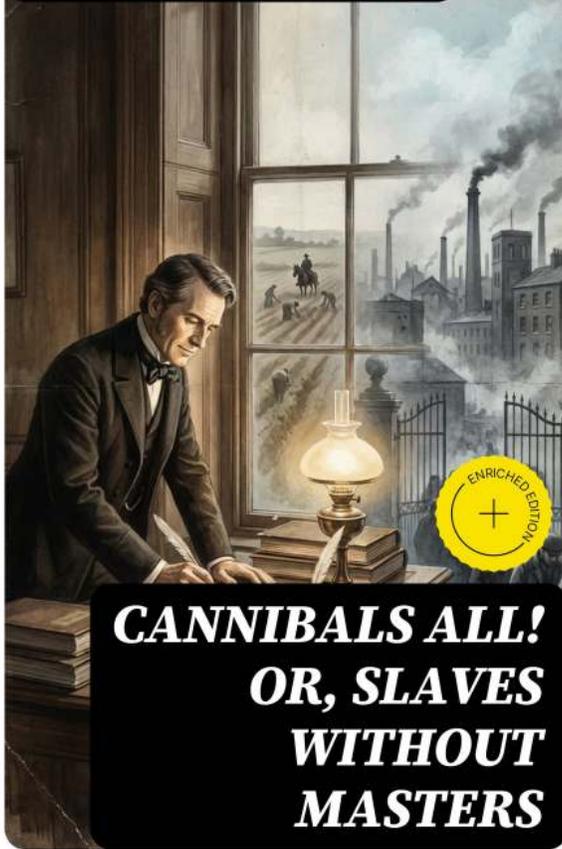


GEORGE FITZHUGH



***CANNIBALS ALL!
OR, SLAVES
WITHOUT
MASTERS***

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Cannibals all! or, Slaves without masters

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Bryce Emerson

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Introduction

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At once a provocation and a system, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* presses the paradox that a society exalting individual freedom may, in practice, organize itself around dependence, supervision, and sanctioned exploitation, and it hammers that paradox into a polemic that insists the marketplace consumes the weak while a paternal regime claims to shelter them, staging a stark contest between competing definitions of liberty, security, and moral duty whose friction still jolts readers because it exposes how arguments about care and protection can be marshaled to defend hierarchy, discipline, and the permanent subordination of some people to the authority of others.

George Fitzhugh's book is a mid-nineteenth-century American pro-slavery treatise and work of social criticism, first published in 1857 amid the antebellum United States' escalating sectional crisis. Written by a Virginia polemicist who had earlier advanced similar claims in *Sociology for the South*, it belongs to a genre that sought to supply slavery with philosophical and economic rationales. The setting is not fictional but the public arena of debate, where arguments about labor, property, and governance were fought in newspapers, pamphlets, and lecture halls. This volume arrives as a deliberate intervention, aiming to turn the era's vocabulary of political economy against free-labor societies.

In place of narrative, the book unfolds as a sustained argument that contrasts the supposed benevolence of slaveholding with the perceived harshness of free labor, especially in the industrializing North and Europe. Fitzhugh advances comparisons, anecdotes, and sweeping generalizations to claim that wage earners are trapped in insecurity, while enslaved people are, in his view, protected by masters. The voice is assertive and combative, the tone often sarcastic, and the style ranges from aphoristic bursts to leisurely digressions. Readers encounter an elastic rhetoric that mixes economic claims with moral pronouncements, producing a reading experience that is both polemical and disturbingly persuasive in cadence.

At its thematic core, the treatise opposes two social visions: a competitive order premised on nominal equality, and a hierarchical order premised on managed dependence. Fitzhugh argues that human beings require guardianship; he reframes bondage as social welfare and recasts contractual freedom as a mask for coercion. He indicts laissez-faire ideology, treats property relations as moral obligations, and elevates household-style governance as a preferred political model. The book thus explores how language about care and protection can legitimize domination, how appeals to tradition confront claims of progress, and how definitions of freedom pivot on who counts as fully human within a given economy.

One of the book's most striking maneuvers is its reversal of abolitionist vocabulary, appropriating the language of humanitarian concern to portray enslavers as benefactors and to depict employers as predatory. Fitzhugh threads his

case through vignettes, historical sketches, and assertions about human nature that seek to naturalize dependence. He gestures to political economy while discounting its premises, using the specter of instability in urban labor markets to heighten contrast with plantation order. This rhetorical architecture reveals how pro-slavery thought sought legitimacy: by claiming realism, criticizing abstraction, and redefining exploitation so that it appears everywhere except where chattel bondage stands most plainly in view.

