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Clerks All! Or, Slaves with Cash

WALTER JOHNSON

Douglas Egerton's fascinating article begins with an image of slave rebels in Charleston in 1822 planning to rob a bank. And, indeed, it speaks volumes that such an image should be interesting in and of itself, as it surely is. We have focused intensively in the literature on slavery and slave revolts to discern underlying tendencies and long-term transformations, but there is much about the everyday life of slavery (and especially of enslaved resistance) about which we know next to nothing. And apparently when slave rebels thought about revolt one of the practical steps they considered was to take over banks and steal the money inside (if, of course, taking that money from those banks could be called stealing given that it represented, in congealed form, labor that had been wrung from their bodies). Egerton asks why they began with the banks.

Ranging widely and comparatively in time and space, Egerton proposes a big answer composed of several smaller arguments. To wit: Urban environments that hosted banks were shaped by structures and practices that both suggested and supported collective revolt as a solution to the problem of slavery. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cities, Egerton points out, were geographically complex: They provided a lot of places to hide and a lot of places to encounter subversive ideas and discontented people. And they provided enslaved people with a lot of ways to make money. The urban economy was sufficiently complex that it required flexible terms of employment even for slave labor. The skilled labor of a cabinet-maker would never be needed all the time by one

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owner, but through hiring out, it might be useful to any number of clients and transformed into an income stream. Likewise, a man trying to set up a tavern in his front room might not have had the money to invest in buying a slave, but hiring a slave for a year at a time might have been a way to begin to make that money. And, finally, there were all the petty bribes and small cash incentives through which notionally unpropertied slaves were daily and regularly coaxed into labor everywhere in the Americas.[1]

And this money, Egerton argues, was meaningful. It was the lubricant that offered slaves an entrée to the treating and drinking of the multiracial tavern life of the docks, a world that Egerton's wonderful books on the revolts in Richmond in 1800 and Charleston in 1822 demonstrates was full of the subversive ideas and rough characters that made the idea of revolution believable. But there was more to money than that, for money, Egerton suggests, shaped the aspirational structure of revolt. The experience of having had money in their hands, Egerton argues, was, for slaves an experience of freedom: of possibilities that were otherwise foreclosed, of crossing boundaries that were in principle defined by race, but in practice, it turned out, defined by the cash nexus. Of buying fine clothes, or standing for a round of drinks, of experiencing the tonic power of

1. On urban slavery see Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York, 1964), Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT, 1985), 40–62. On cities and slave revolts see Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993) and *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, WI, 1999); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge, UK, 1997); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000), esp. 174–210; and Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-century Manhattan* (New York, 2005). On slaves with money and money as an incentive in slavery see Lawrence T. McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master: Market Relations and the American Slave Community" in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society* eds. W. B. Moore, et al. (New York, 1988); Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York, 1994); Jonathan Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 161–87; and Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2005).

being able to choose, to evaluate, consider, compare, linger. Of behaving like a clerk. For Egerton, this experience was one of "psychological independence" of the very sort that made it possible to imagine revolution and freedom.

I must admit that it took me a while to get used to this idea, but after my initial skepticism, I did so, and it is, of course, a really bright and interesting idea. Enslaved people lived in a society where power and beauty and sanctity and all sorts of other virtues were experienced and expressed as control over commodities. And the only irony in the fact that some of them—many of them?—might have joined their owners in imagining that the achievement of human freedom could be indexed by the possession of things is the most obvious one. It seems utterly sensible to try to imagine a world in which enslaved people could care for themselves and express their love for one another by pursuing money and purchasing goods. And, indeed, it seems utterly sensible to try to imagine a world in which that micro-economic activity might mark out pathways and forge connections that could be activated with the current of revolt. Denmark Vesey himself, after all, resolved the paradox of propertied property when he purchased his own freedom with money he had won in a lottery.

Certainly, slaveholders thought this was the case. In the aftermath of almost every revolt (and revolt scare) in American history, they mounted crackdowns on the micro-economy of the enslaved: on lotteries and self-hires and live-outs, on interracial drinking and gambling and trading. And their vision of the slaves' economy was clearly related to, if not identical with, that suggested by Egerton: There was something subversive, something dangerous, something corrosive of public order and racial hierarchy to having the social order of the South performed along the cash nexus.

