

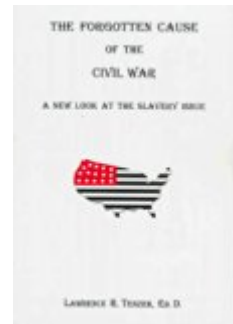
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lawrence R. Tenzer. *The Forgotten Cause of the Civil War: A New Look at the Slavery Issue*. Manahawkin, N.J.: Scholars' Publishing House, 1997. xxvi + 273 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9628348-0-6.

James Walvin. *Questioning Slavery*. London: Routledge, 1996. xi + 202 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-15356-0; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-15357-7.

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Slavery is at the heart of the modern western European, American, and African experiences in respect to economics, social customs, and moral theorizing. So much is written on the subject because there is still so much to learn from it. James Walvin takes a broad look at the development of the institution in the British-speaking areas of North America while Lawrence Tenzer probes one particular reason for its ending. Walvin offers a refreshing synthesis of the literature that has appeared in the last twenty-five years, while Tenzer produces an interesting but debatable reason for the North's hostility to the peculiar institution.

James Walvin has been engaged in investigating British slavery, especially in the Caribbean, for several decades. Besides authoring numerous books, he is one of the editors of the British Journal *Slavery and Abolition* and thus has been in a position to observe the changing flow of studies on the institution. His work synthesizes the recent literature on the growth and demise of slavery in the British-speaking American world and thereby performs a welcome service for scholars who wish to keep abreast of the field. Nevertheless, the book is a sketch of scholarly developments that the author has molded to his purposes; as Walvin states in his introduction, the work does not present the points at issue in the innumerable controversies that rage over slavery, nor does it seek to include all topics relating to the institution. Walvin's subjects—actually, his chapter headings—are the European experience with slavery in the past, the origins of the institution, the reason for the enslavement of Africans, the impact of slavery upon the developing Eu-

ropean economy, the means of domination and its effect upon the enslaved, the different roles of male and female slaves, slave resistance, and the demise of the institution. However, within these headings are distinct themes that Walvin hammers home.

First, slavery was wholly an economic institution. Its purpose everywhere was to provide a labor supply. As an economic institution, slavery stimulated the European economy and assisted the rise of capitalism by fostering extensive commercial exchange between Europe and the Americas and by spreading the use of banking institutions to finance the slave trade. Into this discussion Walvin then injects the question, why Africans? His answer is twofold. First, European racial prejudice against Africans can be traced back to antiquity and certainly to Elizabethan England and, second, the other supply of cheap labor, Indians, either died out or proved unproductive. Indeed, Walvin insists that the racial argument developed because slaveowners found it the best means to justify slavery in the political realm—his evidence here is primarily with the West Indies planters.

A second theme running throughout the book is the physical violence associated with slavery: "The Atlantic slave system was conceived in and nurtured by violence" (p. 50), and "Once again it is impossible to understand the realities of slave life without confronting the ubiquity, the inescapability, of physical punishment" (p. 58). Walvin notes that violence varied considerably with demography and circumstance: it was less violent in the American colonies and the United States, and it

was worst in Haiti and Barbados. The extent of violence, Walvin intimates, ultimately caused the institution's downfall. In the eighteenth century, a humanitarian sensibility arose that attacked European practices of cruelty. This sensibility ultimately was the backbone of the moral crusade against slavery in Great Britain and the United States. And against it, slaveholders had few defenses except race.

A third theme that Walvin develops is the unusual extent of paradoxes involved with slavery. This theme is clearly associated with the recent literature because it is here that Walvin makes use of the expanding literature on females and slave community social life. Only a few of these ironies will be illustrated in this review. Slaveholders based their public defense of slavery on race and keeping the races separate; yet interracial sex in the Caribbean was the norm, not a deviation. Slavery required domination of the slave, yet as a system slavery could not operate without individual freedom; the totally dominated slave was economically worthless. Slaves were property who were legally denied the fruits of their labor; yet in the Caribbean islands—Jamaica in particular—a slave market economy arose in which, Walvin states, some twenty percent of the currency was in the hands of the slaves.

The paradoxes of slavery involve some of the most problematic parts of the book, and the problem has now been with the profession since the 1960s. Slavery was a system of oppression, but to follow the thought to its logical conclusion results in slaves having no autonomy and no personality—it leads to Stanley Elkins' *Sambo*. Thus we enter into the realm of resistance, negotiation, and the give-and-take of relations between master and slave. Some of this discussion, as it always has been, is strained. One simply cannot have extreme exploitation of slaves while simultaneously positing a vibrant, autonomous slave community. With this reservation aside, Walvin's book is an excellent read and highly informative.

