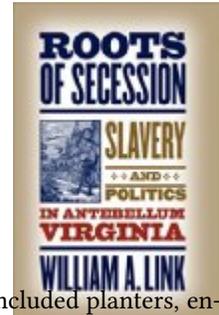


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William A. Link. *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xvii + 387 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2771-0.

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At first glance, William A. Link's *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* appears to be a rather intricate work of history. Why? Professor Link attempts to make some fairly wide and disparate connections. The author explains that his book will examine "the interconnections between slavery, slaves, and politics, and the impact that this relationship had on the origins of secession" (p. 1). This is quite a task in itself. To make matters even more complicated, however, economics and market changes are also a critical part of Link's thesis. Will he be able to offer the evidence and conclusive proof that gives credence to his complex argument?

What *Roots of Secession* seems most focused upon is the central position of slavery in the political debates of the 1850s. Obviously, slavery was important. But Link is attempting to demonstrate much more. He states that the 1850s is generally viewed as clash over the institution of slavery—and we have all read scores of monographs written about the debate over slavery during the antebellum era. Link is trying to take the historical debate a bit further. He explains that in most books written about antebellum politics "slaves remain at the margins" (p. 1). In other words, too many historians have looked at the sectional debate, the expansion of slavery, and the other territorial issues—but what about the slaves themselves?

According to Link, slaves were a central part of the changes that were taking place in the 1850s. The author uses the state of Virginia to make his point for several reasons. First, Virginia had more slaves than any other state. And of even more importance, Virginia was going through many economic changes during the 1850s that affected politics, slavery, and slaves themselves. Finally, the state itself possessed many diverse interests

and groups. Virginia's geography included planters, entrepreneurs, small farmers, merchants, slave and even anti-slave factions—making it a great laboratory of study. How did Virginia act and react? How did slaves respond to these changes? And what form did the master-slave relationship take? Did the economic changes alter the peculiar institution, or did slavery's permutations alter the political climate in antebellum Virginia?

At this point, you might be thinking that Link's task was impossible. But I am here to report that this book works! The author has taken a multitude of issues and connected them in a fine narrative about antebellum Virginia slavery and politics. There are two general areas where I think this book works best: antebellum market changes and the simultaneous transformations in the slave system. These are, I believe, the two most important themes in the book—and the clearest. Link's other primary theme—Virginia politics—is also good, but I think secondary to his other premises.

First, the economic changes taking place in antebellum Virginia were extraordinary. And the vast geography of the state makes it a fine laboratory of study, as Link is able to discuss changes in different geographical regions and sections. Railroads, factories, mills, and the subsequent growth of cities were all changing the Virginia political and economic landscape. These alterations were also upsetting the traditional relationships in Virginia. Some sections of the state welcomed the changes, while other sections of Virginia feared the future. The market revolution, urbanization, and transportation were changing, for example, western Virginia and even offering that section more political power over the traditional elite of the Tidewater area, which was good for western Virginia but not for the Tidewater.

For the old, plantation elite, the changes were causing, among other things, the erosion of traditional norms and mores, and a fear of loss of control.

The Southern planters and the slave system did not take kindly to these sorts of revolutionary societal alterations. Link makes the connection well that the slave system itself was being altered by the market changes. In fact, planters began making changes themselves with such “innovations” as hiring out slaves to other plantations, more freedoms, and additional sales. Even though most planters wanted to keep the traditional system in tact, the market revolution in Virginia was forcing changes in the slave system. And Link offers ample evidence to support this thesis. But the author has promised to discuss several other themes. First, how were the slaves themselves affected; and second, how did politics in Virginia deal with these economic changes and adjustments in slavery?

Probably the most difficult item to prove historically is how slaves themselves dealt with the changes taking place in Virginia. Professor Link attempts to demonstrate that Virginia slaves were becoming bolder and more assertive in the 1850s. Because planters were starting to lose their authority to impersonal market forces, slaves began to take advantage of these conditions. Link makes this connection work also—to a certain degree. While the lack of sources makes this one of Link’s most difficult tasks, he does show that there was an increase in slave resistance and even outright challenges to slaveholders’s authority. The proof that slaves were getting more restless during the 1850s comes from available crime statistics, plantation documents, and written evidence of white paranoia. The inference made by the author (and I believe he makes a credible case), is that slaves were becoming increasingly more resistant as the institution itself was being altered by market forces. The response of white plantation owners was predictable—unable to fathom the changing nature of slavery, they defined what they saw as an assault on their power. It is clear that slaves probably knew things were changing, and Virginia whites also knew it. But how can we be sure? Link looks at Virginia’s political campaigns.

It is in the political arena where Link is able to show the strong feelings, paranoia, and worry of Southern planters. For politics in Virginia became a fight between the old and the new orders with all the issues, including slavery, being played out in the vicious campaigns of the 1850s. Since Virginia appears to have been split between the forces of the old and new, market changes

were important during the political campaigns. But slavery was also a critical issue; and the slavery debates were even more revealing. One of the most interesting topics concerned runaway slaves. It was during the 1850s, amidst these market changes, that the runaway problem became a volatile issue in Virginia politics. Runaways had always been a concern, but the paranoia of the 1850s forced slave-owners to attempt to solidify their position. What they worried about was weakening legal-political protection for their property. This weakness came about due to the market revolution, the Compromise of 1850, and other general shifts in political power. Link shows how increasingly insecure these planters became during the 1850s. They saw their “world” slipping away, their political power being diluted, and the traditional system in peril. This paranoia caused the elite to even try decreasing any slave privileges: things like gun ownership and hunting privileges. These kinds of issues became the primary debates in the volatile Virginia campaigns and Link uses the political rhetoric to form a context of what threats whites were worried about. Link concludes that, “these threats appeared all the more menacing because of the ample evidence of slavery’s transformation” (p. 175).

In summation, the state of Virginia was undergoing great market changes during the 1850s. Those market changes were altering the traditional slave system and also changing the way slavery was conducted. In addition, slaves were seeing these changes and taking opportunities to be more assertive and aggressive in seeking freedoms within the slave system. Those master-slave conflicts can best be seen in the Virginia political campaigns where planter paranoia and slippage of political power were staring to show. The issues debated in Virginia politics demonstrated how much slippage was taking place and exhibited the worry and concern of the white Tidewater elite.

Does Link prove it all? I think he does a truly admirable job in *Roots of Secession*. This is superb historical scholarship—a work that attempts to discern important social changes and how those changes affected nearly every other issue in the era. I think Link does his best work chronicling the market changes and how slavery itself was affected. His proof about slaves and their assertiveness is impressive, but the evidence is difficult to come by. The political parts of the book do show the planters worries and concerns. It all fits together well. And his sources are impeccable. Especially good are his citations of Virginia newspapers and statehouse records from the era.

I not only like the book very much, but I would go one step further and say it is a must read for antebellum students. Those interested in politics, slavery, and the economy, all can benefit from it. But it is even more about the way Link has written the book and the connections he makes. *Roots of Secession* shows how good history can include many factors and how the complexities of society are so often interconnected.

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