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REVIEW ESSAY

From New Nation to Old South: Politics, Progress, and the Problem of Slavery in America

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The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress

EDITED BY L. DIANE BARNES, BRIAN SCHOEN AND FRANK TOWERS

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011

Pp. 352, £61.75 (hbk), £18.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0195384024

Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation

EDITED BY JOHN CRAIG HAMMOND AND MATTHEW MASON

Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011

Pp. 344, £42.95 (hbk), £21.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0813933054

In the face of admittedly rather contradictory evidence, publishers have long been said to be suspicious of essays collections, fearful they will not have the impact of a monograph, that sales will be lower. Academics on the Old World side of the pond have certainly had some cause to feel concerned about the edited collection, albeit for rather different reasons, but the times may definitely be a-changing, certainly if the two impressive examples under consideration here are any indication. When it comes to the subject of slavery and the South, of course, scholars and their students alike have a real appreciation of, and possibly a greater need for such compilation volumes, showcasing as they do not just the “best of” the most recent research in a burgeoning and sometimes overwhelming field but the fresh and subtle contours of that field that are revealed when a group of scholars cohere around a central theme. In each of the works here, the subject under discussion, approached along rather different albeit converging paths, is the political, national, and sectional ramifications of chattel slavery in the United States.

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Both are substantial – intellectually and physically – collections. *Contesting Slavery* comprises thirteen individual essays, divided into three sections that cover slavery and ideology, slavery and the state, and slavery, sectionalism, and politics respectively, book ended by a valuable editorial introduction and a concluding commentary by James Oakes. *The Old South's Modern Worlds*, similarly, consists of fourteen discrete essays, an afterword by Michael O'Brien and a thoughtful conclusion by the editors on "The Future of the Old South." With a few notable exceptions, the contributors to each comprise some of the leading younger scholars in the field, and they engage with the subject and with each other in genuinely original and innovative ways that reflect the most recent research questions, and answers, relating to slavery and the South. The inevitable cross-over between the two volumes – two of their respective editors, Matthew Mason and Brian Schoen, indeed, have a foot in both camps, as does Peter Onuf – is testament to the extent of scholarly interdependence and interchange across the subject of slavery, America's "dark counterpoint to the progress of democracy," as Onuf so eloquently describes it in his foreword to *Contesting Slavery* (xi). It also means that, although valuable as stand-alone volumes, their combined interpretations and their impact are mutually reinforcing in several crucial respects.

In their introduction to *Contesting Slavery*, Matthew Mason and John Craig Hammond establish both the historiographical context for and the general thrust of their volume, designed as it was, they emphasize, to engage with and analyze "the Revolutionary era and the early republic on their own terms rather than as mere precursors of the antebellum and Civil War eras" (p. 6). Slavery, they argue, had "a lasting political presence in the early republic precisely because it became an adjunct to other issues – as political, partisan, social, cultural, sectional, and economic concerns repeatedly forced slavery into politics in unforeseen ways" (p. 5). And Mason's opening essay, "Necessary but Not Sufficient: Revolutionary Ideology and Antislavery Action in the Early Republic," dives straight into the debate over the Revolution's impact on slavery by adumbrating the two main schools of thought on the matter: the first positing that Revolutionary ideology had established a psychological framework for the implementation of universal freedom that later generations were left to flesh out; and the second that this framework, if it existed at all, was already wobbling by 1787 and pretty much toppled when the Constitutional Convention saw northerners capitulate to "the Southern disunionist bluff" (p. 11).