One of the most prominent of those to take up this problem was Edward Pollard of Virginia, the pro-slavery sentimentalist and eventual inventor of the phrase "the lost cause." In his 1859 *Black Diamonds*, Pollard told the story of seeing "some poor 'cracker' dressed in stripped cotton, and going through the streets . . . gazing at shop windows with a scared curiosity, made sport of by the sleek dandified Negroes who lounge in the street." This image did singular work for Pollard, for it represented the white inequality that was actually a feature of the triangular social structure of the South—slaveholders, nonslaveholders, and slaves—as a problem of conjuncture; overprivileged slaves acting out.

Pollard's disgust for his nonslaveholding neighbors is obvious throughout *Black Diamonds*, but in this case he felt that he had to defend them from the snide remarks of well-dressed slaves because, by his own account, he thought that making fun of a white man might lead to slaves being "inoculated with white notions." For Pollard, that is, there was something to the experience of property holding and consumption that might make slaves less fearful of whiteness: less fearful, that is, of men like Pollard himself.[2]

But here's the thing: There's nothing in the circumstances just described, which I do think supports Egerton's substantial and really interesting addition to the literature on slavery and capitalism, that would necessarily lead to the conclusion that slaves' "psychological independence" (if the problem were indeed posed that way) was rooted in the moment that they first got a hold of a coin or purchased a hat. Nor would it lead to any necessary connection between cash-carrying slaves and the ("psychologically independent") disposition to revolt. Indeed, Egerton's argument seems to be based upon several debatable premises. First, there is the anachronistic presumption that identifies "psychological independence" with the full realization of human being, which treats "psychological independence" as some sort of essential human condition rather than as notion of personhood derived from the therapeutic individualism of our own times. While the psychological dimensions of enslavement (and slaveholding) are surely important, approaching them through a simple opposition of the terms *dependent* and *independent* elides the historically modern specificity of the idea of "independence" as the ultimate form of self-realization (an idea upon which many of us might be said to be dangerously dependent).[3]

It might likewise be worth thinking more carefully about the politics of psychological dependence, for political organizing relies upon the mobilizing the weak as well as the strong. The trial records of New World

2. Edward Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Houses of the South*, originally published 1859 (New York, 1968), 56–58.

3. For a consideration of the very real psychological aspects (and traumas) of that treats the dependencies of *both* masters and slaves which, that is, does not treat "psychological dependence" as an absolute condition, but as psychological "attachment" (i.e., as an aspect of the social relations of slavery), see Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 15–111.

slave revolts reveal a world in which the conversations between co-conspirators were as likely to be characterized by hectoring and bullying as with talk of aspiration and inspiration. As Nat Turner (whose millennialism might itself be understood as a profound sort of dependence upon the God whose Purpose he believed himself to be serving) put it in explaining the some of the psychological vulnerabilities upon which his revolt was partly based, "Jack, I knew, was only a tool in the hands of Hark." Indeed, the success of a leader—an organizer—like Turner depended on his ability to make people understand the meaning of their own lives in a set of terms that rendered their "independence" meaningless in relation to the larger struggle. Rather than resorting to notions of "psychological independence" as the predicate condition, we might instead think historically about what sorts of subjectivity characterized the lives and revolts of enslaved people—about the sets of terms through which they imagined themselves socially.[4]

But even if we were to assume that "psychological independence" is the natural condition of human flourishing, it would not follow that slaves could achieve it only by getting money in their pockets and mounting full-scale revolts. Again, there is a jump in the argument here, which elides the many forms of enslaved politics and solidarity that existed prior to and separate from the cash economy, themselves chronicled in a body of work published in the wake of the Elkins thesis.[5] But

4. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Boston, MA, 1996), 48.

5. Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, IL, 1959). A sampling of the work to which I refer includes John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Old South* (New York, 1972); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987); Margaret Washington Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York, 1988); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1992); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Coun-*

there is also a perilous illogic to reversing the (I have suggested tenuous) argument that "psychological independence" was the predicate of armed collective action in order to suggest that the presence of slave revolts is the best tool to index the underlying presence of "psychological independence," and thus that the supposed coincidence between the frequency of slave revolts in urban areas and the frequency of slaves with cash in their pockets in urban areas thus suggests a set of causal linkages. Think again of Nat Turner whose success depended on his ability to get other slaves repeatedly to take actions that could cost them their lives—actions as simple as saying the words "we should revolt" and as previously unimaginable as killing a sleeping child. The withering difficulty of organizing a revolution in the midst of an active and powerful campaign of slaveholding counterinsurgency and the long odds of its success, might have led even fully self-realized psychological independents to resist without revolting.[6]

Finally, even if were are to ignore all the prior politics and evidence of networks and cultural forms that characterized the lives of the enslaved and conclude that slaves were indeed suffering from some sort of psychological dependence upon their masters, it does not follow that such a condition of abjection might have been addressed by the presence of a few coins in their pockets.

