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Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation ed. by John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason (review)

Justin Roberts

Civil War History, Volume 59, Number 1, March 2013, pp. 104-105 (Article)

Published by The Kent State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/cwh.2013.0007

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publisher will issue a paperback at a more affordable price point for both students and the knowledgeable lay reader—the audiences most in need of such a judicious and well-argued work of historical interpretation.

Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh
U.S. Naval Academy

Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation. Ed. John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8139-3105-0, 336 pp., cloth, $49.50.

Contesting Slavery is an anthology of thirteen essays along with an introduction and a final commentary. The essays explore the relationship between politics and slavery in the early U.S. republic on its own terms and the political debate over the westward expansion of the institution. By reading forward from the revolution rather than backward from the Civil War, the authors move beyond tired debates about the origins of the Civil War and thus transcend the teleology that has too often plagued works in southern history. The essays share a set of common themes. They counter the idea that the slavery debates and, particularly, antislavery sentiments were suppressed between the creation of the Constitution and the 1820s or 1830s. They look beyond major political events such as congressional debates and founding fathers to politics on the ground. They stress contingency, partisan politics, and local and regional politics. They avoid the oversimplification of a North/South divide in political ideals. Many of them claim to situate the early republic more fully within the Atlantic World, striving to avoid the too often parochial view that has constrained nineteenth-century U.S. history. Many of the essays also complicate the binaries of positive good and necessary evil as interpretive lenses in the slavery debates. Finally, they question whether ideology alone was sufficient to drive action.

Although the editors claim that the anthology situates the slavery debates of the early republic within broader Atlantic contexts, not many of the essays are successful at doing this. Because they lend interpretive cachet, "Atlantic" and "Atlantic World" have certainly become popular buzzwords, but it is much easier to call a work "Atlantic" than to make that work deeply comparative and transnational both contextually and historiographically. The Atlantic history paradigm has been venturing forward from the colonial era deep into the nineteenth-century United States. Most of the essays in this volume are very sensitive to local politics and regional variations in the early United States, but they fail to fully engage with Atlantic contexts. Edward B. Rugemer's "Caribbean Slave Revolts and the Origins of the Gag Rule," and John Craig Hammond's "Uncontrollable Necessity," which explore the plantation revolution that was transforming Mississippi and the Louisiana territory as politicians debated slavery's westward expansion, are the essays that best situate the United States within a broader Atlantic.

Most of the essays that try to position their subject in an Atlantic context mention just a few key events, such as slave rebellions in the Caribbean. Brian Schoen, for

example, touches on the impact of slave rebellions in the French Caribbean on the development of slavery in the Lower South. The essays do not, however, adequately engage with a burgeoning literature on slavery in the French and British West Indies. In several cases the omission is glaring. Eva Sheppard Wolf, for example, explores the rise of free-labor thinking in the United States, tracing it from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth century. This is an important essay because, as she explains, our thinking is still influenced by this powerful idea that free labor is cheaper or more efficient than slave labor. Although Wolf's essay is thoughtful, she fails to even cite Seymour Drescher's critically important work *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (2002), which explores the rise of an ideology that privileged free labor in the British Empire. The anthology would have also benefited from an essay with a broad Atlantic perspective on the rapid natural growth of the slave population in the United States (which was almost unique in the history of Atlantic slavery). How did this shape political perspectives on slavery in the early republic, and how did Americans interpret or respond to it?

Collectively, these essays suggest we are moving into a new historiographical paradigm in the study of the early republic. The authors question the idea of an ideological consensus in American history, and they stress the need to understand how politics on the ground and particular social and economic interests gave impetus to action; ideas were not sufficient on their own to effect historical change. If there is a collective interpretation of slavery and politics in the early republic in this volume, we could call it neo-progressivism. Here, culture and ideology take a back seat to regional political, social, and economic interests. Far from being overly deterministic materialists, however, the authors of these essays offer subtly nuanced interpretations of political behavior and historical change, which stress the continual interplay of ideas and interests. Matt Mason's essay is the best example of a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between ideas and interests. He concludes by arguing that "ideas by themselves very rarely moved people from merely wringing their hands over the injustice of slavery to actually picking up those weapons and joining a battalion to storm slavery's citadels" (26). This quote sums up what is perhaps the key interpretive kernel in all the essays in this anthology. Not surprisingly, this kind of interpretive model is akin to some of the best work on abolition in the British Empire, by Thomas Haskell and Christopher L. Brown.

Overall, this anthology stands as a thought-provoking addition to scholarship on slavery and the formation of the early United States. It is principally a specialist work, and it would not be suitable for undergraduates. It succeeds in attacking the master narrative of pro- and antislavery debates in U.S. history but shows us that much work remains to be done before we can offer a new master narrative. To get to that point, *Contesting Slavery* makes it clear that historians will need to do far more work on the politics of slavery at a local and regional level and on the economic, social, and political interests that drove people to act on a particular set of pro- or antislavery ideas.

Justin Roberts
Dalhousie University