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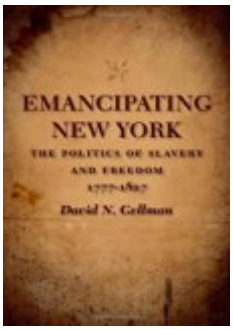
David N. Gellman. *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827.* Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. xi + 297 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3174-9.



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Published on H-SHEAR (September, 2009)

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Over the course of the past twenty years, histories of free and enslaved black New Yorkers have appeared in increasing numbers, and recent work, inspired by the insightful archeological evidence unearthed from the African Burial Ground that lies steps from City Hall and the remarkably well-attended exhibitions mounted by the New-York Historical Society four years ago, has helped New York's slave community to attain an important place in the study of early slavery. "Yet," as David N. Gellman observes in his insightful book, *Emancipating New York*, while slaves' lives have garnered considerable scholarly attention, "how New Yorkers decided to abolish slavery at all is, at best, partially understood" (p. 1).

Emancipating New York helps rectify that problem. Through a sustained analysis of the debate over the end of slavery, Gellman argues that abolition in New York revealed deep disagreements "about citizenship, the proper dimension of the public sphere, the regional and partisan identities of New Yorkers, and the political economy of prosperity, poverty, and productivity" (p. 1). Gellman focuses throughout his work on the participation of New Yorkers in a larger public discourse that shaped the initial resistance to and eventual acceptance of the 1799 "Act for the gradual abolition of slavery." By tracing ongoing print disputes, drawn mainly from newspapers, he showcases the multiple voices of free whites, black citizens, and slaves as partisan persuaders, economic opportunists, and metaphorical discursive subjects on the page. And he also shows how the debate over slavery shaped and was shaped by debates over other early national concerns, including the meaning of citizenship, the growth and development of governmental institutions and policies, the profitable pathways to economic vitality, the ongoing fears of piratical activities, and the meaning of the "black voice." In the end, Gellman argues that the articulation of the ideologies of "white supremacy" and "egalitarianism" that emerged during New Yorkers' debate over slavery prefigured "the prolonged debate over slavery" that occurred throughout the following six decades (p. 10).

In part 1 of his three-part book, Gellman aptly summarizes many of the conclusions that historians of colonial and early national slavery have reached regarding the growing urban port town. Gellman insists that the American Revolution played the most significant early role in the eventual destabilization of the slave regime. The author does acknowledge that, superficially, New York's slave population witnessed few changes following the war, best exemplified by the 1777 state constitutional convention's rejection of a gradual abolition proposal. Yet the large-scale national changes incited by the war's successful cessation all helped to lay the groundwork for later transformations.

The central analytical thrust of Gellman's book is part 2. Six chapters tell two interrelated stories. First, Gellman analyzes how New Yorkers, spurred on by the New York Manumission Society, embraced gradualism as an effective strategy for abolition, and second, he shows how slavery became identified with a number of early national causes. Gellman begins his analysis in 1785 when the newly constituted state legislature debated a possible abolition bill. While the bill garnered some initial support, particularly in rural counties, this early attempt at abolition foundered. Ultimately, New York's council vetoed the bill and described it as "internally contradictory"; council members noted that the bill's drafters were unable to reconcile how potentially freed slaves would fit into the polity (p. 50).

Further legislative debates over gradualism would reappear during the following decade (and would culminate in the passage of the 1799 act). Gellman's analytical focus is not social activism, however. While he does examine the actions of the New York Manumission Society and its members' grudging acceptance of gradualism as a tactic to advance their agenda, Gellman's strengths lie elsewhere. Throughout the core chapters of part 2, he expertly traces the ways in which discourse about slavery frequently intersected with a number of seemingly disconnected debates that occurred simultaneously with the march toward gradual abolition. The goal here is twofold. First, Gellman seeks to demonstrate that abolition's advocates and enemies did not rest on their laurels following the defeat of the 1785 bill; rather they injected their political ideologies into a number of public debates to gain adherents to their cause. Second, Gellman uses these debates to contextualize the 1799 gradual abolition debate and explain how abolition partially won the day. He insists that the emphasis abolitionists placed on the importance of sentiment, the creation of a fair political economy, and the use of state power in order to protect the innocent during these debates help to explain how and why New Yorkers accepted the gradual abolition of the state's enslaved population.

