



Steven Hahn. *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. xvii + 246 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03296-5.



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Emancipation, Rebellion, and Self-Determination

I read and was duly impressed by Steven Hahn's 2004 Bancroft and Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Frankly, I expected *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (based on his 2007 Nathan I. Huggins lectures at Harvard) to be a slightly popularized reprise. It was that, but it was also much more.

The Political Worlds is a provocation and a challenge to the American historical profession. Hahn calls on us to re-think our periodization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and re-analyze it from a series of new perspectives.

The book is divided into three chapters, a preface, an appendix, fifty-six pages of notes, and an index. The first chapter, "Slaves at Large: The Emancipation Process and the Terrain of African American Politics," begins with a question. If the traditional view that there were two emancipations—one as a result of the Revolution and the other as an integral part of the Civil War—was wrong

and if instead there was one prolonged emancipation process beginning in 1777 and ending with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, how would this affect the interpretation of the nation's antebellum history?

The author concludes that conditional slavery would be a reality for all black Americans in all parts of the nation. Even in those states and territories where the "peculiar institution" was officially banned, both local and federal law would make African American rights tenuous, at best. He writes that black communities in the free North would ultimately be akin to the maroon settlements in Brazil and the Caribbean. Like them, the freedom and independence of their inhabitants would be provisional.

And, like the provisionally free in other slave societies, the Free Negroes of the North would also see themselves as under siege. Virtually unprotected by the law, any white could claim them as runaways. While the actual percentage of fugitives is unknown, Hahn points out that according to the 1850 federal census just under 25

percent of the inhabitants of Boston, Providence, Brooklyn, and New York City and as high as 90 percent of those in the rural counties of southern Ohio had been born in the slave states, proportions that generally increased over the decade. Thus, the connections between the nominally free and actively enslaved was an unbroken chain and its links transmitted information, aspiration, and social perception in both directions.

The concept of a long, gradual emancipation significantly challenges the orthodox view of both the antebellum United States and of the Civil War. The implication of the country as a whole in slavery casts doubt on any interpretation of an âirrepressible conflict.â It reopens questions of causality, contingency, and formal and informal politics. It demands a re-imagining of American history, modifying the revolutionary drama definitively ending slavery.

At the center of the second chapter, âDid We Miss the Greatest Slave Rebellion in Modern History?â is a comparison between the actions and attitudes of African Americans during the Civil War and French Saint Domingueâs Negroes during the Haitian Rebellion. While recognizing their differences, Hahn notes that both began with a profound disruption of the white elite and both ended with black men taking up arms to successfully end the institution of slavery. Yet, what happened and why is not the essential question. It is rather why Americans, white and black, professional historians, and the general populace have so absolutely rejected any idea of a slave rebellion as a component of the Civil War.

Clearly, this was not the case, particularly for white Southerners between 1861 and 1865. They saw slave flight, assistance to Union raiders, and most especially enlistment in the Union forces as manifestations of servile insurrection. But in the years following the war, reconciliation seemed to demand a reconsideration of the matter.

If the war really was a clash of great and noble principles, a brothersâ war with glory enough for the blue and the gray, then there was no room left for black insurgents. In both popular literature and historical monographs, African Americans became the comic relief with little real agency and even less influence on the American *Iliad*.

While African Americans refused to accept the image of blacks as passive during the war, they were equally reluctant to see themselves or their progenitors as slave rebels. According to Hahn, they saw African American

actions and attitudes as an adherence to the fundamental principles of American freedom, as a model of civilized behavior, and as proof of their loyalty to the United States. At the same time, these perceptions were part of black resistance to the negative racial stereotypes of the white majority, a majority whose nightmares were populated by African American men with guns.

The great exception to these âinterpretive sensibilitiesâ was W. E. B. DuBois. Regarding African Americans in both slavery and freedom as consequential political actors, when they had determined that the federal army would not or could not return fugitive slaves, when they were convinced that their masters were uncertain of victory, DuBois concluded that African Americans acted collectively, fleeing bondage and offering their labor and themselves to the Union.

Many of DuBoisâs insights have become part of the mainstream orthodoxy over time. Yet there is still a reluctance to incorporate a conscious slave revolt into the interpretation of the Civil War. Hahn suggests that this reluctance is quintessentially American. A belief in formal politics with their elections, party platforms, and official institutions, blinds American historians to the reality and influence of the ad hoc, grassroots politics of slaves, the poor, and the disenfranchised.

The third chapter, âMarcus Garvey, the UNIA, and the Hidden Political History of African Americans,â presents a problem of historiography and analysis. The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was founded in Jamaica in 1914 by Marcus Garvey. By the mid 1920s, it was indisputably the largest mass organization in the history of the African Diaspora. However, Hahn points out that it has received less serious investigation than the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the black membership of the Communist Party, or African American participation in the early twentieth-century labor movements. His question is why.

He proposes three interrelated answers. The first and most damning is mere laziness. Although he admits that resources on the UNIA are relatively scarce, he condemns his fellow historians for their failure to investigate even those resources, as well as their failure to conduct oral interviews with surviving members of the organization, their families, and their critics.

The second answer returns to the underlying theme of *The Political Worlds*, the American inability to incorporate or even imagine the ad hoc, the grassroots politics of outsiders.

The third answer is that the alternative goals of the UNIA seem so foreign to the assimilationist mainstream that the organization is simply dismissed. The UNIA and its followers are seen as an aberration roughly akin to the Ghost Dances of the Plains Indians.

Not surprisingly, Hahn writes, many of the major historical works on Marcus Garvey and the UNIA have been produced by scholars born and educated in the Caribbean and Britain (p. 161). Garvey and his movement electrified black America during the 1920s, together with much of the black Atlantic world. Given the numbers of those people who identified themselves as Gar-

veyites, Hahn concludes, we condescend to Garvey and the UNIA at our own loss and our peril (p. 162).

The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom is a very important book. Steven Hahn is brash, intemperate, and critical of the American historical profession. Occasionally, he is over the top. Occasionally, he may be wrong. But, all of his questions are good ones. He has spit on the ground, drawn a line in the sand, and placed a chunk of wood on his shoulder. It is up to his fellow historians to step up to the mark, knock the chip off his shoulder, and answer the challenges he has proposed.

Let the best combatants win!

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