

Chapter 259 – A Southerner Attacks Slavery On Behalf Of “Plain White Folks”



Dates:
1857

Sections:

- Hinton Helper Publishes *The Impending Crisis Of The South*
- Statistics Reveal The Failures Of The South’s Slave-Based Economy
- He Calls For The Abolition Of Slavery To Help The Poor Whites
- He Calls For The Abolition Of Slavery To Help The Poor Whites
- Helper Becomes A Footnote In History

Date: 1857

Hinton Helper Publishes *The Impending Crisis Of The South*

While Southern planters like John Hammond are touting the glories of slavery, a North Carolina man named Hinton R. Helper announces a very different assessment.

Helper’s 1857 book, *The Impending Crisis Of The South*, rocks the region by insisting that the institution of slavery be abolished since it has benefited only a narrow band of planter oligarchs at the expense of the vast majority of “plain white folks.”

To prove his point, he relies on published government data comparing the relative development and well-being of the South, operating under its slavery-based agricultural system, vis a vis the North, with its diversified economy based on the labor of free white men.

The stark contrasts he shows for the two approaches make him an overnight pariah among the Southern elite and a hero with critics of slavery in the North.

Helper is only twenty-eight when his explosive book is published. He has graduated from a local academy and, following a failed trip to California during the gold rush, has written a book, *The Land of Gold*, chronicling his experiences there. In 1855 he is back home determined to advance his career as an author.

The result is *The Impending Crisis*, which begins with a series of assurances to readers, the first being that he is a dedicated “Southron” at heart:

The son of a venerated parent...whose home has been in the valley of the Yadkin for nearly a century and a half, a Southerner by instinct and by all the influences of thought, habits, and

kindred, and with the desire and fixed purpose to reside permanently within the limits of the South, and with the expectation of dying there also.

He insists that his cause in the text is high-minded:

I desire to do something to elevate the South to an honorable and powerful position among the enlightened quarters of the globe.

He also makes it clear that the book's intent is not to "display any special friendliness or sympathy for the blacks." Despite feeling that human bondage is unjust, Helper fully shares the racial prejudices dominant in white society at the time, both South and North.

Thus, while he demands an end to slavery, his rationale lies in advancing *his people*, poor whites, rather than the "heathenish blacks," whom he would "re-colonize" in Africa.

According to Helper, these poor whites of the South comprise well over two-thirds of the entire population, and their current existence is worse off than "the serfs of Russia."

Poverty, ignorance, and superstition, are the three leading characteristics of the non-slaveholding whites of the South. Many of them grow up to the age of maturity, and pass through life without ever owning as much as five dollars at any one time. Thousands of them die at an advanced age, as ignorant of the common alphabet as if it had never been invented. All are more or less impressed with a belief in witches, ghosts, and supernatural signs. Few are exempt from habits of sensuality and intemperance. None have anything like adequate ideas of the duties which they owe either to their God, to themselves, or to their fellow-men. Piteable, indeed, in the fullest sense of the term, is their condition.

The serfs of Russia have reason to congratulate themselves that they are neither the negroes nor the non-slaveholding whites of the South.

The source of their misery lies not with oppressors from the North.

Rather, he says, the fault rests squarely on the shoulders of a small core of aristocratic Southern planters – men who have dominated the region since the colonial period, and who sustain the economic institution of slavery only to maximize their personal wealth.

This populist argument effectively pits the majority class of "poor whites" against the elites, and, as such, it alarms those currently bent on vilifying the North and calling for secession.

Statistics Reveal The Failures Of The South's Slave-Based Economy

Helper announces early on in the book that he intends to rely on government statistics to prove his case.

The cultivation of statistics must be the source of all future improvement in the science of political economy This science is yet in its infancy, but has already produced the most beneficial effects.

The outline for Chapter I sets the tone for all that follows.

