Unrequited Toil: A History of United States Slavery

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20 years ago, Ira Berlin pushed the fields of African American history and the history of slavery in the United States in radically new directions. From the 1970s through the 1990s, historians had produced scores of works, scattered across specialized journals and obscure monographs. Berlin was able to take in the totality of these works, synthesize them, and then create a powerful new interpretation of African American history from its colonial origins to its abolition in civil war in the 1860s.[1] In the two decades since publication of Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America, historians have continued apace with the production of high quality journal articles and monographs, much of it specialized, too much of it obscure. Indeed, historians have been prodigious at producing studies of race, slavery, and empire over the course of four centuries and across a sprawling expanse that includes the Atlantic world and the North and South American continents. Unfortunately, even specialists find it difficult to keep pace with the steady output of monographs and articles examining everything from the changing dynamics of Native American slavery to sexual violence in the slave trades, from the ways that capitalism transformed colonial slavery to the ways that slavery underwrote 19th-century Anglo-American capitalism.

Over the past decade, Calvin Schermerhorn has made significant contributions to that scholarship in a series of books, articles, and chapters in edited volumes.[2] Now, with Unrequited Toil: A History of United States Slavery, Schermerhorn joins a talented group of historians who have brought coherence to that sprawling body of scholarship on slavery and racism, empire and abolition, capitalism and slave-produced commodities.[3]

Unrequited Toil offers scholars, students, and interested readers a slim, well-written narrative and analysis of the great growth and then dramatic collapse of slavery in the United States in the century stretching between independence and the end of Reconstruction. In the classroom, Unrequited Toil offers a sound introduction to slavery in the United States to undergraduates, and a brief but comprehensive synthesis for graduate students. Specialists in slavery will appreciate the fresh interpretive insights and claims yielded by reducing a century of continental slavery and trans-Atlantic capitalism to 240 pages. Non-specialists will appreciate the fresh synthesis of a generation’s worth of scholarship on slavery. Finally, Unrequited Toil offers general readers a fast-paced narrative that covers the big scope of slavery in the United States. It’s a book that deserves a wide readership. Schermerhorn moves effectively between providing a wide-lens view of forces that drove slavery’s tremendous growth and expansion, and the day-to-day details that
shaped the lives of slaves and slaveholders. For example, Schermerhorn provide a geo-political analysis of the developments and machinations that led Napoleon to sell the vast Louisiana Purchase to the United States. This is followed with the narrative of slave Charles Ball, which Schermerhorn uses to examine in painful detail the experiences of slaves snatched from the Upper South and forced to march south to a life of unrequited and seemingly unceasing toil on Deep South cotton plantations. Schermerhorn also effectively moves back and forth between the great emphases of African American history under slavery: what states, slaveholders, and other whites did to slaves; and what slaves did for themselves. The chapters on the ‘quotidian’ lives of slaves, sexual violence, and ‘narrative’ are models of social, cultural, and gender history. Schermerhorn effectively weaves together social history, imperial history, political history, and the economic history of slavery into something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Organized both topically and chronologically, Unrequited Toil pivots on a series of important developments and changes stretching from the 1770s through the 1870s. The first third of the book centers on the transition from colonial slavery in the 1770s to cotton-based capitalist slavery in the 1820s. In Schermerhorn’s telling, ‘the American Revolution decided the question of independence, but it did not decide whether slavery was a residue of the colonial past or a force shaping the future United States’ (p. 20). In this indeterminate period from the 1770s through the 1790s, slaves, free blacks, and a small band of antislavery allies fought to make it a residue. Slaves in the North and South freed themselves through military service or through flight. In the North, slaves and free blacks joined with well-meaning whites to implement a series of gradual abolition laws at the state level. Although slavery would die a slow death in the northern states, by the 1820s it had largely become a vestige of the colonial past, even if a few thousand slaves continued to toil in northern bondage into the 1820s.

