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THE CRIME OF ARISTOCRACY -
COUNT ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE
ON AMERICAN SLAVERY

During his journey to the United States in 1831, the French count Alexis de Tocqueville encountered in Baltimore a slave so terrorized by his master that he had gone out of his mind and spent his days in lunacy, howling like a dog¹. Near the end of the journey, Tocqueville wrote to his father:

I have thought a good deal about what might be written about America. To try to present a complete picture of the Union would be an enterprise absolutely impracticable for a man who has passed but a year in this immense country. I believe, moreover, that such a work would be as boring as it would be uninstrutive. One might be able, on the other hand by selecting the topics, to present only those subjects having a more or less direct relation to our [France's] social and political state ... There's the plan: but will I have time and discover in myself the ability to carry it out?²

For a year, Tocqueville was unable to discover this ability. In 1833, he finally sat down to write the first volume of his magnificent *Democracy in America*, published two years later. He addressed his book to the French: with the Great Revolution in mind, he wanted to present them with a true democratic society, warning them of its perils at the same time.

The last chapter of the first volume is devoted to racial problems in the United States. The image of the mad slave from Baltimore must have haunted the French aristocrat, because he wrote quite a lot about slavery. In his opinion keeping

¹ J. Epstein, *Alexis de Tocqueville – Democracy's Guide*, New York 2006, p. 42.

² *Ibidem*, p. 63.

so many people in bondage seemed completely at odds with the political ideology of America. In the first pages of the chapter, he discusses the differences between ancient and modern slavery. Ancient slavery was not based on racism. "Among the ancients", writes Tocqueville, "the slave belonged to the same race as his master"³. In those times he was usually a prisoner of war, and according to *ius belli* (the law of war) he became the servant of those who won the conflict. "And often", we read further on, "he was superior to [his master] in education and enlightenment"⁴. This remark seems very appropriate when one thinks of some Roman slaves, especially of Greek origin, who very often were the teachers of their masters. Such people, once emancipated, easily joined the intellectual elite of Roman Empire, sometimes working as the ministers of emperors themselves. For example Cleander, omnipotent advisor to Commodus (180–192), was a former slave⁵. Such a "freedman so strongly resembled men of free origin that it soon became impossible to distinguish him in their midst"⁶.

In contrast to those times, racism was a keystone of North American bondage. Negroes were regarded as creatures inferior to whites. Even most enlightened Southerners in history shared the racial prejudices of their society. Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* describes blacks as subhumans:

They are more ardent about their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether has give life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more on sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labor. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course. Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason and imagination it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to whites; in reason much inferior [...] in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous...⁷

The Founding Fathers treated Negroes as creatures driven mainly by instincts, almost animals. Such an opinion was common among almost all white Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. This became very evident in the Supreme Court sentence which ended the Dred Scott case. Dred Scott was a slave who, living for a long time on territory where slavery was banned, wanted the courts to set him free. In 1857, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Roger Taney, denied his claim, stating also that the drafters of the Constitution had viewed all blacks as

³ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chicago 2000, p. 327.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 327.

⁵ M. Cary, H. Scullard, *A History of Rome Down to the Reign of Constantine*, Polish edition: Warsaw 1992, Vol. 2, p. 294.

⁶ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁷ *Slavery and Emancipation*, ed. R. Halpern, E. Dal Lago, Oxford 2002, p. 93–94.

beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.

The main defender of North American slavery, George Fitzhugh, wrote in his *Slaves Without Masters*, published in 1857, that

There is one strong argument in favor of negro slavery over all other slavery: that he, being unfitted for mechanic arts, for trade, and all skillful pursuits, leaves those pursuits to be carried on by whites; and does not all industry into disrupt, as in Greece and Rome, where the slaves were not only the artist and mechanics, but also the merchants⁸.

