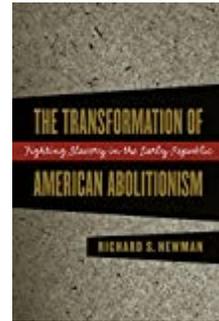




Richard S. Newman. *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 256 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4998-9; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2671-3.



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Published on H-SHEAR (October, 2002)

The Changing Character of Abolitionism in the New Nation

The Changing Character of Abolitionism in the New Nation

Richard Newman's new book provides a fresh analysis of the nature and development of abolitionism from the late eighteenth century through the 1830s. He pays particularly close attention to the personnel, ideology, and tactics of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MASS), organizations that he considers to have been exemplars, respectively, of "first-wave" and "second-wave" abolitionism in the early republic. Newman convincingly argues that the elite white men of the PAS shared a "late-eighteenth-century republican worldview" that in turn shaped their commitment to a "rational, enlightened, and highly dispassionate" variety of antislavery reform. These "first-wave abolitionists" believed that submitting respectfully worded legislative petitions and filing mildly antislavery legal suits would eventually persuade fellow politicians, jurists, and other men of standing to embrace the virtues of gradual emancipation. Frustrated by the growth of slavery, the intensification of racial prejudice, and the unwillingness of the PAS to modify its tactics,

the black and white men and women who formed the integrated ranks of later abolitionist organizations like the MASS embraced a more egalitarian and democratic ethos that gave shape to a highly "emotional" and "romantic" type of reform activity. These "second-wave abolitionists" emphasized the moral evils of both slavery and racial discrimination, employing "mass action strategies" that included lecturing, pamphleteering, newspaper publishing, and mass petitioning, with the ultimate aim of transforming public opinion to such a degree that otherwise complacent judges and politicians would be pressured to put an immediate end to the institution of slavery (p. 6).

If the more general outlines of this analysis seem familiar, there are a number of valuable and original features to Newman's book. First, Newman gives "first-wave," gradualist abolitionism the attention and even respect that it deserves. In Newman's book, as in David Brion Davis's seminal essay of forty years ago, the "gradualism" that characterizes both the ideology and tactics of the PAS is not an anachronistic, neo-abolitionist epithet, but a useful, explanatory term that illuminates the larger ideological constraints within which most late-

eighteenth and early-nineteenth century reformers operated.[1] For a generation of scholars who came of age during the civil rights movement, nothing could be worse, to quote Martin Luther King, Jr., than “the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.” This perspective helps explain why so few historians have bothered to write about early abolitionists, and why those who have chosen to do so have sometimes criticized their seemingly cautious approach.[2] Newman, by contrast, lavishes great attention upon early abolitionists, and shows how the PAS in particular managed to score a number of antislavery victories, while simultaneously operating, both ideologically and tactically, within a deferential, republican, political universe.

Second, Newman fills a gaping hole in the historical literature by providing us with a narrative of antislavery activities between the federal prohibition on slave imports in 1808 and the rise of Garrisonian abolition in the 1830s, a relatively “neglected period” in the historiography.[3] Newman reminds us of the legal advocacy and legislative petitioning of the PAS and the American Convention of Abolition Societies, the antislavery efforts of African Americans, and even the somewhat ambiguous activities of the American Colonization Society, which, while it sought the removal of free blacks from the United States, also served as a temporary antislavery training ground for many future radical abolitionists such as Amos Phelps, Samuel May, and even William Lloyd Garrison himself.

Finally, while Newman, like other historians, demonstrates that the “transformation” of American abolitionism was inseparable from broader developments, such as the market revolution, religious revivalism, the emergence of print culture, and democratization, he focuses most of his attention on the ways in which second-wave abolitionism owed its birth to the emergence of a vibrant, democratic, public sphere increasingly subject to the pressures of formerly marginalized groups, such as African Americans and women.[4] On the whole, he dedicates more space to the role of African Americans as agents in this process of transformation, arguing, though not always convincingly, that it was their own passionate denunciations of the immorality and injustice of slavery and race prejudice that pushed abolitionism in a more radical direction.

The first three chapters of Newman’s book deal with the personnel, ideology, and tactics of the most vibrant first-wave abolitionist organization: the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. While other scholars have noted the

predominance of Quakers in the PAS, Newman is clearly more interested in how their socio-economic status, more than their religious sensibilities, shaped their abolitionism.[5] For Newman, what is essential is that the PAS was comprised of prominent members of the economic, political, and legal elite who embraced a widely shared set of conservative, eighteenth-century, republican political values. While a greater attention to the Quaker and Federalist character of the PAS would have enriched the analysis, Newman’s more general characterization still rings true: abolitionism, it was believed, was to be a legalistic affair, best promoted by gentlemen whose deference to union, comity, and the rule of law would gradually win the day.

