

Brad DeLong's Grasping Reality

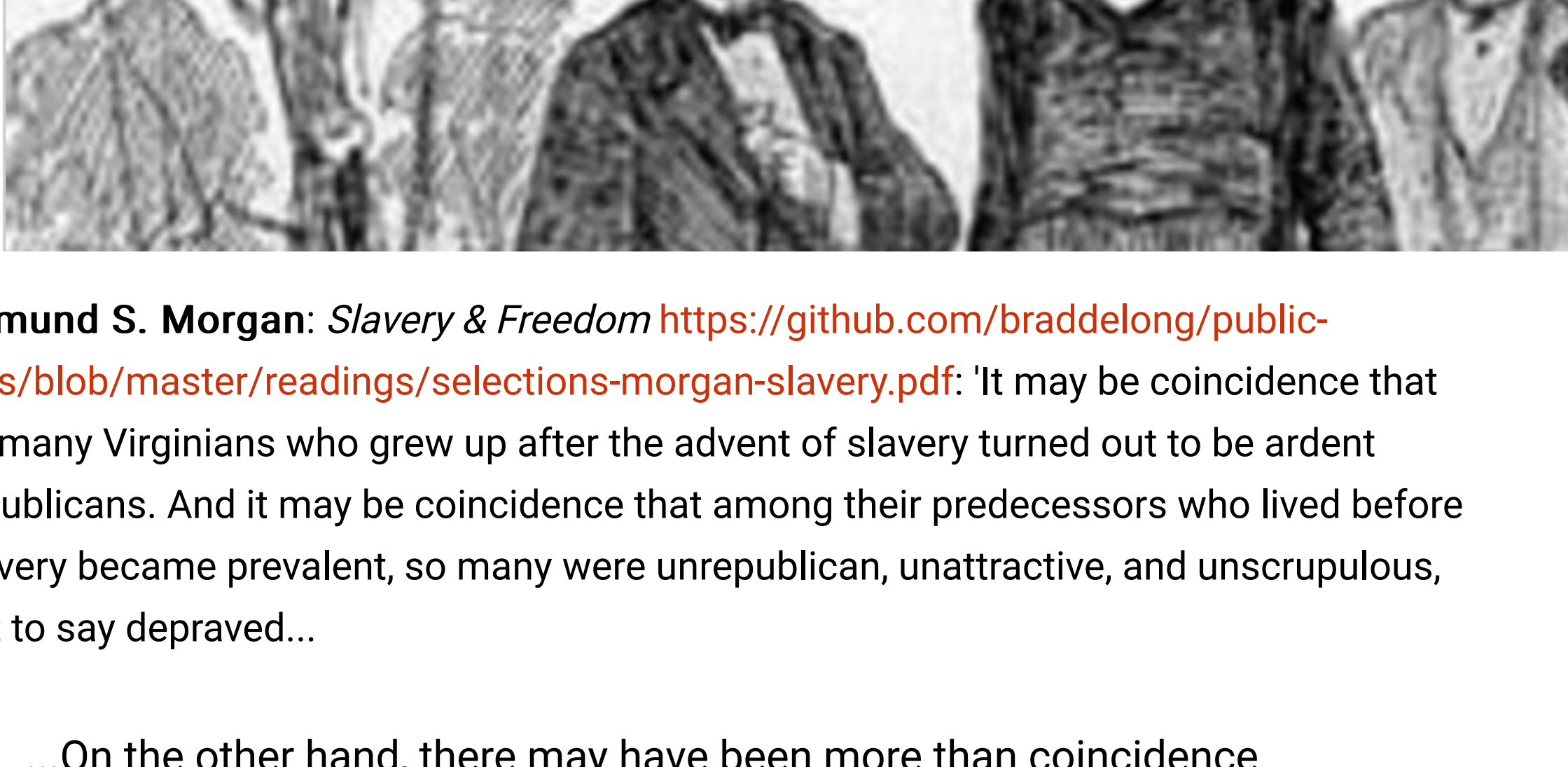
A Semi-Daily Journal. Trying to grasp reality with both hands since 1999...