A liberated slave had no chance of entering the free society as an equal. Surrounded by hostile attitudes, he was subdued to humiliating segregation, deprived of many privileges enjoyed by whites. The fear of racial intermingling was very strong among whites, even in the free states. "You can make the Negro free", claims Tocqueville, "but you cannot do it so that he is not in the position of a stranger *vis à vis* the European"⁹. This is because "we hardly recognize in him the general features of humanity"¹⁰. But while in the South,

the master does not fear lifting his slave up to himself, because he will always be able, if he wishes, to throw him back into the dust [...]. In the North, the white no longer perceives distinctly the barriers that will separate him from a debased race¹¹.

The physical power exercised by the Southerner over his slave (whipping, prison) protected his privileged position. In the North, segregation was the only legal way of keeping blacks at a distance.

The concept of black inferiority helped slave owners to justify the institution of slavery. According to them the meek intellectual values of Negroes predestined them to work for whites who civilized them, giving them the English language, European clothes and – last but not least – the Christian religion. What is more, the proud Southern planter believed that Providence had given him a mission to fulfill. "I have a large family on my own", wrote one of them, William Byrd II, in 1726,

and my Doors are open to Every Body [...] Like one of the Patriarchs, I have my flocks, my herds, my bond – men and my bond – women [...]. I must take care to keep all my people to their Duty, to set all the springs in motion and to make every one draw his equal share to carry the Machine forward¹².

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁹ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 329.

¹² *Slavery and Emancipation...*, p. 58.

People like William Byrd II formed an aristocratic society. According to Tocqueville, this was determined by the fact that the people who settled in the Southern states before the formation of the American Union were usually “great English property owners”, who brought with them aristocratic ways and aristocratic estate law. Although in America they “possessed no privileges and since cultivation by slaves gave them no tenant farmers and consequently no patronage”, they nevertheless “formed a superior class having ideas and tastes of its own and generally concentrating political action within itself”¹³. The planters were especially proud of the leaders, like Jefferson or Washington, whom they gave to the American Revolution. But being at the head of it, they sustained the institution which would one day threaten the existence of the Union.

Slavery, according to the author of *Democracy in America*, “dishonors work; it introduces idleness into society, and with it, ignorance and haughtiness, poverty and luxury. It enervates the forces of the intellect and puts human activity to sleep. The influence of slavery, combined with the English character, explains the mores and social state of the South”¹⁴. Tocqueville points out that the character of the Southerner is formed mainly under the influence of slavery. The “peculiar institution”, as some called it, made white people not only lazy but also despotic and unable to tolerate any opinion contrary to theirs; meeting resistance they reacted with aggression. This was because:

The slave is a servant who does not debate and submits to everything without murmuring. Sometimes he assassinates his master, but he never resists him. In the South there are no families so poor as to have no slaves. The American of the South, from his birth, finds himself invested with a sort dictatorship; the first notions that he receives from life make him know that he is born to command, and the first habit that he contracts is that of dominating without difficulty. Education therefore tends powerfully to make the American of the South a man high-minded, prompt irascible, violent, ardent in his desires, impatient of obstacles, but easy to discourage if he cannot triumph with the first stroke¹⁵.

The aristocratic pride of Southerners made them also view even slight attempts to deprive them of their rights as a deadly offence. The best illustration of the Southern character is the so-called Nullification Crisis. Between 1828 and 1832, federal power passed two tariffs protecting the Northern industry. The South regarded them as an assault on its economy.

The Southern politician John C. Calhoun formulated the Nullification Theory, according to which a state had the right to secession when its prerogatives were violated by the federal government. The whole case nearly ended up in civil war, when South Carolina started gathering militia to oppose the tariffs and President Andrew Jackson threatened to send troops to Charleston. Fortunately the parties

¹³ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 360.

produced a compromise. In the years to come, foolish pride led the Southern states to rebellion and war¹⁶.

The decision to confront the federal government in 1861 was not especially difficult since, as Tocqueville mentions in his book, “the use of arms is familiar to [the Southerner]. And from his childhood he has learned to stake his life in a single combat”¹⁷. The aggressive character of Southerners was also an influence of slavery. It was Thomas Jefferson who said in his *Notes on Virginia* that slavery makes white children resort to violent ways. It is true that young men were familiar with the use of arms. Most of them were members of so called *Negro Watches* as well as local militias. Besides, the Southern code of honor included the duel as a way of solving conflicts (incidentally, if it were not for the slavery and the aristocratic lifestyle it sustained, there would perhaps never have been such a code). *Negro Watches*, the patrols keeping blacks in respect of white power, remind me of Ancient Sparta. Southern whites feared their slaves just like Spartans feared the helots.

