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Book review of The Peculiar Institution

Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1956).

HST 326

Professor Miller

February 23, 1992

One of the great controversies in American history was the question of slavery and what conditions under which the slaves actually lived. Since the abolitionists wished to maximize the misiries of slavery to their audience, and the pro-slavery polemicists wished to minimize them, the many contemporary sources on the topic are frequently marred by bias, leaving a minefield for future historians. And since the subject of slavery closely ties in the current political problems concerning race relations, affirmative action, the inner city underclass, etc., it's hard for historians to remain unbiased themselves when examining the subject. However, despite such obstacles and some loose ends, Kenneth M. Stampp's The Peculiar Institution[1] does a remarkably good job in portraying the daily lives of the slaves, and how their masters dealt with them.

Don't use an scholarly article - say what you mean.

Kenneth M. Stampp was born July 12, 1912 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He got his B.S. (1935), M.A. (1937), and Ph.D. (1942) all from the University of Wisconsin. After being an instructor at the University of Arkansas, and an assistant and associate professor at the University of Maryland, he spent the majority of his career at the University of California at Berkeley. The books he has written are mostly on nineteenth century American history. It appears politically he is a liberal or a democratic socialist, but not a Marxist. He abandoned support of Henry Wallace's communist-tinged third party campaign in 1948, only to give his vote to "Farrell Dobbes and the Socialist Workers."[2] He felt very strongly that Reconstruction hadn't been pursued strongly enough in the postwar period by the radical Republicans.[3] He is a member of the ACLU and the NAACP.[4]

Stampp does a good job in trying to be objective by pointing out seemingly contrary facts about slavery, which shows the diversity of conditions under which the slaves lived. He chose mostly to focus on the years 1830-

[1]Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1956). For now on, this designated normally by "S."

[2]Peter Novick, That Noble Dream The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 322. For now on, this will be designated normally by "N."

1860 in order to avoid problems resulting from changes in the institution itself (such as major changes in the slave codes) (S., p. 28), but still acknowledged the highly varied situations slaves lived under: " . . . they were evidences of regional variations within the South itself and of natural variations among individual masters and slaves" (S., p. 28).

As a result, all sorts of variations and differences in the institution of slavery get covered in Stampp's work, since he is objective enough to conceed some masters and overseers[5] were cruel and harsh while others weren't. He says: "Not that a substantial number of slaveholders deliberately adopted a policy of brutality. The great majority in fact, preferred to use as little violence as possible" (S., p. 78). Yet, of course, brutality existed along side paternalism: "But these restraints were not always enough. Some masters, made irascible by the endless irritations which were an inevitable part of owning slaves, were unmerciful in exercising their almost unlimited powers" (S., p. 180). And he cites the evidence that indicated that some slaveholders were much worse than others, instead of making the simplistic generalization all were brutes, or all were loving, caring paternalistic "fathers."

And Stampp is repeatedly careful to show both sides, making judicious weighings of the evidence. For instance, he points out how some slaveholders developed a paternalistic style in which slaves could be done with tasks by the middle of the afternoon (S., p. 76), with the "average" slaveholder, who expected the routine dawn to dusk workday[6] (S., p. 80), with those who overdid it and overworked their slaves (S., p. 81). Or, he discussed what and how much slaves were fed. Many got only cornmeal and bacon/pork year around (S., p. 284-285), but at least some masters added milk, vegetables,

[4] Clare D. Kinsman, ed., Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 19), Volumes 13-16, p. 761. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information on Stampp was from this source.

[5] Frederick Douglass had similar experience: "Mr. Severe's place (of overseer--EVS) was filled by a Mr. Hopkins. He was a very different man. He was less cruel, less profane, and made less noise, than Mr. Severe. His course was characterized by no extraordinary demonstrations of cruelty. He whipped, but seemed to take no pleasure in it. He was called by the slaves a good overseer" Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave (New York: Signet Books, 1968), p. 30.

[6] Since, as Stampp notes (S., p. 76), Northern free factory workers labored 12 hours a day, this wasn't by any means very unusual for the nineteenth century. Free Northern farmers normally put in over 70 hours a week at this time.

eggs, potatoes, etc. (S., p. 284). Stampp covers the variations in housing slaves had to live with, from "snug dwellings of logs covered with weather-boarding, or frame houses of bricks, clapboards, or shingles" (S., p. 293) down to "houses" with no windows, no opening besides the doorway, with holes between the logs the winter wind would blow through, and holes in the roofs rain would fall through (S., p. 295). Or, he mentions how white women and black men were responsible for some miscegeneration (S., p. 353), even if white men and black women was the much more common variation (S., p. 353). Stampp's willingness to conceed such variations shows he has done the patient work of a scholar, not the polemic of a Northern abolitionist.