CHAPTER I. COMPARISON BETWEEN THE FREE AND THE SLAVE STATES

Progress and Prosperity of the North--Inertness and Imbecility of the South--The True Cause and the Remedy--Quantity and Value of the Agricultural Products of the two Sections--Important Statistics--Wealth, Revenue, and Expenditures of the several States--Sterling Extracts and General Remarks on Free and Slave Labor

By looking at the data he says he will prove...

That the South, at one time the superior of the North in almost all the ennobling pursuits and conditions of life, has now fallen far behind her competitor.

He begins with a few illustrative comparisons on growth in population and economic wealth from colonial times up to the 1850 Census in pairs of states: North Carolina vs. Massachusetts; South Carolina vs. Pennsylvania; Virginia vs. New York. The latter, for example, shows how the crowning jewel of the old South, Virginia, has fallen far behind its Northern rival on all key measures of prosperity.

Hinton Helper's Comparative Data

Population	Virginia	New York
1790	748,308	340,120
1850	1,421,661	3,097,394
Exports		
1791	\$ 3,130,865	\$ 2,505,465
1852	2,724,657	87,484,456
Total Wealth		
1850	\$ 391,646,438	\$1,080,309,216

But he is only getting started here.

The remainder of the 450 page book lays out side by side comparisons on the full range of economic and cultural outcomes as of the 1850's in the sixteen Free States of the North vs. the fifteen Slave States of the South. (See below for a simplified summary.)

The differences are profound, with the Slave-based system trailing far behind on measures such as total trade, manufacturing, city development, banking, commercial infrastructure such canals and railroads, patents issued, public education, libraries, newspapers, literacy, even enlistments in the militia.

The result of the slave-based economy is a South which has become "dependent " on the North for almost all the daily necessities of life from "shoes to steamships."

The North becomes, in one way or another, the proprietor and dispenser of all our floating wealth, and that we are dependent on Northern capitalists for the means necessary to build our railroads, canals and other public improvements

All the world sees, or ought to see, that in a commercial, mechanical, manufactural, financial, and literary point of view, we are as helpless as babes... It is a fact well known to every intelligent Southerner that we are compelled to go to the North for almost every article of utility and adornment from matches, shoepegs and paintings up to cotton-mills, steamships and statuary.

This was not the case in colonial times, according to Helper. In fact, the South, with its temperate climate and fertile land, was “at one time the superior of the North.”

It thus appears, in view of the preceding statistical facts and arguments, that the South, at one time the superior of the North in almost all the ennobling pursuits and conditions of life, has fallen far behind her competitor, and now ranks more as the dependency of a mother country than as the equal confederate of free and independent States

But those advantages have all gone by the wayside. The reason why, he says, is Slavery.

Why the North has surpassed the South? It may all be traced to one common source --Slavery!

Sidebar: Hinton Rowan Helper's Comparative Data				
Economic And Cultural Outcomes By Region				
Year	Trade	Free States	Slave States	Ratio F/S
1855	Total Tonnage (000)	4,252	855	4.97x
	Export Value (MM)	\$167.5	\$107.4	1.56
	Import Value (MM)	236.8	24.6	9.62
1850	Manufacturing			
	Product Value (MM)	\$842.6	\$165.4	5.09
	Capital Invested (MM)	430.2	95.0	2,66
	# Workers (000)	780.6	161.7	4.83
1850	Agriculture/Outdoor Labor			
	# Free Whites >15 (000)	NA	1,019.0	
	Nine Largest Cities			
	# Total Population (000)	2,083.0	787.0	2.65
	Total Wealth (MM)	\$1,572.1	\$375.9	4.18
	Per Capita Wealth	\$754	\$477	1.58
	Transportation			
1854	Total Canal Miles	3,682	1,116	3.30
1857	Railroad Miles	17,855	6,859	2.60
1857	Cost of Railroads (MM)	\$538.3	\$95.3	5.65
1855	Bank Capital (MM)	\$230.1	\$102.1	2.25
1852	Militia Forces (000)	1,381.8	792.9	1.74
1850	Public Schools	62,433	18,507	3.37
	# Teachers	72,621	19,307	3.76
	# Pupils (000)	2,769.9	581.9	4.76

