The Abolitionists on Slavery: The Critique Behind the Social Movement

By Donald G. Mathews

The abolitionists as agitators and moralists tried to change the mind of the American democrat. They appealed to his better nature and thundered against his fallen condition in pulpit, press, and petition in order to obtain for Negroes the same opportunity that white men had to participate in the nation's destiny. The goal was noble indeed, but the movement which tried to change American society was, as all human enterprises, compromised by the diverse motives, ideologies, and activities of its adherents. Historians have remarked upon the abolitionists' ambivalence towards Negroes and reminded us that radical antislavery men were not always and everywhere social egalitarians. Even as they tried to change prevailing attitudes, some abolitionists apparently shared in various degrees many of the prejudices of their contemporaries—scarcely an earth-shaking discovery. And there are other supposed internal contradictions cherished by students of ante-bellum America: abolitionists were involved in a religious crusade that became political; they emphasized pietistic perfection and individual voluntarism while searching for a valid social ethic that took into account a kind of pristine environmentalism; they agitated against slavery where it did not exist, etc., etc. Part of the ambiguity that supposedly shrouds antislavery history involves the assumption of many scholars that, since abolitionists were trying to destroy slavery, they could not have understood it. Careful investigation, however, will show that this assumption is untrue.

Considering the many contrasts already on a long list, it may seem tiresome to add another. Nevertheless, in reading what abolitionists said about slavery and slaveholders, one gets the distinct impression of exaggerated rhetoric and elaborate condemnation on the one hand combined with astute insight, humane sympathy, and wide knowledge on the other. In fact, if one takes Herbert Butterfield's advice to practice "imaginative sympathy"

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in dealing with the past,¹ he may almost conclude that abolitionists were right when they claimed to be able to understand slavery better than anyone else since they were "uncorrupted by a bribe." In any event, behind the flamboyant rhetoric and beyond the vicious allusions of popular oratory there was a legitimate critique of slavery.² In order to discuss this critique it will not do to make distinctions between rational and irrational, sensible and nonsensical, sober and emotional abolitionists, since these categories are too vague and invidious for serious discussion. But it might be useful for the historian to make a distinction between the various functions of abolitionism, between its functions as a social movement, as a large-scale agitation, and finally as a legitimate and thoughtful critique of the institution of slavery. Once these distinctions are made, it may be easier to see that abolitionists held a balanced view of slavery even as they attempted to change prevalent attitudes towards it.

Gilbert H. Barnes first emphasized the intimate relationship between abolitionism and revivalism.³ Since the publication of his book in 1933 it has been generally accepted that the same kind of

² There are many books on the antislavery movement, but few devote a significant section to a discussion of abolitionists' ideas. One exception is the general analysis in Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago, 1959). Another survey reads like an abolitionist tract in places; see Dwight L. Dumond, Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America (Ann Arbor, 1961), especially 69-71, 99-100, 252, 255, 357-58. Gilbert H. Barnes, The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844 (New York, 1933), has no analysis of what abolitionists said about slavery. Rather the book leaves one with the impression that slavery was condemned out of moral urgency alone and that Theodore Dwight Weld's American Slavery as It Is was the primary statement of the abolitionists' view of slavery. Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860 (New York, 1960), has a few scattered paragraphs concerning the abolitionists' ideas on the subject of their agitation. Russel B. Nye, Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy, 1830-1860 (East Lansing, 1949), has one of the best short descriptions of the abolition movement in Chapter 1, but is not greatly concerned with what abolitionists said about slavery. Even a specialized monograph such as Herman Muelder's Fighters for Freedom: The History of Anti-Slavery Activities of Men and Women Associated with Knox College (New York, 1959), has no discussion of the content of abolitionist thought. Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment (Indianapolis, 1964), is an exception, but she weaves her analysis of abolition ideas in with another story. The author of this article has only a few references to abolitionist ideas in his Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845 (Princeton, 1965). Henry H. Simms, "A Critical Analysis of Abolition Literature, 1830-1840," Journal of Southern History (August 1940), 368-82, is too superficial.
³ Barnes, Antislavery Impulse.
preaching which forced men to their knees in religious revivals enticed many of them into the antislavery movement. The social strain resulting from the great changes in American society during the first forty years of the nineteenth century made many people susceptible to the evangelicalism that increased the number of Methodists, Baptists, and even Presbyterians throughout the nation. Along with the revivalistic fervor in the churches came movements which enlisted people in various causes. Each had its prophets, its special vocabulary, its fears, enemies, and ideal vision of society. Each in some way catered to the special needs of people.