For contemporary readers, the book matters as both a historical artifact and a caution about the pliability of social theory. It demonstrates how appeals to benevolence, order, and security can be assembled into a case for permanent inequality, and how economic critique can be conscripted to defend unfreedom. It enriches the study of American intellectual history, labor debates, and the rhetoric of reform by showing a systematic pro-slavery argument in full voice. Engaging it equips readers to recognize familiar patterns—selective comparison, moral inversion, definitional drift—without requiring agreement, and to test today's arguments about work, care, and authority against their historical echoes.

Approached with care, *Cannibals All!* rewards critical reading that separates description from endorsement while attending closely to how its reasoning is assembled. Its pages remain unsettling not because they surprise with hidden revelations, but because their confidence and cadence model how a comprehensive worldview can rationalize domination as kindness. The book offers scholars and students a map to antebellum polemics and a

laboratory for testing concepts like freedom, protection, and dependency. To read it today is to confront the architecture of an argument that helped structure a nation's fiercest debate, and to measure our own assumptions against that history.

Synopsis

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Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters (1857) by Virginian polemicist George Fitzhugh advances a comprehensive defense of chattel slavery while condemning free-labor capitalism. Written amid intensifying antebellum debates, the book presents itself not as fiction but as social and economic argument, claiming that so-called free societies practice a covert form of exploitation. Fitzhugh frames the North's wage system as predatory and the South's slave system as humane and orderly. He proposes that dependence is the normal human condition and that a properly supervised hierarchy secures welfare better than markets and individual rights. The volume's chapters develop this thesis through comparison, invective, and prescription.

Fitzhugh begins by redefining liberty and dependence. He argues that most people are weak, improvident, and vulnerable, thus requiring permanent guardianship. In his view, domestic patriarchy furnishes the best template for society: the master as provider and disciplinarian; the dependent as protected laborer. From this premise he extends the household analogy to the plantation and, by implication, to the state. He rejects the notion that autonomy is desirable for the mass of workers, treating individualism as a mask for domination by the strong. The opening sections lay the moral groundwork for his case that

slavery institutionalizes benevolence and restrains social conflict.

He then targets the wage-labor system, asserting that industrial competition reduces laborers to insecurity and neglect. Drawing contrasts between Southern plantations and Northern or British factories, he claims that the latter expose workers to cyclical poverty, illness, and dismissal, whereas slavery guarantees subsistence, care, and old-age support. He treats market discipline as a harsher master than any planter, and labels voluntary contracts illusory for the poor. Throughout, he marshals anecdotes and generalized comparisons to argue that material outcomes under slavery surpass those in free labor, portraying plantation paternalism as an economic safety net rather than a deprivation of rights.

Turning to political economy, Fitzhugh attacks classical liberal principles. He disputes the universality of natural rights, questions social-contract theory, and denounces laissez-faire as socially destructive. In his account, competition rewards cunning and punishes virtue, while centralized authority and personal rule cultivate order and compassion. He portrays the doctrines of individual sovereignty and free exchange as unproven abstractions that ignore real human dependency. To counter them, he elevates customary ties, coercive responsibility, and legal subordination as instruments of social welfare. This critique aims to recast slavery not as a regional anomaly but as a rational alternative to Enlightenment theories of society.

Addressing moral objections, Fitzhugh acknowledges abuses but insists they are aberrations correctable by

community norms and masterly duty. He argues that the structure of slavery incentivizes care, since the enslaved person's well-being preserves the master's property, whereas employers in free systems can discard workers. He further contends that bondage is not inherently racial in principle, proposing that many impoverished whites would also be better off as permanent dependents. In this way he attempts to shift the debate from race to supposed social utility, recasting slavery as a humanitarian institution aimed at protecting the weak from predation and want.

From theory he moves to a prescriptive vision of order. He favors an agrarian, hierarchical society organized around households, with limited mobility, constrained markets, and duties flowing downward as obedience flows upward. He treats philanthropy, poor relief, and reform schemes as inferior to compulsory guardianship and lifelong service. While critical of European socialism, he asserts partial kinship with its promise of security, claiming that slavery realizes those ends without egalitarian politics. The proposed system entails broad managerial authority paired with material guarantees for dependents. These chapters outline how law, custom, and economy might be reshaped to institutionalize permanent tutelage.

