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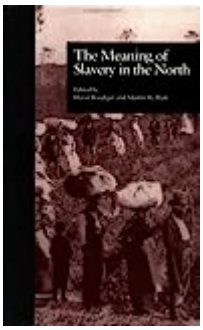

David Roediger, Martin H. Blatt, eds. *The Meaning of Slavery in the North.* New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998. xxiv + 192 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-2345-7.

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Capitalism and Antislavery Revisited

This collection of essays emerged out of papers delivered at the twelfth Lowell Conference on Industrial History, "The Meaning of Slavery in the North," held June 3-5, 1993. Published five years later, it may thus raise a few questions of timeliness in a fast-moving field (a problem unrelieved by the tardiness of this review). Much of the scholarship here represents existing work represented in digest form. Lengthier versions of essays by authors such Alexander Saxton and John McKivigan have appeared elsewhere, for example.[1] Yet the essays live up to the collectionÃs mandate to "stimulate further and more comprehensive treatment of the multiple meanings of slavery in the antebellum North" (iv, xxiv). While the collection occasionally misfires, it poses interesting problems which refocus our attention to anstislavery in salutary ways.

The collection is divided into two sections, the first of which is more closely concerned with economic issues. Ronald Bailey's opening essay on the economic impact of the slave economy on industrialization in New England sets the tone for this half of the volume. Bailey coins the term "slave(ry) trade" to refer not simply to the trade in slaves, but to an entire economy built directly or tangentially around slave labor and its produce. A useful shorthand which reminds us of the complex economic linkages wrought by slaveholding, the phrase goes far to describe the relationships between those he studies. New England textile mill owners and planter interests in the South and the Carribean maintained a steady commerce of raw goods and finished supplies. As Bailey demonstrates, the interests of these groups was sometimes so close that the distinction between them broke down; individuals or families could become industrial capitalists as well as plantation owners. The examples Bailey cites of economic relationships between New England merchants and Carribean plantation owners personalize the economic relationship between northern industry and the plantation considerably.

They do not arouse much dissent. We know that New Englanders traded extensively with the slave regimes of the Southern States and the Caribbean. Rum, sugar, tobacco, cotton – all passed through the hands of northern traders, who sent back guns, candles, shackles, and other finished goods. While Bailey's case studies pro-

vide rich anecdotal evidence of the connections between industrial capitalism and the slave(ry) trade, one might wonder how representative these instances were of the economy as a whole. A closer examination of structural linkages between the two economies might bolster the argument. In the end, Bailey's central arguments are not as startling as he himself seems to believe. His claim that "the Atlantic economy was dependent on the slave trade and slave labor from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century" easily recalls Eric Williams, though Bailey never makes a case specific enough to be challenged, as Williams's was. While a broader public could surely benefit from the truths Bailey would have us tell about the relationship between Northern capital and the plantation complex, most who study the field have been long converted.

Whereas Bailey introduces many of the concepts at work – the idea of the slave(ry) trade, and the close personal connections between manufacturer and planter – Myron Stachiw uses one manifestation of these concepts, the production of so-called "negro cloth," to begin exploring some of the complex ideological questions arising from the relationship between Northern capital and the plantation complex. In an essay which nicely frames the issue, Stachiw highlights the central paradox: on the one hand, those who made cloth for slaves lived in a market society increasingly able to consider the slave labor system of the plantation backward and sinful; on the other, they relied deeply on the market created by that labor system (which I would venture to describe as "precapitalist" in many respects) for their own livelihood. As Melville put it, "the producer is as much dependent upon the consumer as the consumer is upon the producer" (quoted 34). What actually impelled such capitalists into the abolitionist camp? Or, conversely, what kept them from it?