All of these logical missteps and historical elisions seem in one way or another to stem from the notion of The Slave Rebel (and I'm using the definite article advisedly) as a bourgeois subject: as a person whose aspirations are centered upon the realization of self—the achievement of freedom—through work and the attainment of purchasing power. There is a sort of theoretical impossibility to such a notion, given that model of bourgeois self-interest here posited as one of the root causes of slave revolt has its historical origins precisely in the inability of the bourgeois political economists who worked in the tradition of Adam Smith to think about slave resistance as a factor in the historical development of capital-

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terpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA, 2005).

6. Books that seem to me to capture the difficulty of planning and executing a slave revolt (what might be called the "labor theory" of revolution) are Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords,* and Emilia Viotti DaCosta, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994).

ism. Thus Adam Smith and his followers emphasized the superior motive power of incentives and self-interest to compel hard work and assumed that the problem with unfree laborers was that they were unmotivated, but did not go a step further and recognize that condition as less the absence of motivation than the concrete presence of resistance. The very figure of *homo economicus* who lies at the center of Egerton's retheorization of the relationship between capitalism and slave resistance is a figment of the imagination of the bourgeois political theorists who failed to consider slave resistance as a motive force of history.[7]

And this seems to me to be exactly the point. When slaveholders cracked down in the aftermath of revolts and revolt scares, when they closed down grog shops and gambling parlors and made laws against hiring out and self-hiring and all of the other practices upon which the political economy of urban slavery depended, they treated slave revolts as if they could be ended by more vigilance—more mastery—on the part of white people, as if, that is to say, those revolts were aspects of their own agency. Their reform efforts covered over the prior politics of black communities—the aspirational structure of revolt—with a set of programs based on reforming white behavior. They responded to, without ever fully imagining, the politics of black revolt.[8]

Think again for a moment of Pollard, imagining what having property meant to a slave. When he posed the problem of overprivileged slaves as a question of whether they might be inoculated with white notions, he did so in a particular way (one that lends much credence to Egerton's argument): as if the problem of slave unruliness began with slaves getting a bit of money in their pockets. But Pollard could go no further than that. He could not look through his own projected obsessions to imagine a world of meaning and politics rich enough that it could absorb and determine the meanings of money.[9]

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7. See James Oakes, "The Peculiar Fate of the Bourgeois Critique of Slavery" and Walter Johnson, "Response to James Oakes" in Winthrop D. Jordan and Annette Gordon-Reed, eds., *Slavery and the American South* (Jackson, MS, 2003).

8. Michel Rolphe Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA, 1995), 70–107.

9. There is a huge literature on money, but for my purposes here one might start with Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money* (New York, 1994), remembering with her that Marx initial formulation of money as the essential commodity had embedded within it an understanding that money has a "use

Perhaps we could start to build on Egerton's wonderful foundation by rethinking meanings of money that are not fully captured by the idea of "independence," for, after all, money is a slippery medium, full of possibilities—indeed, full of futures. Perhaps, then, we might try to think about Egerton's ideas in light of what we already know about enslaved people and all of the ways that they lived lives separate from and oppositional to the limitations of their enslavement without necessarily being "independent."

The monetization of exchange dilates the moment of bargaining along an indifference curve that stretches toward infinity—in a monetized economy, every possible future exchange is immanent in every present exchange—and we conventionally imagine that arc tracing out the pathway of maximization, the hallmark of bourgeois subjectivity.[10] But, of course, the history of money long antedates the pretensions of *homo economicus* to the title of Universal Subject of History, and, indeed, there were a lot of things slaves could do with money other than feel the bracing thrill of the purchase. They could contribute to black mutual aid societies of the type that Vesey belonged to, or to churches, or to families in which property was imagined not as the hallmark of independence but as the membrane of kinship. Money, that is to say, could represent and concretely articulate notions of subjectivity that were not framed around the question of independence but around that that of commonality; not around a bourgeois notion of freedom as the right to possess but around other, more radical notions of freedom achieved through the duty to contribute, and around notions of self and the care of the self framed not by independence but by belonging. Indeed, one of the things that we could imagine those well-dressed slaves who so upset Edward Pollard thinking about themselves is that they were a set of very beautiful black men: a notion of self predicated in the "we" of the racial subject rather than the "I" of the bourgeois subject.

