

EXCEPTIONALISM AND INDIVIDUALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF SLAVERY IN *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS*

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Résumé

Cet article vise à démontrer à travers le "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" que les comportements narcissiques et agressifs de certains blancs contre les esclaves noirs à l'époque de l'esclavage étaient enracinés dans les notions de l'exceptionnalisme et l'individualisme Américains. C'est-à-dire, pour démontrer qu'ils ont un statut de super humains, certains Américains blancs ont exercé des hostilités contre les esclaves dans leur course aux intérêts individuels et matérialistes. Ce faisant, certaines des notions idéologiques Américaines, à savoir les notions de l'individualisme et l'exceptionnalisme, ont été transférées aux noirs asservis. Théoriquement, l'étude a eu recours à la psychanalyse pour interpréter et analyser les effets de la notion américaine d'exceptionnalisme et d'individualisme sur, à la fois, certains Américains blancs et les noirs asservis dans le contexte de l'esclavage.

Mots clés : *noirs, exceptionnalisme américain, individualisme, esclavage, maîtres blancs.*

Abstract

This article is aimed to demonstrate through Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave that the narcissistic and aggressive behaviors of some Whites against black slaves in slavery era were rooted in the notions of American exceptionalism and individualism. That is, to demonstrate their super human status, some white Americans used hostilities against slaves in their hunt for individualistic and materialistic interests. In doing so, some of American ideological notions, namely the notions of individualism and exceptionalism, have been transferred to the enslaved Blacks. Theoretically, the study resorted to psychoanalysis in order to interpret and analyze the effects of the American notions of exceptionalism and individualism on both some white Americans and the enslaved Blacks in the context of slavery.

Keywords: *blacks, exceptionalism, individualism, slavery, white masters.*

Introduction

Individualism has been one the underlying principles of the concept of American exceptionalism in the very beginning of the American nation. This concept was postulated by Americans to create national

pride in all Americans and encourage competition between individual American citizens on one hand, and between American citizens and citizens of other nations on the other hand. Hence, in the period of transatlantic slave trade, white people, in need of strong workers for their plantations and other domestic services, had gradually made Africans their first choice. From fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Africans underwent terrific ordeals on their captures, departures from mother Africa, crossing the horrendous middle passage and ending on plantations. That period marked the beginning of the objectification and the race-based exploitation of Africans on the American mainland. Many scholars have tackled the issue of slavery and its related physical and mental abuses for slaves. However, less has been said about how America had become the leader of slave business and why it had become the final destination for the enslaved Blacks. We have also remarked that the conflicting relationship existing in the midst of the enslaved Blacks and their related causes were slightly documented.

It is in this context that we have noticed through Douglass's narrative that the enslaved Blacks were taught individualistic principles on American plantations. The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is an historical document which not only talks about the relationship between slaves and masters, but also the conflicting cohabitation of slaves themselves. In regard to what precedes, the objective of this paper is to demonstrate that the narcissistic and intolerant attitudes of some American people, during the period of slavery, had been caused by the notions of the American exceptionalism and individualism. Secondly, the study attempts to show that the internal or external divisions of slaves were caused by the impact of the notion of individualism. The psychoanalytic tools "narcissism" and "transference" are used to carry out the analysis and the interpretation of the study's data. In doing so, the paper presents how the concepts of exceptionalism and individualism were manifest through white enslavers. Finally, it tries to explicate how the two concepts were transferred to the enslaved Blacks, and how these concepts were manifest among them.

1. Redefinition of American exceptionalism in the context of slavery

The concept of individualism is embedded in American culture. It is

one of the tenets that structures the American nation. In fact, since the foundation of the American nation, this notion has been introduced as it was one of the cultural legacies handed down by the early European immigrants to the newly founded land: “Intuitively, as settlers of European origin shed their former culture and embraced rugged individualism across the U.S., America as a whole became more and more different from Europe”(Bazzi et, al. 2017,p.28). This quote evidences that the concept of individualism became part of the American life with the pioneers who introduced a new social orientation, different from what they used to practice in Europe. Under the Individualistic mentality, a person becomes a hunter of self-interest rather than common one:

Following Hofstede (1980, 1991) and Triandis (1988, 1995, 2001), we think of individualism (in contrast to collectivism) as comprising several related traits: a view of the self as independent rather than interdependent, the emphasis on self-reliance, the primacy of self-interest, and the regulation of behavior by personal attitudes rather than social norms (Bazzi et, al, 2017,p.05).