Whatever those special needs might have been, thousands of people joined the abolition movement in some capacity. They were encouraged to do so by itinerant organizers who built up a network of local and state agencies and saw to it that the ideas of the movement were broadcast and perpetuated by subscription to one of the many antislavery periodicals. Slogans such as “immediate emancipation without expatriation” emerged from the endless discussions and articles which poured forth from the publicists who shaped the ideas of the movement. Along with the slogans often came the same lack of humor and viciousness of language which characterized the Great Revival’s attack upon sin, the Democrat’s attack upon Whig, and the rhetoric of many social movements which aimed at conversion either in religion or politics. Thus, when reading abolition literature, one is not called upon to explain away its exaggerations, but to understand them as a function of a movement which existed to perpetuate itself regardless of the value of its goals. As revivalists had been taught to be specific and harsh and to allow no “false comforts for sinners,” so abolitionists acted in relation to slaveholders and slav-


6 Sargent, Battle for the Mind, 131-65.

ery as they labored to build a movement. When they addressed
those whom they hoped to convert they were as uncompromising
as William Lloyd Garrison promised to be in the first edition of
his Liberator. Unconditional attack was simply the approved
method of the temperance reformation and the revivals; aboli-
tionist crusaders saw no reason to discard weapons that had been
so successful in previous sallies against evil.

In reading controversial literature, the historian is under an
obligation not to be too easily offended and to appreciate the
shocking impact which disputants wanted to create with their
propaganda. For even behind rhetoric characteristically “vicious”
is a meaning which the true believer would grasp rather easily
and which the student should understand. Stephen Symonds Fos-
ter was infamous for his pamphlet, The Brotherhood of Thieves,
in which he accused the Methodist Episcopal Church of possess-
ing less virtue than all the brothels in New York City. Although
the statement was not especially delicate (William Lloyd Garri-
son thought it especially inappropriate in the Methodist strong-
hold of Syracuse, New York), neither it is prima facie evidence of
irrationality. By clearly defining the virtuous and nonvirtuous
(abolitionists and antiabolitionists), it not only bound the faith-
ful together but also highlighted one of the main tenets of aboli-
tionist belief by calling into question the respectability of an or-
ganization which prided itself on its respectability. Quite apart
from the form in which the words came from Foster’s outraged
pen, he was attacking the Methodist clergy for hypocrisy. Those
good men supposedly opposed prostitution and yet refused to
condemn a system in which women were bought and sold with
no legal rights either as people or as wives and mothers. The
point Foster was trying to make in his own peculiar way was that
a morality which condemned one kind of prostitution and not
another was a false morality. What he demanded was a transval-
uation of middle-class values.

By making such a demand, Foster and his colleagues were ad-
herents of a peculiar kind of social movement—one that made
them into agitators. As agitators they were not attempting to re-
constitute American values but to extend the normative power of
those values to a group of people hitherto considered beyond the

8 Liberator, January 1, 1831.
9 Stephen Symonds Foster, The Brotherhood of Thieves; or, A True Picture of
the American Church and Clergy . . . (Boston, 1844), 9 ff.; William Lloyd Garri-
nson to his wife, November 27, 1842, in William Lloyd Garrison Papers (Bos-
ton Public Library).
pale. Abolitionists, or at least their articulate spokesmen, were fully aware that they would have to overstate their case in order to move the balky, stubborn American democrat. The master agitator William Lloyd Garrison explained his situation quite succinctly: “In demanding equal and exact justice we may get partial redress; in asking for the whole that is due us, we may get a part; in advocating the immediate, we may succeed in procuring the speedy abolition of slavery. But, if we demand anything short of justice, we shall recover no damages; if we ask for a part, we shall get nothing . . . .”

Had the abolitionists relied upon sweet reason and careful analyses presented to the proper authorities, their efforts would have been as proper and pathetic as the quietistic witness of Southern Quakers. As agitators abolitionists knew that the dispassionate understanding of a problem was of interest only to intellectuals and that most Americans scarcely fit into that category. That the abolitionists used passionate and disruptive agitation to gain their ends is not evidence that they did not understand slavery; rather, it is proof that they understood Americans.

The problem was not only agitation, but agitation across most of the lines which divided Americans into smaller communities. Wendell Phillips spoke for the entire abolition movement when he outlined the problems of communication he and his comrades faced. If the nation had been merely a market, abolitionists would talk in dollars and cents, if a college, they would load their “cannons with cold facts,” if a church, they would talk of “righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come.” But since abolitionists lived in the world of “thought and impulse, of self-conceit and self-interest, of weak men and wicked,” they would have to be able to speak to each man in words that would make him respond favorably to antislavery goals. This of course poses a problem for anyone who wants to know what abolitionists said about slaveholders and slavery. Because as agitators the abolitionists spoke in so many different ways to so many different people, no consistently held, clearly defined view of the masters and their system readily emerges from the literature.

Nevertheless, when one takes into account how much aboli-

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tionist rhetoric had to accomplish and goes behind the functionally angry words to investigate what the historical evidence reveals, he finds a balanced, intelligent, and sometimes sophisticated understanding of the world which the antislavery radicals were trying to change. Historians divide abolitionists into Garrisonians, New Yorkers, denominationalists, and many more subgroups beloved of the specialist. But whether one does this or simply takes them straight as noncolonizationist, antislavery moralists (not politicians or nonextensionists), he will see that abolitionists (1) thought of slaveholders not merely as sinners but also as good men; (2) thought slavery a complex institution; but (3) understood it primarily as arbitrary and absolute power.

