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Teaching American History

Book Review of Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*

Upon finishing Edmund Morgan's tome on colonial Virginia, I was struck at Morgan's ability to explain how the diametrically opposed ideas of slavery and freedom could simultaneously exist in colonial Virginia on the eve of the American Revolution. Throughout his account, Morgan offers a deep understanding of the motivations and human nature of man throughout 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia. Although his text is nearly thirty years old, and some claim that we live in a post-racial society today, the ideas Morgan illuminates offers us a deeper appreciation of how slavery and racism were cultivated alongside the idea of liberty and republicanism. His thoughtful analysis relies heavily on primary sources as well as secondary accounts that serve to lay the foundation of his argument.

For Morgan, the existence and expansion of slavery in Virginia is rooted in the development of 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginian society. The men who sought to establish Virginia were acting within their own environment; Europe on the eve of colonization. They were exposed to the practices of the Spanish, who sought to actively enslave natives and derive vast riches from the New World in an attempt to "overrun Europe and saddle [the] people there with the same slavery that the Indians were suffering" (Morgan, p. 8). Acting out of a motivation for survival and dominance, the English sought out native allies in the New World against the Spanish and "cast themselves as liberators" (p. 13) of the native peoples. However, as Morgan notes, "friendships between different peoples have seldom extended beyond mutual interest" and the real test came when it was called into question as to whether the English could have offered the natives the same type "of freedom that Englishmen at home were beginning to pride themselves on" (p. 14).

Englishmen, according to Morgan, were due to colonize the world. Morgan offers accounts dating back to King Arthur, Chaucer and a 1436 poem on England's sea power, entitled *The Libelle of Englyshe Policye*, to credit his idea. However, England sought not just the expansion of empire, but the freedom from tyranny and slavery that their brand of government would offer. Thus, Englishmen set up joint stock companies, in hopes of allying themselves with "good Indians" in an attempt to exploit the natural resources of the New World. According to some in England, this New World would be a blueprint for a utopian society. Christopher Carleill, and other Utopians, believed that "good-for-nothing English beggars" would become new men when shipped to work in colonial North America, side by side with the Indians, and that "the two parties would gradually merge together and absorb the same way of life and customs" (p.22-24). However, even in Utopia, land would be taken from those that would not prove to be industrious.

Throughout the first third of his text as Morgan seeks to establish what life was like in colonial Virginia, he consistently re-visits a motivating factor of why England sought to expand its colonies in North America. As Morgan notes, England "was troubled by the growing number of men and women for whom England could not afford neither food nor shelter nor even the opportunity to work for their bread" (p. 30). In addition, England's economy did not expand fast enough to provide work for the increase in population that continued through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some Utopians, such as Richard Hakluyt, believed that the idleness, poverty and corruption of the English poor was not part of any unworthiness of character. For Hakluyt, desperation, not depravity drew men to crime. As a result, these men could be deemed "economic opportunities" as their labor would enrich the gentlemen who invested in the joint stock companies that started the colonies. However, a lack of skilled artisans and a lack of relations with the natives caused the Roanoke experiment to fail. "Neither Englishman nor native Americans lived up to the expectations" of Utopia, but it was only the beginning of English colonization.

According to Morgan, the Virginia company attempted colonization in North America in 1607 with motivations less akin to economic advancement and more altruistic in nature. They sought to establish a colony to civilize and Christianize the heathen savages of North America much like the Romans were able to do to the primitive Britons. In addition, they sought to expand their joint stock company in an attempt to relieve England of the idleness and crime of the unemployed masses of England. However, the native way of life was alien to the culture of England. For natives, the ideal way of life was one which minimizes worldly goods and maximizes leisure time. In contrast, in England, statutes were enacted which required all laborers to work from five in the morning until seven or eight at night. The English believed that “the devil finds work for idle hands, and some of his work might threaten the state as well as the church” (p. 65). In an attempt to deal with the situation, work in England was rationed and apprenticeships began and made it illegal for a man to work until he spent seven years in his trade. Workers were hired by year and work was spread thin. Laborers who learned to work under these conditions, learned not to work very hard, and spend their earnings on alcohol. England did seek to diversify its agrarian economy by trying to make glass, paper, brass and gunpowder and increasing its refinement of coal and iron. However, it sought new colonies in America to produce the “articles of trade” that it could not or would not produce at home.