Stachiw tries to explain how those such as Rowland Gibson Hazard, a Rhode Island manufacturer of negro cloth, could have found it consistent to support abolitionist principles while also producing products which directly implicated them in the slave(ry) trade (to use Bailey's phrase). Stachiw thus engages the deep literature on abolitionism, capitalism, and ideology of scholars such as Thomas Haskell. Following Haskell, Stachiw contends that somehow such people were able to experience a shift in their moral values without fundamentally reassessing the consequences of their own economic activities. As a result, they could embrace antislavery sentiments, but not sufficiently to cease all economic participation in the slave(ry) trade, and not sufficiently to become ardent abolitionists. "Why," Stachiw asks, "didn't they expand their perceptions of moral principles to encompass the full consequences of their actions?" (41). Their opposition to abolitionism, he explains, drew less from their moral stand against it than from their opposition to what they saw as the threat to their status as local elites represented by upstart immediatists. Stachiw agrees with Leonard Richards that many northern capitalists rejected abolitionism because it threatened their status as social elites. This hypothesis raises some serious questions about abolitionist tactics. If opposition to abolitionists derived from non-moral factors, perhaps radicals such as Garrison would have been better taking a more reasoned stand which could have attracted the alliance of those such as the Hazards? On the other hand, since the Hazards never completely relinquished their economic support of slavery, perhaps their moderate brand of abolitionism may have been of such marginal value in ending slavery that their support was not worth cultivating, especially if it involved the co-optation of their stridency and sense of moral purpose.

This question preoccupies Thomas O'Connor in the next essay. O'Connor, too, says that industrialists rejected radical abolitionism not for its antislavery, but because its "aggressive methods destroyed civil discussion and removed the basis for rational planning" (46). Industrialists' antislavery activity took the form of more moderate stands, such as opposition to the expansion of slavery. By claiming that "the mill owners were increasingly concerned that the expansion of slavery would endanger the future freedom of the Western lands" (47), O'Connor follows the logic of those such as Eric Foner, who focus on the ways a broad coalition of Northern interests was created by avoiding the conflicted issues of racial equality and slavery's sinfulness, and instead displacing them on the less troublesome question of slavery's expansion.

In this view, the cement which held antislavery together was not a moral outrage born of evangelical fervor. Instead, we may conclude, consensus on the political notions which served the bourgeois revolution "namely, the sanctity of property rights and the means of securing profits" came to exercise a kind of hegemonic power: universalism came to constitute an end in itself. Industrialists could identify in antislavery not their immediate interests, or even the rules which ran the game they were playing, but something much more fundamental – something probably most closely akin to civil religion. They could thus contribute to moderate antislavery without endorsing any of the ideas which lent immediatism its moral radicalism. Writes O'Connor: "Still avoiding the

biblical argument, the industrialists acted on the rational and essentially pragmatic assumption that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was bad for the future of the nation and bad for the free economic system upon which the vision of that future was based" (48).

O'Connor's argument suggests that bourgeois capital seems to have fostered not so much the moral order which produced immediatism as it did Habermas's rational public sphere, dominated by Enlightenment liberalism's commitment to universalism, the level playing field, and inalienable rights.[2] O'Connor's essay comports fairly easily with understandings of antislavery in Britain, which stress a concern for rationalizing politics as well as the economy, and asserting the sanctity of a labor system well-suited for industrial production.

Larry K. Menna balances the preceding essays by leaving the North to explore a chapter in the long-studied story of slavery's affinity with capitalism. Menna looks at the South's apostles of development, the planter elites who comprised the leadership of the Whig Party leadership in the South, and their difficulties. According to Menna, factors militated against economic expansion and diversification in the South, both related to the region's reliance on unfree labor. Planters' fears of slave disorder made them hesitate to contemplate industrial enterprises which required relatively autonomous work regimes for the enslaved. Additionally, non-slaveholding whites feared the labor competition the enslaved would pose in an expanded industrial economy.

Southern Whigs thus had to sanction a national party ideology of economic development which stood at odds with their need to appeal to their non-elite constituencies, and thus maintain their hegemony as elites. In answer they played to another concern pervasive throughout the white South: fear of increasing dependence on northern credit and produce. Southern Whigs claimed that northern economic expansion would fuel the growth of the South's economy which, were that prosperity directed toward economic diversification, would in turn render the region less dependent on the North. All would benefit in this, and the benefits would compensate for the threats to slavery posed by expansion. But as slavery came under increasing fire, Menna says, southern politicians found it hard to sell any platform which seemed to threaten slavery, as did the more capitalistic labor relations entailed in non-plantation labor. As the white South's protection of slavery intensified, any challenge to the stability of slave society "even those which also promised benefits" became increasingly unthinkable. The Whigs thus lost their platform, and ultimately their party.

Paradoxically, planters' very success in inculcating the value of slavery among white Southerners seems to have prevented the mass from embracing the Whigs' own platform. The more Southern Whigs pressed for economic reform, Menna suggests, the more white non-elites saw them threatening the social order. Yet this was an order which elites themselves had sought to imbue in southern society for their own interests: the marriage of caste and class, and a social order built on paternalism.