Now Stampp himself is pretty much a pedestrian writer, with no particular eloquence or flair for writing. The famous sentence, "I have assumed that the slaves were merely ordinary human beings, that innately Negroes are, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less" (his emphasis, S., p. vii) is one of the few eloquent lines in the book written by the author. (But note the end, p. 430 and also p. 132). But, with his wealth of detail and crystal clear writing, his book is both easy to follow and interesting to read. And many of his sources are very interesting, as illustrated by the Southern planter's wife complaining about the temptations of slave women to her menfolk, "Under slavery we live surrounded by prostitutes" (S., p. 356). He would end chapters with highly appropriate quotes from the sources (S., p. 85, 191, 236). If you have any intrinsic interest in the subject, The Peculiar Institution makes for a good read.

While some zealous social scientist types might complain Stampp brings a moral agenda to his work (see p. vii, 7-11, 429-30, etc.)--namely racism and slavery were and are evil, and that blacks and whites are innately equal--this kind of "bias" poses little real problem.[7] For I would argue moral values can be objective absolutes, and need not seriously distort a

Rather than citing page references an example or two in your paper would help

[7] N., p. 352-353, which quotes from a criticism on this issue from Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 22-23. This book shall be called

historical work so long as they are true. The evil of racism becomes obvious upon exmaination, for it involves treating different people differently for no ethically relevant factors (skin pigmentation, shape of nose, etc.) Thus, Stampp's anti-racism need not distort his work's objectivity, so long as he avoids covering up evidence that slavery wasn't always as harsh as abolitionists said it was. And, as seen above, he does avoid doing this.

Stampp used a wide variety of sources, which included: plantation records, slaveholder diaries and wills, court records, escaped slave narratives, travellers' accounts, agricultural journals, newspapers, census records, and even pro-slavery polemics. His list of the manuscripts he consulted for writing The Peculiar Institution fill almost six pages (S., p. 431-436). As illustrated above, he is careful to show the variation in conditions under which the slaves lived. So while he is forced to generalize many times without any specific statistics (such as pointing out how black slaves and poor illiterate whites had nearly the same emotional religious pracices by citing only two cases from source documents--S., p. 376-377), his extrapolations still sound plausible. For since there weren't scientific investigators or market researchers running around in the Ante-bellum South making surveys and taking scientific samples of the slaves' conditions, the lack of preciseness is inevitable. As Eugene Genovese put it in his "A Note On Sources" at the end of Roll, Jordan, Roll The World the Slaves Made: "My frequent use of 'many,' 'most,' 'probably,' 'on balance,' and 'typically' reflects the difficulties of precise quantification."[8] While Stanely M. Elkins criticized Stampp for using this approach (E., p. 22), there really isn't an alternative other than the reasoned judgment of a professional historian who specializes in the subject.

Now Stampp's overall thesis and descriptions of slavery are fairly closely paralleled in Genovese's Roll Jordan Roll, which helps to support the validity of Stampp's work. Now Genovese adds Marxist concepts, interpretations, and categories to his analysis (see p. 5, 6, 25, 57-58, etc.), and

[8]Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1976)

can't resist condemningthe American army's actions in Vietnam War (G., p. 152-153), but his account largely agree with Stampp's. Both Genovese and Stampp see slavery and racism as evil, which certainly wasn't the case for some prior Southern historians on the subject, such as U.B. Phillips (G., p. xvi, 3-4; S., p. vii, 8-11). Both cover how the slaves could manipulate the differences between the overseer and master to alleviate harsh treatment (G., p. 17; S., p. 107-108). Both dealt with the legal problems resulting from a slave being both property and a human being (G., p. 28-29; S., p. 192-193). Both see miscegeneration as occurring sometimes between white women and black men (G., p. 422; S., p. 352), but more commonly between white men and black women (G., 415-416, 429; S., p. 353). Sometimes slaves would dominate or get their own way with their incompetent "masters" (G., p. 347; S., p. 106). Slavery made the masters worse morally also, which means it didn't just hurt the slaves (G., p. 94-95; S., p. 422). Both agree branding and mutation declined as punishments for slaves in the nineteenth century, compared to colonial days (G., p. 67; S., p. 188). Both feel that rumors of and panic over the American slave rebellions were far greater than the threat actually was possibilities of (G., p. 595-596; S., p. 134, 136-7, 140). Thus, these examples of similarities between Stampp and Genovese in their conclusions about what slavery did to people.

However, sometimes they disagreed. For instance, Genovese is skeptical of Stampp's view that overseers were as numerous as 30+ slave farms or plantations, saying they were considerably less numerous (compare G., p. 13 with S., p. 38). Or Stampp says masters didn't care very much about the field hands or know them personally, while Genovese maintains much more well personal contact and care was the case on average (compare S., p. 325-326 with G., p. 10). Also it seems Genovese has additional insights on various issues Stampp lacks, though this could well be due to Genovese having some 370 more pages to work with and type that averages about a third smaller. For instance, he points out how the many overseers, since

You don't touch on Genovese's thesis regarding paternalism. This is much different than Stampp. Why do you show how much deeper G. got into actual slave culture & religion.

they were neither slaves nor of the rich landowning class, were caught in-between (p. 15-16). Or how the imports of Northern and European manufactures undermined the size and skill of the black artisan class (G., p. 389). But Stampp's effort is a great one in its own right, even if presumably now over-shadowed by Genovese's.

