

## "Facts" Versus Interpretations

Unlike some other fields of scholarship, history is not an exact science. We can establish with some certainty many of the basic "facts" of history—that the United States declared its independence in 1776, for example; or that the North won the Civil War; or that the first atomic bomb was detonated in 1945. But wide disagreement remains, and will always remain, about the *significance* of such facts. There are as many different ways of viewing a historical event as there are historians viewing it. In reading any work of history, therefore, it is important to ask not only what facts the author is presenting but how he or she is choosing and interpreting those facts.

Historians disagree with one another for many reasons. People of different backgrounds, for example, often bring different attitudes to their exploration of issues. A black historian might look at the American Revolution in terms of its significance for the members of his or her race and thus draw conclusions about it that would differ from those of a white historian. A Southerner might view Reconstruction in terms different from a Northerner. Social, religious, racial, ethnic, and gender differences among historians all contribute to the shaping of distinctive points of view.

Historians might disagree, too, as a result of the methods they use to explore their subjects. One scholar might choose to examine slavery by using psychological techniques; another might reach different conclusions by employing quantitative methods and making use of a computer. Because history is an unusually integrative discipline—that is, because it employs methods and ideas from many different fields of knowledge, ranging from science to the humanities, from economics to literary criticism—the historian has available an enormous range of techniques, each of which might produce its own distinctive results.

One of the greatest sources of disagreement among historians is personal ideology—a scholar's assumptions about the past, the present, politics, society. Historians who accept the teachings of Karl Marx and others that economics and social classes lie at the root of all historical processes will emphasize such matters in their examination of the past. Others might stress ideas, or the influence of

particular individuals, or the workings of institutions and bureaucracies. A critic of capitalism, for example, might argue that American foreign policy after World War II was a reflection of economic imperialism. A critic of communism would be more likely to argue that the United States was merely responding to Soviet expansionism.

Perhaps most important, historical interpretations differ from one another according to the time in which they are written. It may not be true, as some have said, that "every generation writes its own history." But it is certainly true that no historian can entirely escape the influence of his or her own time. Hence, for example, historians writing in the relatively calm 1950s often emphasized very different issues and took very different approaches from those who wrote in the turbulent 1960s, particularly on such issues as race and foreign policy. A scholar writing in a time of general satisfaction with the nation's social and political system is likely to view the past very differently from one writing in a time of discontent. Historians in each generation, in other words, tend to emphasize those features of the past that seem most relevant to contemporary concerns.

All of this is not to say that present concerns dictate, or should dictate, historical views. Nor is it to say that all interpretations are equally valid. On some questions, historians do reach general agreement; some interpretations prove in time to be without merit, while others become widely accepted. What is most often the case, however, is that each interpretation brings something of value to our understanding of the past. The history of the world, like the life of an individual, has so many facets, such vast complexities, so much that is unknowable, that there will always be room for new approaches to understanding it. Like the blind man examining the elephant, in the fable, the historian can get hold of and describe only one part of the past at a time. The cumulative efforts of countless scholars examining different aspects of history contribute to a view of the past that grows fuller with every generation. But the challenge and the excitement of history lie in the knowledge that that view can never be complete.

## The Origins of Slavery

How did the institution of slavery establish itself in the New World? How did white people come to believe that Africans should be kept in bondage? Historians have offered a number of different interpretations.

The debate had its modern origins in an important 1950 article by Oscar and Mary Handlin ("Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly*). They pointed out that in the seventeenth century many residents of the American colonies (and of England) lived in varying degrees of "unfreedom," that there was nothing unusual or new about a dependent labor force. What was new was the transformation of black servitude in America into a permanent system, based on race, with the condition of slavery passed from one generation to the next. The Handlins identified this transition from "servant" to "slave" more as a legal process by which colonial legislatures sought to increase the available labor force than as a response to racial prejudice. The leaders of the Chesapeake hoped to attract white laborers to the New World; to do so, they had to make clear the distinction between voluntary and involuntary servitude. Hence the institutionalization of slavery: It was an effort to persuade whites that their status would be higher than that of blacks.