A perfect example of personhood achieved outside the conventions of "independence" comes from the narrative of Charles Ball, a Maryland slave who was sold to South Carolina in the first decades of the nine-

value" as well as an "exchange value." As well as being a social solvent, that is to say, money might be a social sealant.

10. See Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, UK, 1986).

teenth century. Ball was placed by his owner in the cabin of a family of slaves, and though he had nothing to give them in return for the meal they shared with him on the first night, he made them a promise: "I would bring all my earnings in the family stock, provided I might be treated as one of its members, and be allowed a portion of the proceeds of their patch or garden." If we are to imagine Ball's experience in cultural rather than psychological (or, perhaps better, psychologistic) terms, we can see it as far more than a parable of "independence" or even "masculine independence." It is the story a man finding belonging in the sharing out of goods with a group that he came to call first his "community" and then "our family," of personhood rooted in kinship and commonality.[11]

As well as trying to imagine notions of belonging and commonality that had the power to absorb and remake the meanings of money, Egerton's work would profit from a more thoroughgoing consideration of the gendered and generational character of enslaved accumulation. It is well known that much of the marketing and money-making among slaves was done by women. And thus it seems absolutely critical to address the question of the economics of the enslaved in relation to black families and households. It is interesting that this aspect of the slaves' economy did not seem so troubling to slaveholders when they cracked down on money-making slaves in the aftermath of revolts and revolt scares, and suggests to me that slaveholders were aware that the social reproduction of the enslaved class—the bare ability of their labor force to survive and reproduce itself over time—depended upon this gendered access to the market. Dylan Penningroth has recently provided a model for thinking about the way that enslaved people made property meaningful, by uncovering the role of things—including money—in structuring and articulating notions of kinship among the enslaved. In Penningroth's formulation, property did, indeed, serve as the foundation for alternative notions of enslaved subjectivity, but for notions that were not so much framed around the question of independence as they were the questions of duty and commonality. But—and this is the important flip side of Penningroth's arguments—the dense identification of property and kinship could actually *undermine* the larger sorts of solidarities necessary to

11. Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, the Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1859), 131–34, 147.

resistance and revolt. Property, that is to say, could exert a fundamentally conservative effect on the politics of the enslaved just as it did upon those of whites.[12]

Finally, I want to go back to where I began with the notion of the basic practical planning that went into organizing a slave revolt. One of the limitations of the historiographical emphasis on the sort of culturalist parsing in which I have just engaged is that we have often thought about historical events like slave revolts in a set of rarified historical terms—African or African American, conservative or progressive, authentic or syncretic—that has drawn attention away from the practical business of putting together a revolt. We have, in the words of the bank robber Willie Sutton, sometime forgotten that people rob banks "because that's where the money is." And thought of in this light, of course it would make sense that slaves who were planning a revolt would think about robbing banks: Like any army in human history, revolutionary slaves would need to be provisioned, armed, transported, and so on. What seems interesting to me about this little bit of common sense is the way it was structured by the specific shape of the Atlantic economy. Put another way: the question of "psychological independence" notwithstanding, Egerton's discussion of money and urban slave resistance opens out into a new way of thinking about the relationship of space, capitalism, and slavery.[13]

The commercial practices of Atlantic slavery structured space in a very specific way: The slaveholding societies of the New World were all characterized by a set of urban export-processing zones where exports were collected, processed, and exported, and, as important, accounts were reckoned and money changed. Thus, the movement of money—and most specifically specie—through the Atlantic world was concentrated in these urban centers where currency could be changed and bills discounted. The urban spaces of the South were spaces produced out of

12. Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African-American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003).

13. For interesting work in this vein see Scott Nelson, "Livestock, Boundaries, and Public Space in Spartanburg: African American Men, Elite White Women, and the Spectacle of Conjugal Relations" in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* ed. Martha Hodes (New York, 1999), 313–27 and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

the concrete practices of the Atlantic economy: their concentrations of wealth, their polyglot flows of sailors and merchants, their irreducible dependence upon a broader world full of subversive ideas and threatening possibilities. And the specific character of these connections defined the terrain of enslaved resistance.