From the foregoing, one can learn that an individualistic person generally acts for his/her own good rather than the general one. It is this attitude that entice competition among population. This concept of individualism is narrowly related to another concept which also framed the American history up to the modern days. It is the concept of “American exceptionalism.”

Since the early period American nation, it was inculcated in the mind of American citizens that they were exceptional human beings. That is, they were different from people other nations. It also connotes that Americans were better than the people of other nations. In this regard, Wells in his paper entitled “Pragmatism as American Exceptionalism” writes the following:

American exceptionalism, the concept that the United States stands outside the boundaries of the rest of the world in

such a way as to be incomparable to other nations, has been a staple tactic that sociologists and political scientists employ to explain a perceived uniqueness that this country allegedly possesses (2012, p.1).

Inferring from the above extract, it becomes obvious that the notion of individualism has paved the way for the mentioned notion of exceptionalism. Both concepts put accent on the self. That is, the notion of American individualism creates competitions among Americans, encouraging citizens to go for self-interest and make sufficient profit. The second concept “American exceptionalism” makes the Americans believe that they are unique creatures in the world. It also implies that their nation (the U.S) is the best nation in the world. It is this feeling of exceptionalism that framed the notion of individualism in the mindsets of Americans: “The United States has enjoyed remarkable success, and Americans tend to portray their rise to world power as a direct result of the political foresight of the founding Fathers, the virtues of the U.S. Constitution, the priority placed on individual liberty, and the creativity and the hard work of the American people” (Walt, 2011, NP.). Through the foregoing passage, it is clearly affirmed that the prosperity of America and its citizens lie in some factors established the pioneers, namely the individual liberty, the hard work of the American people. Therefore, Americans became competitors at all levels of human activities. It is because of these elements that throughout the history of United States, Americans have been engaged in internal and external competitions. The internal competition is a competition that is among the American citizens, each of whom trying to better. On the other hand, the external competition is the one in which the American people are engaged vis-à-vis the rest of the world. In the light of what precedes, it can be sustained that the concept exceptionalism has paved the way for the system of capitalism in America. Thus, at the beginning of the triangular slave trade in the 15th century, American people had taken an immense advantage of that system as it permitted to the development of the American nation of that epoch.

Indeed, the same individualistic ideology combined with the feeling of exceptionalism had continued to influence American people during the period of slavery. The institution of slavery, being an economic venture, had given opportunities to the then American people to implement their

individualistic project, that is, their pursuit of self-interests through the commodification of Africans. This situation is the evidence that highlights the notion of individualism and its ramifications leading to competition among Americans. The aforementioned competition for fortune is undoubtedly the factor that gave birth to the system of capitalism in the western nations, especially the United States. In that, during slavery, some Americans, indoctrinated by the notion of the individual liberty, had engaged in slave race. In Douglass's narrative and many other documents tackling the American slave society, it has been highlighted that the economy of the American nation was essentially dependent on slave business. Most of the wealthy Americans of that period were major slave owners, and there was blatant competition among them.

Believed that they were exceptional and superior humans, some slave owners expected their black slaves to be happy with their situation of bondage. According to these particular masters, black slaves were naturally inferior to the exceptional Whites, so they had to appreciate whatever their masters might do to them. It is in this context that some wealthy slave owners usually sent spies among their slaves to make sure that their slaves had good opinion about them: "The slaveholders have been known to send in spies among their slaves, to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition. The frequency of this has had the effect to establish among the slaves the maxim, that a still tongue makes a wise head" (Douglass, 1845, p.31). The passage shows that some slaveholders, despite the brutality they exerted on slaves, were resolute to receive good opinions from the oppressed Blacks. In doing so, they employed methods of harassment by sending spies among their slaves to check what slaves thought about them. Through the same extract, it can be affirmed that the notion of exceptionalism had created a great feeling of narcissism in the mindsets of some white Americans. That excessive feeling of self-importance made some white Americans, especially masters, believe that black slaves did not have the right to have any critical opinions about their masters; just like a creature should not judge what almighty God do. We can postulate that some Americans under the influence of exceptionalism considered themselves as gods.