Jamestown’s early attempts at colonization were appropriately entitled a “fiasco.” Labor was ineffective and inefficient. Food was in short supply and the work a man did on behalf of the colony bore no direct relationship to his reward. In addition, many of the men who arrived were of the gentleman class and had no manual skills. Many of those sent were men with highly specialized skills, such as smelters of iron and silk dressers. The settlers were expected to create an economy more complex than that of England but in doing so it created an economy not of efficiency but that of idleness (p. 85). Morgan also believes that the tenuous relationship with the Indians began at this point because of the ability of the Indians to live off the land so well and the English in their times of need. Instead of accepting their inferiority and failure as compared to the Indians, Englishmen burned their

villages and tortured them.

As Jamestown's viability from tobacco production grew, so did its incessant desire for more labor and servants. Even though servants would come without supplies they were still welcomed into the colony. According to Morgan, the secret to success in Jamestown rested upon the idea that "a man could not make a fortune by himself. But if he could stay alive and somehow get control of a few servants and keep them alive, he could make more in a year than he was likely to make in several in England" (p. 110). Jamestown had in essence become a boom town, a place to strike it rich, get your money and then move on. But there are many more losers than winners in a boom town. Self-preservation from Indian attacks came second to wealth creation and tobacco farming in Jamestown. Jamestown became a consumer based economy as well as an agricultural one for those that were able to generate profits. There were private traders with floating taverns and many profits were drunk away. In many ways it was a society driven by greed and profits dependent on land ownership. Men rushed out to stake claims and secured patents for large amounts. But labor was just as necessary and men arriving as tenants to company lands were treated as servants upon their arrival without supplies. This gave rise to the "labor barons" of Jamestown as some men were able to acquire nearly forty servants to work on their plantations. These men, including the governor Thomas Yeardley, were able to grow rich by depriving Englishmen the freedom that they considered as their birthright. In addition, because servants had no reason to work hard extreme abuse was inflicted on them to compel them to work. Morgan later draws a direct parallel with this idea to plantation owners and slaves later in his text. As Morgan also writes, a servant, "by going to Virginia, became for a number of years a thing, a commodity with a price" much like the slaves that would soon follow. Morgan describes the servants not as men but as machines, like the chattel slavery that is soon to engulf all of the south in the coming century.

Even though Jamestown and Virginia in general started to become more civilized in the later

half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many inhabitants still lived in wooden houses, moving often because of soil depletion. In addition, death was a constant on their doorsteps. Doctors charged high fees to deal with the ailing and life expectancy was reflected in the price one would charge for a seasoned servant versus a new hand. Widows were sought after, which led to a consolidation and accumulation of wealth within the colony and creating a widowarchy that defined the families of Virginia's aristocracy. However, as time wore on and as people living in Virginia became less susceptible to disease, so to did the servants who outlived their terms of indenture. This created another class within Virginia; the recent freedman.

Masters of servants did all they could to expand the lengths of terms for servants but when they eventually did become free government officials sought to restrict them in many ways. Freedmen were levied with unequal taxation forcing many back into a life of servitude. Some, that were able to set up for themselves, because of cheap land, posed a threat to big landowners as they competed with them. The more tobacco that was produced resulted in a depression of prices. Controlling the costs became an aim of the large planters so it became more and more difficult for freedmen to get land because it was patented and held by larger planters.

As the 1600s closed Virginia consisted of a structure that did not include Indians, but did include, at the bottom, a small number of slaves. Above them were the servants, working at different lengths of term. In the upper echelons of society stood the elite group that had amassed large estates and were able to receive a steady supply of servants. Below them households with one or two servants and finally in between the households and servants stood a portion of the population that began to grow rapidly; the freedmen who finished their indenture. According to Morgan, some of the resentment that the freedmen felt boiled over into Bacon's Rebellion in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Freedmen were being squeezed very tightly by taxes from the king and local officials, so much so that they almost resorted to rebellion again in the 1680s and did take part in a crop cutting rebellion. Bacon's Rebellion

also had an impact on the racial attitudes of freedmen towards natives. For Morgan, Bacon's Rebellion occurred as a release of anger and racial hatred directed at the Indians as a result of the condition the freedmen were put in by the Virginia gentry.

