Why Historians Change Their Minds

Carl N. Degler

The author is professor of history in Stanford University. This paper was his presidential address to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at its sixty-eighth annual meeting in August 1975.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO a psychologist friend of mine asked me to read a proposal he had drawn up for revamping American society. It included, among other things, the obliteration of state lines, the elimination of the U.S. Supreme Court, and the substitution of a plural executive for a single one. My reaction to his proposal was that he had ignored history, that his whole approach to the reformation of society was nonhistorical. His response, in turn, was that he did not think history was relevant to the matter because historians never agree among themselves about the past, and besides, they are always changing their minds. If you have ever given an historiographical analysis to a group of nonhistorians you have probably run into similar objections or at least into puzzlement as to what historians do and why they cannot arrive at definitive conclusions about what they think about the past. Even students in our classes, I think, are never quite clear as to why there are "changing interpretations." My remarks are addressed to those who wonder why historians change their minds. I do not mean why the content or subject matter included in the field of history changes; that is another issue, though, as I think you will agree, not unrelated to my present concern of why our interpretations of the past alter. My intention is to explore this rather philosophical question through a concrete example of one historiographical transformation. For, as has been said, history is philosophy teaching by example.

The example I will use is the profound reinterpretation that the study of United States slavery has passed through in the course of the last quarter of a century. Three large themes in the study of slavery have undergone revision in the course of those years. The first is the impact of slavery upon blacks; the second is the profitability of slavery as an economic institution; and the third is the comparative history of slavery in the New World.

The story of the transformation begins with Ulrich B. Phillips, for it was his interpretation of slavery that was first overturned. Although Phillips produced a large body of work on slavery, his principal book was *American Negro Slavery*, which was first published in 1918. What was Phillips's interpretation of the three themes? Phillips actually devoted very little space to a comparison of slave regimes. In fact, his only comparison was a very brief one —with ancient Roman slavery—though in drawing it he made clear what his position was in regard to our first theme, that is, the effect of slavery upon blacks. "There was plenty of coercion in the South," Phillips observed, "but in comparison with the harshness of the Roman system the American régime was essentially mild."[1] In his book Phillips depicted American slavery as a system wherein slaves lived in families, were generally well cared-for physically by masters, and were punished no more severely than recalcitrant children, unruly seamen, or white indentured servants.

In common with most white southerners and most white scholars in the Western world of the early twentieth century, Phillips also believed that race determined human behavior to a considerable, though usually unspecified, extent. It is not surprising therefore that Phillips and the majority of American historians who followed his lead should see the inefficiencies of slavery and the social and moral behavior of blacks under slavery as a result of the Negro's race and not as a consequence of slavery. As Phillips said when comparing Roman and southern slavery, the character of the two systems differed because the race of the slaves differed. In the South, he concluded, "the slaves were negroes, who for the most part were by racial quality submissive rather than defiant, light-hearted instead of gloomy, ingratiating instead of sullen, and whose very defects invited paternalism rather than repression."[2]

1 Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1928), 342.
2 *Ibid.*, 391–392.

Although Phillips is sometimes called an apologist for slavery, the charge is not strictly accurate. Phillips's work makes quite clear that he thought the ending of slavery was desirable, but his reason for thinking so was not that slavery was bad for blacks, for he was not at all sure that it was, but that it was economically disadvantageous for whites. "By the close of the 'fifties," he wrote, "it is fairly certain that no slaveholders but those few whose plantations lay in the most advantageous parts of the cotton and sugar districts and whose managerial ability was exceptionally great were earning anything beyond what would cover their maintenance and carrying charges."[3] In short, Phillips's interpretation of the second theme was that slavery was unprofitable to the individual planter, whatever value it might have as a means of social control over black people.

Phillips's conception of slavery as mild in its impact on blacks and unprofitable for whites dominated the interpretation of slavery until the late 1930s at least. Black historians, it is true, denied his racist explanations as well as his descriptions of slavery as paternalistic, and a few white economic historians disagreed with his assertion that slavery was unprofitable.[4] But these dissenters were a distinct minority.