Winthrop Jordan, in *White over Black* (1968), offered a different view of how slavery developed in America: Jordan emphasized that Europeans had long viewed people of color—and particularly black Africans—as inferior beings preeminently fit to serve whites. Slavery did not evolve slowly from a system of relative racial equality. Blacks and whites were viewed and treated differently from the beginning; and the institution that finally emerged was a natural reflection of the deep-seated racism that the white settlers had brought with them. David Brion Davis, similarly, argued in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) and later works that American slavery emerged not so much from the legal or economic conditions of the colonies as from a deeply embedded set of cultural assumptions. Davis placed less emphasis than Jordan on racism, arguing that the notion of slavery was an integral part of Western culture and that African servitude in America was not so very different from other forms of slavery in other societies.

Several historians in the 1970s returned to an

emphasis on the particular conditions within the American colonies that helped produce the slave system. But unlike the Handlins, they saw the legal process by which slavery emerged as secondary to other issues. Peter Wood, in *Black Majority* (1974), emphasized the economic benefits that the black labor force provided whites in colonial South Carolina. In the early years of settlement (the "frontier period") in South Carolina, blacks and whites often worked together. Black workers were relatively few in number, and differentiations in status were relatively vague. After the 1690s, however, whites discovered that African workers were better suited than Europeans to do the arduous work of rice cultivation, which was now coming to dominate the economy of the colony. Importation of black workers rapidly increased; and by the early eighteenth century, whites were becoming uneasy about the presence of a black majority in the colony. The hardening of the slave system, through legislation and in practice, reflected white fears of black resistance or even revolt.

Edmund S. Morgan, in *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), also argued that the labor system in the South was at first relatively flexible and later grew more rigid. In an examination of colonial Virginia, Morgan suggested that the early colonists did not at first intend to create a permanent system of human bondage. By the late seventeenth century, however, the flourishing tobacco economy had created a growing need for cheap labor. The existence of a large, dependent white labor force, which was difficult to recruit and even more difficult to control, was unappealing to the colonists. African workers could be recruited and controlled more easily. The creation of a rigid slave system in the eighteenth century was, therefore, less a result of historic racism than a response to economic and social needs. Racism emerged largely as a result of slavery; it was not the cause of slavery. Morgan went on to argue that the later development of democratic ideas in Virginia was made possible by the existence of slavery. A dependent white labor force would have made the idea of political equality difficult to sustain; but by making the dependent workers into slaves, outside the white political world, it was possible to believe that all white citizens were politically equal.

## The American Revolution

One of the oldest and most enduring controversies among American historians involves the nature of the American Revolution. Two broad schools of interpretation have emerged. One group of scholars has argued that the Revolution was primarily a political and intellectual event; that Americans in the 1770s were fighting to defend principles and ideals. Others have maintained that much of the motivation for the Revolution was social and economic; that Americans were inspired to fight because of economic interests and social aspirations. Although there is a wide range of views and approaches within each of these schools, the question of "ideas" versus "interests" remains the crucial divide in interpretation.

The emphasis on ideology as the cause of the Revolution reflects, to some extent, the view of those who were involved in the event itself. Early histories of the Revolution, written by participants and contemporaries, invariably emphasized the high ideals of the Founding Fathers. That approach continued in an almost unbroken line throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in the work of one of the first great American historians, George Bancroft, who wrote in 1876 that the Revolution "was most radical in its character, yet achieved with such benign tranquillity that even conservatism hesitated to censure." Its aim, he believed, was to "preserve liberty" against the threat of British tyranny.