In the eyes of the French count, the inhabitants of the North formed a completely different species. They did not see “slaves running their cradle”; they “therefore learn easily to know by themselves the natural limits to their power; they “do not expect to bend the wills that are opposed to their power”. Because of that, “they are patient, reflective, tolerant, slow to act, and persevering in their design”. Whereas “the American of the South loves greatness, luxury”, his Northern counterpart “has been occupied with combating misery” since childhood. He is generally “more active, more reasonable, more enlightened and more skillful”¹⁸.

But it was not in character, but in the economy that the difference between North and South was most visible. Tocqueville presents the opinion that “the provinces that so to speak possessed no slaves grew in population, in wealth, and in well-being more than those that had them”¹⁹.

Tocqueville discusses this difference using his famous comparison between Ohio and Kentucky. In the free states the work of free laborers was more efficient. They worked for themselves, therefore they paid more attention to their job, some hoping that the money they collected would one day let them start their own business. Succeeding in this, they increased the wealth of the whole country, giving others a place to work and improving industry.

In the slave states, on the other hand, the development was slowed by the system of plantation. The slaveholder had to oversee his serfs in order to be sure that they were working effectively. According to James Thomas Flexner, biographer of George Washington, slaves not only worked inefficiently but also committed acts of sabotage: they would spoil every machine. Blacks simulated diseases and stole things from the plantation as well. Supervisors, on the other hand, were

¹⁶ *Slavery and Emancipation...*, p. 316.

¹⁷ A de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 359–361.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 330.

usually drunk and lazy. Planters had to provide their serfs with clothes, food, as well as welfare when they were old and weak, wasting money they could invest somewhere else²⁰.

This last fact led George Fitzhugh, cited earlier, to claim that slavery was in fact a more humanitarian institution than the capitalistic system of the Northern states, because the white workers of factories were left to themselves once they were no longer able to work, whereas an old slave was given food and shelter. Therefore, in his opinion, "Our Southern slavery has become a benign and protective institution, and our negroes are confessedly better off than any free laboring population in the world"²¹.

Southern economy left no space for free labor. "It is thus toward the free states" writes Tocqueville, "that European immigration is directed"²². The bravest and most industrious elements from Europe came to the Northern states simply because they had no prospects in the South. Many Southerners had seen the inefficiency of slave economy. Why did they not try to abolish slavery themselves?

First of all they still gained large profits, thanks to the cotton gin, a machine separating seeds from cotton. Its invention increased the efficiency of production. They still did not have to work for themselves. Secondly, they feared that liberated blacks would take revenge on them:

It is not that all inhabitants of the South regard slavery as necessary to the wealth of the master; on this point many of them are in accord with Northerners and willingly admit that servitude is an evil; but they think that one must preserve this evil in order to live.

Besides, slavery was not only an economic and social institution – it was a lifestyle. Tocqueville describes it as an institution completely alien to American democracy. Laziness and keeping so many people in bondage was in his eyes a crime – the crime of Southern aristocrats. But despite its inefficiency, slavery coexisted with Northern capitalism at the time when Tocqueville wrote his book. Why – instead of diminishing slowly – did it end by the 1860s? Unwillingly, the Southerners themselves sealed their doom.

It all started with the competition over the Western territories between the North and the South. The cultivation of cotton and tobacco, yielding relatively large profits, at the same time devastated the soil. Therefore Southern planters needed new land, desired by the free Northern farmers as well.

Southern bondage had a very important political aspect as well, which Tocqueville did not mention. From 1787, three people were counted for every five slaves to determine the number of representatives in Congress²³. Growth in the

²⁰ J. T. Flexner, *Washington. The Indispensable Man*, Polish edition: Warsaw 1990, p. 423–424.

