

Social Justice in 19th Century Louisiana

During the 1800s, African Americans were facing some of the most inhumane acts against them in the history of our nation. Louisiana became infamous for the horrible treatment of slaves by their owners, and for the statewide view of the African American race as a whole. The concept of social justice before, during, and after the Civil War was virtually unattainable for African Americans in Louisiana, as well as across the Deep South. Especially during the years of Reconstruction, slaves in Louisiana were present, and Free Men on Color were not free at all: they could not vote, were not considered equal citizens to white males, and some were stripped of their property and possessions. Social justice, the ability of all members of society to have personal autonomy, equal access to public goods, and the privileges of citizenry were non-existent in Louisiana during the 19th century. White males of affluent backgrounds went to great lengths to ensure white supremacy controlled all aspect of city, parish and state level operations. This is illustrated in great detail in both *Twelve Years A Slave* and *The Colfax Massacre*. While there were indeed a handful of gracious and human slave owners, the violent events that are chronicled in both of the previous books overwhelm the outlying acts of kindness by those few slaveholders. Overall, social justice was unattainable in Louisiana during the 1800s due to the violent events and suppression of civil rights toward the African American race by white males bent on white supremacy.

Beginning with Solomon Northup's autobiography, there are three situations that stick out to me as evidence that social justice was unattainable, even if Northup was once a

free man of color. In the beginning of Northup's story, two men lure Northup away from his home in Saratoga Springs with offers of earning money through his violin performance. Eventually, they set him up to be kidnapped and sold into slavery. During this transition, Northup is kept in a damp prison cell with no windows and no connection to the outside world. At certain times during the day, he is brought food, but when he pleads for his freedom, insisting he did not escape slavery, he is beaten. Northup identifies these men as James H. Burch and Ebenezer Radburn, who worked as a business partner and lackey to slave dealer Theophilus Freeman, respectively. (Northup, 15-21) The details that Northup gives of his isolation and imprisonment put a vivid picture in the reader's mind about the inferior conditions to which Northup was subjected. These actions toward Northup impair his personal autonomy and his access to public goods: slave dealers could find any man of color, claim he was the slave they were looking for, and "return" them or sell them to slave holders in the South.

While Northup is serving as a slave in Louisiana, he is sold to John M. Tibbeats, who becomes a vicious master to Northup and they get into many altercations. Mr. Tibbeats acquires Northup for his carpentry skills and during his time with Tibbeats, Northup is beaten, ridiculed and restricted to specific tasks and orders as a slave. Even when Northup completed carpentry tasks as he was asked, Tibbeats finds excuses to ridicule, belittle and cause harm to Northup. Eventually, Northup begins to stand up to Tibbeats and fights back. Mr. Chapin, the overseer for Tibbeats backs up Northup when Tibbeats accosted him, and pleads Northup not to run after such altercations. Mr. Chapin knew the value of Northup and his skills, but there were many masters like Tibbeats who would treat his slaves like animals or prisoners and would subject them to horrible violence for punishment for

failing to obey their master. Slaves in the Deep South during this time experienced this for decades, and this treatment of fellow human beings was vehement, and prohibited African Americans from exercising personal autonomy, or simply acting like equal citizens or human beings. (Northup, 49-52)

A final example from *Twelve Years A Slave* follows Northup's memory of trying to send a letter to his relatives and acquaintances up North pleading for his rescue from slavery. The mere fact that Northup could not simply send a letter through the postal service, or possess ink or paper, is a direct prohibition of his rights as a citizen.

Additionally, Northup risks his life to run next door and ask his "friend," who he called Armsby, to assist him in sending a letter from Marksville, and after agreeing to the deed, Northup thought he was on his way to freedom. However, Armsby reports this to Northup's then master, Mr. Epps, who confronts Northup. Northup denies such accusations, and assures his master he would never do such things against his master's will, and to his relief, Epps believes him. (Northup, 112-114) Having to lie for his life and deny his education and literacy abilities further hindered his autonomy as a human and restricted his access to basic privileges of a citizen. Later, Northup is rescued after many months with the help of Bass, a white carpenter Northup comes into contact with on the Epps plantation.

Though *The Colfax Massacre* is a historical account of one of the most vicious attacks in American history, it does give insight to the views that white Louisiana men had toward African American slaves and free men during and after the Civil War and Reconstruction. Frederick Law Olmstead visits the Calhoun plantation during service as special correspondent to the *New York Daily Times* and it is here we start to see details and eye-opening experiences that Olmstead records about the horrifying treatment of slaves,

specifically those under the eye of Meredith Calhoun. He reports about a local story that told of a slave, who many times escaped his daily duties was ordered to be “burned alive before a crowd of 300 others” in payment for his transgressions. Although this cannot be totally proven, other stories Olmstead witnesses himself, including the presence of whipping. Olmstead reports that flogging is incredibly common to the point that children were threatening each other and older slaves with having the overseer whip them. In addition, whipping becomes so brutal that a few overseers would have the slave strip down nude for their punishment. These instances and many more accounts of violence support the notion that social justice was out of reach. As long as one race is exerting authority over another through violence and neglect, equality and social justice cannot be achieved. (Keith, 23-27)

The 1873 Mystick Krewe of Comus parade mocks “radical carpetbaggers” who were trying to oversee, supervise and implement Reconstruction regulations throughout Louisiana. Further, it satirizes the newly famous Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, something that “scientific racists would exploit to the fullest.” (Keith, 84) The parade, themed “The Missing Link to Darwin’s Origin of Species,” satirizes “enemies of the native elite,” such as “carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Negro politicians” as lowly beasts, and the parade participants depict these caricatures as monkeys and other incompetent jungle creatures. The fact that these participants and parade supporters viewed their enemies as animals and “lowly beasts” show that social justice was not a priority: the “native elite” did not see their enemies as equals or counterparts; instead they were people that were chastised and stereotyped in an incredibly prejudicial way.

Finally, the main event, which comes to be known as the Colfax Massacre, is the pinnacle that details the fact that social justice was not in the minds of white male property owners in Louisiana. In protest to carpetbagger control of Colfax and Grant Parish, white men attack the Colfax courthouse and kill 150 black men and three white men were killed as well. The battle at the courthouse, the killings of African Americans, treatment of the prisoners, and the trial thereafter addresses the egregious treatment of African Americans, and further, supports the argument that social injustice was not a priority in 19th century Louisiana.

Social justice is something all present-day Americans can enjoy. But after looking through the ugly past of the Civil War and Reconstruction, it can be argued that this right was not, and at the time, could never be, available or attainable to all who resided in America. Especially in the Deep South, African Americans were subjected to intense violence, ridicule, and restrictions that greatly hindered their personal autonomy, equal access to public goods, and the privilege to enjoy basic rights of citizens. America has come a long way since then, but through the examples from *Twelve Years A Slave* and *The Colfax Massacre* one can easily see that such a concept was not the forefront of priorities for the “superior” white population of Reconstruction America.