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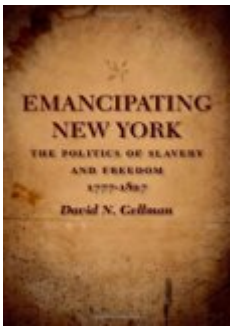
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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-Law (August, 2008)

Gone are the days when mastering the important historiography on slavery and emancipation in the early American North demanded little more than two or three days of caffeinated diligence. Heeding Ira Berlin's call to chart the spatial and temporal dimensions of American slavery, a generation of scholars that includes Joanne Pope Melish, John Wood Sweet, Leslie Harris, and Graham Hodges has been hard at work expanding and redefining the field.[1] Along with classic and important but less recent works by Edgar McManus, Leon Litwack, Arthur Zilversmit, Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund, and Shane White, this growing body of knowledge has greatly enhanced understanding of slavery's ubiquity and variety in early America.[2] Never again can stock images of the North as land of the free be taken at face value.

The new historians of northern slavery and freedom trace their intellectual roots back to the forebears just named, and to David Brion Davis and Winthrop Jordan.[3] Inevitably, though, their histories reflect trends in historical analysis since the so-called linguistic and cultural turn. *Emancipating Slavery* continues this bent, in a good way. Indeed, the book is an important and refreshing addition to the literature precisely because its author weaves jargon-free discursive analysis of antislavery in New York into a narrative that remains squarely rooted in the political process of emancipation. "Public discourse influenced but did not control slavery's fate" in New York, Gellman writes, where "only the give and take of the political process could synthesize competing interests and ideas to abolish slavery within a generation" after the American Revolution (p. 185). Above all, this book reminds us that black activism, ideologies of social reform, and the public sphere mattered, but only alongside questions of citizenship, partisanship, public policy, and electoral alignment that ultimately determined the timing and pace of emancipation in New York in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

This is not a book about black cultural and community formation or an institutional history of New York slavery. As the popularity of an exhibition in 2005-06 on "Slavery in New York" at the

New York Historical Society attests, both of these subjects have garnered heightened public attention in recent years. They have also been the subjects of recent scholarly treatments by Thelma Wills Foote, Jill Lepore, Craig Wilder, and others. [4] Gellman lingers just long enough on slavery in the eighteenth century to observe that New Yorkers owned more slaves than any other northerners. Moreover, revolutionary ideology and wartime disruption failed to overturn the "fundamental continuity" of the slave regime in the 1770s and 1780s (p. 41). Though some slaves escaped behind British lines, and others won freedom for military service, the Revolutionary War "changed everything and nothing" about slavery in New York (p. 26). Gouverneur Morris's pleas to include future abolition in the New York constitution of 1777 met with stony silence, and enlightened ideas about liberty produced more "hypocrites and temporizers" than liberators (p. 31).

Throughout the 1780s, Gellman observes, New Yorkers' support for gradual emancipation schemes modeled after plans adopted by Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Connecticut remained "broad but shallow" (p. 46). In 1785, the Council of Revision vetoed an assembly bill that approved gradual emancipation but restricted black voting and office-holding, arguing that it augured the creation of a potentially dangerous class of propertied but disfranchised citizens. Sent back to the assembly, the 1785 bill did not survive an override vote. If New York lawmakers could imagine black freedom at a future date, they blinked when it came to biracial citizenship in the political present. Such ambivalence over race and citizenship, combined with the conservative leadership of John Jay and other slaveholding spokesmen for "pragmatic incrementalism," explains the limits of even gradual reform in the mid-1780s. In 1790, New Yorkers still owned some 20,000 slaves.

If the Revolution failed to dislodge slavery's foundations, it did plant "the seeds of an enduring antislavery discourse," nurtured by an "increasingly political" public sphere (pp. 27, 76). For Gellman, whose graduate mentor at Northwestern, T. H. Breen, has written on public opinion and abolition in revolutionary Massachusetts, analysis of print culture proceeds from the assumption that "what the public thought about slavery and what public officials could do about it were fundamentally intertwined" (p. 57).[5] The book's antislavery advocates clearly shared this faith in public opinion as a potent if nebulous force for political change. Whether writing against the slave trade and slave exportations, or in support of African American schools, members of the New York Manumission Society (NYMS) and other activists campaigned against slavery in print with all the gusto of later Garrisonians. They had to, because proslavery forces remained strong in the 1780s and 1790s. Indeed, with the larger goal of abolition stonewalled by cold feet and staunch legislative opposition, reformers counted small victories, such as the closing of New York borders to slave imports or exports in 1788, and adopted a strategy that "sought to move public opinion over the long term" (p. 72). Armed with the heady rhetoric of the antislavery international, and a sentimental discourse that encouraged public sympathy for the plight of slaves, writers consistently slipped slavery into matters of public concern ranging from the cruelty of debt imprisonment, the injustice of Algerian piracy, the calculus of constitutional ratification, even the promise of maple sugar production (p. 72). Tapping into fantasies of "sweetness and profit" without the taint of West Indian slavery, proponents of large-scale upstate sugar cultivation in the 1780s and 1790s joined a swelling chorus of free market, free labor voices that paired antislavery with economic development and, crucially, the reorientation of regional identity (p. 92).