In the early twentieth century, historians first began seriously to examine the social and economic forces that may have contributed to the Revolution. Influenced by the reform currents of the progressive era, during which the power of economic interests came under scorching criti-

cism, a number of scholars adopted the ideas of Carl Becker, who wrote in 1909—in a case study of New York—that not one but two questions were involved in the struggle. "The first was the question of home rule; the second was the question, if we may so put it, of who should rule at home." In addition to the fight against the British, in other words, there was also in progress a kind of civil war, a contest for power between radicals and conservatives that led to the "democratization of American politics and society." J. Franklin Jameson, expanding on Becker's views, argued in an influential book—*The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926)—that the "stream of revolution, once started, could not be confined within narrow banks, but spread abroad upon the land. . . . Many economic desires, many social aspirations were set free by the political struggle, many aspects of society profoundly altered by the forces thus let loose."

Other "progressive" historians accepted the importance of economics as a cause of the Revolution but differed with Becker and Jameson over the form economic influences took. Arthur M. Schlesinger, for example, argued in an influential 1917 study that it was the colonial merchants who were chiefly responsible for arousing American resistance to the British; and that although they spoke of principles and ideals, their real motives were economic self-interest: freedom from the restrictive policies of British mercantilism. In the end, however, the Revolution could not be controlled by the merchants and became a far more broadly based social movement than they had anticipated or desired.

Economic interpretations of the Revolution pre-

valled for several decades; but the relatively conservative political climate of the 1950s helped produce new studies that reemphasized the role of ideology. Robert E. Brown, in *Middle-Class Democracy and the American Revolution in Massachusetts* (1955), contended that long before 1776, Massachusetts was "very close to a complete democracy" and that the internal social conflicts that some historians ascribed to the era simply did not exist. Edmund S. Morgan, like Brown, argued in 1956 that most Americans of the Revolutionary era shared the same basic political principles, that the rhetoric of the Revolution could not be dismissed as propaganda—as Schlesinger had claimed—but should be taken seriously as the motivating force behind the movement. The preeminent statement of the importance of ideas in the conflict came from Bernard Bailyn, in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967). After reading hundreds of Revolutionary pamphlets, Bailyn concluded that they "confirmed my rather old-fashioned view that the American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy." By the time Bailyn's book was published, however, a new group of historians was already reviving a social and economic approach to the Revolution. Influenced by the New Left of the 1960s, they claimed that domestic tensions between classes contributed in crucial ways to the development of the Revolutionary movement. Historians such as Jesse Lemisch and Dirk Hoerder pointed to the actions of mobs in colonial cities as evidence of the social concerns of resisting Amer-

icans. Joseph Ernst reemphasized the significance of economic pressures on colonial merchants and tradesmen. Gary B. Nash, in *The Urban Crucible* (1979), emphasized the role of increasing economic tension and distress in colonial cities in creating a climate in which the Revolutionary movement could flourish. Edward Countryman, in *A People in Revolution* (1981) and *The American Revolution* (1985), also stressed the social and economic roots of the Revolution. And Rhys Isaac suggested in *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (1982) that the religious and cultural changes in colonial life, and the relationship between those changes and class alignments, underlay the new political outlook that led to the Revolution.

The new socioeconomic interpretations of the Revolution do not usually maintain that the struggle was a class conflict. Participants in the Revolution did not often justify their positions, even to themselves, in purely, or even primarily, economic terms. What the new interpretations suggest is that the political ideas (the ideologies) of participants emerged at least in part out of social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Historians arguing along these lines have been careful to avoid the deterministic quality of some earlier economic interpretations; that is, they do not claim that a person's view of the Revolution was determined by his or her social or economic condition. They do maintain, however, that material circumstances must be a factor in any workable explanation of the conflict. "Everyone has economic interests," Gary Nash has written, "and everyone . . . has an ideology." Only by exploring the relationships between the two, he maintains, can historians hope fully to understand either.

## The Causes of the Civil War

Debate over the causes of the Civil War began even before the war itself. In 1858, Senator William H. Seward of New York took note of the two competing explanations of the sectional tensions that were then inflaming the nation. On one side, he claimed, stood those who believed the sectional hostility to be "accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators." Opposing them stood those (like Seward himself) who believed there to be "an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces." Although he did not realize it at the time, Seward was drawing the outlines of a debate that would survive among historians for more than a century to come.

