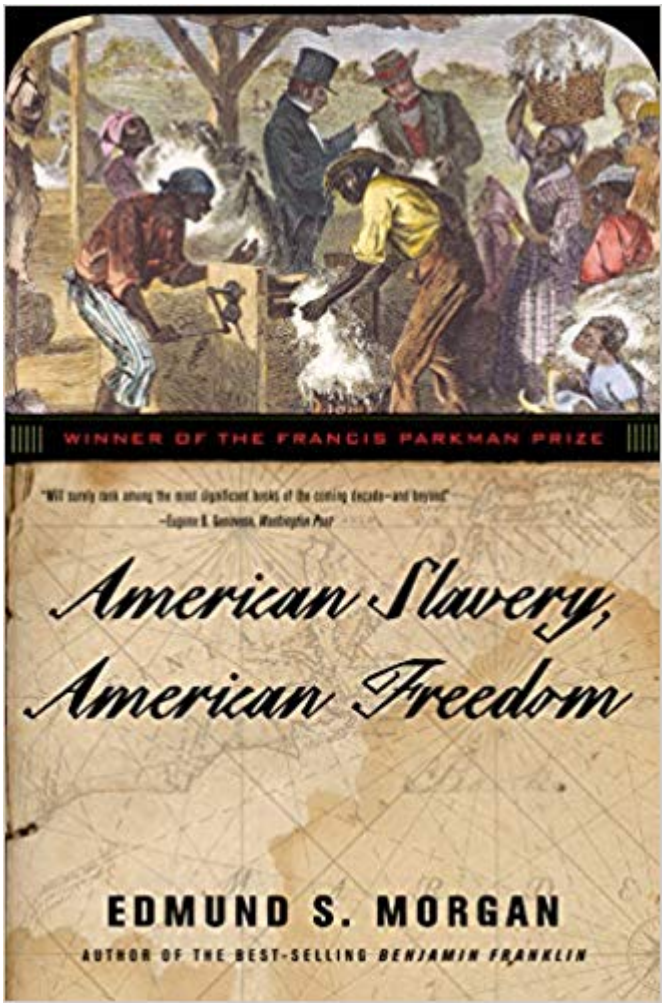
Americans on the James



Re-reading by Kathleen Brown

I own three copies of Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1976), the legacy of a decade of teaching early American history. Although the pages of the oldest copy are no longer attached to the paperback binding, it still enjoys a prime spot on my bookshelf because of its extensive marginalia and sentimental value—this is the copy I read in graduate school, the copy that inspired my first book. I continue to assign Morgan's classic study of British North America's first slave society to my students, and they continue to read it with enthusiasm. Why, when so many other scholarly books can barely provide their authors with fifteen minutes of fame, has Morgan's withstood twenty-five years of new research and changing scholarly fashion? How can we account for the persisting appeal of his narrative for students born long after it was written?

It takes the reader of *American Slavery, American Freedom* forty-five pages to get to the British North American mainland, with stops in Spanish Florida and the doomed colony at Roanoke. Morgan used these pages to sketch the genealogy

of the Virginia Company's plan for the North American mainland. Motivated by an intense imperial rivalry with Spain and a desire to bring glory to the English nation, early English explorers fantasized about liberating Indians oppressed by ruthless Spanish conquistadores. When they imagined their own colonies, they pictured submissive natives, laboring cheerfully to support their colonizers. English colonies would differ from those of the Spaniards because England itself was home to a particular brand of freedom, the product of the political conflicts of the sixteenth century and Parliament's efforts to expand its autonomy. By the early seventeenth century, the concept of a distinctive English freedom had become a self-conscious feature of English national identity and permeated all of England's efforts to become an imperial power. It also lay at the heart of English self-delusion in Virginia.

As rendered by Morgan, English-style freedom was naive, arrogant, and ethnocentric, qualities that readers in the post-Vietnam United States might have recognized with shame. Arrogance and ethnocentrism helped Morgan explain the rage with which English settlers on the mainland killed Indian men, women, and children and destroyed their cornfields, even though they depended on this corn to survive. To lash out at those who provided necessary food was suicidal, in Morgan's view, and could only be explained by the unsustainability of English ideas of their own superiority: "[T]he Indians, keeping to themselves, laughed at your superior methods and lived from the land more abundantly and with less labor than you did. They even furnished you with the food that you somehow did not get around to growing enough of yourselves. To be thus condescended to by heathen savages was intolerable . . . So you killed the Indians, tortured them, burned their villages, burned their cornfields. It proved your superiority in spite of your failures" (90). Echoing the evening news reports of U.S. atrocities in Vietnam, Morgan found a germ of Americanness in the rage of English colonists towards the indigenous neighbors they both needed and despised.

In the tobacco mania that overtook the Virginia Company's outpost, yielding profits to planters large and small, Morgan found yet another American pattern: the boom-town phenomenon. Investing all they had in tobacco production, planters scrambled for laborers, worked them to death, and grabbed new lands to replace those exhausted by the "stinking weed." While the tobacco boom made the fortunes of many, it only increased the misery of indentured laborers who complained of being bought and sold like slaves. Following the 1622 Powhatan Indian attack upon English settlements, moreover, the English hatred of Indians was no longer held in check by naive visions of peaceful coexistence. Virginia's successful entry into the global market in tobacco fanned the flames of class tension and coincided with this incipient form of racial contempt.