One of the basic charges leveled against abolitionists has been that they were morally simplistic in their condemnation of slaveholders. Repudiating social complexity as a legitimate vindication of slaveholding, they demanded that the abolition of slavery be begun at once. Years of waiting for conscientious Southerners to find a way to ease slavery out of existence had produced nothing to convince radical antislavery men that Negro servitude would die without purposeful action. The matter was made urgent for the revivalistically oriented abolitionists by their conviction that slavery was a sin: it was not a moral evil which everyone could regret and for which no one was responsible; it was not a political evil to be left to compromising politicians; it was not an economic evil to be left to self-interested slaveholders to manage—it was a sin. It broke the laws of God. It made man into merchantable property and deprived him of his humanity—his freedom to make of himself what he would. Thus, anyone involved in slavery as a master was culpably responsible to God. This conclusion put abolitionists in the position of calling decent, churchgoing Southerners sinners. Even though they worshiped three times a day, attended prayer meeting on Wednesday night, took their slaves with them to camp meeting, paid their debts, and gave money to foreign missions, slaveholders were sinners. This view became for many contemporaries as well as for historians the hallmark of abolitionist attitudes towards the South: abolitionists thought of slaveholders and their advocates as evil people.

In reaction to what they supposed was moralistic simplicity, antibolitionists and later-day historians committed what could be called “the fallacy of misplaced righteousness.” That is, by implication they attributed the personal moral respectability of individual Southerners to the institution of slavery. They pointed
out that abolitionists were disastrously overstating their case by neglecting the complexities of the historical process, human motivation, and institutional entrenchment. Actually, the South was peopled, not by sinners as abolitionists so self-righteously assumed, but rather by good men caught in a difficult situation. Many Southern slaveholders were decent people, it was said, who secretly regretted the deep injustices of slavery, who treated their slaves well, and sent them to church on Sunday. Some Negroes even attained some status within the system. One ought not to curse good masters who were unfortunately involved in slavery, but praise them for responsibility in the midst of unjust institutions. These good men—reluctant and kindly slaveholders trying to make slavery as easy as possible for the slaves—were the tragic victims of a cruel and unjust fate. Furthermore, those people who believed the abolitionists irresponsible pointed out that slavery was not so bad as Theodore Dwight Weld claimed it to be in his pamphlet of 1839, *American Slavery as It Is*. As all sections, the South had its evil men (such as slave traders) who gave its peculiar institutions a bad name. The good, however, should not be confused with them and called sinners.

The “fallacy of misplaced righteousness” obscures what reformers are talking about in times of social change. Good men, abolitionists pointed out, were the chief vindicators of American Negro slavery. Had the antislavery vanguard been totally unaware of the moral character of slavery and its relationships, they could justly be accused of being irrelevant fanatics. But the abolitionists were not content with middle-class morality as some historians have been. The simple assumption that abolitionists thought of Southern slaveholders only as unregenerate sinners needs to be challenged to reveal what they did in fact say and simply to set the story straight.

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The Missouri controversies had educated thoughtful Southerners to believe that Northern interest in slavery was primarily political. Therefore, they were in no mood to appreciate the care with which some abolitionists attempted to explain that slavery was a national problem and that sectional power or virtue was not really at issue. Abolitionists did maintain, however, that their not being from the South was an aid in gaining perspective. Mrs. Lydia Maria Child wrote in her pamphlet on slavery in 1833:

It would be very absurd to imagine that the inhabitants of one State are worse than the inhabitants of another, unless some peculiar circumstances, of universal influence, tend to make them so. Human nature is everywhere the same; but developed differently, by different incitements and temptations. . . . If we were educated at the South, we should no doubt vindicate slavery, and inherit as a birthright all the evils it engrafts upon the character. If they lived on our rocky soil, and under our inclement skies, their shrewdness would sometimes border on knavery, and their frugality sometimes degenerate into parsimony. We both have our virtues and our faults, induced by the influences under which we live. . . .

Abolitionists were willing to admit the obvious: that people accustomed to slavery would be inclined to vindicate it.

In spite of this fact, there were Southerners to whom antislavery men thought they might effectively appeal—the responsible, churchgoing, humane slaveholders who would be sensitive to an honest discussion of slavery. Wrote a Methodist: “I sincerely sympathize with the slave, and as truly with many masters. I believe that northern men would be southern men in their circumstances; and that southern men would be northern men in ours, where moral principle was equally felt.” The operative words were “where moral principle was equally felt.” Abolitionists believed (or at least a great many of them did) that the moral regeneration of America institutionalized by steady increases in church membership would be the energizing force of abolition. They had seen this moral regeneration become moral action in the creation of new benevolent societies, and they saw no reason why slaves could not be helped just as much as drunkards, prostitutes, and the heathen. Thus they preached a new gospel because, as Orange Scott, the Methodist antislavery leader, wrote, it was “by preaching against great and destructive evils, particu-

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13 Child, _An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans_ (Boston, 1833), 27-28.
14 _Zion's Herald_, May 6, 1835.
larly, pointedly, and perseveringly, that the world [was] to be re-
formed."

