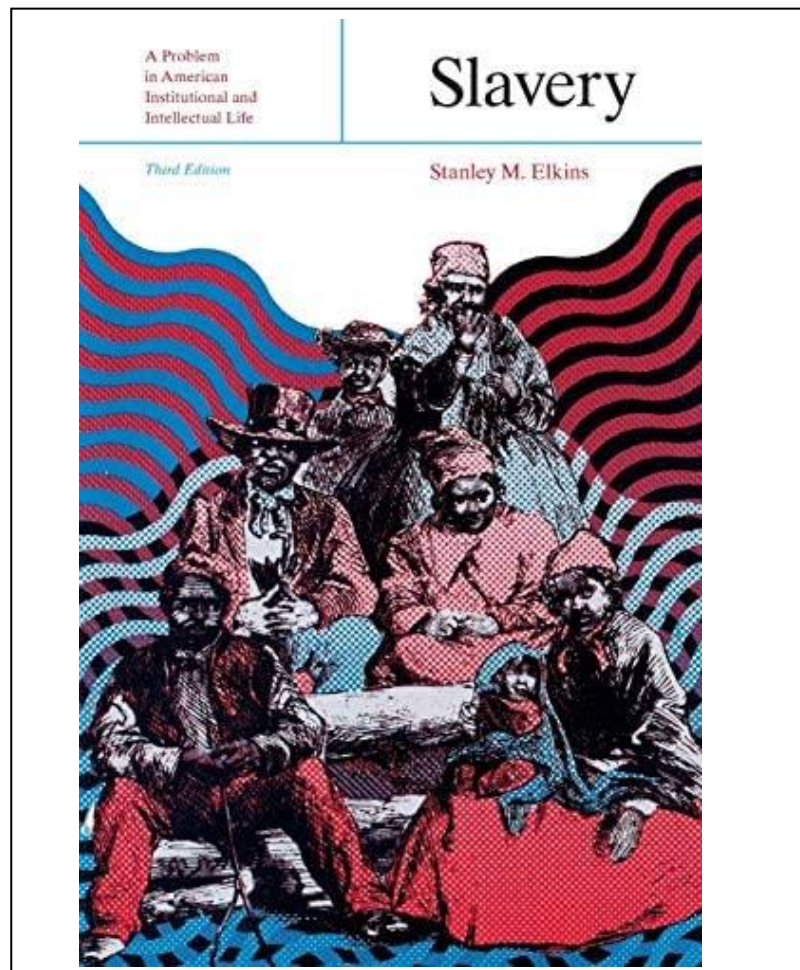


Stanley Elkins' *Slavery* Revisited



Robert M. Wesser
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In 1959, Stanley Elkins sought to shift historians' discussion of American slavery away from that of a "strong moral bias, one way or another" toward a multi-disciplinary approach more akin to an American Studies analysis than traditional historical research.¹ In *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Elkins thus delved into the areas of anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines, all in an attempt to offer up new, more complex questions and conclusions regarding the nature of American slavery divorced from the customary moral judgments bolstered by historical research that had characterized its historiography up to that point. This is a much different approach than that of historian James McPherson who generally grounds his understanding of the Civil War and slavery within a more "traditional political history, economic history, and diplomatic history."² Thus, in his *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*, McPherson chooses to instead identify the historically changing and developing American economy and institutions as the key factors which ultimately decided the nature and fate of slavery in the United States, an approach I personally find to be more accurate and truthful than Elkins' multi-disciplinary one.

Although there are many facets of Elkins' analysis, the core of his argument is that American slavery was entirely unique when compared with slavery elsewhere in the world, such as Latin America or the Caribbean. According to Elkins, what ultimately became the slave-based "agricultural capitalism" (as he calls it) of the southern United States developed as such simply because there were "no prior institutions with competing claims of their own [which] might

¹ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 4.