Menna's formulation also suggests that nothing inherent in capitalism itself precluded the development of the South; rather, it was the political and social implications of development –combined with the deeply polarized national discourse on slavery –which obviated the possibility of industrial expansion in the South. Menna contributes to the volume's discussion of the larger relationship between capitalism and slavery by highlighting the internal inconsistencies wrought by the values of bourgeois capital in a slave society. As represented in southern Whiggery, development and diversification contrasted with a social order built to control an unfree labor population, maintain planters' class hegemony, and combat an emerging discourse of antislavery in national debate. While Whig elites correctly understood the need to diversify and develop or risk deepening dependence on the industrial North, they lacked a political structure which would permit them to do this.

The essays in the second section of the volume are united by their desire to demonstrate "that the notion of African racial inferiority generated by slavery was not a sectional prejudice, but a national consensus of the dominant European culture" (iii). Straying from issues strictly related to political economy into the realm of the social and cultural, these essays explore the role of the churches, white women, and blackface minstrelsy in the northern discourse on slavery. The essays in the first half of the volume speak to the ways bourgeois capitalism created a world which could foster antislavery values of progress, efficiency, and liberalism; yet they also stress the deep mutual dependence of northern and southern economies which countered the antislavery commitment of northern industrialists. The essays in the second half of the volume encounter the realm of the cultural, exploring obstacles which help explain northern society's abolitionist reticence.

John McKivigan's essay explores the paradox of an abolitionist movement based in evangelical moralism

which yet failed to convert most northern churches to antislavery. McKivigan argues that the churches' institutional intransigence owed to three factors: the vulnerability of an antebellum church enjoying a new and delicate period of strength and prestige, diversity in doctrine and makeup, and a historical tolerance of slavery. These resulted in an array of barriers to conversion, most of them indirectly related to slavery as a moral issue: conservative rejections of evangelicalism, theologies which accepted imperfection within institutions, disinclinations to social activism, the limitations of ecclesiastical structure, inherent institutional conservativism, and southern influence.

These all suggest the fragility of abolitionisms' linkage with religion. Echoing David Brion Davis, McKivigan's essay suggests that Christianity was not naturally or unequivocally compatible with antislavery, but had to be forged through careful ideological work. The wonder is not so much that the churches failed to convert, but that they did at all. Radical abolitionism – as opposed to the general category of antislavery sentiment – appears not as the inevitable result of market society in the North, but as its anomalous concomitant.

Carolyn Williams takes a somewhat less nuanced view of the ideological sources of abolitionism in her essay on the personal religious trajectories of four abolitionists women: Lucretia Mott, Lydia Maria Child, Maria Weston Chapman, and Mary Grew. Arguing that a background in "religious liberalism" united these women in abolitionism and feminism, Williams examines the ideological underpinnings of these reformers' activism in the dissenting traditions and a world-focused arminianism. Reconsidering the familiar story of the birth of the women's movement in antislavery, she locates these women in their efforts to act publicly yet remain within their proper gender roles as moral guardians and domestic nurturers.

One wonders about the exact role of religious belief in Williams' analysis. As McKivigan's preceding essay notes, Unitarianism and Quakerism could as easily lead away from the immediatists' radical activism as towards it. True, "the Unitarian concept of individual moral responsibility to the wider community provided an important basis of nineteenth-century reform" (100). Yet many Unitarians failed to become ardent abolitionists. And while many non-Unitarians also embraced such a view of moral responsibility, some did and some did not become abolitionists. While Williams argues only that religious liberalism contributed to these women's abolitionism, liberal religious upbringings were neither necessary nor sufficient to define women abolitionists. Her claim does not offer much unless taken further, but doing that threatens to throw her argument into tautology: one of the things which defines the religious traditions considered here as liberal, one suspects, was their endorsement of antislavery. Still, in noting these women's important role in divorcing "Christianity" from "the church," Williams contributes much. Echoing McKivigan's concern with the gulf between idea and institution, she highlights the fragility of radical abolitionist belief, challenging us to account for its novelty in a largely hostile world.