The dissenters, however, became more numerous soon after the publication in 1956 of Kenneth Stampp's book, *The Peculiar Institution*. Unlike Phillips, Stampp did not accept the biological inferiority of the Negro. In fact, in his book Stampp was quite explicit that he wrote his study of slavery on the assumption that "innately, Negroes are, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less."[5] Stampp's portrait of slavery in *The Peculiar Institution* was markedly different from Phillips's. In place of a benign system, Stampp portrayed one in which punishment was harsh and constant, work onerous and continuous, and resistance by the slaves widespread and justified. Moreover, unlike Phillips, Stampp concluded that slavery was economically profitable to the whites. About the only way in which Stampp agreed with

[3] *Ibid.*, 391–392.

[4] The principal dissenter on the question of profitability was Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1933).

[5] Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1956), vii.

Phillips was in failing to look beyond the United States at other slave systems. Stampp's interpretation now largely supplanted Phillips's conception. How was that revolution in interpretation accomplished?

The starting point was undoubtedly Stampp's assumption that black slaves were no more than "white men with black skins." For once that assumption is made certain interpretations of slaves' behavior are precluded or at least made difficult to accept. No longer can their behavior be explained by reference to biological or genetic differences from whites, but must, instead, be examined in the context of historical or cultural experience. For Stampp that meant the power of the master, which determined the environment that shaped the life of the slave. Slipshod work by slaves could no longer simply be attributed to the racial character of blacks, as it was by economic historian L. C. Gray, for example. Its source would have to be sought in the operation of the system of power that was slavery. This is not to say that Stampp did not bring a wealth of new evidence to bear on the question of how slavery affected blacks, for he did. But the relevance and significance of that new evidence was appreciated by him because he came to it with a new conception of black people. It is noteworthy in this regard that the *kinds* of evidence Stampp used were generally the same as Phillips's, namely manuscript and printed literary records from the time of slavery.

In trying to explain why shifts occur in historical interpretation the overturning of Phillips by Stampp raises the further question of how Stampp's conception of slavery superseded Phillips's in the minds of so many historians. For the large question we are really considering here is not why new interpretations occur at all, for that is more a matter of psychology than history. New interpretations are being thrown out by individual historians all the time, but only a few are taken up by the profession. The significant historical question is why was Stampp's interpretation so widely followed? Part of the answer, of course, is that most historians by the time Stampp wrote had abandoned a racial interpretation of black history. Stampp spoke to them quite directly with his frank assumption that Negroes were "innately white men with black skins." This alteration in the general outlook of historians, in turn,

is to be explained by the fact that by 1956 the society itself had moved a long way from its acceptance of segregation and discrimination, i.e., its acceptance of Negro inferiority. In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal published his monumental *American Dilemma* in which he dramatized the contrast between the American creed of equality and American discriminatory practices toward blacks. Furthermore, the war against Nazi Germany had further focused the attention of Americans on the error of racist assumptions. The change in popular attitudes was measured as well as reinforced by still other events. In 1948, for example, the Democratic party went on record in support of the civil rights of blacks, and Harry Truman carried his party to victory on that platform and in the face of serious defection by Democrats in several southern states. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court declared racially separate public schools in violation of the Constitution. Stampp's interpretation, in short, was quite in tune with the times. *The Peculiar Institution,* it is true, contained much new evidence in support of his view, but Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* had been based upon evidence, too, and in a different intellectual climate it had been widely followed.

