

# H-Net Reviews

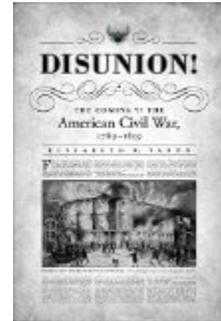
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth R. Varon. *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*. Littlefield History of the Civil War Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 416 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3232-5.

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## A War of Words

In scope, authority, and lucidity, this book by Elizabeth R. Varon deserves to be ranked alongside some of the landmark studies of Civil War causation by Allan Nevins, David Potter, William W. Freehling, and John Ashworth. It is arranged as a chronological narrative, structured around key events: the Missouri crisis; the Nat Turner revolt; the rise of Garrisonian “immediatism” and the Southern response; the Mexican war and its aftermath; and the rising drumbeat of sectional crises in the 1850s, from the Kansas-Nebraska Act to John Brown’s raid. Judged as a work of synthesis it is highly effective, and, given the tremendous amount of material encompassed, this must be considered an enormous achievement. One of the great strengths of this work, one which distinguishes it from several other comparable books, is Varon’s ability to integrate judicious historiographical analysis into her narrative without losing its momentum. In this respect, Varon’s book resembles Peter J. Parish’s *The American Civil War* (1975), which covers much of the terrain surveyed here and is still the shrewdest and most elegant work on the subject.

Varon does a particularly good job of tracing the evolution of southern attitudes to slavery, offering a nuanced account of the transition that it sometimes represented, somewhat schematically, as between the doctrine of “necessary evil” and “positive good.” For example, opponents of Thomas Jefferson Randolph’s “post-nati” emancipation scheme in Virginia in 1831-32 were, she shows, not yet ready to embrace the fully fledged

proslavery ideology that would come to the fore in the 1850s, but they were certain that immediate abolitionism represented a profound and permanent threat. They may have clung to the fantasy of an all-white South at some indeterminate point in the future, but they were at least as certain that the immediatist dream of black equality was, in reality, a nightmare to be avoided at all costs—a cost that may include disunion.

Varon does not, as the dates in her title make clear, engage with the final stage of the drama she is recounting, other than in some brief remarks in an epilogue (the secession crisis, we are told, is to be addressed in a later volume in this new Littlefield History of the Civil War series from University of North Carolina Press). The cessation of the narrative at Harpers Ferry has the effect of implying that by that stage disunion was unstoppable, or at least that the elements were in place which had fatally corroded southern resistance to the idea that disunion was a solution to the perceived threat to slavery. Sixty or more years of talk of disunion had laid the groundwork for the coming crisis, she suggests. Varon’s subject is politics, by which I mean not only the multiple ways in which antebellum Americans could “act” politically, but ultimately, and most importantly, the way in which newspapers and politicians created the terms of debate and provided Americans with ways of thinking about their nation and the challenges it faced.

This book, however, has an even greater ambition

than simply the deft retelling of a familiar story. It is, Varon writes in the introduction, an attempt to “reframe” the issue of Civil War causality by examining sectional conflict over economic and political issues through the prism of language. The organizing idea for the book is an exploration of the way in which the word “disunion” was used in the seventy years preceding the war. The power over the imagination of antebellum Americans held by the word “disunion” has, she suggests, been overlooked by previous historians, yet it offers a “key” to understanding the origins of the war. Disunion rhetoric, Varon writes, “shaped and limited Americans’ political and moral imagination, ultimately discouraging a politics of compromise and lending an aura of inexorability to the cataclysmic confrontation of North and South” (p. 2). The word “disunion” resonated because of its antonym “Union,” which connoted nation, Republic, and all that had been won in the Revolution. The book is also, therefore, a history of discourses of Union, or of the contested ways in which the American nation was imagined, from the celebratory mode of Whig nationalist Edward Everett, to the conception of the Union as a work in progress held up by African Americans and their white supporters. Nationalism and anxiety about disunion were, in fact, two sides of the same coin: the more fervently the idea of a perpetual union was clung to, the more tantalizing and dangerous and thus politically potent was the idea of disunion.

Importantly, Varon emphasizes that she is not using disunion as a synonym for “secession,” which, unlike disunion, had a relatively specific and incontestable meaning and was, in any case, only a mechanism to effect disunion rather than the thing itself. This is an important perception because, as Varon points out, threats of secession were, in fact, relatively isolated in the antebellum era whereas the language of disunion was pervasive. Only on the eve of the Civil War did secession become a viable political program, but Varon’s focus on disunion discourse offers a way of sensing underlying anxieties about the Union that were a precondition for its eventual breakup.