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Edmund S. Morgan: Slavery & Freedom—For the Weekend



Edmund S. Morgan: *Slavery & Freedom* <https://github.com/braddelong/public-files/blob/master/readings/selections-morgan-slavery.pdf>: 'It may be coincidence that so many Virginians who grew up after the advent of slavery turned out to be ardent republicans. And it may be coincidence that among their predecessors who lived before slavery became prevalent, so many were unrepublican, unattractive, and unscrupulous, not to say depraved...

...On the other hand, there may have been more than coincidence involved.

Although it seems unlikely that slavery had any tendency to improve the character of masters, it may have had affinities with republicanism that escaped Jefferson's analysis. The presence of men and women who were, in law at least, almost totally subject to the will of other men gave to those in control of them an immediate experience of what it could mean to be at the mercy of a tyrant. Virginians may have had a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like....

Aristocrats could more safely preach equality in a slave society than in a free one. Slaves did not become leveling mobs, because their owners would see to it that they had no chance to. The apostrophes to equality were not addressed to them. And because Virginia's labor force was composed mainly of slaves, who had been isolated by race and removed from the political equation, the remaining free laborers and tenant farmers were too few in number to constitute a serious threat to the superiority of the men who assured them of their equality....

The small planter's small stake in human property placed him on the same side of the fence as the large man, whom he regularly elected to protect his interests. Virginia's small farmers could perceive a common identity with the large.... Neither was a slave. And both were equal in not being slaves. This is not to say that a belief in republican equality had to rest on slavery, but only that in Virginia (and probably in other southern colonies) it did. The most ardent American republicans were Virginians, and their ardor was not unrelated to their power over the men and women they held in bondage....

Virginia's republicans had the decency to be disturbed by the apparent inconsistency of what they were doing. But they were far more disturbed by the prospect of turning 200,000 slaves loose.... The only serious plan for... emancipation, proposed by St. George Tucker in 1796... seemed too dangerous to receive serious consideration.

Virginia's slaves had [not] belonged to the same race as their masters. The fact that they did not made it easier for Virginians to use slavery as a flying buttress to freedom. The English had come to view their poor almost as an alien race... [with] continual denunciations from a battery of philosophers and reformers; it even required special badges to proclaim the differentness of the poor.... In Virginia neither badges nor philosophers were needed.... Anyone could tell black from white, even if black was actually brown or red. And as the number of poor white Virginians diminished, the vicious traits of character attributed by Englishmen to their poor could in Virginia increasingly appear to be the exclusive heritage of blacks... ungrateful, irresponsible, lazy, and dishonest.... Racism thus absorbed in Virginia the fear and contempt that men in England, whether Whig or Tory, monarchist or republican, felt for the inarticulate lower classes....

By lumping Indians, mulattoes, and Negroes in a single pariah class, Virginians had paved the way for a similar lumping of small and large planters in a single master class.... The forces which dictated that Virginians see Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians as one also dictated that they see large and small planters as one. Racism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation

How Virginian, then, was America? How heavily did American economic opportunity and political freedom rest on Virginia's slaves?... [In] Philadelphia and New York and Boston... the poor were... growing in numbers.... Would Northerners have embraced republican ideas of equality so readily if they had been [more] surrounded by men in "a certain degree of misery"? And could the new United States have made a go of it in the world of nations without Virginia and without the products of slave labor?

Northern republicans apparently thought not.... They allowed Virginians to compose the documents that founded their republic, and they chose Virginians to chart its course for a generation.... Was the vision of a nation of equals flawed at the source by contempt for both the poor and the black? Is America still colonial Virginia writ large? More than a century after Appomattox the questions linger...

AMERICAN SLAVERY AMERICAN FREEDOM *The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* EDMUND S. MORGAN

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SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

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