Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies

Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press. 2000. xii, 198pp. ISBN 0-8078-4854-9.

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Written by three of the most prominent North American historians of post-slavery societies, *Beyond Slavery* presents a multifaceted window onto some of the best research currently being done in this field. Drawing together Thomas Holt's work on Jamaica, Rebecca Scott's comparative work on Louisiana and Cuba, and Frederick Cooper's work on British East Africa and French West Africa, the book's collaborative triptych format successfully crosses the production values of a research monograph with the snappy pace of an edited collection. Each author offers an in-depth and carefully researched chapter drawn from their larger *oeuvre*. The juxtaposition of the three (and the very useful introductory framing) provides the reader with a fascinating opportunity for comparisons of different postemancipation varieties of freedom, ranging from the British use of 'apprenticeship' in the West Indies

in the 1830s to the French abolition of forced labor in West Africa in the 1940s. As an exploration of comparative questions of race, labor, and citizenship it is an invaluable volume not only for students of post-slavery societies, but also for anyone with an interest in colonial and post-colonial history, labor history, and the history of citizenship and racial exclusion.

The three historians began their collaboration at the University of Michigan in 1982, and gradually built up a corpus of courses, research seminars, graduate students, and publications, all under the rubric of the 'Postemancipation Societies Project', which has deeply informed their work. One output of this common research culture is the forthcoming bibliographic compendium, *Societies After Slavery: A Select Annotated Bibliography of Printed Sources on the British West Indies, British Colonial Africa, South Africa, Cuba and Brazil* (University of Michigan Press). But the project also fostered the production of a new generation of scholars of worldwide postemancipation societies who have also published important studies, including Pamela Scully, Neil Foley, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Ada Ferrer, and Laurent Dubois, amongst others.[1] Thus the publication of *Beyond Slavery* is in some sense an outcome of these productive synergies and shared commitments to comparative history. One can sense that the teachers have learned from the students as much as vice versa, and they admirably give credit where it is due.

One of the great strengths of *Beyond Slavery* is the creation of a common framework, or set of problems, for postemancipation studies. British Caribbean specialists, for example, will benefit from considering the uses of forced labor in French West Africa in the twentieth century, and North

American specialists (often quite insular) can fruitfully compare the post-bellum South with the quite different patterns of race, labor, and citizenship in Jamaica or Cuba. Such comparisons help to highlight the continuities as well as the contingencies in patterns of slavery and freedom. In fields that often seem to exist in separate orbits, a volume bringing them together is very welcome both from a scholarly perspective and for purposes of teaching. It also allows these particular histories to be set in the context of wider historical questions concerning race, class, citizenship, and power (along the way attempting something of a rescue of Frank Tannenbaum's 1956 *Slave and Citizen,* for at least having posed the right questions). Moreover, the authors make a great effort to illustrate the contemporary relevance of their work for all of us who live in post-slavery societies. Insofar as the world we inhabit is still shaped by the conflicts and struggles over labor and citizenship that this book so compellingly delineates, one might complain that the all too brief Afterword on contemporary 'global society' reads more like an afterthought.

The key theme that runs throughout this book is the idea that 'beyond slavery' there may be something that we call 'freedom', but what precisely constitutes that freedom was always contested and remains open to question today. After the ending of enslavement, former slaves had to face other structures of labor control including 'apprenticeship', forced labor, indenture, gang labor, and sharecropping. There were also new boundaries of citizenship and systems of colonial rule, of belonging and exclusion, autonomy and dependence, articulated in relation to gender ideologies and racial marking. All of these local particularities and colonial 'peculiarities', the authors suggest, chafed against the supposed universalism of Western

notions of freedom. However, rather than simply rejecting 'Western' concepts of freedom, equality, and citizenship as tainted ideologies that have supported imperialism and colonial rule, the project of this book is to investigate the contests over these ideologies and practices, the ambiguities within them, and the strategic (mis)appropriations of them by both colonial elites and by 'emancipated' peoples. As the introduction suggests, 'However refined the theorizing of citizenship by metropolitans in different times and places, the concept of citizenship was not theirs alone to invent. The case studies that follow point to the complicated ways in which collective action could confront the exclusions built up around dominant notions of citizenship.' (p.23). Their project, then, intersects with more Eurocentric versions of labor history and collective action, injecting into them a much needed colonial perspective.

