

“Ideologies in Comparative Perspective:
Reflections on the Pro-Slavery South and Nazi Germany

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There are several ways of approaching this topic of the proslavery argument and Nazi ideology: defining direct influences, establishing the degree of cousinhood among these reactionary ideologies, and comparative analysis. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but, for the purposes of exposition, I would like to consider them separately.

Least promising, perhaps, though not uninteresting is establishing direct links between the proslavery argument and Nazi ideology. Here I will need to rely upon Professor Herf's knowledge, but I would very surprised to learn that Hitler and other Nazis were knowledgeable about George Fitzhugh, William Harper, and other proslavery writers in the American South before the Civil War. It is more likely that they knew a little about the South's racial ideologists, most probably Josiah Nott the racial ethnologist, who was one of the few Southerners whose writings were well known in Europe in the mid and late nineteenth century, and who certainly formed part of that immense body of racial theory — from Blumenbach to Gobineau to Houston Stewart Chamberlain — which was an indispensable influence on the Nazis.

More promising is the question of what these two social and cultural moments say about responses to modernity. For, certainly, if one were cataloguing those societies since the eighteenth century which have tried, with no little ruthlessness, to use modern technology while resisting what were often claimed to be its progressive social and political implications, the antebellum South and Nazi Germany would be conspicuous on the list, though it is a very long list — indeed, it would be hard to find societies not on that list, to one degree or another. I will try to come back to this issue at the end, because it does seem to me to raise the most profound issues. But it is an issue difficult to discuss without first undertaking the comparative analysis which might help us to gain our bearings.

The first thing which needs to be said is that we are not really comparing like with like, or at least I do not think so. For good or ill, Nazi ideology claimed to be comprehensive. It was not merely a vision of politics or of economic organization, but a vision of human history, of human nature, of the family, of art and science, of the cinema and dance, of poetry and music. Although I know there are historians who think that slavery was so fundamental to the antebellum South that it comprehensively explains everything that Southerners did and thought — I am not one of those historians, I need to say — nonetheless, even those historians would concede, I think, that the proslavery argument never claimed to offer a comprehensive social and aesthetic program. It certainly offered ideas about history and human nature, and had firm views on economics and politics, but it coexisted with and did not usually seek to dominate an eclectic body of other ideas, common in Southern and American society — religion, republicanism, laissez-fair economics, and so forth. Indeed it was more remarkable for presuming the validity of these other ideas and finding ways to make slavery compatible with them, than for presuming that slavery made those ideas moot.

Secondly, as is familiarly known, the Nazis were impresarios of modern techniques of communication, media, and propaganda, but antebellum Southerners were not. The proslavery argument was, on whole, a dry and even scholarly enterprise, inferior as propaganda even to that offered by American abolitionists, who understood the usages of the popular press and even the utility of melodrama. The proslavery argument did occasionally reach a broad audience, usually when it took the form of oratory — sermons, political speeches — but even these forms more usually had small, local audiences. For the most part, the proslavery argument was made in print, in books with very limited print runs, in periodicals with small readerships, in pamphlets with smaller readerships which reprinted speeches to philosophical societies. It was a fairly elitist business. I suspect that, if

you had pulled aside an ordinary Southerner in 1850 and asked him or her to name a proslavery theorist, Calhoun might have got a mention, but hardly anyone else, and Calhoun's popular identity was as far more than a proslavery thinker. The proslavery argument had no charismatic public rituals, certainly no Nuremburg rallies, and not even American marches and brass bands, not even the sort of rituals invented by the Ku Klux Klan in the twentieth century. In a culture that threw off many partisan artifacts — party political banners about Tippecanoe and Tyler Too, pottery with slogans about Oregon, clothing buttons enthusiastic about Andrew Jackson, pins with images of Henry Clay — candid proslavery artifacts are rare, if not non-existent, although derogatory visual representations of African Americans are commonplace. Partly this absence of populist propaganda was a function of an earlier moment in the technologies of communication and the fact that the Old South was not a mass society. It would be pleasant to think that this absence was a proof of weakness. But, to the contrary, I suspect the unimaginative lassitude of the proslavery argument was evidence of its strength, the fact that what it said was what most white Southerners took for granted, anyway. On whether the reverse is true, that the relentless inventiveness of Nazi propaganda was a measure of its weakness, I defer to Professor Herf. The response to Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* suggests that the degree to which the German public accepted or was skeptical of Nazi ideology is much contested among historians and I am not competent to arbitrate.