People of African descent in the southern states faced a much more difficult task. In the southern states, where slavery was most entrenched, the War for Independence was also ‘a war to preserve and extend chattel slavery in the Chesapeake south to the Georgia Lowcountry’ (p. 12). Thousands of southern slaves managed to gain freedom through flight, service to the British, or service to the Continental Army or state militias. Nonetheless, hundreds of thousands more remained trapped in slavery in the South. By the 1780s, trends towards abolition in the North and consolidation in the South seemed clear. The new federal government undertook a series of half-hearted, half-effective antislavery measures, which was probably the best that could be expected from a federal government dominated by slaveholders. The Northwest Ordinance kept slavery mostly out of the old Northwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, but racial subordination survived across the North. Challenging much recent scholarship that characterizes the Constitution of 1787 as an essentially proslavery document, Schermerhorn instead contends that ‘the Constitution was a half-measure’ for slaveholders who failed to obtain ‘absolute protections for slave property’ (pp. 30, 31). Slaveholders would soon enough seek to make that half-measure full.

The indeterminate period ended in the 1790s when a series of contingent events laid the groundwork for a ‘cotton empire’ that would be forged across the southern interior. In the early 1790s, slaves from the French colony of Saint-Domingue supplied British mills with nearly a quarter of their raw cotton. Just as British merchants were ramping up production of cotton cloth, the Haitian Revolution dramatically cut cotton exports. British merchants searching for new sources of cotton eagerly sought cotton from North American planters seeking new cash crops and markets in the aftermath of the War for Independence. Between 1790 and 1820 production of cotton in the United States would increase by more than 1000 per cent, with the bulk of that cotton ending up in British mills. Building on work from historians Sven Beckert and Edward Baptist, Schermerhorn uses the concept of ‘war capitalism’ to explain slavery’s great growth and expansion across the southern interior.[4] In Schermerhorn’s telling, ‘war capitalism was less a betrayal of the Revolutionary republicanism than a strategic response to Britain’s industrial revolution, which gave American planters an interest in producing cotton bales for market’ (p. 34). War capitalism abetted cotton production by using the resources of the state to purchase European claims to the lower Mississippi Valley; to drive the Spanish and British from the Gulf Coast borderlands; to seize Native American lands; to survey and sell those lands; to forge commercial treaties with Great Britain and to fight wars for better commercial treaties. State power also defined people of African descent as chattel and recognized slaveholder property
rights as being near absolute. Finally, state power sanctioned the unceasing worlds of violence and terror that kept slaves in slavery, made the interstate slave trade possible, and increased the efficiency of cotton-production four fold between 1800 and 1860. Borrowing from Edward Baptist, Schermerhorn notes that slave productivity increased four-fold between 1800 and 1860. But while Manchester mill workers exhibited the same increase in productivity, Deep South slaves’ increases came from relentless whippings rather than steam and water power. Under war capitalism and state support for slavery, ‘torture became part of cotton’s business model’ (p. 41).

Slaveowners and their allies resorted to ‘war capitalism’ because slave and free black resistance seemed ceaseless in the half-century between the 1770s and the 1820s. In fighting against ‘black insurgency,’ slaveowners and their allies ultimately created what Schermerhorn aptly terms the ‘slave security state’ (p. 73). The 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion in Virginia came on the tail end of a series of revolts, rebellions, and challenges to slavery that stretched back to the 1790s. War capitalism and the slave security state came into their own as planters and their allies battled Gabriel’s Rebellion (Virginia, 1800), the Easter Rebellion Scares (Virginia, 1802), the Louisiana Rebellion of 1811, the flight of 3,400 Chesapeake slaves to British forces during the War of 1812, and Native American and free black challenges to the emerging plantation order emanating from Spanish Florida’s Negro Fort. Andrew Jackson’s destruction of Negro Fort in 1818 quelled direct, existential challenges to the plantation order expanding into the Deep South interior, but people of African descent took up the battle against slavery from elsewhere.