Holt's chapter, 'The Essence of the Contract: The Articulation of Race, Gender, and Political Economy in British Emancipation Policy, 1838-1866' covers some of the same ground as his prize-winning book, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). But it also branches out in new directions and brings new insights, particularly in regard to the place of gender ideologies in circumscribing freedom. Most importantly, Holt shows that the formulation of emancipation policies exposed the contradictions in classical liberalism and thus contributed to deep ideological shifts in Britain and the wider Atlantic world. The British retreat from democracy and turn to 'beneficent despotism' in the second half of the nineteenth century was part of a racist reaction to slave emancipation. This colonial ideology hinged on an argument regarding the 'failure' of freedmen to govern the private sphere of

family life in a manner that would make them fit to act as public citizens. Thus, he convincingly argues, the bourgeois gender order reinforced a colonial political order, which justified paternalistic rule on the basis of racial difference.

Scott's chapter, 'Fault Lines, Color Lines, and Party Lines: Race, Labor, and Collective Action in Louisiana and Cuba, 1862-1912', draws on her extensive research for a forthcoming and much-anticipated comparative study of these two societies. She offers an excellent overview of the different options that were available to 'freed' plantation workers, including both the openings for collective action and the closures of political space via racist reactions and the consolidation of the 'color line'. Staying close to her sources and to particular events, she depicts the complex interactions of workers, unions, militias, vigilantes, armed forces, and local governments. Most importantly, her analysis of the complex interplay between these actors demonstrates how the marking of racial and class boundaries was always contingent. In her skilled hands, a 'comparative analysis of postemancipation sugar regions offers an opportunity to explore the complicated links between the organization of production and the possibilities for collective action. It also highlights the very different constructions of race in postemancipation societies, as well as the effect of race as idea and symbol on the practice of politics' (p. 62-3).

Her close analysis of labor organization in the cane fields of southern Louisiana shows how cross-racial class alliances were crushed in the onslaught of physical and rhetorical violence by planters and their allies (who suppressed the strikes of the 1880s). Rather than being the inevitable rise of

white supremacy, however, she argues that the subsequent marking of ‘a binary world of black and white required multiple elisions’ (p. 80). In Cuba’s multiracial sugar regions, in contrast, ‘the cross-racial alliances within the independence struggle had left a powerful legacy’ (p.94), for the workers’ movement continued to organize across racial lines, even in the aftermath of the suppression of the Partido Independiente de Color in 1912. By carefully demonstrating that the ‘politicization of the color line’ in Louisiana was contingent, ‘rather than a direct sequel to slavery or a concomitant of the transition to free labor’ (p. 105), Scott’s work enables us to call into question the formation of the color line in other postemancipation contexts. Adding some meat to the bones of theories of race as socially constructed, she shows exactly *how* racial boundaries solidified in different ways in different political and social contexts, and in particular, often paradoxical, ways in different regions.

Cooper’s chapter, ‘Conditions Analagous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa', makes clear that beyond slavery there is not simply freedom, but instead a far hazier shading into various forms of coerced and forced labor, with free labor itself being a deeply flawed ideal. He also shows how former slaves resisted becoming ‘free laborers’, insofar as ‘they often found niches in urban labor markets that could offset dependence on local landowners, used increased possibilities for safely moving about to return to homelands or to migrate to places where land was more readily availbale, and otherwise diversified their strategies for combining subsistence with irregular cash earnings’ (p.110). In tracing the imperialist project as an effort to come to terms with these undisciplined laborers, Cooper contributes

to an understanding of the normalization of some of the most brutal aspects of colonial rule. The chapter draws in part on Cooper's book, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1996),[2] and perhaps because of the very weight of data and density of the argument, it is somewhat less suited to the essay-format than the previous chapters.

Cooper's most powerful point is in regard to the abolition of forced labor in French West Africa in 1946, and the declaration that all workers, including Africans, would be treated as French citizens. Here, countering certain strands of postcolonial theory that would reject anything associated with 'Western' notions of freedom, he argues that 'citizenship is a dynamic concept, whose meanings are not intrinsic to the construct but are shaped in political, social, and cultural debate and confrontation' (p.147). With Holt and Scott, then, we can also read Cooper's piece as a reassessment of some of the fundamental categories of Western modernity *taking into account the struggles of workers in the plantation world who claimed these as their own*: freedom, citizenship, rights, political empowerment. As I have argued in my own contribution to these questions, workers in plantation societies have contributed as much to the making of modern democracy and concepts of freedom as the 'industrial proletariat' who usually figure in European and North American labor histories.[3] As the authors insist, the struggles that emerged in freedom's wake remain our own horizon.