²¹ *Slavery and Emancipation...*, p. 58.

²² A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

²³ H. Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, Polish translation: Wrocław 2004, p. 223.

population of the free states would give them more representatives than the slave ones. Therefore the expansion of slavery would help the planters to defend their interests in Washington. "The South", observed the French historian, "today knows that federal power is escaping it, that each year sees the number of its representatives in Congress diminish and these of the North and the West grow"²⁴.

The conflict resulted in a series of compromises. One of these concerned the status of the state of Missouri. Representative Tallmadge wanted it to join the Union as a free state. The Southerners resisted this idea. Finally slavery was accepted there, and another state, Maine, became a free state. The territory of Louisiana, purchased from France in 1803, had been divided: slavery was accepted south of 36, 30' N, and banned north of this line. This so-called Missouri Compromise was signed in 1820. In 1850 another compromise solved the problem of slavery in the lands captured from Mexico. But the tension was still high.

At the same time the incredibly strong abolitionist movement appeared in the North. Accusing the Southern society of cruelty, abolitionists led many to sympathize with Negroes. Regarded as lethal enemies by the inhabitants of the Southern states, they made the latter suspicious towards the North. The suspicion arose after John Brown's revolt (1859). Brown was a fanatical abolitionist who seized an arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He planned to arm black fugitives from neighboring plantations and lead them to confrontation with slave owners. Captured and executed, he became a martyr of radical abolitionism. For planters he was evidence of a Northern plot to abolish slavery²⁵. The Republican Party was considered an enemy as well.

When its candidate, Abraham Lincoln, was elected president, the South reacted hysterically. Believing that Lincoln would abolish slavery, it chose secession. In this way the words of Tocqueville had been fulfilled: "Once the federal will is broken, Southerners would be wrong to count on lasting support on the part of their brothers in the North"²⁶.

Southerners broke the federal link themselves and were now seen in the North as enemies of the Union. The secession led to the Civil War (1861–1865), perhaps the most tragic event in American history. The Confederates – as the secessionists were known – had few chances to win this war. The plantation system took revenge. The Confederacy lacked factories, ironworks, shipyards and even a sufficient number of railways. Trying to force the European powers to intervene on their behalf, the Southerners recklessly ceased the export of cotton. It soon turned out that Europe got on very well without it. The war resulted in the defeat of Confederacy, and the emancipation of Negroes guaranteed by the Thirteenth Amendment. Federal forces watched over the social changes in the South, usually referred to as Reconstruction.

²⁴ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 366–367.

²⁵ G. Swoboda, *Gettysburg 1863*, Warsaw 1990, p. 15–17.

²⁶ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

Tocqueville predicted that “the abolition of slavery in the South will increase the repugnance for blacks felt by the white population”²⁷. With black people liberated, they became the object of terror. Once workers on a plantation, they now became competitors demanding land and privileges. The Southerners during the years of Reconstruction could not stand seeing blacks becoming step by step rightful citizens of the United States. For them they were still “niggers”, savages not worthy of being called humans. But now their former masters lacked legal physical power, so they started to abuse Negroes by other means.

The Southern states very quickly passed so-called *Black Codes*, laws limiting the civil rights and liberties of black people. They mainly concerned the work of former slaves, who were obliged to make annual contracts for their laborers in writing, and if they should run away from their tasks they were to forfeit their wages for the year. They had to present licenses citing places of residence and authorizing them to work. Fugitives from labor were arrested and carried back to their employers. It was made a misdemeanor (punishable by a fine or imprisonment) to persuade a freedman to leave his employer. Negroes were not allowed to carry knives or firearms unless they were licensed to do so. One was not allowed to sell intoxicating liquors to a Negro. The aim of the Black Codes was to create a substitute for the old plantation system with its strict discipline. Between 1876 and 1965 the other system – *the Jim Crow laws* – introduced segregation of public schools, public transportation, restrooms and restaurants.

Ten of the eleven Southern states ratified constitutions or amendments that completed the disfranchisement of most African Americans. Voter registration became more complicated; it required poll taxes, residency requirements, record-keeping and literacy tests. According to these regulations, a great number of blacks and poor whites became deprived of suffrage, representation at any level of government, local elected offices, and the right to serve on juries (usually restricted to voters).