That women and notions of women's gender roles played important roles in this process is reinforced by Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven's provocative essay on the activities of women in the abolitionist movement. Shying away from the prominent figures Williams examines, Van Broekhoven concerns herself with levels of activity rarely considered in studies of abolitionism. The crux of the argument is that most women's participation in abolitionist activities occurred at levels rarely considered political (in their day or ours), yet which when reconsidered greatly expand their significance in antislavery politics. Though women took leading roles in petitioning, they also figured prominently in organizing and producing for antislavery fairs. In this regard, Van Broekhoven discusses non-conventional forms of literature produced by women abolitionists. Male abolitionists dominated opportunities to produce what is commonly considered antislavery literature, defining newspaper editing, pamphleteering, and public speaking as masculine realms of the public and the political. This left women to fill heretofore ignored literary niches, such as creating mottos, jingles, poems, children's primers, banners, songs, and even the embroidered pincushions sold at antislavery fairs. Women's participation was thus confined by and reflected contemporary gender definitions.

By focusing on the large numbers of women engaged in such production, Van Broekhoven expands considerably the number of women involved in "apolitical" antislavery activities within their domestic sphere. Yet she also suggests that such activities may have been far more political than contemporaries or modern historians have thought. Women's antislavery organizing and networking "eroded the fuzzy boundaries between the moral and domestic responsibilities nominally assumed of women on the one hand and the public and political duties assumed to be the right and responsibility of male citizens" (147). The argument that these activities brought women into the realm of the political contin-

ues an ongoing challenge to the utility of applying the separate spheres model to women's reform activity, and suggests that some more complex model – such as Karen V. Hansen's idea of an intermediate "social sphere" [3] – ought to replace it. In considering their production of antislavery literature and fair produce, Van Broekhoven finds women operating in the new market economy in ways which went beyond mere production: "In organizing their broad appeal, abolitionist women were in fact acting much as their bothers, fathers, and husbands did in their daily merchandising of their skills and goods" (140).

Alexander Saxton's essay on blackface minstrelsy adds a welcome dose of class politics to the collection. Saxton begins by identifying four types of vernacular humor figures: the New England Yankee, the frontiersman, the urban workingman, and the blackface minstrel. These figures struck "out angrily against the hegemony of the old elites" of the northeast (162). They also upheld Jacksonian democracy's key racialist tenets: white supremacy, domination of people of color in the West, herrenvolk democracy, and the sanctity of plantation slavery. The minstrel show was above all concerned with "romanticizing and justifying slavery" by providing premarket images of child-like Sambos cared for by benevolent white patrons (164). Yet as the sectional crisis disrupted party alignments, Free Soilers and then Republicans cut deeply into the Democratic Party's western constituency with liberal offers of homesteads and rhetoric laced with labor sympathy. The white supremacist component of the Free Soil message promised white settlers that the new lands would be kept free of the competition of hated blacks. The new party appropriated Jacksonian Democracy's white supremacy only to align it against the plantation regime. Blackface minstrelsy adapted by splitting along party lines, but in both cases it retained – Saxton might say infused – the parties with a healthy dose of white supremacy.

Saxton's minstrelsy faltered in its critique of deference politics only when dealing with the plantation South. In presenting the plantation myth which upheld slavery, minstrelsy fictively invoked the paternalistic social relations giving way to liberalism's rampant individualism, competitiveness, and anonymity. Even when marshaled against the plantation regime, it nonetheless retained and fostered the pervasive racism of antebellum America. The point is also apparent in Van Broekhoven's essay. Her argument suggests a genial relationship between capitalism and antislavery, devoid of the conundrums posed by other authors in the collection. Yet her evidence suggests a more complex connection characterized by disturbingly ambivalent racial messages. For example, among the jingles concocted by abolitionist women was one which countered charges that abolitionists sought the unthinkable – sexual integration of blacks and whites. It responded through the common claim that the greatest "amalgamationists" were the planters who raped their female slaves and bred mulattoes. The jingle – "by immediate emancipation/ We hope to stop amalgamation" (quoted 131) – addressed such concerns, but only by endorsing its underlying racist premise. Such unwitting concessions to racialism suggest the limits even of abolition itself – limits which, as McKivigan and Saxton point out, came to horrific fruition after the Civil War, when northern support for racial democracy retreated before sectional reconciliation and southern intransigence.

