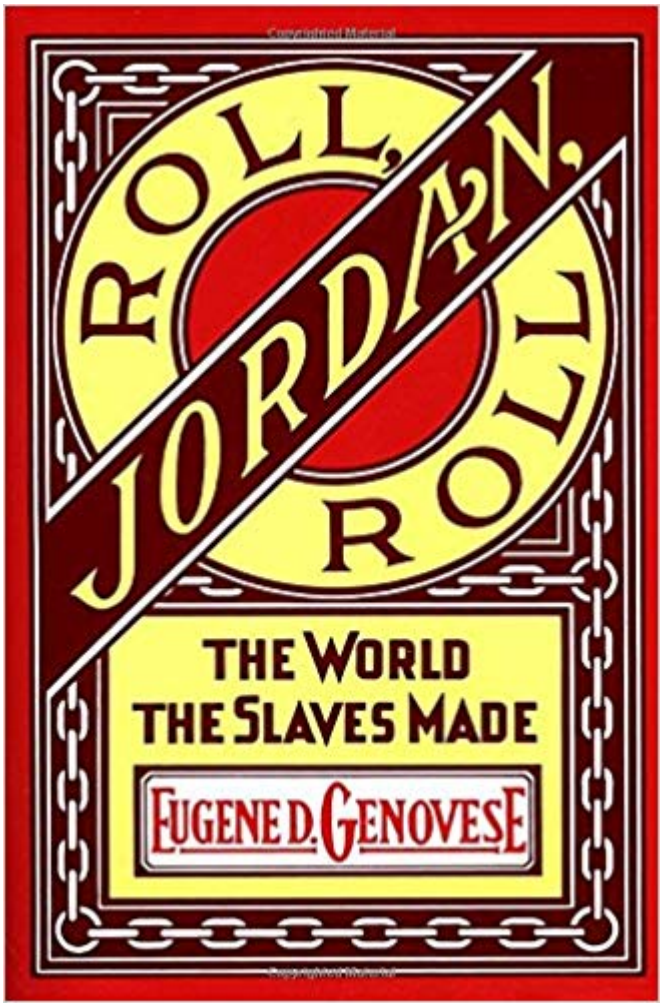
A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five



Re-reading by Walter Johnson

Would I still recommend reading *Roll, Jordan, Roll* twenty-five years after it was published?

Absolutely.

What? You thought I was going to say no? Of course, there's a lot to get through: the usage of stories about black people who gave the author bad directions on Southern roads in the 1950s to illustrate a point about dissimulating slaves in the nineteenth century (116-17); the full-throated celebration of the devotion of the enslaving class to its "mammies" (343); the kooky exoticism of the supposed distinction in black culture between "bad" and "*baaaad*" Negroes (635); the strange, unforgettable declarative sentences like, "The slaveholders were heroes," (97) that punctuate almost its every page. All of this makes *Roll, Jordan, Roll* seem a bit dated today, as does its (inevitable) failure to engage issues that have emerged as central themes in scholarship in the years since 1976: the role of African culture in American slave culture; the complex interrelation of racial domination and economic

exploitation in New World slave societies; the salience of gender and sexuality to any real understanding of slavery and the South.

And yet there's no getting around the categories.*Roll, Jordan, Roll* is the *locus classicus* for some of the most powerful and important ideas that have shaped the discussion of slavery for the last quarter century. Paternalism, hegemony, the distinction between individual and collective acts of resistance, the master-slave dialectic, the triangular stress and negotiation between overseers, planters, and slaves: all of these remain key terms in the historiography of slavery, terms that it is impossible to discuss without thinking of the world Eugene D. Genovese made. In thinking aloud about why I still read, teach, and argue with this book I want to concentrate on the two concepts—paternalism and hegemony—with which I think the book is most often identified, and to both clarify Genovese's usage of the terms, and specify what I think that usage misunderstands, elides, and sometimes simply ignores.