Hatred toward blacks took the form of barbaric violence as well. In 1865, six frustrated veterans of the Confederate Army formed a secret brotherhood known as the Ku Klux Klan. Its name came from the Greek word *kyklos*, meaning *circle*. Two years later the Klan adopted more organized, hierarchical structures. George Gordon wrote the so-called *Prescript*, a sort of elementary “white power”. His friend Nathaniel Bedford Forrest, slave trader and confederate general, reacted very enthusiastically when he heard about the organization. “That’s a good thing”, he said, “We can use that to keep the niggers in their place”. Forrest soon became Grand Wizard – national chief of the Klan. The famous historian of Reconstruction, Eric Foner, described this brotherhood as “a military force serving the interest of [...] the planter class and all those who desired restoration of white supremacy [...]. It aimed to reestablish control of the black labor force, and restore racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life”²⁸.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

²⁸ E. Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, New York 1990, p. 184.

Klansmen, wearing grotesque white robes and hoods, threatened and assassinated black social and political leaders, burned houses belonging to freedmen, and drove them off their land. A good example of the Klan's methods was the case of Essie Harris. This former slave from North Carolina possessed a gun which was confiscated by the "Night Riders". Recklessly, he armed himself again. This time Klansmen attacked his house at night. Harris wounded two of his attackers. Finally, terrorized, he had to leave his house with his whole family²⁹.

Black voting was strongly resented: in 1868, within a few weeks of the presidential election, about two thousand people were either killed or wounded in Louisiana.

In judicial cases concerning Klan atrocities some juries were terrified, but most secretly supported its methods. Therefore there were hardly any condemning sentences. In 1871, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the *Ku Klux Klan Act*. Section Three of the act treated the activity of the Klan as an anti-state plot³⁰:

[...] in all cases of insurrection, domestic violence, unlawful combinations, or conspiracies in any State shall so obstruct or hinder the execution of the laws thereof, and of the United States, as to deprive any portion or class of people of such State of any of the rights, privileges, or immunities, or protection, named in the constitution and secured by this act, and the constituted authorities of such State shall either be unable to protect, or shall, from any cause, fail in or refuse protection of the people in such rights, such facts shall, from any cause, fail in or refuse protection of the people in such rights, such facts shall be deemed a denial by such State of the equal protection of the laws to which they are entitled under the constitution of the United States; and in all such cases ... it shall be lawful for the President, and it shall be his duty to take such measures, by the employment of the militia or the land and naval forces of the United States, or of either, or by other means, as he may deem necessary for the suppressions of such insurrection, domestic violence, or combinations.

Hundreds of Klansmen were either fined or imprisoned. By 1872, the Klan was broken as an organization.

Nevertheless, the racial violence in the South raged on. In 1873 in Colfax, Louisiana, white militia killed between 105 and 208 black Republicans who contested the election of a sheriff. Aside from the Ku Klux Klan, there were other similar groups such as the White League or the Knights of the White Camelia. The Klan itself was reborn twice, in 1915 and around 1950, a fact which is the best testimony to the lasting racial hatred. This repugnance was also felt in the North, where the liberated Negroes went to seek a new life. Ready to work for low wages, they were viewed there as dangerous rivals by the white workforce.

In any case, slavery was over, and the black population of the United States now had more possibilities of development than ever. Tocqueville had predicted the fall of the "peculiar institution", but was deeply mistaken in assuming the way it would end. He prophesied a great racial war which would result in the emancipation of blacks and extermination of whites, or at least their withdrawal from the

²⁹ J. Sobieraj, *Ku Klux Klan*, Warsaw 2004, p. 35–36.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

South. "Furthermore", we read in his books, "whatever the period of the struggle may be, the whites of the South, should they be abandoned to themselves with an immense superiority of enlightenment and of means; but the blacks will have numbers and the energy of despair working for them. There are great resources when one has arms in hand. Perhaps then what happened to the Moors in Spain will happen to the white race of the South"³¹.

