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The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War

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On the occasion of his famous address commemorating the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, delivered in Concord on August 1, 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson highlighted America's avoidance of slavery's implications. "What if it cost a few unpleasant scenes on the coast of Africa?" he asked, rhetorically, since that was "a great way off." Back home in America, slavery's realities could be avoided, by those in the North, at least, and if "any mention was made of homicide, madness, adultery, and intolerable tortures," Americans would simply "let the church-bells ring louder." So long as the sugar, coffee and tobacco produced by slaves "was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it."⁽¹⁾ The African coast may have been sufficiently distant to be safely ignored; not so the Caribbean, which in many ways became too close for comfort as far as America's slaveholders were concerned and which, in any case, was hardly entirely separate from the United States. As Edward Rugemer emphasizes at the start of his search for the Caribbean roots of America's Civil War, "the United States was never a self-contained entity moved solely by the internal dynamics of American society," but was "firmly embedded in an Anglo-Atlantic world that transcended the political boundaries of nation-states" (p. 5). America's boundaries, indeed, were inherently "permeable," admitting an influx of information, individuals and, increasingly, abolitionist influences along with the commercial traffic that linked the colonies of the British West Indies to the United States. This reinforced a transatlantic perspective originally grounded in the slave trade but, by the mid-1830s, directed

toward the debates over its abolition and the abolition of slavery itself. Any attempt to comprehend the coming of the Civil War, therefore, cannot, although too often does, remove the internal dynamics of abolitionist agitation and political debate within America from their broader transatlantic context; 19th-century Americans could not avoid the implications of abolition in the West Indies and nor, Rugemer reminds us, should we. "White America's problem with black emancipation," he stresses, most definitely "had Caribbean roots" (p. 7).

The evidence presented here makes Rugemer's case forcibly and with sophistication; this is a complicated and quite convoluted story, but one clearly told. Divided into two parts, the first examining the influence of British abolitionism on both the West Indies and the United States between 1804 and 1834, the second exploring the impact of West Indian abolition on America, the work draws mainly, though not exclusively, on both secular and evangelical press coverage of abolitionist agitations, emancipation celebrations and, of course, slave rebellions in order to track the impact of those communication networks by which the "the print culture of the Anglo-Atlantic world" was established and through which the various, and varying, perspectives on emancipation were expressed (p. 36). Here Rugemer distinguishes between the two different modes of communication identified by James Carey, the "transmission" model and the "ritual" model respectively, in his analysis not just of the news and its dissemination across national borders, but the ways in which 19th-century Americans interpreted the information received. With newspapers widely, and cheaply available following the Post Office Act of 1792, the combination of the postal system and the papers it carried constituted an important national and international bond; indeed, in 1833, the very year that Britain finally abolished slavery in her colonies, Associate Justice Joseph Story, later most famous for handing down the decision in the *Amistad* slave-ship rebellion case in 1841, praised the United States' postal service for the efficacy with which it "brings the most distant places and persons" in contact with each other; and thus softens the anxieties, increases the enjoyments, and cheers the solitude of millions of hearts. (2)

In 1833, the newspapers carried through the mails, as Rugemer shows, hardly softened any anxieties on the part of America's slaveholders, but certainly did cheer the solitude of abolitionist hearts. This is the point of his chosen sources; the newspapers of the period constituted, Rugemer proposes, ritual communication, through which, in Carey's description, "nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed"; in this case, Rugemer argues, the newspapers of the period "helped to form the opposed communities in the American struggle over slavery". (3) These "imagined communities", to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, were hardly national, however; they not only "transcended political boundaries" but were both constructed by and operated within an Anglo-Atlantic context, drawing together the slaveholders of the West Indies with those of the South, New England's abolitionists with "their British counterparts" (p. 38). Although newspapers were distinctly partisan organs in the 19th-century United States, their efficacy as tools of party was limited by the need to cross constituencies: a slaveholding South and a North that, increasingly, distanced itself from slavery even if it was hardly radically abolitionist in outlook. As a result, it was in the press that some of the most vigorous debates over slavery were aired and via the press that "the place of slavery in the national life" was most "consistently challenged" (p. 41).