Thirdly, Nazism was preeminently a theory of the authoritarian state and of how individuals belong to a collectivity; it flourished on an idea of service and sacrifice. The proslavery argument was, if anything, an anti-statist theory, which counterpoised the domestic against the public realm. To be sure, slaveholders were anxious to use the law and, in that sense, to use the state as a bulwark and grounding for the institution, but they mistrusted strong government, had a

remarkable faith in individualism, and were very averse to the idea of sacrifice — comfort and safety were their ideas of how a society might work well. The iconic slaveholder was supposed to sit on his front porch, with his feet up. The only proslavery thinker who came close to the Nazi authoritarian vision was Henry Hughes of Mississippi in the 1850s. In fact, he came surprisingly close; he knew the romantic thrill of the leadership principle and wrote of “the supreme hero”, he was militarist, he presumed men were driven by desire and fear, he suspected that anarchy was imminent but for his own intervention, he demanded that the state control education, religion, and aesthetics, he believed in racial purity, and he had very odd ideas about personal hygiene. However, most people in the South who knew anything about Hughes believed he was more or less crazy, for he broke almost every ideological rule in the Southern book. That book was inscribed with commitments to republicanism, democracy, the rule of law, laissez-faire economics, party politics, all things that Nazism was later to regard as irrelevancies. Like Hughes, a Nazi ideologist would presumably say to an antebellum Southerner that these commitments were incompatible with slavery and racial hierarchy, which to survive would need a different politics. But a proslavery Southerner would reply that the whole point of Southern culture was the compatibility of slavery and racial hierarchy with republicanism, democracy, and the rest.

Obviously, the thing that Nazis had most in common with antebellum Southerners was racial theory. For the Nazi, as for the Southerner, the Negro was an inferior degenerate. However, racial theory takes many forms and I incline to think that there were many differences between these two cultures on the score of race. Technically, Southerners knew little or nothing of Aryanism, though they certainly knew about Caucasians and the types of mankind. The Negro, central to the Southern imagination, was marginal to the Nazi sensibility. What was crucially

missing from the South's racial theory was anti-Semitism, the heart and corrupt soul of National Socialism. It is not that anti-Semitism was unknown to the Old South. Jews had some legal disabilities in some Southern states until well into the mid-nineteenth century. There are discoverable moments of anti-Semitism in private letters and diaries, though very rarely in printed texts. But I can think of no instance where there was a formal anti-Semitic movement in Southern culture or society before the Civil War. (After the Civil War is another matter, when one remembers the Leo Frank case and Tom Watson, and even during the Civil War, when Judah P. Benjamin was on the receiving end of much anti-Semitic abuse.) In the lexicon of antebellum Southern racial theory, Jews were white, which was not how some racial theorists elsewhere saw the matter. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon in their *Types of Mankind* of the 1850s, when summarizing the various theorists who divided mankind into differing numbers of racial types, opted for the typology of Honoré Jacquinot, who in 1846 had defined three races (Caucasian, Mongol, Negro), and had subdivided the Caucasian into the Germanic, Celtic, Semitic, and Hindu. Nott's chapter on the "Physical History of the Jews" speaks of the "noble moral precepts bequeathed us by the kings and prophets of Judea" and is, for the most part, anxious to praise the Jews and, in line with his usual hostility towards hybridity, anxious to expel from Judaism any who tended to weaken its racial purity. The overwhelming evidence from the Old South is that Jews were accepted, worshipped freely, and intermarried freely with Gentiles, to the point where it became a worry to the orthodox. Further, Jews were slaveholders like everyone else. Indeed there were several rabbis (Isaac Wise, Isaac Leeser) who wrote proslavery tracts. The history of ancient Israel as recorded in the Bible was, of course, a fundamental element in the wider proslavery argument, whether it was making a point about God's purposes for man or making a point about secular history. And this alone points to a crucial difference. For the Nazis, the Jew was

the incarnation of modernity, because he was supposed to run the economic institutions of modernity. For Southerners, insofar as they had a coherent view, the Jew was the incarnation of antiquity, was associated not with banks in Frankfurt, but with flocks peacefully grazing in the Holy Land.

