

# H-Net Reviews

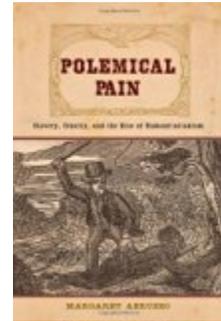
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margaret Abruzzo. *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism*. New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 344 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9852-5.

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## Sectional Musings

If current statistics are correct, there are somewhere between four and twenty-seven million people still held in global slavery.[1] Modern responses to the injustice of bondage frequently involve appeals for humanitarian aid and point to gross violations of basic human rights. Such was not always the case. These concerns first arose between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the emergence and evolution of a “new humanitarianism” by addressing the proper roles of pain and cruelty in civilized society, argues Margaret Abruzzo (p. 1). During this period, the institution of slavery came under attack, eventually occupying a crucial place in an unfolding transatlantic dialogue that would culminate in the American Civil War and the formal end of slavery in North America. *Polemical Pain* recasts the otherwise familiar antebellum debates over slavery as part of a dialectic struggle to define the very meaning of humaneness itself in an era searching for “moral clarity.” In contrast to many recent studies that focus on either proslavery or antislavery in isolation, the present work focuses on national rhetoric and demonstrates the ways in which “new ideas about humaneness and cruelty pressed Americans to rethink the institution of slavery” (p. 251n24).

The author argues in chapters 1 and 2 that the emergence of a new eighteenth-century humanitarianism was a product of two parallel strands of thought. Chapter 1 highlights the first strand, best embodied by a Quaker type, which valued suffering, exalted martyrdom, and encouraged self-denial. However, mounting Quaker con-

cerns about their group identity as “a suffering, self-denying people” slowly segued into corporate culpability for the “distant cruelty” of the African slave trade by “imagin[ing] themselves as causal links in a cruel Atlantic-wide system” (p. 40). A second type of humanitarian thought, traced in chapter 2, denounced “the deliberate and unnecessary *infliction* of pain,” emphasizing both sympathy and benevolence to humankind in keeping with ideas of Protestant Christian morality (p. 63, emphasis in original). As the author rightly notes, this particular strand differed from Quaker thinking in that the emphasis was on *self-interest*. Acting with “benevolence” toward others, Abruzzo writes, “was the surest path to personal benefit” (p. 62).

The third chapter demonstrates that humaneness continued to function as a broad, inclusive concept. This quality was a source of strength in an especially difficult era that witnessed parliamentary debates (1791-92) against the African slave trade, the onslaught of revolutions in France and Saint-Domingue, and chronic instability and panic throughout the Atlantic world. Pain became a central concern in the proceedings and the details elicited horror and disbelief. Critics of the slave trade drew readers into a world of unspeakable “distant” acts through pamphlets and broadsides intended to shock and awe. The end of legal Anglo-American participation in the African slave trade proved problematic for humanitarian appeals. By 1808, Abruzzo argues, Americans inherited a rendering of humanitarianism that was

vaguely defined, unstable, and preoccupied more so with cruelty abroad than at home. Abolishing the slave trade brought these concerns into sharp focus in the United States. Slavery's critics repeatedly emphasized the evils of spectatorship as a moral road to ruin of sorts. Familiarity bred toleration and "created a spiral of immorality." Charges of cruelty acquired a pronounced sectionalism that "implicated an entire geographic community" (p. 95). If northerners could and did assuage their own ailing consciences by contrasting their declining interest in holding slaves with comparisons to slaveholding cruelty in the larger Atlantic world, the author sees that their success on this point came by way of placing much of the guilt squarely on the southern states. Insofar as northerners and guilt were concerned, Abruzzo argues that they saw themselves guilty of toleration. This was presumably akin to the evils inherent in, say, spectatorship, but certainly no more than that. From the northern vantage point, southern slavery and its cruelty came to have clearly discernible boundaries, particularly after the Missouri Compromise in 1820.

One possible solution that initially appeared promising was African colonization. Colonization placed the ultimate blame for slavery on the cruelty of the slave trade. Doing so proved therapeutic but posed no threat to slavery or slaveowners. Yet the idea "obscured white ambivalence about perpetuating slavery" and "denounced slavery's cruelties but defined undoing the trade—and the arrival of African Americans—as the only humane choice." Despite its relative failure as a movement, Abruzzo argues that colonization altered the American conversation "about the relationship between slavery and cruelty, as well as the possibilities and limitations of reform efforts" (p. 107).

