The pro-African slave-trade argument was undoubtedly the most extreme and aggressive ideological defense of slavery. In newspapers, magazines, letters, speeches, public meetings, Southern Commercial Conventions, political conventions, election campaigns, and state legislatures, hundreds of Southerners were advocating the African slave trade. In their defense of the African slave trade, they were expressing and revealing their deepest concerns and anxieties about themselves and their slaveholding society. The pro-African slave-trade argument was a mirror of the Old South in profound crisis.
After the admission of California as a free state in 1850, Southerners felt a new sense of powerlessness. They knew the North had a majority in both houses of Congress, and they worried about this new loss of Southern influence in the federal government. A few years later in the election of 1856, they watched the newly organized Republican Party make its national debut. But the anti-slavery party failed to capture the Presidency, and the editor of the Richmond *Enquirer* hailed the Democratic victory: “The Union is safe. The Star Spangled Banner yet waves in undiminished splendor in the atmosphere of a Democratic republic. . . . Let the hearts of desponding patriots take wing, in the hope that the country and its institutions are safe in the haven of Democracy.”¹ But for many Southerners the election of 1856 represented a Pyrrhic victory—a success more disturbing than comforting. They saw their illusions shattered. They saw the ominous narrowness of the Buchanan margin. They saw that the Republican Party was no Liberty Party, no Free Soil Party—anti-slavery parties that could attract little support. They saw it as a vital, powerful, and therefore dangerous subversive organization which could destroy their peculiar institution. Representative William Barksdale of Mississippi pessimistically commented that the anti-slavery sentiment was at first “a mere speck upon the political horizon; now it overspreads the whole political skies.”² And the Galveston *Weekly News*, which would soon become a propaganda engine for the African slave trade, expressed the view of many upset Southerners: “We have but just been awakened from this dream of fancied security—to find the entire North, and a large majority of the West, voting in solid columns against us, on questions vital to our very existence.”³ An Englishman touring the South

¹ Richmond *Enquirer*, November 7, 1856.
² William Barksdale, speech, in appendix to the *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1st session, p. 170.
shortly after the election, observed a deep uneasiness among Southerners, who, he said, had seen the handwriting on the wall. The election had confirmed their apprehensions about the recent political powerlessness of the South.

After the election of 1856, many of these Southerners advocated the reopening of the African slave trade. But some of the advocates occasionally insisted that their aim was to save the Union. They argued that the cause of the decline of Southern power in the national government was the federal prohibition of the African slave trade. As a result of this prohibition, Southern population did not increase as rapidly as Northern population, swelled by the flow of European immigrants. While Northern representation in Congress steadily increased, Southern representation lagged. While the North expanded into the territories, the South lacked the slave resources for territorial expansion. But the African slave trade, Spratt and his associates guaranteed, would reverse this dangerous trend and contribute directly to the political power of the South. Every 50,000 slaves that came would give their section the right to 30,000 votes in federal representation. One of the resolutions introduced at an African slave-trade meeting at Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, asserted that only the importation of Africans could give the South sufficient political power to defend its rights within the Union. Henry Hughes of Mississippi, a sociolo-

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7 Charleston *Mercury*, October 22, 1859.
they publicly expressed their distrust of the national party. State Representative John Izard Middleton, an advocate from South Carolina, asked the readers of the Charleston Mercury: "Is not the northern wing hopelessly abolitionized?" John Mitchel of the Southern Citizen charged that the most effective allies of William Seward and the North were the Southern National Democrats. In his speech in the United States Senate on February 24, 1851, Robert Barnwell Rhett saw no hope for cooperation with the Northern Democrats: "At the last session of Congress they surrendered to their enemies; they went over in the free States to the consolidationists, in order that together they might spoil the South." 26 The connection between pro-slave-trade and anti-Democratic sentiments may be seen in a letter signed "H" in the Edgefield Advertiser of September 15, 1858. While urging the renewal of the trade and Southern secession, this writer assailed the National Democratic Party. "The more we become Nationalized, or affiliate with National Democracy," he argued, "the worse it will be for the South."

Contemporary observers often noted this relationship between the African slave-trade agitation and secession. Frederick Law Olmsted, the ubiquitous traveler in the South, viewed the issue as a logical step towards disunion. "Is dissolution or the slave trade," he asked, "to be the next alternative presented to us by the politicians of the South?" 27 William H. Tresco, who thoughtfully probed the nature of the trade question, came to a similar inescapable conclusion. "I am brought to the conclusion," he wrote to William Porcher Miles, "that in the Union there is no room for the discussion of these questions and if they are so earnest ... as Southern men would represent—then dissolution is absolutely necessary." 28

28 Tresco to Miles, February 8, 1859, Miles Papers, University of
Clearly the African slave-trade agitation had a secessionist function. But the advocates were divided over an important question: should the South actually reopen the African slave trade? Advocates like Georgia businessman C. A. L. Lamar thought the agitation should involve the actual importation of African slaves. Such boldness would certainly hasten the end of the Union. But advocates like William Yancey made a distinction between the demand for the repeal of the federal laws against the trade and the demand for the actual reopening of the trade. In his report to the 1858 Montgomery Southern Commercial Convention, Yancey argued that the laws prohibiting the foreign slave trade not only violated the spirit of the Constitution but were also unjust and insulting to the South. He asked the convention to adopt a resolution calling for the repeal of those laws. But unlike Lamar, Yancey did not advocate the reopening of the trade. In a letter to Thomas J. Orne, Yancey explained that a reading of his report would show that he did not recommend the reopening of the African slave trade. “What I did recommend was simply the repeal of the laws of Congress making the foreign trade in slaves piracy.” Yancey added that his real interest was “to strip the Southern ship of State for battle...” Thus Lamar and Yancey had different views about the actual importation of African slaves. But they both hoped their agitation would help them realize their wildest dreams of a Southern Confederacy.

The agitation to reopen the African slave trade was designed to protect the South against the emergence of political antislavery in the North. But the agitation was much more than a

North Carolina Library. See also the Cincinnati Gazette, in the Washington National Intelligencer, January 23, 1861; Republican Banner and Nashville Whig, December 28, 1856; Wade Hampton to J. J. Pettigrew, May 28, 1858, Pettigrew Papers, North Carolina Archives.

29 Yancey, in Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian, May 28, 1858.

revolution to achieve Southern political independence from a Northern-controlled Union. Consequently what concerns us more deeply in our analysis is the question: how was the African slave-trade radicalism a response to the internal crisis of the Old South?

The internal crisis was related to the economic threat of the scarcity of slave labor. During the 1850's many advocates of the African slave trade shared an uneasy fear of foreign cotton competition. They were anxiously aware of reports describing the successful cultivation of cotton in India and Africa. In February 1854, the American Cotton Planter published Alexander Mackay's report that the South might find India a formidable competitor in reduced-price cotton. A few years later the Southern Planter informed its readers that Great Britain had imported 654,758,008 pounds of cotton from the South and 250,388,144 pounds from India in 1857. But Africa, too, loomed as a potential competitor. According to an article reprinted in the Charleston Mercury, Africa was suitable for cotton cultivation and was already marketing raw cotton.

Ironically this new threat of foreign cotton cultivation was due largely to the rise in cotton prices. Throughout the 1840's the South had been in a severe depression caused chiefly by the collapse of cotton prices. The average price of cotton for that decade was about 8 cents per pound, a significant drop from the 12.6 cents average price of the 1830's. In 1845 cotton hit a disastrous low of 5% cents per pound. At no period of


32 The Southern Planter, XX, No. 1 (January, 1860), p. 14; Charleston Mercury, November 1, 1858. According to James Adams, in his 1850 message to the legislature, the United States in 1855 sent 679 million pounds of cotton to Britain, while the East Indies, Egypt, and Brazil sent 202 million pounds. Adams, “Message,” reprinted in Bryan, Report, p. 47. See also New Orleans Daily Delta, October 6, 1858; De Bow's Review, XXII (December, 1857), pp. 624–639.

our history from the year 1781," wrote a contributor to the Southern Quarterly Review of July 1845, "has a greater gloom been cast over the agricultural prospects of South Carolina, than at the present time."34 Four years later, however, the price of cotton shot up to 11½ cents a pound, and the South entered into a decade of economic prosperity.35 But it was this very rise in cotton prices that stimulated the production of cotton in Africa and India.

Advocates of the African slave trade undoubtedly welcomed the new price rise, but they were also extremely apprehensive that the development of foreign cotton competition would jeopardize the Southern cotton monopoly. They noticed that the European demand for cotton was increasing rapidly but that the Southern capacity to keep pace with the demand was handicapped by its limited supply of labor. They knew only too well that the closing of the African slave trade had transformed slavery into an inflexible system of labor—a system dependent on natural increase for new laborers.