The book closes by reiterating that Northern antislavery politics misdiagnose the roots of misery and that only a paternal regime can harmonize labor and capital. As a document of its time, it consolidates the most sweeping proslavery logic of the 1850s, fusing economic, moral, and philosophical claims into a single polemic. Today it is read less for practical counsel than for what it reveals about the

lengths to which defenders of slavery went to invert liberal premises and recast exploitation as welfare. Its arguments, though widely rejected, illuminate enduring debates over dependence, labor security, and the rhetoric of freedom.

Historical Context

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George Fitzhugh's *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* appeared in 1857, in the closing decade of the United States' antebellum era. A native of Virginia, Fitzhugh wrote from within a slaveholding society whose plantation economy tied local hierarchies to transatlantic markets. The book emerged when regional identities hardened between a largely agrarian South dependent on enslaved labor and a rapidly industrializing North increasingly organized around wage work. Publishing in this climate, Fitzhugh addressed readers through the South's vibrant periodical culture and public lectures, positioning himself as a polemicist who sought to justify slavery in social, economic, and moral terms against mounting Northern criticism.

Southern institutions in the 1850s rested on chattel slavery, protected by state law and embedded in everyday governance, religion, and family life. The domestic slave trade moved hundreds of thousands of people from the Upper to the Lower South between 1820 and 1860, fueling cotton and sugar production. National politics revolved around slavery's expansion after the Mexican-American War, from the Compromise of 1850 and Fugitive Slave Act to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. These measures intensified sectional conflict, encouraging northern Personal Liberty Laws and violent contests in Kansas. Fitzhugh wrote while this legal-political framework emboldened southern defenses of slavery.

Global demand for cotton linked southern plantations to British and French textile mills, making enslaved labor central to international commerce. At the same time, northern cities expanded through factories, canals, and railroads, drawing immigrant labor and creating visible wage dependency and urban poverty. Labor strikes and nativist politics punctuated the 1840s and 1850s, while reformers debated the perils of “wage slavery.” The Panic of 1857, a financial crisis triggered by credit contractions and falling exports, sharpened critiques of laissez-faire capitalism. Fitzhugh seized on these developments to argue that free labor was precarious and exploitative compared with slavery’s claimed security.

Fitzhugh intervened in an established proslavery intellectual tradition that portrayed bondage as a “positive good.” John C. Calhoun’s 1837 Senate speech and ensuing theological defenses by writers such as Thornton Stringfellow framed slavery as natural and beneficial. Fitzhugh departed by mounting a broad social critique of liberal individualism and free markets, drawing on European conservative and socialist commentators who attacked laissez-faire. He echoed themes found in Thomas Carlyle’s writings on labor and authority and published essays in outlets like De Bow’s Review and Southern Literary Messenger. His earlier *Sociology for the South* (1854) rehearsed arguments refined in *Cannibals All!*.

The decade’s literary marketplace shaped proslavery polemics. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) galvanized antislavery sentiment and sold in the hundreds of thousands, prompting a flood of southern rebuttals in

fiction and essays. Editors such as J. D. B. De Bow promoted economic defenses of slavery and the South's commercial autonomy. Fitzhugh leveraged this print network to present slavery as humane guardianship and to invert abolitionist charges by accusing free societies of "cannibalizing" workers. *Cannibals All!* thus participated in a noisy pamphlet war in which statistical tables, travel narratives, sermons, and novels competed to define labor, morality, and progress.

National flashpoints framed the book's arguments. Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act inflamed northern cities, exemplified by the 1854 rendition of Anthony Burns from Boston under federal guard. Several northern states passed Personal Liberty Laws in response, while southern politicians denounced resistance as unconstitutional. Bleeding Kansas (1854–1856) produced armed clashes over whether slavery would extend west. In 1856, Representative Preston Brooks's caning of Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor dramatized the rupture. Such confrontations confirmed, for Fitzhugh's audience, that sectional compromise was failing, and they supplied him with evidence of free-labor societies' instability and moral disorder.

In March 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, ruling that African Americans could not be citizens and that Congress lacked power to prohibit slavery in federal territories. The decision emboldened proslavery theorists and outraged many northerners, deepening party fractures within the Democratic coalition and energizing the emerging Republican Party. Earlier expansionist schemes,

including the 1854 Ostend Manifesto's call to acquire Cuba, had already signaled southern ambitions to safeguard slavery's future. *Cannibals All!* appeared in this legal and diplomatic context, asserting a comprehensive defense of bondage just as national institutions seemed to validate slaveholders' constitutional claims.