Such an orientation, Newman argues, led to a “distinctively conservative style of activism,” but one that nevertheless produced some significant antislavery results (p. 16). At the state level, for example, the PAS lobbied and litigated to promote the enforcement of the Pennsylvania Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 (guaranteeing eventual freedom, upon reaching adulthood, to those slaves born after passage of the law), but they avoided filing what they considered to be reckless lawsuits against the more general right of masters to hold slave property. In retrospect, such a strategy may seem excessively cautious, but Newman points out this approach ultimately succeeded in weakening the obstructionist resolve of masters and thus prevented Northern legislative gradual emancipation laws from becoming dead letters. Newman deserves much credit for highlighting the remarkably steady and vigilant legal work of the PAS, an activity that has not been fully appreciated by historians. He provides evidence to show that the lawyers who made up the PAS defended hundreds, if not thousands, of African Americans before the Pennsylvania courts during the early republic and in the process helped establish a relatively more friendly legal climate for African Americans in the state.

But, as Newman points out, if PAS legal advocacy on behalf of African Americans at the state level was invaluable, their cautious political strategy bore little fruit in the federal arena. Well into the 1820s, the “deferential petitioners” of the PAS eschewed moral, higher-law arguments that might have alienated slaveholders and asked nothing of Congress that it did not presently have the recognizable constitutional power to authorize (p. 39). Always adopting the politest of language, they limited their appeals to closing loopholes in the federal ban on slave importations, to preventing the expansion of slavery in the territories, and to ending slavery and the slave trade

in Washington, D.C. It is not surprising given the continued growth of both slavery and racial prejudice as well as the unwillingness of Congress to entertain most of their petitions, that dissidents would emerge who called for an alternative abolitionist approach. It is hard not to agree with Newman that the PAS, given the changing context, was becoming increasingly conservative, if not downright obstructionist, in its failure to heed newer, more radical, abolitionist voices.

In the middle two chapters of his book, Newman credits African Americans with devising the new arguments that, by the end of the 1820s, would serve as the moral and political foundations of second-wave abolitionism. Newman does a fine job of showing that as early as the late eighteenth century, African Americans, operating through their churches, mutual aid societies, and schools, crafted sermons, petitions, and pamphlets that delivered a more uncompromising, passionate, moral condemnation, not only of slavery, but of racial prejudice as well. The urgency and intensity of their arguments, he points out, grew in response to the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816, an organization ostensibly committed to the voluntary removal of the free black population from the United States, but one that also gathered together a remarkably diverse body of supporters: from Southerners who hoped to rid the region of free blacks, and thus render the system of slavery more secure, to Northerners who saw it as a vehicle for eliminating both blacks and slavery from the republic. Newman provides evidence to suggest that while most members of the PAS remained studiously neutral towards the ACS for fear of alienating some of its respectable supporters, African Americans immediately and universally condemned what they considered to be the racial prejudice that lay at the heart of the colonization movement. Most significantly, African Americans directly challenged the denigrating, white colonizationist premise that it was the dangerous prospect of freed blacks, rather than the intractable opposition of corrupt slaveholders, that constituted the greatest obstacle to emancipation and democracy. At mass gatherings, in printed circulars, and later in their own independent newspapers, it was African Americans who provided disaffected white abolitionists, and even some receptive Northern colonizationists, with an animating, radical vision of a truly interracial democracy that brooked no compromise with morally corrupt politicians and slaveholders.

Newman's decision to place the African-American critique of colonizationist racism at the literal core of

his book is clearly intended to highlight the centrality of black actors and arguments to the simultaneous rise of second-wave abolitionism and the decline of both the ACS and the PAS. His focus on how they helped contribute to a paradigm shift in abolitionist thinking on race constitutes a real contribution to the historiography. But in constructing his narrative, Newman glosses over the limited, but significant, diversity of black opinion regarding colonization. In Newman's account, for example, Philadelphia's free African-American elite appear as articulate critics of the ACS, with no mention that leaders such as James Forten and Richard Allen had initially expressed a tepid support for the white organization, perhaps in part because it was so heavily laden with respectable gentlemen. Their support disintegrated only when it became clear that the vast majority of African Americans were opposed to the ACS.^[6] Here, it seems, Newman missed an opportunity to apply his larger argument regarding the tension between respectability and radicalism to the specific case of black abolitionism. Perhaps it was not just respectable white abolitionists who ultimately responded to more radical pressures from below, but elite black abolitionists as well.

Newman also seems to have passed up another opportunity to develop his argument. During his discussion of African American opposition to colonization, he never mentions that perhaps as many as ten thousand free blacks emigrated to Haiti in the 1820s, no doubt because they were inspired by the black republican experiment on the island and also because they feared that white prejudice would always serve as an obstacle to black progress in the United States. Again, the inclusion of this important story would not have necessarily detracted from Newman's larger argument. African Americans could clearly support black-led colonization efforts to Haiti while simultaneously condemning white-led colonization efforts to Africa. These are more than mere details. They are important nuances that have often been lost because historians have tended to recapitulate the Garrisonian claim that radical abolitionism was entirely incompatible with colonizationism. Clearly, such political maneuvering on the part of Garrison masked a more complex reality.