And they could clearly see the dangerous consequences of this weakness. Louisiana State Senator Edward Delony observed that the Southern cotton production in 1856 was only 3 million bales, the same as the Southern cotton output of 1851. European cotton consumption, on the other hand, was rising. Unless the South found a means to increase her production of cotton, Delony concluded, Europe would be forced to look elsewhere for it.36 In his 1856 message to the South Carolina legislature, Governor James H. Adams warned that high cotton prices would encourage foreign countries to cultivate more cotton, and this competition would lead to the destruction of the Southern cotton monopoly. The loss of this monopoly would be a disaster for

34 Southern Quarterly Review, VIII (July, 1845), p. 118, quoted in Russel, p. 34.
35 Phillips, Life and Labor, p. 177; Russel, Economic Aspects of Southern Sectionalism, p. 35; Edgefield Advertiser, June 13, 1855.
the South. “Whenever England and the continent can procure their supply of raw material elsewhere than from us, and the cotton states are limited to the home market, then will our doom be sealed. Destroy the value of slave labor, and emancipation follows immediately.” 37 Thus, in order to meet the demand for cotton, crush the new African and Indian competitors in cotton cultivation, and preserve slavery, Governor Adams recommended the reopening of the African slave trade. 38

The high cotton prices of the 1850’s noticeably boosted the price of slaves. The price of a prime field hand in the New Orleans market skyrocketed from $700 in 1845 to $1,000 in 1850 to $1,800 in 1860, and the slave prices in the Virginia, Georgia, and Charleston markets followed the same pattern. 39 In 1859 Edmund Ruffin estimated that slave prices had doubled since 1844 and that the escalation would continue. A Southerner told Frederick Olmsted “a nigger that wouldn’t bring over $300, seven years ago, will fetch $1,000, cash, quick, this year.” Southern newspapers throughout the fifties reported the new slave prices with great excitement. In 1854 the New Orleans Delta, for example, announced that at a recent sale slave prices were “extraordinary,” and that one man commanded $3,000, another $1,970, others $1,600 and $1,700. 40

40 Bancroft, Slave Trading, p. 342; Olmsted, A Journey in the Back Country, p. 220; New Orleans Delta in Milledgeville Federal Union, February 28, 1854. See also Newbern (North Carolina) Daily Progress, January 8, 1859; Huntsville Texas Beacon, in Republican Banner and Nashville Whig, May 22, 1855; Richmond Dispatch, in Charleston Mercury, February 2, 1856; New Orleans Picayune, January 20, 1860; Jack-
Many Southerners were worried because the new high prices departed from the old rule of pricing a slave by the price of a pound of cotton. According to this rule, if cotton were worth twelve cents, a slave was worth $1,200. But, as the above prices show, this ratio was hardly the case in the 1850's. While cotton prices had doubled, slave prices had tripled. The editor of the Montgomery Journal reported the slave prices at an auction in 1854. "These are the highest prices," he commented, "which we have ever noticed paid for negroes of this description." While Southerners could view the high prices as an indication of the abiding confidence in the prosperity of the planting interest, they also feared that prices were ranging "far above their legitimate point" and were not justified by the ruling rates for the value of cotton. 41

Some Southerners blamed speculation for this discrepancy between cotton and slave prices. A domestic slave trader told Olmsted there was a passion among Louisiana planters to buy slaves. The editor of the Milledgeville Federal Union observed that there was "a perfect fever raging in Georgia now on the subject of buying negroes. . . . Men are borrowing money at exorbitant prices. . . . Men are demented on the subject." 42 But many Southerners emphasized the scarcity of slave labor as the explanation for the unreasonable rise in slave prices. P. A. Morse of Louisiana calculated that the natural increase of slaves could not supply the number of slaves necessary to produce enough cotton to satisfy the demand for cotton in 1860. Thus the cotton planters were forced to buy slaves at excessive rates. 43


Cardoza of Charleston pointed out that while the cotton demand had increased, the labor supply had been limited, and thus the price of field hands had risen nearly 100 per cent in five years. The editor of the Charleston Mercury explained that the doubling of prices was due to "the scarcity of, as compared with the multiplying demands for labor." 44

And what was the cause of the scarcity of slave labor? The advocates blamed the federal prohibition of the African slave trade. "All the southern states," complained Edmund Ruffin, "suffer greatly from the scarcity and high price of labor. They can obtain no supply from abroad, because the only available and useful supply, of negroes, is prohibited by law." Concerned about the limited resources of slave labor and the consequent high prices of slaves, the editor of the American Cotton Planter demanded the reopening of the African slave trade. 45

The fresh supply of Africans, advocates promised, would reduce the cost of production and increase profits. 46 This point had a special interest for Edmund Ruffin, Virginia's leading agriculturalist. In "The Effects of High Prices of Slaves," published in De Bow's Review, he asserted that the prices for slaves had already exceeded the profits of their labor in Virginia, and he implied that the African slave trade would correct this dangerous situation. 47 In a private letter to Ruffin, dated June 29, 1859, editor James De Bow wrote: "Your article in June No. is capital. It is exactly to our purpose and proves we must have


Africans." Many planters, however, feared that the cheap Africans would diminish the value of the slaves they already owned. But a writer to the Charleston Mercury reminded them that the slave's intrinsic value was his ability to produce and to improve his master's land. And State Senator I. N. Davis, a fiery advocate from Panola, Mississippi, argued that reduced slave prices would permit the planter to buy with the same annual income twenty rather than ten fieldhands. Furthermore, the advocates pointed out, the new Africans could be used to restore exhausted lands, to cultivate new lands, and to improve the millions of acres of impoverished lands. If the planter spent less on labor, they added, he would be able to spend more on fertilizing the land. In a letter to Spratt, J. G. M. Ramsey, a Tennessee physician, explained that the African slave trade would allow the South to expand the area of agricultural production. But could these newly imported Africans be easily and quickly trained for agricultural labor? African slave-trade radicals proposed the "couple-working system" to facilitate the training of Africans. In this system, the African "savage" would be placed under the tutelage of a "civilized negro." "Education thus becomes imitation, and imitation is the African's talent; he watches his partner and duly learns to plow" the fields and to pick the cotton. The African slave trade and the "couple-working system" would


49 Letter signed "South," Charleston Mercury, August 11, 1858; letter signed "Barnwell," Charleston Mercury, August 6, 1858; I. N. Davis, in Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian, April 26, 1859.

the 1850's was not motivated simply by a love for progress but also by a deep hatred for Southern economic dependence upon the North. Southerners were jealously aware of their inferior economic status. They saw the obvious economic differences between the two sections in the tables of the 1850 Census published in De Bow's Review, and they were reminded about this dependence again and again by Southern newspapers. The editor of an Alabama newspaper, for example, observed:

At present, the North fattens and grows rich upon the South. We purchase all our luxuries and necessaries from the North... With us, every branch and pursuit in life... is dependent upon the North... The slaveholder dresses in Northern goods, rides in a Northern saddle... sports his Northern carriage, patronizes Northern newspapers, drinks Northern liquors... The aggressive acts upon his rights and his property arouse his resentment—and on Northern-made paper, with a Northern pen, with Northern ink, he resolves and re-resolves in regard to his rights! 54

One of the chief objectives of the sound and fury of Southern industrialism in the 1850's was the overthrow of this despised economic dependence on the North in order to fortify Southern political defenses against Northern abolitionism. W. Sykes advocated the construction of railroads and factories as "the Best Guaranty for the Protection of Southern Rights." In Sociology for the South, Fitzhugh proclaimed manufacturing as the road to Southern independence. A writer to the Augusta Constitutionalist explained that the introduction of slaves into factories and the industrial development of the South would

bility of employing "uncivilized" Africans in manufacturing, Spratt suggested that the Africans could be used in the fields while the civilized slaves could be directed into the factories. In 1859 several Mississippians purchased ten African slaves imported illegally and followed Spratt's advice. According to the Vicksburg Sun, "Ten Africans were sold in Vicksburg varying in price from four hundred to one thousand dollars each... these gentlemen wish to establish a manufactory and place their Mississippi born negroes under an overseer, who will learn them to spin, weave and attend the machinery, while they make the Africans cultivate their crops, help to build levees and construct railroads. This arrangement would enable the South to manufacture its own cotton into cloth, and be independent of the North." 62 Obviously the African slave-trade radicals had a more informed and sophisticated understanding of the versatility of slavery as a labor system than certain twentieth century historians. The radicals knew black workers could be used not only in agriculture but also in industry. The expansion of slavery, they could see, had no "natural limits," and an industrial society could be based on the labor of black slaves. 63

Of course, the South could have attempted to base its industrialization on white labor. But the African slave-trade radicals abhorred such a development, for they were extremely worried about the internal threat of the nonslaveholders of the South. Southern industrialization, these radicals argued, would

T. B. King Papers, University of North Carolina Library; Newbern (North Carolina) Daily Progress, January 12, 1859.


require a large labor supply. The supply of Southern slaves, however, was already limited. Unless the African slave trade were reopened, the industrial workers of the South would have to be white and these white workers in the South would constitute a force hostile to slavery. Thus Southern industrialization and economic independence from the North without the African slave trade would not offer security to the institution of slavery and the South.

Economic competition between white laborers and slaves had existed in the South for a long time. In South Carolina, even as early as 1720, slave labor drove white artisans from the colony; and in 1742, a grand jury, concerned for the interests of white workingmen, demanded a law to prevent the hiring out of slave tradesmen. “I hear the Negroes in Carolina,” a Georgian declared, “learn all sorts of trade, which takes away the bread of a poor white tradesman likewise.” 61 Similar sentiments were expressed about a century later during the famous slavery debate in the Virginia legislature of 1831–32. Slavery, declared Charles James Faulkner, “banishes free white labor, exterminates the mechanic, the artisan, the manufacturer. It deprives them of occupation. It deprives them of bread.... Shall all interests be subservient to one—all rights subordinate to those of the slaveholder? Has not the mechanic, have not the middle classes their rights—rights incompatible with the existence of slavery?” 62 In New Orleans, white mechanics declared they would never train slaves; and in Baltimore, the white shipyard apprentices brutally attacked Frederick Douglass, a young slave worker. 63

A decade later the competition between the white and

slave laborers increased. During the 1840's, partly due to the collapse of cotton prices and the consequent surplus of slave labor, many planters diverted their slaves into the mechanic trades. The white workers protested. In Mississippi white mechanics forced the enactment of municipal ordinances prohibiting slaves from hiring their own time. South Carolina grand jury presentments between 1849 and 1851 demanded the enforcement of the law against Negro competition. In 1845 Georgia passed an act that prohibited the hiring of slaves and free Negroes as mechanics and provided that violators be fined. Sir Charles Lyell, visiting Georgia at the time, observed that Georgia white mechanics were using their political power to pass disabling statutes against the black workers, and that such actions would forward the substitution of white for black labor and might hasten the era of general emancipation.