Common-sense political economists wielded antislavery, antislavery advocates trotted out timeworn essays on the immorality of the slave trade, and few New Yorkers on either side of the issue shrank from fear-mongering in order to cap-

ture the public mind. But ultimately, Gellman argues, the success of gradual abolition depended "in no small part on the contested nature of the African American voice" itself (p. 128). His standout chapter on the relationship between black voicings and the public sphere merits close attention, both for the way it connects print culture to the political, and as an example of how and where cultural history intersects with macro-historical issues such as race and nation. Marshaling a wide variety of printed material culled largely from newspapers of the 1780s and 1790s, Gellman suggests that on one hand crude satire, coded aphorisms, and anecdotal humor buoyed arguments for the impossibility of African American citizenship. Print renderings of black speech in dialect enforced distinctions between those who could participate in serious political discourse, and those whose ineloquence disqualified them from the arena. Imaginary pseudo-African American speech thus became a referendum on blacks' capacity to contribute to the republic of letters. But with so much riding on "how New Yorkers defined the public sphere in relation to race," opponents of slavery inserted into the political discourse mostly fictive black voices that countered marginalization and staked stylistic and substantive claims for inclusion (p. 128). Newspaper asides and poems such as William Cowper's oft-printed "The Negro's Complaint" enlisted environmentalism and the power of sympathy in claiming that "Fleecy locks and black complexion, / Cannot forfeit nature's claim; / Skins may differ, but affection / Dwells in black and white the same" (p. 119). Sentimentality was the common coin of literary representations that made a "strong case" for African Americans' "legitimate place in public discourse" (p. 128). And all this not only helped frame the larger ideological landscape of antislavery in terms of a debate over race and republican citizenship, but also paved the way for a black counterpublic to emerge in dialogue with the antislavery public sphere.

This last tantalizing observation about a budding black public puts Gellman in conversation with the cutting-edge work of literary scholars such as Dickson D. Bruce and Joanna Brooks.[6] But here and elsewhere, one wishes that Gellman pushed his analysis a bit further. On the whole, Gellman's unwillingness to let his conclusions outrun the evidence warrants praise, most especially when discussing racialized discourse. The book avoids the hermeneutic trap of divorcing language from context, but by treating black voices in print as part of a political process of critical evaluation and containment, Gellman tends to excavate meaning in ways that downplay multiple contexts and alternate voicings. A popular poem on "True African Wit" thus served to "play silliness for laughs" (p. 114). But is that all it did? What did wily "Old Cato" imply when he warned a group of slaves gathered at his deathbed that, if they allowed "Scip" to be a pallbearer at the funeral, "I won't stir" (p. 114)? Sterling Stuckey has noted that many transplanted Africans believed that without a proper burial, which included respecting wishes expressed by the dying, the spirit would be denied its rightful place in the afterworld. It would not "stir" or cross over, but rather lingered on as a disruptive force in the lives of those who failed to appease it.[7] The presence at the funeral of Scip, who allegedly once told "lies" that got Cato whipped, thus might have posed two serious problems. One for Cato himself, whose spirit would be unable to rest comfortably in the land of ancestral bliss, and another for his friends, who might expect subsequently to suffer harassment by his malevolent spirit. Behind the folksy charm of this piece, it seems "Old Cato" had issued an African-inspired appeal and warning.