Fitzhugh's treatise distilled antebellum debates by recasting slavery as social welfare and condemning free-labor modernity as predatory. He rejected natural-rights liberalism and the social contract, elevating hierarchy, dependency, and patriarchal governance as civilizational norms. In doing so, the book mirrored a southern intellectual turn from apologetic defenses to assertive claims that slavery was superior to northern capitalism. Within four years, secession and the Civil War (1861-1865) would test these assertions on the battlefield. *Cannibals All!* thus stands as a document of its moment: a polemical synthesis that reveals how sectional conflict shaped the South's self-justification and critique of modernity.

CANNIBALS ALL! OR, SLAVES WITHOUT MASTERS

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PREFACE.

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I have endeavored, in this work, to treat the subjects of Liberty and Slavery in a more rigidly analytical manner than in "Sociology for the South;" and, at the same time, to furnish the reader with abundance of facts, authorities and admissions, whereby to test the truth of my views.

My chief aim has been to shew, that *Labor makes values, and Wit exploitates and accumulates them*; and hence to deduce the conclusion that the unrestricted exploitation of so-called free society, is more oppressive to the laborer than domestic slavery.

In making a distinct onslaught on the popular doctrines of Modern Ethics, I must share the credit or censure with my corresponding acquaintance and friend, Professor H. of Virginia[1].

Our acquaintance commenced by his congratulating me, by letter, on the announcement that I was occupied with a treatise vindicating the institution of Slavery in the abstract, and by his suggestion, that he foresaw, from what he had read of my communications to the papers, that I should be compelled to make a general assault on the prevalent political and moral philosophy. This letter, and others subsequent to it, together with the reception of my Book by the Southern Public, have induced me in the present work to avow the full breadth and scope of my purpose. I am sure it will be easier to convince the world that the customary theories of our Modern Ethical Philosophy, whether utilitarian or sentimental, are so fallacious or so false in their

premises and their deductions as to deserve rejection, than to persuade it that the social forms under which it lives, and attempts to justify and approve, are equally erroneous, and should be re-placed by others founded on a broader philosophical system and more Christian principles.

Yet, I believe that, under the banners of Socialism and more dangerous, because more delusive, Semi-Socialism, society is insensibly, and often unconsciously, marching to the utter abandonment of the most essential institutions—religion, family ties, property, and the restraints of justice. The present profession is, indeed, to stop at the half-way house of No-Government and Free Love; but we are sure that it cannot halt and encamp in such quarters. Society will work out erroneous doctrines to their logical consequences, and detect error only by the experience of mischief. The world will only fall back on domestic slavery when all other social forms have failed and been exhausted. That hour may not be far off.

Mr. H. will not see this work before its publication, and would dissent from many of its details, from the unrestricted latitude of its positions, and from its want of precise definition. The time has not yet arrived, in my opinion, for such precision, nor will it arrive until the present philosophy is seen to be untenable, and we begin to look about us for a loftier and more enlightened substitute.

INTRODUCTION.

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In our little work, "Sociology for the South," we said, "We may again appear in the character of writer before the public; but we shall not intrude, and would prefer that others should finish the work which we have begun." That little work has met, every where, we believe, at the South, with a favorable reception. No one has denied its theory of Free Society, nor disputed the facts on which that theory rests. Very many able co-laborers have arisen, and many books and essays are daily appearing, taking higher ground in defence of Slavery; justifying it as a normal and natural institution, instead of excusing or apologizing for it, as an exceptional one. It is now treated as a positive good, not a necessary evil. The success, not the ability of our essay, may have had some influence in eliciting this new mode of defence. We have, for many years, been gradually and cautiously testing public opinion at the South, and have ascertained that it is ready to approve, and much prefers, the highest ground of defence. We have no peculiar fitness for the work we are engaged in, except the confidence that we address a public predisposed to approve our doctrines, however bold or novel. Heretofore the great difficulty in defending Slavery has arisen from the fear that the public would take offence at assaults on its long-cherished political axioms; which, nevertheless, stood in the way of that defence. It is now evident that those axioms have outlived their day—for no one, either North or South, has complained of our rather ferocious assault on them—much less attempted to reply to or refute our arguments and objections. All men begin very clearly to perceive, that the state of revolution is politically and socially abnormal and