In the 1850's slaveholders continued to pit their slaves directly against white workers. In Texas slaveholders underbid the German laborers for the contract to construct the state capitol building, and in Savannah shipping merchants used slaves to break a white labor strike in 1856. Southern white workers resented this competition. At Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1857, the framework of a new building erected by Negro carpenters was destroyed as a protest against the use of Negro labor in the construction trade. In New Orleans a white mechanic observed that the white workingmen were rapidly displacing the slaves, and he hoped and believed that soon every Negro would be driven out of the town. A slave told Olmsted


that he had been forced to leave San Antonio because "they made a law that no nigger shouldn't hire his time in San Antone, so I had to cl'ar out, and mass'r wanted me, so I come back to him." In a petition presented to the Atlanta city council, 200 white mechanics and laborers complained that slave mechanics were underbidding them. The Mechanical Association of Jackson, Mississippi, resolved that the practice of making public mechanics of slaves should be suppressed. The Mechanics Institute of Little Rock demanded the enactment of state legislation to suppress Negro mechanics, and refused to instruct Negroes in the mechanic arts, to employ Negro mechanics, and to work with them. Between 1854 and 1860 organizations like the Charleston Mechanics Association and the South Carolina Mechanics Association of Charleston sent the state legislature no fewer than ten petitions and memorials demanding the prohibition of slave hiring and the removal of slave competition. In 1859 a resolution to consider the enactment of a bill prohibiting slave competition was introduced in the Alabama House, and a bill forbidding slaves to be public craftsmen was introduced in the Mississippi House. The white canaille of the South,” an English visitor observed, “regard the slaves as interfering with


their interests as free labourers; they detest them as rivals...”

“The [slaveholders’] policy of teaching negroes the various trades,” a Mississippi editor declared, “instead of putting them on the plantations, where they belong, tends to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, by bringing slave labor into competition with white labor, and thus arraying capital against labor, (for the negro is capital) and this will produce a spirit of antagonism between the rich and the poor. Such a policy... tends to elevate the negro at the expense of the poor white man, and makes the poor mechanic at the South the enemy of the negro and of the institution of slavery.”

A strange and unique pattern of class conflict was taking shape in the Old South—white labor versus slaveholders and their slave “capital.”

The white workers’ opposition to slave mechanics was motivated by racism as well as economic self-interest. White workers were concerned about their status as white laborers worthy of dignity and respect. They did not want to do jobs Negroes did. “No white man would ever do certain kinds of work...,” a Virginian explained, “and if you should ask a white man you had hired, to do such things, he would get mad and tell you he wasn’t a nigger.” If slaves did mechanical labor, white mechanics thought, wouldn’t the white mechanic be “a nigger”? The white mechanics in competition with slaves

74 Sterling, Letters from the Slave States, p. 86.
76 In Olmsted, Seaboard, I, pp. 91-92.
felt a sense of degradation. A writer to De Bow’s Review warned that the presence of slaves in the mechanic trades had degraded the trades to the condition of menial services, and that consequently “the no-property men of the South” shared “a feeling of deep-rooted jealousy and prejudice, of painful antagonism, if not hostility, to the institution of negro slavery.” 77

The use of white labor in the South threatened to become more extensive during the 1850’s. Wages in the South, it was reported, were higher than wages in the North. In a detailed study of wages in American cities, a United States Senator from Tennessee showed that wages for painters, bricklayers, carpenters, and other workers were higher in Southern than in Northern cities. A Texas newspaper editor complained about the high cost of hired labor in the south vis à vis labor in the North. Olmsted estimated that the wages for common laborers were 25 per cent more in Virginia than in New York. The high Southern wages encouraged the migration of European and Northern workers into the South, and their presence in Southern towns and cities was noticeable. The population of Montgomery included a considerable proportion of Northern and foreign-born mechanics, and the mechanics in Mobile were mainly from the North. The major portion of tradesmen in the river and coastal towns and cities of Mississippi were Northerners or immigrants. 78

Thus the rise in cotton prices during the 1850’s along with the demand for more labor, the high slave prices, the high wages in the South, and the increasing movement of white workers into the South seemed to predict the rise of a Southern white


working class.79 And it was this forecast that struck fear in the minds of many African slave-trade radicals. They pointed out that the increase in cotton prices and the consequent rise in the demand for labor would force the South to find some way to meet this new demand. Since the African slave trade was closed, the flow of labor would have to come from the North and Europe, and the new labor demand and the high wages in the South would attract these outside workers. Thus the ranks of free labor in the South would be augmented and slavery would be threatened. “If we cannot supply the demand for slave labor,” Governor Adams warned in his message of 1856, “then we must expect to be supplied with a species of labor we do not want, and which is, from the very nature of things antagonistic to our institutions.”60

Many advocates were indeed greatly disturbed by this antagonism. They observed that many white workingmen had emigrated to the South since the prohibition of the African slave trade, that they were struggling for subsistence in competition with slaves, and that they were “distinctly conscious” of the “difference between ‘labor’ and ‘slave labor.’” The advocates also noticed that Negroes were no longer being employed as draymen in the large Southern cities because poor white men were unwilling to compete with slaves. They saw that foreigners, especially Irishmen, were being employed in Southern hotels, factories, steamboats, and railroads. If the South could procure a new supply of labor only from Europe, the African slave-trade


Like John C. Calhoun, whom the historian Richard Hofstadter has called "The Marx of the Master Class," many African slave-trade advocates understood and admired slavery as an institution liberating the South from the dangers of class conflict.\footnote{Adams, "Message, 1856," in Bryan, Report on the Message of Gov. Adams, p. 48; Richard Hofstadter, "John C. Calhoun: Marx of the Master Class," The American Political Tradition (New York: Vintage 1960), pp. 68-92.} "From the conservative character of the institution," observed Calhoun years before the African slave-trade agitation, "it would prevent that conflict between labor and capital, which must ever exist in populous and crowded communities, where wages are the regulator between them. . . ." In Calhoun's view, every plantation was a little community in which the interests of capital and labor were united under a master.\footnote{Richard K. Cralle (ed.), The Works of John C. Calhoun, 6 Vols. (Charleston: Walker & James, 1851-1856), Vol. IV, pp. 532-533, quoted by Richard Current, John C. Calhoun (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), pp. 95, 96.} During the 1850's, African slave-trade advocates like George Fitzhugh of Virginia and Henry Hughes of Mississippi also argued that the conservatism of slavery rested on the united interests of capital and labor. Since slaveholders viewed their slaves not only as workers but also as capital assets, they had a special interest in the proper maintenance of their slaves. "In our labor system," they explained, "the laborers are capital. Capitalists are therefore economically enforced to keep them in the best possible working order, and cannot afford to let fifteen hundred dollars die by starvation." Unlike the exploited, miserable, and rebellious white workers of a free labor society, the slave workers were "comfortable."\footnote{Henry Hughes, in Port Gibson Southern Reveille, July 30, 1858, clipping in Hughes Scrapbook, Hughes Papers, Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi; New Orleans Delta, in Charleston Mercury, January 1859.} Thus Southern slaveholding society did
not have to worry about mobs, trade unions, strikes for higher wages, armed resistance to the law, and social revolution.

But while African slave-trade radicals echoed Calhoun's claim about the conservatism of the institution, they asserted that the crucial basis of Southern conservatism was not the united interests of capital and labor and the slavemasters' care for their slaves, but their despotic power over the slave labor class. To the 1858 Southern Commercial Convention at Montgomery, Spratt declared:

> In all democracies, and in fact, in every constitutional government, there is the right of individual action, and the citizen may meet and discuss the evils of their state, and resolve, in fact, upon the mode and measure of redress, before it shall be lawful to arrest him. And so, even in the despotism of France, they meet and chant the Marseilles, and march upon the Bostich before they encounter the force of the Empire. But not so the slave. To him there is no liberty of individual action. Hard as it may seem, he cannot move without permission of his master. To him, therefore, there can be no march, no arms, no chant, no meeting, even without violation of authority. The first step is an act of insubordination, upon the right to punish which there is no restraint; and whatever may be said of the hardship of that condition . . . it must be owned that it is intensely conservative of peace and order. Elsewhere it is legitimate to meet the process only, but here it is permitted to crush the germ of insurrection. 85

Thus, in societies where labor was white and free, workers had certain political rights and could not be effectively controlled and suppressed. The South, however, had a system of labor based on the racial supremacy and the absolute power of the white master class. So long as the Southern workers were black and in bondage, the South would be an ideal conservative.

17, 1858; Mobile Daily Register, September 18, 1857; George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond: Morris, 1854), pp. 22–23, 39–40; Fitzhugh, Cannibals, p. 31; Townsend, The South Alone, p. 17.

85 Spratt, in De Bow's Review, XXIV (June, 1858), p. 489.
society. In Spratt’s judgment, while democracy and the “contest of classes” threatened to plunge free labor societies in the North and in Europe into revolution and anarchy, slave-labor society in the South was essentially safe from class turmoil, for the Southern black working class was enslaved and powerless. But the presence and pressures of white workers in the towns and cities of the South alarmed Spratt and his associates.

Thus to meet the need for labor for the expansion of agriculture and the development of Southern industrialization, to discourage the immigration of Northern and foreign laborers into the South, to check the increase of white workers within the South, and to reduce white class conflict in their society, Southerners like Adams and Spratt demanded the reopening of the African slave trade. “We want,” they insisted, “only that kind of population which will extend and secure our peculiar institutions, and there is no source but Africa.” Indeed, to these men, any source of white labor would only strengthen the enemy within.