According to Morgan, slavery became a natural outgrowth of the Virginian society. Every year, Virginia poured a number of new freemen into a society where the opportunities for advancement were limited. Replacing servants with slaves would alleviate the Virginia gentry of its problem. Masters motivated slaves into work through use of fear. With nothing left to lose but life, masters threatened their slaves and statutes were enacted to protect them from punishment.

As in pre-colonial England, productivity of slaves in colonial Virginia, working in an agrarian society, was much the same for those poor "brutish" peasants. Weather interfering with crops and alcohol dependence resulted in slaves being labeled, much like the wretched poor of England a century earlier, as "shiftless, irresponsible, unfaithful, dishonest, and ungrateful" (p. 319). Thus, Morgan argues, that the beliefs and morals that were held by many in England in regards to the "wretched" of that society, who immigrated to Virginia and eventually established themselves as freedmen, were transferred to the black slaves working in the fields of Virginia. Many of the "commonwealth men," such as John Locke, who stood up in opposition to the tyranny of monarchy, and influenced the revolutionary generation of Virginia, espoused the idea of inuring individuals, even children, to work, so that they would not think any different of it their whole lives. However, these men never sought the elimination of poverty through work, for they sought to make them work for meager wages, but to discipline the poor to work for them. For this reason many slaves and servants saw themselves in common, but this commonality was eliminated through statutes forbidding rights and property to slaves from the Virginia legislature.

However, the true shift came, according to Morgan, when large planters and former servants, now freedmen, found they had mutual interests in common. These interests included the institutionalization of slavery. As the number of slaves reduced the number of servants, which in turn

reduced the number of freedmen, the poor grew richer. Small farmers began to accumulate more wealth into the 1700s and sought the stabilization of tobacco prices. This alignment resulted in a shift of exploitation from the servants to the slaves. Small farmers soon acquired the necessary amount of land to vote and often voted for large planters whose interests began to match their own.

Morgan concludes his text by trying to determine the impact that the creation of this society had on the founders of our country. Why were men, entrenched in the institution of slavery, able to preach “an unbounded love of liberty and of democracy?” The reason, according to Morgan and Sir Augustus John Foster, an English diplomat to Washington during Jefferson’s presidency, was that aristocrats can more safely preach equality in a slave society than a free one because slaves did not become leveling mobs. Slaves were controlled physically and psychologically and their owners saw to it they had no chance of rebellion. Slaves became viewed as alien, just as the English before viewed the poor as an alien race with inbred traits of character that justified their plans for enslavement or incarceration in workhouses.

Morgan’s book offers us an insight in how to view race, not just in terms of skin color, but how we create the social construct that enables a group of people, en masse, to be identified and labeled for the benefit of the economic elite. Morgan has shown that society’s morals and beliefs, in this case that of the poor, can be transferred to peoples of a distant land, causing them to be stripped of human rights and unleashing a number of unfathomable effects on future generations of black and white Americans. Morgan’s ideas and views could be easily adapted into a lesson plan on the ramifications of slavery in America today and serve to teach students on the origins of the institution and overcome the labeling theory that has haunted many African Americans for generations. As I teach in a diverse community, with members of many different races, including African Americans, I was profoundly impacted on the notion that American racism towards blacks, developed in pre-colonial England and was a transference of ideas and attitudes that those in England held towards the wretched and brutish white poor.

I most likely would design a lesson using Morgan’s ideas on the impact that economic

competition can have on society. Morgan offers a concise argument on the origins of American slavery that should serve as an example when students ponder how some individuals were able to enslave other human beings. It also serves to show how a lack of empathy and understanding towards fellow man can have immense repercussions.