² Eric Foner, James McPherson, and Peter Field, "Talking Civil War History: A Conversation with Eric Foner and James McPherson." *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 30, no. 2 (2011): 1–32.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23264085>

interpose at any of a dozen points with sufficient power to retard or modify its progress.”³ Thus, argues Elkins, North American slavery developed its own evils and characteristics unfettered and unchecked by the time-honored institutions of Old Europe, including those of Great Britain. In the case of Latin American slavery, Elkins informs us that both the Church and the Crown (in the case of Spain) mitigated the conditions of slavery there by allowing slaves to marry, attend church services (i.e., masses), and, to a limited degree, even earn wages and own property. Elkins claims that all of this served to “humanize the Negro,” something that was not possible in the young United States void of these well-established institutions. Hence, although some of the same types of “reforms” of slavery may have been attempted in North America, alas there were no such institutions “capable of receiving them, of debating them, of transforming them into something more than mere proposals.”⁴ I find this argument flawed in many respects, some of which are also addressed by McPherson.

Although no serious historian would debate the brutality and horrors involved when southern plantation owners broke up families by selling parents, siblings or children, still American slave owners had a vested economic interest in fostering family formation among the slave population. The abolition of the slave trade in the United States and Great Britain in 1808 made such family formation among slaves in the United States an absolute necessity if the institution were to continue to be viable. McPherson points out that in contrast many Caribbean and Latin American slave owners simply considered it more profitable to work their slaves to death (Cuba being a notorious example), relying instead on the influx of slaves from the trade to replace them, something not economically viable in the United States not to mention whether it

³ Elkins, 42.

⁴ Elkins, 196-97.

would have even been tolerated morally.⁵ Further, as historian David Hackett Fischer has argued, Elkins' comparison of American slavery with that of Latin America presents a particular historic fallacy known as the "fallacy of appositional proof." Establishing a quality of "A" by contrasting it to a misrepresented "B" proves nothing about the actual nature of "A." Since Stanley Elkins' sanitized depiction of slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean is itself questionable, his subsequent characterization of American slavery as somehow more dehumanizing *in comparison* ultimately proves nothing about the actual nature of slavery in North America.⁶

As part of his analysis, Elkins boldly delves into the realm of psychology seeking to demonstrate that this "closed system" of American slavery was a crucial factor in creating the docile and subservient "Sambo" black slave stereotype personality in North America. To "prove" this, he includes a lengthy and rightfully unnerving discussion of the psychological aberrations suffered by victims of Second World War Nazi concentration camps, comparing the infantile and passive identities adopted by the inmates there to the servile Sambo personality. Although there are certainly some important issues of psychology and identity raised by Elkins' comparison, again this suffers from yet another historic fallacy, namely the fallacy of "proof by analogy." Elkins spends over thirty pages of *Slavery* discussing the famous "Bettelheim syndrome" and related psychological issues, but there is almost nothing of *documented substance* in his book that actually demonstrates the hegemony of the Sambo phenomena among American slaves. Thus, although his concentration camp discussion in this context might be an interesting heuristic device, it unfortunately proves absolutely nothing about slavery in North America.⁷

⁵ McPherson, 40-41.

⁶ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970), 56-57.

⁷ Hackett Fischer, 255-56.

Elkins goes on to tell us that no such Sambo personality trope existed among Latin American slaves. Here again, he claims that Old Europe's moderating institutional factors were responsible, this time allowing slaves to be more than what they actually were, even including becoming "rebels" against the institution of slavery itself. Elkins extends this argument to the point of insisting that this Sambo passivity was the primary reason for the general lack of bloody revolts by American slaves who, compared to their Latin American and Caribbean counterparts, were apparently more emboldened by this "institutionally" expanded identity.⁸ The problem with this argument is that, again, it leaves out important demographic questions resulting from economic circumstances, not to mention other evidence to the contrary. As McPherson correctly points out, the ratio of male to female slaves in North America was approximately 1:1, as opposed to 2:1 or greater in Latin America and the Caribbean, for the reasons cited above regarding family formation and the necessity of maintaining slavery in the South after the trade was outlawed. Thus, male slaves in the United States had important, albeit stunted, family responsibilities which, as McPherson argues, most likely had more to do with their unwillingness to initiate or participate in insurrections than their Caribbean and Latin American counterparts.⁹ Additionally, McPherson identifies another general phenomenon among American black slaves that would also appear to contradict the Sambo trope. Not only did most slaves in the American South gladly welcome freedom when it became a possibility, but they overwhelmingly craved literacy and education when freed, belying Elkins' pliant, servitude-loving Sambo stereotype.¹⁰ Interestingly, this spirited quality was apparently so pronounced among the American slave, that