Although slaves were not well treated, the masters would not tolerate any slave to make it known, for they believed that black slaves were born to serve the exceptional Whites. Therefore, whatever the latter did to the inferior Blacks had to be considered by them as good. For instance in

case a master heard that one of his slaves complained about his living condition, he would be taken from his family and sold away as a punishment:

The poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader. He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment's warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions. (Douglass, 1845 p.31)

Through the passage, Douglass relates that, one day, his master Colonel Lloyd had questioned one of his slaves about his living condition. The latter responded negatively without knowing that he was talking to his master. As a result, Colonel Lloyd decided to separate him from his family and friends by selling him away. Inferring from the same extract, masters did not accept to be judged by their slaves since they believed that they were outstanding human beings. Aware that slaves were not in good condition, some narcissistic white masters would expect the oppressed slaves to pronounce compliments toward them. A possible explanation to the foregoing attitude of some white Americans is that they wanted black slaves recognized their exceptionalism. In that, they wanted Blacks to submissive objects.

Moreover, the slave business was extremely profitable for Americans, especially masters and traders. This was made possible because the constitution of America has given liberty to individuals to do whatever it may take to make fortune. In relation to preceding idea, Stevens writes the following: "Capitalism gives ordinary people opportunities to do extraordinary things. There is strong link between capitalism and the exceptionalism that makes America such a unique and wonderful place (2020, p.18)." This opportunity granted to ordinary American citizens to go from rags to riches is what had galvanized American people of the period slavery to regard black slaves as commodities. In this regard, the ideology of social mobility through slave bargain enticed many masters in the light of Douglass's master Colonel Lloyd to make huge fortune.

Douglass sustains that Colonel Lloyd possessed countless slaves; however, he was determined to expand his fortune:

To describe the wealth of Colonel Lloyd would be almost equal to describing the riches of Job. He kept from ten to fifteen house-servants. He was said to own a thousand slaves, and I think this estimate quite within the truth. Colonel Lloyd owned so many that he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out farms know him (p.30).

The passage showcases the huge fortunes that slave masters could make out of the slave business. The success made by Americans in slave business lies in the notion of American exceptionalism. As indicated earlier, that concept of the uniqueness of Americans had influenced them through the period of slavery and leading them to consider the enslaved Africans as keys to richness. Therefore, in Douglass's narrative, and by extension most slave narratives, slaves are depicted as vital commodities for white people, especially traders and masters. Besides, to achieve their objectives as exceptional people, white traders and masters had intensified slave activities to make maximum profit.

Another occurrence that evidences the white slave owners' endeavor to show that they were exceptional human beings was the cruel treatment they reserved for black slaves. Douglass demonstrates that some white owners took pleasure in inflicting pains to slaves just to please their ego. That is, according to some white masters, to prove their feeling of superiority or super humans, they had to demean black slaves. In that, Douglass affirms that slave holders preferred submissive slaves who did not contest the status and authority of their owners. It is in this context that some white masters did not want their slaves to be educated because education could enlighten them and eventually lead them to question the superhuman status of Whites: "A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave (Douglass, 1845, p.44). It can be inferred from the extract that teaching a slave was an infringement upon the super

human status of white enslavers. From their point of view, slaves should not be instructed anything other than how to obey. This attitude of some Whites demonstrates that they were guided by extreme narcissism.

In the same dynamics, it is quite obvious that the brutality experienced by black slaves in the hands of some Whites was motivated by the fact that they wanted to demonstrate their superiority. In their endeavor to prove their super human status and to subdue black slaves, it is noted that some white slave owners had exerted a number of dehumanizing treatment against Blacks. For instance, Douglass reveals that just to show his anger against a so-called lack of respect, a master, named Covey, had opened fire on a black slave:

Mr. Gore, in short, sounds like someone who could kill somebody, and indeed, what comes next is Douglass's account of Mr. Gore's shooting and killing a slave named Demby. Demby's offense was that he did not obey the command—the sound—of his “master's voice” (the “master” in this instance being Gore) (Douglass, 1845, pp.XIX, XX).