In fact, it was largely because Phillips's and Stampp's books were based upon the same kinds of evidence—individual examples—that the second stage in the historiographical revolution occurred. In 1959 Stanley Elkins published *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life,* in which he set forth his dissatisfaction with Stampp's critique of Phillips. Elkins, to be sure, agreed completely with Stampp's denial of Phillips's assumption of the racial inferiority of Negroes. It was the character, not the substance, of Stampp's answer to Phillips's assertion of the benign impact of slavery on blacks that caused Elkins to disagree with Phillips. He criticized Stampp for debating the matter in the terms that Phillips had set and which could not resolve the issue in any conclusive way. For it was true that for virtually every example of harsh treatment that Stampp could muster, Phillips or his followers could muster a contrary example. In place of this unsatisfactory balancing of accounts, Elkins proposed one that would show much more conclusively than Stampp was able to do that slavery's impact upon blacks was the opposite of benign. For Elkins's contribution

to the historiographical revolution was to emphasize even more than Stampp had done the extremely heavy burden that slavery had imposed upon blacks.

Elkins's attack upon the problem was twofold. Rather than debate with Phillips how many examples of harsh or mild treatment there were, Elkins accepted as given a description of Negroes under slavery that the slaveholders themselves offered. This was the famous Sambo concept. Sambo, as Elkins described him, "was docile, but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing, [accompanied by behavior] full of infantile silliness and talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being."[6] Instead of accounting for this behavior on grounds of race, as Phillips and some other white historians were prone to do, Elkins attributed it to the special character of slavery in the United States. He was able to do this with conviction because of a second part of his argument: the introduction of international comparison into the discussion of the nature of slavery. Relying upon Frank Tannenbaum's book, *Slave and Citizen*, published in 1947, Elkins contended that in Latin America, where blacks had also first entered as slaves, a Sambo type was not to be found. Moreover, Elkins went on, the severe social and psychological impact of Sambo was measured in the fact that after slavery was abolished there was no legal segregation of, or discrimination against, blacks in Latin American societies as there was in the United States. His central point was further emphasized when he asserted that U.S. slavery had much the same impact on blacks that the Nazi concentration camps had upon their inmates. Using social psychological literature, particularly the work of Harry Stack Sullivan, Elkins argued that among the reasons for the development of Sambo was the lack of a variety of "significant others" among the slaves, a term he took from Sullivan. The behavior represented by Sambo, Elkins emphasized, was not simply a protective device erected against the master's power; the slave *was* a Sambo; he was not simply playing a role.

On what was Elkins's new interpretation based? Like Stampp,

[6] Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), 82.

Elkins began with a new assumption, in this case, that Sambo was a true personality and not simply a sham or a protective device adopted consciously by the slave. But unlike Stampp, Elkins did not advance or seek out new, original sources to support his interpretation. Indeed, he referred quite frankly to his "decision not to consult manuscript sources. . . ."[7] Nor did he use other kinds of primary sources. Instead he relied upon secondary works for support of his interpretations. His use of the analogy or metaphor of the concentration camp was not new evidence since it was simply a new way of conceptualizing old evidence.

Elkins's concept of Sambo was at first slow to be accepted, but during the middle and late 1960s it was probably the most widely read, studied, and quoted book on slavery since *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* The widespread acceptance of the book is certainly related to the Negro Revolution of the 1960s. At a time when the issue of black deprivation was everyone's concern—from President Lyndon Johnson and the Supreme Court down to the local school board—Elkins's interpretation of slavery promised to explain much about the sources of that deprivation. Not least in that explanation was the implication that the causes of black deprivation and disadvantage lay not in present conditions but in the slave past. Blacks as well as whites could take comfort from slavery's alleged responsibility for the disadvantaged position of blacks in modern America. Elkins's use of social and clinical psychology also fitted in with a strong interest among lay people and professionals in interdisciplinary approaches to history.

Besides, many professional historians who were quite in agreement with Stampp that Phillips's racism was unacceptable were nonetheless frustrated that Stampp's method did not allow him to do more than offer counter examples to Phillips's evidence. For until Elkins came along the actual nature of slavery's impact on blacks was inconclusive from an evidential point of view. It seemed to depend largely upon whether one accepted Phillips's or Stampp's selection of the examples drawn from the sources. What Elkins set out to do, and accomplished to the satisfaction of many historians caught up in the Negro Revolution, was to show that the truly oppressive character of slavery was not dependent upon discovering

[7] *Ibid.*, 224.

more examples of oppression. Rather, that oppression could be shown by pointing to the presence of Sambo under U.S. slavery and in the Nazi concentration camps, and his absence from Latin American slavery.