⁸ Elkins, 136-37.

⁹ McPherson, 40.

¹⁰ McPherson, 428, 433.

even Karl Marx was impressed by the “the present generation of Negroes in America” who, to him, seemed much more “fit for emancipation” than those of the Caribbean.¹¹

Finally, Elkins extends his “institution-less” United States argument to include the claim that abolitionist opponents of slavery had no real institutional moorings to either identify with or operate through, and therefore lacked any effective means to end slavery. A huge part of this analysis centers around his comparison of abolitionism in general with the “anti-institutional, antiformal, and individualistic” Transcendentalists of the day.¹² Reading Elkins’ *Slavery*, one might conclude that opposition to slavery in the United States was overwhelmingly limited to this transcendentalist-like “anti-institutionalism” which seems to have been more pre-occupied with personal spiritual values than ensuring any effective fight to oppose or end slavery. Curiously, Elkins expends exactly two paragraphs mentioning either the Underground Railroad or Free-Soil movements, *but over fifty pages* on the intricacies of Transcendentalism, Garrisonian abolitionism and the flawed political and personal views that accompanied them. In contrast, McPherson identifies the fact that there were crucial *institutional* influences at work which ultimately were responsible for the disappearance of slavery in North America, not the least of which was the new *institution* of the United States of America as a developing republic struggling to become more aligned with her founding principles.

In my mind, this is the central flaw of Elkins’ entire analysis and argument. There can be no doubt that the end of slavery was anticipated by a substantial number of the founders of the American Republic, as certain specific content in both the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence demonstrates, not to mention the various speeches and statements by their

¹¹ From a June, 1853 letter to Friedrich Engels quoted in W. Allen Salisbury’s *The Civil War and the American System* (Washington, DC, Executive Intelligence Review, 1992), 23.

¹² Elkins, 148.

authors.¹³ Additionally, McPherson identifies “the modernizing ethos of Yankee Protestantism” as a decisive intellectual and cultural current that drove the modernization of the United States which ultimately made slavery impractical and obsolete.¹⁴ This free labor ideology led to the Free Soil movement which in turn led to the establishment of the Republican Party in 1854—a unique American *institution* through which slavery was ultimately abolished.¹⁵

As a final thought, I can’t help but being reminded of Abraham Lincoln’s 1838 speech before the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, appropriately entitled “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” which seems to offer an asynchronous refutation of Elkins’ main argument from the author of the Emancipation Proclamation himself:

[The Founders] were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason ... Let those materials be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws: and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last ...¹⁶

In the long run, the perpetuation and ongoing perfection of the institutions of the American Republic by the likes of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and many others proved to be more powerful historical instruments for defining and ultimately ending slavery than perhaps all

¹³ Robert M. Wesser, “The United States Constitution Was Never a ‘Pro-Slavery,’” unpublished academic paper, January 28, 2021. <https://files.journoportfolio.com/users/258380/uploads/0276eae7-4cd9-47d7-9831-17cd1320bd50.pdf>

¹⁴ McPherson, 14-16.

¹⁵ McPherson, 48.

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838,” <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>

the esteemed institutions of Old Europe. Thus, although Stanley Elkins' desire to introduce new elements into the historiography of American slavery may have been sincere, I fear that he may have inadvertently tossed out the wine with the cork, and good wine at that.