
The Difference Freedom Made: The Emancipation
of Afro-Americans

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Emancipation studies already stands at the cutting edge of scholarly explorations into Afro-American life and history. This preeminence will continue at least through the remainder of this decade and reflects the critical role that the death of slavery played in the overall history of Afro-Americans. In fact, the experience with emancipation, spanning the two generations from 1860 to 1920, occupied the critical moment of transition between the dominant modes of black life in American society: the slavery period and twentieth-century urbanization. During the sixty-year interval that links slavery to urbanization, American society attempted to cope with the consequences of black freedom. Only by being free laborers could blacks have participated so readily in the twentieth-century population movements that dramatically transformed the geographic locus and the economic focus of Afro-American life. Thus, the tasks of describing and analyzing the social forces that contributed to these revolutionary transformations constitute the *raison d'être* for the study of emancipation.

At the heart of the challenge posed by the death of slavery lay the necessity of incorporating four million former chattel slaves into American society and economy. Prior to the Civil War, the Peculiar Institution established the boundaries of blacks' participation in American life. The laws governing chattel slavery accomplished this by involuntarily appropriating the fruits of black labor at the same time that they restrained black freedom of movement. So successfully did this system work that, for a quarter

of a millennium, the Peculiar Institution served as the bedrock upon which the entire structure of antebellum southern society and economy rested.¹ Not only did slavery define the broad outlines of social class relationships within southern society, but this system of production also played a critical role in fashioning the pattern of interdependent regional economic specialization that undergirded antebellum American economic development, a pattern that also linked this developing economy to the expansion of international capitalism.² Precisely because emancipation precipitously destroyed a status quo that predated the American republic, this social revolution brought with it the urgent necessity of developing mechanisms for incorporating the newly freed into the national economy.

Under almost any conceivable set of circumstances, the adjustment to emancipation would have imposed a major crisis upon post-Civil War American political economy,³ even without the disruptive impact of the industrial revolution. However, the onset of full-scale industrialization served to further complicate what could not have been other than a most trying ordeal. Economists now date the "take-off" of the American industrial revolution to the years between 1860 and 1914, precisely the same era during which the results of the Civil War compelled this society to undertake a new accommodation with Afro-Americans.⁴ The simultaneous advent of emancipation and industrialization made it virtually inevitable that southern society would experience a powerful combination of internal and external pressures. Indeed, this combination would prove sufficiently powerful to stimulate revolutionary changes both in the patterns of relationships within that region's social structure and in the relationships between the southern economy and the rapidly changing economy of the nation as a whole.

Within the South, this confluence of forces compelled all of the region's

1. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965), 13-39.

2. Douglas C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (New York, 1966); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 34-75.

3. Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge, 1983), 1.

4. Harold G. Vatter, *The Drive to Industrial Maturity: The U.S. Economy, 1860-1914* (Westport, Conn., 1976), 37-86.

social classes and racial groups to grapple for new moorings, a process that could have no other outcome than the complete destruction of the antebellum social order.⁵ Former masters and former slaves could not avoid engaging in bitter struggle, since, in general, societies experiencing the demise of unfreedom have discovered that the former masters of the unfree attempt to retain as much of their former dominance as possible.⁶ Furthermore, the peculiar pattern of antebellum southern agrarianism that saw slaves producing most of the exportable surplus while the non-slaveholding white majority remained on the periphery of the market economy could not survive the rapid postwar expansion of commercial farming, textiles, and extractive industries into the "backcountry" hinterland.⁷ By the turn of the century, emancipation and industrialization would produce profound changes in the labor requirements of the southern economy. With white laborers inextricably entwined in the tentacles of the market economy, the South grew much less dependent upon black labor than it had been during antebellum times.⁸ And, it was this tendency toward the emergence of a pool of underemployed southern black laborers that made for the World War I migrations.⁹

Being free did make a difference.¹⁰ For former slaves, freedom opened new horizons of personal autonomy and facilitated hitherto unrealizable degrees of economic and geographic mobility. In fact, no other single

5. Harold D. Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery: The New History Views the Postbellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, XLIII (November, 1977), 523-24; Thavolia Glymph (ed.), *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy* (College Station, Texas, 1985).

6. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (London, 1975), Chap. 10; Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York, 1969), 22-23.

7. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 291-320; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of Georgia's Upper Piedmont, 1850-1880* (New York, 1983); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana, 1985).

8. Harvey Perloff (ed.), *Regions, Resources, and Economic Growth* (Baltimore, 1960), 175-80.

9. Florette Henri, *Black Migration, the Movement North, 1900-1920: The Road from Myth to Man* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), 50-51.

10. Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 502-56; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1977), 461-75.

event exerted more pervasive influence over the lives of nineteenth-century Afro-Americans than did emancipation. On the eve of the Civil War, fully 90 percent of this nation's 4.2 million blacks lived as chattel slaves; the balance of the black population existed at the margins of unfreedom whether they lived north or south of the Mason-Dixon Line.¹¹ The three Reconstruction-era constitutional amendments that followed inevitably from wartime emancipation carried important advances in their wake.¹² These amendments eliminated chattel slavery as a racially exclusive legal category at the same time that they conferred citizenship and voting rights upon Afro-Americans whether "born" or "shot" free. Even though American society found it enormously difficult to accord to freedmen the same social and economic mobility that white Americans claimed as their birthright of freedom, it does seem clear that being free made a significant difference in the quality of life for most Afro-Americans.

