



PROJECT MUSE®

Review Essay

Rethinking the Politics of Slavery, 1776–1836

JAMES BREWER STEWART

Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New Nation. Edited by John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 313, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.50; paper, \$26.50.)

The final decade of the eighteenth century and the earliest decades of the nineteenth were once considered a “neglected period” of scholarship on the politics of slavery. But no longer. Numerous scholars have examined this period afresh from many perspectives over the past two decades. But as this volume well confirms, we have much still to learn, and to rethink, about the politics of slavery in the early republic.

Some of the same historians who have made the “neglected period” passé are prominent in this volume, making up the majority of the fifteen authors. Firmly planted on familiar historiographical ground, the essays discuss quite varied topics yet contribute to the volume’s overall coherence. The volume’s mission, as I understand it, is to demonstrate that controversies over slavery were incessant in the politics of the early republic (1780s through the 1820s), to explain why this was the case, and to suggest how understanding this phenomenon invites us to alter our views on the evolution of politics from the age of the Founders to the decades before the Civil War.

In their “Introduction,” editors Matthew Mason and John Craig Hammond summarize precisely what I take to be their collection’s salient conclusion: “The issue of slavery repeatedly entered into state, regional,

James Brewer Stewart is James Wallace Professor of History Emeritus at Macalester College.

sectional and international conflicts, in turn feeding into and impinging on politics on the national level" (3). In the early republic, in other words, conflicts over slavery were frequent, serious, many faceted, usually from "the bottom up," and above all fundamental to the systemic functioning of the larger political system. Disagreements over slavery, moreover, quite often became implicated in debates over other contested issues unrelated to bondage, causing the volatile language of slavery and antislavery to insinuate itself deeply and early on the new nation's political culture.

Mason and Hammond caution that a proper understanding of these dynamics requires stifling instincts to seek the origins of Civil War causation in these earlier politics of slavery. Their advice is exactly right and pays a big dividend. By focusing on their subjects without anticipating the political crises over slavery in the 1840s and 1850s, the essayists push their inquiries well beyond familiar investigations of elite politicians, the wording of the Founders' Constitution, debates restricted within the walls of Congress, chronologies of individual state-making and so forth. Instead they either expand on topics about which we know too little or offer perspectives that may, to some, be new.

The findings of these essays make it clear that disagreements over slavery were ubiquitous, substantial, and significant enough in the early republic to require historians to assay their meaning carefully. Together, they posit an invigorating challenge to the way in which antebellum political history is customarily organized. No matter what their specific interest, students of sectional politics will find real value in this collection.

Mason and Hammond's "Introduction" outlines their collection's overall claims and offers a reliable outline of its structure and content. After that, the collection divides into three headings. Part I, *Slavery and Ideology, Action and Inaction*, explores connections between belief systems and political choices. Part II, *The State and Slavery*, addresses ways in which slavery issues shaped law, economy, and institutions of racial domination. Part III, *Slavery, Sectionalism and Partisan Politics*, offers just what its title promises. It is here that the historiographical implications of this volume for political historians are most clearly delineated.

Part I, focused on ideology, is anchored by Matthew Mason's "Necessary But Not Sufficient: Revolutionary Ideology and Antislavery Action in the Early Republic," an expansive analysis of when and why anti-

slavery beliefs translated into antislavery actions—and when and why they did not. Next, Eva Sheppard Wolf's "Early Free-Labor Thought and the Contest over Slavery in the Early Republic" analyzes the origins of the North's "free-soil" critique of the 1850s by examining northern political economists' first ideological objections to slavery. Robert G. Parkinson's "'Manifest Signs of Passion': The First Federal Congress, Antislavery and the Legacies of the Revolutionary War" examines the roles of ideology in shaping Congressional discord over naturalization, race, and citizenship. Then Richard S. Newman connects ideology with the private sphere in "'Good Communications Corrects Bad Manners': The Banneker–Jefferson Dialogue and the Project of White Uplift," a recounting of how Jefferson's racism blighted his relationship with an exceptional man of color, who in turn transmuted his encounter with bigotry into empowering activism. Finally, Edward Rugemer's "Caribbean Slave Revolts and the Origins of the Gag Rule" tracks ideology internationally when demonstrating that the 1835 congressional ban on antislavery petitioning had its origins in decades of accumulating anxiety over black revolution in the Caribbean.

Part II examines how slavery's interests shaped governance. It opens with William Van Cleve's "Founding a Slaveholder's Union, 1770–1797," which presents the Constitution as inherently proslavery because of its concessions to states' rights, devotion to private property, and rejection of "natural law." John Craig Hammond traces the complex sectional politics that ultimately led to the Missouri Crisis in "'Uncontrollable Necessity': Local Politics, Geopolitics and the Sectional Politics of Slavery Expansion," an effective prelude to Brian Schoen's "Positive Goods and Necessary Evils: Commerce, Security and Slavery in the Lower South, 1787–1837," and to David F. Ericson's "Slave Smugglers, Slave Catchers and Slave Rebels: Slavery and American State Development, 1787–1837," both of which explain why, by the 1830s, the Federal government had become such an effective protector of slavery's interests.