1850	# Libraries	14,911	695	21.45
1850	#Newspapers/Magazines	1,790	704	2.54
1850	Illiterate White Adults			
	# Native (000)	248.7	493.0	0.50
	# Foreign (000)	173.8	19.9	8.73
1856	# Patents Issued	1,929	268	7.20
1857	Political Power			
1857	# US Presidents from:	6	9	0.67
	# Years in office	24	48	0.50
	# Speakers of the House	12	15	0.80
	# Years in office	25	43	0.58
	# Secretaries of State	8	14	0.57
	# Years in office	27	40	0.68
	# Treasury Secretaries	14	7	2.00
	# War Secretaries	15	15	1.00
	# Foreign Ministers	54	80	0.68
	Current Supreme Court	4	5	0.80
1857	White pop in states (MM)	13.2	6.2	2.13
	# Senators	32	30	1.07
	# White pop/Senator (000)	412.5	206.7	
	# Congressmen	144	90	1.60
	# White pop/Congressmen	91.6m	68.9m	1.33
	# Electoral Votes	176	120	1.47

He Calls For The Abolition Of Slavery To Help The Poor Whites



A Common Man Of The South

In imposing a slave-based economy on the South, Helper says, the planter oligarchs have chosen a system that “in the very nature of things” is inferior to the North’s reliance on free white labor.

In the very nature of things, the freeman must produce more than the slave... The slave toils for another, and not for himself What a difference, plain and heaven-wide, between the outward and interior life of a slave and of a free community.

To further prove this point, Helper focuses on the value of agricultural output in 1850 across fourteen different crops, including wheat, hay, oats, flax, potatoes, beans, maple sugar, butter, cheese, honey, wool, in addition to cotton, rice, and tobacco. His conclusion: “even agricultural output favors the North!”

Even agricultural output favors the North! So much for the boasted agricultural superiority of the South! Until we examined into the matter, we thought and hoped the South was really ahead of the North in one particular, that of agriculture; but our thoughts have been changed, and our hopes frustrated.

Agricultural Output By Region In 1850

Year	14 Agricultural Products	Free States	Slave States	Ratio F/S
1850	Bushels (000)	499,190.0	481,766.9	1.04
	Value (000)	\$351,709.7	\$306,927.1	1.15

Worse yet, slavery has not only failed to optimize production from the land, but the greed exhibited by the planter in their crop management programs has damaged the value of the land itself.

Value Of An Acre Of Land In 1850

	Northeast	Northwest	Southeast	Southwest
\$ per acre	\$28.07	\$11.39	\$ 5.34	\$6.26

Helper next turns to extensive quotes from the iconic founding fathers of the South to argue that the negative effects of a slave-based system were apparent to them from the beginning – and that the hope and expectation was to end the practice not expand it. He cites Washington:

I never mean, unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it, to possess another slave by purchase, it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by which slavery, in this country, may be abolished by law.

Then Jefferson, among others:

There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people, produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions--the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and

degrading submissions on the other... The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances... With the morals of the people, their industry also is destroyed; for, in a warm climate, no man will labor for himself who can make another labor for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion, indeed, are ever seen to labor.... I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.

The reason this obviously failed system remains in place, says Helper, is the ability of the few powerful oligarchs to keep the majority of Southerners – “the poor white trash” – in the dark about its failures.

How little the "poor white trash," the great majority of the Southern people, know of the real condition of the country is, indeed, sadly astonishing. The truth is, they know nothing of public measures, and little of private affairs, except what their imperious masters, the slave-drivers, condescend to tell, and that is but precious little.

Helper’s solution to the negative outcomes lies in having the common people rise up, abolish slavery and embrace the virtues he sees in the Free Soil movement.