The foregoing excerpt is a note by Robert B. Stepto, retrieved from the introduction notes of the narrative of Douglass. It evidences that excessive pride turned into narcissism had rendered some white slave holders violent. They believed that they had to show firmness so as to impose respect and their status as super humans even though that could involve assassination.

2. Slaves in the Individualistic Society

As discussed in the previous section, the notion of individualism and American exceptionalism have always been part of American life as it was the driving force of the power of America. It is in this context that during slavery period, slaves found themselves trapped in a system in which they were considered as the main capitals for the prosperity of their masters. In addition to that, slaves were under heavy pressures: the emotional and the physical ones. Violent treatment experienced by slaves from overseers on plantations, and the dilemma they had as to how to

behave in a servitude situation had impacted the mind and the attitude of slaves.

Consequently, slaves became traumatized and confused as to how they could behave in the American society. That traumatism led many black slaves of that period to be individualistic like their then masters. In that, Douglass narrates that under slavery, some slaves became selfish and individualistic to the extent that they could only think of their own wellbeing rather than that of the majority: “they think their own better than that of others” (Douglass, 1845, p. 16). From this quote, it can be affirmed that American capitalist societies which were founded on materialism and individualism where money and profit epitomized power and keys to everything had impacted the enslaved Blacks. Thus, a large number of the alienated slaves became interested in personal success instead of the general one.

Besides, under the individualistic ideologies, incredible rivalries sparked among alienated black slaves. The mentioned rivalries opposed slaves of different masters. Accordingly, when slaves of different masters met on occasions, they used to exchange words, ending sometimes in harsh debates. Some slaves, being mentally impacted by the stereotypes of the Whites’ superiority and the individualistic ideologies hailed the wealth and the fame of their owners. For instance, some slaves belonging to a wealthy master would say to their counterparts of another master that their particular white master was richer and better, and vice versa. That situation of black slaves confronting each other in support of their respective white masters shows how destabilized their mindsets were under the yoke of slavery and the ideology of exceptionalism. That is, as they believed that their masters were exceptional and better than the masters of other slaves, they were also exceptional and better as compared to their fellow slaves belonging to other owners.

Besides, they were even ready to fight one another on the basis that their respective masters were better: “These quarrels would almost always end in a fight between the parties” (Douglass, 1845, p. 17). The foregoing evidences that black slaves were guided by the white man’s style of individualism. For, instead of getting together as one to fight for their human rights, those alienated slaves were concerned with the wealth and power of their oppressors. Surprisingly, Douglass affirms that whenever slaves of different masters met, they constantly disputed, and each supported their respective masters. The disputes sometimes ended in scuffles and fighting as like in the capitalistic society where people are

only concerned with individual interests: “Many, under the influence of this prejudice, think their own masters are better than the masters of other slave (...)” (Douglass, 1845, p.16). From this illustration, the reader is edified about the fact that those black slaves had accepted both their fate as slaves and the supremacy of Whites because of their mental vulnerability resulting from slavery. Hence, that mental situation also demonstrates how the process of transference was frequent in the era of slavery as the notion of American individualism and exceptionalism were transferred to slaves. Putting it differently, this psychological state of mind enticed many black slaves to believe that they were exceptional like their masters in comparison with other slaves.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated in the narrative of Douglass that the notions of American exceptionalism and individualism had made some white Americans narcissistic and aggressive towards black slaves. It is actually the notion of American exceptionalism that led to individualism in the American society. Then the practice of slavery had also prospered in America because of the hunt for the individualistic gain in that nation. In their endeavor to prove their superhuman status as far as black slaves were concerned and to fulfill their materialistic objective, some white slave holders were ready to dehumanize the enslaved Blacks preventing them to exert their human rights. Surprisingly, the study has uncovered that the notions of the American exceptionalism and individualism were transferred to some enslaved Blacks as some of them became individualistic caring for their own good on the detriment of the general one. On top of that, some slaves under the influence of the two notions believed that their respective masters were better than the masters of other slaves. Hence, slaves belonging to wealthy masters believed they were also better than their fellow slaves belonging to poor masters.

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