The "irrepressible conflict" argument was the first to dominate historical discussion. In the first decades after the fighting, histories of the Civil War generally reflected the views of Northerners who had themselves participated in the conflict. To them, the war appeared to be a stark moral conflict in which the South was clearly to blame, a conflict that arose inevitably as a result of the threatening immorality of slave society. Henry Wilson's *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power* (1872-1877) was (as the title suggests) a particularly vivid version of this moral interpretation of the war, which argued that Northerners had fought to preserve the Union and a system of free labor against the aggressive designs of the South.

A more temperate interpretation, but one that reached generally the same conclusions, emerged in the 1890s, when the first serious histories of the war began to appear. Preeminent among them was the seven-volume *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 . . . (1893-1900)* by James Ford Rhodes. Like Wilson and others, Rhodes identified slavery as the central, indeed virtually the only, cause of the war. "If the Negro had not been brought to America," he wrote, "the Civil War could not have occurred." And because the North and South had reached positions on the issue of slavery that were both irreconcilable and unalterable, the conflict had become "inevitable."

Although Rhodes placed his greatest emphasis on the moral conflict over slavery, he suggested that the struggle also reflected fundamental differences between the Northern and Southern economic systems. Not until the 1920s, however, did the idea of the war as an irrepressible economic rather than moral conflict receive full expression, from Charles and Mary Beard in *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols., 1927). Slavery, the Beards claimed, was not so much a social or cultural institution as an economic one, a labor system. There were, they insisted, "inherent antagonisms" between Northern industrialists and Southern planters. Each group sought to control the federal government so as to protect its own economic interests. Both groups used arguments over slavery and states' rights only as smoke screens.

The economic determinism of the Beards influenced a generation of historians in important ways, but ultimately most of those who believed the Civil War to have been "irrepressible" returned to an emphasis on social and cultural factors. Allan Nevins argued as much in his great work, *The Ordeal of the Union* (8 vols., 1947-1971). The North and the South, he wrote, "were rapidly becoming separate peoples." At the root of these cultural differences was the "problem of slavery," but the "fundamental assumptions, tastes, and cultural aims" of the two regions were diverging in other ways as well.

More recent proponents of the "irrepressible conflict" argument have taken different views of the Northern and Southern positions on the conflict but have been equally insistent on the role of culture and ideology in creating them. Eric Foner, in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970) and other writings, emphasized the importance of the "free-labor ideology" to Northern opponents of slavery. The moral concerns of the abolitionists were not the dominant sentiments in the North, he claimed. Instead, most Northerners (including Abraham Lincoln) opposed slavery largely because they feared it might spread to the North and threaten the position of free white laborers. Convinced that Northern society was superior to that

of the South, increasingly persuaded of the South's intentions to extend the "slave power" beyond its existing borders, Northerners were embracing a viewpoint that made conflict inevitable. Eugene Genovese, writing of Southern slaveholders in *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1965), emphasized their conviction that the slave system provided a far more humane society than industrial labor, that the South had constructed "a special civilization built on the relation of master to slave." Just as Northerners were becoming convinced of a Southern threat to their economic system, so Southerners believed that the North had aggressive and hostile designs on the Southern way of life. Like Foner, therefore, Genovese saw in the cultural outlook of the section the source of an all but inevitable conflict.

Historians who argue that the conflict emerged naturally, even inevitably, out of a fundamental divergence between the sections have, therefore, disagreed markedly over whether moral, cultural, social, ideological, or economic issues were the primary causes of the Civil War. But they have been in general accord that the conflict between North and South was deeply embedded in the nature of the two societies, that the crisis that ultimately emerged was irrepressible. Other historians, however, have questioned that assumption and have argued that the Civil War could have been avoided, that the differences between North and South were not important enough to have necessitated war. Like proponents of the "irrepressible conflict" school, advocates of the war as a "repressible conflict" emerged first in the nineteenth century. President James Buchanan, for example, believed that extremist agitators were to blame for the conflict, and many Southerners writing of the war in the late nineteenth century claimed that only the fanaticism of the Republican party could account for the conflict.

