Arguably the finest body of literature produced by American historians since 1960 has been the work reappraising the South's "peculiar institution." But before new views could take hold, the traditional interpretation that had dominated the field until the mid-1950s had to be swept away. Shaped by the assumption that slavery was a civilizing institution made necessary by the racial inferiority of Afro-Americans, previous histories sketched a congenial portrait of plantation life: decent living conditions for all, only the lightest of punishments, and a general system of give-and-take between master and slave. In this view, slavery -- usually unprofitable -- was maintained for racial and cultural reasons, rather than economic self-interest, and might well have died out peacefully had the Civil War not intervened.

Not until the era of the modern civil rights movement, which profoundly affected the ways historians viewed race relations in the past, did a full-scale refutation of the traditional interpretation appear. This was provided by Kenneth M. Stampp, who perceived that once one abandoned the notion that slaves were an inferior race in need of civilizing influences, the entire edifice of the traditional viewpoint must fall to the ground. Stampp depicted the plantation as an arena of persistent conflict between masters concerned mainly with maximizing their income and slaves in a constant state of semirebellion.

If Stampp cleared away old delusions about slavery, it was Stanley Elkins who drew attention to his generation's major concern--the nature of the slave experience itself. Impressed by studies arguing that other societies that had known slavery, such as Brazil, were marked by significantly less racial prejudice than the United States (an argument subsequently challenged by other scholars), Elkins asserted that bondage in this country had taken a particularly oppressive form, for which the best analogy was the Nazi concentration camp. A more devastating critique of American slavery could hardly be imagined, but Elkins was less concerned with the physical conditions of slave life than with the psychological impact of "total institutions" upon their victims, whether white or black. He concluded that the culture and self-respect of the slave had been stripped away, leaving an "infantilized" personality incapable of rebellion and psychologically dependent upon the master.

More than any other scholar, Elkins redefined the problématique (to borrow a term from the French philosopher Louis Althusser) of historians of slavery: that is, the underlying preoccupations that shape the questions scholars ask. His comparative approach inspired subsequent historians to place the South's peculiar institution within the broad context of the hemisphere as a whole, thus counteracting the insular "American exceptionalism" that underpins so many accounts of this nation's history. At the same time, comparative analysis has underscored the unique qualities of the old South's slave society in which, unlike that of the Caribbean, the white population considerably outnumbered the black. But most strikingly, even though few subsequent writers agreed entirely with his conclusions, Elkins pushed to the forefront the issue of "slave culture," which has dominated scholarship ever since. A generation of historians set out to demonstrate that rather than being transformed into "Sambos" entirely dependent upon their masters, slaves had created a viable, semiautonomous culture among themselves. Scholars delved into sources hitherto largely ignored -- slave songs, spirituals,
folklore, narratives written by fugitives, the reminiscences of former slaves interviewed during the 1930s by the Works Projects Administration (WPA), marriage registers dating from just after emancipation -- to demonstrate that slaves possessed their own values, aspirations, and sense of identity. Their work formed a major component of the broader effort in the 1960s and 1970s to rewrite American history "from the bottom up." The study of slave culture continued to dominate writing on slavery in the 1980s, although Peter Kolchin, in a work comparing American slavery with Russian serfdom, argues that scholars must not lose sight of the authority that planters exercised over every aspect of the slaves' lives, and the obstacles to the creation of real independence within the slave community.

Two institutions of slave life have attracted the most intense scrutiny -- the church and the family. The vitality, outlook, and distinctive patterns of worship of slave religion underscore the resiliency of the African inheritance and the degree to which blacks managed to resist the dehumanizing implications of the South's peculiar institution. Blacks rejected the interpretation of Christianity promoted by their masters, which emphasized obedience, humility, and release from suffering in an afterlife rather than in this world. Instead, they came to see themselves as a chosen people akin to the Children of Israel, their bondage and eventual freedom parts of a preordained divine plan. From the Bible they drew favorite images of those who had overcome adversity: Daniel escaping the lion's den, David slaying Goliath, and especially Moses leading his people to a promised land of freedom. In religion blacks found a vehicle for surviving their experience of enslavement with their dignity intact, and in the church an arena for developing a leadership independent of white control. Preachers were key organizers of the nineteenth century's major slave conspiracies, those of Gabriel Prosser (1800), Denmark Vesey (1822), and the religious exhorter Nat Turner (1831). Simultaneously, studies of folktales emphasized the slaves' imaginative reversal of everyday power relations. In the Brer Rabbit stories, for example, weaker creatures get the better of the strong by relying upon their wits. In black religion and folkways, scholars have found solid evidence that slaves understood their own exploitation and believed in the inevitability of their release from bondage.

Similarly, studies of the slave family have shown that an institution once thought to have been destroyed by enslavement not only survived but did so with a set of distinctive values, demonstrating again the partial autonomy of the slave community. Herbert G. Gutman, who has produced the most comprehensive investigation of this subject, acknowledges that black family life faced the constant threat of disruption because of the frequent sale of slaves. Yet he also presents convincing evidence that most slaves lived in "traditional" two-parent families, that many slave marriages were of long duration, and that naming patterns revealed an awareness of family ties going back one or two generations. Subsequent scholars have brought the insights of women's history to bear upon the slave family. Investigating the "internal economy" of slave life -- how slaves managed their own time when not at work for their masters -- they have discovered a sexual division of labor in which women were generally assigned the tasks of child rearing, cooking, and cleaning, while men hunted, fished, and did outdoor chores. Rather than being the "matriarchy" described in much traditional literature, the slave family was as much influenced by tendencies toward male primacy as the white families around it.

