

THE QUESTION OF "SAMBO"

A Report of the Ninth Newberry Library Conference on American Studies

Is "Sambo" as a conception of the Southern plantation Negro a wholly false "racial stereotype," designed by the white man to rationalize and justify his own behavior? Or does he characterize an infantilism actually manifest by the Negro as slave in the American South? If the latter is true and is inapplicable in terms of "racial character," how and why did "Sambo" develop? What is his significance, if any, in terms of a general theory of personality?

These were questions raised and tentatively answered by Stanley Elkins of the University of Chicago in a paper entitled "Slavery and Personality," discussed by the Ninth Newberry Library Conference on American Studies which met in the Librarian's office on May 3, 1958.¹

"Sambo, the typical plantation slave [as pictured in Southern lore], was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing," said Mr. Elkins; "his behavior was full of infantile silliness, his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and often childlike devotion: it was indeed this very *childlike* quality that was the key to his character."

Was he real or unreal? asked Mr. Elkins.

¹ The Conference was attended by: Stanley Pargellis, The Newberry Library, Chairman; Daniel J. Boorstin, University of Chicago; Avery O. Craven, University of Chicago; Kenneth S. Davis, The Newberry Library; K. O. Dike, Northwestern; Stanley Elkins, University of Chicago; Norman A. Graebner, University of Illinois; Richard J. Hooker, Roosevelt; Manfred Kuhn, State University of Iowa; Arthur S. Link, Northwestern; Stow Persons, State University of Iowa; John L. Phelan, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Francis Schwarzenberg, Loyola; Richard J. Storr, University of Chicago; David Stout, State University of Iowa; Howard Vincent, Illinois Institute of Technology; Francis G. Wilson, University of Illinois; Kimball Young, Northwestern; Jules Zanger, Illinois Institute of Technology.

The slaveholding Southerner was of course convinced that not only was Sambo real, "but also that his characteristics were the clear product of racial inheritance." Indeed, the "absoluteness with which such a personality ('real' or 'unreal') had been stamped upon the plantation slave does much to make plausible the ante-bellum Southerner's difficulty in imagining that blacks *anywhere* could be anything but a degraded race—and it goes far to explain his great reluctance to see any sense at all in abolitionism." For the abolitionists refused even to recognize in "Sambo" a real social problem which could not be solved all at once merely by wiping out the institution of slavery. In fact, the abolitionists "could literally not afford to recognize it," since it was "so all-encompassing a problem in human personality." Hence, "virtually without exception, they met this dilemma either by side-tracking it altogether (they explicitly refused to advance plans for solving it, arguing that this would rob their message of its moral force), or else they countered it with theories of infinite human perfectibility." They asserted that "nothing could actually be said about the Negro's 'true' nature because that nature was veiled by the institution of slavery" and could be revealed "only . . . by tearing away the veil." But it was also a cardinal article of their faith that this "true" nature would then stand revealed as equal in quality if not actually identical with the white man's, thus disproving absolutely the Southerner's racist views.

As for the "modern approach to Sambo," it closely parallels the abolitionists'. Since all "racial explanations for any feature of plantation slavery" are discredited as unscientific, and since the moral sensibilities of most civilized men are outraged by the very idea of slavery and by the apologists for it, the tendency has been to deny to "Sambo" any validity at all as a description of "real" character. Insofar as "Sambo" ever existed it was, by modern view, a synthetic role assumed by the Negro quite consciously as part of his defensive strategy or in order to curry favor with his master.

To this view, however, Mr. Elkins was unable to subscribe. "The [Sambo] picture has far too many circumstantial details,

his hues have been stroked in by too many different brushes, for it to be denounced as counterfeit," said he. "Too much folk-knowledge, too much plantation literature, too much of the Negro's own lore, have gone into its making to entitle one in good conscience to condemn it as sheer conspiracy." But if Sambo did in fact exist as a distinct personality type and is not to be explained on racial grounds ("that 'explanation' can be consigned to oblivion"), how is he to be explained? Is the infantilization of the slave, the transforming of him into a childlike personality, the *inevitable* consequence of slavery? Obviously not, said Mr. Elkins, since there have been slave societies in which nothing approaching Sambo, as a general personality type, emerged. None emerged, for example, in Latin America ("the literature [there] . . . reveals no Sambo"), despite the fact that the Negroes in Latin America came from the same widely various African background as did those of North America and suffered, at the outset of their bondage, the same horrors of capture, forced march to the sea, and Middle Passage. . . .

Hence, concluded Mr. Elkins, the explanation must lie in the "variety" of slavery "peculiar" to our plantations, a variety which might be defined by contrast with that practiced in countries to the south of us. Said he:

"In Latin America, the very tension, as it were, among three kinds of organizational concerns—church, crown, and plantation agriculture—prevented slavery from being carried by the planting class to its ultimate logic. For the slave, in terms of the space thus allowed for the development of men and women as moral beings, the result was an 'open system': a system of contacts with free society through which ultimate absorption into that society could and did occur with great frequency. The rights of personality implicit in the ancient traditions of slavery and in the church's most venerable assumptions regarding the nature of the human soul were thus in a vital sense conserved, whereas to a staggering degree the very opposite was true of North American slavery. The latter system had developed virtually unchecked by institutions hav-

ing anything like the power of their Latin counterparts; the legal structure which supported it, shaped only by the demands of a staple-raising capitalism, had defined with such nicety the slave's character as chattel, that his character as a moral individual was left in the vaguest legal obscurity. In this sense American slavery operated as a 'closed' system—one in which, for the generality of slaves in their nature as men and women, *sub specie aeternitatis*, contacts with free society could occur only on the most narrowly circumscribed of terms. The question now to be asked is whether or not living within such a 'closed system' might for the slave have produced noticeable effects upon the personality itself."