exceptional, and that the principles that would justify it are true in the particular, false in the general. "A recurrence to fundamental principles," by an oppressed people, is treason if it fails; the noblest of heroism if it eventuates in successful revolution. But a "frequent recurrence to fundamental principles" is at war with the continued existence of all government, and is a doctrine fit to be sported only by the Isms of the North and the Red Republicans of Europe. With them no principles are considered established and sacred, nor will ever be. When, in time of revolution, society is partially disbanded, disintegrated and dissolved, the doctrine of Human Equality may have a hearing, and may be useful in stimulating rebellion; but it is practically impossible, and directly conflicts with all government, all separate property, and all social existence. We cite these two examples, as instances, to shew how the wisest and best of men are sure to deduce, as general principles, what is only true as to themselves and their peculiar circumstances. Never were people blessed with such wise and noble Institutions as we; for they combine most that was good in those of Rome and Greece, of Judea, and of Mediæval England. But the mischievous absurdity of our political axioms and principles quite equals the wisdom and conservatism of our political practices. The ready appreciation by the public of such doctrines as these, encourages us to persevere in writing. The silence of the North is far more encouraging, however, than the approbation of the South. Piqued and taunted for two years, by many Southern Presses of high standing, to deny the proposition that Free Society in Western Europe is a failure,

and that it betrays premonitory symptoms of failure, even in America, the North is silent, and thus tacitly admits the charge. Challenged to compare and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of our domestic slavery with their slavery of the masses to capital and skill, it is mute, and neither accepts nor declines our challenge. The comparative evils of Slave Society and of Free Society, of slavery to human Masters and of slavery to Capital, are the issues which the South now presents, and which the North avoids. And she avoids them, because the Abolitionists, the only assailants of Southern Slavery, have, we believe, to a man, asserted the entire failure of their own social system, proposed its subversion, and suggested an approximating millenium, or some system of Free Love, Communism, or Socialism, as a substitute.

The alarming extent of this state of public opinion, or, to speak more accurately, the absence of any public opinion, or common faith and conviction about anything, is not dreamed of at the South, nor fully and properly realized, even at the North. *We* cannot believe what is so entirely different from all our experience and observation, and *they* have become familiarized and inattentive to the infected social atmosphere they continually inhale. Besides, living in the midst of the isms, their situation is not favorable for comprehensive observation or calm generalization. More than a year since, we made a short trip to the North, and whilst there only associated with distinguished Abolitionists. We have corresponded much with them, before and since, and read many of their books, lectures, essays and speeches. We have neither seen nor heard any denial by

them of the failure of their own social system; but, in the contrary, found that they all concurred in the necessity of radical social changes. 'Tis true, in conversation, they will say, "Our system of society is bad, but yours of the South is worse; the cause of social science is advancing, and we are ready to institute a system better than either." We could give many private anecdotes, and quote thousands of authorities, to prove that such is the exact state of opinion with the multitudinous isms of the North. The correctness of our statement will not be denied. If it is, any one may satisfy himself of its truth by reading any Abolition or Infidel paper at the North for a single month. The Liberator^[4], of Boston, their ablest paper, gives continually the fullest exposé of their opinions, and of their wholesale destructiveness of purpose.

The neglect of the North to take issue with us, or with the Southern Press, in the new positions which we have assumed, our own observations of the working of Northern society, the alarming increase of Socialism, as evinced by its control of many Northern State Legislatures, and its majority in the lower house of Congress, are all new proofs of the truth of our doctrine. The character of that majority in Congress is displayed in full relief, by the single fact, which we saw stated in a Northern Abolition paper, that "there are a hundred Spiritual Rappers in Congress." A Northern member of Congress made a similar remark to us a few days since. 'Tis but a copy of the Hiss Legislature of Massachusetts, or the Praise-God-Barebones Parliament of England^[5]. Further study, too, of Western European Society, which has been engaged in continual revolution for

administration, promoted workhouses, and enshrined the principle of 'less eligibility' for recipients.

20 Abbreviation for the statute enacted in the 23rd year of King Edward III's reign (the Statute of Labourers, commonly dated 1349), a post-Black Death law that attempted to fix wages and restrict workers' movement.