It is this latter view, Mason notes, that has achieved most traction in the last decade or so, as scholars, assessing the "glacial pace" of antislavery action, have largely concluded that the period of the early republic was one in which chattel slavery was both protected and, to an extent promoted by those for whom, as Gary Nash famously charged, economics trumped ethics (p. 12). For Mason, however, as indeed for all the contributors to *Contesting Slavery*, the story is more complicated than an interpretative choice between a virtuous but vague and a vacillating, if not venal, founding generation. "From the Revolution forward," he argues, "only when slavery became personal in some way did those who harbored an ideological antipathy to slavery act in any organized way against it" (p. 13). The proposition that the road to hell is paved with good intentions is hardly an original one, of course, but the root of Mason's argument is that although the thought was father to the deed in

the case of antislavery, active abolitionism itself was a sensitive plant, dependant on quite specific climatic conditions, be these revolutionary, religious or political, to flower into full-blown, organized opposition to chattel servitude. It is in the “distinction between belief and action,” he asserts, that scholars may uncover “a richer and more precise understanding of the antislavery impact of the ideals of the American Revolution than the polarized scholarship has produced” (p. 26).

The chapters that follow each pursue this subtle distinction at varying points in America’s early history via a close reading of the battle lines established between those who advocated unfree labor and those who perceived it as both economic drain and moral stain on the new republican experiment. Yet for many Americans, they show, the opposing camps were far from clearly defined in this period. In effect, slavery created a metaphorical no-man’s land in which the slave became, legally, less than a man and those who worried about this perched uncomfortably on the fence contemplating the alternatives. Eva Sheppard Wolf, for example, whose monograph *Race and Liberty in the New Nation* (2006) examined emancipation (specifically, the extent of, and degree of success accorded individual applications for manumission before Nat Turner’s rebellion and the start of the Virginia slavery debates) here draws on her earlier work to examine the complexities and contradictions of free-labor thought more generally. *Race and Liberty* had clearly shown that individual circumstance – in Virginia, the decline of tobacco production – could encourage emancipation, but equally that the fear of freedmen and women could discourage it. In her chapter, Wolf considers the emergence of the concept of free labor in this context, and argues that it has suffered from being taken for granted rather than understood as evolving from the moral and material minefield that slavery had already produced in the early republic.

Wolf’s essay is a study of transition, of the multiple processes and pressures at play that produced, in time, something that could be termed free-labor “ideology” but that, in the period under consideration, were too diffuse to comprise anything resembling “a coherent, consistent, and widely shared set of assumptions and symbols” (p. 33). Although Benjamin Franklin, in his “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind” (1751) had argued for the economic superiority of free over slave labor, it was not until the 1790s that free labor as a concept became integral to anti-slavery writings (although not, Wolfe notes, much beyond them). Initially couched within an economic paradigm that, contra the accepted wisdom of previous decades, perceived slave labor as a financial handicap, the link between money and morality came later, Wolfe argues. It was only in the nineteenth century that the “triad of ideas” surrounding free labor, namely its “economic superiority . . . accompanied by its moral superiority and the importance of personal liberty,” merged to powerful effect (p. 34).

Wolfe is not suggesting, of course, that the individual components of this triad had not exercised Americans since the nation’s inception; as most of the essays in the first section of the volume emphasize, they clearly had, be it in the context of the naturalization debates, incisively assessed by Robert Parkinson, in the dialog between Thomas Jefferson and black reformer Benjamin Banneker, explored by Richard Newman, or in Southern fears of Caribbean-inspired slave insurrection that Edward Rugemer assesses. Each author, in their respective ways, emphasizes conflict over consensus, but in the process produces what James Oakes terms “racial consensus

history” as an explanatory paradigm for the apparent absence of active abolitionism in the era of the early republic (p. 297). As far as antislavery ideology was concerned, it would appear that the national spirit was (sometimes) willing, but the flesh was weak, or at least, the mind insufficiently focused to implement the new nation’s mission statement that promised life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. Where this leaves us as far as the historiography of the early republic is concerned may, however, be a moot point. At times the combined logic of the essays in the first section of *Contesting Slavery* seem likely to achieve for this earlier era of America’s history what Civil War historians once established for the immediate antebellum period: in this case, not so much a blundering as a somewhat inept generation, unable to drive reform through and eventually compromised by an evolving party system that could concentrate, but also constrain, the antislavery impetus.