The idea of the war as avoidable did not gain wide recognition among historians until the 1920s and 1930s, when a group known as the "revisionists" began to offer new accounts of the origins of the conflict. One of the leading revisionists was

James G. Randall, who saw in the social and economic systems of the North and the South no differences so fundamental as to require a war. Slavery, he suggested, was an essentially benign institution; it was, in any case, already "crumbling in the presence of nineteenth century tendencies." Only the political ineptitude of a "blundering generation" of leaders could account for the Civil War, he claimed. Avery Craven, another leading revisionist, placed more emphasis on the issue of slavery than had Randall. But in *The Coming of the Civil War* (1942) he too argued that slave laborers were not much worse off than Northern industrial workers, that the institution was already on the road to "ultimate extinction," and that war could, therefore, have been averted had skillful and responsible leaders worked to produce compromise.

More recent students of the war have kept elements of the revisionist interpretation alive by emphasizing the role of political agitation in the coming of the war. David Herbert Donald, for example, argued in 1960 that the politicians of the 1850s were not unusually inept, but that they were operating in a society in which traditional restraints were being eroded in the face of the rapid extension of democracy. Thus the sober, statesmanlike solution of differences was particularly difficult. Michael Holt, in *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (1978), similarly emphasized the actions of politicians, rather than the irreconcilable differences between sections, in explaining the conflict, although he avoided placing blame on any one group. "Much of the story of the coming of the Civil War," he wrote, "is the story of the successful efforts of Democratic politicians in the South and Republican politicians in the North to keep the sectional conflict at the center of the political debate."

Like the proponents of the "irrepressible conflict" interpretation, the "revisionist" historians have differed among themselves in important ways. But the explanation of the Civil War has continued, even a century later, to divide roughly into the same two schools of thought that William Seward identified in 1858.

## The Nature of Plantation Slavery

Few subjects have produced so rich a historical literature, or so lively a scholarly debate, as the nature of American slavery. Even more vividly than other historical controversies, the argument over slavery illustrates the extent to which historians are influenced by the times in which they write. Popular attitudes about race have always found reflection in historical examinations of slavery.

The first accounts of slavery, written before the Civil War by contemporaries of the institution, were usually stark expressions of the political beliefs of their authors. Southern chroniclers emphasized the benevolent features of the system, the paternalism with which masters cared for their slaves (a contrast, they implied, to the brutal impersonality of Northern factory owners and their "wage slaves"), and the carefree, happy demeanor of the slaves themselves. From Northern writers (many of them abolitionists) came a picture of slavery as a brutal, savage institution that dehumanized all who were touched by it. Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery as It Is* (1839), for many years a widely cited book, depicted a system so cruel and savage that the book inspired many of its readers to embrace abolitionism. That, of course, was Weld's intent.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the political climate had changed. White Americans were now eager for sectional reconciliation, and in both North and South, there was emerging—in popular literature, in folktales and myths, and increasingly in scholarship—a romantic vision of the Old South as a graceful and serene civilization. It was a receptive climate for the publication in 1918 of the most influential study of slavery of the time (and for many years thereafter): Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*. Phillips portrayed slavery as an essentially benign institution, in which kindly masters looked after submissive, childlike, and generally contented blacks. Black people, he suggested, were for the most part lazy and irresponsible, and the occasional harshness of the slave system was simply a

necessary part of supervising a backward labor force. For nearly thirty years, Phillips's apologia for the Southern slaveowner remained the authoritative work on the subject.

In the 1940s, as concern about racial injustice began increasingly to engage the attention of white Americans, new approaches to slavery started to emerge. As early as 1941, Melville J. Herskovits was challenging one of Phillips's principal assumptions: that slaves had retained little if any of their African cultural inheritance. In fact, Herskovits argued, many Africanisms survived in slave culture for generations. Two years later, Herbert Aptheker attacked another of Phillips's claims: that slaves were submissive and content. "Discontent and rebelliousness," he wrote in *American Negro Slave Revolts*, "were not only exceedingly common, but, indeed, characteristic of American Negro slaves."