The broader context of much of the newspaper coverage of slavery derived, Rugemer explains, from the Saint-Domingue uprising of 1791 and the establishment, in 1804, of Haiti; specifically the interpretation of this event in the work of Bryan Edwards, whose *Historical Survey of the French Colony of St. Domingo* (1797) "became the standard proslavery interpretation of the Haitian Revolution throughout the antebellum period" (p. 43). Edwards's identification of abolitionist agitation, in particular the activities of the French abolitionist society, the *Amis des Noirs*, as the main source of the rebellion reinforced the fears of American and British slaveholders alike that abolitionists were dangerous insurgents, contra the abolitionist position which argued "that insurrections arose from the injustice and brutality of slavery and that rebellions were punishments for the sin of slaveholding" (p. 44). Complicating, and informing the reactions of both the slaves themselves and the white communities to the Haitian Revolution, the later Easter Rebellion in Barbados (1816) and the Demerara rebellion (1823) was the issue of the mission to the slaves, and the perceived reinforcement of the abolitionist message via Evangelical missionaries (p. 53). Within the United States, therefore, by the 1820s, slaveholders were not only familiar with the Edwards thesis but were

persuaded by the examples of other slave uprisings, including that in Charleston in 1822, that there was a causal link between abolitionist agitation and slave rebellion. Their resultant concern, Rugemer argues, must be differentiated from 'the general fear of slave insurrection that has characterized the slaveholding mind across time and space', something that many scholars, he charges, focussed as they have been on the American South alone, have 'failed to appreciate.' (pp. 66-7) The growing opposition to abolition in the American South of the 1820s and 1830s was specific to that time, and derived from a space, the West Indies, in which American slaveholders dimly, but with increasing clarity, began to perceive a wall; one with writing on it.

Rugemer pursues the American reaction to the Edwards thesis in part through the writings of South Carolinian Robert Turnbull, whose publications in the *Charleston Mercury* from 1823 onwards revealed the extent to which the fear of slave rebellion constituted 'the emotional root of states rights theory' among elements of the white South (p. 83). At the same time, from close analysis of American newspaper coverage of the West Indian rebellions, Rugemer identifies a more general shift in focus: between the Easter Rebellion in 1816 and the Demerara rebellion seven years later, northern papers had tripled the extent of their coverage of events in the West Indies; some southern publications, by contrast, particularly the *Charleston Mercury*, had gone strangely quiet on the subject, revealing, Rugemer proposes, South Carolina's outlier position in the South as a whole at that point. By the early 1830s, however, with the Nat Turner uprising in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 and, in the same year, a revolt in Jamaica, followed by Britain's abolition of slavery in 1833, what Rugemer terms an expanded 'liberated space' had opened up in the Anglo-Atlantic world, expressed via three crucial developments in 1829: first, the publication of Robert Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto* and David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*; second, the emigration of free African Americans from Ohio to British Canada West; and third the recognition by the British government that free coloureds of St. Lucia and Trinidad were the 'legal equals' of whites. It was within this new 'geography of freedom' that the future conflict over slavery in the United States would be conducted, its battle-lines drawn up, in effect, for the Civil War that came nearly 30 years later (p. 100).

The first part of Rugemer's work makes a strong case for a reassessment, indeed a heightened appreciation of the influences of both slave rebellions and British emancipation in the West Indies on the American debate over emancipation. Of course, the bare bones of the discussion of the impact of, for example, the Saint-Domingue uprising will be familiar to scholars through the work of, among others, David Brion Davis, whose most recent work, *Inhuman Bondage*, emphasizes the importance of the Haitian Revolution which, in the words of Frederick Douglass in 1893, constituted 'the original pioneer emancipator of the nineteenth century', even as the imagery of its horrors as described so graphically by Edwards 'hovered over the antislavery debates like a bloodstained ghost'.⁽⁴⁾ What Rugemer brings to our knowledge of the shock 'waves of fear,' to use Davis's phrase, that emanated from Saint-Domingue is a nuanced and quite specific identification of the reverberations such waves produced throughout the Atlantic world but especially in the United States, and more narrowly in an American South on the cusp of becoming the dominant slave society of that world. By deriving from the destruction of those slave societies that surrounded it both economic gain and, more crucially, the evidence to bolster an anti-abolitionist argument, the South's stance on slavery shifted away from the necessary evil paradigm toward the idea of slavery as, in John C Calhoun's famous phrase, a 'positive good'.