The troubled decade of the 1830s witnessed the growth of two polarizing visions of humanitarianism outlined in chapter 4. Immediate abolitionists, personified by William Lloyd Garrison, denounced colonization, and the cruelty of slavery, and argued that abolition alone represented the only humane solution. "By shifting the center of the slavery debate from colonization to abolition," Abruzzo argues, "abolitionism drove a wedge into Americans' conceptions of humaneness" (p. 121). Immediatism prompted slavery's defenders to greater claims: they now defended slavery as a humane alternative to emancipation. These starkly opposing portraits of benevolence indicated that sympathy had become a political tool. According to the author, "Slaveholders grew increasingly willing to defend slavery, and critics grew increasingly willing to attack it" (p. 122).

In chapter 5, Abruzzo shows that cruelty remained at the core of antebellum slavery debates. As the discussion evolved, critics and defenders of slavery saw their own actions as steps to alleviate pain, though neither side was very effective in swaying its adversaries. Humaneness proved to be a powerful and enticing concept, according to Abruzzo, because its meaning appeared self-evident. "Instead of settling the debate," she says, "claims of cruelty and benevolence only escalated it and created a war of competing narratives aimed at establishing the *true* reality of slavery" (p. 160, emphasis in original). American westward expansion, including the Texas and Mexico issues, heightened these tensions in an era that bred "hostility and incomprehension" over the slavery issue (p. 161). Such an atmosphere was home to more extravagant and often oversimplified claims to humanitarianism. "As slavery retreated in the antebellum North, the temptation to view the North as a land of humanity and the South as a 'land of Whips & chains' intensified," Abruzzo writes (p. 167). The stakes had no doubt increased. Both sides offered distinct claims about their own humaneness and, in turn, as many "visions of slavery's reality" (p. 170).

Between the 1840s and 1850s, proslavery writers turned to the Bible and to scientific racial theories to defend the institution of slavery as part of a divinely sanctioned plan to organize society. However, Abruzzo notes, slaves themselves provided powerful proof of the cruelty behind slaveholder fictions. The abundance of runaway slave ads and the immensely popular genre of slave narratives attested to mental and physical suffering as well as the basic desire for liberty. Arguably no work was more important in shattering this stalemate than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), as Abruzzo argues in chapter 6. In appealing to the emotions of her readers, Stowe demonstrated the cruelty of slavery and slaveholders alike in the destruction of the black slave family. The work served to further polarize arguments about slavery because it forced those who supported slavery into defensive appeals to a vaguely defined benevolence even as they "forced abolitionists to prove, time and again, the veracity of their claims and perhaps even to think their tactics" (p. 194).

Abolitionists broadened their attacks, Abruzzo says, by focusing on the issue of cruelty to counter what she depicts as boldfaced and outrageous proslavery claims. For example, the power of the photograph to show the universal cruelty of slavery caused no uncertain amount of difficulty for self-styled benevolent masters "to develop ways to reconcile their behavior and ideals" (p.

206). The subsequent proslavery literature from the 1850s seemed to respond in kind by dividing defenders into both moderate and radical camps. If the first group could argue that slavery, despite some of “its inhumane aspects,” was based on “friendship, kindness, and mutual affection,” the latter group admitted no such faults (pp. 212, 207). Instead, Abruzzo demonstrates that radical advocates of slavery offered countless ways in which self-interest and ties of affection ensured benevolence, higher profits, and otherwise superior results not realized by northern wage labor. Slavery and the principle of self-interest, so these defenders claimed, “served humanity by teaching people to protect and provide for laborers” (p. 213).

