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Rethinking Slavery and Freedom (Book Reviews)

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

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REVIEW ESSAY

RETHINKING SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America. By Ira Berlin. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Pp. 497. \$29.95.)

Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War. Edited by Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xvi, 192. \$49.95.)

Through his scholarship and leadership, Ira Berlin has recast the way we conceive of the history of African Americans and their relationship to other Americans. His 1974 book *Slaves Without Masters*, an expansive history of free black people in the antebellum years, chronicles a complex and dynamic history, which was too often relegated to the margins in previous studies. Even more important has been the Freedom Project, a vast collaborative editing enterprise overseen by Berlin that has made accessible a hitherto invisible world of black experience in the era of the Civil War. Two new books by Berlin and his associates help us see the breadth and depth of his accomplishment.

In *Many Thousands Gone* Berlin considers the origins of slavery in North America. He offers an overview and an interpretation of African slavery from its first appearance on the continent to the institution's transformation in the era of the American Revolution. Covering a vast terrain and chronological span, the author gives us a fuller portrayal of slavery's formative stages in this country than we have ever possessed. The book is a work of synthesis, harvesting the research and insights of hundreds of historians who have focused on one place, time, or issue. Though the book contains no original archival research, it is a rare student of the American past who will not be surprised by something in virtually every chapter. It is the pattern of slavery that is significant here, the variations and consistencies across the continent and across the centuries. Berlin follows no one historiographical tradition, but weaves among several, taking the best of each.

The book is organized chronologically, detailing the experience of three "generations" of enslaved people. The "Charter Generation" appeared in North America from the late sixteenth century to about 1680. Its members were followed by the "Plantation Generation," people brought across the Atlantic in overwhelming numbers between 1680 and the time of the American Revolution. Finally, the "Revolutionary Generation" confronted the challenges, opportunities, and setbacks of the war for American independence. Berlin devotes a quarter of each chronological section to a geographic area: the northern colonies, the Chesapeake, the Carolina-Georgia low country, and the lower Mississippi Valley. The result is a clear, and yet subtle, analytical framework.

Berlin also has a clear set of ideas about what makes this history move. In sharp contrast to the way slavery has often been viewed outside the academy—and inside it as well—Berlin

insists that slavery was a “negotiated relationship” (2). The institution was “never made, but instead was continually remade, for power—no matter how great—was never absolute, but always contingent” (3). Berlin is a materialist, arguing that we should start our understanding of slaves’ lives with their work, if for no other reason than because that is what “slaves did most of the time” (6-7).

This combination of context and change, as well as negotiation and material grounding, gives Berlin a nuanced, yet powerful way of understanding slavery. The keys for Berlin’s interpretation are not simple and familiar ones such as “race” or “capitalism,” but distinctly complicated conceptions with which we have become familiar in this decade: negotiation, complexity, agency, multiplicity, indeterminacy, and interaction. Berlin manages to portray slavery as both fundamentally important and highly contingent, an analytical juggling act that would have failed in less skillful hands.

Following influential studies of ancient slavery, Berlin makes a distinction between “societies with slaves” and “slave societies.” In societies with slaves, slaves constituted one labor force among several and slave owners were one powerful class among others. In slave societies, by contrast, slavery stood as the foundation of the entire social order. He contends that, “From the most intimate connections between men and women to the most public ones between ruler and ruled, all relationships mimicked those of slavery” (8). The marginality of bondage in a society with slaves did not mean that enslaved people were better treated, for the very expendability of slaves increased the brutality they endured. Neither did slavery develop in any single direction: “slave societies also became societies with slaves as often as the opposite” (10). For Berlin, therefore, slavery was as complicated as any other social relationship—and maybe more so.

Many Thousands Gone is a superb example of the benefits of an “Atlantic history.” Rather than restricting his focus to North America, which remained a quite marginal slave society deep into the modern slave era, Berlin explores the entire Atlantic world. His interpretation embraces Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Spanish North America, and Europe as well as British North America. Berlin deftly weaves what became the United States into a system of networks spanning two hemispheres. Thus, in his portrayal, British North America is simultaneously pushed to the edges of the world of slavery and integrated more deeply into that world. Both are welcome changes in perspective.

The first enslaved people we meet in this book are remarkably skilled negotiators who live on the boundaries between various systems. Whether in Africa, the Caribbean, or North America, these struggling, raw, and rough port cities stood as complex points of intersection among many languages, skin colors, interests, and labor relations. The dominant human relationships in these places were marked by bargaining, as diverse people jockeyed for advantage. Although these places offered many opportunities for exploitation, they also offered enslaved people some opportunities for freedom and for money-making. Both freedom and suffering lay at the places where the land met the sea.

As his larger focus on complexity and change might suggest, Berlin also complicates facile notions of African culture. Rather than stressing shared styles or patterns of perception and expression, he emphasizes the diversity of the cultures of Africa. “Africa housed hundreds, per-

haps thousands, of different 'nations,'" Berlin points out, "whether defined by the languages they spoke, the religions they practiced, or the chieftains to whom they gave allegiance" (103). The only meaningful commonality these people shared was created by enslavement itself. "When the captives boarded ship in Africa, they did not think of themselves as Africans. Their allegiance was to a family, clan, community, or perhaps—although rarely—state, but never to the continent itself." Enslavement and transport across the Atlantic Ocean supplied these people with a common experience; their shared effort to adapt to their strange new surroundings in the Caribbean or North America brought them together even more. "The construction of African identity," Berlin argues persuasively, "proceeded on the western, not the eastern, side of the Atlantic, amid the maelstrom of the plantation revolution" (104).