If I had to identify the greatest weakness of the book, it is the treatment of issues of gender, which have increasingly emerged as the very crux of issues of race, labor and citizenship in postemancipation societies. Cooper

never really gets to grip with questions of gender and power (in spite of a brief discussion of the effects of emancipation policies in matrilineal contexts), and offers a quite traditional male-centered narrative of the interactions between labor movements, various colonial policy-makers, and African state-builders. Throughout the chapter he makes reference to categories such as ‘wage workers’, ‘tenant laborers’, or the ‘labor force’, without any indication of whether these are male-only categories, and if so, what labor women are doing. While finally acknowledging that ‘gender exclusions have had a crucial impact on the kinds of opportunities people have in both wage labor and commerce’ (p.148), he does not make the exploration of these exclusions central to (or even visible within) his overall project. Scott makes important contributions to understanding the contingency of ‘color lines’ in particular contexts, yet she has surprisingly little to say about gender boundaries and how their variable marking intersects with racial boundaries. One can only hope that she has reserved the analysis of gender to a separate chapter of her larger study.

Holt’s is the only chapter to deal centrally with gender as it intersects with race, labor, and citizenship, yet he fails to move beyond the gender ideologies of the white colonial elite. Though he gestures toward the possibility of ‘alternative conceptions of gender roles and identities, of family and community’ (p.58-9), at no point does he explore what these might be, how they relate to elite ideologies, or what methods historians might employ to find them. Insofar as gender formations are emerging as a crucial terrain for understanding the limitations of ‘emancipation’, it is a surprising oversight in an otherwise incisive book. Particularly when the idea of a ‘public sphere’

plays such a key part in each of the chapters, one would expect a more theoretically reflexive analysis both of the gender-marking of the public/private distinction, and of the way it intersected with racial boundaries. Holt's work is beginning to move in this direction, but the problem of absent subaltern perspectives haunts his analysis.

The three authors have varying degrees of concern with subaltern perspectives or what Scott calls 'on-the-ground' struggles. Although Cooper's terrain is the twentieth century, he seems most thoroughly removed from any interest in local perspectives, oral history, or events as seen from the 'ground up'. He refers to the colonial idea that African's irregular work-practices were 'peculiar', yet he offers no alternative viewpoint or explanation. Holt's strength likewise lies in the analysis of British discourses and the views of policy-makers and white elites, while he seems to have little primary evidence to fall back on when it comes to speculating about black Jamaican viewpoints, practices, or ideologies. Indeed his vague gestures toward an unspecified 'Afro-Jamaican' subject seem to problematically elide the variations and differences (of gender, colour, ethnicity, class, occupation, etc.) among non-white Jamaicans. Scott is most effective of the three in her efforts to stay close to 'particular events in specific locales' (p.84) as seen through sources giving us 'on the ground' views of the action. Most fortuitously, while presenting earlier versions of the work at a conference in Cienfuegos, Cuba, one of the translators introduced her to his 96-year-old grandfather Tom·s Pérez y Pérez, who, it transpired, remembered the particular events of 1899 that she was researching in the archives.[4] This jolt of reality seems to have inspired in Scott a deeper interest in getting to know the local terrain, the living

survivors, and the popular memory of the period of her research, and Pérez y Pérez makes an appearance in her footnotes and on the book's cover.

Despite its immense scholarly integrity and its many merits, then, this version of North American postemancipation historiography gestures toward the people it studies, yet seems to be curiously disengaged from debates about authorial location or methods of subaltern studies that have been raised both by feminist theorists and postcolonial theorists. These are theoretical issues with which many historians must grapple, but they certainly cannot be ignored – even from the safe mid-Western distance of the University of Michigan or the University of Chicago. Like a building cloaked in scaffolding which hangs out a 'business as usual' sign, these industrious North American historians get on with their job of producing exquisitely crafted jewels like this volume, even as the foundations and public façade of their workplace are at risk of crumbling. Depending on one's perspective, this is both the work's greatest strength and its fatal flaw.

ENDNOTES

[1] Beyond their excellent Ph.D. dissertations, some of the important published work of this cohort includes Laurent Dubois, *Les esclaves de la République: L'historie Oubliée de la premiére émancipation, 1789-1794* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1998); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery; Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); and Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997).

[2] Also relevant is his earlier work, Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890-1925* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[3] See Mimi Sheller, *Democracy After Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2000).

[4] For an account of this see Laurence Zuckerman, 'Amid a Thaw, Cuba Studies Get Hot', *The New York Times*, May 13, 2000, p. A17.