But the Southern white workers probably did not represent an actual danger to slavery. If the foreigners in the South were anti-slavery, the foreign-born population of the South was in-

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66 Spratt, Foreign Slave Trade, p. 8.
significant, constituting in 1850 only 4.4 per cent of the total Southern white population.\textsuperscript{89} No doubt a few Southern states had larger ratios: Louisiana, 26.34 per cent, Maryland 12.20, Missouri 12.93, and Texas 11.44 per cent. But generally the Southern states had extremely small ratios: Alabama 1.76 per cent, Arkansas 0.90, Georgia 1.24, Mississippi 1.61, North Carolina 0.46, Virginia 2.57, South Carolina 3.10 per cent.\textsuperscript{90} As for the white laborers in the South, it is true they did exert increasing pressure against slave competition during the 1850's. But this opposition to slave mechanics should not be interpreted as abolitionist. In their resolutions to prevent slave hiring, the Mechanical Association of Jackson, Mississippi, insisted "that our fidelity to the institution of slavery is unquestionable."\textsuperscript{91} These white laborers simply wanted to remove the Negro from the workshop and keep him on the plantation and in slavery. Furthermore the white workers did not represent a powerful political force. Although they sent petitions to the state legislatures, these efforts were futile. In South Carolina, for example, the legislators merely directed these notices into committees and they were seen no more. Although bills and resolutions in behalf of the interest of the white workers were introduced into the state legislatures, they were quickly tabled.\textsuperscript{92}

The African slave-trade advocates' fear of the Southern white laborers was based more on a potential than a present


\textsuperscript{90}De Bow's Review, XVII (October, 1854), p. 431.


\textsuperscript{92}South Carolina House Journal, 1854, pp. 156-157; House Journal, 1858, p. 9; Mississippi House Journal, 1858, p. 123; Jackson Daily Mississippian, November 25, 1839; Louisiana House Journal, 1839, p. 94.
reality. They were afraid of a future influx of foreigners and a future threat of white laborers in the South. And, it seemed to the worried advocates, the closed African slave trade, the Southern demand for labor, and the high wages in the South would continue to encourage the expansion of white labor in the South and ultimately drive the South into a whirlwind of social revolution.

Their anxiety about the potential emergence of white labor in the South was related to certain Southern images of the free labor societies of the North and Europe. In their defense of slavery, African slave-trade radicals had investigated, criticized, and denounced the social ills of the free labor system. They had used many sources Karl Marx would later examine to expose the exploitation of free laborers in England. They had called attention to the suffering and discontent of the working classes and to the explosive social disorders and upheavals in the North and Europe. Their analysis led them to an inevitable conclusion: in free society a contest was always waging between capital and labor, between rich and poor classes. The tendency of this conflict was "to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, until extremity" drove the poor "to satiate at once their vengeance and their want by slaughter and rapine." Thus free labor societies were doomed to a "continually recurring catastrophe" and to the "prostration of all law. Licentiousness will then follow with anarchy and ruin." But the South could have

perfect confidence that, when France shall reel again into the delirium of liberty—when the peerage of England shall have yielded to the masses—when democracy at the North shall hold its carnival—when all that is pure and whole shall be dragged down—when all that

is low and vile shall have mounted to the surface—when women shall have taken the places and habiliments of men, and men shall have taken the places and habiliments of women—when Free Love Unions and phalansteries shall pervade the land—when the sexes shall consort without the restraints of marriage, and when youths and maidens, drunk at noon day, and half naked, shall reel about the market places—the South will stand, secure and erect... the slave will be restrained by power, the master by the trusts of a superior position; she will move on with a measured dignity of power and progress. ...95

The logic and implications of their criticisms of free labor societies are highly significant. In their judgment, the social disintegration due to the conflict between labor and capital present in the North and Europe led to "licentiousness" and sexual anarchy—the confusion of male and female identities, the breakdown of marital restraints on sexuality, and the rise of "Free Love Unions." What must have concerned African slave-trade radicals was not the destruction of order and control in the North and Europe but its possibility in the South. Unlike the North and Europe, the South was a biracial society: one third of the Southern population was black. Hence the breakdown of "peace and order" in the South would have a special significance. If slave workers were not imported from Africa, if the ominous conflict between white labor and capital continued to develop within the South, and if social chaos and sexual anarchy reigned in their biracial society, Southerners would surely be living their nightmare of miscegenation.

The scarcity of slave labor and the consequent rise in slave prices plagued the advocates of the African slave trade with another problem. To the advocates, the increase of slave prices meant that fewer whites would be able to enter the slaveowning ranks, and that slavery would become the monopoly of the rich. Such a development would shatter the nonslaveholders' hope to

possess slaves—the symbols of wealth and status in the slave society of the South. As Southern poet William J. Grayson remarked, "no matter how one might begin, as lawyer, physician, clergyman, mechanic, or merchant, he ended, if prosperous, as proprietor of a rice or cotton plantation." A perceptive analyst of the Southern white psychology, slave Frederick Douglass painfully knew that poor white men like Edward Covey strained "every nerve" to obtain the "first condition of wealth and respectability"—the "ownership of human property." "A plantation well stocked with hands," a settler in Mississippi observed in the 1830's, "is the ne plus ultra of every man's ambition who resides at the South." 96 While the increase of slave prices in the 1850's threatened to frustrate this ambition, it also intensified the slave drain from the border states to the southwest where the slave demand and slave prices were extremely high. Both the slaveholding monopoly and the slave drain, the advocates apprehensively thought, would create a large nonslaveholding population in the South—a class whose loyalty to slavery, they felt, could not be trusted.

In the past nonslaveholders had criticized the peculiar institution. During the debate on slavery in the Virginia legislature shortly after the frightening Nat Turner insurrection, the Southern critics of slavery represented the nonslaveholders of western Virginia. In their anti-slavery arguments, they expressed a concern about slave competition with white labor and the presence of a dangerous servile population. 97 Twenty-five years later Hinton R. Helper, a nonslaveholder from North Carolina, published his controversial The Impending Crisis and How to Meet It. Motivated by a hatred for the Negro and a love for the South, Helper argued that slavery, the source of Southern


economic inferiority and backwardness vis à vis Northern economic superiority and progress, must be abolished, and that Negroes must be banished from the South. He pressed racist thought to a fiercely logical conclusion: since this should be a white man's country, the Negro must be totally excluded. Helper was partly echoing the exclusionist sentiments of Thomas Jefferson, who had warned that the Negro, when freed, must be removed from American society. Helper's chief concern, however, was the welfare of the oppressed Southern nonslaveholders. In his vitriolic protest against the poverty and powerlessness of nonslaveholders in the South, Helper declared: "The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks, who are bought and sold, and driven about like so many cattle, but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all nonslaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated." Thus he urged his fellow nonslaveholders of the South to unite, overthrow the planter class, and destroy slavery, "the frightful tumor on the body politic." Helper's book appalled many Southerners. The editor of the Galveston Weekly News, an advocate of the African slave trade, denounced the subversive book and charged it was impossible to read it "without feeling nauseated by the crude, false and unnatural sentiments expressed." In a letter to Edmund Ruffin, William H. Harrison attacked the "atrocious book," and warned that the incendiary work was "calculated to do infinite injury" among the nonslaveholders of the South. Alarmed by Helper's book, South Carolina legislators introduced a bill prohibiting nonslaveholders to circulate and possess books and pamphlets designed to excite prejudice against slaveholders. As the Civil War approached, slaveholders were haunted by the spectre of Hinton Helper and his brand of racist abolitionism within the South.

98 Helper, Impending Crisis, pp. 20, 24, 25, 43, 97, 120, 155.
Northern abolitionists also tried to promote conflict between nonslaveholders and slaveholders in the South. In their appeal to Southern nonslaveholders, abolitionists condemned the slaveholders as a powerful landed aristocracy, responsible for the impoverishment and ignorance of the Southern white masses. Slavery, they declared, had rendered labor disgraceful in Southern society. The destruction of slavery would mean the liberation of nonslaveholding whites from the tyranny of a selfishly interested Southern minority, the slaveholding aristocracy. “Without your co-operation,” the Northern abolitionists concluded, “the slaveholders . . . are powerless. To you they look for . . . overseers, and drivers, and patrols. To you they look for votes to elevate them to office, and to you they too often look for aid to enforce their Lynch laws. Feel then your own power; claim your rights, and exert them for the deliverance of the slave, and consequently for your own happiness and prosperity. . . .”

Like Helper and Northern abolitionists, many African slave-trade radicals viewed Southern nonslaveholders as a potential internal danger to slavery and the slaveholding class. But actually nonslaveholders were true to the South and slavery. Like Helper, many nonslaveholders despised the Negro. “I wish there warn’t no niggers here,” a poor white farmer told a traveler. “They are a great cuss to this country. . . .” Unlike Helper, however, many nonslaveholders feared that emancipation would not mean the exclusion of Negroes from the South but economic competition with Negroes and race wars. They were reminded of the horrors of the bloody slave revolts in St. Domingo and regarded the emancipation of three million slaves in the South as a prospect of certain destruction of white society. Little wonder slave patrols were ordinarily recruited from the yeoman class.