That it *did* do so, and that Sambo resulted, was the essential argument of Mr. Elkins' essay. He stated it explicitly: "It will be assumed that there were elements in the very structure of the [American] plantation system—its 'closed' character—that could sustain infantilism as a normal feature of behavior. These elements, having less to do with 'cruelty' *per se* than simply with the sanctions of authority, were sufficiently effective and pervasive as to require that such infantilism be characterized as something more basic than mere 'accommodation'. It will be assumed that the sanctions of the system were in themselves sufficient to produce a recognizable personality type." ("It should be understood," he quickly added, "that to identify a social type in this sense is still to generalize on a fairly crude level—and to insist for a limited purpose on the legitimacy of such generalizing is by no means to deny that, on more refined levels, a great profusion of individual types might have been observed in slave society.")

Mr. Elkins based his argument in part on theoretical grounds: "It is recognized in most theory [of social psychology] that social behavior is regulated in some general way by adjustment to symbols of authority—however diversely 'authority' may be defined either in theory or in culture itself—and such adjustment is closely related to the very formation of personality. A corollary would be, of course, that the more diverse those symbols of authority may be, the greater is the

permissible variety of adjustment to them—and the wider the margin of individuality, consequently, in the development of the self." On the ante-bellum plantation, where the master was virtually the *only* symbol of authority (the "only significant 'other'"), the variety of responses which the slave might make to authority was extremely limited and the "margin of individuality" within which he might develop a distinct personality was correspondingly narrow.

But though Mr. Elkins thus argued from theory, the bulk of his argument was from concrete example. Central to it was a bold analogy between slavery, as a "closed system," and the German concentration camps of the recent past.

The "experience undergone by several million men and women in [these] . . . camps" was "not unlike that that of slavery," said he, and it was "one in which wide-scale instances of infantilization were also observed." Moreover, the documentary material "is sufficiently detailed . . . by men who not only took part in the experience itself but who were versed in the use of psychological theory for analyzing it, that the risks of using the material seem much outweighed by the possible advantages." Admittedly, the dissimilarities of the two "closed" systems were very great. "The American plantation was not even in the metaphorical sense 'a concentration camp'; nor was it even 'like' a concentration camp, to extent that any standards comparable to those governing the camps might be imputed to any section of American society . . . ; but it should at least be permissible to turn the thing around—to speak of the concentration camp as a special and highly perverted instance of human slavery."

In both instances the initial experience of bondage involved "shock and detachment" to a degree which virtually annihilated the free past as in any active way relevant to the present self and way of life. In both instances, adjustment to bondage was a process in which the victim not only developed childish attitudes and behavior patterns but also identified himself with persons in authority over him, thus becoming increasingly infantile in the very structure of his personality. In both

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instances it was the "closedness" of the system and not "cruelty *per se*" which produced the personality changes—though descriptive material in Mr. Elkins' paper (and much of his paper was horrifyingly descriptive) seemed to suggest that the concentration camp, to the precise degree that its cruelty exceeded that of the plantation, produced a "perversion" of Sambo. And, finally, in both instances any mitigation of the "closedness" of the system as it affected the individual—any "opening" of it to increase the individual's range of genuinely free choices—resulted in a seemingly proportionate preservation or development of that individual's mature personality.

The rank and file Negro on the plantation might be and often was genuinely loved by his master, but "what were the terms" on which this love was granted? They were that the Negro remain "a child forever." As a "good" child he was expected to, and generally did, display "obedience, fidelity, humility, docility, cheerfulness, and so on." But he was also expected to display, as exasperating if often "lovable" concomitants of his "good" qualities, such childish traits as "irresponsibility, playfulness, silliness, laziness, and (quite possibly) tendencies to lying and stealing."

Similarly if to a highly perverted degree, as though he were the child of a cruelly tyrannical father, the rank and file inmate who survived the concentration camp—and only 700,000 out of nearly eight million did survive—displayed docility, obedience, humility, and so on. Having survived long enough to become an "old prisoner"—that is, "for two or three years"—he developed into a "specific type" whose "most immediate aspect" in terms of behavior, when viewed by such knowledgeable fellow victims as Elie Cohen and Bruno Bettelheim, was a pervasive childishness.

"Such infantile behavior took innumerable forms," said Mr. Elkins. "The inmates' sexual impotence brought about a disappearance of sexuality in their talk; instead, excretory functions occupied them endlessly. They lost many of the customary inhibitions as to soiling their beds and their persons. Their humor was shot through with silliness and they giggled like

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children when one of them would expel wind . . . Prisoners would, like early adolescents, fight one another tooth and nail . . . only to become close friends within a few minutes.' Dishonesty became chronic. 'Now they suddenly appeared to be pathological liars, to be unable to restrain themselves, to be unable to make objective evaluation, etc.'" And "this development of childlike behavior in the old inmates was simply the counterpart of something even more striking that was happening to them: 'only very few of the prisoners escaped a more or less intense identification with the SS.' As Mr Bettelheim puts it: 'A prisoner had reached the final stage of adjustment to the camp situation when he had changed his personality so as to accept as his own the values of the Gestapo.' The Bettelheim study furnishes a veritable catalogue of examples. The old prisoners came to share the attitude of the SS toward the so-called 'unfit' prisoners; newcomers who behaved badly in the labor groups or who could not withstand the strain became a liability for the others, who were often instrumental in getting rid of them. Many old prisoners actually imitated the SS; they would sew and mend their uniforms in such a way as to make them look more like those of the SS—even though they risked punishment for it. . . . To all these men, reduced to complete and childish dependence upon their masters, the SS had actually become a father-symbol . . . The closed system . . . had become a kind of grotesque patriarchy."

