

Review: Slavery and the Comparative Study of Social Structure

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by Stanley Elkins

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### SLAVERY AND THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE\*

ROBERT A. GORDON

If there is anything at all to social science, then we should see more books like this one. In the opening chapter Elkins guides the non-historian through the great scholarly works on American slavery. The problem of fairness in appraising slavery, the question of racial inferiority, and other once prominent issues in this scholarly tradition, from Ulrich Phillips to Myrdal and beyond, are clearly set forth. For Elkins these represent the "old debate," for which the accounts are now settled. There remain, however, certain perplexing and dramatic problems turned up in past scholarship which require an entirely new tack. The remaining three chapters are addressed to their solution.

Why was it that in the United States the status of plantation slave was tailored to its ultimate degree of convenience for the slave-holder—so that physical discipline of the slave was "virtually unlimited," his status virtually unalterable, and his rights, including those of marriage and family, non-existent—while in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Latin America the slave could acquire property, enjoy protection of his marital and family status, and even purchase his freedom? Elkins seeks the answer in a comparative study of the institutions of the two Americas.

In the United States slavery developed concurrently with a burgeoning plantation capitalism. In the fluidity of new institutions in a new country it was thus possible to rationalize the economic potential of slavery to a degree not possible within

a Mediterranean culture which had known slaves for centuries and in which the competing institutional claims of King and Church intersected along with those of the plantation in the status of slave. In North America, where King and Church were absent, it was natural that governmental action, unchallenged by any other established institutional interest, was largely subservient to the interests of the planter. Here the absence of a unified and powerful Church with a traditionally recognized concern for the souls of slaves made it easy for the slave-holder to permit religious figures only token access to the slaves. It was even urged that the Negro lacked a soul. Similarly, the secular government owed nothing to an Established Church in return for its own legitimation. Thus, we see that Elkins is fashioning an "institutional key" to understanding.

If we reject the hypothesis of racial inferiority, how are we to account for the "Sambo" stereotype of "the typical plantation slave, . . . docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration . . .," especially when numerous references compel us to grant, however reluctantly, that it must have had some substance? Better understanding of the "essentially heroic" aboriginal African culture leads us now to reject also the once current explanation that Sambo was its modal personality type. Again, the study of institutional contexts and the comparative method prove illuminating. This time the lesson is drawn from the concentration camps of recent history. This is admittedly a somewhat daring com-

\* *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. By STANLEY ELKINS. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959. Pp. viii+248. \$4.50.

parison in view of the extreme nature of the camps, but it is accomplished convincingly and with restraint. The reported reactions of inmates to imprisonment in a concentration camp reveal a consistent tendency toward infantilism and regressive behavior, a capacity for radically accommodating one's personality to the abrupt change, and the frequent adoption of a dependent role toward the oppressive authorities who are then recast as father-figures. Much the same reaction must have been the Negro's, reasons Elkins, when, suffering the shock of capture, the horrible Middle Passage, and deliberate confinement with fellows of alien tongue to forestall rebellion, he was transported to a condition subject to authority as total and as absolute as that of the concentration camp, if somewhat more benevolent. The argument at this point is bolstered by a knowledgeable consideration of theories of personality dynamics. Whatever one's attitude toward the theories in question, the relevance of the behavioral evidence to the actual historical event of slavery is striking.

When the comparison is made to Latin America, where a variety of roles in several institutional contexts were available to the slave—for example, father, worshiper, property-holder—we search in vain for "Sambo." The absence of the stereotype there, where the Negro underwent the same trauma of capture, is evidence, Elkins asserts, of the significance of the drastically truncated status-set of the North American Negro in perpetuating "Sambo" for future slave generations. As in the concentration camp, the pitifully small rewards of the situation as well as any modicum of control over one's fate had to be gleaned mostly from a single unbalanced relationship, that of master and slave.