As perhaps nothing else can, the reflections of former slaves reveal the dimensions of the task facing scholars studying the American experience with emancipation. According analytic importance to firsthand evidence from the freed people is of special relevance because one of the great pitfalls confronting those who would study emancipation is a marked tendency toward a brand of economism that reduces the process of postslavery social change to a mere reflex of economic forces.¹³ Slavery scholars have already demonstrated the critical contribution that careful attention to the values and the ideology of the slaves makes to a comprehensive analysis of the culture of the Peculiar Institution.¹⁴ So too must students of emancipation realize that what former slaves and their descen-

11. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), 217-49; Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery* (Chicago, 1961), 153-86.

12. Mary Frances Berry, *Military Necessity and Civil Rights Policy: Black Citizenship and the Constitution, 1861-1968* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1977), 100-107.

13. Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge, 1977); Joseph D. Reid, "Sharecropping as an Understandable Market Response: The Postbellum South," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXIII (March, 1973), 106-30; Stephen L. DeCamo, *Agriculture in the Postbellum South: The Economics of Production and Supply* (Cambridge, 1974); Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham, N.C., 1978).

14. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 3-7; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977).

dants thought and did made an enormous difference in the outcome of postslavery developments both inside and outside of the South. Precisely because the years immediately following the Civil War afforded Afro-Americans their first opportunity to realize dreams long deferred during the nightmare of slavery, it is imperative that emancipation studies strive for a balance between history viewed from the "top down" and history viewed from the "bottom up."

I propose to outline some of the more significant lines of investigation that await scholars interested in the study of emancipation. Although historiographic questions remain important, my purpose is not to critique the existing literature so much as it is to define the limits of current research. Three interrelated sets of questions seem likely to dominate the emancipation studies research agenda. The Civil War origins of the postwar labor system constitute the first line of inquiry that demands attention. Following this, it seems essential that scholars study the process of social differentiation among the recently freed during the initial decades after emancipation. Finally, significant attention must be focused on the origins and the outcomes of postslavery black migrations to areas both inside and outside of the South. These suggestions are intended to stimulate debate about the topics that demand attention, about the kinds of questions that ought to be posed, and about the types of sources that are available to help supply creative hypotheses concerning the numerous unresolved issues confronting the field of emancipation studies. Out of this dialogue should emerge the material from which scholars can finally construct the long-overdue synthesis about American emancipation.

I

Emancipation emerged as an official Civil War policy only after prolonged examination of practically every other alternative for saving the Union.¹⁵ In fact, Lincoln's apprehensions about the peacetime aftershocks certain to emanate from the emancipation temblor prompted him to move very cautiously in the matter of declaring that the only path to defeating the

15. John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, N.Y., 1963), 29-54.

Confederacy lay through laying waste the foundations of southern society.¹⁶ Lincoln knew that his fellow northerners did not wish emancipation to provide a pretext for the massive resettlement of job-hungry former slaves in the "Free States."¹⁷ Recognizing these political realities, the president promised that he would find some distant place beyond the foreseeable territorial boundaries of the United States to which he would transport the former slaves once the Civil War had run its course.¹⁸ Obviously, Lincoln hoped that resettlement would resolve once and for all the questions posed by the troublesome presence of millions of freed persons of African descent.¹⁹ Ultimately, the fortunes of war forced his hand. Lincoln moved to proclaim emancipation because of three major developments: the unexpected strength of the Confederacy, the danger that Great Britain and France might recognize the Confederacy, and the inability of his commanders in the field to cope with the black freedom struggle unintentionally ignited by the conflict between North and South.

Although neither the Confederacy nor the Union intended to foment a freedom struggle, nothing that either government could do seemed to avail against slaves' determination to exploit the North-South conflict to win their own freedom.²⁰ For example, the city of Nashville surrendered to the northern invaders in early February, 1862, almost a year before Lincoln promulgated the final Emancipation Proclamation. Yet in the immediate aftermath of the city's capitulation, slaves celebrated joyously throughout the Nashville region, supremely confident that the onrushing columns of blue-clad Yankees signified the final coming of the long-hoped-for "Day of Jubilo." An elderly slave captured the mood of the moment when he cried out:

Oh Praise and Tanks
De Lord He Come
To Set de People Free
An' Massa Tink it Day ob Gloom
An' We ob Jubilee
Oh Nebber You Fear
If Nebber You Hear
De Driver Blow His Horn.²¹

Long before "Massa" Lincoln decided to proclaim emancipation, millions of southern blacks concluded that defeat for their masters meant freedom for them.²² Scholars still know far too little about this initial phase of the emancipation experience. In fact, analyzing the wartime origins of slavery's demise probably holds the key to understanding the variety of strategies that freedpeople employed during the immediate post-Civil War period.²³ Although no more than a quarter of the prewar slave population gained freedom as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation, it nonetheless remains clear that effective control over slaves disappeared from almost all of even the most remote plantations long before the surrender at Appomattox.²⁴ The pervasiveness of this loss of mastery reflected the impact of the revolution in attitudes unleashed by the onset of the war, a revolution of rising slave expectations that helped impel Lincoln toward proclaiming emancipation.²⁵

Material for understanding the wartime demise of slavery is almost embarrassingly abundant. The published collection of WPA slave narratives speaks eloquently and at great length about the variety of ways that freedom came to wartime slaves.²⁶ In fact, these narratives probably reveal more about the emancipation experience than they do about the Peculiar

16. LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia, S.C., 1981), 3-43.

17. V. Jacques Voegeli, *Free but Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago, 1967), 1-29.

18. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Annual Message," in James D. Richardson (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, D.C., 1896-1899), VII, 3340-42.

