

## A-304 Attica Uprising

Hutcheson were being repeated, developed, and propagated by many of the intellectuals of the enlightened world, including such different thinkers as Burke and Diderot. John Locke, the great enemy of all absolute and arbitrary power, had been the last major philosopher to seek a justification for absolute and perpetual slavery.

A second and closely related transformation was the increasing popularity of the ethic of benevolence as personified by the “man of feeling.” The insistence on man’s inner goodness, on his capacity for sympathy, became part of a gradual secularizing tendency in British Protestantism. Ultimately, this liberal spirit led in two directions, each described by the titles of Adam Smith’s two books: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s theory of sympathetic benevolence toward other persons as the source of moral judgment and his theory of individual enterprise both condemned slavery as an intolerable obstacle to human progress. The man of sensibility needed to act on his virtuous feelings by relieving the sufferings of innocent victims; the economic man required a social order that allowed, and morally vindicated, the free play of individual self-interest. By definition, the slave was both innocent and a victim, since he could not be held responsible for his own condition.

For Smith, the African’s enslavement, unlike the legitimate restraints imposed upon the members of society by rational laws, seemed wholly undeserved. The slave represented innocent nature, and hence his actions corresponded, psychologically, to the natural and spontaneous impulses of the man of feeling. Accordingly, for Smith the key to progress lay in recognizing the innocent nature that was objectively characteristic of the slave and that was also the source of the subjective affections of the reformer. The slave would be lifted to a level of independent action and social obligation; the reformer would be assured of the beneficence of his own self-interest by his participation in a transcendent cause. These, at least, were the expectations of the philanthropists, who, as the eighteenth century wore on, increasingly transformed the quest for salvation from a sinful world into a mission to cleanse the world of sin.

By the eve of the American Revolution there was a remarkable convergence of cultural and intellectual developments that at once undercut traditional rationalizations for slavery and offered new ways of identifying with its victims. Thus the African’s cultural difference acquired a positive image at the hands of eighteenth-century students of the primitive, such as Rousseau, and evangelical Christians, such as John Wesley, who searched through travel accounts and descriptions of exotic lands for examples of man’s inherent virtue and creativity. In some ways the “noble savage” was little more than a literary convention that conflated the Iroquois and South Sea islander with sable Venuses and tear-bedewed daughters of “injur’d Afric.”

The convention did, however, partially weaken Europe’s arrogant ethnocentrism and create at least a momentary ambivalence about the human costs of modern civilization. It also tended to counteract the many fears and prejudices that had long cut Africans off from the normal mechanisms of sympathy

and identification. Ultimately, literary primitivism was no match for the pseudo-scientific racism, which drew on the Enlightenment and reduced the African to a “link” or even a separate species between man and the apes. But for many Europeans, as diverse as John Wesley and the Abbé Raynal, the African was not a human animal but an innocent child of nature whose enslavement in America betrayed the very notion of the New World as a land of natural innocence and new hope for mankind. By the early 1770s such writers portrayed the black slave as a man of natural virtue and sensitivity who was at once oppressed by the worst vices of civilization and yet capable of receiving its greatest benefits.

This complex change in moral vision was a precondition for antislavery movements and for the eventual abolition of New World slavery from 1777, when Vermont’s constitution outlawed the institution, to 1888, when, in a state of almost revolutionary turmoil, Brazil finally freed some half-million remaining slaves. But the diffusion of religious and secular antislavery arguments in no way guaranteed such an outcome. If Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and other slaveholding founders could view human bondage as an embarrassing and even dangerous social evil, they also respected the rights of private property and expressed deep fear of the consequences of any general and unrestricted act of emancipation. The U.S. Constitution was designed to protect the rights and security of slaveholders, and between 1792 and 1845 the American political system encouraged and rewarded the expansion of slavery into nine new states.

As the American slave system became increasingly profitable, the moral doubts of the Revolutionary generation gave way in the South to strong religious, economic, and racial arguments that defended slavery as a “positive good.” Historians are still sharply divided over the fundamental reasons for slave emancipation, which ultimately required an imposition of power even in the regions that were spared a Haitian Revolution or an American Civil War. Yet whatever weight one gives the contending economic and political interests that were involved in the abolition of slavery, it was the inherent contradiction of chattel slavery—the impossible effort to bestialize human beings—that eventually evoked a revolution in moral perception. What finally emerged was a recognition that slaves could become masters or masters slaves, and that human beings are therefore not required to resign themselves to the world that has always been.