As the essays on politics found in Part III make clear, this rapid consolidation of slavery's dominance ignited passionate objections all over the North. Mixing moral absolutes and political partisanship, northern Federalists and Jeffersonians created stringent critiques of slavery that would, soon enough, circulate widely throughout "the age of Jackson" and well beyond. Rachel Hope Cleves assesses the Federalists' contributions in "'Hurtful to the State': The Political Morality of Federalist Antislavery," while Pdraig Riley does likewise for Jeffersonians in "Slavery

and Democracy in Jeffersonian America.” Andrew Shankman confirms the expansive extent of slavery’s reach by demonstrating in “Neither Infinite Wretchedness nor Positive Good: Matthew Cary and Henry Clay on Political Economy and Slavery in the Long 1820’s” that these premier political economists could not envision the republic’s peaceful development without their theories being fatally undermined by the “peculiar institution.”

So how, as I have suggested, do these essays challenge the current periodizing of pre-Civil War political history? Donald J. Ratcliffe’s remarkable closing essay “Decline of Antislavery Politics, 1815–1840” supplies much of the answer. He argues persuasively that the 1830s marked the suppression of decades of previous antislavery politics, not their dramatic eruption as historians have for so long insisted. His argument speaks directly to one of this volume’s basic point concerning the perils of reading the political history of slavery in the early republic from the vantage point of the subsequent sectional crisis.

This error of anachronism, Ratcliffe argues, has led historians to the questionable conclusion that antislavery politics exploded in the 1830s and that by contrast political antislavery in the preceding decades was but a faint prelude of the enormous traumas to come. According to this prevailing view, early antislavery politics was episodic, unorganized, ideologically hesitant, and ineffectual. But in point of fact, Ratcliffe insists (as, one way or another, does every other essay) that antislavery politics in the early republic, though decentralized, was ubiquitous, free-wheeling, iconoclastic, redolent with controversy, and far more expressive than in the era soon to follow.

What suppressed this ferment, according to Ratcliffe, was the second party system, based as it was on a consensus between among Whigs and Democrats to stifle all discussions of slavery. The later 1820s witnessed much enflamed feelings of generalized white supremacy even as politicians were busily constructing two new parties that could compete with one another nationally while transcending otherwise divisive sectional issues. That agreement (first noted over four decades ago by Richard H. Brown) led in turn to the successive enactment of gag rules, the attempted suppression of antislavery Congressmen, waves of discriminatory northern “black laws,” the mobs that pillaged black neighborhoods and terrorized abolitionists, and the intensified enforcement the Fugitive Slave Law. In this respect, Ratcliffe posits a truly important generalization. The open-ended politics of slavery and antislavery in the early republic

do stand in incontestably vivid contrast to excruciating political suppression of the 1830s.

It must be pointed out, however, that Ratcliffe's generalization will be familiar to scholars who chart black activism's relationships to antislavery politics from the 1780s through the 1850s. From this particular vantage point, Ratcliffe's explanations of the early republic's political openness and its collapse are strongly reinforced by considerations that for reasons not apparent to this reviewer fall outside the purview of this volume. To explain: Until the 1820s, many of the urban whites comprising the urban North's "lower orders" fraternized with their darker skinned neighbors. Moreover, such whites had yet to undergo the ethnic and racial traumas so closely associated with rapid urbanization, the rise of manufacturing, and renewed waves of heightened Anglophobia. Until the end of the 1820s black elites generally showed deference to elite whites, who in turn smiled upon quests for uplift and respectability by genteel "colored" people. Even in the face of such alarms as the Haitian revolution and Gabriel's insurrection, "whiteness" was less malevolently constructed in these earlier decades than it would become later on. By the early 1830s militant blacks and whites supporting them were abruptly changing all that—Nat Turner, slave revolutions in the British and Dutch Caribbean, British West Indian emancipators, David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison. They and their slaveholding foils, the South Carolina nullifiers, were suddenly fashioning an explosive generalized crisis over race and slavery utterly unprecedented in the nation's history. By comparison to earlier decades, antislavery in all its forms had suddenly become far more creatively militant, politically confrontational, internationally focused, and racially transgressive.¹

Little wonder, then, that the *formal* politics of slavery as expressed by elected officials bent on preserving intersectional consensus turned to ruthless repression in the 1830s and that the politics of the preceding decades seem so open and free-wheeling. In this respect, *Contesting*

1. Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis, Slavery and the Politics of Jacksonianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 65 (Winter 1966), 15–28; Julie Winch, *James Forten: A Gentleman of Color* (New York, 2008); Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Richard Allen, the African Methodist Church and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008); James Brewer Stewart, "The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790–1840," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Summer 1998), 181–217.

Slavery makes a significant interpretive contribution. But if one's definition of political actors expands to include proslavery mobs, abolitionist "martyrs," polemical journalists, mobilized petitioners, and militant African Americans as well as elected officials, then the 1830s did indeed witness unprecedented contestations over slavery, much as established historiography has claimed. How to parse this matter depends, obviously, on one's definition of politics.

A fine concluding reflection by James Oakes suggests useful contexts for some of the points just made. It also situates the volume's claims in long-term trends in antebellum political history. From first to last, these essays deserve our attention. The volume as a whole well exceeds "the sum of its parts."