102 A. C. Brown, letter, in Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian, Octo-
The nonslaveholders’ worry about emancipation was partly based on their fear of the Negro man as a sexual danger to the white woman. They were warned that emancipated blacks would rape and murder Southern poor white women, and that the dreaded horror of forced miscegenation would follow the abolition of slavery. Albert G. Brown of Mississippi cautioned that freedom for the slave would mean among other things that the black man’s “son shall marry the white man’s daughter.” If the Negro were liberat ed, declared Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, “blood, rape and rapine will be our portion. You can’t get rid of the Negro except by holding him in slavery.” 103 Hence, for many nonslaveholders, slavery was valued not as a system of labor but as a system of race control, especially the sexual control of the black man. For a long time, the image of the highly sexed black man worried whites in America. Black men, Jefferson claimed, preferred white women to black “as uniformly as is the preference of the Oran-utan for the black women over those of his own species.” 104 Colonial laws not only provided for the sexual separation of the two races but also emphasized the abhorrence of sexual unions between Negro men and white women. Seventeenth-century Maryland and Virginia legislation clearly reveals that white women were being singled out for special protection and special separation from Negro men very early in the history of race relations in America. This white


male anxiety over miscegenation between Negro men and white women must have been extreme, for a number of colonies castrated Negro men guilty of sexual aggressions against white women.\textsuperscript{105}

During the nineteenth century, slavery continued to be a system to keep the black man in his place socially as well as economically. The nonslaveholders of the 1850's therefore had a definite social stake in slavery. As one Alabama nonslaveholding farmer told Frederick Law Olmsted:

Well, I'll tell you what I think on it [emancipation]; I'd like it if we could get rid of 'em to youst. I wouldn't like to hev 'em freed, if they was gwine to hang 'round. They ought to get some country and put 'em war they could be by themselves. It wouldn't be no good to free 'em, and let 'em hang 'round, because they is so monstrous lazy; if they hadn't got nobody to take keer on 'em, you see they wouldn't do nothin' but juss nat'rally laze 'round, and steal, and pilfer, and no man couldn't live, you see, war they was—if they was free, no man couldn't live. And then, I've two objections; that's one on 'em—no man couldn't live—and this 'ere's the other: Now suppoze they was free, you see they'd all think themselves just as good as we; of course they would, if they was free. Now, just suppoze you had a family of children, how would you like to hev a nigger steppin' up to your darter? Of course you wouldn't, and that's the reason I wouldn't like to hev 'em free; but I tell you, I don't think it's right to hev 'em slaves so; that's the fac—taant right to keep 'em as they is.\textsuperscript{106}

Significantly, this Alabama nonslaveholder made a moral judgment about slavery. Slavery "taant right." It was morally wrong to enslave Negroes. Yet his moral concern was in conflict with his social and psychological concerns. The Negro, the Alabama farmer explained, must be kept in slavery because the Negro was "nat'rally" lazy. Hence he must have someone to


control him and to take care of him. Otherwise, under freedom, the Negro would not work and would steal and pilfer. He would be a criminal. An intolerable anarchy would plague the South, and the traditional caste order—especially the sexual separation of the races—would break down. If the Negro were freed, he would feel “just as good as a white man,” which meant he would be “steppin’ up” to the white man’s “darter.” And if the freed Negro and the white man’s “darter” engaged in sexual intercourse, this would lead to what horrified Thomas Jefferson—“staining the blood” of the white race. White racial purity would be corrupted, and a new breed of lazy and lawless people would destroy civilization in the South. Undoubtedly the Alabama farmer would have supported Jefferson’s candid warning against miscegenation. “Amalgamation with the other color,” Jefferson had declared, “produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent.”  

Thus here we have an Alabama farmer admitting slavery “taant right.” Yet many Southern farmers, perhaps including our Alabama farmer, who had no vested economic interest in slavery would later go to war and be killed at Chancellorsville and other battlefields in defense of slavery—an institution that, in their eyes, protected white women and civilization in the South.

Thus slavery guaranteed order in the biracial society of the South. In this society, the nonslaveholder could feel he belonged to the white aristocracy, and thus all white people, according to Senator Albert G. Brown, could associate with each other on terms of perfect social equality. The presence of Negroes in the South, Jefferson Davis explained, not only raised all white men to the same general level but also dignified and exalted every white man. Even the poor white, who had so little economically, had a social and psychological interest in slavery: it assigned status to his white skin. He was told that in the South “color, not money, marks the class; black is the

108 Brown, in Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian, October 12, 1860; Davis, in Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought, p. 192.
badge of slavery; white the color of freemen; and the white man, however poor... feels himself a sovereign..." Thus, despite his despised and wretched condition, the poor white could find psychological comfort in the whiteness of his skin, and he could cherish Calhoun's claim that the "two great divisions of [Southern] society are not the rich and poor, but the black and white." Furthermore, the nonslaveholder, many believed, could become a slaveholder through hard work. Every white man in the South, D. R. Hundley explained, had "just as much right to become an Oligarch as the most ultra fire-eater." A writer for De Bow's Review claimed that many wealthy planters had begun their fortunes as nonslaveholders, and that "cheap lands, abundant harvests, high prices gives [sic] the poor man soon a negro." Later, in his story about the young South Carolina Irishman, Wilbur J. Cash would sing about the epic rise of the Old South's one-generation slaveholding aristocracy.

No doubt the African slave-trade radicals recognized that nonslaveholders had interests in slavery. Some advocates even expressed great confidence in the nonslaveholders' allegiance to the peculiar institution. In his essay, "The Non-Slaveholders of the South," James De Bow offered detailed reasons why the interest of the poorest nonslaveholder was "to make common cause with, and die in the last trenches in defence of, the slave property of his more favored neighbor." But many advocates, including De Bow himself, had doubts about nonslaveholders. While De Bow's essay on the nonslaveholders was a declaration of their loyalty, it was also an appeal for their support for


111 De Bow, in The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder (Charleston: 1860), in McKitrick (ed.), Slavery Defended, p. 171.

slavery. African slave-trade advocates like De Bow and Spratt feared that until white men acquired property in slaves they were not completely committed to the institution, and that high slave prices were making it extremely difficult for nonslaveholders to purchase slaves. If many Southerners could not own or even hope to own slaves, could they be expected to support the peculiar institution? Would they not be antagonistic towards slavery and the slaveholding class? Would they not rally to Hinton Helper’s cry for revolution within the South? Worried about the high slave prices, a Louisiana editor offered his readers this gloomy prediction. “Let things go on as they are now tending, and the days of this peculiar institution of the South are necessarily few. The present tendency of supply and demand is to concentrate all the slaves in the hands of the few, and thus excite the envy rather than cultivate the sympathy of the people.”

Echoing the same anxiety, a Texas editor warned that thousands of citizens were unable to own slaves at the present “exorbitant monopoly prices,” and that “the very inability with so many thousands among us to be slaveowners” had a tendency to create an unfriendly feeling towards the institution. If cheap African slaves could be imported, advocates promised, slaves could be more widely distributed, and the tensions between slaveholders and nonslaveholders in the South could be eased.

The South Carolina advocates of the African slave trade were especially suspicious about the loyalty of the nonslaveholder. They believed that the nonslaveholders of South Carolina

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113 Ouachita Register, in New Orleans Daily Delta, April 3, 1858.
had failed to support secession during the crisis over the Compromise of 1850. In the 1851 South Carolina election of delegates to a Southern convention at Montgomery, the upcountry, low slave-population counties and Charleston city voted overwhelmingly against secession.\textsuperscript{115} Secessionists were able to win only in the high slave-population parishes of the lowcountry. In a letter to the \textit{Southern Reveille} in September 1853, a slaveholder commented on South Carolina’s divided response to the Compromise. In the excited political discussions of 1851, he observed, there was a general apprehension over the permanency of slave property. Many reflective Southerners realized the dangerous “absence of a more general diffusion” of an interest in slave property, and they believed a large majority in the state would have been opposed to submission to the Compromise had all white men in South Carolina been slaveholders.\textsuperscript{116}

In 1851 South Carolina Unionists made appeals to the non-slaveholders of the state. One Unionist pamphleteer, under the pen name of “Brutus,” charged that the secessionists wanted to preserve planter rule in the state. He urged the 200,000 disenfranchised white citizens of South Carolina to appoint delegates to a state constitutional convention rather than to a secession convention. Let that state convention, he continued, draft a new state constitution to provide for the interest of the free laborer and to establish equality of representation in the state legislature. And if the legislature rejected the measure, “Brutus” urged the people to appeal to Congress to secure a truly republican form of state government.\textsuperscript{117} It is no wonder that in 1854 the editor of the Charleston \textit{Mercury} feared that with the new rise in slave prices nonslaveholders would not be able to purchase slaves, that they would have little interest in defending slavery, and that “the idea and spirit of that infamous pamphlet ‘Brutus’” would spread. “But,” continued the editor, “increase

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Southern Reveille}, in \textit{Boston Liberator}, September 13, 1853.
the supply of labor, and thus cheapen the cost of slaves and the South will escape this internal peril. The number of slaveowners would multiply, the direct interest in its preservation would be more universally diffused, and that great necessity of the South—union in defense of slavery, more readily accomplished.” The wider distribution of slaves to whites in South Carolina could be an antidote to class conflict in the Palmetto State.