The final chapter treats differences in the social position of the intellectual in the British and American abolitionist movements. In America the leading abolitionist intellectuals were the Concord Transcendentalists, led by Emerson and his circle. Vehemently anti-institutional, typically

viewing problems in abstract and morally absolutist terms, ultra-individualist, they were "men without connections," according to Elkins. The few of them who actually occupied a status in some institutional structure were given to resigning their position abruptly. In contrast, the English abolitionist intellectuals were deeply involved in the institutions of their society and thought it respectable to be closely linked to sources of power. Their abolitionism found expression through institutional means; they understood compromise, knew necessity, and made headway. But in America the Concord intellectuals succeeded only in generating an enormous guilt, within both their own minds and the mind of society at large. Instead of being gradually transformed through a series of institutionally implemented steps, each facilitating the next, slavery in America awaited a single cataclysmic explosion.

Quite aside from its intrinsic interest as history, Elkins' work offers the sociologist an unusual opportunity to develop the theory of comparative institutions and societies. For, while the work itself draws upon current theories in social science to explain particular cases, the author does not unify the cases within a single general theory.

One promising theoretical approach to Elkins' work is suggested by the concept of status-set, and perhaps also role-set, as used by Robert K. Merton and others. The isolation of the status of slave in North America from any other institutionally nested status contrasts with its coincidence in South America with the statuses of worshiper, royal subject, and even family member. Another way of stating this is that in South America the prescriptions associated with these additional statuses extended also to cover persons subject to the prescriptions of being a slave, while this was not the case in North America. Connected with these additional statuses were role-partners, the King or, rather, his agents, and the priest, who were powerful in their own right. Their power

enabled them to prevent plantation owners from introducing into the master-slave relation innovations in the interest of efficiency which might have interfered with the performance of the slave within the roles with which they, King and priest, were legitimately concerned. Thus, the Universal Church could not remain indifferent to the spectacle of a debased family life among slaves, or of their brutal mistreatment by masters, when souls were at stake on both sides. The King, in turn, could not ignore the Church's demands in such matters and could exert power against the slave-holders, without jeopardizing his legitimation, by claiming the slaves as his subjects. The effect of this concern was not only to protect the slave's claim to the perquisite gratifications of these statuses but also to benefit him within the slave status itself. He might, for example, purchase his freedom.

Implicit in these considerations is a general hypothesis as to the consequences of multi-institutional membership, or its absence, for persons who are powerless members of a particular institution. Obvious variations of this situation may provide a basis for the comparative study of large-scale social entities up to and including societies. Other conceivably important variants, for example, would occur when at least one of the statuses of the status-set commands relatively high power, or when all the statuses of a frequently observed set are powerful and all those of another set are powerless, with both sets running through the same major institutions of a society. Yet another source of variation might stem from taking into account the types of institutions involved.

Elkins' chapter on "Sambo" teaches us that the power constellation of the actor's status-set may affect not only the social expectation associated with his performance of some role but also his personality. Confinement from birth within a narrow status-set restricts opportunities to learn and canalizes gratification toward residual sources which are likely to be infantile, if

only because available in even the most restricted circumstances. Perhaps this even sheds light on some of the self-perpetuating characteristics of the underdog. It would appear that the concept of status-set is a valuable tool for those concerned with the interplay between culture and personality, particularly as mediated by reciprocal expectations joined in roles. The effects of creation and extinction of roles are certainly of fundamental importance for the study of social change.

Even the voluntary renunciation of roles entails the sacrifice of skills. Evidence for this is to be found in Elkins' final chapter. By abstaining from institutional involvement, the intellectuals of the American abolitionist movement handicapped themselves through lack of a political finesse they might otherwise have acquired. But the composition of their status-set has other implications, too. There are two important means of bringing the enormous resources of an institution to bear upon a problem arising in some other sphere. One is to make the problem a legitimate one for the institution; the other is to divert informally some of the resources of the institution to the other purpose. Neither of these strategies is available to men who belong to no institution. The convictions which led the Transcendentalists to isolate themselves from institutional life and the effects which this isolation may have had upon the course of the abolitionist movement in the United States ought to suggest new approaches to the sociology of knowledge.

Elkins' book is recommended to the sociologist as a well-equipped laboratory for experimentation with the concept of status-set. The simplicity of the concept invites its application to exactly this sort of material. It certainly offers one means of employing for sociological purposes a wealth of historical material unsuited to other modern techniques, for its use depends upon the very information which is likely to be accessible to historical research.

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