Preaching even to "good men" did not work. James G. Birney's
special pilgrimage demonstrates what it did not take abolition-
ists everywhere long to find out: that the so-called good people
of the South would not listen. As a colonization agent in the South
in 1833, Birney, the owner of several slaves and heir to many
others, found that the more he condemned slavery the less en-
thusiasm he engendered among his listeners. Nevertheless, he
persisted in his efforts to convince the respectable portion of the
community that it ought to think about abolishing slavery as soon
as humanly possible. After his own conversion to abolitionism,
Birney tried to convince the Kentucky Presbyterian clergy to
urge abolition—but the result was a mild and evasive answer. He
then tried to reach the community by reasonable discussion in
an antislavery paper—but he was driven from Kentucky as a
traitor. Even in the North, Birney's appeal to the churches as
America's great moral institutions was repudiated by those
whom he had hoped to convert. Not surprisingly, Birney and
most of his abolitionist confreres were convinced that the good
people were the bulwarks of slavery.16

The morality ascribed to responsible people in the South did
not impress abolitionists. Some conservative antislavery men
tried to develop theories of moral responsibility which allowed
for "moral men in immoral society," but most insisted that all
slaveholders would have to be held responsible for their status.17
In this conclusion they denied the relevance of explanations de-
ring from the "fallacy of misplaced righteousness." Abolition-
ists admitted that slaveholders might be humanely motivated,
that they might treat slaves well, that they might preach the
Gospel (however mutilated) to them; but, in all cases, the Ne-
groes were still slaves. This fact alone ran contrary to any con-

15 Orange Scott, An Appeal to the Methodist Episcopal Church (Boston,
1838), 45.
16 See [James Gillespie Birney], The American Churches, the Bulwarks of
American Slavery (Boston, 1843), passim; Betty Fladeland, James Gillespie
Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist (Ithaca, [1955]), 90-124; John Devins
Lamkin, "James Gillespie Birney: Portrait of a Reformer" (unpublished B.A.
17 See Robert Merideth, "A Conservative Abolitionist at Alton: Edward
Beecher's Narrative," Journal of Presbyterian History, XLII (March and June
1964), 39-53, 92-103. Beecher explained that although slavery was sinful, the
guilt rested upon the community instead of the individual. Amos A. Phelps and
the Garrisonians dissented.
cept of freedom, human dignity, and Christian love. Slavery was too evil in principle to be vindicated by the heroic sadness of a conscience-stricken master or by the sympathy of the most gentle mistress. "In the hand of a good man or a bad man . . . this principle is the same;" wrote one abolitionist, "it [slavery] possesses not one redeeming quality."  

In other words, the fact that Southern slaveholders were good men was not relevant in the discussion of slavery.

Abolitionists thus found that their most inveterate enemies were not evil men who defended slavery as a positive good, but good men who could live with it. They were not so simple-minded as to overlook the historical any more than the moral facts of slavery, and as master propagandists they undoubtedly knew that Weld's pamphlet, *American Slavery as It Is*, told the significant facts about slavery rather than the whole story. Americans who generally accepted the efficacy of moral living would not be persuaded to hate slavery because it was a mixture of good men and evil institutions. They would be convinced only if slavery in some way affronted their own morality. By thus emphasizing the immoralities associated with slavery, abolitionists acquired a reputation for violent condemnation; but they knew their enemy well. He was not only the proslavery extremist whose absurd abstractions, abolitionists believed, would antagonize the North. Rather, abolitionists understood their major opponents to be the good people of the South.

True, abolitionists called these people sinners, but they were not thought of simply in those terms. An eloquent example of the attitude of antislavery men towards the South can be seen in the address of the executive committee of the American Wesleyan Anti-Slavery Society in 1840. "The strength of the slave power," the Methodists wrote, "consists in the countenance extended to the system by professedly good men. A practice prevalent only among wicked men, especially one so abominably wicked as that of enslaving human beings, could not be tolerated in civil society. Hence, it can only exist by seducing professedly good people to believe that 'circumstances' render it necessary for them to adopt it, or justify the practice by those with whom they are connected." Thus, to those who tried to counter abolitionist criticism of slaveholders and slavery with a defense of the good Southern people, the abolitionists replied that the argument was irrelevant.

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18 Orange Scott in *Zion's Herald*, February 24, 1836.
19 *Zion's Watchman*, October 31, 1840.
They explained, “It is of little consequence to us whether the man who robs us of our money be polite or complacent or otherwise.”

Decent, philanthropic slaveholders were nevertheless people who deprived other men of their freedom.