Again and again from Virginia to Texas, the advocates of the African slave trade warned the South that slavery was becoming a monopoly. They argued that the number of slaveowners was decreasing daily due to the constantly increasing price of slaves, and that the next census would show a 20 per cent decrease from the number of slaveholders in the 1850 census. They publicized statistics to demonstrate the presence of a slaveholding elite: only a minority of 350,000 out of 6,000,000 whites in the South owned slaves; in Mississippi, less than one third of the voters were slaveholders; and in Louisiana, only about 8 per cent of the white population owned slaves, and 50 per cent of these slaveholders owned about 90 per cent of the slaves. To an important extent, the African slave-trade radicals were correct in their statistical understanding of slave ownership in Southern society on the eve of the Civil War. Actually the number of slaveholders increased 11 per cent between 1850 and 1860. But the white population of the South increased 27 per cent during that decade; thus the percentage increase of the white population was 16 per cent more than the percentage increase of slaveholders. In 1850, 6.2 per cent of the Southern white population owned slaves, while in 1860 this percentage had dropped to 5.5. A comparison between white

118 Charleston Mercury, in Edgefield Advertiser, November 16, 1854.
family units and slaveholders yields a similar pattern. "During the fifties," historian Fabian Linden has pointed out, "the increment in the number of white families in the entire South exceeded the growth in the number of slaveowners by over 25 per cent. Thus we must conclude that the propertied classes of the Old South constituted a relatively shrinking segment of the population." 121 Only about one fourth of all white Southerners were involved in the peculiar institution through direct ownership of family ties. The white Southerner was usually a non-slaveholding small farmer, and the Southern slaveholder was not usually a planter, a slaveholder with at least twenty slaves. While the planters constituted only 12 per cent of the total number of slaveholders in 1860, they owned a majority of all the slaves in the South.122

Clearly "only the large capitalists—the very few of our people," the African slave-trade radicals argued, benefited from the system of slave labor. Thus the large number of nonslaveholders was a "smoldering volcano" beneath Southern society, and the permanency of the institution was in danger unless Africans were imported in behalf of the nonslaveholders.123 The continued decrease in slaveholding social mobility would be fatal to the peculiar institution. "That minute you put it out of the power of common farmers to purchase a negro man or woman to help him in his farm, or his wife in the house, you make him an abolitionist at once."124 But, if the African slave

123 See Pollard, A New Southern Policy, pp. 52–53; De Bow's Review, XXVII (1859), p. 234; Bryan, Report, pp. 43–44; Spratt, in De Bow's Review, XXIV (June, 1858), p. 691; Carolina Times, in New York National Anti-Slavery Standard, November 8, 1856; Galveston Weekly News, June 1, 1858; Mississippi Cross City, in Boston Liberator, October 14, 1859; Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian, September 17, 1858, June 10, 1859; New Orleans Delta, in Boston Liberator, November 14, 1856; Southern Cultivator, XVII, No. 3 (March, 1859), p. 84; Richmond Enquirer, October 5, 1858; Ouachita Register, in New Orleans Daily Delta, April 3, 1858.
124 Sparta Jeffersonian, in New Orleans Crescent, September 17, 1859, in Roger W. Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History
trade could be reopened, and if cheap slaves could be made available to all white men, African slave-trade advocates concluded, the South could then prevent the coming of that time when all the slaves would be in the hands of a few wealthy individuals. In 1859 the Augusta Dispatch published a letter written by a poor man. “I am a native Georgian,” he wrote, “am interested to a limited extent in slave property—and am really a poor man. . . .” But the price of slaves was beyond his reach. “Remove the restrictions upon the Slave Trade, and where is there a poor man in the South who could not soon become a slaveholder—who could not thus become more and more identified with slavery, and more and more ready to defend the institution?” Many slaveholding readers of this letter must have apprehensively wondered what would happen to the poor white man and to them if the restrictions were not removed.

While African slave-trade radicals found such expressions of resentment toward the monopolization of slaves disturbing, they also worried about the slave migration from the older Southern states to the new cotton-growing states of the deep South where planters paid handsome prices for slaves. In a report of a South Carolina legislative committee, advocates for the African slave trade offered some ominous statistics on the slave drain. Between 1840 and 1850, Maryland had exported 26,279 slaves, Kentucky, 25,937, and Virginia, 111,259. Even the radical pro-slavery state of South Carolina had lost 40,154 slaves. This movement of slaves had dangerous consequences for slavery in the border and eastern states of the South. It meant that these states, if the slave drain continued, would eventually lose much of their slave population, that free labor


125 Goulden, De Bow’s Review, XXII (1858), p. 222; New Orleans Delta, February 14, 1858. In order to encourage every citizen to become a slaveholder, some Southerners proposed that a certain number of slaves be legally exempted from sale for debt. See Memphis Eagle and Enquirer, in Charleston Mercury, January 16, 1857.


127 Bryan, Report, p. 28.
would replace slave labor, and that these states would therefore be gradually "abolitionized." We must proclaim the "approaching danger!" the advocates of the African slave trade asserted. "The supply of slave labor for the Southwest must be had elsewhere than the removal of them from the border states, to give place to free soil voting labor!" But if the demand for slaves in the deep South could be supplied from Africa, this slave drain could be stopped, and the peculiar institution could be preserved in the border South.\textsuperscript{128}

More distressing to the African slave-trade radicals than Northern anti-slavery or the scarcity of slave labor or the peril of social conflict within the South was the presence of Southern doubts about the rightness of slavery. If the South did not have absolute faith in slavery, the radicals questioned, how could their society defend slavery against the Northern assault? If confidence in slaveholding social mobility had been an important basis for the nonslaveholding Southerner's commitment to slavery, and if the old yeoman-to-planter pattern of social mobility were breaking in the 1850's, how could their society overcome a Southern uncertainty about the morality of the peculiar institution? If slaveholders themselves, moreover, felt guilty about their involvement in slavery, how could Southern society have confidence in the rightness of slavery?

Southern leaders like Yancey, De Bow, and Fitzhugh were only too well aware of the fact that the sentiment of the nineteenth-century western world was arrayed against the institution of slavery. They found especially disturbing the 1820 federal act that declared the African slave trade piracy. The advocates themselves could not avoid making moral equations. In his mes-

sage to the legislature Governor Adams logically reasoned that "if the trade be piracy, the slave must be plunder." The editor of the Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian questioned: "If it is wrong to buy and sell negroes with an intention to enslave them, IS IT NOT WRONG TO HOLD THEM IN SLAVERY?" Mississippi Governor John J. McRae declared he could see no moral difference between buying a slave in an African market and buying one in a Southern market. In a letter to Pettigrew, Spratt pointed out that if slavery were right, "it must be logically right in its inception." 129

Ironically, in making the juxtaposition between the African slave trade and slavery, these pro-slavery radicals were in agreement with certain abolitionists. In the late eighteenth century, Anthony Benezet and Samuel Hopkins saw no difference between the trade and slavery. 130 When abolitionists of the 1850's learned about the new proposal to import Africans, some welcomed it for its consistency. James Redpath said he favored the reopening of the African slave trade because it was "neither more immoral in theory or inhuman in practice than the Southern inter-State slave trade." The editor of the New York Tribune queried: "And pray what is the vast difference between shipping negroes by sea . . . on a twenty days' voyage from Baltimore into the Gulf of Mexico, and shipping them for the same purposes in the same way on a voyage of forty days from


130 Mary Locke, Anti-Slavery in America; from the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade, 1619-1808 (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1905), pp. 28, 55.
the Gaboon River to the lagoons of Florida?" 131 The advocates of the African slave trade were using almost the same language and the same logic to make the opposite point: if slavery were right, then the African slave trade must be right.

The evolution of the Southern awareness of this moral equation can be seen in the thinking of George Fitzhugh—sociologist of the Old South. Initially Fitzhugh condemned the African slave trade as an "infamous traffic," and argued that it would brutalize the institution of slavery. "Slavery with us," he wrote in 1854, "is becoming milder every day; were the slave trade revived, it would resume its pristine cruelty. The slaves we now hold would become less valuable, and we should take less care of them." But then three years later, probably influenced by the incisive and logical arguments of fire-eaters like Spratt, Fitzhugh abandoned his opposition to the African slave trade. "We are now satisfied," he explained, "that the South cannot, consistently, approve the sentence passed by christendom on the slave trade, and yet justify slaveholding." 132 Thus he recognized that the South could not consistently declare the African slave trade immoral and slavery moral.

Like Fitzhugh, many Southerners painfully realized the fundamental contradiction between their acceptance of slavery and their government's prohibition of the African slave trade as piracy. To them the federal laws against the trade represented a stigma, a brand upon slavery, the South, and themselves. "In thus branding it [African slave trade]" the editor of the Mississippi Baptist announced, "we condemned ourselves." In a burst of hatred for those laws, Alabama planter William F. Samford expressed the anguish of many Southerners when he cried: "I despise them . . . they are odious to me! They lyingly accuse me and my country of crimes the most infamous and horrible—they hiss the world's stinging scorn into my ears." 133 These

133 Charleston Standard, in Boston Liberator, December 12, 1858;
Southerners felt an urgency to deny their guilt, to repudiate the laws condemning them as criminals, as immoral men. Thus they demanded that this federal slur upon them, this "foul imputation" be blotted from the statute book.\textsuperscript{134}

The advocates of the African slave trade also bitterly attacked the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. In the Georgia and South Carolina legislatures, they introduced resolutions demanding that the federal government abrogate this treaty, especially the articles providing for the maintenance of an American squadron for the suppression of the slave trade along the African coast. They felt that they were being forced to participate in an act which in effect condemned the South and themselves. They indignantly charged that "slavery itself must be wrong, when the ships and seamen of our country are kept upon the seas to preclude the means to its formation." And they pointed out that since Southerners were paying taxes to finance the squadron, they were vindicating the principle that made slaves plunder and slaveholders pirates.\textsuperscript{135}

This aggressive Southern attack on the federal laws and the Webster-Ashburton Treaty perplexed ex-president John Tyler of


Virginia. He remembered how the South had voted with "singular unanimity" for the law declaring the African slave trade to be piracy. "How it happens, then," he remarked, "that a provision introduced into a treaty to enforce a law, for which the South had voted, can be rightly regarded as an insult to the South, I must say passes my comprehension."  

In his bewilderment, Tyler could not understand what these fire-eaters were trying to say: for the sake of moral purity, the federal laws had to be repealed, and the treaty of 1842 had to be annulled.

The Southern criticism of the federal prohibition of the African slave trade had a moral purpose. This was undoubtedly the agitation's most important function. It provided a common ground of agreement among Southerners involved in the agitation. While Southerners like Fitzhugh and Spratt could not agree on the question of secession, they could both assert the African slave trade's morality. Similarly, while Southerners could be divided over whether African slaves should actually be imported, they could be united in the struggle to repudiate the indictment of the African slave trade as immoral. Southerners like Representative William Porcher Miles of South Carolina opposed the actual reopening of the trade. Yet they advocated the repeal of the federal laws. In their view, to repeal the federal laws and to reopen the trade were two different questions. The first was moral and the second economic and political; and thus it was possible to favor the first and oppose the second. On the floor of Congress in 1859, Representative Miles argued: "I, sir, am not prepared to advocate the reopening of the slave trade, but I am prepared to advocate with all my mind and strength, the sweeping away from our statute-book of laws which stamp the people of my section as pirates, and put a stigma upon their institutions."  