And the precise role that politics, state, and sectional played in the process of contesting slavery is the focus of the remainder of Hammond and Mason’s collection. Again, the direction of travel for these sections is established in a very fine chapter by George William Van Cleve, who explores the contradictions implicit in “Founding a Slaveholders’ Union” over the three decades between 1770 and 1797. Specifically, Van Cleve unpicks those “methodological problems” that he perceives in “the ‘proslavery’ Constitution historiography.” This, he proposes, by focusing on “the adoption of the Constitution, may mistakenly gloss over the remarkable divisiveness of slavery” (p. 117). His solution, to highlight both “continuity and change in the transition from British imperial support for slavery to a new American regime,” enables him to draw out the implications of the “contested political choices” that the founding generation made, choices that established slavery as “an integral part of law and governance” in the new republic (p. 118). And when that republic began to expand westwards, the battleground between slavery and freedom was established, as John Craig Hammond emphasizes, not between North and South but between the Atlantic states and the Trans-Appalachian West, the latter comprising a “polyglot group of expatriated Americans, British loyalists, French planters, and ‘men of no country,’” who “threatened disunion whenever Congress considered restrictions on Western slavery” (p. 139).

More frequently aligned along the North/South axis, Hammond’s analysis of the specter of disunion’s presence in the West in this earlier period reminds us that the contest over slavery played out across both the warp and the weft threads of the Union, that slavery itself, indeed, was woven into the fabric of that Union from its inception, and that every compromise, from the debate over Missouri onwards, simply solved “an immediate problem by putting off the larger issue” (p. 155). And the reluctance to tackle that larger issue, as Brian Schoen argues, was fundamentally related to “the complicated political story of the Lower South” in the Early Republic. Schoen takes issue with the two dominant historiographical narratives that inform our response to the Lower South: one positing it as an exception to an emergent national republican rule, a “counterrevolutionary” region, as William Freehling and, especially, Manisha Sinha would have it; and the other positioning it as central to a national narrative increasingly written by an emergent “slave power” that made “the Lower South’s devotion to slavery the national rule rather than the regional

exception" (p. 161). Crucially, and in common with many of his co-authors, Schoen urges us to look "forward from the Revolution, rather than backwards from nullification or the Civil War" (p. 162), if we want to trace, with any accuracy, the actual progress of, and processes that informed, both slavery's commercial expansion and political opposition to this.

Both the political and psychological ramifications of these processes inform the essays in the final section of *Contesting Slavery*, closing the circle, in a sense, by drawing the reader back to Mason's opening argument that the personal and the partisan simply cannot be considered apart when it comes to the subject of slavery in the Early Republic. This is a point that Rachel Hope Cleves highlights in her consideration of "The Political Morality of Federalist Antislavery." She argues that, for the Federalists, the "ideology of republicanism concatenated partisanship with righteousness" (pp. 209–10). Yet the essential instability of this ideology is a theme developed by both Pdraig Riley and Andrew Shankman in chapters that remind us, as Riley stresses, that "for many non-slaveholders, slavery remained both geographically and ideologically distant. Even those who confronted slavery," he notes, "struggled to explain their complex ties to the power and oppression at the heart of the institution" (p. 227). How this struggle informed and influenced the politics of the Early Republic and antebellum eras forms the focus of the final chapter of this excellent volume: Donald Ratcliffe's analysis of "The Decline of Antislavery Politics" between 1815 and 1840.

Ratcliffe's broad sweep across the latter years of the period is a very valuable, indeed necessary conclusion for a work of this nature that sets out its stall with a varied range of nuanced explorations of discrete developments within the slavery/antislavery spectrum, specific political flashpoints, or individual perspectives. What Ratcliffe provides is a valuable political map for the new antislavery landscape revealed by Hammond and Mason's collection. He reminds us that there is a crucial "distinction between 'antislavery' and 'abolition,' a distinction," he notes, "not commonly made by historians, but one that illuminates the historical process" (p. 268), and argues that, from this perspective, it may be more "reasonable to see the 1830s marked not by 'the rebirth of antislavery,'" but by its decline. Long identified as a turning point on the road to Civil War in terms of abolitionist agitation, Ratcliffe posits that the 1830s was instead the decade "when the slavery issue was deliberately removed from the mainstream of national political argument" (p. 267). And by 1835, he argues, "the world of antislavery concern had changed to a world of anti-abolitionist mobs and persecution in the North," matched by an increasingly "severe racial fear in the South" (p. 273). As Ratcliffe argues, although alienated from the party-political arena, antislavery was too deep-rooted ever to be eradicated, even by the virulent racism that permeated the North in the 1820s.