Today, sixteen years later, there are few historians who accept Elkins's interpretation. The concept of Sambo has been repudiated by investigators into United States slavery as well as by students of slavery in Latin America. Indeed, it is just this overturning of widely accepted views—and in such short space of time—that causes nonhistorians to shake their heads in disbelief or shrug their shoulders in puzzlement. How was this interpretive edifice toppled?

Significantly enough, the unraveling of Elkins's interpretation began, as his own and Stampp's reinterpretations had begun, from a dissatisfaction with a prevailing assumption about the past. Parenthetically, it might be observed here that if any proof is needed of the central role played by present day concerns in the reinterpretation of the past, the revolution in the historiography of slavery is certainly a case in point. At virtually each shift in interpretation the catalyst to reinterpretation has been a new assumption derived from a concern about the present. In the case of the overturning of Elkins's Sambo the new conceptual point was that Elkins left little or no room for black individuality, independence, or even resistance to slavery. For if slavery transformed Africans into Sambos, they could hardly be independent persons living a life of significance, or even carrying out resistance to slavery. Furthermore, how could there be a black subculture during slavery, from which the music of the blues and black religion might emerge later, when the very essence of a Sambo was that he had accepted the values and attitudes of the white master class? Many whites as well as blacks came to object to Elkins's interpretation on just these grounds. Kenneth Stampp, for example, objected to the Elkins formulation virtually from the beginning. He objected, one suspects, partly because Sambo denied blacks autonomy and even resistance to slavery, and partly because the existence of Sambo could not be found in the kind of sources Stampp had confidence in, namely manuscript and printed remains from people who lived during slavery. In 1971 Stampp published a skillful and persuasive critique of Sambo, arguing that there was no evidential basis for

believing that Sambos existed in significant numbers in the slave South.[8]

Stampp's repudiation of Sambo has been supported by other scholars, who began to look with fresh eyes at the sources on the nature of slavery. More systematically than ever before new materials on the character of slavery's impact on blacks were now drawn upon. Phillips and Stampp in their general studies of slavery relied principally upon sources written by whites if only because blacks and slaves left few written records from those years. Yet as long ago as 1944 Richard Hofstadter, in perhaps the first all-out criticism of Phillips's interpretation, argued that the history of slavery could not be adequately written until the point of view of the slave was central to the analysis.[9] And to a certain degree that was what Stampp did in his *Peculiar Institution,* though his use of slave testimony was slight.

Of the two principal bodies of slave testimony, Stampp drew hardly at all upon one and only in a minor way upon the other. Although voluminous, these sources are extremely tricky to interpret and that fact, among other consideratitons, had kept historians away from them. One group of these testimonies from slaves is the several score of slave narratives written by runaway slaves during the slave era, usually under the influence or at the instigation of white abolitionists. They were essentially antislavery propaganda. The other group is composed of reminiscences of former slaves during the 1920s and 1930s when Fisk University and then the federal government undertook to interview former slaves still living in the South. Although selections from all of these sources had been published for a long time, it is only since 1971 that they have been used extensively by historians.[10] John Blassingame relied heavily upon the narratives for his *Slave Community*, published in 1972,

---

8 Kenneth M. Stampp, "Rebels and Sambos: The Search for the Negro's Personality in Slavery," *Journal of Southern History,* XXXVII (1971), 367–392.

9 Richard Hofstadter, "U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend," *Journal of Negro History,* XXIX (1944), 109–124.

10 Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945). The Fisk collection is *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville, 1945). The slave narratives were extensively quoted and commented upon in Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Leiden, Netherlands, 1963).

and George Rawick drew principally upon the slave reminiscences for his book, *From Sundown to Sunup,* which appeared in the same year. Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* published in 1974, was based heavily upon manuscript sources, in the Stampp-Phillips tradition, but also drew much more extensively on the slave reminiscences than did either Stampp's or Phillips's books.

