

1797. Immorality of Slavery

Samuel Miller , April 12, 1797, Presbyterian Minister, in D. Gellman and D. Quigley, ed. (2003). *Jim Cow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877*. NY: New York University Press, 44-46

Slavery will always be found, in proportion to the extent and severity with which it prevails, to INJURE THE MORALS of a people. That it tends to produce, on the one hand, haughtiness, a spirit of domination, cruelty, and lewdness, among the whites, appears probable, upon the slightest consideration of the subject, and is abundantly proved by experience. And, on the other hand, that it has an equal tendency, to produce and cherish almost every species of vice, among the slaves themselves, none, I presume, will hesitate to admit. Should any have a remaining doubt whether this be the case, let them compare the state of morals in those parts of our country, in which slavery is either unknown, or exists in the most lenient form, with that which is exhibited in those states in which slaves are more numerous and more degraded. . . .

In this State, as well as in most others in the union, the testimony of a slave cannot be admitted in judicial process, excepting in a few cases. What is the ground of this law? The answer is obvious,—"SLAVERY DEBASES THE MIND, AND CORRUPTS THE MORAL CHARACTER." The unhappy victims of oppression, feeling themselves precluded by violence, from enjoying the benefits of society, neglect the social virtues. Finding their own rights habitually invaded, they soon learn to disregard the rights of others. Living perpetually under the frowns of power, they are insensibly taught the arts of deception, treachery, and fraud, until every moral feeling is blunted or destroyed. Hence slaves, in all ages and countries, have generally exhibited the most odious moral depravity. . . .

Nor has slavery a more mischievous effect on the morals of society, than it has on NATIONAL INDUSTRY, POPULATION, AND GENERAL IMPROVEMENT. Men not only become lazy and idle when they can make others the servile instruments of their will; but labour will soon be esteemed disreputable and degrading, when it is chiefly performed by slaves. And whatever diminishes industry, discourages population, and sows the seeds of social weakness and disorder. . . .

In this part of the United States, indeed, the pernicious effects of slavery are displayed in a comparatively moderate degree. But even in our State they are distinctly perceptible. Even here we should be a happier and a wealthier people, were every labourer a freeman, and, of consequence, the product of every man's labour his own property. . . .

Many have been the proposals of benevolent men to remedy this grand evil, and to ameliorate the condition of the injured negroes. . . . Immediately to emancipate *seven hundred thousand* slaves, and send them forth into society, with all the ignorance, habits, and vices of their degraded education about them, would probably produce effects more unhappy than any one is able to calculate or conceive. Nor does the plan appear much more plausible, which some have proposed, to collect, and send them back to the country from whence they or their fathers have been violently dragged; or, to form them into a colony, in some retired part of our own territory. . . .

Perhaps no method can be devised, to deliver our country from the evil in question, more safe, more promising, and more easy of execution, than one which has been partially adopted in some of the states, and hitherto with all the success that could have been expected. This plan is, to frame laws, which will bring about emancipation in a GRADUAL MANNER; which will, at the same time, PROVIDE FOR THE INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL CULTIVATION of slaves, that they may be prepared to exercise the rights, and discharge the duties of citizens, when liberty shall be given them; and which, having thus fitted them for the station, will confer upon them, in due time, the privileges and dignity of other freemen. By the operation of such a plan, it is easy to see that slavery, at no great distance of time, would be banished from the United States; the mischiefs attending an universal and immediate emancipation would be, in a great measure, if not entirely, prevented; and beings, who are now gnawing the vitals, and wasting the strength of the body politic, might be converted into wholesome and useful members of it. Say not that they are unfit for the rank of citizens, and can never be made honest and industrious members of the

community. Say not that their ignorance and brutality must operate as everlasting bars against their being elevated to this station. All just reasoning abjures the flimsy pretext. Make them freemen; and they will soon be found to have the manners, the character, and the virtues of freemen. . . .

The time, I trust, is not far distant, when there shall be no slavery to lament—no oppression to oppose in the United States: when the EMANCIPATING SPIRIT of our Constitution shall go forth . . . when she shall proclaim, even to the stranger and the sojourner, the moment he sets his foot upon American earth, that the ground on which he treads is sacred to LIBERTY; and that the air which he breathes, nourishes FREEMEN ONLY—when every being, who bears the name MAN, whatever complexion an equatorial Sun may have burnt on him, and with whatever solemn injustice his rights may have been infringed, shall enjoy the privileges, and be raised to the dignity which belong to the human character.