

BLACK
RECONSTRUCTION
IN AMERICA

W. E. B. Du Bois

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
DAVID LEVERING LEWIS

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This matter of manumission, or emancipation 'now, thank heaven, less practiced than formerly,' is a species of false philanthropy, which we look upon as a cousin-German to Abolitionism—bad for the master, worse for the slave."

Beneath this educational and social propaganda lay the undoubted evidence of the planter's own expenses. He saw ignorant and sullen labor deliberately reducing his profits. In fact, he always faced the negative attitude of the general strike. Open revolt of slaves—refusal to work—could be met by beating and selling to the harsher methods of the deep South and Southwest as punishment. Running away could be curbed by law and police. But nothing could stop the dogged slave from doing just as little and as poor work as possible. All observers spoke of the fact that the slaves were slow and churlish; that they wasted material and malingered at their work. Of course, they did. This was not racial but economic. It was the answer of any group of laborers forced down to the last ditch. They might be made to work continuously but no power could make them work well.

If the European or Northern laborer did not do his work properly and fast enough, he would lose the job. The black slave could not lose his job. If the Northern laborer got sick or injured, he was discharged, usually without compensation; the black slave could not be discharged and had to be given some care in sicknesses, particularly if he represented a valuable investment. The Northern and English employer could select workers in the prime of life and did not have to pay children too young to work or adults too old. The slave owner had to take care of children and old folk, and while this did not cost much on a farm or entail any great care, it did seriously cut down the proportion of his effective laborers, which could only be balanced by the systematic labor of women and children. The children ran loose with only the most general control, getting their food with the other slaves. The old folk foraged for themselves. Now and then they were found dead of neglect, but usually there was no trouble in their getting at least food enough to live and some rude shelter.

The economic difficulties that thus faced the planter in exploiting the black slave were curious. Contrary to the trend of his age, he could not use higher wage to induce better work or a larger supply of labor. He could not allow his labor to become intelligent, although intelligent labor would greatly increase the production of wealth. He could not depend on voluntary immigration unless the immigrants be slaves, and he must bear the burden of the old and sick and could only balance this by child labor and the labor of women.

The use of slave women as day workers naturally broke up or made impossible the normal Negro home and this and the slave code led

to a development of which the South was really ashamed and which it often denied, and yet perfectly evident: the raising of slaves in the Border slave states for systematic sale on the commercialized cotton plantations.

The ability of the slaveholder and landlord to sequester a large share of the profits of slave labor depended upon his exploitation of that labor, rather than upon high prices for his product in the market. In the world market, the merchants and manufacturers had all the advantage of unity, knowledge and purpose, and could hammer down the price of raw material. The slaveholder, therefore, saw Northern merchants and manufacturers enrich themselves from the results of Southern agriculture. He was angry and used all of his great political power to circumvent it. His only effective economic movement, however, could take place against the slave. He was forced, unless willing to take lower profits, continually to beat down the cost of his slave labor.

But there was another motive which more and more strongly as time went on compelled the planter to cling to slavery. His political power was based on slavery. With four million slaves he could balance the votes of 2,400,000 Northern voters, while in the inconceivable event of their becoming free, their votes would outnumber those of his Northern opponents, which was precisely what happened in 1868.

As the economic power of the planter waned, his political power became more and more indispensable to the maintenance of his income and profits. Holding his industrial system secure by this political domination, the planter turned to the more systematic exploitation of his black labor. One method called for more land and the other for more slaves. Both meant not only increased crops but increased political power. It was a temptation that swept greed, religion, military pride and dreams of empire to its defense. There were two possibilities. He might follow the old method of the early West Indian sugar plantations: work his slaves without regard to their physical condition, until they died of over-work or exposure, and then buy new ones. The difficulty of this, however, was that the price of slaves, since the attempt to abolish the slave trade, was gradually rising. This in the deep South led to a strong and gradually increasing demand for the reopening of the African slave trade, just as modern industry demands cheaper and cheaper coolie labor in Asia and half-slave labor in African mines.

The other possibility was to find continual increments of new, rich land upon which ordinary slave labor would bring adequate return. This land the South sought in the Southeast; then beyond the Mississippi in Louisiana and Texas, then in Mexico, and finally, it turned