When abolitionists turned from the slaveholder to the system he represented they were no more simplistic behind their bombastic rhetoric than when they were dealing with the Pollyanna propriety of the “fallacy of misplaced righteousness.” They could all agree that slavery was a complex, well-developed social and economic institution which could not be destroyed in one day. In fact, it would take so long to extinguish the psychological, moral, and cultural scars of slavery that its abolition should be begun immediately. Whether the abolitionist wanted “immediate emancipation gradually accomplished” or “immediate uncondi-

20 Ibid., June 8, 1836.

21 The following account is difficult to annotate. Essentially the material upon which this interpretation is based came from the Liberator, the Friend of Man, the Herald of Freedom, the Philanthropist, the Emancipator, Zion's Watchman, Orange Scott's articles in Zion's Herald for January and February 1835 and the following pamphlets: the annual reports of the American Anti-Slavery Society; [George Bourne], Picture of Slavery in the United States of America (Boston, 1838); William I. Bowditch, Slavery and the Constitution (Boston, 1849); Child, An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans; William Goodell, American Slavery. A Formidable Obstacle to the Conversion of the World (New York, 1854); Goodell, The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions, and Illustrative Facts (New York, 1853); [Richard Hildreth], Despotism in America: or, An Inquiry into the Nature and Results of the Slave-Holding System in the United States (Boston, 1840); William Jay, An Inquiry into the Character and Tendency of the American Colonization, and American Anti-Slavery Societies (New York, 1835); Horace Mann, Speech of Hon. Horace Mann, on the Right of Congress to Legislate for the Territories of the United States . . . June 30, 1848 (Boston, 1848); Theodore Parker, A Letter to the People of the United States Touching the Matter of Slavery (Boston, 1848); Amos A. Phelps, Lectures on Slavery, and Its Remedy (Boston, 1834); Orange Scott, Address to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church by the Rev. O. Scott, a Member of That Body (New York, 1836); Scott, An Appeal to the Methodist Episcopal Church (Boston, 1838); Seymour B. Treadwell, American Liberties and American Slavery (New York, 1838); La Roy Sunderland, Anti-Slavery Manual, Containing a Collection of Facts and Arguments on American Slavery (New York, 1837); [Theodore Dwight Weld], American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses (New York, 1839). For reasons suggested above the sources do not “speak for themselves,” and careless exegesis of these materials would produce nothing but florid examples to be filed under the superficial categories of “irrationality” and “fanaticism.” That the thesis of this article has merit is partially supported by the balanced collections of antislavery arguments edited by Louis Ruchames and especially William H. and Jane H. Pease. See Louis Ruchames (ed.), The Abolitionists: A Collection of their Writings (New York, 1963), and William H. and Jane H. Pease (eds.), The Antislavery Argument (Indianapolis, [1965]).
tional emancipation," he had no intention of irresponsibly turning the slaves loose without some guidance. From the beginning of their agitation abolitionists could agree with William Lloyd Garrison's plea that Negro slaves be emancipated according to carefully worked out and equitably executed legal procedures which would in the end guarantee Negroes the equality they had been so long denied. The immediacy in immediate emancipation referred to the revivalist-agitator's desire to begin at once in order that something might be done eventually; but the formula in no way contradicted the abolitionist's belief that slavery was not a simple institution.

For one thing, slavery varied from place to place, and in the variations abolitionists hoped they had found a basic weakness. Since slavery was not so significant a part of the economy in the border states as in the expanding cotton kingdom, it had a less firm hold upon the people in those areas. Encouraging evidence of this was found at first in the open criticism of slavery in Kentucky, Maryland, and even Virginia, where a large number of nonslaveholding farmers resented the power of an aristocracy that rested on an unjust and unequal control of the labor force. Slavery where it did exist in the farms of the border states was believed to be less severe than in the great plantations farther south. Smaller holdings were thought to necessitate more humane relations between masters and slaves, a fact which would not justify slavery but which did demonstrate that it was not monolithic in its cultural aspects.

The complexity of slavery, however, was not thought to consist primarily of its situational variations but of its effect upon Southern people and institutions. Negro servitude was so intricately woven into the fabric of society that it compromised values, institutions, and perspectives by which it might otherwise have been weakened. Christianity, the Revolution, democracy, equality—all the abstractions of American national romanticism existed in varying degrees of subordination to the facts of slavery. The complexity existed not in the quantitative varieties of the experiences of slavery but in the qualitative bondage that perpetuated the institution. That is, everything in the system reinforced everything else. Thus, Theodore Dwight Weld could de-

22 See the prospectus for the Liberator printed in the Genius of Universal Emancipation, December 1832.
23 It was this fact that made abolitionists so scornful of amelioration. There was nothing within the system that a reformer could use against it because slavery
scribe the interaction between slave and master as a frustrating experience which was good for neither. Wrote Weld:

... not only is the slave destitute of those peculiarities, habits, tastes, and acquisitions, which by assimilating the possessor to the rest of the community, excite their interest in him, and thus, in a measure, secure for him their protection; but he possesses those peculiarities of bodily organization which are looked upon with deep disgust, contempt, prejudice, and aversion. Besides this, constant contact with the ignorance and stupidity of the slaves, their filth, rags, and nakedness; their cowering air, servile employments, repulsive food, and squalid hovels, their purchase and sale, and use as brutes—all these associations, constantly mingling and circulating in the minds of slaveholders, ... produce in them a permanent state of feeling toward the slave, made up of repulsion and settled ill-will. When we add to this the corrosions produced by the petty thefts of the slaves, the necessity of constant watching, their reluctant service, and indifference to their master's interests, their ill-concealed aversion to him, and spurning of his authority; and finally, that fact, as old as human nature, that men always hate those whom they oppress, and oppress those whom they hate, thus oppression and hatred mutually begetting and perpetuating each other—and we have a raging compound of fiery elements and disturbing forces ....