But, for Southerners like C. A. L. Lamar and Leonidas W. Spratt, repeal alone would have been too moderate,

136 Tyler, in Nashville Union and American, September 13, 1857.
For additional evidence, see Richmond Enquirer, October 28, 1858; Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian, June 10, 1859, May 31, 1859; Charleston Mercury, in Richmond Enquirer, June 18, 1859; New Orleans Crescent, in Savannah Morning News, July 9, 1859.
too innocuous. They wanted to transport Africans into the South in order to illustrate defiantly the morality of slavery. Nevertheless, while Miles and Lamar differed on the question of actual importations, they were in agreement on the crucial issue: the South had to declare her moral innocence.

The advocates believed that the contest was one of ideas—between the idea of the North and the western world that slavery was morally wrong and the idea of the South that slavery was morally right. The war then, they argued, must be waged on the battlefield of principles. But they knew these contradictory principles were warring within Southern society and within the minds of Southerners themselves. They knew that Southerners in the past, especially before 1832, had admitted to the world that slavery was wrong. During the American Revolution, Southern slaveholders had realized they could not justify slavery, an institution "repugnant to humanity" and "destructive of liberty."

\[138\] Even after the invention of the cotton gin and the expansion of cotton cultivation had given slavery a new profitability, Southerners had continued to apologize for their peculiar institution. During the 1820’s, they had called their institution "an evil at best," and "an evil, the curse of which is felt and acknowledged by every enlightened man in the Slave-holding States." A South Carolina Representative had even declared in Congress: "Slavery, in the abstract, I condemn and abhor. . . . However ameliorated by compassion—however corrected by religion—still slavery is a bitter draught, and the chalice which contains the nauseous potion, is, perhaps, more frequently pressed by the lips of the master than of the slave." \[139\] Three decades later the African slave-trade radicals noticed that many Southerners continued to feel hesitant to defend their institution

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of slavery on moral grounds. "There was," Spratt observed, "the feeling, that, in some sense, they [slaves] were plunder, which it was enough to get out of the way with."\(^{140}\) Consequently advocates launched their crusade to reopen the African slave trade in order to convince Southerners themselves—apologetic slaveholders as well as nonslaveholders like our Alabama farmer who said slavery "taant right"—that slavery was right.

For a long time Southerners had been bothered by the fundamental ambivalence of Southern slavery.\(^{141}\) On the one hand, they regarded the slave as an object of economic value, a thing, a chattel, and a piece of real estate or property. "A slave," the Civil Code of Louisiana declared, "is one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor: he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to the master." Slaves were bought, sold, and transferred like horses and cows and other items of property. A Southern newspaper, for example, reported in 1853: "Boys weighing about fifty lbs. can be sold for about five hundred dollars." In his will, a slavemaster bequeathed to his daughter "three negroes . . . also one gray mare and one cow."\(^{142}\) Slavemasters also viewed the death of a slave as the loss of property, and they recorded such a financial loss in their plantation accounts.

Yet, on the other hand, Southerners also recognized the slave as a person. The slave could be Christianized and also seduced; baptism was an acknowledgment of the slave's soul,

\(^{140}\) Charleston Standard, in New York Weekly Tribune, November 18, 1856.


\(^{142}\) Quoted in Wilbert Moore, op. cit., p. 191; Anderson (South Carolina) Gazette, and will of John Enssor, quoted in Stampp, Peculiar Institution, pp. 201, 204.
and the slavemasters' sexual exploitation of bondswomen was, as David Brion Davis noted, "the clearest recognition of their humanity." Miscegenation in the Old South was, a Kentucky judge admitted, a common practice. The judge's admission could be documented by the half a million mulattoes in the South in 1860. "Under slavery, we live surrounded by prostitutes," a Southern white woman complained. "Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds. My disgust sometimes is boiling over." Slavemasters who had intimacies with slave women could not easily deny the humanity of their mulatto slave children. One such slavemaster "pictured to himself his sons dragged from market to market and passing from the authority of a parent to the rod of a stranger, until these horrid anticipations worked his expiring imagination into frenzy." Many slaveholders found it impossible to relate to slaves simply as property and not as persons, capable of human feelings and friendship. Slaveholders sometimes, perhaps often, developed an affection for certain slaves. A Southern lady described the death of her slave nurse in very human terms: "When I saw that Death had the mastery, I laid my hands over her eyes, and in tears and fervor prayed that God would cause us to meet in happiness in another world. I knew, at that solemn moment, that color made no difference, but that her life would have been as precious, if I could have saved it, as if she had been white as snow." Even the slave's very economic value was based on the fact that he had human qualities. The slave was valuable as a human worker, not as an animal or a machine;

144 In Stampp, op. cit., p. 351.
145 Mary Boykin Chesnut, A Diary from Dixie (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Riverside Press, 1961), pp. 21-22.
147 Quoted in Stampp, op. cit., p. 324.
his human possessions—his human body, his human skill, and his human intelligence—could be and were used by his master. Southern laws prohibiting the education of the slave implied that the slave, like the white man, was inherently capable of learning how to read and write. Moreover, the slave committed human acts of violence: he rebelled against his bondage and the master class. In this respect, the Nat Turner slave insurrection of 1831 made the slave’s humanity frightfully apparent to the South.

Obviously the Southern conception of the slave was a contradiction. Edmund Ruffin’s attitude towards his Negro mammy illustrates this paradox. Ruffin, his biographer observes, gave Lucy Lockett “affection in life and a place among his children in death.” He buried her in Blandford Cemetery at Petersburg and inscribed a personal tribute on her grave stone: “In remembrance of Lucy Lockett, a slave, yet not the less the friend of her master’s family, by whom is offered this testimonial of their esteem for her excellent virtues and true piety, gratitude for her affectionate and faithful services, and grief for her death.” Yet, as a slave, Lucy Lockett was undoubtedly also listed as livestock in Ruffin’s farm journals. This kind of contradiction was also reflected in the Southern legal system. A Southern court, for example, declared: “Because they are rational human beings, they are capable of committing crimes; and in reference to acts which are crimes, are regarded as persons. Because they are slaves, they are incapable of performing civil acts; and in reference to all such, they are things, not persons. . . .”

For many perplexed Southerners, this ambivalence between the assertion of the slave as property and the admission of the slave’s humanity was hard to reconcile. Their tyrannical power over the slave sharpened the anguish of their dilemma. Masters usually employed force to control their slaves—their “troublesome property.” Slaves were generally engaged in a “day to day

resistance" against their oppressive bondage: they shirked labor, feigned illness, destroyed tools and work animals, and ran away. To discipline their slaves, masters often used cruel punishments: they savagely whipped, starved, and even separated slaves from their families. Yet many masters felt guilty about the punishment of slaves, for they recognized that their "troublesome property" was human. When a North Carolina slaveholder willed his estate to his sons, he explained to them this painful predicament of slaveholding. "To manage negroes without the exercise of too much passion, is next to an impossibility. . . . I would therefore put you on your guard, lest their provocations should on some occasions transport you beyond the limits of decency and Christian morality." A South Carolina planter confessed that he whipped his slaves "in a passion & half the time unjustly," and that he suffered "scruples of conscience about slavery." 149

Even after the Nat Turner insurrection of 1831 had driven Southerners into a fear of race war, even after pro-slavery polemics like Thomas R. Dew and John C. Calhoun had proclaimed slavery "a positive good," even after the South had supposedly become a closed society, many Southerners were still profoundly uneasy about the morality of their institution. A Virginian exclaimed in 1832: "This, sir, is a Christian community. Southerners read in their Bibles, 'Do unto all men as you would have them do unto you'; and this golden rule and slavery are hard to reconcile." Writing to his wife in 1837, a Southerner expressed a troubled conscience: "I sometimes think my feelings unfit me for a slaveholder." 150 While distressed slavemasters were reluctant and fearful to admit publicly their feelings of guilt over slavery, they sometimes recorded their anguish in diaries. "Oh what trouble," a slavemaster wrote in his diary on December 21,

150 Quoted in Charles G. Sellers, Jr., The Southerner as American, p. 48; Gustavus A. Henry to his wife, December 2, 1837, Henry Papers, University of North Carolina Library, quoted in Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, p. 424.
1858, "running sore, constant pressing weight, perpetual wearily, dripping, is this patriarchal institution! What miserable folly for men to cling to it as something heaven-descended. And here we and our children after us must groan under the burden—our hands tied from freeing ourselves." Ten days later he added: "I am more and more perplexed about my negroes. I cannot just take them up and sell them though that would be clearly the best I could do for myself. I cannot free them. I cannot keep them with comfort. . . . What would I not give to be freed from responsibility for these poor creatures. Oh, that I could know just what is right." 151

Pro-slavery radicals, worried about this Southern moral anxiousness and uncertainty toward slavery, thought they had to declare aggressively that slavery was right in order to help Southerners rid themselves of their inner doubts. During the 1830's a Southern editor asserted that it was not enough for Southerners to believe that slavery had been entailed upon them by their forefathers. "We must satisfy the consciences, we must allay the fears of our own people. We must satisfy them that slavery is of itself right—that it is not a sin against God. . . ." 152 The pro-slavery argument was to an important extent a response to the psychological need of Southern society to overcome an anxiety based on a feeling of guilt, a feeling that slavery was "a sin against God."