19. Charles H. Wesley, "Lincoln's Plan for Colonizing the Emancipated Negroes," *Journal of Negro History*, IV (January, 1919), 7-21; Warren A. Beck, "Lincoln and Negro Colonization in Central America," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, VI (September, 1950), 162-63; Paul J. Schieps, "Lincoln and the Chiriqui Colonization Project," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXVIII (October, 1952), 418-53.

20. James Ford Rhodes, *History of the Civil War* (New York, 1919), 49-50.

21. In Armstead L. Robinson, "Day of Jubilo: Civil War and the Demise of Slavery in the Mississippi Valley, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1977), 499.

22. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1969), 42-56.

23. Louis D. Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport, Conn., 1973), 193; C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1976).

24. Robinson, "Day of Jubilo."

25. James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), 68-108.

26. George Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn., 1972 and 1978).

Institution. Another important source lies in the records relating to emancipation located in the National Archives. The recently inaugurated edition of these records offers a skillfully chosen sample of the voluminous materials bearing upon the demise of slavery that were compiled by the northern and southern armies as well as by various agencies of the federal government.²⁷ In addition, the diaries, journals, and home letters of northern soldiers and missionaries serving in the South contain invaluable accounts of the destruction and reconstruction of the southern labor system.²⁸

Additional evidence about the demise of wartime slavery abounds in the records kept by embattled slaveholders, many of whom were women unfamiliar with the routines of slave management. The pleas these women dispatched to their relatives and also to local, state, and national officials vividly depict the rapid erosion of control over slaves made newly restive by reports about war pitting their masters in combat against northern "abolitionists." In turn, the inability to cope effectively with this erosion played a critical role in prompting the Confederate government to undertake draft and taxation policies that alienated the nonslaveholding majority from the southern cause, an alienation which took the forms of draft resistance, desertion, and tax evasion; most of this activity took place in the southern "backcountry."²⁹ Since these wartime conflicts had their roots in the political economy of the antebellum South and since much of southern political history in the immediate postwar years revolved around struggles between former slaveholders and "backcountry" yeomen, it would appear that careful analysis of wartime social developments may help explain hitherto inexplicable trends, such as the hotly contested postwar debt relief movement and the involvement, during the initial years of Congressional Reconstruction, of scores of thousands of southern yeomen in biracial Republican parties.³⁰

27. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, Series II of *The Black Military Experience* (New York, 1982).

28. For an exemplary demonstration of the contributions such sources can make, see Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: 1964).

29. Albert B. Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy* (New York, 1924), 228–54; Robinson, "Day of Jubilo."

30. Armstead Robinson, "Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus: New Meanings of Reconstruction for American History," *Journal of American History*, LXVIII (September, 1981), 286–87.

Of even greater significance for emancipation studies, however, is the way that the assertion of blacks' claim to control over their persons and over the fruits of their labor power precipitated wartime struggles that prefigured postwar battles over the meaning of freedom. When the elderly slave near Nashville proclaimed his belief that freedom meant that blacks never again needed to fear the blowing of the driver's horn, he was articulating an ideological viewpoint widely held among the freedpeople, a cultural perspective that would confound practically every postwar attempt to reimpose slavlike forms of involuntary labor.³¹ By examining carefully how these struggles resolved themselves during the Civil War, scholars can gain insight into the normative values that former slaves brought to their postslavery confrontations with the coming of free labor. The particular focus of these wartime struggles varied quite significantly, generally in keeping with the type of labor systems in which particular groups of slaves worked and the proximity of the slaves to the northern invaders. Thus, dimensions of time and place remain critically important for analysis of the wartime origins of the transition to a free labor economy.³² By conceptualizing the war years as the stage upon which a spectrum of types of slavery gave way to a variety of types of free labor, students of emancipation will gain understanding of the social origins of labor readjustment in the various subregions that constituted the postwar southern economy.

II

Once the Civil War actually came to an end, southerners of all social classes and racial groups undertook the task of adjusting to the dawning of a new era. The three decades immediately following the war produced major changes in southern society, as defeat and emancipation forced a massive reshuffling of the balances of political and social power. In the same way that freedom from slavery raised the possibility of blacks' realizing dreams of economic independence, so too did the enfranchisement of former slaves and the disenfranchisement of many former slaveholders

31. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 136–89.

32. Bell Irvin Wiley, *Southern Negroes, 1861–1865* (New Haven, 1938), 3–23; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935), 55–83.

open the door to a whole new style of southern politics that featured an alliance between poorer blacks and poorer whites. Unfortunately, this biracial lower-class politics could not long endure without the stable social foundation that very broadly based black land ownership might have provided; and further, the victorious national government revealed little of the iron-fisted determination called for by this situation. As a result, biracial lower-class politics failed during Reconstruction, only to experience a revival when the corrosive effects of New South-style economic development reignited fires of popular anger in the forms of the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist Movement. Ultimately, this second coming of biracial lower-class politics failed as well, victimized by divisions within and between various social classes and racial groups.³³ In its stead arose the grim specter of Jim Crow, that cradle-to-grave system of racial segregation that symbolized the abnegation of the optimistic dream about the meaning of freedom to which former slaves clung so fiercely during the initial enthusiasm for the "Day of Jubilo."³⁴

Perhaps no group felt more immediate optimism about what emancipation could mean than did the freedpeople. So much of the story of war and emancipation conformed to the cherished biblical scenario of the Children of Israel's escape from bondage that most former slaves could not avoid believing themselves headed for the Promised Land.³⁵ Land was what the freedpeople craved more than anything else, for they understood that ownership of land constituted the essential prerequisite for independence from coercive external influences.³⁶ Indeed, if any single cultural theme summarized freedmen's visions of the world that would ensue from slavery's demise, it was this dream of a life in which an agrarian people could make their own decisions about how to organize their lives, decisions that would enable them to be "free" in the fullest sense of the term.