This was one side of slavery, of course, but Weld's statement shows that even as they condemned the worst aspects of that institution, abolitionists knew that it was extremely complex in its hold upon masters and slaves, victimizing both. One may question the abolitionists' tough-minded expectation that men could or would extricate themselves willfully from such a socially determined predicament as that described above, but no one can seriously doubt that abolitionists thought slavery complex. They simply believed that complexity was no vindication either of slavery or the slaveholder; and it is perhaps this ethical rigor rather than simplicity that has made the abolitionists so unpopular.

They maintained that their agitation and ethical importunity was justified because of slavery's effect upon the Negro and its ultimate character as absolute power. It was understood as absolute power because the slave had no legal claim upon the white man with which he could protect himself and because that most precious of American possessions, the right to one's own labor,

had become so involved with everything in the South. See Goodell, *American Slave Code*, 403 ff.

24 [Weld], *American Slavery as It Is*, 116-17.
was denied him. Slaves worked not because they would be better off if they did, but because they would be worse off if they did not. Force, fear, and fraud made slavery operate, abolitionists charged, and what they meant was that men's labor was extracted from them by an inherited system of bondage which ultimately relied upon brute force. They meant that men faced the future not with the hope and courage of the American Hercules but only with despair. And by fraud they meant that the church's Gospel had been used to enslave not free men's minds, that the law and planned ignorance which perpetuated slavery deprived Negroes of the same kind of advancement enjoyed by other Americans. They meant that the Negro was, for all intents and purposes, completely in the hands of the white man.

The best evidence of this fact, abolitionists thought, was the cruelties inflicted by whites on Negroes. Every discussion of the abolitionist attack on slavery includes an appropriate section for atrocities; and this was certainly a major aspect of antislavery propaganda. Everyone who has read this material is well acquainted with the vivid portrayal of all the infamies men can inflict upon their fellows, a striking method by which antislavery publicists could "clank the chains" of slavery in the ears of indifferent Americans. The atrocity stories, while possibly interesting in themselves to some abolitionists and historians, were printed not merely to arouse hatred of the kindly old slaveholder but also to demonstrate that slavery ultimately meant absolute and unchecked power. Abolitionists knew that some slaves were better treated than others—house servants and artisans were assumed to be safer than slaves less visible to the public—and they admitted that some slaveholders could be kind to their servants. But the significant aspect of slavery was not kind treatment. And cruelty was considered not as an exception to kind treatment, but as the natural result of the power to give or withhold kind treatment. With no effective way to defend themselves against the masters, Negroes bore mutilations, brands, and scars as identification not only of runaways in advertisements but also of the entire slave system. Men owned slaves not for altruistic purposes but to exploit their labor; and since the incentive to work was the thoroughly negative one of force not wages, since Negroes as men would intentionally frustrate the masters, and since men

25 The atrocities committed by slaveholders as abolitionists imagined them are vividly recounted and illustrated in Dumond, Antislavery, passim.

26 [Weld], American Slavery as It Is, 7.
with absolute power used it, the natural result of slavery was cruelty. This was of course an abstract argument, but mutilated runaways seemed convincing empirical proof of its truth. Halos there were over the heads of some slaveowners; but scars on the backs of runaways were more significant.

The absolute power which so repelled abolitionists was revealed in many guises. Throughout radical antislavery literature run the complementary themes of white authority and Negro helplessness. The absoluteness of the power consisted not in the fact that force was always used with totalitarian efficiency, but in the inability of Negroes to claim anything for themselves on the basis of their own social and legal integrity. The slave trade was selected as the best institutional example of what the master could do to the slaves. The experience of manacles, iron collars, and auction blocks left psychological scars on Negroes which were bad enough and widely criticized, but what was considered even worse was a total disregard for the inviolability of family life. Abolitionists contrasted the relatively humane laws of Louisiana and South America (which forbade breaking up families) with the lack of such protection in most of the American South. Admittedly some (perhaps even many) masters did not break up families, but even the sensitivities of kind slaveholders could not keep families together when the law forced slave sales to pay the debts of deceased planters. And this was not the only shock the slave family had to endure. It was also grotesquely misshapen by servitude. The Negro man had no legal right to protect his wife against a white man, nor could he assume his proper role as a father since his children as well as his wife belonged to the white man. This kind of helplessness before the master’s desires brought the emotion-charged accusation that slavery was a “legalized system of licentiousness.”

This was exaggerated rhetoric perhaps, but quite correct in pointing out that Negroes were subject to the greatest of desecrations, many had experienced them, and none could do anything about it.