"For most Northerners," Ratcliffe concludes, "the rejection of abolitionism would not contradict their antislavery" sentiments (p. 284). In the end, of course, it was not the institution of slavery but that of the South that brought their dormant, but never dead, antislavery beliefs to political prominence once again, and not reform, but warfare, that enabled them to translate thought into action. And without doubt the South, even in the Early Republic, was already becoming perceived as a

separate, sectional institution even as it pursued a national, indeed increasingly international agenda. In *Contesting Slavery*, Brian Schoen had expanded our understanding of the southern slavery debate by locating it in the broader context of “the nature of the political economy, the entrance of new states into the Union, or debates over the contours of federalism.” There he had stressed that southern commitment to slavery was closely linked to other concerns, notably “the region’s transition from a languishing, eighteenth-century Caribbean-focused economy, to a vibrant, nineteenth-century one based around the coastal and trans-Atlantic trade in cotton” (p. 162). In *The Old South’s Modern Worlds*, Schoen focuses more closely on southern planters’ approach to these “ever-changing global commodity markets,” and explores the practicalities of, and pressures involved in their transition from plantation patriarchs to active players in modern political economies (p. 67).

As with *Contesting Slavery*, *The Old South’s Modern Worlds* is fundamentally about complicating a traditional historiographical approach to, and subsequent understandings of, in this case, “The South,” both its national and international dimensions. Schoen’s contribution to the volume he co-edited is, as one might expect, especially astute in this respect, emphasizing as it does the global changes that impacted on Southern agriculture and to which the region’s planters were forced to respond, with varying degrees of success. Nor is this Atlantic history from another angle since, as Schoen reminds us, “the emergence of Asia as a competitive market” (p. 69) means that historians need to consider the Pacific rim in the nineteenth century, and in particular its role in inculcating a broader and more diverse market outlook among Southern planters. Indeed, as Schoen and his co-editors stress, it is essential that we position the “Old South” not simply in relation either to “its sectional rival,” the North, nor in a restricted Atlantic relationship with Britain, but rather focus more on “the region’s diversity, modernity, and global interconnections,” and see it “as an active participant in, and even promoter of, change and progress” (p. 3).

This is actually a trickier proposal than it seems at first glance. Without doubt, the South’s slaveowners could be regarded as agents of progress; it was simply that, from a Northern, and in some respects from a global, perspective, that progress just happened to be in a dubious direction, but to focus on that, as the editors note, is to persist in defining the South “for what it was not, rather than for what it was” (p. 7). And like *Contesting Slavery*, *The Old South’s Modern Worlds* is a collection driven by the imperative to approach its subject “on its own terms,” even if the underlying argument is that these terms can now be better accessed via reference to ours, or at least in the context of modernity as theoretically and historiographically defined (p. 3). At the same time, the application of the concept of modernity in relation to the many and various developments – social, political, economic – in southern agricultural practices, political involvement, and global positioning does not in and of itself negate the idea of the South as essentially “backward-looking.” It is perfectly possible to move forward whilst looking backwards, although one does run the risk of collisions in the process. What the editors and contributors understand and mean by modernity, therefore, is central to their argument that the Old South is more fully explicable in a modern context, and crucial to the success of their undertaking here; yet what they do mean is sometimes hard to pin down, especially when “modernity”

and “modernization” are used interchangeably. Beyond a brief nod to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the theoretical debate over modernity is assumed as general knowledge here rather than discussed in any great detail; nevertheless, the editors’ insistence that modernity “can be understood as both a matter of cultural outlook and material achievement” (p. 10) informs every chapter.