This dream would die aborning, betrayed in the first instance by the perfidy of Lincoln's successor, in the second by the reluctance of the Re-

33. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976), 493-514.

34. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 2nd revised ed. (New York, 1966), 67-109.

35. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 136-38.

36. Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community* (Westport, Conn., 1973), 137-73.

publican party to countenance the politically motivated expropriation of private property, and in the final analysis by the spread of capitalist agriculture that, through a process of consolidation that rendered semisubsistence family farming an increasingly nonviable undertaking, used debt as the primary mechanism to force small farmers from the land. Instead of finding their Promised Land in the independent proprietorship that blacks thought would result from Yankee promises of land after war's end, the freedpeople struggled to make do as best they could, focusing on activities in the economic sphere, in voluntary social organizations, and in politics: the kinds of activities that allowed them to construct a community suited to their perceptions of their own needs.

Freedmen hungered for land. To a people long accustomed to working involuntarily on someone else's land, the ownership of even a modest plot of ground symbolized irreversible independence from external control. After the Civil War ended, keen disappointment awaited land-hungry freedmen. Although there never was enough land available for even a quarter of the freedmen who yearned for it, Congress did pass a bill in February, 1865, that created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to supervise the redistribution of land abandoned by former Confederates. Unfortunately for even the small group of freedmen who might have obtained land through the Freedmen's Bureau, Lincoln's assassination gave his southern-born successor, Andrew Johnson, the opportunity to grant thousands of presidential pardons to southern landowners threatened with confiscation.³⁷ Congress subsequently refused to enact legislation that could have ordered massive confiscation of southern lands, in large measure because such seizures would establish the potentially dangerous precedent of sanctioning the violation of private property rights for the explicit purpose of giving working people ownership of the means of production.³⁸ With land redistribution eliminated from its functions,

37. William McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General Oliver Otis Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven, 1968), 94-114; Donald G. Nieman, *To Set the Law in Motion: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Legal Rights of Blacks, 1865-1868* (Millwood, N.Y., 1979).

38. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, 1981), 335-86; Ronald Davis, "'Good and Faithful Labor': A Study of the Development and Economics of Southern Sharecropping, 1860-1880" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1974).

the Freedmen's Bureau turned its attention toward the task of making "good and faithful" laborers out of freedpeople determined to gain independence.

Freedmen refused to accept this betrayal passively. Of the many protests that dot the records of the Freedmen's Bureau, none speaks more eloquently of the world view of the vast majority of freedpeople than one that occurred early in 1866. Bayley Wyatt, a freedman from Yorktown, Virginia, addressed a meeting called to protest an order directing local freedpeople to return to prewar owners land that the blacks had been led to believe would soon be theirs. Wyatt spoke with fierce anger and with great conviction as he articulated the freedpeople's grievances against their emancipators:

We now as a people desires to be elevated, and we desires to do all we can to be educated, and we hope our friends will aid us all dey can. . . .

I may state to all our friends, and to all our enemies, that we has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locate upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land. . . .

And den didn't we clear the lands and raise de crops ob corn, ob cotton, ob tobacco, ob rice, ob sugar, ob everything? And den didn't dem large cities in de North grow up on de cotton and de sugars and de rice dat we made? Yes! I appeal to de South and to de North if I hasn't spoken de words of truth.

I say dey have grown rich and my people is poor."

Neither the eloquence of Bayley Wyatt's oratory nor the accuracy of his social analysis availed much in the struggle over the forms in which freedpeople's labor power would be appropriated in the postwar South. It appears that initially most landowners preferred to continue as much of the antebellum pattern of centralized control as was possible; they did so by promising to pay wages at the end of the crop year while making few substantive alterations in the manner in which black labor was to be organized. However, these arrangements bore such a strong resemblance to slavery times that most freedmen resisted signing contracts that made a

39. Magdol, *A Right to the Land*, 172; Janet Sharpe Herman, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (New York, 1981).

mockery of their new freedom. This response was particularly marked among blacks who worked in capital- and labor-intensive crops such as sugar, tobacco, and rice, although the Cotton Kingdom experienced its share of conflict over the same set of issues.⁴⁰ As a result, a wide range of experiments with "free" labor arrangements took place, with varying combinations of wages, shares, and tenancy appearing throughout the South.⁴¹

The diversity of contractual arrangements did not obscure a startling unity of cultural purpose among the freedmen: their determination to assert their new status by removing black dependents from the labor force. Freedmen insisted upon shielding young children, pregnant women, and the sick and the elderly from the heavy field labor that had been their brutal lot during slavery. In the Cotton Kingdom, for example, by 1870 almost 40 percent fewer blacks were involved in field labor than had been the case in 1860, a result directly attributable to the withdrawal of dependent labor from the fields.⁴² Although this minor reform could not prevent landowners from driving most landless freedmen into the status of agrarian proletarians, it nonetheless remains significant that the decentralized share-cropping system that came to dominate postwar southern agriculture afforded black families an approximation, however crude, of the independent family proprietorship that had been their initial goal.