The use of these new sources from the slaves themselves has provided a new basis for the repudiation of Elkins's conception of Sambo. Genovese, Blassingame, and Rawick depict a slave community that was quite autonomous, full of cultural and social variety, and controlled in only limited ways by the master. By implication, if not by intention, slavery is depicted in these recent studies as not only considerably less burdensome than Elkins contended with his concept of Sambo, but less onerous even than that described by Stampp. This line of argument has been pushed even further from a different evidential base in the work of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman in their controversial book, *Time on the Gross,* which became one of the publishing events of 1974. Fogel and Engerman, as economists, use statistical evidence and analyses to a much greater extent than either Phillips or Stampp. Unfortunately, the evidence and some of the interpretations of Fogel and Engerman are seriously flawed, even if the general thrust of their argument has merit to it. They, too, like other recent writers on the subject, assert the mildness of the impact of slavery upon blacks. Indeed, one of the novel conclusions of *Time on the Cross* is that blacks were an important element in the prosperity of the antebellum southern economy. In sum, in all of these most recent works on slavery, Sambo is nowhere to be seen.

If it is clear that the flood of new evidence, whether traditional or novel, destroyed Sambo, it ought to be noted that once again the search for this new evidence was sparked by philosophical or ideological objections to the implications that Elkins's Sambo held for modern black people. Some of the writers themselves make this quite plain. George Rawick, for example, in delineating the autonomous and varied life of blacks under slavery in his book, *From Sundown to Sunup,* admits that at one time he had accepted the idea of Sambo. His repudiation of it came, apparently, when he was able to purge himself, as he admitted, of the "implicit racism

and elitism" from which he thought the concept was derived.[11] And Fogel and Engerman do not hide their motives, either, for in their sustained criticism of Stampp for stressing the burden of slavery on Negroes they imply an even greater objection to Elkins's more oppressive picture in the form of Sambo. Undoubtedly it is only their decision to end their historiographical survey in *Time on the Cross* with Stampp's work that prevented their making overt their implied rejection of Sambo. Eugene Genovese's assertion of the beginnings of black nationalism under slavery and the way in which the slaves were able to assert themselves against their masters' power testifies to at least one of the roots of his depiction of slaves as living a life, and building a culture, of their own in spite of the masters' power.[12] There is nothing illegitimate, of course, in a search for new evidence being sparked by ideology or philosophy. Indeed, it might be said, as Thomas Kuhn has pointed out in regard to similar alterations in scientific conceptions, that it is often not possible to recognize or "to see" the significance of new evidence until a new way of conceiving the problem has been formulated.[13]

Another, more social incentive to a reformulation of the problem that led to a repudiation of Sambo was the transformation within the Negro Revolution of the late 1960s. Although the early stages of the Negro Revolution emphasized the unfair burden slavery had placed upon blacks, the later stage of the movement began to emphasize the special character of blacks: their subculture in plantation and ghetto, their singular contributions to religion and music, their special speech and food, ethos and psychology. Not surprisingly, all of these characteristics of Negro life have been found among the slaves as described in Genovese's, Rawick's, and Blassingame's recent studies of slave life. Rawick even accused Stampp of trying to fit blacks into the behavioral pattern of whites because Stampp had written of blacks as "white men with black skins."[14]

---

11 George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 74, fn. 2.

12 Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), xv and *passim*.

13 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), 115.

14 Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, 78.

Black cultural nationalism, in short, made it difficult to hold on to a view of slavery's impact that seemed to deny a cultural past to Negroes.