Twenty years later some of the more radical fire-eaters also recognized the need to confront this Southern disquietude towards slavery. Many of these radicals belonged to a post-1830 generation. In their revolt against a history of Southern shame towards the institution, young men of the South like Henry Hughes and C. A. L. Lamar were pressing to its logical extreme the break from the old Southern tendency of apologizing for slavery. They were trying to create a new pro-slavery civilization and felt compelled to drive the pro-slavery argument beyond

152 Washington United States Telegraph, December 5, 1835, quoted in Sellers, Southerner, p. 51. Italic added.
the contradictory thinking of Dew and Calhoun. Unlike the older pro-slavery theoreticians, they could not defend the peculiar institution as “a positive good” and continue to describe the African slave trade as “wretched in the extreme.” Hence they demanded the repeal of the federal laws against the African slave trade—laws enacted by Southerners like Jefferson and Calhoun—and sought to transform the African slave trade from a symbol of piracy and horror into a symbol of the morality of slavery.

“It is a miserable sophistry,” declared a writer to the Charleston Mercury, “which views the domestic trade with complacency, but shudders at the buying and selling of the naked Africans. I desire earnestly that we shall not only think consistently, but feel rightly, on this subject.” The editor of the Galveston Weekly News charged that in the past Southern statesmen had acknowledged slavery to be a moral wrong, and that the South could no longer compromise this subject and must assert that slavery was “right in the sight of God.” “If you agree to slavery,” the editor warned his Texas readers, “you must agree to the trade, for they are one. Those who are not for us must be against us. Those who deny slavery and the slave-trade are enemies of the South.” Secessionist William Yancey of Alabama explained that the African slave-trade debate was forcing Southerners to place themselves on the line on the slavery question, and to clarify the slavery issue in their own minds. In his judgment, the agitation had already exposed “much unsoundness in our midst upon the question of slavery, and one of the advantages of discussion will be to correct these erroneous views and to warn our people of those amongst us who are

135 Galveston Weekly News, November 9, 1858, March 3, 1857.
radically unsound upon the principles which underlie that institution.”  

Thus, in their ideological attack on the North, these Southern fire-eaters were also aiming at Southerners. They were advancing a radical pro-slavery ideology to discipline the abolitionist Helpers and the distrusted nonslaveholders of the South. While they could not persuade Congress to repeal the federal laws and actually import large numbers of African slaves to restore slaveholding social mobility and thereby reinforce the security of the institution in the South, they sought to wield the pro-African slave-trade argument to intimidate Southern nonslaveholders. They also sought to use their ideological weapon to discipline perplexed and guilt-tortured slaveholders. Advocates of the African slave trade like Spratt and Yancey were defining the norms for Southerners, for themselves. They were trying to give Southerners a new and a consistent pro-slavery identity. They were telling Southerners who they were, or should be—Southerners were both slaveholders and righteous men. They were leading a Southern crusade to ferret out “unsoundness” on slavery within the South. Support for the African slave trade was a test of Southern loyalty to the peculiar institution.

Their aggressive and insistent affirmation of slavery as the essence of morality could help some of the African slave-trade advocates overcome their private moral qualms about the institution. Public declarations of confidence in slavery sometimes concealed inner misgivings. Even leading pro-slavery theoretician George Fitzhugh confessed privately that he saw “great evils in Slavery, but in a controversial work I ought not to

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156 Yancey, letter, in Montgomery Advertiser and Gazette, reprinted in Charleston Mercury, July 9, 1859. For further evidence, see Houston Telegraph, in Galveston Weekly News, March 9, 1858; Galveston Civilian, July 19, 1859; De Bow’s Review, XXIII (September, 1857), p. 317; Bryan, Letters, pp. 5-6; Charleston Standard, in New York National Anti-Slavery Standard, November 8, 1856, December 6, 1856; Charleston Standard, in Boston, Liberator, December 12, 1856; New Orleans Delta, May 18, 1858.

admit them.” Possibly even Edmund Ruffin had not completely conquered his early feelings about slavery as an evil to be abolished someday. In their assault on Southerners who might have been unsound on slavery, some of the advocates were actually trying to convince themselves as well as others that slavery was not a sin.

The African slave-trade agitation’s press for a proslavery conformity was related to the thrust for Southern independence. Secession could give the South much more than political independence from the North: it could provide a framework for the reconstruction of values in the South on a sound pro-slavery basis. A Southern Confederacy could reopen the African slave trade, widen the social base of slaveholding, and buttress the commitment to the institution. The presence of numerous blacks in Southern society would compel whites, anxious about their survival, to support slavery, an institution of race control, and condemn the Helper schemes for abolition and colonization as ridiculous. If the African slave trade could be used to provide labor support for Southern industrialization, then even the industrial society of a Confederacy would be committed to slavery. But even if African slaves were not imported into a Confederate South, the defiance of secession and the violence of war in defense of slavery would surely help to confirm the rightness of slavery in the minds of Southerners. In short, the agitation for the reopening of the African slave trade was designed not only to repel the moral crusade of William Lloyd Garrison but also to help Southerners get right with slavery!

The moral argument for the reopening of the African slave trade was based on a contradiction. Since the slave was property, the advocates argued, Southerners could morally transport slaves from Africa as well as from Virginia. “A man visits a country where negroes are sold as merchandise. He buys one, or more . . . just as we would buy a horse or any other species of property; and there was no more reason for characterizing the

trade in the one as piracy, than in the other." Yet advocates also recognized the slave as person in their emphasis on the missionary function of the African slave trade. They reminded Southerners that Africa was a "benighted land" inhabited by "miserable, naked savages" who worshipped snakes and practiced cannibalism. "Pity the sorrows of a European," they observed, "traveling through the bush and partaking of the hospitality... of a native, when as a delicacy reserved for him, there is fished up out of the big pot of soup a black head, with the lips drawn back and the white teeth grinning, and such a painful resemblance of the faces around him that for a moment he wonders which of the younger members of the family has been sacrificed to the exigencies of the occasion. But he is reassured, and discovers that he is not eating man, but monkey." The African slave trade would transport unfortunate, degraded, and barbarous Africans from a depraved continent; and Southern slavery would elevate them to a condition of usefulness, well-being, and morality. In the American South, the African would be transformed from a cannibal to a "submissive," "docile," "patient," and "happy" slave—a Sambo. Slavery would teach the wild African how to work in the cotton fields, "to speak English, to say the Lord's prayer, to trample his fetish, and to loathe raw frogs and redworms, roasted lizards and parched wasps, beetles, bumble-bees and grasshoppers." The African slave trade was a "commerce of mercy," and slavery a missionizing institution. Thus the African slave-trade argu-
ment was actually an extension rather than a resolution of the institution's ambivalent view of the slave as property as well as person.

Yet the message of the African slave-trade argument was clear: since the African slave trade and slavery were moral institutions, Southern moral meekness on the slavery question was unwise. Southerners must launch their own crusade, advance their own principles, and challenge the anti-slavery sentiments of the western world. To accomplish this, the advocates asserted, the South must give to slavery "the moral strength of an aggressive attitude—a position in which there could be no admission of a wrong—no implication of a sense of shame in its condition." Thus in this war of opinion they proposed to plant their standard in the very faces of their adversaries and to declare boldly the renewal of the African slave trade as the leading principle of the South.

Contemporary observers recognized this new aggressiveness. They thought the agitation to reopen the African slave trade represented a spite to the North and a defiance of the opinions of western civilization. William Lloyd Garrison re-


marked that “attempts are now being made to change the views of the Christian world, in regard to slavery; to make it respected.” Commenting on the South Carolina proposal to reopen the African slave trade, Frederick Law Olmsted asked: “Why, except for the sake of consistency, or for the purpose of bullying the moral sense of the rest of mankind. . . ?” The editor of the London Times shuddered at the new pro-slavery crusade. The revival of the African slave trade, he declared, would mean “a war of principle—a war of religion between the slave-trading states of the North American Union and mankind.” But, while these unhappy observers correctly described the African slave-trade agitation as a revolt against the anti-slavery values of western culture, they did not understand that much of the new Southern aggression against the western world was actually being directed inward against the uncertain South.

In the supreme expression of Southern pro-slavery defiance, Mississippi State Senator Henry Hughes caustically proposed an identification system for the newly imported Africans.

The identification of our negroes [from Africa] will not be difficult. Public officers . . . may be ordained and sworn to identify. If necessary bloody letters may by State authority, be branded on the negroes’ cheeks or chins. Or if rampant, free-labor philanthropy, fattening on its own abuses but sickening at ours, shall still fall into foaming convulsions at the horrors of our labor system, then, let us in healthy, cool and laughing defiance, identify by other means, the negroes and their children. Let us in hard and staunch protest against what is philanthropy in design but misanthropy indeed; let us in

165 Boston Liberator, June 25, 1858.
humorous contempt, in delightful and deliberate detestation of sanctimonious meddlers; let us if expedient to identify our new negroes, mark them like hogs and brand them like beeeves; let us slit their nostrils; let us pinch in their bleeding ears, cross-cuts and underbits, or with hot and salted irons, fry on their brows and breasts, lasting letters. . . . Then let freedom shriek till her face is red, and her voice is cracked as her skull.\textsuperscript{168}

Hughes's extreme protest can help us understand an anxiety at the heart of the internal crisis of the Old South. In his scornful call for the branding of slaves "like beeeves," Hughes was trying to make it unmistakably clear to Southerners as well as Northerners what the slave should be: the slave should not be both person and property, but only property. If the slave were nothing more than property, nothing more than "hogs" and "beeeves," how could the slaveholder be condemned as sinful and inhuman? Yet the shrillness of his arrogant and desperate scream suggests that Senator Hughes himself knew the slave, despite the bloody letters fried on his brows and breasts, was still nothing but a man.