Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States

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The ratification of the 13th Amendment in December 1865 marked the crowning achievement in the history of American abolitionism. The sesquicentennial anniversary of this amendment has led to a recent avalanche of scholarship on the downfall of American slavery and the coming of freedom for more than four million slaves. Who abolished slavery? How was slavery abolished? Why was slavery abolished? Although deceptively simple, these questions have fueled debate among historians for the last 150 years, a conversation that prolific historian Ira Berlin enters into with his latest work *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States of America*. Originally delivered as the Nathan I. Huggins Lectures at Harvard University’s Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Berlin’s interpretation offers a provocative framework for constructing the history of abolition and emancipation in the United States.

This short think piece is reminiscent, in both size and premise, of Eric Foner’s *Nothing But Freedom* (1), and can be read as the prequel to Foner’s focus on the post-emancipation world. Berlin does not set out to write ‘a full history of abolition in the United States’, but instead offers historians ‘a framework by which that history might be constructed’ (p. 11). Berlin relies on a thorough grasp of the secondary literature and wide familiarity with the primary sources to build his framework for understanding American emancipation. In particular, Berlin sees his work challenging two analogous perspectives in the debates over American slavery’s demise. The first is the popular-culture view that characterizes President Lincoln as the ‘Great Emancipator’ and attributes the downfall of American slavery to a single event, the Civil War – a perspective recently made in Steven Spielberg’s award-winning film *Lincoln* (2012). The second perspective, latterly argued by João Pedro Marques’s essay in the edited collection *Who Abolished Slavery?* (2), downplays the actions of slaves and people of color in demise of slavery, while giving credit for emancipation to white European and American abolitionists and politicians.

Berlin counters these two lines of thinking by asserting that American emancipation was ‘a long process that stretched across a near-century’ (p. 18), which depended upon the commitment and actions of slaves, former slaves, and descendants of slaves. Berlin joins a growing number of scholars who argue that American emancipation was a protracted process, similar to the way historians have described the downfall of slavery and the coming of emancipation in the Caribbean and Latin America. While historians such as Jim Downs
have described American emancipation as a process that continued well after 1865, Berlin argues that this process began with the outbreak of the American Revolution. His call for writing the ‘longue durée of emancipation’ (p. 20) also invites comparison to Richard Newman’s challenge in The Transformation of American Abolitionism (3), which encouraged historians to reconnect the history of the first-wave abolitionists (gradualists) with the history of the second-wave abolitionists (immediatists). In short, Berlin’s framework for writing the 89-year history of American slavery and emancipation is both powerful and provocative.

In three chapters, Berlin succinctly covers the struggle over slavery from the American Revolution to the Civil War. His framework for emancipation consists of four principles: ‘the centrality of black people, the commitment to universal freedom, the necessity of racial equality, and the ubiquity of violence’ (p. 46). Berlin argues that taking the ‘long view’ illuminates these four distinctive characteristics of American emancipation, which are ‘often blurred when placed in the context of the shifting tactics and strategies’ (p. 19) used by abolitionists. The traditional periodization of American anti-slavery is divided into two phases. The first involves the slow legal decline of slavery in the North, marked by the efforts of gradualists and colonizationists. The second often begins with the publication of David Walkers’ Appeal (1829) or William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator newspaper (1831), and is highlighted by a more radical and militant movement for immediate and uncompensated emancipation. Berlin’s framework encourages historians to move away from this bipartite division, and, instead, examine the process of emancipation from beginning to end. Such a perspective leaves little doubt that black people were essential to the demise of American slavery. Berlin expands on each element in his first chapter, and stresses how the long view of slavery’s demise exposes the realities of emancipation. Although emancipation took nearly a century to achieve, Berlin is careful not to present this history as a linear progressive march towards freedom, but instead, he shows how the road to abolition was long, bumpy, and often times uncertain.

Berlin uses the last two chapters to demonstrate how each principle of emancipation remained ubiquitous throughout any period of American slavery. The second chapter starts with the American Revolution, where the principles of emancipation took shape. Berlin does an impressive job of demonstrating how the Revolution set the stage for American abolitionism over the next century. Building on the works of scholars such as Benjamin Quarles, Gary Nash, Sylvia Frey, and Shane White, Berlin illustrates how African Americans wholeheartedly embraced the idea of egalitarianism espoused by the Declaration of Independence and the biblical precepts of evangelical awakenings. The Revolution also offered slaves opportunities to secure their freedom through official and unofficial channels, resulting in the first mass exodus from American slavery. The growth of a large northern free black population in the United States coupled with the Revolution’s rhetoric of liberty and equality created questions about the status of African Americans outside of slavery. Over the next century, the black community would use the promises of the Declaration of Independence to not only fight slavery, but also to support their demands for equal rights as citizens.

Berlin also shows how slaves, in the aftermath of the Revolution, challenged their masters in court for freedom. Drawing on a number of well-known freedom suits such as Quok Walker, James Somerset, and the descendants of ‘Irish Nell’, he shows how slaves found success in securing their freedom through legal means. Northern free blacks also started demanding full rights as American citizens, including the right to vote, serve in the militia, and own property. Although judicial emancipations played a significant role in bring about the abolition of slavery in the North, Berlin explains how the confrontation between idealism and materialism ultimately turned the tables in favor of slaveholders. This transformation occurred for a number of reasons: the debate over property rights, the ratification of a new Constitution which gave slaveholders disproportionate representation, growing white fears over events such as the Haitian Revolution and Gabriel’s Conspiracy, and Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, which condemned black people as naturally inferior while also calling for their removal from the United States. By the turn of the century, Berlin concludes, the American legal system ‘became a bulwark of slavery’ (p. 98).