The Elkins interpretation of the comparative history of slavery has also been sharply revised. One of the central contentions in the Elkins-Tannenbaum interpretation was that in Latin America the slave was a person, while in North America he was only a piece of property, a thing. Since the essential difference was psychological or conceptual, Elkins wrote, the actual physical treatment of a slave was irrelevant in comparing the slave systems of North and South America. One of the ways Elkins attempted to establish his distinction was by asserting differences in the law of slavery in the United States and in Latin America. But the law, as a measure of social conceptions, turned out to be inadequate for his purposes. Investigations showed, for example, that in *both* Brazil and the United States, the slave was seen by the law as a person *and* a piece of property. That the law in the United States held the slave responsible for any crime he or she might commit shows that a slave was quite different from any other kind of property. Not even animate property, like dogs or horses, was held responsible for its acts, though its owners were. Furthermore, in the courts of the southern states the judges again and again affirmed the human character of the slave while recognizing at the same time the master's rights in the slave as property. Once it was clear that in both the United States and Latin America the slave was at once a person and a thing, the actual physical treatment of the slaves became a basis for evaluating how slaveholders and other whites perceived black slaves. And when that treatment in the two regions was compared, it also became evident that in the United States treatment was milder than in other parts of the New World.[1]

Undoubtedly the most striking piece of evidence to suggest the mildness of treatment in the United States was that after the final closing of the slave trade from Africa in 1808, the slave population of the United States grew at about 2.5 percent per year right down to the Civil War, a rate not much lower than that for white southerners. No other slave society in the New World was able to equal that rate and virtually none was able to maintain its slave population without substantial and constant importations from Africa. It seems reasonable to conclude that one of the principal reasons

the United States was able to do this was because the labor exacted from the slaves and the physical care provided them were more conducive to child-bearing and child-rearing.

The explanation advanced by Tannenbaum and Elkins for the alleged differences between North and South American slavery has also been seriously undermined. They had contended that the Catholic Church and the home governments protected the humanity of the Negro who was held as a slave in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World. But recent studies of slavery show that the state and church in Brazil, Peru, Cuba, and Saint Domingue rarely intervened effectively in the relationship between master and slave.[15] In sum, rather than seeing North American slavery as the most oppressive in the New World, as Tannenbaum and Elkins described it, the most recent work seems to depict it as the mildest in the Western Hemisphere. In that respect, at least, U. B. Phillips's interpretation has returned.

Undoubtedly, as I am sure you recognize, the prime lesson to be drawn from the rise and fall of Elkins's interpretation of the nature of United States slavery is that historical evidence is crucial. Philosophy or ideology may suggest a new interpretation, but in the end, all interpretations must be tested against the available evidence. Nowhere is the central role of evidence clearer in causing a shift in historical interpretations than in the question of the profitability of slavery. As I noted earlier, Stampp sharply disagreed with Phillips about whether slavery as a system produced

---

15 Stanley J. Stein, *Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee Country, 1850–1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957); Charles Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825* (Oxford, 1963); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, New York, 1966), chaps. 8 and 9; Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, 1971), chap. 2; Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore, 1971); Frederick P. Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524–1650* (Stanford, Calif., 1974), chap. 9. After noting numerous examples of blasphemy by slaves in the course of torture by their masters, Colin Palmer observes drily that the "Inquisition seemed not to have been concerned at the violence which directly contributed to these religious offenses." Colin A. Palmer, "Religion and Magic in Mexican Slave Society, 1570–1650," in Stanley Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), 315; see also p. 318. Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Conn., 1974) is a recent and excellent collection of new research in which all but one of the fourteen articles are critical in one fashion or another of the Elkins-Tannenbaum argument.

an adequate profit, but he had not been able to make the point conclusively. By the time that Elkins wrote, however, there had been a conceptual breakthrough in the analysis of the issue. In 1958 two young economists, Alfred Conrad and John Meyer, demonstrated through the use of economic theory and macrostatistics that slavery was profitable for slaveholders.[16] They went beyond the work of scholars like Stampp who had drawn upon samples of individual plantation records in seeking to determine the level of economic return to planters. Conrad and Meyer used statistical evidence for the whole South, thus transcending the question of representativeness that had limited Stampp's persuasiveness. Conrad and Meyer concluded that on the average a planter who invested in slaves and land could expect as good a return on his money as if he had put it into such other enterprises as northern railroad securities. This decisive overturning of one of Phillips's conclusions was clearly the result of new techniques as well as new statistical evidence. Significantly, it was soon accepted by most other historians, and the principal reason it was widely accepted is that other economic historians carried out similar analyses and arrived at substantially the same results.[17] In fact, since Conrad and Meyer wrote there has been no further revolution in that aspect of the historiography of slavery, in itself convincing testimony of the central role that evidence plays in establishing interpretations. The stability of this interpretation is one of the achievements of the new economic history or cliometrics.