Of a different character is Lawrence Tenzer's book on the "hidden" cause of the Civil War. Tenzer's hidden cause is northern fear that slavery knew no racial boundaries and that eventually the institution would claim northerners as victims. Leaving aside momentarily the thesis, Tenzer's work inadvertently raises disturbing epistemological and methodological questions.

Tenzer's argument is straightforward and quite logically presented. Slavery's definition depended on the mother's race; by law, any African blood meant an in-

dividual could be enslaved. However, because of interracial liaisons, mulattoes appeared that began losing a dark skin color. Over the decades, a sizeable number of slaves appeared who had light skins: skin coloration, in fact, was ceasing to become the mark of slavery. That circumstance led Tenzer to conclude that instead of African slavery, the South was practicing white slavery. Race by the 1850s ceased to be the distinguishing feature of southern slavery. Northerners recognized this and feared that the continued existence of slavery would lead to northerners becoming enslaved. Because skin color no longer was any real guide, southerners could claim northern whites to be their runaway slaves and recapture them via the Fugitive Slave Law. Tenzer demonstrates that the term "white slavery" abounded in the appeals of abolitionists and Republicans and formed one of their main arguments to restrict and dismantle slavery. Thus the dread of "white slavery" becomes one of the hidden causes of the Civil War.

The documentation is not in question. Most historians of the 1850s will find few documentary discoveries here, and virtually all scholars have run into this argument. In the literature, it is more appropriately subsumed under the "slave power conspiracy theory." The author calls it a hidden cause of the Civil War because he defines cause as "any political or social dynamic which exacerbated the tension between the North and the South" (p. xi). This definition is too broad for me, and what Tenzer has focused upon is one strand of argument that indeed existed in political antislavery. Tenzer would stand, I think, on firmer ground if he argued that northerners feared the competition between free and slave labor rather than stressing the apprehension about whites becoming slaves, but his basic point is correct: this argument existed and supporting evidence for it is unquestionable. It is at this point that epistemological and methodological problems arise.

The methodological problem is Tenzer's reliance entirely upon documentary evidence taken from political tracts and speeches and then imputing from these sources motivations and concerns. Tenzer has done what virtually all historians—and particularly those interested in political ideology—have done, and that is to rely upon the written and spoken word. This work should serve as a caution against a too ready acceptance of parts of argument and a belief that words alone are sufficient to reconstruct the past. The problem is that Tenzer wants to argue that antebellum Americans did not think of slavery in racial terms. His methodological shortcoming is that while his documentary evidence is undisputed, he

does not balance it against other evidence or try to assess whether it was central or a derivative part of more important arguments. To be specific, the whole South—with the exception of some strange folk like George Fitzhugh—justified slavery on the basis of race and claimed that white liberty depended on black slavery. More important, northern Democrats only sustained southern institutions because of race. If white slavery had indeed been a pervasive fear, northern Democrats would have reacted to it—and they did not. Tenzer is correct that slavery and its legal definition posed problems in regard to skin color, but the whole of the documentary evidence is that southern slavery was African slavery and white Americans knew it.

The epistemological dilemma involves what historians do with the documentary record. In numerous instances, Tenzer yields a long quote from a tract or a speech, frequently of abolitionist origin. He then says northerners had easy access to this material and therefore absorbed the argument. For example, of abolitionist charges that southern slavery included white people, Tenzer summarizes (all in italics), “*The abolitionist newspapers in which accounts of white slavery appeared were widely read*” (p. 37). But historians have few ways of knowing what documents were actually read, how they were received—especially by the multitudes—what lessons were absorbed, and how people responded to them. Just to be precise on the point, Republican speeches probably normally carried five to six major an-

tislavery themes, ranging from morality to economics to political to racial. Which of these prompted concern on the part of the northern public? The epistemological problem—and not just for Tenzer but for those employing the documentary record—is to figure out how the arguments were received and which ones actually motivated behavior. If this sounds familiar, it should. The issue, still unresolved, is the one that haunted the 1970s and 1980s, the one of literary postmodernism and deconstruction: it is the problem of the semiotics of the text.

Although I doubt that historians will accept Tenzer’s thesis, and they will probably be irked by his introductory concern over “political correctness” and his tendency to italicize so frequently, the book is nonetheless worth reading and the problem he poses worth considering. A fear that slavery would encompass whites did exist, although not as strongly as Tenzer would have us believe. The larger framework for consideration—one well suited for class discussion—is what were the long term ramifications of slavery? Could slavery be defined racially and the country be continuously divided into one realm of freedom and one realm of slavery? Were there no repercussions for free society by having slavery in its midst? It is in this area that I think Tenzer makes a worthwhile contribution.

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