Paternalism first. For Genovese, paternalism was an ideology rooted in the political economy of antebellum slavery, particularly in the efforts between 1831 and 1861 of a group of slaveholding "reformers" to stave off the growing antislavery movement in parts of the upper South and the nation at large. Through a set of managerial reforms and emotional transformations, Genovese argues, slaveholders attempted to "humanize" slavery while at the same time consolidating the institution's political position. Genovese gives a number of examples of what he means by slaveholding paternalism. Slaveholders, he tells us, "almost with one voice . . . denounced cruelty" (71). They "boasted of the physical or intellectual prowess of one or more of [their] blacks, much as the strictest father might boast of the prowess of a favored child" (73). They thought of their obligation to feed, clothe, and take care of their slaves as "a duty and a burden" upon themselves even as they tried to make their slaves' work "as festive as possible" (75, 60). They described their own children and their slaves as being part of a single "family black and white" (without any apparent ironic recognition of the degree to which this was often literally the case) (73). And they were genuinely shocked, dismayed, and devastated—"betrayed" is the word Genovese uses—when their erstwhile slaves took off in search of freedom at the end of the Civil War (97). At that historic moment (as well as at a host of local moments throughout the period of slavery), Genovese argues, it became clear that the slaveholders' actually believed what they were saying, that they "desperately needed the gratitude of their slaves in order to define themselves as moral human beings" (146). Slaveholders were themselves living lives defined and limited by slavery.

The notion of slaveholders fabricating themselves for an audience of their own slaves in a kind of Hegelian dialectic is an extraordinarily powerful one, and it illuminates countless aspects of American slavery. It does not, however, quite capture the quicksilver slipperiness with which slaveholders could reformulate the nominally beneficent promises of paternalism into self-serving regrets, reactionary nostalgia, and flat-out threats. Can it be mere coincidence that so many examples of planters expressing ostensibly

“paternalist” sentiments refer to slaves who have disappeared or are in the process of disappearing? Apart from the literature in slaveholder periodocals like *DeBow’s Review* and *Southern Agriculturalist* on hygiene, medicine, housing, and nutrition, which does indeed seem to emerge according to Genovese’s reformist timeline (although to be much more characterized by the evocation of “my workforce black and white” than by any genuinely paternalist language), the most common sources of evidence for slaveholders’ paternalism seem to me to be three: statements that slaves are not governed by the lash but by the threat of sale; effusions of heartfelt feelings of loss for slaves who have just died (usually recorded in letters to other slaveholders); and the forenoted statements of “betrayal” at the hands of former slaves who took off at the end of the war (also recorded in letters between whites and other whites).

Paternalism, it turns out, as often expressed a sort of nostalgia for dead slaves and the lost cause as it did the actively governing ideology of a ruling class. In many cases it seems more properly read as a sort of a pose that slaveholders put on for one another than as a praxis through which they governed their slaves. Except, of course, in relation to the slave trade. For it was the slave trade—the threat of sale—that allowed slaveholders to formulate a system of labor discipline that relied not on torture but on terror as its axis of power. “I govern them the same way your late brother did, without the whip by stating to them that I should sell them if they do not conduct themselves as I wish,” proudly stated one Southern “paternalist” in an 1838 letter to another. To judge by this statement at least, the historical predicate for the effusion of paternalist language between 1831 and 1861 might well be seen as the expansion of the interstate slave trade into a central feature of the political economy of slavery. The paternalist ideology of “my family black and white” depended, at least in part, upon the ability of the white part of that “family” to extract labor from the black part by threatening to destroy it through separation and sale. Another way of describing the relationship of slaveholders’ effusive paternalism to the threats of family separation through which they increasingly governed their slaves is this: the slaveholders were liars.