The absolute power observed in calculated cruelty or the side effects of the slave trade affected every aspect of the slave’s life from daily bread to daily prayer. Since the masters alone were responsible for food and clothing, their interests, not those of the slaves, would dictate the quality of provisions. In this as in all cases, abolitionists admitted variations but were unimpressed

27 Zion's Herald, March 11, 1835.
with the general fare reported from the South. Self-interest would not necessarily make the master treat the slaves well because short-term economic interest might possibly contradict long-range human considerations—it would not have been the first time in history. And abolitionists had little faith in the power of public opinion to protect Negroes since the Southern public was thoroughly accustomed to all the evils of slavery. In fact, the slave could turn nowhere to check the power of the white man. The churches were completely subservient to the masters as they tried to make the Negroes into good, docile slaves rather than dignified men. The slaves heard only one side of the Gospel, and were denied the means to broaden their understanding since they could not be educated. Deprived of evangelical truth, of anything stronger than white sensitivities to protect their families, of an independent control over their lives—deprived therefore of self-respect, the Negroes were ultimately helpless.

The best evidence of the Negro's helplessness was found by abolitionists in the slave codes. Slavery could not be completely understood merely by surveying its legal structure, but anti-slavery radicals knew that the helplessness of the slave and the power of the master were formalized in Southern legislation. In the first place, the law forbade the slave to do anything which could make him free. He could not learn to read or write. He could not follow whatever profession he chose. He could not own property. Consequently, the Negro was denied the American right of self-advancement. Other slave systems (in ancient Rome and contemporary Brazil) might allow Negroes to have personal property or to gain their liberty by legal processes. But in America, where the future was supposedly boundless for all men, the future was denied slaves. In America, where property was so valuable and powerful that to own some meant personal security, the Negro had no access to the privileges and protection of society.

In the law, charged the abolitionists, as in everything else in slavery, the Negro was acted upon—he could not act on his own. He could not sue in court. He could not testify against the white man. He could not in fact resist a white man lest he lose his life. He could not be tried by his peers. He could not assemble freely. Laws required good treatment of slaves, but white men executed and interpreted those laws, leaving the Negro no protection on his own. Furthermore, the laws demanding good treatment of Negroes revealed in themselves how fragile was the slave's claim
to protection: a South Carolina law, for example, allowed punishment by sticks or whips but no unusual punishment. That sailors as well as Negroes were whipped did not justify either barbarity. The point was, as abolitionists made it, that Negro slaves possessed nothing other than white philanthropy with which to mitigate their slavery. The law which protected so many Americans, which even protected slaves in other times and places, did not protect the Negro slave. The control of the white man was so absolute that no improvement in the legal code could reform slavery. It corrupted everything it touched, leaving nothing with which to fight it—not the church, not the law, not education, and not even philanthropy, which accepted and therefore fortified slavery. Only complete destruction of the system would be acceptable.

The effect of this absolute system upon the Negro was degradation according to abolitionists. Nothing in slavery encouraged independence and resourcefulness for acceptable social goals such as acquiring property and advancement; rather, all the slave’s energies were turned to protect himself from the master in one way or another. Bravery, honesty, and resoluteness which might lead a man to fight his master and the system were often rewarded with punishment so that these qualities were distorted into adaptation, deceit, and vacillation in order to survive. Work became a hopeless task that offered no self-gratification so that laziness became a virtue and a chief character trait in the slave. This mirror effect on values was presumed to be the natural result of a system which contradicted everything necessary to make a man responsible, knowledgeable, reflective. But even though the future was hopeless and life precarious, slaves made the best of their lot. In fact, some were happy; and a happy slave was to an abolitionist one of the best examples of the demonic effects of slavery. He was a symbol of the absolute power of the white man to keep Negroes from knowing the depths of their alienation from all that it meant to be free.

The white man, too, suffered ill effects from slavery. The image of the good slaveholder which was so present in abolition literature was tarnished by the general agreement among antislavery men that in giving absolute and arbitrary power to the masters, slavery tended to make them arrogant, violent, and disdainful of the rights of others. Theodore Dwight Weld wrote: “If there is among human convictions one that is invariable and universal, it is, that when men possess unrestrained power over others . . .
they are under great temptations to abuse it ..."28 Abolitionists believed that Southerners yielded to these temptations. In their flamboyant propaganda abolitionists created the familiar image of a bowie-knife-wielding, lazy grandee who fought duels and kept Negro mistresses. The difference between good masters and profligate dandies is of course great. The abolitionists as propagandists tried to have it both ways in order to emphasize that the natural tendency of unchecked power was to corrupt those who wielded it. Respectable people, too, were corrupted because, instead of fighting slavery, they lent their respectability to a system which created what decent people stood against: licentiousness, disrespect for persons, arrogance, and lust for power.