There was, perhaps, more sympathy between Nazis and Southerners on the score of paranoia, though I think the Nazis were incomparably more paranoid than the Southerners. Fifty years ago, most American historians would not have agreed with that observation, for it was presumed then that the Old South was a deeply paranoid society, for it was thought inconceivable that rational people might wish to cease to be Americans and hence must be more-or-less unhinged. Perhaps a few American historians still think this, but I, at least, do not. If I am right, we need to make a distinction. The worldwide Jewish conspiracy was a fetid Nazi fiction, but it was not irrational for a Charlestonian to think that the world was planning, with some fixity of purpose, to extinguish slavery from the South Carolinian world or that eventually the black Republicans might move against them. Still, there was, to a limited degree, a cast of mind shared between proslavery Southerners and Nazis: each felt obliged to be aggressive by way of preempting dangers threatened by enemies — for the Nazis, these were preeminently the Jews, secondarily the Bolsheviks — for the Southerners, preeminently the abolitionists, secondarily the slaves themselves, inspired by Haitian dreams of freedom and slaughter. I would add that one reason for the difference, the intensity of Nazi paranoia compared to the episodic anxiety of Southerners, has to do with a differing sense of time. Hitler's world and imagination had a breakneck pace, a dizzy sense of urgency about dynamic weeks and months. By comparison, Southerners lived in slow motion and reasoned about decades, even centuries.

As to the status of slavery itself in the two systems, I can only make a few tentative suggestions, since I am not an expert on the Nazi use of slave labor. It is my impression, which I would be glad to have corrected, that the Nazis did not think systematically about slavery, that they improvised their slave system, and were much torn between the impulse to use the labor of those they considered inferiors (which was the Southern custom) and the desire to murder inferiors (which was not the Southern custom). Adam Tooze's recent economic history of the Third Reich is insistent on this point — that Nazi ideology formally demanded extirpation, the removal of inferior races from land which could then be colonized by Aryans, and they variously pursued this policy through starvation and extermination — but the informal reality of economics, that there were not enough Germans to go around for the purposes of running a war and an economy, made the case for keeping these people alive and establishing labor camps. By comparison, Southern thought about slavery is very systematic and not improvised, at all, but long considered. While the Nazis never got to the point of planning what a permanent, peacetime slave system would look like, Southerners well knew that permanence required a intricate body of law, ideology, and social custom which needed to be articulated to masters and slaves alike. Indeed, Southern slavery was founded on the idea of permanence and inheritance. Though they were habitually, even casually cruel, Southerners had a cynical understanding that slaves had to be kept alive, were there to be used. Genocide, insofar as it existed in the Southern imagination, was a thing reserved for Native Americans.

One would be tempted, therefore, to say that Nazi slavery was the child of war, and Southern slavery the child of peace, but that would be to overstate the case. As Adam Tooze has also suggested, Hitler was conscious of American imperialism as a model for his vision of German expansion, and well knew that the use of slave labor was a significant element in the American seizure of land, and so

the American South was a precedent for the use of slave labor in facilitating the search for *lebensraum*. The difference, of course, is that until 1861 American imperialism and slavery were able to coexist, indeed forced African labor helped to make that imperialism possible. But this was partly a function of the weakness of American opponents in the southern half of North America. When Southern slavery faced a serious military opponent in 1861, that coexistence disintegrated. Nazi slavery faced still more stringent enemies.

Still, points of sympathy also need emphasis. The proslavery argument and Nazism were both imperialist ideologies, they both presumed that inferior peoples could rightly be pushed aside or enslaved, and they were both committed to the value of colonization, of what we now call settler societies. However, one needs to observe that the Americans, as the heirs of the British, well understood that settler societies were only possible in thinly-peopled lands. India with its millions of people and its ancient cultures required a different technique of empire. The United States prudently refused to annex all of Mexico in the late 1840s, though it might have done so, and contented itself with Mexico's thinly-peopled northern provinces, because this fitted the familiar logic of American expansion, which could only deal with extirpations on a small scale, done half in denial. Hitler, by comparison, was incomparably more ruthless and this ruthlessness made it seem possible to do, what a British or American imperialist would have thought a folly, the establishment of a settler society in a densely-peopled land, as though one might deal with India as though it were Australia. And, of course, the British and American imperialist would have been right; it was a folly.

For all that, because of the imperialist commitment, the Southerners and the Nazis both had a romantic commitment to agrarianism, to the possession of land, and a propensity for self-regarding myths about family life and kinship, about the *Volk* and about plain folks. They roughly shared a culture of blood and place,

sanctified by history and war, though this was and is a common enough aspect of Western culture, sometimes of non–Western culture. That the preeminent American text for such a culture of national sanctification by the shedding of blood is Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* shows that there is little exclusivity here, but a common–or–garden propensity for the messianic. A pessimist cannot fail to observe a sad abundance of last, best hopes in the modern world.