Assuming that the intended readership of *The Old South’s Modern Worlds* is familiar with at least the work of Bauman, or even Max Weber, the one thing it is not likely to do is equate modernity with “the inevitable unfolding of human liberty,” and nor, indeed, do the contributors to this volume who, in the main, reveal in the “Old South” multiple examples of the moral and material complexities, contradictions, compromises, and cruelties that litter the “multiple paths to modernity” in the United States (p. 11). The “Old South,” indeed, could hardly fail to exhibit a wide selection of modernity’s trappings, given the nation’s origins and democratic imperatives, but its relationship with these, as Peter Onuf shows, took on new meaning in the context of chattel slavery. Onuf’s chapter, the first in “The South in a World of Nations” section, is a provocative way in which to begin this volume, at the end, almost, rather than the beginning. Yet looking at it does to the downfall of the Confederacy enables Onuf to explore the extent of white southern patriotic sentiment alongside the impulses that eventually “made the idea of Confederate independence and nationhood compelling” (p. 27). “Southern writers found the idea of a great American union irresistibly appealing,” Onuf notes, “even when they contemplated its destruction” (p. 30). And driving that destructive impulse was the idea of slavery as the “vital force” (p. 39) that secured not just southern but American expansion and civilization, a perspective that eventually compromised the “common nationality” (p. 42) that white southerners believed themselves part of; until they, briefly, no longer were.

Many of the essays that follow explore, explain, and expand our understanding of the society that eventually seceded, its cultural, material, and moral outlook, its relationship with distant markets and its response to pressures closer to home, the enslaved and the slaveholder populations and the urban and the rural environments that they constructed and that, in a sense, constructed them. This was an insecure world, susceptible to both foreign and domestic pressures that enabled it to expand but also, at times, forced it to contract; for those traveling the roads to modernity, in short, as these essays reveal, the process sometimes involved three steps forward and two back. Matthew Mason’s analysis of southern intellectual reactions to a British-informed “Benevolent Empire” imperative that they perceived as manifested in the reform impulses of the era is a case in point. Mason reinforces Edward Rugener’s argument in *Contesting Slavery* that West Indian emancipation served to confirm slaveholders’ growing belief that “the slave South was the fulcrum of civilization,” economically and culturally (p. 57). At the same time, their self-assurance was sometimes less assured than it sounded; in the face of what they perceived as foreign-influenced agitation against slavery they backed themselves into a corner; broader global engagement, in effect, produced only retrenchment, a circling of the sectional wagons against what southern intellectuals regarded as a threat to the very bedrock of their way of life.

Some of the complexities inherent in the broader southern (as opposed to simply white southern) way of life are explored by Larry Hudson, who finds that defending

against foreign influence was perhaps an easier task than preventing the inevitable changes that resulted from the expanding economic world of nineteenth-century slavery and the subsequent diversification of employment among rural slaves that this produced. In a careful assessment of the “multilayered meanings that certain kinds of work held for the enslaved as individuals and as a community,” Hudson concludes that many of “the enslaved not only took steps toward advancing their own interests,” but, in the process, “also embraced some of the language and practices, if not the underlying values, prevalent in the public world of their owners” (p. 97). Slaves, too, were part of the “market revolution,” and not simply as commodities, although often they were that, too, as Steven Deyle emphasizes in his study of the internal slave trade and James Huston reinforces in his assessment of the economy of the states of the Border South, specifically Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, the “abandoned children of scholarship” (p. 120).

