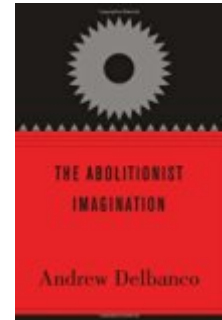


Andrew Delbanco. *The Abolitionist Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. xi + 205 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06444-7.



Reviewed by Chris Babits

Published on H-CivWar (September, 2014)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

A collection of essays that grew out of literary historian Andrew Delbanco's Alexis de Tocqueville Lectures on American Politics at Harvard, *The Abolitionist Imagination* has provoked strong criticism. The late Michael Fellman, for example, wrote that Delbanco's introductory essay, "standing on its own ... is one of the most annoying and ill-informed excursions into the study of abolitionism I have ever read." [1] Temple University's David Waldstreicher insisted that "this book shouldn't exist as a book; it should have been a journal roundtable at best (and I certainly would not have published it in the journal I edit)." [2] Despite these negative assessments, *The Abolitionist Imagination* provides readers a wide introduction to historiographic debates about the abolitionists, with especially strong rebuttals of Delbanco by John Stauffer and Manisha Sinha.

Delbanco presents a dual thesis that might irritate historians: first, he argues that historians have not been duly critical of the abolitionists, and second, he maintains that an "abolitionist imagination" provides us a kind of totalizing con-

cept that explains certain moral crusaders' efforts at eradicating perceived injustices in the United States. For the former, Delbanco uses the literature of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, two Democrats sympathetic to the antislavery cause, to demonstrate the value of understanding the importance of a "vital center" for political compromise. Delbanco is at his best when describing how Melville generalized about slavery by analogy, namely, the ways works like *Moby Dick* (1851) represented the struggle over the "peculiar institution"—not a surprise for one of the foremost scholars of the American Renaissance (p. 32). For the latter argument, he seeks a unifying concept that transcends time and space, something of an American reform impulse defined by religious righteousness. For Delbanco, an abolitionist is "someone who identifies a heinous evil and wants to eradicate it—not tomorrow, not next year, but now" (p. 23).

John Stauffer and Manisha Sinha offer strong rebuttals to Delbanco's opening essay. In "Fighting the Devil with His Own Fire," Stauffer makes the

point that the South, not the North, became uncompromising over the issue of slavery. After devoting several pages to the gradual abolitionists of the early American Republic, Stauffer zeroes in on what changed: “The short answer is the rise of King Cotton and unprecedented profits from slave labor, coupled with a sudden belligerence among slaveowning Southerners, who, feeling threatened by the success of emancipation movements throughout Europe and the New World, began to look for ways to expand slavery” (p. 71). Sinha also puts blame elsewhere. In “Did the Abolitionists Cause the Civil War?” she writes, “the major problem confronting antebellum Americans was racial slavery and not the movement against it. Abolitionists addressed the cancer at the heart of the slaveholding American republic; they did not invent it” (p. 83). Sinha continues her critique of Delbanco’s essay, arguing that his interpretation falls victim from the past mistakes of the “needless war” historiography that preceded the civil rights movement.

Sinha raises other powerful objections. For instance, she points out the important distinction between abolitionists and those who had antislavery sentiments, something Delbanco never addresses when theorizing about an abolitionist imagination. Perhaps more passionately, Sinha disagrees wholeheartedly with Delbanco’s historical and modern-day examples of the abolitionist imagination. In the opening essay, Delbanco’s broad characteristics of an abolitionist—religious fervor and immediatism—includes antebellum abolitionists, temperance reformers during Prohibition, and even anti-abortion activists in the present. Readers might share Sinha’s reaction. As she writes, “in its opposition to women’s rights and devotion to religious fundamentalism, the anti-abortion movement of our times is the direct lineal ideological descendant of the pro-slavery argument rather than of abolition” (p. 106).

Since this work is a collection of essays, all of which were originally written as lectures, a num-

ber of criticisms of Delbanco have gone unmentioned. One additional qualm might be Delbanco’s use of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s “the vital center” as a model for reinterpreting the abolitionists. For those unfamiliar with Schlesinger’s thesis, he defended a liberal democratic model of a state-regulated economy as a strong counter to communism and fascism. Delbanco does not explicitly state so, but it feels as though his desire for a middle ground in politics emanates from today’s political scene—a climate where partisan gridlock prevents legislation from being discussed on the Senate floor. There are numerous problems with this analogy, though. First, and Stauffer begins to make this point, compromise is not always good. The Three-Fifths Clause, the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850—all of these allowed for slavery to continue. And next, Schlesinger’s vital center required internal and external enemies to survive. A political center purged purported communists and homosexuals from the American government in the late 1940s and 1950s in the name of liberal democracy. It was also slow to recognize the political and social equality of African Americans. For these reasons, Schlesinger’s vital center might not be the model of compromise historians hail.

Wilfred M. McClay views abolitionism as a “master concept” in more positive light than Stauffer and Sinha. McClay appreciates that Delbanco elevated “a single powerful and central concept in the American past, abolition,... to symbolic status” (p. 137). Describing Delbanco’s essay as post-revisionist in the very best use of the term, McClay finds the concept of the abolitionist imagination useful for the following reasons: first, it helps us understand the sociological implications of American reform, especially the reforms of the nineteenth century; second, reform might not be universal and one person’s godly reform might be perceived as intrusion by another; and last, historians may have exalted the abolitionists too much.

Delbanco's theses provide an opportunity for a reevaluation of the antebellum abolitionists and the purpose of studying the past. Although one might agree with Stauffer's assessment that abolitionists, especially white ones, have received some critical examinations in recent years, it is important to remember that historians could always be more nuanced—more critical—in their examinations of the past. However, Delbanco's search for a "usable past," although possibly anathema to many in the historical profession, is a call for history to be more relevant for the general public. For those of us who have taught, there remains the dreaded question about the past's relevance to the present day. Depending on one's pedagogical goals, the search for "the presence of the past," which is the title of Delbanco's closing essay, might be a useful reminder that historians often become specialists of one particular era without writing about the connections throughout American history.

The Abolitionist Imagination should stir strong emotions in readers. Being fair to a series of essays based on lectures is a difficult task, although this review pointed out the strengths of each essay in this collection. At the very least, *The Abolitionist Imagination* could serve as an introductory text, one that helps undergraduate students parse the complexities of historical interpretation. At the next level, the essays, not to mention the notes, provide a strong introduction to the historiography of American abolition, even if more recent work of transnational and comparative approaches is noticeably missing. (Darryl Pinckney, an author and playwright, for example, provides a useful autobiographical account of his discovery of Benjamin Quarles and black abolitionism in this volume.) At its best, though, *The Abolitionist Imagination* could spark more nuanced examinations of the antebellum era, thus moving us away from examining abolitionists like John Brown as "good" or "bad." The past is much

more complicated than that. *The Abolitionist Imagination* reminds us of this fact.

Notes

[1]. Michael Fellman, "DELBANCO: The Abolitionist Imagination (2012)," *The Civil War Monitor* (April 18, 2012), <http://civilwarmonitor.com/bookshelf/delblanco-the-abolitionist-imagination-2012>.

[2]. David Waldstreicher, "Andrew Delbanco, *The Abolitionist Imagination*; with Commentaries by John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred M. McClay," *Journal of American Studies* 2 (2013): 1, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8893523&fileId=S002187581300042X>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Chris Babits. Review of Delbanco, Andrew. *The Abolitionist Imagination*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36897>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.