Corruption of people was a primary concern in the abolitionists’ scheme of values, but slavery also corrupted the nation and the South. It became abstracted as diabolical power which stripped Americans of the security of their persons. It deprived them of their rights to petition Congress, to assemble peaceably, to publish freely, to dissent from majority opinion.29 And when the fugitive slave law was passed in 1850, the South’s peculiar institution was interpreted as undermining the security of Northern legal processes. Southerners’ fear of slaves, of new ideas, and of other white men was weakening the entire nation. Not only was this insecurity affecting freedom, but also the national defense. For if Americans were ever called to fight a strong foreign enemy, their efforts would be endangered by limiting available manpower to white men and limiting those whites’ effectiveness by the necessity of policing slaves.

Slavery had corrupted the American economy even as it had its politics and security. It endangered all property by using arguments based upon property rights to defend holding men as slaves. The repugnancy men had for slavery could conceivably be transferred to property, thus devaluing the foundation of American wealth and stability. This consideration was overshadowed by the much more important concern for the economic disadvantages of slavery. Although an economic argument was never emphasized to the exclusion of others, it was usually present in abolitionist literature. Richard Hildreth was particularly eloquent in his Despotism in America, where he argued that slavery was a bad labor system which crippled American economic growth. Labor (the principal source of value) was not free to produce and consume at full capacity in a slave society.

28 [Weld], American Slavery as It Is, 116.
29 See Nye, Fettered Freedom, passim.
Slave laborers were presumed to be less productive than free because the former had no positive incentive. Only force and authority kept them at their tasks whereas wages and the hope of advancement would increase productivity if they were free.

Not only were the South and nation deprived of the full labor of the Negroes, but also of the whites. The low status of labor as being proper only to slaves supposedly paralyzed the poor whites as well as enervated the masters, whose disdain for work precluded the full utilization of labor resources. Slavery not only penalized the poor white man by devaluing labor, but also by requiring greater capitalization for expansion in the South than in the North. Since Southerners bought their laborers instead of hiring them, only the rich could increase their power appreciably. These supposed limitations on economic expansion were linked also with the fact that slaves did not consume as much as free laborers since their desires were so curtailed. With consumption at a low point, there was consequently less prosperity. This theory that slavery hindered optimum economic growth was complemented by other economic arguments. Most posited the superiority of industrial over agrarian society or accepted slavery as a single explanation of even those economic problems which derived from a one-crop economy. But in the economic and political sphere as in the personal, abolitionists understood slavery to be an unwarranted delimitation of freedom—arbitrary power.

There are many deficiencies in the arguments that abolitionists directed against slavery. Their data may have been faulty, but not the direction in which their understanding was taking them—towards an emphasis on social justice. Their objectivity was of course compromised by their partisan activity; but with all of the scientific knowledge of the twentieth century they would have come essentially to the same conclusions they reached a hundred years earlier. They would have admitted all the findings of historical investigation because they had a great appreciation for facts. But they would also have insisted that slavery, for all of its variety and complexity, still meant the white man's absolute power over the Negro.

Reflecting upon this view, one is struck by the contrast between the abolitionists' understanding of complexity and social determinism as opposed to their much-emphasized voluntarism. They were impressed by the effects of man's social situation in determining his values, goals, and general understanding, and yet they expected some men somehow to transcend their social

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30 [Hildreth], Despotism in America, 83 ff., 111 ff.
context and by a sheer act of will break the chains binding their minds as well as their slaves. Frustrated in this, abolitionists retreated either to politics or to the mental and moral utopia of being “right” in a world that was wrong. Their “realism” in doing this is not so important as their pioneering attempt to understand social determinism and at the same time to thwart it.

While trying to understand absolute power and its effect upon people, they tried to affirm man’s freedom. This meant that they had to change the rules of the game called “reform.” Whereas reformers had previously accepted the givenness of the present structures of society within which to comfort the sick and dispossessed, abolitionists would not. They began to see in part that some social questions and prejudices were simply not so important as justice. That is, proper social agitation did not aim to care for the victims of society but to change society so that there would be no victims in the first place. Abolitionists did not know all the implications of this tendency when they called not for manumission but abolition. They did not always see the general application of principles that called not for colonization to escape prejudice but laws which could fight it. Nevertheless, the principles they professed and the tendencies they started, even unknowingly, were part of the transition from benevolent philanthropy to social reform. Charity had been the genteel province of the “better people” before the abolitionists began their work; but pitying charity was not enough to break absolute power, the new reformers said. Charity itself might be a form of absolute power. Let Negroes have justice. Give them not better food, fewer whippings, and more clothes, but give them equal laws, free churches, honest education, and a chance to acquire property.

This kind of thinking about slavery, linked as it was with social agitation, personal frustration, civil war, and incomplete understanding was never fulfilled by a purposive and just transition from slavery to freedom. The dialectic of social determinism and voluntarism, appreciation for facts and the use of abstract argument, affirmation of complexity and belief in single causation was not resolved by the cataclysm which has since been seen as the major event in the progress of American freedom. Rather, the dialectic was lost in social frustration and political weariness. But unlike most Americans, the abolitionists had at least tried to understand slavery in a new perspective even if with old formulae. And their attempt made them a vanguard in the fight to abridge the complexity of slavery by willful destruction of its absolute power.