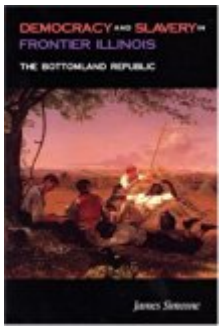
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Simeone. *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000. x + 290 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-263-3.

Reviewed by Susan Sessions Rugh

Published on H-SHEAR (February, 2002)

The convention movement in 1823-1824 was a strange chapter in Illinois politics. Notwithstanding the fact that there were only 970 de facto slaves in the state, and that the Northwest Ordinance had prohibited legal slavery in the territory that became Illinois, some voters agitated to restore it. This book examines the attempts of Illinois' southern settlers to call for a convention to put the matter on the ballot, thus opposing the efforts of Governor Edward Coles to end de facto slavery in Illinois. This chapter of Illinois history warrants a fresh look not only for its value to understanding state history, but also because Illinois was in the vanguard of such social and political revolutions in the early republic. By explaining how the personal politics of the early party system evolved into the fierce partisanship of the Jacksonian period in a major state of the Old Northwest, Simeone contributes to our understanding of this transitional period for the nation.

Despite its title, this book is not a social history of slavery, but an intellectual history of how the struggle over slavery figured in the political process in early Illinois. James Simeone contends that the convention movement "reveals the distinctive grain of antebellum American politics," in which poor white males used the rhetoric of freedom and equality to further their own interests (p. 5). In his view, the struggle to sustain slavery was between the "white folks" (poor whites) and the "big folks," influential politicians like Coles. He argues that the "white folks" were motivated by a vision of what he calls "western republicanism," a democratic revolution of social and political equality carried out through majority rule. The irony is that although most whites were not sufficiently wealthy to own slaves, they believed that the continuance of de facto slavery in Illinois would attract southern settlers and restore the prosperity the state had enjoyed before the Panic of 1819. Slaves could clear the fertile bottomlands of southern Illinois, and their presence would maintain a social hierarchy that would elevate the poor whites.

Simeone, a political science professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, sees the convention movement as a class conflict between the poor whites and the wealthy politicians in the state. De-

spite the fact that the convention resolution passed the legislature by only one vote, and was defeated at the polls, he argues that the political mobilization of the "poor whites" was a democratic revolution that ushered in a new style of politics out-of-doors. His evidence, drawn from party organs, legislative speeches, and letters, show the author has gone through the archives with a fine-toothed comb, but he tends to take the political rhetoric at face value in assuming that the agitators were indeed, poor whites, an oppressed lower class. Nevertheless, Simeone recognizes that the pro-democracy movement meant freedom and equality for just one group--white males.

Once the white folks achieved their aims of legitimating a loyal opposition, he contends, cultural politics replaced class politics, which the author explores through a study of organized religion in Illinois's Second Great Awakening. The white folks split into absolutists ("Whole-Hog Calvinists") and moderates ("Milk-and-Cider Arminians"), people of two persuasions who were later attracted to the Democrat and Whig parties, respectively. The book concludes with a thoughtful essay on Illinois in the context of American political development, where Simeone challenges the assertion of Louis Hartz that Americans were born liberal. Instead, he argues, out of a dissenting tradition they were born republican.

Simeone is a political scientist, not a historian, and he uses the convention movement as a historical case study of the genesis of liberal democracy. The text is replete with references to political theorists, like David Greenstone, Simeone's mentor, and Richard J. Ellis. At times the theoretical borrowing interrupts the forward flow of the major argument, or leads to head-scratching, such as his statement that "self-actualization, recognition of the inner spirit, was the only moral guide for pure republicans" (p. 165).

I have two major reservations about Simeone's argument. First, the dichotomy of the Big Folks versus the White Folks is a useful heuristic device, but it is too crude a categorization to capture the diversity of Illinois' population at the time. It strains credulity to assume that the southern white settlers were all poor (which is not defined), even if they complained about being poor. And Simeone fails to supply evidence of wealth or landowning that might bolster his argument of two different classes, perhaps because such evidence would be difficult to obtain. Second, the white folks versus big folks scheme ignores the importance of nativity in political predilections. Simeone's argument challenges the longstanding view that the fractures in Illinois politics were most closely correlated to the nativity of the settlers, not their economic standing. What Simeone calls "white folks," others have called "upland southerners," and most recently, Nicole Etcheson has convincingly demonstrated the saliency of regional identity in antebellum Illinois politics.[1] A more solid grounding in the social and economic history of the period could have added heft to the political narrative.

Nevertheless, Simeone revises our view of the period by demonstrating how racism and the emergence of dissent shaped the emergence of democratic politics in Illinois. Scholars of Illinois and the Old Northwest, and political scientists of a historical bent, will find this book well-reasoned and thought-provoking.

Note

[1]. Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

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

Citation: Susan Sessions Rugh. Review of Simeone, James. *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. February, 2002.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5946