In conclusion, let me turn to the difficult matter, postponed earlier in this talk, the matter of what these two social and cultural moments say about responses to modernity. This is, what we might loosely call the Hannah Arendt problem, for it is the issue she was among the first to raise in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. Was National Socialism merely an intensification of familiar tendencies in German and Western culture and, as such — relevantly for the remit of this panel — a first cousin to the slave South? Or was totalitarianism, as Arendt argued, something radically new and peculiarly evil, hence something radically different from anything John C. Calhoun might have advocated or understood? On the whole, the argument in recent years has run against Arendt; the construct of totalitarianism has been deconstructed, and more people incline to George Mosse’s view that Nazism did, indeed, have deep taproots in German history, though there may be more disagreement over Mosse’s insistence that the the German case was *sui generis* and not an instance of a wider European problem. In the context of this panel, I’d like briefly to reconsider Arendt.

As I understand her critics, Arendt is held to have overestimated the efficacy of totalitarianism. No system, whatever its purposes, can be total. I do not wish to quarrel with that criticism, but I do think that, if we retreat to the lesser ground of ideological ambition, it does seem to me, as I have been suggesting, that National Socialism, in contradistinction to the proslavery argument, was a remarkably comprehensive and, by its own lights, internally–consistent ideology.

To be sure, both confronted the problem of modernity, both thought the modern liberal vision of modernity's meaning was inadequate, both meditated on how industry and urban life were affecting rural life and virtue, both grasped that domestic life and the larger economy were intimately connected. However, by comparison, the proslavery thinkers look muddled and at odds. For the most part, they did not mind cities, at least on small scale; they were not greatly averse to factories; they believed in free trade, elections, and progress; they were ameliorists, ill-disposed towards abrupt innovation, but liking incremental change — a new sewing machine here, a steam engine there, an annexed or purchased province somewhere else. At the heart of the muddle was an indecision about whether slavery was the systematic grounding of their culture, as Fitzhugh claimed, or just a way to make money, as Thomas Dew mostly thought. Was it the final solution to modernity's uncertain evolution and unwise experiment with free labor, as Fitzhugh claimed in the 1850s, or just a historical stage, valuable but destined for supersession, as Edward Brown had said in the 1820s? Few agreed. In so decentralized and fragmentary a society, in which many were not slaveholders or slaves, no one was in a position to compel agreement, although there were any number of people in a position to compel enslavement. Here is a paradox. The Nazis believed in modernity less, but used its techniques with extraordinary sophistication and violence, so the contradiction for them was intense, if denied. The Southerners believed in modernity more, but used its techniques less, and so for them the tension was modest, if enough to make them walk away from the United States and its differing version of modernity in 1861.

Such issues are close to the heart of Arendt's analysis. Hers was an argument about the relationship between ideology and power, imagination and coercion. Her commitment was to classical republicanism, indeed to the ideology of the American Revolution, and she most distrusted modern ideologies for their

erasure of the distinction between public and private life. Indeed, she may be said to have stood with Thomas Jefferson against Adolf Hitler and Karl Marx, and she did not fail to notice, if glancingly, that she was thereby standing with a slaveholder. What I am calling muddle, she praised as moral clarity, for she claimed that American society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like other Western cultures, lacked a systematic social theory, hence had little to impose, and hence permitted freedom and human dignity. She observes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “In the light of recent events it is possible to say that even slaves still belonged to some sort of human community; their labor was needed, used, and exploited, and this kept them within the pale of humanity.” By comparison, those in Nazi labor camps were expelled from humanity, were the victims of something new in human history, something unprecedentedly drastic. “All parallels create confusion and distract attention from what is essential,” Arendt says. “Forced labor in prisons and penal colonies, banishment, slavery, all seem for a moment to offer helpful comparisons, but on closer examination lead nowhere . . . slaves were not, like concentration–camp inmates, withdrawn from the sight and hence the protection of their fellow men; as instruments of labor they had a definite price and as property a definite value. The concentration–camp inmate has no price, because he can always be replaced; nobody knows to whom he belongs, because he is never seen. From the point of view of normal society he is absolutely superfluous, although in times of acute labor shortage, as in Russia and in Germany during the war, he is used for work.” Now, we might quarrel with some of this, but I incline to think the basic insight is illuminating. On the whole, I do think that, when we pass from the Old South to Nazi Germany, we are passing from an fairly–ordinary historical culture, with the usual mix of virtue and vice, to an extraordinary historical culture with few or no precedents and, one hopes, few or no successors.