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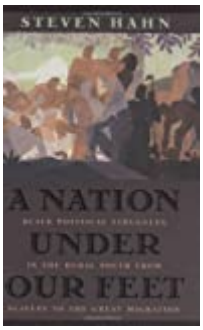

Steven Hahn. *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. viii + 610 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01169-4.

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Grassroots Black Political Action

Steven Hahn has done it again. Exactly twenty years after his groundbreaking work on rural white politics in the post-Civil War South, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, he has published an equally ambitious work looking at black political action from slavery to the early twentieth century.

A Nation Under Our Feet is the kind of book that is necessarily the product of decades. Rich with stories and people, it simultaneously cuts a broad swathe through time and space, offering a new interpretation of African-American involvement in the politics that determined their lives during much of the nineteenth century.

What Hahn does is delineate the political space occupied by blacks, explain how they struggled to expand it, and show how that space was continually contested by whites. Over time, these factors constantly reshaped and redefined the political influence of African Americans. Initially, during slavery, black political space was limited to exercising some control over their own labor, forging communities, both familial and religious, and creating a network of information and literacy.

Hahn proceeds to discuss how the blacks actively exploited the opportunities offered by the Civil War, fleeing to Union lines and enrolling in the Union army and thus making slavery a key issue in the conflict. The postwar period, and the chaos and confusion that it embodied, gave African-Americans the chance to partially define their political future, a chance they eagerly embraced through Freedmen Conventions that "sought to help define the meanings and set the terms of both emancipation and national unification" and the Republican Party (p. 125).

Moving to a discussion of the southern Reconstruction governments, Hahn focuses on the continuity of black political traditions, by emphasizing the importance played by extant black leaders and networks including churches. "Churches … had an unrivaled ability to mobilize community sentiment and action and to unify rural African Americans across district and county lines. To this extent, they were by definition political institutions" (p. 233). While examining the successes of black Reconstruction governments, Hahn also points out the attempts of whites, both within and without the Repub-

lican Party, to limit black access to power and halt their political growth.

One technique used to limit black access to power was the vigilantism of the Ku Klux Klan. Here, Hahn again stresses continuity. Southern politics, he claims, had always been based on violence. "Paramilitary organization had been fundamental to the social and political order of slavery; it remained fundamental to the social and political order of freedom" (p. 266). The Klan, and other white supremacist organizations, presented both an attempt to rein in the growing African-American power and a springboard to aspiring white politicians. While the violence failed to destroy all black political office-holding and was often countered with black paramilitary action, it did begin the process of limiting black political space in the South. The violence and federal intervention led to various state plans to implement redemption and to a growing northern disillusionment with southern politics.

The blacks' response to this curtailment of their political involvement was to investigate alternative political outlets from emigration to biracialism. Hahn's last three chapters offer a reinterpretation of late nineteenth-century movements from the Readjusters to the Garveyists to the Farmers' Alliance. Southern blacks actively explored these organizations as ways to maintain and expand their political control in new and perhaps less contested ways, while simultaneously trying to regain more traditional political power.

This book ultimately is about black agency. It reminds me of traditions in Latin American scholarship. With an interest in subaltern studies, Latin American scholars, such as Steve Stern, Cynthia Radding, and RamÃ³n A. GutiÃ©rrez, have, for the last twenty years at least, looked at the persistence and power of natives under Spanish rule. Like Hahn, they recognize that an unequal power relationship never eliminates the possibility of activism and like Hahn they articulate the presence of the political in the cultural and social.

Hahn sees two ways that people can politicize. The most obvious one is by taking a step that has clear political ramifications. From joining the Union army to voting to running for office, the political aspect of these actions is unambiguous. The other form of politicization is more opaque. This is represented by deeds that are highly personal and not consciously political in intent, but that have "a political resonance" (p. 3). Examples abound in the book: the slave and freedmen's search for literacy, the mass flight to Union lines, the defense of potential lynching victims. While discussing this distinction in his introduction, Hahn could have helped his readers by returning to it periodically during the book–although with nearly five hundred pages of text, his editors may have balked.

A Nation Under Our Feet, truly great in its scope and interpretation, well-deserved the 2003 Pulitzer Prize. Hahn's career deserves close attention from historians and administrators alike. Having spent considerable time on various fellowships and promoting the teaching of history in public schools, he has only written two books himself–both award-winners. Excellence takes time.

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