Thus can be explained the otherwise inexplicable fact that few of the prisoners, upon being released, manifest a strong hatred of the SS. Liberators who had expected to find "a burning spirit of rebellion" were astonished by this. Such a spirit "would have had to be supported by fierce and smoldering emotions," however, and these were simply "not there." But to this general process of infantilization, in both camp and plantation, there were a few exceptions—and it was significant for Mr. Elkins' conclusions that these exceptions were individuals who had been "protected . . . from the full impact of the closed system." Some prisoners in the concentration camps had "wretched little jobs in the . . . administration which offered

them a minute measure of privilege" and enabled them to carry on real if extremely limited "underground" activities. . . . [For] the psychological balance of those involved, such activities were vital . . . To a prisoner so engaged, there were others who mattered—who gave real point to his existence—the SS was no longer the *only* one. Conversely, the role of the child was not the only one he played. He could take initiative; he could give as well as receive protection; he did things which had meaning in adult terms." And these were the prisoners who, upon liberation, could "resume normal lives most easily." Indeed, they (and not those of the rank and file) are the people "who have described the camps to us."

And on the Southern plantation, too, there were Negroes who, by virtue of breaks in the "closed system," managed to avoid becoming "Sambo." "The house servant, the urban mechanic, the slave who arranged his own employment and paid his master a stipulated sum each week, were all figuratively members of the 'underground'" who could and did develop relatively mature personalities. These, however, were made conspicuous by their rarity in North America whereas in Latin America, where the "open system" offered the slave "multiple roles" and a relatively wide "range of aspirations," such individuals were common.

In the latter area, the Negro slave "could have a fantasy-life not limited to catfish and watermelons; it was within his conception to become a priest, an independent farmer, a successful merchant, a military officer." To an extent "unthinkable in the United States," the slave might even "conceive of himself *as a rebel*" and act as one. Surely there is significance in the fact that "bloody slave revolts—actual wars—took place in Latin America" whereas "nothing on this order occurred in the United States."

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Since the members of the conference were by no means in perfect agreement in their appraisals of Mr. Elkins' paper, the critique of it which emerged from their discussion was by

no means perfectly self-consistent. It had, however, a fairly clear and firm outline, deriving in approximately equal parts from three quite distinct critical approaches. One of these had as its object the *Methodology and Design* of the paper. Another focussed upon the *Data* which Mr. Elkins cited, raising questions as to their accuracy and adequacy. The third had to do with the author's *Conclusions*, including the inferential processes by which these were drawn from evidence and argument.

As regards its *Methodology and Design*, the paper was variously described as "ingenious" (Mr. Kuhn), "dramatic" (Mr. Persons), "courageous" (Mr. Young), "a fine example of the comparative method" (Mr. Stout), "highly interesting" (Mr. Hooker), and an admirable display of "boldness, imaginativeness, and a feeling for the symbol—poetic virtues absent from too much present-day sociology" (Mr. Boorstin). Even those conferees who dispensed such words of praise, however, often accompanied them with sharp methodological criticism.

Mr. Boorstin, for instance, spoke for several colleagues when he said that the paper, despite its several virtues, seemed to illustrate two grave dangers implicit in "social science fashions these days." One is the "leaving out of the flavor and uniqueness of the individual human experience"; the other is the "leaving out of the context of the individual experience." Impressed by the "wide variety of systems of slavery" within both Latin and North America, he found highly suspect the kind of generalization Mr. Elkins was making. "To ignore the differences *within* each area may be to ignore the very things which would give insight into the differences in individual personality development," he asserted. With this, Mr. Kuhn was inclined to agree. "Were there not considerable differences among plantation masters in their relations with slaves?" he asked. "Would there not be some possibility of comparing these with respect to differences in their slaves' personalities?" Such comparisons, he seemed to suggest, might lead to more valid conclusions than did the comparisons Mr. Elkins made. Further, Mr. Boorstin deplored the "lack of attention" by

Mr. Elkins to "common sense considerations" in the comparison of concentration camp with Southern plantation. The essence of the latter was "property" (the slave was economically valuable); the essence of the former was "terror" (the inmate was worthless save as the object of a sadism which might with impunity destroy him); and surely to ignore this essential difference by describing the camp as a "perversion" of the kind of slavery practised in our South was to render dubious any conclusions reached as to the allegedly common factors which, in the two systems, produced allegedly similar personality structures.

Mr. Graebner made much the same point: slavery was "purposeful," the concentration camp was "purposeless"; the former was "economic," the latter "sadistic." So did Mr. Persons, who listed among the "basic differences of the two systems the fact that the slaveholder 'boasted of his code of responsibility' for the well-being of the slave whereas the SS took pride in its 'toughness,' deliberately using the concentration camp to train recruits in the attitudes and techniques of brutality. Mr. Stout, on the other hand, though he raised questions about the paper on other grounds, was sure that the "purpose of captivity is irrelevant to a study of this sort" and that Mr. Elkins' "research design, whereby two factors are held constant in order to measure other variables," was not only "ingenious" but also fundamentally sound.

Like Mr. Boorstin, Mr. Persons expressed concern lest the "unique" (as Mr. Boorstin used the term) be submerged in a sea of statistical averages through such methodology as Mr. Elkins employed. Speaking of the paper as "an exercise in historical imagination," he expressed the conviction that "such exercises . . . cannot yield the peculiar quality of satisfaction that comes from vicarious contact with the past through its records." The historian's function is "to interpret the record," and the "unimpeachable testimony of the source itself must always remain the historian's stock-in-trade." Nevertheless he, like Mr. Stout, if for somewhat different reasons, was willing to accept as legitimate the paper's general methodology.

Certainly this method, said he, "is not new." On the contrary, historians "in the absence of direct data" have always attempted "to bridge gaps in historical reconstruction by inserting currently authoritative assumptions," using "techniques and insights from other disciplines" as they did so. In past times, the bridge was commonly made of "theological assumptions"; in more recent times it was made of "economic assumptions"; and perhaps Mr. Elkins' paper signified that today, increasingly, the bridging assumptions are being taken from the general field of psychology. (Mr. Storr made the same point, finding significance in the fact that Mr. Elkins applied "psychological rather than economic theory" to history, implying that the "determinants of history and personality," formerly sought [under the influence of Marx] among economic forces, may now be sought among psychological forces. It seemed to him that the Elkins study might be considered a "test case of the permissible limits of this kind of analysis," raising vividly the "whole question of how far you can go in studying human personality in historical terms.") Concluded Mr. Persons, the comparative method has yielded valuable results in the past and is, theoretically at least, perfectly justified.