In his effort to highlight the contributions of African Americans to the development of second-wave abolitionism, Newman perhaps overemphasizes the sheer transformative power of their appeals upon the hearts of emerging white radical abolitionists. Because Newman seems more interested in the broader social developments that shaped second-wave abolitionism, a num-

ber of important, specific, political controversies that contributed to the transformation of abolitionism recede from view. While young white abolitionists like Garrison were no doubt energized by black critiques of the ACS, there were a number of political events that may have convinced other young abolitionist dissidents to bolt from the ACS and the PAS as well. In the mid- to late-1820s many Northern state legislatures submitted resolutions asking that Congress pass an ambitious program of federally sponsored emancipation and colonization, but these were successfully repudiated by Southern legislators. Later, in the aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion, a minority of politicians in Virginia endorsed passing legislation that coupled emancipation with colonization but these efforts too were soundly repudiated. In short, it was not simply the racism implicit in colonization that budding, radical abolitionists might have found so odious. It was also the fact that attempts to promote colonization were repeatedly defeated by Southern politicians who increasingly viewed even the mildest colonization proposals as the slippery slope to economic and social upheaval.

If Newman does not give us a particularly detailed sense of the political debates of the 1820s that helped shape the transformation of abolitionism, he nevertheless illuminates the broader cultural, economic, and political developments out of which second-wave abolitionism emerged. Newman demonstrates important affinities between second-wave abolitionism and the new evangelical revivalism, economic salesmanship, and democratic organizing of the 1820s and 1830s. Radical abolitionists bore some striking similarities to the proselytizing evangelists, traveling salesmen, and political entrepreneurs of the period. They shared with them a zeal, boldness, and audacity that set them apart from their more staid, cautious, and respectable predecessors.

Newman's final two chapters examine the personnel, ideology, and tactics of second-wave abolitionism, although, as with the prior analysis of the PAS, his primary focus seems to be on the last of these three. He begins by reminding us that if the PAS was comprised of elite white men, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and other second-wave abolitionist organizations included non-elite men and women, both white and black. If first-wave abolitionists were ideologically "deferential" and "republican," second-wave abolitionists were assertive and "democratic" (p. 131). Here too, Newman shows how the makeup and ideology of second-wave abolitionist organizations like the MASS had a profound effect on shaping the "mass action" strategies and tactics that they would employ to achieve their goal of immedi-

ate abolition. If older abolitionists preferred a rationalist and legalistic strategy, newer abolitionists did not shrink from pursuing a more passionate and moral approach. While first-wave reformers gave due deference to the rights of property and the integrity of the nation, second-wave radicals privileged the slave's claim to freedom and preferred justice to union. While older abolitionists targeted fellow jurists and politicians to help them achieve their aims, the new guard sought to transform the public at large, hoping that "the people" might pressure indifferent politicians to action. If the PAS crafted legalistic and polite antislavery petitions containing a small number of respectable signatures, the MASS drafted moral and confrontational memorials that were circulated and signed by thousands of abolitionists. Newman does a good job of showing how the "agency system" constituted an integral part of their overall strategy. The traveling agents who were at the core of the system did far more than give lectures that condemned slavery and race prejudice in unequivocal terms. They also tapped the energy of women and blacks, established auxiliaries, circulated petitions, published heart-wrenching slave narratives, sold newspaper subscriptions, and in some cases even convinced more mainstream newspaper editors to publish sympathetic accounts of abolitionist activities.

Newman's *The Transformation of American Abolitionism* offers one of the richest accounts of early abolitionist tactics; it provides a narrative of abolitionist activities—both white and black—during the neglected period of antislavery between 1808-1831; and it shows how first- and second-wave abolitionists were both critical, yet very much a part of the larger cultural, political, and economic environment in which they operated. There is no other book that so systematically and carefully demonstrates the continuous, yet evolving efforts of abolitionists from the late-eighteenth century through the 1830s.

Notes

[1]. David Brion Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49 (September 1962), pp. 209-20.

[2]. Speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963. Some of the key works on early abolitionism include Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Penn-*

sylvania and Its Aftermath (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991). The last is particularly severe in its criticism of the New York Manumission Society; see pp. 81-88.

[3]. The term belongs to Alice Dana Adams, *The Neglected Period of Anti-Slavery in America, 1808-1831* (London: Ginn and Co., 1908).

[4]. Some of the best works on the role of blacks and women in the abolitionist movement are Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford Univer-

sity Press, 1969); and Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[5]. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, pp. 213-54; Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[6]. Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 177-235.

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Citation: Anthony Iaccarino. Review of Newman, Richard S., *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

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