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THE DECADENCE OF THE PLANTATION SYSTEM¹

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The sinister prominence of slavery and Negro controversies has long obscured the historical importance of the plantation system. That system was as essential a correlative to the institution of slavery as the southern white man has been to the southern Negro. It, indeed, was less dependent upon slavery than slavery was upon it; and the plantation régime has persisted on a considerable scale to the present day in spite of the destruction of slavery a half century since. The plantation system formed, so to speak, the industrial and social frame of government in the black-belt communities, while slavery was a code of written laws enacted for the furtherance of that system's purposes. Since the overthrow of slavery, the present or former plantation communities have had to provide new laws and customs for the adjustment of employers and employees. In some localities these new codes have centered about the historic plantation system; in others the old régime has been almost completely discarded and the present adjustments have grown up *de novo*. Its concentration of labor under skilled management made the plantation system, with its overseers, foremen, blacksmiths, carpenters, hostlers, cooks, nurses, plow-hands and hoe-hands, practically the factory system applied to agriculture. Since the replacement of domestic manufacturing by the factory has become established in history as the industrial revolution, the counter replacement of the plantation system by peasant farming or other decentralized types of rural industry seems to require description as an industrial counter-revolution. That this counter-revolution has not wrought such havoc in the South as it did in Jamaica and Hayti is at the same time a cause for warm congratulation and an evidence of the greater vigor, adaptability and resourcefulness of both the white and Negro elements of our continental population.

¹A paper read in substance at the initial meeting of the Tulane Society of Economics, New Orleans, La., January 12, 1909.



To enumerate its achievements, whether good or bad: the plantation system furnished an early means of large-scale prosperity, and made America attractive to high-grade captains of industry; in colonial Virginia and Maryland it imported under indentures great numbers of white servants, who soon worked out their terms of service and became independent yeomen; it imported great numbers of Negroes in slavery into all the southern colonies, gave them discipline and instruction, and spread them through all the districts where the soil, climate and facilities for transportation were good for producing and marketing tobacco, rice, indigo, sugar or cotton; it thereby crowded many of the yeomen whites out of the staple districts and drove them away to the mountains or the pine-barrens, or to the great non-slaveholding northwest; it kept, on the other hand, a large element of the southern whites in fairly close and fairly friendly association with the Negroes, and in considerable degree welded the two races into one community; it certainly shaped the views and tradition of nearly all elements of the southern population; and it controlled the public policy of numerous states and in large measure that of the United States government. It was so thoroughly dominant in all the districts where staple production prevailed that few there questioned its thorough and lasting efficacy and expediency.

The plantation system provided for the steady employment of labor, mainly in gangs and in routine tasks, for the large-scale production of the staple crops. It utilized crude labor, and it depended upon fairly cheap and abundant labor for its maintenance. The economic strength of the system depended in large degree upon the ability of the planters to direct the energies of the laborers on hand to better effect than each laborer could direct his own energies in isolation. Now, when steam power and machinery are not in question, large units of industry are more efficient than small ones only in cases where the work may be reduced to a steady routine. In truck-farming, dairying, cereal production, when there are long lay-by intervals to be filled economically with odd jobs, and in most sorts of frontier industry, there are positive requirements of versatility and reliability on the part of the laborers; and in these cases no amount of knowledge and will-power on the part of a large-scale employer can make up for a deficiency in the necessary qualities on the part of his employees. Therefore the planta-

tion system, with its crude type of labor, was clearly debarred from these enterprises. The five great southern staples became plantation staples because each of them permitted long-continued routine work in their production. The nature of their system and their labor supply, in fact, made the planters depend upon their respective staples to a degree which proved a positive vice in the long run and eventually created a need for economic reform if not of actual revolution.

The plantation system was highly excellent for its primary and principal purpose of employing the available low-grade labor supply to serviceable ends; and also in giving industrial education to the laboring population, in promoting certain moral virtues, and in spreading the amenities. On the other hand, like other capitalistic systems, it sadly restricted the opportunity of such men as were of better industrial quality than was required for the field gangs, yet could not control the capital required to make themselves captains of industry. The prevalence of the plantation régime stratified industrial society, and society in general, to a greater degree than was expedient for developing the greatest resources and power from the population on hand. In particular, while it utilized the productive strength of the Negro population to excellent effect, it substantially discouraged the non-planter whites and thereby reduced their service to the world and to themselves. Furthermore, to say the least, it did not check the American disposition, born of the wilderness environment, to skim the fields and waste the natural fertility. Worst of all, perhaps, the predominance of the system hindered all diversification in southern industry, and kept the whole community in a state of commercial dependence upon the North and Europe like that of any normal colony upon its mother country. The ante-bellum South achieved no industrial complexity, and its several interests were deprived of any advantage from economic interdependence and mutual gain from mutual satisfaction of wants. Whereas the settlement of Ohio proved of great benefit to New York and Pennsylvania by extending the demand for their manufactures and swelling the volume of their commerce, the settlement of Alabama yielded no economic benefit to Virginia, and was of actual detriment to South Carolina, because of its flooding the world's market with the same fleecy staple upon which that older community, with its partially exhausted lands, continued to depend for prosperity.

In the ante-bellum régime in the black belts, unfortunately, the plantation system was in most cases not only the beginning of the development, but its end as well. The system led normally to nothing else. If a large number of planters had customarily educated a large proportion of their laborers into fitness for better things than gang work, the skilled occupations on the plantations would have been glutted and the superior ability of the laborers in large degree wasted. This was the fault of slavery as well as of the plantation system. Slavery, or in other words, the capitalization of labor control, was also responsible for the calamitous fact that the ante-bellum planters were involved in a cut-throat competition in buying labor and in selling produce. These shortcomings impaired the industrial efficiency of the southern community, and, at the same time, prevented that community from securing the full normal earnings from such productive efficiency as it did achieve.

If no cataclysm of war and false reconstruction had accompanied the displacement of slavery, the plantation system might well have experienced something of a happy further progress with free wage-earning labor. The increase of its service to the community would have required some provision whereby such laborers as the system had schooled into superior efficiency might easily withdraw from the gangs and set themselves up as independent artisans, merchants or farmers. The gangs must graduate at least the ablest of their laborers into the industrial democracy, and the régime must permit small farms, factories and cities to flourish in the same districts as the plantations. In a word, for the best economic results, industrial resources and the industrial mechanism of society must be made varied, complex and elastic, and every distinctly capable member of the community must be permitted to find his own suitable employment. On the other hand, wherever there is a large element of the population deficient in industrial talents and economic motives, as a great number of the southern Negroes still are, it is desirable for the sake of order and general prosperity that the inefficient and unstable element be provided with firm control and skilled management. The historic southern system met this particular need more successfully than any other device yet brought to the world's knowledge. The remodeling and partial replacement of that system was necessary in the progress of industrial society. The extent of its decadence can hardly be measured at the present day, since the United

States census figures are entirely misleading in the premises and the character and tendencies of the numerous rural industrial adjustments which have arisen in the latter-day South can hardly be estimated without more elaborate study than has yet been made in the field. But it seems fairly safe to conclude that retention of the plantation system in some form or other, in suitable districts and for the proper elements of the population, is fortunate at the present day and both expedient and inevitable for a long period in the future, as one among the bases of adjustment in southern industrial society.