In this he found himself, with Mr. Stout, in disagreement with Mr. Link, whose view of the paper's methodology was quite flatly negative. "Is this paper history?" asked Mr. Link. "Is it psychology?" He was "fairly certain" it was not the former ("at least not *good* history"), he doubted that it was the latter, and he was in general convinced that "any attempt to derive historical truths from the kind of comparisons made here is highly dubious." The present attempt seemed particularly so because Mr. Elkins argued from "a false analogy." For instance, Mr. Elkins made much of the "shock and detachment" which both slave and concentration camp inmate suffered at the outset of their bondage, but when he compared the personality of slave and inmate his data were concerned, not with "the African who was brought to America," but with the "characteristics of slavery as it finally developed here." It would have been far better, in Mr. Link's opinion, to compare the person-

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ality of the slave in early Virginia with that of the slave on the later Southern plantation—an opinion with which Mr. Kuhn might conceivably have agreed since he made, in his criticism, a similar point. "What is the alleged effect, if any, of the so-called 'first shock'?" asked Mr. Kuhn. "Much is made of it, but then when Latin American slaves are brought in it turns out to be virtually unimportant."

Mr. Wilson, too, had grave doubts as to the general method of which the present paper seemed to be an "extension"—a method whereby opinions and personality traits were considered wholly in terms of the conditions under which they arose or by which (as in Mr. Elkins' study) they were allegedly produced. The method, Mr. Wilson seemed to suggest, might well lead to the "genetic fallacy," namely the belief that a full knowledge of the environmental conditions under which an idea arose or a personality developed enable one to judge the validity of the idea or the value (the moral or intellectual quality) of the person. "I suppose this paper might be deemed an extrapolation of the theory of the authoritarian personality," said Mr. Wilson. "At least some use is made of that theory." And as he read it, Mr. Wilson became aware of a "jarring" of "old and new terms," and of a notable failure of the new vocabulary and "new method" to come to grips with "philosophical questions" of value and of the nature of personality. For instance, it was obvious that individual personalities varied much more widely, on the Southern plantation and in the Nazi concentration camp, than did the possible responses which the slave or prisoner could make to his environment. Yet Mr. Elkins seemed to define personality altogether in terms of these severely limited overt responses, concluding that personality structure, under the authoritarian pressures of a "closed system," was as a *general rule* modified in the direction of infantilism. Could such a conclusion, on such grounds, be justified?

Mr. Craven's strictures upon the paper were even more severe than Mr. Link's, involving not only *Methodology and Design* (Mr. Craven was convinced that the process of "sweeping"

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generalization which the paper employed was *per se* invalid) but also, and principally, the *Data* which Mr. Elkins cited or, as Mr. Craven emphasized, ignored. There were, said Mr. Craven, "two kinds of slavery" in North America. One was the "concrete reality," or rather "realities," which actually existed. The other was an "abstraction" in the minds of Northern reformers whose vision, to some extent at least, was distorted by moral preconceptions. One might speak of "abstract slavery" as a "system"; abolitionists continually did so; but one could not speak thus of slavery as it was, in fact, practiced. "Slavery varied widely between masters in any given locality," said Mr. Craven; "it varied widely between one region and another. Even on the same plantation it was likely to be one thing one day and another on another." So "tremendous" were these variations, and so utterly ignored by Mr. Elkins, that the paper's picture of American slavery had "no reality whatever." This of course rendered false the analogy with the Nazi concentration camp and the contrast with slavery in Latin America.

As for "Sambo," he was not at all "the picture which the master had of slaves," as Mr. Elkins evidently believed. Rather was he a "minstrel picture, and I don't think you can draw valid generalizations from a false stereotype." The slaves which the Southern planter knew did not constitute a "type" at all; they were individuals of widely various personality, clearly recognized as such by the master. Moreover, Mr. Craven was convinced that these slaves "did not worry about being slaves" in the way in which we, by projecting our consciousness into theirs, might believe they did. In short, slavery as a "human institution" had all the gradations from good to evil of other human institutions, and the picture one obtains of it by using contemporary newspaper accounts, as so many scholars have done, is as horribly distorted as that one would form of modern marriage if one were to depend wholly upon news stories of weddings and divorces.

Mr. Dike, vice-principal of the University College in Ibadan, Nigeria, who is a visiting professor in the anthropology department of Northwestern University this year, confessed

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himself incompetent to discuss "what happened to the slave after he got to America," but he did know a good deal about the African tribes and the organization of the slave trade in Africa. He was sure that the sources Mr. Elkins had consulted for information on these subjects were highly dubious. The slave trade was a floating one in Africa, and the trader on the coast was not in contact with the tribes of the interior and had little or no accurate knowledge of their organization or culture. He generally had little knowledge even of the slave trade in the interior, being concerned almost exclusively with that trade's end-products. Mr. Elkins, therefore, would do well to consult sources other than the accounts of the slave-traders on the coast—and these other sources, said Mr. Dike, are now quite readily available, since a "new literature" on the subject has been opened up in Africa in recent years. When Mr. Elkins, for example, described the horrors of slave recruitment in the interior and of the march to the sea as though they were elements of a general experience, he evidently leaned far more heavily than was wise on the coastal traders' accounts. Actually the ways of recruitment in the interior were many and widely various by any standard of comparison, including that of cruelty. Religion as shaped by tribal "oracles" often served the traders' interests by convincing the Negroes that slavery was Fate, that it might at any moment descend upon them, and that to fight against it was useless. In such cases there was a long psychological preparation for the individual's enslavement and no such "shock and detachment" as Mr. Elkins described.