Slaves continued to run away whenever desperation and opportunity met to permit slave flight. Flight and rebellion – real or suspected – provoked new, more stringent regulations on the lives of free and enslaved blacks, and new, more ghastly punishments and executions. In 1829, black Bostonian David Walker published his pamphlet Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1829), which called for outright slave rebellion. Barely a year after Walker’s pamphlet began appearing in southern port cities, Virginian Nat Turner led an uprising that resulted in the deaths of sixty white people. Nat Turner’s rebellion was concomitant with uprisings in the Caribbean that gave British abolitionists the advantage necessary to push emancipation through Parliament. Conversely, planters and their allies in the United States committed themselves more deeply to slavery in response to new financial and market innovations that promised even greater profits from slavery. They also committed themselves more deeply than ever to war capitalism and the slave security state. The Deep South plantation system was not something that just happened; planters and their allies used the state to create it through ceaseless violence and terror.

New forms of money and credit that became widespread in the 1820s and 1830s financed a new round of war capitalism, an enhanced slave security state, and expanding, trans-Atlantic webs of commerce in slaves and cotton. Schermerhorn’s assessment is blunt: ‘Capitalism transformed American slavery by radically commercializing it. And finance was decisive in that transformation. Without banking and credit there would have been no war capitalism and no cotton empire’ (pp. 76–7). Schermerhorn details how British firms invested in US banks, mostly in the North. Those banks then issued notes, which could be exchanged for slaves or cotton, whether in the slave markets of Norfolk or the slave and cotton markets of New Orleans. In the late 1820s, Louisiana planters used their state government to underwrite a bond issue. The bonds securitized slaves and led to the issue of slave-backed securities (much like the mortgage-backed securities that nearly wrecked the global financial markets in the 2000s). Other states followed Louisiana’s lead. Planters used the proceeds from securitized and mortgaged slaves to purchase more land and more slaves (who were also securitized). By the early 1830s, the Deep South and the Upper South were awash in money and credit. The price of everything related to slavery and cotton soared. In the overheated market, one planter mortgaged his land and slaves for the equivalent of $156 million in 2017 dollars. The trans-Atlantic slave-cotton-capitalism market fluctuated wildly between the 1820s and the 1860s. Whether in boom or bust, the vicissitudes of slavery and capitalism inflicted havoc on the lives of slaves.

The middle third of Unrequited Toil examines the worlds created by the enslaved within the ever-shifting ‘constellation of constraints’ (p. 92) created by trans-Atlantic slave-cotton-capitalism and the unrelenting demands on their labor. But as Schermerhorn shows, slaves managed to establish ‘human ties against a
dehumanizing institution’ (p. 92). For one, the raw power that underwrote enslavement created ‘a contest between enslaved people’s investment in manhood or womanhood’ and ‘enslavers’ blunting of gender identities as part of a means of social control.’ That conflict produced ‘a gender fluidity that existed in the spaces between enslaved peoples intentions and enslavers’ constraints’ (p. 99). Within those spaces, both slaves and enslavers won battles. Enslavers never permitted children to become men or women. Men were boys until they became aged uncles. Women were girls until they became aged aunts. Slavery emasculated; as Fredrick Douglass put it, ‘manhood’ was ‘lost in chattelhood’ (p. 101). But while whites used ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ to neuter and infantilize blacks, slaves turned these names into terms of endearment, affection, and respect. The gendering of slaves also forced men and women to resort to different strategies for creating networks and institutions that created bonds of friendship and family beyond the confines of the workplace. The ability of men to work in the trades and transportation created one set of networks; women’s primacy in church and childbirth allowed them to create a different set of networks.