I am a Free-Soiler and I don't deny it. I am for the greatest good of the greatest number, and against the system which monopolizes the free and fertile territory of our country for a few slaveholders, to the exclusion of thousands upon thousands of the sinewy sons of toil. The time will come, and perhaps very soon, when the people will rule for their own benefit and not for that of a class which, numerically speaking, is insignificant. I shall take my stand in favor of the white man.

He calls for a general convention of non-slaveholders to devise a plan that will finally address their interests.

Let there be a general convention of non-slaveholders from every slave State in the Union, to deliberate on the momentous issues now pending. let them devise ways and means for the complete annihilation of slavery ...inviting the active sympathy and co-operation of the millions of down-trodden non-slaveholders throughout the Southern and Southwestern States.

He further argues that those in the planter oligarchy must pay the price for the damage they have done to their region. Thus, instead of being compensated for releasing their slaves, the owners should be forced to pay taxes on their holdings, some to recompense their neighbors, others to resettle the blacks, ideally abroad.

Less than three-quarters of a century ago... the South... began an even race with the North... and now, in the brief space of scarce three score years and ten, we find her completely distanced, enervated, dejected and dishonored. Slave-drivers are the sole authors of her disgrace; as they have sown so let them reap.

A Tax of Sixty Dollars on every Slaveholder for each and every Negro in his Possession at the present time, or at any intermediate time between now and the 4th of July, 1863--said Money to be Applied to the transportation of the Blacks to Liberia, to their Colonization in Central or South America, or to their Comfortable Settlement within the Boundaries of the United States.

Having made his case, Helper ends by repeating his devotion to the South, and his hope that in ending the slavery-based systems imposed by the few, the needs of the majority of free white men will be realized.

Let it be understood, then, once for all, that we do not hate the South, war on the South, nor seek to ruin the South, in resisting the extension of slavery.... The time will come, and perhaps very soon, when the people will rule for their own benefit and not for that of a class which, numerically speaking, is insignificant. I shall take my stand in favor of the white man.

Helper Becomes A Footnote In History

The call for poor whites of the South to recognize the failures of their slavery-based economy and end the oligarchical reign of the aristocratic planters never materializes.

The Impending Crisis is widely ignored for almost two years until Northerners begin to cite it to attack the “slavocracy” during the run-up to the election of 1860. In response to that, Southern authorities ban its distribution and burn whatever copies they find. In the U.S. House, Democrats deny John Sherman the Speakership, ostensibly because he endorses the book.

In the process, Hinton Helper momentarily becomes a well-known public figure, applauded up North but vilified back in his home land.

But by 1861 he is living in poverty when President Lincoln – whose election he has arguably aided -- names him a consul to Argentina, where he serves for five years. He returns in 1867 to North Carolina where he is shunned, then moves around America, living in New York, St. Louis and Washington, DC.

He writes two subsequent books which display his underlying anti-black racism, in spite of his opposition to the principle of slavery. He also spends several decades trying to promote an international railroad from Canada through the United States to Argentina.

In 1890, at age seventy-seven, he commits suicide, broken both financially and mentally.

Sidebar: Helper's Data On Political Power

Hinton Helper's statistics also encompass the distribution of political power in America from 1789 through 1857. The comparisons reveal the disproportionate power enjoyed by the South over that period.

Historical Political Influence By Region

As Of	Trade	Free States	Slave States	Ratio F/S
1857	# US Presidents from:	6	9	0.67
	# Years in office	24	48	0.50
	# Speakers of the House	12	15	0.80
	# Years in office	25	43	0.58
	# Secretaries of State	8	14	0.57
	# Tears in office	27	40	0.68
	# Treasury Secretaries	14	7	2.00
	# War Secretaries	15	15	1.00
	# Foreign Ministers	54	80	0.68
	Current Supreme Court	4	5	0.80
	White pop in states (MM)	13.2	6.2	2.13
	# Senators	32	30	1.07
	# White pop/Senator (000)	412.5	206.7	
	# Congressmen	144	90	1.60
	# White pop/Congressmen	91.6m	68.9m	1.33
	# Electoral Votes	176	120	1.47