21 A Latin legal phrase meaning 'bound to the land' (sometimes written as *ascripti glebae*), used in medieval and early modern contexts to describe peasants or serfs legally tied to a lord's estate.

22 A legal category created by Tudor-period vagrancy statutes in England for able-bodied wanderers and beggars; persons so labeled could face corporal punishment, confinement, transportation or other severe penalties.

23 A French 19th-century term (from Latin *proletarius*) meaning a member of the proletariat — someone without capital who sells their labor; used in contemporary social and political debates about class and industrial society.

24 A Latin legal maxim meaning "the welfare (or safety) of the people is the supreme law," long used in political and legal discourse to justify putting public welfare above other considerations.

25 A Latin phrase meaning "the healing power of nature," used historically in medicine and natural philosophy to describe the body's or nature's inherent ability to restore health.

26 Followers of William Miller, a mid-19th-century American Baptist preacher whose movement (c. 1830s–1840s) expected the imminent Second Coming of Christ, a

campaign that culminated in the widely noted 1844 "Great Disappointment."

27 A style of women's dress reform in the mid-19th century associated with reformer Amelia Bloomer, consisting of loose trousers gathered at the ankle worn under a short skirt; it symbolized early campaigns for practical dress and women's rights.

28 A poem by the English poet Thomas Hood (1799–1845) lamenting the harsh conditions of sewing women and factory labor; it was first published and widely circulated in the 1840s and became a well-known protest piece of that era.

29 A mid-19th-century English periodical associated with the writer and editor Douglas Jerrold (1803–1857); it published essays, reports, and fiction addressing social and literary topics of the time.

30 A prominent British quarterly political and literary journal founded in Edinburgh in 1802, influential in 19th-century public debate and often cited in contemporary discussions of economics and reform.

31 A Latin legal phrase meaning 'bound to the soil' used historically to describe serfs or peasants tied to a lord's land (serfdom); it denotes a legal status in which mobility and personal freedom were restricted.

32 An official appointed to assist a larger governmental or royal commission in the 19th century; Sub-commissioners collected local evidence, carried out examinations and reported findings to the central inquiry into industry and labour conditions.

33 A collier is a coal miner or someone employed in coal mining; 19th-century British usage commonly applied the term to miners and to their families and communities.

34 A teerer was a child or assistant in calico-printing who mixed and ground colours or prepared dyes for block printers; the term appears in 19th-century reports on child labour in textile trades.

35 Refers to governmental commissioners who investigated factory conditions in Britain during the early-to-mid 19th century (for example the 1830s inquiries into child and adult labour); their reports were widely cited in debates on industrial regulation.

36 The Oneida Community was a mid-19th-century communal utopian society founded in New York (founded 1848) known for communal property and controversial sexual and marriage practices; contemporary critics often used pejorative labels like 'den of incest.'

37 Here used in the sense of the *ancien régime* — the pre-revolutionary political and social order in Europe, especially the monarchical and aristocratic systems in place before the French Revolution.

38 Refers to John Hampden (1594–1643), an English parliamentarian known for opposing King Charles I's taxation practices and for his role in early 17th-century resistance to the doctrine of the divine right of kings.

39 A period of the French Revolution (roughly 1793–1794) marked by radical revolutionary government, mass arrests and executions carried out by revolutionary tribunals, notably under the Committee of Public Safety.

40 A 18th–19th century Christian sect (the United Society of Believers) founded by Ann Lee that practiced communal living, celibacy, and strict separation of the sexes; they were known for ecstatic worship and simple material culture.

41 A practice of the Oneida Perfectionists (mid-19th century) in which community members rejected exclusive marital bonds in favor of collective or non-exclusive sexual relations, defended by followers as a religious doctrine.

42 A mid-19th-century Methodist newspaper published in New York State; it carried religious and social commentary and was influential among American Methodists and other Protestant readers in that period.

43 A religious movement begun by Joseph Smith in western New York in the 1820s–1830s, formally organized as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830 and later led by Brigham Young to settlements in the American West.

44 A 19th-century term used for indentured laborers from parts of Asia (notably China and India) who were contracted to work overseas; these labor systems were often exploitative and distinct from, though sometimes compared with, chattel slavery.

45 An abolitionist newspaper edited by William Lloyd Garrison, published from 1831 to 1865, known for its radical anti-slavery advocacy and influence on the American abolitionist movement.

46 Wm. Lloyd Garrison refers to William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), a leading American abolitionist and journalist