The importance of evidence in settling issues of interpretation can be illustrated in yet another way. Ideological or philosophical objections to established interpretations are not the only sources of new interpretations. Some of them arise from the use of concepts taken from the nonhistorical disciplines. Essentially the insights gained from nonhistorical disciplines are of two kinds. The first

[16] Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South," *Journal of Political Economy*, LXVI (1958), 95–130.

[17] Hugh G. Aitken, ed., *Did Slavery Pay?* (Boston, 1971), collects most of the literature; see especially the articles by Yasukichi Yasuba, Robert Evans, Jr., and Richard Sutch for replications of the original Conrad and Meyer interpretation. Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman, "The Economics of Slavery," in Fogel and Engerman, eds., *The Reinterpretation of American Economic History* (New York, 1971) also support Conrad and Meyer. For a survey and analysis of the broader issues involved in the question of profitability, see Harold D. Woodman, "The Profitability of Slavery: A Historical Perennial," *Journal of Southern History*, XXIX (1963), 303–325. The Woodman piece is also reprinted in the Aitken collection.

demonstrate the invariant nature of some aspect of human beings over time and, often, through space. The description of human behavior derived from this type of insight might be said to be transhistorical—above or outside historical changes. An example would be that when genetics disproved the principle of acquired characteristics, historians could no longer say that some trait of behavior or attitude of mind had been inherited from a subject's forebears. Or, to take a more appropriate example, when psychology and anthropology invalidated the doctrine of Negro racial inferiority, historians could no longer use racial explanations for Negro behavior in the past, any more than they could in the present.

These transhistorical insights from other disciplines are rare compared to the second kind: those advanced by the nonhistorical social disciplines. These are derived generally from modern sociological or psychological investigations of living people. Elkins, as we have seen, used concepts from modern social and clinical psychology in developing his idea of Sambo and in comparing the behavior of slaves with that of the inmates of Nazi concentration camps. The only proper way in which these findings about human behavior or motivation from the social disciplines may be used, however, is when they can be documented by evidence from the past.[18] For the historian, unlike the social scientist, deals with people from a different time and, therefore, often with different values, assumptions, and expectations. It is nonhistorical to assume without specific corroborative evidence that a given pattern of behavior can be explained by reference to conclusions drawn from an investigation of people today. For to do that is to assume that human motivation and the causes of human behavior do not change over time. Yet, as every historian knows, human motivation and the impulses that give rise to human behavior do change over time and with culture. In effect, it was this error that Elkins committed. One of the reasons his conception of slavery was ultimately repudiated was that his application of social science findings lacked historical evidence. His assumption or metaphor that slavery was a form of concentration camp did not square with the facts of plantation life and his assumption that slaves internalized their own sense of

[18] The amount of documentation necessary to show the presence in the past of a modern behavioral pattern or attitude is, of course, a different question. The only point I want to make here is that some historical validation is needed in order to apply a modern social science interpretation to a society or institution in the past.

powerlessness similarly could not withstand the onslaught of evidence from the slave narratives and reminiscences and from statistical sources. He never established the existence of Sambo; he merely assumed it.

