

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

We are constrained to reveal serious errors of fact and interpretation in Professor Degler's recent article, "Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice" in your October, 1959 issue. We find it necessary to do so because of the intrinsic importance of the subject and because Professor Degler's analysis takes issue with our studies, "The Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly*, VII (1950), 199 ff.; and *Race and Nationality in American Life* (Boston, 1957). We shall not here repeat the arguments advanced in these works; nor shall we attempt to correct all the mistakes Professor Degler has made. We shall rather limit ourselves to a consideration of his major misunderstandings of the historical evidence.

Professor Degler does not use the significant terms of his discussion, "slavery" and "prejudice," with any precision. At the very outset he confuses the issue by an inept comparison of slavery in English and Latin America. Slavery in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, he asserts, "did not leave upon the freed Negro anything like the prejudicial mark which it did in the United States." Hence that prejudicial mark must have antedated slavery. But the very authorities he cites in his footnotes 3 and 4 explain slavery did not have the same consequences in Brazil as in Virginia because slavery in Brazil was not the same institution as in Virginia, in such important respects as family or communal organization or the impact upon individual personality. The effects were different because the institutions Degler loosely comprehends within the term "slavery" were different. Nowhere does he show an understanding of the need for distinguishing the various meanings of the term in the continental colonies, in the West Indies or in Latin America.

By the same token, the loose reference to race prejudice in Professor Degler's usage conflates at least two different phenomena and obscures them both. The attitude which de Tocqueville and others perceived to be a product of slavery was one which rested upon the belief that the Negroes were a species of being inherently different from and inferior to the whites. Professor Degler offers no evidence of the existence of that assumption among

sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Englishmen or Americans. In those centuries, as Englishmen established contacts with every part of the world, they had numerous occasions to encounter men of other colors. In the voluminous accounts of their travels, we know of no such expressions of racial prejudice.

Professor Degler does present evidence of discrimination against the Negroes in the treatment of seventeenth-century American servants, but he does not understand that this is not the same phenomenon as that involved in his first usage of the term, "race prejudice." He not only errs in the implication that our treatment failed to recognize these discriminations; more important, he fails to perceive that such differential treatment was directed not against Negroes alone but against all sorts of strangers—white, red, and black. There were laws against "the insolencies of the Irish" just as there were laws against "the insolencies of the Negroes."

Englishmen, in the Old World and the New could, of course, perceive the differences between themselves and Negroes, or, for that matter, between themselves and Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Irishmen, Germans, Welsh and even Scots. The English had an ethnocentric preference for their own kind and looked down upon the queerness of any strangers; Elizabethan literature is full of slurs expressive of that attitude. But a "prejudice" against foreigners, which includes Irishmen or Hollanders, is far different from the race prejudice directed against the Negro in the nineteenth century. One can find the former in the seventeenth century, but not the latter.

Handicapped as he is by the inability to use his terms properly, Professor Degler cannot comprehend the subtle process by which changes in attitudes occur. One example will suffice. He questions the connection we established between the deterioration of the position of Negroes and the improvement in the condition of white servants after the 1660's. He does so by asserting that the position of the Negroes could not have declined for this reason in New England "where servants were of minor importance." There is no footnote to this astounding statement which runs counter to all the evidence. We cannot, of course, expect that Professor Degler should have known William Towner's unpublished dissertation on the subject. But we do have a right to expect some familiarity with the evidence in his own footnote 68. Weedon's *History*, there cited, points out that trade in indentured servants "went on more or less from the beginning. Besides the influx of freemen and freewomen, gentle or yeoman, there was a number of banished convicts and a steady stream of laborers, forced to sell their service to pay the expense of this transfer to the better opportunities of the New World" (II, 520).

Professor Degler further compounds his own confusion by reference to three Virginia and Maryland laws—of 1662, of 1668, and of 1671. Professor Degler may not himself know what he intends to show by them. He summarizes these laws in a paragraph which begins by asserting that they "indicate that an improving status for white servants was at best doubtful"

and which ends by suggesting that “the white servant’s status was not improving.”

But whatever his interpretation, even if the laws cited said what Professor Degler claims they do, they would not contradict our proposition that major changes occurred after the 1660’s. Surely it is a naive view that would expect social attitudes transformed in the 1660’s to be immediately reflected in every legislative action of the decade.

Anyway, the laws do not say what Professor Degler thinks they do. The text of the acts in question supports our view. The Virginia statute is brief enough to be quoted in full:

WHEREAS it hath been questioned whether servants running away may be punished with corporall punishment by their master or magistrate since the act already made gives the master satisfaction by prolonging their time by service. *It is declared and enacted by this assembly* that moderate corporall punishment inflicted by master or magistrate upon a runaway servant, shall not deprive the master of the satisfaction allowed by the law, the one being as necessary to reclayme them from persisting in that idle course, as the other is just to repaire the damages sustayned by the master. (Hening, *Statutes at Large*, II, 266).

This text makes evident: first, that this is an enactment declaratory of intent, not new legislation; and second, that it is evoked by questioning based upon an enlarging view of the rights of servants. The reaffirmation of such a law is evidence of the significance of the questioning of it.

Similarly, the Maryland laws of 1662 and 1671 are reenactments of earlier laws. The antecedent of the statute on length of service survives and proves to be identical with its reenactment. Had Professor Degler compared the two he might have been led to speculate as to why the Assembly found it necessary twice to extend the duration of service from four to five years. It might even have occurred to him that the second measure was an indication of the difficulty of securing conformity with the first (*Maryland Archives*, I, 451; II, 147, 335).

An inappropriately framed problem, loosely-used terms and obtuseness to the dynamics of social change have served Professor Degler badly. The history of American slavery must be approached from an altogether different point of departure. Analysis of the interplay of social, cultural, economic and intellectual forces reveals a gradual transformation of both attitudes and law in which differences in treatment, based upon the helplessness and the strangeness of the Negro, slowly defined his status; and in which the necessity for explaining and justifying that status ultimately evoked the prejudices and the ideology of racism.

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