If Genovese’s concept of paternalism continues to provoke debate and demand refinement, his discussion of slaveholders’ hegemony is the most often misunderstood element of the argument of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. It is commonly seen as a denial of slaves’ “agency” which, in the common counter argument to the book, is to be rectified by “giving” it back. The transitive verb “to give” encapsulates most of the problems with this reading. First, the slaves in question are dead; it might be possible to give them a better history, but giving them agency at this point seems out of the question. Second, this sense of the giving of human agency (even in a historical narrative) to a human subject conveys some of the absurdity (and residual racism) of a historical practice in which jobs can be gained, books published, and major prizes received by historians who frame their project around the argument that a group of human beings were (*mirabile dictu*!) human beings, or in the canonical formulation, that they “preserved their humanity,” as if it would have occurred

to them to do that, or even to do otherwise. Third, in so doing, the critique that replaces Genovese's hegemony with the agency granted by the latter-day historian formulates the role of the revisionist historian (the grantor of agency to the slaves) in the very paternalist terms that it ostensibly repudiates. So, enough of that.

In fact, the important question and the question that Genovese is seeking to answer with the concept of hegemony is predicated upon recognition of the agency of enslaved people. What, he asks, was the field of possibility in which they acted and what were the effects of their actions? In answering those questions, Genovese has something very powerful (though, I believe, ultimately very wrong) to say.

Properly understood, the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony is a theory of the transformation of rule into consent. At certain moments in time, the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci argued, rule by a single class can be enforced not through violence, but through general, if unwitting, assent to a set of limiting definitions of the field of the politically possible. Gramsci's own analysis and much of the like-minded thinking that has followed it, has been particularly concerned with the ability of capitalist ruling classes to make their own dominance seem as if it is predicated upon universal participation and directed toward the common good. Following this line of argument, in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Genovese claims that slaveholders were able, through their paternalist ideology, to refigure what was fundamentally a system of class exploitation as a set of more local relationships between slaves and slaveholders—personal, familial, communal. Genovese does not argue that slaveholders always lived up to the rosiest promises of their paternalism, though he certainly thinks they tried. Rather he argues that paternalism provided the ideological mechanism through which they could disguise their exploitation of their slaves. By reformulating the class relationships of slavery as a system of reciprocal duties and obligations—you hew the wood and draw the water and I'll (have you) whitewash the slave quarter and clean out the latrine—slaveholders exerted hegemony over slaves, claiming that they ruled not in their own interested but in the interest of those they owned.

Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll. New York: Random House, 1976, 823 pp. $19.00.

According to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* this hegemonic sleight of hand was generally successful. For even when their slaves rejected this claim and resisted their masters (as Genovese freely admits they often did), their resistance generally took the form of localized challenges to their owners' authority rather than large-scale, fully theorized collective revolts designed to overthrow slavery itself. In Genovese's formulation, and this is the heart of the argument,

slowing down, playing sick, mouthing off, burning down buildings, and, even, assaulting and murdering masters and overseers did not weaken the authority of the slaveholders, but actually strengthened it. This because, first, these types of resistance formulated the problem of slavery as a problem that occurred upon an individual plantation or farm and between a master or overseer and a slave—they localized, personalized, and naturalized what Genovese believes could only be properly understood as a hemispheric system of class exploitation. And, second, because they bled away resistance energy that might have otherwise gathered into the collective fury of revolution. Day-to-day resistance to slavery was, by this argument, at best a "prepolitical" or even "apolitical" form of "accommodation," and at worst "pathetic nihilism."(598, 659).

Whatever else this is, it is not an argument that denies enslaved people's agency or the frequency of their daily resistance. It is, however, an argument that seems to me to be predicated upon (at least) three faulty premises: first, the idea that there was not a revolutionary aspiration among North American slaves; second, the notion that this alleged failure to revolt must somehow be explained in reference to the slaves' own culture rather than the balance of force in the society—by reference, that is, to "hegemony" rather than simple "rule"; and, third, that there is a contradiction rather than a continuum between individual and collective acts of resistance.