Slave-cotton-capitalism ripped apart families and friendships; the enslaved created their own families and affections from what was left. Many slaves and slave families were the product of sexual violence. Sexual violence was endemic to slavery, a feature, not a bug. Beyond the horrors and traumas inflicted by rapists on their victims, rape and sexual violence complicated slaves’ efforts to establish relations and families. The incidents and stories that Schermerhorn uses in the chapter on sexual violence are stomach-turning and head-shaking. Virginian enslaver John Francis sought to rape his own enslaved daughter, Peggy. Peggy and her companion Patrick then beat the enslaver to death and burned his remains in a house fire. Sentenced to death, Peggy and Patrick saw their sentences converted to transportation and sale out of the state. Slave traders began grooming girls as young as seven for prostitution. The infamous slave-traders Isaac and James Franklin bragged about their rapes in their correspondence, purchased girls specifically to turn them into sex slaves for themselves and their clients, and openly sought girls for sale as ‘fancy maids.’ More than anything, the ‘ritualization’ of sexual violence ‘exemplifies the moral evil inherent in such human subjection’ (p. 125). Yet sexual violence also provided opportunities for a few slaves to free themselves and their families from slavery. Corinna Hinton’s marriage to the slavetrader Silas Omohundro allowed her to move to Philadelphia and freedom. Before Hinton, Sally Hemmings made a ‘choiceless choice of allying’ with Thomas Jefferson to gain some kind of freedom for herself and family. Slavery forced thousands of such choiceless choices on the enslaved.

The final third of the book focuses on the seeming triumph of cotton-slavery in the 1850s, its destruction in the 1860s, and the battle to re-impose white supremacy from the 1860s through the 1890s. The totality and significance of slavery in the United States invited ‘narrative elaboration’ (p. 149). Literature about slavery flourished in the 1850s, as abolitionists, anti-slavery whites, and pro-slavery whites produced three distinct narratives. Slaves and their closest allies wrote abolitionist scripts that laid bare the horrors of slavery. Male slaves positioned themselves as more Christian and more manly than slaveholders. Slaveowning gave enslavers power that would always be abused, whether by breaking up families, using physical violence against male slaves, or sexual violence against female slaves. Slaveowning made it impossible to be a good man or a good Christian at the same time that it prevented black men and women from realizing their God-given abilities. The anti-slavery narrative – exemplified by Uncle Tom’s Cabin – argued that blacks were fit for freedom and free labor, but not in the United States. Emancipation was a necessity in the anti-slavery narrative, but so was removal and colonization. Proslavery narratives held that slavery benefitted blacks more than whites while creating a society insulated from the harshest effects of the market.

Unrequited Toil’s final three chapters draw on recent scholarship to narrate and analyze sectional conflicts from the 1810s through the 1850s; the ways in which a war to restore the Union became a war to end slavery; and the temporary triumph of black freedom in the 1860s before being squelched by the overriding imperatives of white supremacy in the 1870s. From the 1810s through the 1850s, conflicts over slavery were frequently conflicts between northern whites’ ‘democratic entitlements’ and southern whites ever-increasing range of claimed property rights. Disunion began as a means to save slavery and patriarchy in the Confederacy. Disunion and war became the means by which northerners would vindicate democratic self-government for the Union. Slaves immediately turned it into their own war. Slave flight transpired wherever
Union armies appeared, and the United States grew increasingly dependent on the labor, knowledge, and soldiering of former slaves. War-time emancipation took a heavy toll on bondspersons who faced a series of competing pressures from federal officials who wanted their labor to produce cotton, ex-Confederates who had no intention of giving up on white supremacy, and their own desires to reunite with lost family members. Reconstruction ultimately faltered because of white northerners’ rejection of racial justice in favor of inter-sectional peace and economic recovery for whites. Schermerhorn’s powerful conclusion succinctly ties the sins of the United States’ past to its continuing, contemporary racial injustices.

Three years ago I reviewed Patrick Rael’s Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777–1865 for this journal. In that book, Rael noted that ‘rewriting the history of slavery’s long death in the United States is still under way.’ In my review, I noted that Rael’s book went far in writing new, powerful histories of slavery and subordination in connected Atlantic and continental worlds. Unrequited Toil stands side-by-side with Eighty-Eight Years and the best of those new histories of slavery.


The author has responded to say ‘I have no response except to thank Dr. Hammond most sincerely for such a thoughtful and thorough (not to mention favourable) review’.

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