Nor should it be thought that Elkins is alone in this failure to tie modern social science conceptions to the period under investigation. Fogel and Engerman's introduction of the model of the economic market into the history of slavery provides several rather grotesque examples. Here is their explanation for the dearth of revolts and runaways: ". . . for the average slave, who . . . expected his lot to be that of a laborer, the costs of revolution, or even flight, were not worth the gains of quasi-freedom [in the North]—except under special circumstances such as the separation of a man from his wife or parents from their children."[19] Eugene Genovese has no social science model in mind in describing his conception of the slave family, but he commits a similar error by asserting the existence of a pattern of behavior without evidence drawn from the past to document it. "Even the most conservative parents, who married their daughters off young," he writes in regard to the slave family, "did not get hysterical if their unmarried daughters got pregnant. It was not a nice thing to do, but it was not a moral disaster, either."[20] The statement is undocumented and it is hard to know how it could be documented, given the nature of the sources on slave behavior. Nor would anyone guess from Genovese's description that it was the masters, not the slave parents, who decided when and with whom marriage took place. Without documentation there is always the danger that the historian will see in the past what he wants to find, not what was there.

Up until now the burden of my argument has been that new historical interpretations are advanced for a variety of reasons, but that only those interpretations that are supported by historical evidence survive collective professional examination. Thus Elkins's Sambo has been largely repudiated, while Conrad and Meyer's assertion of the profitability of slavery flourishes still. There is yet a further reason, however, why historians change their minds, and unlike the others, it does not depend for its validity upon evi-

[19] Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (2 vols., Boston, 1974), I, 244.

[20] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 465.

dence. Since it, too, can be illustrated from the revolution in the historiography of slavery, let me examine it briefly.

It is that all historical interpretations are shaped by values. No interpretation can transcend the values that a historian brings to his or her own investigation of the past, any more than historical figures at the time could escape their values. To a southern defender of slavery in the nineteenth century, one of the many justifications of slavery was that it served to introduce Africans to Christianity. To an African slave that interpretation could have had little meaning, and, in fact, must have seemed hypocritical and self-serving, as it does to us. The divergence of interpretation does not change the bare facts of life under slavery—the amount of food the slaves received, or the number of whippings, or the character of the slave family. But it does reveal that the meaning ascribed to a historical institution or event is shaped by the values brought to it. For even if a historian could show, as Fogel and Engerman tried to show in *Time on the Cross*, that the physical lot of slaves was no worse than that of free white people, that conclusion would not make slavery acceptable in the eyes of anyone who valued the many freedoms denied by slavery and who also recognized that both blacks and whites deserved those freedoms.

This is but another way of saying that the interpretation of history cannot escape value judgments. Since human beings make distinctions between good and evil, certain events, institutions, or people in the past are going to be denominated good and others bad. And sometimes those that are deemed good in one era are condemned in another. Negro slavery is among those institutions that were once considered acceptable, if not extolled, while by today's value judgments they are considered evil. I do not think it is possible today for a historian to write an acceptable history of slavery from the standpoint that slavery was good. The operative word here is "acceptable," for I have no doubt that a person living in our culture could, either from his or her own preferences or from a disciplined detachment, enter sufficiently into the values of a past society to write about slavery from that point of view. But I do not think that history would be read. I would argue further that what was written would be antiquarianism, not history. For the difference between antiquarianism and history is that the latter has a vital connection with the present while the former does not. In short,

if historians did not change their minds about the past as the great values of the society shifted, their history would cease to be a living part of the culture and therefore incapable of illuminating the present with the light of the past.

That brings us back to my friend the psychologist, for as the antiquarian finds no place for the present in his search of the past, so my friend finds no past in his remodeling of the present. Both separate past from present, thus making the past irrelevant and useless to the living. Neither represents history. As I hope my sketch of the changing interpretations of slavery showed, in order for history to be useful the light that it casts upon the present must be generated by more than the preferences or the ideology of the historian, however important they may be in getting the original inquiry started. It requires evidence and analysis drawn from an honest and full examination of the records of the past. If historical interpretations, regardless of their relevance to the present, do not rest on that foundation, they can no more illuminate the present than they can accurately describe the past. This process of arriving at an historical interpretation may not be tidy or quick, and certainly the results are rarely definitive, but the process is not, as my psychologist friend implied, merely capricious and personal.