Nothing like that happened. It was mainly whites who spilled blood for American blacks. The latter found a powerful ally in federal government and its army. The abolition of slavery was carried out by the federal officials in the post-bellum South. Of course, the former slaves did not get all the privileges at once, but they could still have hope.

Tocqueville's comparison to medieval Spain is surely an exaggeration. Even if the Civil War had not taken place, and the black population had tried to win their freedom by themselves, they would never have obtained power comparable to the Christians of Spain, led by kings, supported by the Church and powerful military organizations like the knight orders of Santiago or Calatrava. And in any case, the struggle with the Moors lasted centuries.

The "numbers and energy of despair" mentioned by Tocqueville are not enough to win or even lead such war. One needs an aggressive leader and political self-consciousness to organize efficient resistance. Blacks in the nineteenth century lacked both. The first true leader of the black community, Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), preached the idea of compromise with Southern whites. In his Atlanta speech of 1895, he claimed that African Americans should sacrifice their political power and social privileges in order to concentrate their energies on education and gaining wealth:

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house.

He assured the Southerners that their former slaves would be very loyal and helpful neighbors:

You can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unrestful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one.

³¹ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

Under the direction of Booker T. Washington, young Negroes took up not arms to fight for privileges, but tools to build the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, a technical school founded in 1881. The pacifist line was continued in the twentieth century by Martin Luther King, an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi³². Even the most radical Negro organization, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, concentrated more on welfare programs like clothing distribution, free medical clinics or drug and alcohol rehabilitation rather than violence. Black Panthers used firearms mainly to oppose police brutality against African Americans. Other than this, they never had a great influence on the black community. Around 1970, they had only one thousand members³³.

The post-bellum South was certainly full of violence, but in the form of riots and clashes easily suppressed by federal forces. The lack of vast intellectual elites among blacks can easily be explained. Tocqueville devotes an excellent passage to this topic:

The Ancients knew only irons and death to maintain slavery, Americans of the South knew only irons and death to maintain slavery; Americans of the South have found more intellectual guarantees for the longevity of their power. They have, if I can express myself so, spiritualized despotism and violence. In antiquity one sought to prevent the slave from breaking his irons; in our one has undertaken to remove his desires for it.

The ancients chained the slave's body, but they left his spirit free and permitted him to enlighten himself. In that they were consistent with themselves; there was then a natural way out of servitude; from one day to another a slave could become free and equal to his master.

Americans of the South, who do not think that Negroes can be intermingling with them in any period, have forbidden under severe penalties teaching them to read and to write. Not wanting to elevate them to their level, they hold them down as close as possible to the brute³⁴.

Southerners very correctly recognized the education of blacks as a great peril. This danger became very clear during Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. Turner was a slave who believed himself to be a prophet sent by God to liberate black people. He started an uprising in Virginia and, after committing many atrocities, was caught and hanged. His case resulted in a very strict ban on teaching blacks to read and write³⁵. The aversion to the idea of educating blacks was very strong in the South. After the Civil War, people founding schools for former slaves, as well as the people teaching in them, were persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan. On March 1871 a group of KKK members visited Miss Allen, who ran a school in Cotton Gin Port in Monroe County, and ordered her to leave the place, using the threat of violence.

In his memoirs, the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass writes that his master was infuriated upon discovering that his wife had taught Douglass to read. He said: "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. He should know nothing

³² H. Brogan, *op. cit.*, p. 686.

³³ *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 4, Danbury 1995, p. 36.

³⁴ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 346–347.

³⁵ *Slavery and Emancipation...*, p. 266.

but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world”³⁶.

Douglass’s master was right, because one of the first texts read by the young slave was *Columbian Orator*, a treatise against slavery³⁷.