Most recently, historians have moved beyond broad generalizations about the South as a whole to explore the regional variations that gave rise to distinctive forms of antebellum slavery. It has long been recognized that slavery in the cities, where many bondsmen worked as skilled artisans
and enjoyed considerable independence from white supervision, differed substantially from the institution in the countryside. But only lately have scholars investigated in detail how rural slavery outside the Cotton Kingdom produced distinct ways of organizing labor, affecting the lives of white and black alike. In the sugar and rice regions, where agriculture required enormous capital investment to support elaborate irrigation systems and grinding and threshing machinery, there arose planter elites whose wealth placed them at the apex of antebellum society. And in both, slaves enjoyed a modicum of day-to-day autonomy: those in the rice fields set their own work pace under a system of individual tasks rather than gang labor; on the sugar plantations, as in the West Indies, black families were allotted individual garden plots. In both cases, slaves used their free time to grow and market crops of their own and were able to accumulate personal property, thus developing a far greater familiarity with the marketplace than those in the cotton region could acquire. In the upper South, moreover, a shift from tobacco to wheat production lessened the need for a resident year-round labor force, leading to the manumission of increasing numbers of slaves. In Maryland, for example, half the black population was already free by 1860.

Attention to regional diversity has also enriched our understanding of the South's free black population. Those in the upper South, employed primarily as agricultural workers or unskilled urban laborers and often linked by family ties to persons in bondage, found their lives closely intertwined with the slave community. Far different was the situation in the port cities of the deep South, particularly Charleston and New Orleans, where there arose a prosperous group of light-skinned free persons of color. Occupying a middle ground between slave and free, black and white, they created a flourishing network of schools, churches, and other institutions and had little in common with the slaves around them. But this free elite would come to play a major role in the turbulent politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Initially, the new focus on the social and cultural aspects of plantation life was accompanied by a neglect of nonslaveholding whites, the majority of the region's population. To a considerable extent, geographical divisions within the old South paralleled those of class and race, and in the predominantly white upcountry a society developed that was distinct in many respects from that of the Black Belt, where most planters and slaves resided. Only recently have historians begun to illuminate this world. The work of Steven Hahn depicts a largely self-sufficient white yeomanry owning few or no slaves, living on the periphery of the market economy, and seeking to preserve the autonomy of their small, local communities. Among other things, Hahn's book adds a new dimension to the continuing discussion of the degree of difference and similarity between northern and southern societies. The world of these yeomen differed profoundly from that of the market-oriented farmers of the Middle West, suggesting that commercial values had penetrated antebellum southern society far less fully than the contemporary North.

The view that slavery was the foundation of an economic and social order differing in fundamental aspects from that of the antebellum North can be found in most sophisticated form in the writings of Eugene D. Genovese, his generation's most influential interpreter of the old South. Genovese argued that slavery, although embedded within a capitalist world economy, spawned a unique form of social relations. More than simply an economic investment, it served as the foundation of a distinct way of life, which grew increasingly separate from that of the North as time went on. Slavery gave rise to a hierarchical society based on paternalism, an ideology linking dominant and subordinate classes in a complex pattern of mutual
responsibilities and obligations. The slaveholders' outlook differed profoundly from the competitive individualism and acquisitiveness so powerful in the contemporary North. Slaveholders saw themselves as responsible for the well being of an extended "family" of dependents, including not only slaves, but white women and children on the plantations. The work of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese shows that planters' wives accepted and reinforced these paternalist, familial values.

The portrait of the old South as a social and economic backwater reminiscent of the semifeudal European periphery did not, however, win universal assent. An entirely different point of view was adopted by historians who believed that the antebellum South adhered to, rather than diverged from, the main trends of nineteenth-century development. This interpretation was most closely associated with the work of "cliometricians" Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, whose writings embodied two major departures in historical methodology: the computerized analysis of quantitative evidence, and the application of modern neoclassical economic theory to historical problems. The first greatly expanded the possibilities for finding definitive answers to statistical questions (Fogel and Engerman demonstrated, for example, that slavery was a profitable institution, which was not likely to disappear for economic reasons). The second reduced the distinctiveness of the old South to a nonproblem by assuming that slave society functioned according to the same market assumptions as those that prevailed in the North.

Inferring the values and motives of blacks and whites alike from the aggregate economic data, Fogel and Engerman concluded that planters and slaves behaved toward one another in terms of rational calculation: the former concerned primarily with maximizing production, efficiency, and profit; the latter, equally imbued with the capitalist ethic, aspiring to social mobility within the slave system (for example, the ability to rise from field hand to driver). Other historians argued that antebellum North and South shared not only a common value structure but also the common experiences of territorial expansion and (for whites) political democratization. This emphasis on shared values made the Civil War itself rather difficult to explain, but the actual degree of southern distinctiveness remains a point of continuing debate.

No scholar has yet succeeded in synthesizing the new insights into a coherent account of American slavery's historical evolution from the colonial period through the era of "King Cotton." Nonetheless, the cumulative impact of the recent literature has been enormous. For one thing, it leaves little doubt about the centrality of slavery to the course of nineteenth-century American history. Scholars of slavery were among the first to challenge the consensus interpretation of the American experience that dominated writing in the 1950s but which, as its leading practitioner Richard Hofstadter later acknowledged, could hardly encompass the stark reality of the Civil War. It is no longer possible to view the peculiar institution as some kind of aberration, existing outside the mainstream of American development. Rather, slavery was intimately bound up with the settlement of the Western Hemisphere, the economic development of the antebellum nation, and the structure of national politics. And as Lincoln observed in his second inaugural address, everyone who lived through that era understood that slavery was "somehow" the cause of the war.

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