Mr. Phelan, the only Latin American scholar at the conference, also confined his remarks to data-problems. He was convinced that Mr. Elkins' general description of Latin American slavery was correct; certainly the "slave system" in those countries was relatively "open." But he believed the author's use of data in support of the "basic thesis" might be "refined." For instance, Mr. Elkins might do well to elaborate somewhat upon the manner in which the crown operated to create and preserve an "open" slavery system. It did so by carefully retaining in its own hands the "balance of power" within a "multi-class

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and multi-racial colonial society," using for this purpose an imperial bureaucracy which intervened to prevent any one group from growing too strong politically. Hence the tendency to guarantee to the slave a self-determination sufficient to qualify or weaken what might otherwise become the overweening power of the planter class.

And how did it happen that Catholicism operated in such a way as to "open" slavery in Latin America? (Protestantism in the North American slave states, insofar as it affected slavery at all, often served a contrary purpose.) Mr. Phelan suggested it did so because the church, though recognizing human inequalities in this world as a consequence of "original sin," insisted upon an "other-worldly" egalitarianism which could not but serve as "a powerful bond of social equality even in this world." Since "all men are equal in the sight of God, having a common origin and a common end," it was impossible to regard the slave in exclusively property terms. The slave, too, had an immortal soul; in this sense of eternity, he was the equal of his master. Nor was there any disposition in the Iberian culture to regard the Negro as "less than a man" merely because of his dark skin. After all, Mr. Phelan pointed out, dark-skinned people were conquerors of the Iberian peninsula in the early Middle Ages; they constituted in those days the ruling class; and in consequence there has persisted among Spaniards a tendency to regard a dark skin as significant of "superiority" rather than "inferiority." ("The dark-skinned woman, in Spain, is sexually attractive.")

Moreover, the Iberian people had had much more experience with slavery prior to 1492 than Nordic peoples had had, and this experience, of itself alone, must lead to a realism whereby the slave's bondage was recognized as an external and partial condition (a "misfortune," perhaps) beneath which and beyond which his uniquely individual personality continued to exist. Finally, Mr. Phelan suggested that Mr. Elkins give some consideration to the "French experience" in Haiti where there was "gruelling exploitation" of the Negro but where the "Sambo mentality" did not emerge, the African cul-

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ture survived to a greater degree than elsewhere, and the greatest and most successful of the slave revolts occurred. Here Mr. Elkins might garner further support for his thesis that the "closedness" of the system and not "cruelty *per se*" produces the personality structure he described.

Several other conferees made data suggestions. Mr. Young, Mr. Graebner, and Mr. Stout all suggested, as a data source which might well prove more valid for purposes of analogy than the Nazi camps, the experiences of inmates in the Russian "slave labor" camps. Mr. Stout agreed with Mr. Phelan as to the need for what he called "a more extensive statement on the Iberian slave situation" and suggested, as another data source, material on Japanese soldiers who became American prisoners of war. Mr. Young, who did not "feel that Mr. Elkins clinched his argument regarding the analogy or parallelism" of the Nazi camp system to American slavery, and who characterized the Elkins study as a contribution to the growing literature dealing with "personality under stress," mentioned in the latter connection studies made at the University of Minnesota where changes in the personality (or behavior) of men subjected to various degrees of starvation were recorded under controlled conditions.

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As regards the paper's general *Conclusions*, two of the conferees, Mr. Stout and Mr. Schwarzenberg, were convinced of their soundness. Both derived their conviction not only from Mr. Elkins' argument but also from their own personal experience.

Mr. Stout, during World War II, had been assigned to interrogate Japanese prisoners and had noted among the Japanese, if in different form, the same essential process of "identification" with the "master" which Mr. Elkins described. The initial impulse of the Japanese prisoner was to commit suicide, but if the Americans could prevent his doing so "for a couple of weeks, he typically transferred completely to the American personnel." This process of "identification" or "transference" took somewhat longer with officers than with enlisted men but

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both kinds of prisoners made it. "We, their captors," said Mr. Stout, "were their 'only significant other.'"

Mr. Schwarzenberg, a native of Czechoslovakia who lived through the Nazi occupation of his country from 1939 to 1945, confessed that when he first read the paper he had had toward its conclusions a "negative reaction." It then seemed to him that Mr. Elkins had "over-generalized" about the personality changes produced by the concentration camp. "There came to my mind the names of many who came back from the camps not at all in the frame of mind Mr. Elkins described," he said. "They were so embittered, in fact, that we feared they might threaten the building of a peaceful social order." But later, Mr. Schwarzenberg went on, he remembered that these rebellious ones were "all people who had enjoyed in the camps the 'little privileges'" Mr. Elkins had mentioned—and as he thought more and more about it he decided that "maybe Mr. Elkins was completely right in his generalization." He himself, however, was unable to say whether or not the conclusions were adequately supported by "the literature" for he was unable to read it: "Too many of my friends were taken away by the Gestapo and nevermore came back." He mentioned, too, as supporting Mr. Elkins' conclusions, observations he had made of German prisoners of war who, after ten years in Russian camps, returned recently to their homes. "I know of many cases where, instead of being thrilled by their return and hating their captors, they seemed strangely passive."

All this had led Mr. Schwarzenberg to "think of whole nations behind the Iron Curtain whose people have been 'shocked and detached' from their past *without* leaving their homes." He wondered if here, too, there was not at work that "process of identification" whereby men and women, without realizing what was happening to them, certainly without becoming Communists or even revising consciously their anti-Communism, began to assume some of the attitudes and adopt some of the ideas of their Communist rulers and to take "a certain pride" in Communist achievements. This "identification," Mr. Schwarzenberg went on, would be "slight" com-

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pared to that occurring in a concentration camp, but it might be sufficient to explain in part why the Czechs, from the Hungarian freedom-fighter's point of view, "behaved like swine" in 1956. Of course the principal explanation of this is undoubtedly that Czech leaders had a greater "political realism" than the Hungarians (they knew from experience that, despite the Eisenhower campaign talk about the "liberation of oppressed peoples," no American help would come to the revolutionists), but perhaps the "identification process" was at work, too. Certainly, to the extent that it was, it militated against American aid to Iron Curtain countries. American observers would not realize that the shift in attitude of the occupied people was not the result of a "free act of will" but, on the contrary, proceeded from that atrophy of the instinct for freedom which may occur among a people in bondage to the degree that they regard freedom's cause as hopeless.

