upon an adoptive Afro-American slave culture and family "model" born before the invention of the cotton gin and the American Revolution. Not all slaves conformed to that "model," he notes. Nevertheless, the values that flowed from these primordial ties contradicted in behavior, not in rhetoric, the powerful ideology that viewed the slave as a perpetual "child" or a repressed "savage."

Gutman takes head on the controversial thesis (models) of such able scholars as E. Franklin Frazier, Kenneth M. Stampp, Stanley M. Elkins and Eugene D. Genovese. Too much attention was given in their work to slave "treatment"; too little attention to slave culture and to the development of distinctive slave feelings, beliefs, and especially institutions, Gutman maintains. Neither Frazier nor Stampp, Gutman notes, explored the important relationship between the slave family and kin group and the developing slave community and how it changed between the Civil War and

According to Gutman, in 1780 about 26,000 Africans and their descendants lived in the North American colonies, 7 out of 10 in Virginia and Maryland. Moreover, Maryland's Black population was more than doubled between 1748 and 1782 and Virginia's increased from about 42,000 in 1743 to 259,000 in 1782. These comparative statistics serve to locate what Gutman calls, "the moment when the greatest number of Africans underwent 'reluctant adaptation.'" Yet, he uses the Bennehan—Cameron plantation records in North Carolina to demonstrate how an adaptive culture developed among 18th century Africans and Afro-Americans. But he does not explain what happened to the records of Virginia and Maryland which had a larger indigenous slave population. One must ask: Can the records from a single North Carolina plantation scientifically and demographically reveal the distinctive character of the 18th century slave family?

Gutman leads us to believe that his book is a statistical and historical account of the 18th century Black family. It is not. Except for the North Carolina Bennehan—Cameron slaves and those slaves who left with the British in 1783, "systematic data on the 18th century Afro-American slave have not been considered in this study," Gutman writes.

Moreover, the title of the book is deceptive and Gutman's emphasis somewhat uneven. The first eight chapters (360 pages) are devoted to the slave family in the 18th and 19th centuries. The focus of this study does not shift from the enslaved to the emancipated (1865) Afro-American until page 363. Only 69 pages (363-432) out of a total narrative of 475 are devoted to the post Civil War and Reconstruction slave families. Gutman is now working on another volume. Although it includes the Civil War and Reconstruction slave families, the federal census manuscripts for 1880, 1900, 1905, and 1925 are not statistically evaluated or scientifically analyzed as in previous chapters. He makes no systematic attempt to follow individual families from one census to another. With the exception of New York City, he does not compile statistics for the same place over an extended period of time.

The war and emancipation fundamentally changed the context that had limited the slave's behavior. Major questions remained. Had the typical ex-slave internalized the "Sambo" mentality? Was there widespread social and cultural disorganization? How did estate sales and the sexual exploitation of the slave women by whites affect the slave family? Too little evidence is devoted to the slave family's health and diet. Nor does Gutman seriously analyze the relationship between docility and poor diet—and more importantly, when both were possibly "real" and possibly "alleged."

More importantly perhaps, Gutman does not place the slave family within the context of the total culture. For example, he did not attempt to apply the tenets of psychiatry to master-slave relationships in the old South and their effects on the slave family. However, he does admit "that nearly as much needs to be learned about whites who enslaved Africans between 1740-1780 as about the Africans themselves. "The head bone was not as distant from the heel bone in 1760 as it was to become by 1860," he maintains. Gutman does not examine the courtship patterns but acknowledges the need to examine in close detail the social beliefs and behavior of ex-slaves between the start of the Civil War and the beginning of Radical Reconstruction. He reserves this critical data for his forthcoming study.

Gutman attempts to put to rest the idea

that slaves were sexually promiscuous. Prenuptial intercourse among slaves was noticed and misunderstood by most non-slave contemporaries according to Gutman. Many slaves, he writes, "distinguished between prenuptial intercourse and licentiousness." Except for Blassingame, contemporary views by Genovese, Fogel and Engerman support Gutman's findings that slaves had a clear sexual ethic. One part of that ethic was a strong sanction against extramarital sex. Fogel and Engerman even maintain that prenuptial sex was a rarity. Slave women, they say, usually had their first child at about age 22 and were usually married when they gave birth. According to Gutman, "most woman had all of their children by one father."

If Gutman, Fogel and Engerman are correct, then the slaves behaved according to strict Victorian ethics. Fogel and Engerman extrapolated their data from probate records; Gutman extracted his from a single plantation. Neither source is a reliable indicator of the mother's age at the birth of her first child or of family stability. A first child might have died or been sold long before the master died and his estate passed through the courts. Furthermore, the evidence of mulatto children suggests that whites did not live up to the injunctions against premarital and extramarital sex. "There is plenty of evidence of promiscuity in both upper and lower class whites," according to Genovese.

Although the master's attitude towards the slave family was contradictory, slave reproduction increased the master's "capital." Gutman admits that "pressures within the slave system encouraged early childbirth among slave women." He also acknowledges that the abolition of the overseas slave trade required that the slave labor force reproduce itself. This evidence overwhelmingly contradicts the longevity of slave marriages and the "particular alternatives" (mate) open to slave women.

Gutman attacks Fogel's and Engerman's interpretation of the stability of the Black family. Extrapolating from data reported in *Time on the Cross*, Gutman challenges the assertion that only 13 percent or less of the slave sales between 1804 and 1862 involved the breakup of marriages. He questions Fogel and Engerman's claim that the westward trek destroyed only about two percent of slave marriages. Gutman contends that both statistics are too high to confirm the stability of the slave family. Gutman's study stops at 1925. Seemingly, a more logical point could have been the 1890s in order to challenge and compare the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction on the Black family before the great migration and disfranchisement.

The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom is the first comprehensive scientific examination of the Black family in slavery and freedom. Gutman proves that the Black family survived slavery and, more importantly, perhaps, he debunked the myth of the matriarchal family. He shows how the family acted as an agent to transmit values through different generations, and establishes a familial and cultural linkage between the 18th century slave family and 20th century Blacks in the urban South and North. His work (model) on the 18th century slave family is an important contribution towards understanding the total Black experience in America.

This book will undoubtedly stimulate and serve as a model for future research into the Black family. Also, it could serve as an important tool for a course on Afro-American historiography.

Although Gutman's book is well-written and thoroughly researched it will not end the controversy over the Black family. Perhaps, his forthcoming volume will answer the questions raised in this essay.

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