The basic question out of which *Roll, Jordan, Roll* unfolds its discussion of hegemony is this: why didn't North American slaves revolt more? And the analysis that follows is developed comparatively. The revolts associated with Gabriel (1800 in Richmond, Virginia), Denmark Vesey (1822 in Charleston, South Carolina), and Nat Turner (1831 in Southampton County, Virginia) do not, in Genovese's view, compare favorably in their "size, frequency, intensity, or general historical significance" to revolts in the Caribbean and South America (588). And perhaps that is right.

But if we think a bit more broadly about what constitutes a slave revolt and what indexes historical importance, I think we're led to a different conclusion about the "revolutionary tradition" among North American slaves. Part of the problem is that many of the North American revolts have been defined out of the mainstream narrative of American history. And I don't just mean the 1811 revolt in Louisiana, which Genovese mentions, or the countless smaller uprisings like that aboard the slave ship *Creole* in 1841, which he ignores. I mean big, history-making military conflagrations: like the Seminole Wars, like the American Revolution, like the Civil War. These events have entered the nation's historical record under different headings, but they were all profoundly (and at various turns decisively) shaped by the self-willed actions, both military and otherwise, of black slaves fighting for freedom, of slave rebels. It doesn't seem a stretch to say that if we apply to the history of American slavery the terms that are conventionally applied to political and military history—that it is good politics and good strategy to take advantage of schisms in the structure of rule in order to advance a cause—then we've got to begin to

think very differently about both the standard historical narrative of the United States and about the revolutionary tradition of American slaves.

I'd further argue that thinking about the military history of American slavery can clarify our thinking about hegemony. If the question driving the discussion is about the comparative absence of slave revolts in North America, accepting for a moment the terms in which Genovese defines a slave "revolt," then doesn't it make sense to look at the balance of forces on the ground before asserting a tradition of "nonrevolutionary self-assertion" among Southern slaves? Speaking strictly from a tactical standpoint, the balance of power between slaves and slaveholders in the United States was strikingly different from that which characterized the Caribbean and South America—the ratio of white to black was higher, holdings were smaller and more spread out, and the territorial sovereignty of the United States (a nation committed by a Constitutional clause drafted in the shadow of the Seminole Wars to the suppression of "domestic insurrections") was almost unimaginably vast. Indeed, this balance of power was continually made clear to enslaved people through the periodic outbursts of vigilante and state terror that historians have labeled "slave revolt scares," events that make the history of the antebellum slaveholding look like a counterinsurgency effort against a widespread, mobile, and, yes, vast enslaved conspiracy. Add to this episodic but continual military campaigning the daily violence through which slaveholders enforced their dominance over reluctant slaves, and it seems hard to argue that Southern slaveholders ever transformed rule into consent—that they ever, in the final instance, succeeded in ruling by anything other than force. It seems, indeed, hard to argue that they ever tried.

There is finally the question of the relationship of individual to collective acts of resistance—a question which has a much clearer formulation in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* than it has had in much subsequent discussion. It does seem to me to be desperately important to maintain this distinction and to think as hard about it as Genovese did. Breaking a hoe and being Nat Turner are not equivalent manifestations of human agency in either their causes or their consequences. Genovese formulates the relationship between these two types of resistance as being one of contradiction, thus missing the historical effect of day-to-day resistance in enabling collective resistance among American slaves. For it was through day-to-day resistance that enslaved people could come to know and trust one another—that they could figure out who to depend on and who to avoid as they talked about ideas and plans which could cost them their lives. Perhaps more importantly, it was through day-to-day resistance that they flushed the character of the slaveholders' rule out into the open. All of the whips and chains and bits, all of the jails and smokehouses and slave pens, all of the threats and laws and passes: all of these were made necessary by the fact that slaveholders knew that they weren't exercising hegemony but fighting something that sometimes looked a lot more like a war. By resisting slavery everyday, slaves, especially those who carried their own scars and stories to the North with them when they ran away, made visible the historical character of the institution, and made possible the formulation of the alliance that

eventually brought about its (revolutionary) demise.

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