Freedmen worked diligently to expand the realms of their lives in which they exercised autonomy. Some of the most intriguing research now under way concentrates on the processes through which freedpeople erected an infrastructure of religious, educational, and social institutions that the blacks themselves controlled.⁴³ Many of the invisible institutions of the slavery period materialized in quite concrete forms during the initial post-

40. Joseph P. Reidy, "Sugar and Freedom: Emancipation in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes," paper, American Historical Association annual meeting, 1980; Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1985); Michael Wayne, *The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860-1880* (Baton Rouge, 1983), 31-71.

41. Harold D. Woodman, "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law," *Agricultural History*, LIII (January, 1979), 319-37.

42. Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1977), 44-46.

43. Armstead L. Robinson, "Plans Dat Comed from God: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis," in Burton and McMath (eds.), *Toward a New South* (Westport, Conn., 1980), 71-102.

war years. Black churches sprouted throughout the South.⁴⁴ Although many of these structures owed their existence at least partially to the work of northern missionaries, the bulk of religious institution building occurred beneath the aegis of denominations that catered more or less exclusively to blacks. In the educational sphere, freedmen displayed what one missionary described as "a greedy fondness for books."⁴⁵ Nothing better illustrates the priorities that former slaves carried into freedom than the virtually universal acknowledgment that most freedmen spared nothing to educate first their children and then themselves.⁴⁶ This commitment to community uplift, a commitment brilliantly articulated by Bayley Wyatt, manifested itself through the emergence of a panoply of voluntary self-help organizations, groups such as benevolent and mutual aid societies, lodges, literary associations, etc.⁴⁷

Scholars interested in analyzing the freedpeople's pursuit of autonomy can turn to a number of enormously rich sources. The archives of the Freedmen's Bureau remain the indispensable starting point for serious study of the immediate transition from slavery to freedom. Although there were never enough bureau agents to provide the help freedpeople required, these agents did leave a thick latticework of weekly, monthly, quarterly, semiannual, and annual reports about topics ranging across every aspect of the freedpeople's lives. Another important but still underutilized source appears in the records of the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company, the so-called Freedmen's Bank. Before this institution went bankrupt in 1872, it opened savings accounts for tens of thousands of blacks across the South. The deposit ledgers kept by the branches of the Freedmen's Bank are a gold mine of information. Not only do many of these ledgers record information about the physical characteristics of depositors, who generally lacked birth certificates, but these bookkeepers also listed their

44. Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (2nd ed.; Washington, D.C., 1945); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, 1964); Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 1982).

45. *Memphis Argus*, August 23, 1865.

46. William Preston Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington, Ky., 1974), 1-22.

47. For a sample of some of the growing literature on institution building among the freedpeople, see Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, Conn., 1972); Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia, 1970).

depositors' best estimate of the location of family members. Armed with lists of names drawn from Freedmen's Bureau and Freedmen's Bank files, it is possible to collate information about specific individuals from sources as varied as the manuscript returns of the United States census, state tax and prison records, and county and municipal sources such as birth, death, and marriage records, property tax rolls and voter registration rosters, police arrest blotters, and the files of local relief agencies. This combination of types of records opens the exciting possibility that researchers can perform the kind of family reconstitution studies that have proved so valuable in reconstructing the social milieu of nonliterate peoples. Bit by bit, it will be possible to capture larger and larger fragments of the varied paths that former slaves traversed as they adjusted to life in freedom.

In the absence of general land reform, electoral politics offered freedmen their best opportunity to redress the inequitable balance of forces that confronted them. As was the case with newly gained educational opportunities, the record shows conclusively that freedmen voted with avidity for as long as it remained physically safe to do so.⁴⁸ The Union Leagues served as one of the most important agencies for politicizing newly enfranchised black voters. Scholars know far too little about these leagues, although they existed across the South and played a major role in the initial stages of Republican politics in the Reconstruction governments of a number of states.⁴⁹ Research into the development of the leagues may provide information about the emergence of leadership cadres within the freed community. Such information would complement the research already available on the activities of blacks elected to local, state, and national offices during Reconstruction.⁵⁰ Out of this attention to the process of politicization should emerge a much clearer picture of the development of interest and factional rivalries among blacks, particularly those who lived in urban areas.

The history of southern urbanization remains to be written, particularly

48. Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York, 1971), xv-xlviii.

49. E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1947), 127-28.

50. Thomas C. Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in Reconstruction South Carolina* (Urbana, Ill., 1977); Howard N. Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana, Ill., 1982); Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 1976).

insofar as postwar urban growth affected the first generation of freed-people.⁵¹ The black population of most southern urban centers grew very rapidly after the war.⁵² It would be enormously helpful to know who these "pioneer urbanites" actually were, where they came from, whether they were seasonal migrants who came to the cities between farming seasons or permanent urban dwellers, and how these different migratory streams fared in the southern "urban crucible."⁵³ Still-scattered data from existing studies suggests that exposure to the harsh challenges of urban life precipitated a process of social class differentiation.⁵⁴ Although some former slaves fared extremely well, opening businesses and accumulating property, most others experienced urban proletarianization; that is, they existed at the margins of the economy as chronically underemployed day laborers without a permanent foothold. However, in several important instances, former slave workers managed to create effective alliances with white wage workers, particularly in the mines and along the docks.⁵⁵ These early examples of the integration of freedmen into the emerging southern working class warrant close attention, as do the more prevalent examples of bitter interracial strife.