Berlin also spends time unfolding the complicated relationship between African Americans and early white
abolitionists. He shows how African Americans appreciated white abolitionists’ attack on prejudice, but had little tolerance for their ‘counsel of “patience and forbearance”’ or ‘preachy moralism’ (p. 84). Frustrated by the glacial pace of emancipation in the North, African Americans became more aggressive in their demand for a swift end to slavery. One major theme that runs throughout this entire work is how black and white abolitionists often held different, if not competing, visions for emancipation. In this period, early white abolitionists sought the slow legal death of slavery, while the black community became more aggressive in their calls for immediate and universal abolition. By 1820, Berlin illustrates how white abolitionists, embarrassed by their failures to fully remove slavery from the North or make headway in the southern states, ‘largely gave up the battle’ (p. 104) against slavery, leaving a significant void in the anti-slavery cause. Black leadership, however, supported by a phalanx of African-American institutions (masonic lodges, churches, anti-slavery societies, etc.), filled this void, keeping the anti-slavery cause alive in the United States.

The final chapter begins with an overview of the Missouri Compromise and how this settlement shook the republic to the core and set the anti-slavery movement onto a new path. Once again, Berlin illustrates how African Americans were at the center of these changes. He shows how the black community became ‘less deferential, less gradualist and more direct, more strident, more confrontational – in a word more militant’ (p. 120). Berlin uses the cases of Denmark Vesey and Daniel Walker to prove his point. He shows how both leaders embraced the principles of emancipation: they demanded the immediate and universal end of slavery, encouraged confrontation with slaveholders, and declared themselves Sons of the Revolution who marched under the banner of the Declaration of Independence. Although the shift from gradualism to militancy has been examined by a number of different historians such as Jim Stewart and Eric Foner, Berlin offers a new perspective on this topic by focusing on how the four elements of emancipation remained constant during this period of intense change in abolitionism.

Berlin also asserts that African Americans were the ones who brought the demands ‘for an immediate end to slavery and the creation of a slave-free world … to a new generation of anti-slavery whites, most notably William Lloyd Garrison’ (p. 130). To make his point, Berlin mentions how two of Baltimore’s most influential black leaders, Jacob Greener and William Watkins, converted Garrison to immediate abolitionism. Berlin may push his argument a bit too far here when he claims that Garrison’s adoption of immediatism led him to reject ‘the teachings of [Benjamin] Lundy and other anti-slavery colonizationists’ (p. 131). It is interesting to note that Lundy reprinted British Quaker Elizabeth Heyrick’s influential work *Immediate, Not Gradual Emancipation* (1824) in his newspaper, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, well before Garrison joined him as coeditor. Although Garrison disagreed with Lundy over many issues, they shared a strong disdain for slavery and a casual perusal of Lundy’s newspaper shows that he too was open to the idea of immediate emancipation. Although wide ideological gulfs separated gradualists from immediatists, it might be useful to think about how Garrisonian and African-American abolitionists selectively adapted aspects of the gradualist and colonizationist movements rather than rejecting them wholesale.

With the rise in immediatism and militant anti-slavery activism, Berlin sees the clashes between African Americans and slaveholders becoming increasingly more violent, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Using the bloody Christiana Riot (1851), Berlin argues that ‘black people would settle for nothing less than freedom and that freedom could be obtained only by violence’ (p. 153). Berlin concludes the chapter with an interesting discussion of the *Dred Scott* decision and how white abolitionists protested the verdict, but at the same time, were not prepared to offer blacks a place in the body politic. African Americans, like so many times before, protested this decision on the grounds of egalitarianism, which they argued was a central precept of the United States. Berlin’s epilogue covers the American Civil War, where he brings his work full circle. He proves that ‘wartime abolition differed little from that of the more than half-century of struggle for universal freedom that had preceded it’ (p. 175). Securing their freedom in a maelstrom of violence brought on by the Civil War, Berlin demonstrates how slaves became indispensable to the Union Army. By 1863, the questions of citizenship and racial equality became central to the debate over the status blacks in the post-emancipation world. Once again, African Americans answered
this question by demanding full rights as citizens of the United States, which they felt were owed to them since the Revolutionary War.

The Long Emancipation brims with possibilities for writing the long history of American emancipation. Some will take issue with Berlin’s framework, but I agree with his overarching thesis that emancipation was a process, dependent on African Americans who were the ‘yeast in the ferment – the active element that was critical for the growth of abolition’ (p. 40). I do have a question about the place of British and other foreign abolitionists in the long history of American emancipation. Scholars such as David Brion Davis and Edward Rugemer have demonstrated the important influence British abolitionists had in the downfall of American slavery, but I am curious as to their place in Berlin’s framework. Where does George Thompson or Thomas Clarkson fit into the long history of American slavery’s demise? Moreover, Berlin argues that the debates over race and the relationship between whites and blacks ‘emerged simultaneously with any discussion of emancipation’ (p. 30). How then does this discussion change with the inclusion of other races and/or groups (Latin Americans, Native Americans, Irish Americans, etc.)? Finally, what happens to this framework when American abolitionists fought foreign slavery or traveled abroad? Episodes such as the American campaign against British East Indian slavery in the 1840s or Henry Highland Garnet’s work in creating the Cuban Anti-Slavery Committee of New York in the 1870s perhaps suggest a fifth ubiquitous theme in the long emancipation: the transnational reach of the process. Nevertheless, The Long Emancipation provides a provocative and powerful framework that scholars will use to rewrite the history of American slavery’s demise.

Notes


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