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## Attica Uprising

**Prison revolt, in 1970, mostly by black inmates in upstate New York.**

Police stormed the prison, indiscriminately killing thirty-nine inmates and hostages.

## Prisoners in the U.S. under State or Federal Jurisdiction, 1985–1998, by Race

Region and Jurisdiction	1985			1998		
	Prisoner Population	Black	Percent Black	Prisoner Population	Black	Percent Black
<b>U.S. TOTAL</b>	<b>502,376</b>	<b>227,137</b>	<b>45.2</b>	<b>1,299,096</b>	<b>616,106</b>	<b>47.4</b>
Federal	40,223	13,066	32.5	123,041	47,847	38.9
State	462,153	214,071	46.3	1,176,055	568,259	48.3
<b>NORTHEAST</b>	<b>75,706</b>	<b>38,036</b>	<b>50.2</b>	<b>175,771</b>	<b>91,904</b>	<b>52.3</b>
Connecticut	6,149	2,765	45.0	17,605	8,290	47.1
Maine	1,226	15	1.2	1,781	57	3.2
Massachusetts	5,390	1,849	34.3	11,799	3,384	28.7
New Hampshire	683	14	2.0	2,169	115	5.3
New Jersey	11,335	7,483	66.0	31,121	20,323	65.3
New York	34,712	17,497	50.4	70,001	38,284	54.7
Pennsylvania	14,227	8,035	56.5	36,377	20,413	56.1
Rhode Island	1,307	378	28.9	3,445	992	28.8
Vermont	667	—	—	1,473	46	3.1
<b>MIDWEST</b>	<b>95,585</b>	<b>43,534</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>228,326</b>	<b>115,737</b>	<b>50.7</b>
Illinois	18,634	11,132	59.7	43,051	28,220	65.6
Indiana	9,904	3,464	35.0	19,197	8,109	42.2
Iowa	2,832	568	20.1	7,394	1,770	23.9
Kansas	4,732	1,678	35.5	8,183	3,050	37.3
Michigan	17,755	10,076	56.8	45,879	25,336	55.2
Minnesota	2,343	502	21.4	5,572	2,088	37.5
Missouri	9,796	3,918	40.0	24,974	11,243	45.0
Nebraska	1,814	553	30.5	3,676	979	26.6
North Dakota	422	5	1.2	915	31	3.4
Ohio	20,864	9,553	45.8	48,450	25,798	53.2
South Dakota	1,047	22	2.1	2,422	97	4.0
Wisconsin	5,442	2,072	38.1	18,613	9,016	48.4
<b>SOUTH</b>	<b>202,100</b>	<b>109,663</b>	<b>54.3</b>	<b>512,622</b>	<b>294,537</b>	<b>57.5</b>
Alabama	11,015	6,560	59.6	22,676	14,905	65.7
Arkansas	4,611	2,264	49.1	10,638	5,699	53.6
Delaware	2,553	1,443	56.5	5,558	3,521	63.4
District of Columbia	6,404	6,232	97.3	9,829	9,574	97.4
Florida	28,600	14,142	49.4	67,224	37,143	55.2
Georgia	16,014	9,531	59.5	39,262	26,022	66.3
Kentucky	4,975	1,592	32.0	14,987	5,574	37.2
Louisiana	13,890	10,032	72.2	32,228	24,621	76.4
Maryland	13,005	9,370	72.0	22,572	17,495	77.5
Mississippi	6,392	4,324	67.6	16,678	12,442	74.6
North Carolina	17,344	9,341	53.9	31,961	20,355	63.7
Oklahoma	8,330	2,434	29.2	20,892	7,119	34.1
South Carolina	10,510	6,326	60.2	22,115	15,339	69.4
Tennessee	7,127	3,153	44.2	17,738	8,993	50.7
Texas	37,532	15,548	41.4	144,510	65,133	45.1
Virginia	12,073	7,111	58.9	30,278	20,050	66.2
West Virginia	1,725	260	15.1	3,478	552	15.9
<b>WEST</b>	<b>88,762</b>	<b>22,829</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>259,336</b>	<b>66,081</b>	<b>25.5</b>
Alaska	2,329	218	9.4	4,097	556	13.6
Arizona	8,531	1,362	16.0	25,311	3,739	14.8
California	50,111	16,954	33.8	160,127	50,052	31.3
Colorado	3,369	705	20.9	14,312	3,376	23.6
Hawaii	2,111	102	4.8	4,924	220	4.7
Idaho	1,344	32	2.4	4,083	57	1.4
Montana	1,129	16	1.4	2,734	49	1.8
Nevada	3,771	1,240	32.9	9,651	2,657	27.5
New Mexico	2,313	239	10.3	4,985	560	11.2
Oregon	4,454	503	11.3	8,927	1,136	12.7
Utah	1,633	149	9.1	4,453	346	7.8
Washington	6,909	1,273	18.4	14,161	3,255	23.0
Wyoming	758	36	4.7	1,571	78	5.0

Source: *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* (1996): "Prisoners under State or Federal Jurisdiction, 1985 and 1991" (Table 4.3).