By 1861 proslavery arguments had “subtly shifted” to cover a lot of rhetorical ground. Early defenders once asserted “that slavery was better than the alternatives to arguing that blacks ... would find happiness only in slavery” (p. 221). This uncomfortable stance found itself problematically entangled with defending, at least in the abstract, the benevolence of the African slave trade. The more radical proslavery faction, unwilling to relinquish any claims to humanitarianism to their opponents, came to view all aspects of enslavement as an unqualified good. Abruzzo deftly notes here that such a shift in the 1850s made much more sense in a decade of high cotton prices and a seemingly limitless demand for slave laborers. Such tensions were already strained in a proslavery argument rooted in benevolence and proved simply too clumsy to overcome. “Slavery might be more benevolent than American freedom,” the author writes, “but not even all of slavery’s defenders viewed it as the most benevolent situation imaginable” (p. 224). Proslavery in the main had faltered in defending the slave trade as humane, unknowingly conceding its claims to benevolence in the process. Civil War in America did little to bring “moral clarity” to definitions of humanitarianism. In its stead were simply more frustration and confusion.

In an all-too-brief epilogue, Abruzzo examines the ways in which humanitarianism served to define the “moral identities” of proslavery and antislavery forces after emancipation (p. 228). The issue of slavery’s cruelty, as the author asserts, was far from settled. For their part, supporters of slavery and their sympathizers continued to justify the benevolent side of enslavement through the era of Reconstruction and beyond. Abolitionists meanwhile worked to sharpen the popular image of the American South as a region defined by cruelty and barbarism under the pretext of extending political rights to former slaves. In any case, both sides saw the postbellum years

through a self-serving lens. The most damaging claim to humanitarianism, however, came from the southern states. It was there that “new forms of organizing and coercing black labor” came to be recast in the popular image as “positively benign” (p. 231). Extreme poverty, idleness, and suffering of ex-slaves appeared to proslavery sympathizers as ample proof of the order and benevolence of southern slavery and the “moral superiority” of its ruling class. The image was a powerful one, Abruzzo suggests, as it came to inform popular culture through films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the dominant historical scholarship of Ulrich B. Phillips. Humanitarianism, she says, obscures larger and more divisive issues by its very flexibility and its promise of moral clarity. That such a concept was put to such effective use so that it could serve proslavery needs is a testament to the power and pitfalls of its malleability.

Readers will find much to ponder, and perhaps much to quarrel with, throughout Abruzzo’s text. One of the most glaring issues is with the author’s conception of the sectional controversy. To that end she employs such terms as “northern” and “southern” states without definition or regard to either space or time. These instead appear as clunky, abstract conceptions that obscure variations and divisions in her portrait of a national dialogue about humanity. This unfortunate tendency is most apparent when considering the ways in which the overall national debate evolved alongside the spread of the institution of slavery itself. A second point is that there is also a surprising lack of discussion about the law regarding humaneness. Recent work by Jeannine Marie DeLombard demonstrates that the antebellum era was steeped in the language of a “popular legal consciousness” that helped to inform and shape public opinion about the slavery issue. An examination of the infamous Compromise of 1850 or the sectional confrontations over fugitive slaves, to cite only two examples, would have provided Abruzzo with excellent opportunities in which to frame her narrative about a national debate about slavery and humaneness through the medium of a common legal language.[2]

A few caveats are worth pointing out to readers. Generally speaking, her use of primary and secondary sources is very good. On a few occasions, however, the author uses evidence that does not correspond to her own periodization. For example, Abruzzo features Kate Foster of Mississippi and Georgia’s Narcissa Melissa Lawton, both writing in 1863, in support of her chapter titled “The Contradictions of Benevolence, 1852-1861.” All in all, these are minor quibbles. *Polemical Pain* is highly

recommended as a first-rate work of intellectual history. Abruzzo has written a richly detailed history not easily captured by the limited space of this review. The result is an important book that is well researched and impressively argued, and that greatly advances our knowledge about the national quarrel about slavery through the language of humanitarianism. Its wide applicability will surely find a diverse audience.

#### Notes

[1]. U.S. Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report 2007," U.S. Department of State Publication 11407 (Washington DC, 2007), 8, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/82902.pdf>; and Joel

Quirk, "Modern Slavery," in *The Routledge History of Slavery*, ed. Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (New York: Routledge, 2011), 331-346.

[2]. Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Print, and Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 35-69. A very different model of sectionalism than that portrayed in Abruzzo's work is in Paul Finkelman, "Fugitive Slaves, Midwestern Racial Tolerance, and the Value of 'Justice Delayed,'" *Iowa Law Review* 78 (October 1992): 89-141. See also Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 219-225, 231-244.

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