The second section seeks to assess the influences of West Indian emancipation in action, as it were, in part through the consideration of two individuals, William Ellery Channing and Robert Monroe Harrison, and in part via an examination of the First of August celebrations in the North and the ongoing influence of British abolition on the American emancipation debate after 1840. The selection of Channing as a case-study is instructive; he was a, indeed, *the* prominent Unitarian theologian of the period, who, in 1835, was ambivalent about the balance between antislavery, which he generally supported, and abolitionist radicalism, which he rather distrusted. Yet within just under a decade and influenced, Rugemer argues, both by the example of British West Indian emancipation and his earlier personal experiences on St. Croix, Channing's final public address in 1842 revealed his 'conversion' to abolition, a 'now unqualified endorsement of emancipation in the West Indies'. Channing's earlier, more moderate position, as described here, bears

comparison with some of the arguments proposed on the other side of the Atlantic by, notably, William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson; in particular Channing's optimistic belief that the "intelligence, virtue and power" of the South's slaveholders would in time remove the "greatest of moral evils and wrongs" that was slavery (p. 155). Wilberforce's brother-in-law, James Stephen, of course, was never convinced "that the interest of the master were really so involved in the well being of the slave", and Channing gradually came to a similar understanding. (5) His conversion was, as Rugemer stresses, "critical" precisely because Channing was such a well-known moderate; by 1842, his attacks on slavery, his calls for constitutional reform, his urgings for northerners to look beyond the hysteria of Edwards's thesis, and his representation of "British abolition as a lesson for the United States on the safety and blessings of immediate emancipation" both informed and reflected a shift in northern public opinion away from the proslavery argument that, Rugemer argues, became increasingly dismissed as "groundless froth that spewed from the mouth of the slave power" (pp. 178-9).

The loss of moderate support such as Channing's could not but impact on the South, and the positive image of West Indian emancipation was countered by, among others, Robert Monroe Harrison, American consul to Jamaica between 1831 and 1858, whose dispatches "developed a portrait of a disastrous emancipation in Jamaica" (p. 181). Harrison's attempts to construct and sustain a climate of fear in America as far as emancipation was concerned relied on a combination of the terror of slave insurrection leavened with a healthy dose of Anglophobia that proposed not just possible British interference with American property rights in their slaves, but a more diffuse imperial ambition that threatened America's independent existence. Although Rugemer clearly has little patience with Harrison's "dire missives" from Jamaica, he nevertheless shows that these had an impact, informing the views of leading proslavery thinkers such as Calhoun in the development of the arguments in favour of Texan annexation, of expansion generally, as the sole means of ensuring slavery's survival and the nation's stability (p. 204).

By this point, the point at which, Rugemer notes, most Civil War historians start their journey along the road to disunion, the antislavery constituency in the North and its proslavery equivalent in the South were already worlds apart, and this was made nowhere more explicit than in the dramatic growth of the First of August celebrations, commemorating the British parliament's Act of Abolition in the Caribbean. Although originating from the "radical wing of the abolitionist movement," First of August celebrations spread both geographically and ideologically in terms of the constituencies they attracted until, by the eve of the Civil War, they were a "fixture in the summer calendar" (p. 257). Whilst Rugemer is careful to note that the mere celebration of the First of August "does not necessarily signify the first manifestation of abolitionism in that community," it does "indicate a new level of dedication to the movement" and, more crucially, "signals a community decision to identify with transatlantic abolitionism," and to take seriously the lessons it had to offer; the fact that neither slaveholders nor the northern public absorbed such lessons, Rugemer concludes, was, in some measure at least, responsible for the armed conflict that came to America in 1861 (p. 249).