The collection as a whole illustrates the extremely complex and ambivalent relationship between the bourgeois capitalism of the North and antislavery sentiment. That bourgeois capitalism posed grave contradictions for the slave regime has long been clear; Larry Menna's essay on the Southern Whigs highlights the point. More novel is Myron Stachiw's contribution, which illuminates the dependence of bourgeois capital on the markets created by the "pre-market" labor relations of slavery. Stachiw poses the central problem: those with a stake in the slave(ry) trade faced competing interests. On one hand, the values attending the emergence of bourgeois capitalism helped propagate a view of slavery as sinful, backwards, barbaric, and antidemocratic. On the other, northern capitalists' profits depended on commerce with the plantation regime, and hence on upholding slavery's basic legitimacy. One can easily understand economic interest taking precedence over vague principle. It is much harder to understand how principles –especially those which might threaten economic well-being – could come to exert influence sufficient to turn a region against slavery and precipitate Civil War. How was it that the world created by bourgeois capitalism could make slavery a crime, especially given that slavery complemented rather than undermined much of what bourgeois capital was about?

O'Connor and Saxton show us how moderate antislavers were able to do just this by latching on to the expansion of slavery as the decisive issue. By arguing that the expansion of slavery threatened liberty, liberalism, and livelihood, they found an issue which could mesh principle with interest. The expansion issue could touch the principles of capital, directly address the interests of the mass of Northerners, and theoretically ap-

peal even to non-slaveholding whites in the South. Yet, as essays by McKivigan, Williams, and Van Broekhoven suggest, the coalition which resulted and the ideology held it together was extremely fragile. A myriad of factors disrupted its formation: family and personal ties, institutional conservativism, theological tradition, and of course economic interest all imperiled antislaveryÃs momentum. As O'Connor suggests, even the very bourgeois society which permitted the possibility of radical abolitionism also produced values which made immediatism anathema.

The collection does raise some questions. For example, the authors are probably correct in locating antislavery sentiment among those in the forefront of the industrial economy, and in suggesting the fragility of radical abolitionism. Where, then, did radical abolitionism come from? What exactly was its relationship with the expanding market economy? Also, Bailey, Stachiw, and O'Connor all use family connections as alternatives to explain the lukewarm antislavery of industrialists whose capitalism, it seems presumed, might have made them more ardent. Yet just as "hypocrisy" ultimately does little to explain half-hearted industrialist antislavers, invocations of family and social connection cannot either – at least not without further analysis. It seems to me that these are not explainers so much as things to be explained. Did family and personal relationships really subvert the imperatives of the market economy? If so, how, and why? If the moral order which produced abolitionism somehow derived from an expanding bourgeois market society, how strong could that order have been if family and personal ties could have so easily superceded its moral imperatives? Rather than treat these as independent variables, what would it look like to integrate family and personal connections into the market society which contextualizes these essays? Perhaps family and social connections ought to be considered a part of the moral imperatives of the new economic order rather than distinct from them. In such a view, family and personal ties to the South might appear as yet another set of competing ideological sub-factors produced by market society in the North – along with a new evangelicalism, and a commitment to economic and political liberalism – which helped determine the region's stance towards slavery. Or perhaps they would appear as atavistic holdovers from a pre-bourgeois social order which economic elites of all stripes retained.

Finally, while the collection does a solid job of exploring the meaning of antislavery in the North, it falters in exploring the meaning of slavery in the North in terms of the experiences of the enslaved. It is strange, given the title, that none of the essays here are dedicated to exploring the ways antislavery activists actually viewed slavery. And despite the editors' homages to the issue of race, the issue is (with the exception of Saxton's essay) conspicuously absent in the collection as a central category. Is it possible to understand the meaning of slavery in the North without understanding the meaning of race? The startling absence of African-American voices in the collection is particularly troubling here. Through the mechanisms of an expanding urban market society, America in the 1830s steadily became a nation defined by its racial nationalism. In light of this, what did the response of African Americans mean? What did their critiques impart to the American discourses of slavery and race? What did the relative successes and failures of their strategies for relief from their plights say about their society? Their radical commitment to converting the white nation into a biracial democracy may suggest America's potential to realize its best vision of itself. On the other hand, the limits of their power in a hostile world may temper our optimism considerably. Despite the destruction of slavery, the failure of the postwar racial settlement to achieve the biracial democracy envisioned by black activists suggests underlying limitations to democratic values which haunt us still.

Notes

[1]. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London and New York: Verso, 1990); John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: The Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[2]. Juergen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

[3]. Karen V. Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

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