Seventeenth-century Virginia continued to be a deadly place for newcomers, with premature death combining with badly skewed sex ratios to disrupt family formation and traditional lines of inheritance. In a colony with a perennial shortage of white women, wealthy widows played an important role in early class formation, creating what Morgan described as a "widowarchy" (166), by

transmitting wealth from the hands of one planter-husband after another. In counties where large numbers of male servants began their lives as free men, the chances of marrying, never mind marrying up, remained slim. Young, single, and poor, these freedmen were concentrated in counties near displaced Indians. The discontent of these young men, who had managed to survive years in the tobacco fields, was aggravated by the corruption of the colony's elite men, who squeezed profits from their government offices.

In 1676, the cauldron of class antagonism boiled over, but with an important historical lesson for a colony that had yet to embrace slave labor. Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy kinsman of then-governor William Berkeley, turned the class anger of these discontented men against the Indian scapegoats they were already prepared to hate. Although Morgan concluded that Bacon's Rebellion resulted in little social change, this lesson in the venting of racial hatred was pivotal in his narrative. Only in the aftermath of the rebellion would Virginia's white planters grasp the full significance of Bacon's use of racism as political strategy.

Morgan's analysis of slavery and its relationship to racism, populist politics, and republican ideals of freedom begins in the final hundred pages of his book. Before 1660, he argues, white servants and black slaves suffered under similarly oppressive work regimes, ate and slept together, made common cause in running away, and even engaged in sexual relations. Enslaved Africans initially shared with their white counterparts the stigma of poverty, including intimations of their "subhumanity" that resembled the way English people of means had always viewed their own poor (325). "In Virginia, too, before 1660," Morgan concluded, "it might have been difficult to distinguish race prejudice from class prejudice."

With slavery, Virginia's white planters found a cost-effective solution to their perennial labor shortage and a means of capping the population of newly freed white men, whose discontent still threatened to shake the foundations of colonial society. Slavery also promised greater productivity; arriving after the decades of the highest mortality were over, slaves of both sexes lived longer than indentured servants and could be worked for their entire lives. But slavery alone did not solve the problem of white servants making common cause with their black counterparts. The potential for class antagonism between whites remained. "The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism," Morgan contended, "to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt" (328). Having evinced racial hatred from their earliest interactions with Indians, English planters needed no prodding to generalize their contempt to Africans and eventually to the children of interracial unions.

Morgan's definition of racism is complex and at times contradictory. He admits that some racial prejudice was doubtless present from the very beginning of the African presence in the colony. But he is agnostic about whether racism was a necessary condition for slavery to take hold. He states obliquely, "[I]f

slavery might have come to Virginia without racism, it did not . . . and the new social order that Virginians created after they changed to slave labor was determined as much by race as by slavery" (315). For Morgan, the creation of that social order is best traced in the legal codes formulated to protect slave property, prevent rebellion, and reduce confusion about the different destinies for whites and blacks.

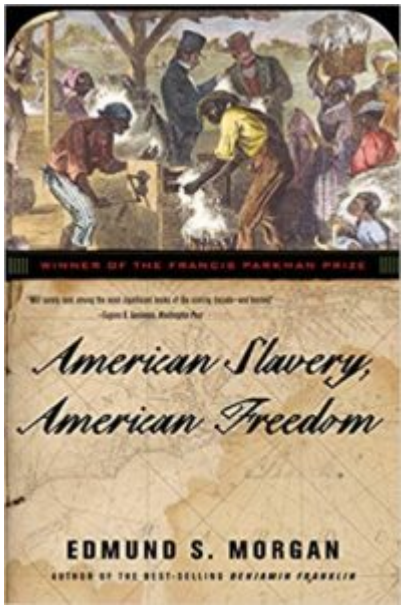
At other times Morgan describes racism as a tool that can be used instrumentally to achieve political ends. Of the colony's lesser white men, who enjoyed rising fortunes by the beginning of the eighteenth century, he writes, "[I]nstead—and I believe partly because of slavery—they were allowed not only to prosper but also to acquire social, psychological, and political advantages that turned the thrust of exploitation away from them and aligned them with their exploiters (344)." Somewhat less instrumentally, racism allowed white men across the class divide "to perceive a common identity," thus making it possible for patricians to "win in populist politics" (364).

By the 1720s, Morgan argues, the conditions of slavery, freedom, and white political solidarity were all in place. The only ingredient missing was a political ideology to hold it all together. Republican ideas, which had become popular in England during the Commonwealth period, gave white Virginians "a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like" (376). Virginia's aristocrats could more "safely preach equality" than their northern counterparts, because slavery had allowed them to solve the social problem of poverty, to absorb "the fear and contempt" that well-heeled, educated Englishmen had always felt for the lower classes. Racism thus "became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation" (386).