Chapter 5 focuses on how pro- and antislavery discourses were inserted "into a wide variety of debates and discourses that otherwise had seemingly little to do with domestic slavery" (p. 78). In particular, Gellman elucidates how slavery's assailants and apologists "attach[ed] the language of slavery to specific social problems," specifically capital punishment, debt imprisonment, Mediterranean pirate attacks, the burgeoning New York maple sugar industry, and constitutional ratification (p. 80). In each case, the author shows how debates about slavery helped to shape the public discourse surrounding these unrelated issues. For example, antislavery advocates utilized the moral outrage produced by "stories of American sailors kidnapped on the high seas by Algerian pirates" in order to "draw attention to the evils of African bondage in America" (pp. 82-83). Alternately, Gellman also explores how William Cooper's foray into domestic maple sugar production in upstate New York led to comparisons between the "purity" of northern sugar and the "poison and filth" produced through the enforced labor of West Indian slaves (pp. 92-93). Thus, such debates were recast within the rhetoric of free labor's superiority over slave la-

bor helping, Gellman insists, to build the case for abolition.

Chapter 6 continues this line of analysis, though the author shifts his focus from the content of these debates to their form. Gellman places the "black voice" at the center of his analysis and links questions about the efficacy of the black voice to the place of future freed blacks within the polity. Newspaper writers might have used the derisive black voice, founded on assumptions of cultural and intellectual inequality, to lampoon legislative proposals and, by doing so, confirmed for readers that "blacks could not serve usefully as citizen-speakers" in the new Republic (p. 111). Yet "other parts of the newspaper," Gellman maintains, "imagined the words of Africans in a manner that allowed the black voice to contend for respect in the public sphere" (p. 115). In this case, poetical "dramatized sentimentality" stressed a "fundamental human identity," thus leading readers to realize that "black and white conditions should be judged by the same criteria" (p. 120). Admittedly, both renderings of the black voice were "controlled" via the manipulations of white literary marionettes, but such examples still confirmed for New York's newspaper readers that the potential equality of the state's black actors remained an open question.

Gellman turns his attention in chapter 7 to the larger political drama that gripped the nation in the 1790s. Arguments between Federalist and Republican sympathizers also embroiled them in the politics of gradual abolition, according to Gellman. At times, both Federalists and Republicans used the discourse of slavery "to make political hay," particularly in debates over the qualifications of John Jay, long an associate of the New York Manumission Society, for political office (p. 131). Moreover, events during the period, from the Haitian Revolution to the Jay Treaty, allowed New Yorkers to construct a regional identity that pitted a self-consciously constructed mild form of northern slavery against the "negative impressions of southern racial bondage" filled with tales of violence (p. 144). Such characterizations of regional identity, coupled with the power of the black sympathetic voice and the numerous ancillary debates into which slavery was inserted, ensured that when "gradual abolition returned to the state legislative agenda" at the end of the decade, it did so "in a transformed political geography [that] opened the way for success for antislavery activists committed to bringing New York into the fold of an abolitionizing North" (p. 151).

These three chapters represent the most insightful contributions that Gellman offers historians interested in slavery's end, either in New York or in the nation more broadly. By studying the discourses that surrounded and informed slavery's debates, he convincingly shows that pro- and antislavery factions frequently inserted the language of slavery and their own ideological positions into a surprising number of contexts. While white and black New Yorkers continually wrestled with how to shape their new republican polity, to identify who could wield rights, and to mark who did and did not belong within their society, many also struggled to define slavery's future. Or, better stated, many New Yorkers came to realize that slavery and citizenship were interrelated; slavery was, or could be placed at, the heart of innumerable issues of the day. Consequently, Gellman's monograph becomes more than a study of gradual abolition, but a study of the terms that early Americans used to define the core concept of freedom itself.

Yet, while these chapters showcase Gellman at his best, they also raise a number of questions about the extent and limits of the discourse that he analyzes. The source base, for example, relies mainly, though not exclusively, on newspapers. There is little doubt that newspapers functioned as important elements within the emerging public space of the nation. However, one wonders if slavery infringed on other forms of public discourse to the extent that Gellman traces in newspapers.

How frequently was the language of slavery employed in the numerous oral addresses being given at this time or in the public performances and demonstrations that many scholars have studied? To ask a different question, did the language of slavery that surfaced in public discourse play a part in the private discourse of the era? Public language is necessarily performative and persuasive, as Gellman notes with the black voice. Might an alternate rhetoric of slavery and racism emerge in private discourse? Can we find a different understanding of citizenship asserted in other places?