There was another circumstance which helped the masters to control their slaves. Black people never had real families, which are the best school of character. Negro children were very often taken away from their parents. They hardly experienced love and the feeling of security necessary for appropriate development. Uprooted, they easily submitted to the will of their owners. Frederick Douglass was one of many black boys who never had a family. He never came to know who his father was; brought up by a grandmother, he saw his mother only once in his lifetime. He did not even suspect that he had brothers and sisters until he left his grandmother’s hut to live on a plantation. Summarizing his childhood, Douglass writes:

There is not, beneath the sky, an enemy to filial affection so destructive as slavery. It had made my brothers and sisters strangers to me; it converted the mother that bore me, into a myth; it shrouded my father in mystery, and left me without an intelligible beginning in the world³⁸.

The attempt to keep the slaves at the level of domestic animals was another aspect of the crime of the aristocracy. Looking at the American South, one can only agree with Abraham Lincoln, who criticized Stephen Douglas’s concept of popular sovereignty by claiming that real democracy cannot exist in the slave society³⁹. The peculiar institution led to degeneration of republican virtues, especially freedom of speech. Southerners resisted the distribution of anti-slavery writings. In July 1835, an angry mob broke into the Charleston post office and made a bonfire out of abolitionist newspapers found there⁴⁰. The same year, the local postmaster ordered that such press be taken out of the mail⁴¹. The state legislatures promised awards for abolitionist journalists: in 1831, four thousand dollars was offered for William Lloyd Garrison, and the so-called Vigilance Committee offered over thousand dollars for any person distributing *Liberator* or *Appeal*⁴².

The readers of the abolitionist press, and even people expressing their unease over slavery, often became the victims of lynching. A Georgian subscriber to *Liberator*, for example, was tarred and feathered, set afire, dipped in the river and then whipped⁴³. Such violence once took place even in Congress. Preston Brooks,

³⁶ F. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, New York 2003, p. 108.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 116–117.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

³⁹ H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, Chicago 1982, p. 13.

⁴⁰ J. Hope Franklin, A. A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom; A History of Negro Americans*, New York 1988, p. 175.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 175.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

who had severely beaten Charles Sumner when the latter had condemned the cruelty of border ruffians in Kansas, seems to be the incarnation of Thomas Jefferson's warnings. In *Notes on Virginia*, the future president wrote that

There must be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passions towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But usually it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to the worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities⁴⁴.

Brooks simply dealt with the old senator just like he would with a rebellious "nigger". Southern congressmen opposed the petition action taken by the abolitionists in 1836 and 1837, for the abolishment of slavery in the District of Columbia. The above-mentioned senator, John C. Calhoun from South Carolina, considered these petitions "the instruments of Northern conspiracy to attack the peculiar institutions of the South" and called for their rejection⁴⁵. His motion failed, but a special committee supported by "Slave Power" recommended that "all petitions relating to the subject of slavery or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being either printed or referred, be laid upon the table and... no further action whatever shall be had thereon"⁴⁶. This was the so-called "gag rule". Former president John Quincy Adams strongly resented this practice, as "a direct violation of the Constitution of the United States [...] and the rights of [his] constituents" and engaged his authority in the defense of the right of petition⁴⁷.

Defending slavery, Southern officials and writers raised arguments suitable for advocating feudalism, having nothing to do with the democratic spirit. "In all social systems" said Governor Hammond of South Carolina, "there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life... Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have or you would have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government: and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air, as to build either the one on the exempt on this mud-sill"⁴⁸.

In *Southern Institutes*, George S. Sawyer reiterated that Negroes are the lower race predestined to work for whites:

⁴⁴ *Slavery and Emancipation...*, p. 95.

⁴⁵ G. Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse 1830–1844*, San Diego 1964, p. 110.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ J. Hope Franklin, A. A. Moss, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 174.

The social, moral, and political, as well as the physical history of the Negro race bears strong testimony against them; It furnishes the most undeniable proof of their mental inferiority. In no age or condition has the real Negro shown a capacity to throw off the chains of barbarism and brutality that have long bound down the nation of that race; or to rise above the common cloud of darkness that still broods over them⁴⁹.

Such an attitude stood in contrast to the ideas of equality and freedom that created the United States. Yet Southerners remained faithful to one specific value of republican society: the right to ownership. The ownership that lowered human beings to the level of moveable goods.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 174–175.