Others among the conferees, however—notably Mr. Graebner, Mr. Kuhn, Mr. Vincent, Mr. Hooker, Mr. Zanger, and Mr. Davis—were convinced that Mr. Elkins' general conclusions remained unproved and perhaps unprovable.

"Was Sambo 'real' or 'unreal?'" Mr. Hooker quoted from the paper, and expressed himself as "not sure Mr. Elkins ever gets over this first hump." Mr. Kuhn thought he sensed a kind of buried "circularity" in Mr. Elkins' argument whereby the "closed system" was to some extent defined as one which produced an "infantile personality" and an "infantile personality" was defined as one produced by a "closed system." Mr. Vincent was convinced that there were "two Sambos"—one "adopted by the slave as a role, the other projected by the guilt-feelings of the master"—but that neither had "reality" as an objectively existing personality structure. He cited Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Melville's darkly moving, profoundly disturbing *Benito Cereno* (Mr. Vincent would not claim to have penetrated to its most inward meaning) as literary examples of the manner in which "infantilism" may be "played" by the Negro in flat contradiction of his "real" personality. Mr. Zanger, too, made reference to Ellison's *Invisible Man* and cited, as yet another

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example of "Sambo-as-role," the astonishment and even outrage which white families in Montgomery, Alabama, were reported to have felt when they discovered that their servants, so obsequious in the white home, seemingly so content with their servile condition, were walking to work in protest against racial segregation on busses. Since "we have ample evidence that the white Southerner today is continually fooled" as to the Negro's actual nature and attitudes, how can we accept Mr. Elkins' argument that Sambo *must* have been an objectively existing personality type because "mere role-playing" could not have "fooled" the antebellum South?²

Actually, Mr. Zanger suggested, Sambo may have been and probably was the product of a deception initially practiced, not by the Negro, but by his white master. Consider the untenable moral and intellectual position in which the Southern slaveholder found himself! He was a "liberty-loving American"; he was also a "slave master"; and he must play these conflicting roles, not before a tolerant or indifferent audience, but under the "pressing attack of highly articulate abolitionists." Somehow he must "internally justify the denial of freedom to creatures who were disturbingly human [while] externally justifying, in the journals and the Congress, the institution of slavery." How could he better do so than by assuming the role of Father in his relations with his slaves? Surely, said Mr. Zanger, this was a more reasonable inference from cited evidence than the one drawn in this paper when, having "defined the master's situation in essentially economic terms" and pointed out that this economic situation demanded "a slave who was absolutely dependent," Mr. Elkins concluded that, for the master, "the role most aptly fitting such a relationship

² But to what extent does role-playing, of and by itself, modify the personality of the role-player? Mr. Davis asserted in passing that "if a man chooses a manner because he thinks it becomes him, and maintains it with sufficient consistency, it does really *become* him." Mr. Kuhn quoted C. Wright Mills to the effect that men tend to become that which they have long sought merely to appear. Mr. Davis doubted, however, that a "manner" imposed by external force upon a personality would so utterly fuse with it as to remain, permanently, after the external pressure is removed. Certainly it would not do so, he believed, if it were wholly foreign to the original self.

would *naturally* be that of the father." Said Mr. Zanger: "I would assume that the most natural role for the master would be that of master. Parenthetically, is there any evidence of the SS ever seriously identifying themselves as *fathers* of their wards?"

But "if the master was to maintain the role of Father, it was absolutely essential for the slave to be seen as Child." Thus we find the slavery apologist Edward Pollard writing, as quoted by Mr. Elkins: "I love the simple and unadulterated slave, with his geniality, his mirth, his swagger, and his nonsense." This "may or may not have accurately described the external mannerisms of a slave," said Mr. Zanger, but it certainly indicated "the internal feelings of a master." Hence one must regard Mr. Elkins' case as, at best, unproved. "It is possible that we had a Sambo because of our closed system and Latin America did not because it lacked one," concluded Mr. Zanger. "It is also possible that we had a *myth* of Sambo and Latin America did not because we had a spirited and articulate attack upon the morality of slavery and of each individual slaveholder. That attack demanded a defense publicly and privately. The defense, the father-role, served to substitute for guilt moral superiority. It might be relevant here to point out that the metaphoric role the United States assumed in its notorious dealings with the American Indian was that of the Great White Father."

Mr. Graebner also wondered if, or to what extent, Sambo was "real." Was the infantilism which Mr. Elkins described, attributing it to a "closed system," actually "fundamental"? Or was it a "conscious pattern of behavior"? Thus Mr. Graebner suggested a distinction between "fundamental" and "conscious" which led Mr. Kuhn to ask if, in Mr. Graebner's view, the "fundamental" personality was always "*un-conscious*." Exigencies of the conference prevented Mr. Graebner's answering this question, but Mr. Davis, who spoke last, indicated a belief that there is indeed a "fundamental" or "essential" personality, that it is no mere creature of circumstance, and hence that it cannot be transformed even by such rigors of "closedness" as Mr. Elkins described.

What chiefly disturbed Mr. Davis in Mr. Elkins' paper, as a matter of fact, "was the view of human nature implicit in its argument." Said he: "There's no doubt that behavior and personality can to a considerable extent be modified by outside pressures. But the implication of the present paper seems to be that *any* person can be *completely* transformed by outer forces—that his personality, even if mature to begin with, can be made infantile through the operations of a closed system—and I just doubt that this is so." Certainly, if so, it destroyed what seemed to Mr. Davis "the only essential justification for a faith in democracy, namely the belief that there is some element in human nature, however small in proportion to the whole, which is truly individual and truly free." This "essential" self may choose to die rather than live under certain circumstances, or may make choices which have the effect of death in those circumstances, but these will be genuine self-determinations proceeding from the most inward self and not mere reactions to external stimuli.