The development of an urban-based black middle class merits careful study. How these men and women managed to accumulate and hold property is as intriguing as the uses to which they put the social and political power that sprang from their affluence. For example, a former slave from Memphis, Tennessee, Robert Reed Church, served as a cabin attendant on a Mississippi River steamer prior to emancipation. With an initial boost from his wealthy white father, Robert Church managed to accumulate a very substantial fortune in real estate and thereby propel himself into a position of enduring social prominence as well as enduring influence within the local, state, and national Republican party. In fact, his son, Robert Reed Church, Jr., carried on the family tradition of "black and

51. Blaine A. Brownwell (ed.), *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1977).

52. Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction*, 261.

53. Douglas H. Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Philadelphia, 1980); Gary D. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1979).

54. Robinson, "Plants Dat Comed from God."

55. Paul B. Worthman and James R. Green, "Black Workers in the New South, 1865-1915," in Huggins, Kilson, and Fox (eds.), *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, II (New York, 1972), 47-69.

tan" political activity so assiduously that he functioned as "Boss Crump's" emissary to Memphis blacks throughout the life of the Crump machine.⁵⁶

Research into the social origins of the black urban middle class should spark interest in the parallel story of the emergence of a class of rural black landowners. For despite all of the hardships endured by the newly freed, the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation found more than 200,000 black landowners listed by the United States census. Although these statistics require careful scrutiny, the roughly 15 million acres under black proprietorship cannot be dismissed.⁵⁷ Both the numbers of landowners and the amount of acreage they held suggest that a significant number of freedmen managed to acquire and hold onto farms during an era when many white family farmers were losing their land. This process of class differentiation would have major implications not only for postemancipation social developments but also for southern and national politics.

Because the Republican party tended to draw its black leadership cadres from the emerging strata of urban and rural middle-class blacks, an intriguing area of inquiry awaits scholars interested in the history of black Republicanism. In the same way that "black and tan" alliances played a major role in electing a series of post-Civil War Republican presidents, so too did alliances of convenience between southern black Republicans and southern white Democrats play a significant part in southern state and local politics.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it would appear that there was a direct link between the social basis of black Republicanism and the origins of Booker T. Washington's "Tuskegee Machine." Washington drew his supporters from a broad cross section of the national black community, with surprising strength coming from urban professionals both inside and outside of the South.⁵⁹ Determining where relatively prosperous blacks thought their political interests lay holds major promise as a contribution to the political history of emancipation, particularly since "black and tan" alliances provoked such heated controversy among both northern and southern blacks.⁶⁰

56. Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, D.C., 1940).

57. James S. Fisher, "Negro Farm Ownership in the South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LXIII (December, 1973), 482.

58. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 75-106.

59. Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1865-1901*, 254-71.

60. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1800-1915* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1956), 161-89.

The paradoxical fate of biracial lower-class alliances offers another fruitful arena for research. Unlike the "black and tan" alliances between wealthy southern whites and affluent southern blacks that apparently endured for decades, interracial lower-class political groupings proved consistently unstable. It would appear that alliances of poorer blacks with poorer whites ought to have had a real chance for success during the initial stages of Congressional Reconstruction; a similar situation would seem to have obtained during the heyday of Populism. However, recent research suggests that the Reconstruction alliances collapsed because they could not cope with the complex interpenetration of class and racial tensions between and within various social groups. Although rabid prejudice helped to scuttle biracial southern Republicanism, the primary factors apparently were the hostility of affluent southerners to lower-class politics, the incompatibility of the interests of land-poor yeomen whites and land-hungry freed blacks, and the conflicting priorities of affluent blacks as opposed to their impoverished brethren.⁶¹

A similar set of constraints contributed to the downfall of southern Populism. However, in this area, unlike the Reconstruction period where scholars know a great deal about the identity of black Republicans, the social basis of black Populism remains shrouded in mystery. Who were the black Populists, why did they join the movement, and why did they leave it? These are questions for which there are at present no satisfactory answers. It would be useful to know how the emerging class of rural black landowners responded to the blandishments of the Colored Farmers' Alliance and then to the appeals of the Populists. Since much of the rhetoric of white Populist leaders seemed directed at black tenants, sharecroppers, and wage laborers, it may well be that independent black landowners saw little of interest in the Populist formula. It would also be useful to know from whom these black landowners were acquiring their property. The probability that some of this land came on the market as a result of post-Civil War debt and tax sales raises the possibility that white Populists resented associating with relatively affluent rural blacks who appeared to be profiting from their dispossession. The question of how much

61. J. Mills Thornton III, "Fiscal Policy and the Failure of Radical Reconstruction in the Lower South," in Kousser and McPherson (eds.), *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York, 1982), 349-94; Robinson, "Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus," 296-97.

influence these class-based tensions exerted during the Populist Movement deserves careful attention, both because these tensions are often misinterpreted as being essentially racial and also because an analysis of these tensions may add depth to our appreciation of the centrifugal tendencies that ripped the Populist alliance asunder.⁶²