Enslaved African people did not quickly assimilate to the dominant societies on the western side of the Atlantic, if for no other reason than that the world around them was so diverse and was changing so rapidly that no single ideal to which to assimilate existed. Instead, there were many ideals from which Africans could select—among themselves, among the members of the owning class, and, for many, among the Native American population (105).

Berlin sees no simple process of adaptation. Nor does he see a rapid emergence of a new African American culture. Those processes stretched over generations and ran backwards as well as forwards. The constant push and pull of the Atlantic slave trade continually uprooted enslaved people, drove them to early deaths, separated them from mates and children, threw them into contact with a steady stream of strange new people, and subjected them to violence. Under such conditions, a common culture was slow to mature.

Though the first slaves in North America had sometimes been able to negotiate spaces of freedom and advantage for themselves and their families, those who came later found even those narrow chances closed. Knowing the language of the master, adopting his church, and learning his laws had provided some ways for the "Charter Generation" to buy space, but later generations found such strategies no longer available or very useful. "Rather than try to integrate themselves into the larger European-American world by adopting the language, religion, and ethos of their enslavers," Berlin argues, "the plantation slaves turned inward, making the plantation itself—the shareholders' home—the site for a reconstruction of African life" (107).

Berlin offers us a remarkable tour of North America, demonstrating the advantages of seeing people in comparison with one another. He details the differences and commonalities among Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana. He is as at ease with agricultural history as he is with demographic, cultural, and ideological history; as comfortable with the city as with the low country; as convincing writing about Rhode Island, New York, and Pennsylvania as about places more usually associated with slavery. Berlin points out that slavery in the North, at least in terms of morbidity and fertility, was worse than its Southern counterpart, with even more family separation, disease, and distorted sex ratios. He resisted the common temptation to see the Northern colonies and states as inimical to slavery; instead, he traces their protracted and painful route to emancipation so that it becomes harder to believe that religion or humanitarianism naturally predisposed white Northerners toward black freedom.

The Revolutionary War plays a critical, paradoxical role in Berlin's portrayal. While the war itself provided unprecedented opportunities for enslaved Americans to free themselves, slavery emerged from the conflict even stronger than it had been at the beginning of the struggle. Slaves rushed to join the British and fought against their former masters or fled the continent altogether. The new United States proved even more firmly devoted to slavery than the colonies had been. Despite the real reservations many white Americans held about the compatibility of slavery with the ideals of the new nation, they did not let the institution go. Berlin writes, "If indeed all men were created equal and some men were slaves—the argument ran—then, perhaps, those who remained in the degraded condition of slaves were not fully men after all" (224). The "Revolutionary Generation" of whites in effect inoculated themselves against black freedom with small acts of manumission and concession.

Berlin portrays the armed struggle of the Revolutionary War as the great engine of emancipation in the two centuries surveyed in the book. Enslaved people seized the first opportunity to free themselves and their families. With this emphasis on the role of war in emancipation, Berlin echoes some of the work in which he and his associates have been engaged for the last 20 years on the American Civil War. The first sentence of *Freedom's Soldiers* proclaims, "Freedom came to most American slaves only through force of arms" (1). Berlin puts little stock in the antislavery actions and attitudes of the Northern majority, focusing instead on the efforts of slaves to free themselves. It was war that offered their only real chances—first in the American Revolution and then in the Civil War.

Freedom's Soldiers is a distillation of material, which has been previously published in several volumes of the remarkable *Freedom* series, one of the great scholarly accomplishments of our time. That series, edited by a team of talented historians headed by Berlin, has presented a part of the past that had long been neglected: the experience of black Americans on both the homefront and battlefields of the Civil War. Sifting through hundreds of thousands of records in the National Archives, Berlin and his associates have reconstructed an alternately uplifting and chilling chapter of African American history. It is a story with which all teachers of American history should be familiar.

Berlin and his associates, Joseph Reidy and Leslie Rowland, who are gifted and accomplished historians in their own right, have selected in *Freedom's Soldiers* some of the most powerful documents devoted to the black military experience. As they acknowledge in their introduction, they do so to make such sources more easily available to the wide audience attracted by the movie *Glory* and the recent surge of interest in the nearly 200,000 black soldiers and sailors who served in the Civil War. The slim volume (also available in an expensive paperback edition) contains an elegant introduction that sums up much of the latest thinking on the subject, a stirring array of photographs, and an effective sampling of the kinds of archival materials that document this complicated experience.

The argument of Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland is that black soldiers changed the Civil War. They gave the war an antislavery purpose that it did not possess at the beginning. They weakened slavery in the crucial border states. They heartened enslaved people wherever they fought. They served as an example of the bravery, sacrifice, and nobility of black Americans. They undermined arguments about the natural docility or cowardice of people of color. They

shattered the confidence of their former owners. In all these ways, the men who fought for the Union remade the war.

Many Thousands Gone and *Freedom's Soldiers* share common themes. They argue that situation, structure, and event—more than shifts in culture, or ideology, or identity—drive fundamental historical change. Wars are the places where the contingencies of history are most on display, where people are forced to change their minds and hearts. In Berlin's survey of colonial slavery and the history of the black military experience, timing is crucial. In both books, too, the everyday experiences of work and family bear great power. And in both books, black people themselves are at the heart of their history, its very soldiers, start to finish.

University of Virginia

Edward L. Ayers