Surely, said Mr. Davis, the "mortality figures which Mr. Elkins cites, both for African slaves and Nazi concentration camp inmates, would seem to indicate that most human beings will die rather than submit to the kind of degradation which the African slave-trade or the Nazi concentration camp imposed." Only one out of three Africans survived the march to the sea, the Middle Passage, the "seasoning." "And would not this one be likely to have been more infantile to begin with, more submissive and docile, than were the two who died?" asked Mr. Davis. "Pride, courage, boldness, self-respect, initiative—all these could become as fatal diseases in the kind of situation Mr. Elkins describes. Those possessing them would be winnowed out." In Nazi camps the mortality rate was even higher—"and Mr. Elkins himself stresses that, at the slightest expression of courage or self-respecting individualism, an inmate was killed by the SS." Clearly, there was a selective process going on here. "And it seems to me unwarranted to assume that conclusions about personality, derived wholly from observations of those who survived, must apply equally to those

(and they were the vast majority) who died, thus extending, as Mr. Elkins implies, to human beings in general."

* * *

It is traditional at these conferences for the author of the paper (the "sacrificial lamb of the occasion," as a member of a former conference put it) to be assigned a definite period in which to answer his critics. Mr. Elkins, it was generally agreed, made effective use of the brief time allotted him.

In part, his defense consisted of a history of his paper, stressing the fact that what was presented here was but one chapter of a long book which, in its entirety, would supply at least some of the "inadequacies of data" which had been pointed out. For instance, the book's second chapter was an extended treatment of the differences between the U.S. and Latin American slave systems, making some though by no means all of the "refinements" Mr. Phelan had recommended. (Mr. Elkins admitted, however, that Mr. Dike had raised "disturbing questions" as to the accuracy and adequacy of the material on the African slave trade, indicating the need for a considerable "refinement" or supplementation of these data.) Moreover, as the conference chairman, Mr. Pargellis, had earlier explained, it had been necessary for the purposes of this meeting to reduce the length of the paper originally submitted; this had been done by eliminating all the footnotes, which were numerous and lengthy, as well as a whole section dealing with "Three Theories of Personality." This eliminated material provided some of the qualifications and support of the central argument whose lack had, by several conferees, been criticized.

But as regarded his general methodology and conclusions, Mr. Elkins, though grateful for criticisms from which he profited, stood firm. He had noted a disposition of his critics to assume that he had "found an interesting hypothesis" in social psychology and then "sought justification for it in history." Actually, the reverse was true: he had started with a problem in history posed by the conflicting views of Ulrich B. Phillips (*American Negro Slavery*) and *Life and Labor* in the

Old South) and Kenneth M. Stampp (*The Peculiar Institution*) concerning the personality of the Negro slave. Phillips' implicit assumption is that "slavery was a benevolent institution made necessary by racial differences" between Negro and white; he assumes that "Sambo was a racial type." Stampp presents slavery as an essentially vicious institution, uneclectic, corrupting alike to master and slave, and "denies that Sambo was a racial type." Since the evidence overwhelmingly supports Stampp's position, how was it possible for Phillips to hold so strongly a contradictory view? "What," Mr. Elkins asked himself, "would have happened to create the kind of personality which Phillips *assumed* existed?" It was at this point, and not before, that he turned from history to psychology in search of answers.

The methodology of the paper involved, admittedly, "gross comparisons" which might be described, in part, as "extended metaphors." The concepts of two kinds of slavery, and of the Nazi concentration camp as an extreme form of one kind, were "sweeping generalizations"—abstractions from, or common denominators of, a great number of widely ranging variables. But this was precisely their virtue. They represented perspectives so broad that individual variations within them cancelled each other out, enabling the student to gain that rigidity of concept without which the logical mind can't operate. They were like landscapes viewed from such a distance as to render invisible the myriad details which a closer look would discover. Surely the absence of microscopic detail did not mean that the landscape was an illusion! On the contrary, only from a proper distance could one actually *see* the countryside in its general contours and colors. . . .

But what, in such cases as this, was the "proper distance"? To what extent could the student eschew concrete detail in favor of abstract pattern when dealing with human behavior and human institutions? At what point or in what ways does the process of generalization falsify the actual, particularly existent realities? These were questions—most specifically posed by Mr. Pargellis, Mr. Young, and Mr. Craven—with which the

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remainder of the conference was occupied. If they remained unanswered when the conference ended, they were at least clarified in a number of minds.

For instance, when Mr. Craven made his initial argument against the paper he asserted that there was in reality no *system* of slavery in the South but, rather, a great number and variety of individual slaveries, each of them unique. Hence, or so he seemed to be saying, no one could make valid generalizations about slavery. But even as he gave this impression he seemed to realize, as did several of his colleagues, that he was on the verge of committing the same essential fallacy as the ancient Sophist who asserted "there are no general truths."³ At any rate, during the later discussion, he quickly retreated to more tenable ground. He admitted that of course there *was* such a thing as slavery, which is to say there were certain factors common to all the "slaveries" he had indicated. All slaves had in common the fact that they were property items, all masters had in common the fact that they owned other human beings, and from these common factors other commonalities must inevitably flow. What Mr. Craven was objecting to, then, was not generalization "in general" but, instead, the *kind* of generalization Mr. Elkins was making. In such papers as this, the generalizations should be of and about facts, whereas Mr. Elkins was generalizing of and about fictions. It was the "validity of the materials" used by Mr. Elkins which Mr. Craven challenged.

And in this he was supported by Mr. Boorstin, for one. The "enemy," said Mr. Boorstin, is "not generalization but a *priorism*." As historians, he said, "we must insist, not that we shouldn't generalize, but that we must make certain we generalize about the *real* world." Hence the historian must be chary of generalizing about earlier generalizations; he must continuously check himself by going "back to the sources."

Mr. Elkins disagreed, insofar as these remarks applied directly to his paper. He frankly confessed that he had not derived his information about U.S. and Latin American slavery

³As Plato's Socrates pointed out, this statement, if true, must be false, and false *because* true, since it is a statement of allegedly general truth.