Huston’s central thesis, that it was one facet of modernity above all, the free market, and its implications for direct competition between slave and free labor that caused tensions on the border will, of course, be familiar to anyone who has read his earlier monograph, *Calculating the Value of the Union* (2003), which is not to suggest that it does not bear repeating here, in a rather different context. Huston’s emphasis on the urban and industrial potential of slavery neatly leads into the chapters that follow by Frank Towers, William Thomas and L. Diane Barnes that pursue the theme of modernity’s material progress in the South in terms of urban and industrial development and the railroads. Towers has provided an especially astute and detailed discussion of the rate and extent of southern urban growth and its implications, and reminds us that comparisons with the North alone not only do not tell the whole story; they rather obscure it. “Judged by the rate of urban population growth,” he points out, “the antebellum South stood in the vanguard of its contemporaries in the Americas and in Europe” (p. 147). Towers’ chapter (and indeed his earlier book on urban development in the South) successfully integrates the story of the urban south into a larger and more coherent narrative. Building on earlier studies, notably those by Richard Wade (*Slavery in the Cities*, 1964) and Claudia Goldin (*Urban Slavery*, 1976) that rather positioned the urban/industrial south outside what we might term the plantation mainstream, Towers emphasizes the fact that southern cities played “a role analogous to a research-and-development laboratory for slaveholders” (p. 157), in which they could envisage a more expansive future for their labor system and the civilization constructed upon it.

The individual cultures that existed in both the rural and urban South is the theme of chapters by Charles Irons, who draws African American missionary work into the traditional narrative of white benevolence and reform, and Andrew Frank, who explores the ways in which southeastern Indians “chose cultural and economic innovations in order to secure their economic and political survival” (p. 229). Together, Irons and Frank show how people too often portrayed as marginal players in the story of the Old South operated within the new national and global networks of the nineteenth century. They delineate their struggles within a moral and material marketplace, sometimes against and sometimes in tune with broader market and missionary impulses, and show how, above all, as Frank argues, they “secured a

nebulous place in a region and nation that was increasingly presumed biracial” (p. 237) but was in reality far more complex than that. “Members of both Native and Southern societies,” Frank concludes, “recognized their own necessities of drawing lines and defining their communities” (p. 242). An individual who had little sense of where lines might be drawn in general, on the other hand, is the subject of Craig Thompson Friend’s exploration of “Self, Sex, and the Performance of Patriarchal Manhood in the Old South.” Friend does not pull any punches. “James Henry Hammond was a despicable man,” he asserts from the off, before moving on to explore the implications of the persistent (horrified) fascination he still holds for historians (p. 246).

“What is at stake here,” Friend argues, “is not the psychology of one individual but rather the character of white, patriarchal masculinity in the Old South” (p. 247). In the particular case of Hammond, Friend concludes – after a rigorous and extremely useful analysis of the major historiographical trends of the past few decades – that he “lived in a world awkwardly situated between the premodern and the modern,” in which vestiges of the premodern, specifically the urge to define “manhood in opposition to childhood” rather than to “womanhood” persisted (p. 261). The extent to which a broader premodern perspective actually dominated in the Old South is the subject of Marc Engel’s “Counterpoint” to this collection, in which he asks the question “What if Genovese is right?” He concludes that he was, but only with reference to secession and the Civil War, the subject of the final chapter by Edward Ayers that positions the war and its aftermath in a global context.

In some respects, a discussion of the Civil War seems a rather unusual inclusion in a collection of essays devoted to approaching the Old South on its own terms. Yet rather like *Contesting Slavery, The Old South’s Modern Worlds* is in a sense constructed in the shadow of the Civil War; however, much the contributors to each strive to draw our attention forward from the Revolution, or to the Old South as it was, we know that a crisis is approaching that will finally put an end to any political procrastination over slavery and to the southern way of life that slavery supported. This is not a criticism. Both are excellent collections, absolutely ideal for teaching purposes. They succeed admirably in their respective aims to encourage us to reconsider both the political polarities of the Early Republic and the rural, urban and cultural worlds that comprised an “Old South” that, of course, did not see itself that way at the time. Indeed, if one of the facets of modernity is characterized, as sociologist Anthony Giddens has posited, by a focus on the future rather than the past then the Old South may seem, in the light of recent scholarship, more modern in some respects than the New. Frank Towers observes that “elements of slaveholders’ blueprint for urban America” found “their way into the cities remade by the Civil War” (p. 160). Yet as both these collections show, it was the Founders’ rather too blurred blueprint for slavery that exercised Americans up to 1865, and arguably defined not just the southern urban landscape, but the national one.

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