## A-306 Attica Uprising



Attorney William Kuntzler tells inmates involved in the Attica uprising that he will defend them. Members of the negotiating committee and prisoners occupying the guardhouse look on. UPI/CORBIS-Bettmann

Inmates at the state prison in Attica, New York, had several grievances before their uprising on September 9, 1971. In 1970 several hundred inmates went on strike over low wages for prison labor—about thirty cents a day—and the high cost of items in the prison commissary. The strike, however, had little effect. Inmates also complained repeatedly of severe overcrowding, but again with little result. Toward the end of the year, several prisoners filed petitions in federal court accusing guards of beating them. The guards, nearly all of whom were white, were also accused of censoring black publications—more than half of the inmates were black—and of treating members of the NATION OF ISLAM religious movement especially harshly. The complaints produced few changes.

In the summer of 1971 several prisoners published a list of their demands for better conditions, including higher pay, better medical treatment, and an end to censorship. While this round of demands was lingering, prison guards in California killed GEORGE JACKSON, a nationally known inmate and activist for prisoners' rights—further escalating tensions at Attica. The morning after Jackson's death, Attica prisoners refused to eat breakfast and wore makeshift armbands in commemoration.

Two weeks later, on September 8, Attica guards tried to break up what they believed to be a fight between two inmates in the prison yard. Both inmates protested (in some accounts, they were playing football), and a swarm of other prisoners encircled the guards. The guards withdrew but that night they removed the two prisoners from their cells. When the two inmates again resisted, prisoners in nearby cells pelted guards with objects. One guard was injured by broken glass, and the

inmate who threw the glass was taken from his cell. The next morning, several other prisoners refused to go to breakfast until he was released. While a prison official tried to mediate, inmates waiting in a nearby hallway overran the area, releasing the prisoner who threw glass and storming some guards. In a short time, a large group of prisoners controlled the entire prison.

The inmates released several guards who were injured during the rioting but held more than thirty others as hostages. They also elected a small group from their ranks to negotiate with the state government. In addition to their demands from earlier in the summer, they sought religious and political freedom, more programs for rehabilitation and education, and immunity from prosecution and beatings after they surrendered the hostages. They also invited doctors and reporters to the prison, to verify that the hostages were in good health and to broadcast the events across the country.

State negotiators met with prisoners for several days, but New York governor Nelson Rockefeller refused to visit Attica, as requested by the inmates. His commissioner of prisons agreed to meet many of the inmates' demands but refused to guarantee immunity from prosecution. On September 13, Rockefeller cancelled negotiations and sent a large contingent of state troopers and prison guards into the prison. For several minutes, troopers fired at the prisoners—who did not have firearms—as well as at the hostages, many of whom were dressed in convicts' clothing.

In all, twenty-nine prisoners and ten hostages were killed; another eighty-five prisoners and three hostages were wounded. (Three prisoners and a guard had already died from the initial riot.) Although ambulances were waiting for wounded hostages, provisions for prisoners were less forthcoming, which contributed to several needless deaths. Prison guards immediately and cruelly beat surviving prisoners.

State authorities explained that Rockefeller ordered the raid because prisoners were mutilating the hostages. They also reported that prisoners had killed the ten hostages who died during the raid. Autopsies and later investigations, however, proved both claims to be untrue: There was no mutilation, and the bullets that killed the hostages matched bullets fired by state troopers. State officials tried to explain the bullets by claiming that the prisoners had built homemade guns. This claim, however, was also proven to be untrue.

For months after the revolt, guards subjected prisoners to savage beatings. On December 1, 1971, a federal court found that guards had conducted an "orgy of brutality" and issued an injunction against further abuse. Coupled with the state's cover-up, the reports of brutality made Attica a symbol of the poor treatment of blacks and other people of color in United States prisons. As a result, Congress and several state legislatures passed minor reforms in the treatment of prisoners.

### Bibliography

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