Lurking within Morgan's study is a big question about what these various germs of Americanness—arrogance, contempt for the poor, racism, and the vociferous defense of liberty—found in colonial Virginia, can tell us about the contemporary United States. "Was the vision of a nation of equals flawed at the source by contempt for both the poor and the black? Is America still colonial Virginia writ large?" (387). It is this haunting question, following on the heels of 387 pages of elegant writing, that keeps bringing the readers back.

As one might expect, the passage of twenty-five years has led to new research and interpretations, many of which complicate or challenge Morgan's formulation of the Anglo-Indian encounter, the rise of slavery, and the triumph of a racist popular politics. Take, for example, what Morgan portrayed as an essentially American contradiction, the links between slavery and freedom. Studies comparing slave societies throughout history have similarly found that slavery provided a crucial foil for definitions of personhood and citizenship. Although the precise meaning of enslavement varied across time and space, nearly every slave society viewed slaves as socially dead nonpersons who lacked the human ties generated by birth and kin group membership. None of this invalidates Morgan's analysis of slavery and freedom in the early American context, but it

undermines somewhat the notion that such contradictions made American slavery distinctive.



Edmund S. Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia.Reprint, New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 387 pp. Paper, $14.95.

Other studies call into question the causality and intent of Virginia planters' turn to racial slavery. Research on the availability of white indentured servants in the second half of the seventeenth century concludes that Virginia planters did not initiate the turn away from indentured servants after Bacon's Rebellion but were simply responding to a diminishing supply of English labor by 1680. Had white servant labor continued to be available, such studies suggest, Virginia planters would not have begun importing African slaves as quickly or in such great quantity. Morgan was aware of this, but he ranked this reason for Virginia's "conversion" to slave labor as less important than the general decline in mortality, which made the purchase of slaves cost effective at century's end, and the political utility of slavery for wealthy planters.

More recently, historians have emphasized colonial Virginia's importance for antebellum Southern culture rather than for contemporary American culture. In *Tobacco and Slaves* (Chapel Hill, 1986), for example, Allan Kulikoff finds the defining patterns of the antebellum South—paternalism, deference, and populism—in Virginia's eighteenth-century plantation society. Whereas for Morgan, colonial Virginia provided the template for Americanness, for Kulikoff, Virginia was the seedbed of Southern culture. This may be why so many Southern historians still hold *American Slavery, American Freedom* in such high regard: it illustrates that the history of the South *is* the history of the United States and not merely some tangent to it.

When gender scholars like myself got their hands on early Virginia, with its unbalanced sex ratios, its laws regulating the sexual behavior and reproductive capacity of female laborers, and the boisterous culture of elections, horse races, and cock fights, Morgan's work initially seemed less promising than that of Winthrop Jordan. Jordan's *White Over Black*(New York, 1968) analyzed the sexual content of early English descriptions of Africans and had been widely anthologized by feminist scholars. But Morgan's ambitious effort to link English imperial ambitions, class conflict, and racial slavery proved irresistible, at least to me. One of the tantalizing questions left unanswered by *American Slavery, American Freedom* was how a culture of racism, which became a central means of social control over unruly white people, could become so thoroughly embedded in colonial society if it were merely a convenient political strategy of wealthy white planters. The stake of white women in racism and slavery helped to explain what Morgan's argument could not. Only if white women actively promoted and reproduced the cultural values supporting slavery out of their own self-interest can we make sense of the deep and rapid proliferation of the racism.

Two and a half decades after Morgan's book was published, scholars place less emphasis on racism as an institutionally sanctioned ideology than on the subtler mechanisms through which racial categories support relations of power. In a post-Foucauldian intellectual world, the power of race resides not only in laws and formal political uses, but in the way people in the past talked and wrote about difference in travelers' accounts, scientific treatises, jokes, insults, and newspaper advertisements. Such an approach gives the idea of race a longer, deeper, and more powerful lineage and helps to explain why it resonated with so many white Virginians, thus enabling it to become a useful political tool for wealthy planters. Approached as a cultural category (race) rather than as the foundation for an ideology (racism), the ways that race evolved with and through class, rather than simply in opposition to it, have become more apparent.

Scholars will continue to quibble with Morgan, but only because they, like their students, continue to read his elegant book. Morgan's effort to trace the genealogy of Vietnam-era American troubles to the cornfields and tobacco fields of colonial Virginia still makes for compelling reading. Indeed, one is hard pressed to think of a more poignant combination than a history of slavery seen through the lenses of Civil Rights struggles and anti-war activism. Few studies can boast the success of *American Slavery, American Freedom,* to write about the past so that readers rethink their present. We may no longer turn to Morgan for the definitive word on the history of slavery, racism, and freedom. But we do turn to him for his eloquent prose, his ability to link key concepts in American history, and his effort to bring the sensibilities of the post-Vietnam era to one of the central tragedies and ironies of American history.

This article originally appeared in issue 1.4 (July, 2001).

Kathleen Brown is associate professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996) and numerous articles.