But the more influential challenge to Phillips came in the 1950s from historians who claimed that he had neglected the brutality of the system and the damage it did to those who lived under it. Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), the first comprehensive study of slavery since Phillips, emphasized the harshness of the system—not only its physical brutality but its psychological impact on men and women kept in a virtual prison with little room to develop their own social and cultural patterns. An even more devastating portrait of slavery came from Stanley Elkins. In *Slavery* (1959), he argued that many slaves had, indeed, displayed childlike, submissive, "Sambo" personalities, as Phillips had suggested. But such personalities, he argued, were evidence of the terrible damage the institution had inflicted on them. Comparing the slave system to Nazi concentration camps in World War II, he cited the effects on the individual of enforced "adjustment to absolute power" and the tragic distortions of character that resulted.

Stampp and Elkins reflected the general belief of white liberals in the 1950s and early 1960s that their society bore a large measure of guilt for the

injustices it had inflicted on blacks, that whites must work to undo the damage they had done in the past. By the early 1970s, however, racial attitudes had changed again, with the emergence of the "black power" ideology and the conviction among many blacks and some whites that blacks themselves should determine their own future. The new emphasis on black pride and achievement, therefore, helped produce a new view of the black past, emphasizing the cultural and social accomplishments of blacks under slavery. John Blassingame, in *The Slave Community* (1973), echoed the approach of Herskovits thirty years before in arguing that "the most remarkable aspect of the whole process of enslavement is the extent to which the American-born slaves were able to retain their ancestors' culture." Herbert Gutman, in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976), provided voluminous evidence to support his claim that the black family, far from being weakened and destroyed by the slave system, survived with remarkable strength, although with some significant differences from the prevailing form of the white family. The slave community, Gutman claimed, was so successful in preserving and developing its own culture that the master class was unable, despite its great legal power, to affect it in any significant way.

This emphasis on the ability of blacks to maintain their own culture and society under slavery, and on their remarkable achievements within the system, formed the basis of two studies in 1974 that claimed to present comprehensive new portraits of the entire system. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, used quantitative methods to show not only that slaves were skilled and efficient workers, not only that the black family was strong and healthy, but also that the institution of slavery was a prosperous one that (in material terms, at least) benefited masters and slaves alike. Slave workers, Fogel and Engerman claimed, were generally better off than Northern industrial workers. Slaves often rose to managerial

positions on plantations. Whippings were few, and families were rarely broken up. The findings of *Time on the Cross* soon came under harsh attack—both from those who were offended by what they considered an apology for slavery, and more important, from historians who claimed to have discovered crucial flaws in Fogel and Engerman's methods. More influential in the long run was Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Genovese revived the idea of "paternalism" as the central element of the slave system. But in his view, paternalism was not an expression of white generosity; it was a powerful instrument of control. And it worked in two directions, enabling blacks to make demands of whites as well as the other way around. Moreover, within this paternal system, Genovese claimed, blacks retained a large cultural "space" of their own within which they developed their own family life, traditions, social patterns, and above all religion. Indeed, slaves had by the mid-nineteenth century developed a sense of themselves as part of a separate black "nation"—a nation tied to white society in important ways, but nevertheless powerful and distinct.

Although no comparably sweeping new interpretations of slavery have emerged in the last decade and a half, historians have continued to examine the institution and have, in the process, opened new avenues of exploration. Among the most important is the study of black women. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is one of several historians who have portrayed the world of black women as in many ways distinctive, defined by their dual roles as members of the plantation work force and anchors of the black family. In *Within the Plantation Household* (1988), Fox-Genovese rejects the contention of some other historians that slave women formed special bonds, born of shared female experiences, with the plantation mistresses. But she agrees that a full understanding of the nature of plantation slavery must include a consideration of the role of gender as well as of race.