While such questions remain purely speculative, more troubling for Gellman's analysis is that he, at times, conflates multiple languages of abolition, specifically a discourse about the ending of the slave trade with one about the manumission of slaves. Gellman is right to note that both languages were circulating throughout 1790s New York, but the question remains whether a discourse concerning the abolition of the slave trade was as instrumental in the move toward black freedom as the author suggests. For instance, Gellman draws on a poem that appeared in a 1788 newspaper to highlight ways in which the black voice drew sympathetic attention to the potential destruction of a black family. Yet the poem's female protagonist weeps for the forced enslavement of her brother along the African coast. Gellman cogently notes that such portrayals of the devastation that slavery visited on black families were designed to arouse "feelings of human fellowship [which] made the best argument against slavery" (p. 120). These arguments were later used to cement a more widespread acceptance for gradual abolition in the late 1790s than existed in 1785. Yet, if the poem's setting remained in Africa, would the poem necessarily resonate with the issue of slavery's abolition? Might such examples indicate a desire to end the external slave trade instead? Might the above example be used with equal aplomb by proslavery factions? Might the discourses at work be even more numerous than Gellman notes?

Reception is a difficult issue for any author to trace, and some of the speculative questions I am raising may be impossible to answer. However, Gellman does base his causal argument on reception by claiming that "an antislavery discourse ... produced a 'structure of opinion' against slavery. This structure of opinion sustained an environment in which white New Yorkers came to regard gradual abolition as plausible, desirable, even necessary" (p. 8). In the end, though, a causative link is impossible to prove definitively. Did the "structure of opinion" encourage legislative representatives to be more supportive of the gradual abolition bill in 1799? Do increasing numbers of New Yorkers embrace abolition because of public discourse, or because of other factors, such as immigration or intrastate rivalries? Do we see changes in the editorial positions of newspapers throughout the region, or increased numbers of articles for or against slavery over the decade? These remain tantalizing questions that are never fully answered.

In the final two chapters in the book, Gellman turns his attention to the passage of the 1799 statute and the ways in which later New Yorkers "sort[ed] out the further implementation of abolition as well as the meaning of abolition's cultural and political legacy" (p. 10). In 1799, the bill's proponents were faced with a serious challenge: to surmount "economically oriented reservations about black freedom and interracial citizenship" (p. 154). By linking various facets of the "optimistic banner of nationalist economic ambition," including the "maple sugar-boosterism of William Cooper" and "the denunciations of Algerian enslavement and debt imprisonment," antislavery apologists hoped to create a culture in which freedom and equality were real possibilities for black slaves (pp. 155-156). Additional pressure was further applied by white reformers and by free and enslaved blacks, who ran away to create indepen-

dent African churches and who launched lawsuits to protect their own freed status. Yet, while the passage of the bill grew increasingly assured, the realities of black freedom renewed older tensions about "abolition's financial and public welfare implications" (p. 171). Consequently, the final version of the 1799 law "emerged from a context in which finances and ideology, racism and antislavery interacted to shape the final outcome" (p. 183).

As Gellman readily acknowledges, the history of the road to freedom for New York's black population did not end in 1799, or even in 1827. Debates concerning the place of freed blacks within the polity remained, and new debates over the historical memory of slavery and its meanings emerged. While Gellman may overstate antislavery activists' commitment to black equality, as opposed to black freedom, he deftly insists that gradual abolition may have "gotten away" from its proponents. As the realities of black freedom became increasingly clear to everyone, and a number of solutions were proffered regarding the place of blacks within the national polity, ranging from outright incorporation to wholesale removal, white lawmakers constructed a history of slavery and an ideology of race that privileged white citizenship and sought to control black political actions. However, black New Yorkers remained undeterred; the author ends with the 1827 holiday celebration and the founding of *Freedom's Journal*. Throughout both the varieties of celebratory gatherings and speeches made on that memorable day and the pages of the nation's first black newspaper, black New Yorkers seized the moment of abolition to shape their own historical memory, an act that would become "a crucial part of [their] struggle to shape the future" (pp. 218-219).

In the end, Gellman invites readers to consider a number of fascinating questions about the role of public discourse, the active participation of black actors in the public sphere, the meaning of national citizenship, and the central place of slavery in early national politics. His informed analysis and fascinating insights ensure that any reader will benefit from spending some time with *Emancipating New York*.

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Citation: Richard Bond. Review of Gellman, David N. *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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