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primarily from "original sources," though he had of course read a good deal among these. It had not seemed to him necessary for his purposes to do so. He had depended upon Phillips and Stampff who certainly *had* consulted the sources. And why should he not? In this stand, he was by no means without support from certain fellow conferees. These asserted that "little progress" could be made in the writing of history if each historian must go back and re-do research already ably done by predecessors, nor could the "crying need" be thus satisfied for "unifications" and "syntheses" to escape (as Mr. Vincent put it) a "multiplicity that can make us psychotic." But Mr. Elkins was also promptly challenged on this point by Mr. Craven and Mr. Phelan. The former specifically criticized him for depending upon Stampff who, he claimed, had *not* sufficiently consulted the sources but had, in fact, done very "superficial and inadequate research" with the result that his conclusions were in many cases erroneous. The latter criticized him on principle, asserting that the necessity for "going back to the sources" was dictated by the fact that, when one approached them "from a specific point of view," one always found "something new." Mr. Phelan also voiced what, in his view, was the "historian's general criticism of the social scientist," namely that the latter tended "to rush to conclusions with an insufficiency of data."

Thus was raised again, as so often before in these conferences, the issue between History and Social Science as disciplines. This time, more clearly than before, the issue was defined in terms of the difference in relative emphases which the disciplines give to the General and the Particular as they look upon human institutions and behavior. Insofar as a consensus was reached, it seemed to be that the historian is inclined to stress the Particular, the social scientist the General. Said Mr. Wilson, the historian is primarily concerned with "uniqueness and sequence" whereas the social scientist "is looking for issues and problems." Hence the historical method aims at a "detailed precision" of historical fact whereas the social scientist is, in method, "experimental." Said Mr. Kuhn, "The historian has a multiple view of himself, the behavioral scientist is much

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more single-minded." And he went on to stress the "multifunctional role of the historian." According to Mr. Persons, agreeing with Mr. Kuhn, the social scientist "begins by framing a question" and has the "assurance that he'll find the data" with which to answer it. The historian, on the other hand, "is at the mercy of his data." Thus was made evident a certain tendency, on the part of some conferees, to depreciate the social scientist.

But the latter, at least as regards general method, was given a Stout defense. Said Mr. Stout: "I am convinced, on the basis of an enormous amount of empirical evidence, that human behavior is patterned. There are regularities, repetitions." To recognize and define these is the function of the social scientist; he does so through a process of generalization; and surely this process, applied with a careful respect for evidence, yields valid and valuable fruit. (But what, asked Mr. Stout, is evidence? Perhaps the historian and social scientist differed in what they were willing to accept as evidence.) Mr. Phelan seemed inclined to agree in part with Mr. Stout, at least as regards the "generalizability" of human behavior revealed in records of the past, for he said that historians must recognize that "though every event has in it an element of the unique, it has also in it an element of similarity with other events." The latter made valid generalizations possible.

Mr. Pargellis suggested that differences in methodology, as between emphasizing the General or emphasizing the Particular, were dictated by differences in the scholar's concern with human behavior. Insofar as human behavior is "patterned" one can "categorize" it, deal with it in terms of "common denominators." But insofar as human behavior is individually free, its every action is unique and "categorization" becomes invalid. He further suggested that the issues between History and Social Science as it was being presented in this conference was, perhaps, too sharp. "What, after all, is the difference in objective between the social scientist and the historian?" he asked. "Aren't we both concerned with the movement of social institutions through time?"

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Perhaps these questions, posed by the chairman as the meeting drew toward its close, were deemed rhetorical by the conferees. At any rate, they were not explicitly answered. Among those present, however, were several who might have answered the second question with a fairly flat "no." Social Science and History are *not* equally concerned with "the movement of institutions through time," these conferees might have said, and it is precisely here that we find the "difference in objective" between the two.

The social scientist, they might have gone on, is concerned with the statics of human behavior and institutions; the historian is concerned with the dynamics. The scientific method is such as will select from the flux of human affairs just those elements which may be considered independently of time because they are (in Mr. Stout's phrase) "patterns of repetition" or (in Mr. Pargellis') "categories of common denominators." But there is a very real sense in which Time itself—"concrete, flowing Time," as Bergson has it—is the historian's subject. Of this "real" time, within which "thing" and "change" are inextricably fused into "thing-changing," every element is necessarily unique if only because it is distinguished by temporal location from every other element, and it undergoes a continuous modification by a flowing present as it recedes into the past.

LIBRARY NOTES

AN EXHIBITION of miniature books, made under the direction of Doris Varner Welsh of the Library staff, herself a printer and binder of tiny books as a hobby, was mounted in the Library lobby from July through September. Scores of books were displayed, none measuring more than four inches in any dimension, with the exception of some 15th century editions which were measured by their printed surfaces (not more than three inches per page), and some scroll books which were measured by their bindings. One purpose of the display was to show that miniature books are not always mere tricks of the printing trade but often have practical value. Many tiny almanacs and dictionaries, for instance, dating from the 17th century to the present time, are easily readable despite their size and unusually convenient because of it. Incunabula dating as early as 1484, illuminated manuscripts produced in Venice early in the 16th century, Bibles, Hebrew prayers, Sanskrit prayer rolls, ancient and modern classics, children's books, music and song books—many of them almost incredibly small—were shown. One of the most interesting items was an edition of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* [Milan, 1878] printed in a "fly's eye" type designed by Giacomo Gnochi, a work of such great technical difficulty that forty-eight years were required for its completion.

* * *

Currently showing is a Library exhibition of early American sheet music, from 1828 to 1893. Among the rare and interesting items displayed are the "Railroad March" issued in 1828 to commemorate the first passenger railroad in the United States, though illustrated with a vignette of a primitive freight train (the piece was dedicated to the directors of the Baltimore and Ohio); "They are Come, They are Come, Thro' the Tempest and Foam," commemorating the arrival in New York, in April, 1838, of the Great Western, first steamship to cross the Atlantic; "The Royal Polka" of 1846, composed by