Now Stampp's work gets high credit in the historical profession for clearing U.B. Phillips' racist-tinged scholarship on slavery from the scene. "The Peculiar Institution . . . has in the eyes of many students replaced American Negro Slavery (Phillips' work--EVS) as the authoritative statement on a long-mooted subject. . . . Not only has Phillips' moral position been overwhelmingly reversed, but even his scholarship--though nearly forty years would have to elapse before anyone finally acomplished it--has been left in the shade by scholarship more painstaking still. Not only has the challenge been successful; the victory is devastating" (his italics, E., 20-21). Genovese also stated that: "Kenneth M. Stampp's Peculiar Institution, which in 1956 delivered the coup de grace to Phillips's more tendentious interpretations, could not so easily have swept the field had not Aptheker and a few others already cleared away so much rubbish" (his italics, G., p. 587). Thus, The Peculiar Institution must have had a powerful influence on the history writing on slavery at the time of its publication and the immediately following years.

One highly controversial area the book throws light on is how slavery badly undermined the black family, which may explain partially today's inner city social pathology of matriarchy, illegitimate births, welfare dependency, absent fathers etc. The black family was undermined and sometimes directly destroyed by the lack of legal protection slave marriages had, with the resulting forced separations at slave auctions (S., p. 340-341, 252). The slave woman first and foremost worked a grueling 12-15 hour day for her master, with all household duties like cooking, cleaning, caring for children, etc. being minor accessory duties done mostly in a few hours before falling asleep

or maybe briefly in the morning before going out to the fields (S., p. 343). The children were cared for while their parents worked by an elderly slave woman who couldn't work in the field anymore (S., p. 58, 345), which no doubt was at least partially why many slave fathers and some slave mothers didn't care about their children much (S., p. 346). Some masters would engage in communal cooking, which had its trade-offs: "If communal cooking increased the regimentation of slave life and destroyed almost the last vestige of the family's significance, it nevertheless resulting ordinarily in a better diet" (S., p. 288). A father, since he had little of a breadwinning role (the master did that), was "at most his wife's assistant, her companion, and her sex partner" (S., p. 344). As a result, the slave family could be aptly described as a matriarchy: "Indeed, the typical slave family was matriarchal in form, for the mother's role was far more important than the father's. . . . He was often thought of as her possession ('Mary's Tom'), as was the cabin in which they lived. It was common for a mother and her children to be considered a family without reference to the father" (S., p. 344; see also p. 267). The instability (including such problems as divorce, adultery, etc.) of the slave family from all these causes resulted in slaves taking a casual attitude towards the duties of marriage, and the lack of real affection developing sometimes (S., p. 345). Sexual promiscuity was fairly common as a result, which the case of a Kentucky slave woman having seven children by seven different fathers not being unique (S., p. 346). I shouldn't overemphasize the bleakness of this situation, for despite all these disastrous influences love still developed strong bonds between black men and their black women, as well as between mothers and their children, as many a slave auction separation scene goes to show (S., p. 348). Of course, much of the fault for creating today's mess lies with the whites who imposed slavery upon the blacks so the extent black family instability of today can be traced back to slavery. Thus, the inner city social pathologies Moynihan's famous 1965 report discussed could well have a major source in the damage inflicted on

African-American families by slavery.[9]

Because of its clarity, its interesting specific examples, its scholarship and judicious weighing of evidence, and its influence upon the historical profession on this particular subject, Kenneth Stampp's The Peculiar Institution is well worth reading. While presumably shadows have been cast upon its significance by later works such as Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll, it is still more than repays the study put into it. It will help serve to remind us white Americans of one of the darkest chapters of American history.

This is certainly a 4 point as an undergraduate paper. As a graduate paper, however, there are certain problems. You make an effort at placing Stampp in the historiography and are certainly successful in terms of his dethroning Phillips. You are much less successful in what Stampp's place is as far as recent historians are concerned. You are right in showing that S. shows a richness and complexity to slavery. But he still essentially sees slaves as victims of white oppression. And while he does use some black sources, primarily his book concerns slavery as a white imposed institution. The treatment of slave families is a good example. S. basically accepts the [redacted] abolitionist view of family instability caused by the institution of slavery itself. Genovese and most recent writers (see: Herbert Gutman, The Slave Family) find great stability in slave marriages.

46 DTM

[9] I am fully aware of how annoying the tone and some points of this paragraph could very well be to feminists. However, since I'm influenced by the George Gilder thesis (see Men and Marriage, which is a revision of his Sexual Suicide) about the innately different personality types of men and women and its influence on family life. I'm not a feminist concerning certain issues

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Special note: Since I'm taking this class for undergraduate credit (I'm enrolled presently in both the B.A. and M.A. programs in history), I didn't make this paper as long as a grad student necessarily might be expected to.