Although the identity of black Populists remains unclear, there is very little doubt that calls for biracial lower-class political activity provoked a major schism among black political and social leaders. Booker T. Washington took a not altogether unexpected stance opposing such alliances.⁶³ However, T. Thomas Fortune, a former slave and editor of the *New York Age*, warmly supported the notion. Writing in 1884, Fortune argued strenuously for the identity of interests between impoverished blacks and poorer whites. After taking a hard look at the first two decades of freedom, Fortune concluded that the transformations undergone by the former slaves closely resembled an abortive journey that moved the freed-people from "chattel slavery . . . to industrial slavery; a slavery more excruciating in its exactions, more irresponsible in its machinations than the other slavery, which I once endured." Fortune could find but one answer for this dilemma: a permanent alliance of the black and white poor. At the core of this strategy lay Fortune's fervent conviction that "the condition of the black and white laborer is the same, and . . . consequently their cause is common."⁶⁴

Exploring the social origins and the political consequences of class differentiations among southern blacks may help clarify the origins of the Du Bois-Washington controversy that loomed so large in the internal politics of many late-nineteenth-century black communities. These explorations will require renewed interest in biographical studies of persons who played significant roles in black community politics both North and South. Careful analysis will almost certainly reveal the important contributions made by hitherto little-known men and women to the active political debates that blacks carried on within their ranks, debates focused on the task of developing strategies that could counteract the turn toward militant ra-

62. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 276-306; Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in Kousser and McPherson (eds.), *Region, Race, and Reconstruction*, 143-77.

63. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington*, 291-92.

64. Timothy Thomas Fortune, *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South* (New York, 1884), 235-36.

cialism characteristic of the age of Jim Crow. Only by identifying the often conflicting social bases of the interests to which different black community leaders saw themselves responding can scholars make analytic sense of the fierce debates that continued to erupt between partisans of Du Bois and Washington.

III

Once scholars develop a more acute sense of the varied patterns of postslavery social development among southern blacks, the most significant challenge confronting students of emancipation will be the task of defining the social parameters of the linkages between these developmental patterns and the late-nineteenth-century origins of southern blacks' relocation to northern urban centers. These origins are crucial to the full comprehension of the emancipation experience, since the massive migrations characteristic of the World War I era tended to follow paths already laid out by these preexisting migration patterns rather than breaking entirely new ground. It already seems clear that most of this interregional movement involved city-to-city residential transfers rather than direct relocations from southern rural to northern urban settings.⁶⁵ Only by tracing the cultural passageways that freedpeople and their descendants traversed during the trek from southern rural to southern urban settings and thence to the urban North can students of emancipation decipher the double transformation that first made former slaves into a regional agrarian proletariat and subsequently incorporated these children of emancipation into the American working class.

A fruitful point of departure lies in careful attention to the different streams of postslavery population movement among the former slaves. If ever there was a people in motion, it most certainly was the freedpeople. For one thing, the Civil War years greatly exacerbated the already massive incidence of involuntary family separations caused by the Peculiar Institution. Furthermore, being free afforded an opportunity many freedpeople used to seek to reknit scattered threads of the fabric of extended kin groups.⁶⁶ And finally, the frustrations that generally accompanied the

65. Henri, *Black Migration*, 49-80.

66. Gutman, *Black Family*, 363-431.

emancipation experience gave many blacks additional incentives to seek out a better life somewhere other than where they found themselves. At least initially, these movements were localized and tended to reflect changes in the locations where laborers thought they could obtain the best working conditions. In other cases, population shifts represented responses to the impact of new opportunities created by the process of urbanization in booming cities such as Birmingham and Atlanta—growth spawned by New South industrialization. Another migration pattern saw black laborers moving so as to follow changes in the geographic regions devoted to the production of specific staple crops, changes such as the westward movement of the cotton belt as well as the relocation of the center of American rice production from South Carolina to Arkansas and Louisiana.⁶⁷ Although most postwar black migrants tended to remain within the former slave states, a very significant segment of the freed population chose to leave the South in order to move to other areas such as black communitarian settlements on the Great Plains or even to return to Africa.⁶⁸

Students of emancipation need to know much more about the factors that differentiated these streams of postslavery black migration. The answers to these questions probably lie in detailed studies of the emigrants and of the movements with which they were associated. By carefully studying the push/pull factors that both detached former slaves from particular social contexts and also differentiated emigrants into the various streams of post-slavery migration, emancipation studies will be able to establish the direct linkages between adjustments to the demise of slavery and the advent of waves of migration that periodically swept the Civil War South.

The recollections of a former slave named Andrew Boone are quite suggestive in this regard. Born in North Carolina in 1847, Boone related vivid recollections not only of slavery but also of emancipation and

67. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 670-709.

68. Stanley L. Engerman, "Economic Adjustments to Emancipation in the United States and the British West Indies," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XIII (Autumn 1982), 191-220; United States Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Agriculture*, Vol. II, 94, 425, 528-29.

69. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York, 1976); William Bittle and Gilbert Geis, *The Longest Way Home: Alfred C. Sam's Back to Africa Movement* (Detroit, 1964).

termath. Having moved north from Raleigh after failing to find the kind of life in freedom that he desired, he worked in New York City for a number of years, mainly as a drummer for an urban circus; Boone proudly recalled living the life of a self-described dandy. Although he married and had a family in New York, he chose to return to North Carolina in order to spend his final years at home in the South. A WPA interviewer asked him at age ninety to assess his personal experience with emancipation. From a perspective embittered by the federal government's refusal to declare him eligible for relief during the Great Depression, Boone critiqued his introduction into freedom: "In slavery times, they kept you down an' you had to wuk, now I can't wuk, an' I'm still down. Not allowed to wuk an' still down. It's all hard, slavery and freedom, both bad when you can't eat. The old bee makes de honey comb, the young bee makes the honey, niggers make de cotton an' corn an' de white folks gets de money. Dis wus de case in Slavery times an' it de case now an' de white folks still git de money dat de nigger's labor makes."⁷⁰

As the reminiscences of Andrew Boone make clear, some former slaves managed to escape from the South, despite the strategy of regional racial containment employed by southern Bourbon Democrats. What remain obscure, however, are the social factors that made escape possible for some former slaves like Andrew Boone while keeping most others effectively bottled up. His being young and also single obviously made rapid long-distance movement much easier to contemplate and also to achieve than it might have been for an older person or for a head of household, particularly for someone burdened with responsibilities to a multigenerational extended family. It may turn out that black urbanization conformed to patterns evident among other groups of nineteenth-century urban migrants, patterns that saw single young adults take the leading role in making the break toward this new way of life.

It appears that gender will be a critical factor in the differentiation of various migratory streams. A recent study comparing black urban migration to the movement of European immigrants outlines some of the methods that young southern males used to gain employment in the urban North. In heavy industry, most jobs could be taken seasonally; this enabled many southern black heads of household to use the fall and winter

70. Andre Boone in *North Carolina Narratives*, in Rawick (ed.), *American Slave*, XIV, 137.

to earn badly needed cash income, supplements of particular importance either when crops failed or when commodity prices plummeted precipitously. Strike breaking also offered another source of extra income, although such interludes were by their very nature both temporary and dangerous. Work on railroads and steamship lines also provided temporary access to the urban North.⁷¹ Taken together, these strategies expanded the numbers of southern blacks with sufficient exposure to the rhythms of life in the urban North to be able to take advantage of the opportunities created by the sudden advent of World War I.

Education was apparently of major importance in directing the migratory paths undertaken by younger southern black women. Particularly for the female graduates of "normal" schools, there generally seemed to be a healthy market in segregated schools, both North and South. Graduates of southern "normal" schools such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Burroughs made careers for themselves working in and building black-controlled educational institutions in predominantly rural areas of the Deep South. Other children of the freedpeople, such as Mary Church Terrell and Ida Wells Barnett, moved northward after concluding that the Deep South was inhospitable to black female social activism. The work of these social activists proved quite significant, since they played leading roles in creating the black-controlled infrastructure of urban social and benevolent institutions that helped ease the transition to northern urban life for succeeding groups of southern immigrants.⁷² In fact, the dispersion of these young women into a number of different urban areas created a network of urban pioneers, a network that provided succeeding waves of black emigrants with introductions to the intricacies of urban life that often spelled the difference between success and failure.⁷³

71. John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), 30-40.

72. Alfreda M. Duster (ed.), *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago, 1970); Kathleen C. Berkeley, "Southern Normal Schools and the Creation of Black Female Networks, 1865-1910," paper, Southern Historical Association annual meeting, 1981.

73. Vincent P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of a Minority Community, 1900-1950* (Philadelphia, 1979); Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967).

IV

If the historic task of emancipation involved the incorporation of freed black laborers into the post-Civil War American industrial economy, then scholars will create a viable synthesis only by connecting the study of emancipation to the social processes that were simultaneously leading to the making of an American working class. The same sets of push/pull factors that transformed the children of the freedpeople into a pool of surplus labor also worked to detach native-born white Americans and European immigrants from their agrarian roots and then to direct them toward the industrial economy. To discover that urban pioneers from every racial and ethnic group employed parallel strategies to cope with the challenges of urbanization is to reveal the commonality of their experiences. And the black encounter with urban racism bears comparison to the discrimination leveled at other immigrant groups, since only through such comparisons can scholars accurately assess the impact of discrimination.

These conceptual schemata represent a significant departure from the general tendency to view emancipation as an experience separate and apart from the main currents of American social development. Yet no comprehensive analysis of processes of social change within postslavery Afro-American communities can possibly emerge unless that analysis comes to grips with the revolutionary transformations that post-Civil War industrialization brought to the whole of American society. Only by writing with an eye toward this larger social dynamic can students of emancipation give meaning to the varied contexts through which social dynamics within the black community mediated the evolution of the main lines of social development in postslavery Afro-American life.

COMMENT

ERIC FONER

I commend Armstead Robinson for an excellent examination of the issues facing those now studying the crisis of emancipation and its impact upon American society. Not only has he managed in a brief compass to summarize a good deal of the most recent historical literature, but he has also identified some of the crucial areas in which more work needs to be done before we can arrive at a fully satisfying understanding of emancipation and its legacy, a legacy in some ways still unresolved in America today. My comments, therefore, are more in the way of elaborations on some of Robinson's themes than criticisms of his approach or conclusions. They focus on the period that has for some time now engaged my own attention: Reconstruction.

I fully endorse Robinson's contention that the emancipation of the slaves did make a difference to blacks and whites alike in nineteenth-century America. If this remark seems to belabor the obvious, it is merely because so much of the historical literature of the past decade has tended to belittle the impact of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and emancipation. Studies of national politics have insisted that the postwar constitutional amendments and civil rights laws in no way altered the fundamentally state-oriented nature of the federal system. Investigations of southern social structure have stressed how the planter class retained control of its land and social prestige; the social revolution envisioned by blacks and white radicals like Thaddeus Stevens did not take place. Historians transfixed by theories of