Discursive forays aside, in the end there was hardball politics. New York finally passed a gradual emancipation law in 1799, at the end of a decade marked by bruising partisanship, and by a fateful shift in the national and international contexts of antislavery. Throughout the 1790s, slavery continued to figure in New York's major political

controversies. In 1792, George Clinton used slavery as a wedge issue in his campaign for governor against Federalist John Jay. The Republican press tarred Jay, the former president of the NYMS, with the brush of antislavery agitator, sensing that "being one of the Emancipation Committee" might operate "much against him" (p. 134). It did, and Jay lost. By 1795, though, when Jay ran again and won the governor's seat, controversy over the deal he brokered with the British in 1794 had moved the political debate over slavery onto new terrain. Intended to revise and improve unsatisfactory elements of the treaty that ended the Revolutionary War in 1783, Jay's Treaty instead sparked wide controversy. But it particularly rankled New Yorkers, Gellman writes, by failing to extract compensation for American slaves carried off when the British evacuated Manhattan at war's end. A decisive debate ensued, in which Alexander Hamilton and other supporters of the agreement countered complaints about "negroes wantonly stolen" with arguments for the legality of seizing enemy property in wartime (p. 137). This dustup ended in resounding defeat for a rough coalition of slaveholders and Republicans, who managed but a feeble response to the specter of reciprocal Loyalist property claims, which Hamilton had subtly inserted into the logic of the debate. More importantly, Gellman argues, the process enabled Federalist supporters of the Jay Treaty to exorcise a "nagging ghost" (p. 136). With "lingering anger" over the 1783 British evacuation now a moot point, the task of legislating gradual abolition proceeded with "one less encumbrance" in tow (p. 140).

As the national and international politics of slavery in 1790s transformed the "political geography" in New York, antislavery morphed from a local partisan issue into a source of regional identity (p. 151). In the wake of the slave revolt in St. Domingue, southerners watched and waited for signs of revolt while New Yorkers, for whom St. Domingue loomed less as a threat but as a potential trading partner, focused on the untested constitutional requirement that their sons might be called to fight and die defending South Carolinians against their slaves. As a result, by the end of the 1790s "relatively few Federalists or Republicans" in New York "found themselves holding a political stake in saving slavery" (p. 131).

Still the end came hard. Doubts about black citizenship did not melt away; existing slave trade laws often went unenforced; compensation for slaveowners undermined prospects for a political compromise in the late 1790s. Indeed, final victory came only after redistricting delivered assembly power to an antislavery bloc now large enough to outvote those who had stymied previous attempts by insisting on reparations for masters. The law that went into effect on July 4, 1799, declared children born to slave mothers after that date free, but obligated males to serve their mothers' masters until they reached age twenty-eight; females served until they reached age twenty-five. Much of the last-minute wrangling over the bill concerned not the justice of this arrangement, but whether masters, towns, or the state would bear financial responsibility for economically vulnerable freedpeople. As Gellman's title suggests, it was no accident that questions of black pauperism had displaced questions about black citizenship in the final crafting of gradual emancipation in New York. For whites, the bargain price of philanthropy shifted most of the costs--social, economic, and political--onto the newly freed.

On one hand, the rapid decline of New York's slave population after 1800 attested to the inroads of freedom well in advance of what the law required. There were ten thousand fewer slaves in New York in 1820 than there had been in 1800. Nevertheless, by the second decade of the nineteenth century, black and white reformers began pushing for a general abolition that might redress issues such as the kidnapping and sale of free blacks back into slavery, economic marginalization, and concerted efforts to undercut black citizenship. In the face of such backlash, which cul-

minated in 1821 with race- and property-based constitutional limits on an otherwise greatly expanded electorate, statutory abolition came in the form of an 1817 law that granted freedom to those slaves born before July 4, 1799, to whom the earlier legislation did not apply. The 1817 law gave masters another ten years to free those slaves, or until July 4, 1827. As Gellman observes, "the context for doing something to end slavery was shaped by discourse that prized sentiment and championed certain visions of a just political economy, without producing a sentimental law or one that meted out anything but a rough version of justice" (p. 184). In that highly edited version, black rights were left on the cutting-room floor. What, to New York slaves and their descendants, was the Fourth of July? A bittersweet anniversary indeed.

Notes

[1]. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Graham Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865* (Madison: Madison House, 1997); Graham Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[2]. Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Slavery in New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966); McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973); Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Gary B. Nash and Jean Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

[3]. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Winthrop P. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

[4]. Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Craig Steven Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2002). See also Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). The website for the New York Historical Society exhibition can be accessed at http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/. A companion volume appeared as Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Slavery in New York* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

[5]. T. H. Breen, "Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Frederika J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 67-95.

[6]. Dickson D. Bruce, *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005): 67-92.

[7]. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 359, 5.