This is a finely-crafted study, and, it must be said, a very beautifully-crafted book, for which the publisher presumably must also take some credit, that delineates an Anglo-Atlantic world in transition, a world, to use the cliché, turned upside down and restructuring itself along both revolutionary and, in the case of the American South, to borrow Manisha Sinha's concept, "counter-revolutionary" lines. (6) Yet, ultimately, although the African-American perspective is implicit in every line of this work, African-American newspapers a critical part of the research base, and noted leaders such as Frederick Douglass central to the interpretation of the Atlantic revolutionary and the American national traditions, this is nevertheless a story of how and why white men fell out. Whether the men in question are behaving badly by contemporary standards, in the case of slaveholders and their spokesmen, or well, in the case of abolitionists, this is a bifurcated Anglo-Atlantic world that is under scrutiny. As a consequence, although Rugemer has uncovered the beating heart of that world very well, some of its extremities are missing, and some of the nuance necessary to our understanding of the abolitionist/antislavery and the antiabolitionist/proslavery positions is, if not wholly absent, slightly marginal to the main narrative.

To take one minor example, the case of Bryan Edwards: in this study, the significance of Edwards's influence is not underestimated, nor should it be; yet the complexities inherent in an individual whom David

Brion Davis (7) described as 'a man of liberal views' who accepted the idea of 'an inter-racial society in a way that Jefferson never could' is here sometimes, and I stress sometimes, rendered as no more than a self-serving apologist for slavery whose 'poisoned pen' not only detailed an anti-abolitionist perspective but underwrote the entire proslavery agenda (p. 177). In some ways, of course, the Edwards thesis did precisely that, and Rugemer's focus is, of course, not on the man, but on the impact of his writings. Still, in the juxtaposition between Edwards's thesis and its target, the abolitionists, the latter come across as rather straightforwardly on the side of the angels; only at one point, and briefly, does Rugemer hint that they, too, might have had a self-serving agenda in his discussion of the 'sanctifying experience' of persecution within the Christian tradition and the 'immortal quality' it bestows upon the persecuted (p. 131). The Caribbean context, too, sometimes pulls Rugemer away from any consideration of internal, to the United States, factors, such as the reaction to northern emancipation which was, after all, an on-going process for much of the earlier period under discussion here. Joanne Pope Melish has, for instance, explored the ways in which New Englanders managed to absolve themselves from the stain of slaveholding in the century prior to the Civil War, but the impact of the Anglo-Atlantic perspective on this process, or vice versa, is absent here.

Similarly, the relationship between the Anglophobia highlighted in the discussion of Robert Monroe Harrison might have been counterbalanced by some consideration of the Anglophilia exhibited by many abolitionists, and indeed by Frederick Douglass himself (detailed in a recent study by Elisa Tamarkin; but it is certainly not grounds for criticism that Rugemer has not looked at a work that was in press at the same time his was).(8) The focus on the print culture of the Anglo-Atlantic world, in short, provides a valuable structure for but also, perhaps, sometimes limits the direction of this carefully-articulated thesis. That is to suggest neither that its conclusions are invalid nor its argument unconvincing; it is a most persuasive work, that repositions the American debates over emancipation where they clearly belong, in a broader Anglo-Atlantic context. When it came to the problem of emancipation, Rugemer has clearly shown that, to paraphrase John Donne, America most certainly was not an island; if the response to that problem was, as Emerson had suggested in 1844, to simply let the church bells ring louder, in the aftermath of abolition in the West Indies neither slaveholders nor their opponents needed to ask for whom those bells tolled.

Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Address delivered in Concord on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies*, August 1, 1844, accessed at: <[Back to \(1\)](#)>
2. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays in Media and Society* (Rev. ed., New York, 2009); Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States, a Preliminary Review of the Constitutional History of the Colonies and States, before the Adoption of the Constitution* (Boston, 1833) vol. 3, p. 1120 <[Back to \(2\)](#)>
3. Carey, *Communication as Culture*, p. 16.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), pp. 158-74; 159-60; and Douglass quoted at p. 158.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. James Stephen quoted in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY, 1975) p. 418.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, pp.185, 195.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago, 2008).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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