Varon describes five modes in which the word “disunion” was used: as a prophecy, a threat, an accusation, a process, and a program. In practice, some of these categories overlap: the analysis that disunion was an inexorable *process*, manifest in the alienation of the sections, was also, for example, often, a *prophecy* of national ruin as a result. Probably the most important category for Varon’s story is the least nuanced of the five: using disunion as an accusation to hurl at one’s political

enemies. But her schema offers a fruitful methodology for the analysis of antebellum political language. She is able, for example, to highlight the ways in which accusations and predications of disunion structured political conflict within each section as well as between them. In this important sense, the book succeeds in its aim of offering a way of “reframing” the discussion. If defenders of slavery used the threat of disunion as a way to try to bully their opponents into conceding their demands, they also used disunion as an accusation to throw at abolitionists and prophesied that unless, for example, the U.S. mail was censored to remove abolitionist propaganda, disunion would be the inevitable result.

The question is whether this emphasis on disunion discourse is an ingenious and effective organizing device (no bad thing in itself) or whether it offers a fundamentally new perspective. Some will feel that what Varon is doing here is offering an account of how contemporaries described the events that they were witnessing without engaging with the core problem of the underlying causes. There is an important underlying methodological assumption being made, which is that language was, at some level, constitutive of political reality. Varon’s argument, boiled down to its essentials, is that language, both private and public (although mainly public, political language) mattered: only when the language was found to describe a problem, a threat, or a fear were there political consequences. The language of disunion, Varon writes, was “more than a catalyst for political strife—it was an integral part of the course that strife took” (p. 16). Disunion discourse “bred disillusionment with party politics, mistrust of compromise; and, in the 1850s, the expectation that only violent conflict would resolve the debate about slavery once and for all” (p. 16). Varon does not claim that disunion discourse “caused” the war, or made it inevitable. Slavery was inseparable from the problem of union and disunion: no discussion of slavery was possible without fears, threats, or prophecies of disunion being made, while talk of disunion was always, somehow, related to the underlying problem of a country that was half slave and half free. In other words, Varon’s argument is carefully hedged. She knows that language matters but is also aware that it cannot become the whole explanation for historical causation.

Varon rightly notes in the introduction that historians have found it difficult to break free of two alternative paradigms for understanding Civil War causation: on the one hand, the “fundamentalists,” like Eric Foner and James M. McPherson who see slavery as the root cause; and, on the other, the “revisionists,” such as Michael F.

Holt and Freehling, who, while they do not usually deny that slavery was the ultimate underlying issue, argue that the politics and culture of the white North and the white South were what determined when and how conflict came to the fore. Varon attempts to circumvent this dichotomy by suggesting that slavery did not displace other “disunion anxieties” but “encompassed them,” by which she means that fears of economic decay, moral decline, and gender and race disorder became inseparable from the problem of slavery (p. 338). At the risk of oversimplifying her argument, what Varon is trying to do here is to use the methodology of the revisionists (taking political language seriously) to reach the conclusions of the fundamentalists (that the slavery controversy underlay every aspect of the sectional confrontation, and, indeed, structured political life in both North and South). Varon says, understandably, that she “has no wish to revive the tired, threadbare, ‘blundering generation’ argument that blamed fanatical political leaders on both sides for starting a ‘needless war’” (p. 14). Unlike the original revisionists of the interwar years—such historians as James G. Randall and Avery Craven—Varon is clear that “radical abolitionists are not the villains of the sectional drama but the heroes” (pp. 14-15). Yet there are some similarities in the way her argument and that of the revisionists she criticizes are structured. Varon’s is a far more sophisticated account of how politics works, yet,

like the proponents of the “blundering generation” thesis, her argument also relies, at bottom, on the idea that the way ideas were expressed had political implications. Like them, she is interested in the way that sectional problems were talked about as much as the problems themselves, even if she, unlike them, is certainly prepared to accept that slavery was indeed a real problem.

In the end, Varon’s illuminating focus on disunion rhetoric leads to one very clear conclusion: that despite the appeal of nationalism, antebellum Americans spoke and behaved as if their Republic was fragile. The observation that the pre-Civil War United States was inherently unstable because it lacked resistance to strain was one often made by foreign observers. Varon shows conclusively that this was a view shared by Americans. In what amounts to an endorsement of the work of scholars who see republican ideology continuing to influence American politics well into the nineteenth century, Varon argues that the “central premise of antebellum political culture” was that the Republic was in constant danger of moral decay, internal and external subversion, and political collapse (p. 337). Such pessimism was, as we know, well founded. The debate on Civil War causation will continue, but this is a thoughtful effort to circumvent the revisionist/fundamentalist dichotomy, and as good an account of the worldview of antebellum Americans as one can read.

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