AHR Reappraisal

The Problem of Abolition in the Age of Capitalism

The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823, by David Brion Davis

MANISHA SINHA

David Brion Davis's corpus, comprising his well-known trilogy *The Problem of Slavery* and numerous other books, has been by any measure foundational to the history of slavery and antislavery in the Western world.[1] The title of Drew Gilpin Faust's review of the last volume in the trilogy, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* [hereafter *Age of Emancipation*], published in 2014, anointed Davis as "The Scholar Who Shaped History."[2] In particular, the first two volumes, the Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966 [hereafter *Western Culture*]) and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975 [hereafter *Age of Revolution*]), have been field-defining. While the former remains an exemplary piece of scholarship on global intellectual history, ranging widely over time and space from antiquity to the early modern period, the latter, as Davis acknowledged, "proved to be far more controversial."[3]

On its publication, though, *Age of Revolution* garnered uniformly favorable reviews. As the eminent British historian Sir J. H. Plumb put it, "like his first book, this will endure, one of the peaks in the vast mountainous range of the bibliography of slavery."[4] Its influence on the historiography of Anglo-American antislavery, even after all these years, is indisputable. As with all historical classics, the significance of *Age of Revolution* lies not so much in establishing a definitive account of early abolition as in opening

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[1] For some of Davis's other important works on slavery and antislavery, see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984); *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); and *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006).

[2] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York, 2014); Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Scholar Who Shaped History," *New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2014, 8–11.

[3] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975; repr., New York, 1999); Davis, "Reexamining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 118, no. 2 (2008): 247–266, here 263.

[4] J. H. Plumb, "The Beginning of the End," *New York Times*, February 9, 1975, sec. VII, 1–2, here 1.

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up new avenues of scholarship and debate. Ten years after its publication, it was the subject of a two-part *AHR* essay by Thomas Haskell, which elicited responses from John Ashworth and Davis himself and a rejoinder by Haskell. Those essays, along with three chapters from the book, were eventually published as *The Antislavery Debate* in 1992.[5] The lasting influence of the first two books of the trilogy is also illustrated by the fact that Oxford University Press reprinted them in 1988 and 1999 respectively. From the perspective of abolition studies in the twenty-first century, some of the debates over Davis's critical second volume, *Age of Revolution*, particularly his contention that antislavery ideology indirectly legitimized wage work and early capitalism, have cast a long shadow.

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The son of Clyde Brion Davis, a peripatetic journalist and novelist, Davis abandoned his first love, the study of science, for history. His personal experiences as a soldier during the Second World War were crucial. His time in the military was eye-opening—not just his encounter with African American soldiers confined below decks, which he later compared to the holds of a slave ship, but also the attitudes of white soldiers and officers in the then-segregated U.S. Army, who viewed blacks rather than the Germans as aliens and resented the fact that German women dated black men. As he reflected, "Even as a teenager in occupied Germany, I glimpsed the cancerous racial division and exploitation that has festered at the core of American society for well over three hundred years."[6] As an undergraduate at Dartmouth, Davis majored in philosophy before receiving a doctorate from Harvard's History of American Civilizations program. His academic training led him to intellectual history, or what he prefers to call the history of ideology and the history of thought. Influenced by the ideas of the leading philosophers and theologians of his college days, Reinhold Niebuhr, William James, and George Santayana, as well as by anthropologists like Talcott Parsons and psychologists such as Erich Fromm, he developed an eclectic interdisciplinary approach that informs much of his historical scholarship. Davis "was taken by the notion of studying *concrete* human moral problems as a way of tracing, within social and cultural frameworks, broad shifts in beliefs, moral values, assumptions, and ideology," a perspective that underlay *Age of Revolution*.[7]

At the same time, Davis confronted the poverty of his education in matters relating

[5] Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 339–361 (reprinted in Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* [Berkeley, Calif., 1992], 107–135); Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 2," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (June 1985): 547–566 (Bender, 136–160); David Brion Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (1987): 797–812 (Bender, 161–179); John Ashworth, "The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (October 1987): 813–828 (Bender, 180–199); Thomas L. Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Slavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (1987): 829–878 (Bender, 200–259). For the mostly positive reception of *Age of Revolution*, see also reviews by Peter Wallenstein in *Business History Review* 49 (Autumn 1975): 401–402; August Meier in *American Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (April 1976): 443–444; and James W. St. G. Walker in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 9 (1975): 383–386.

[6] Davis, "Re-examining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture," 249.

[7] David Brion Davis, "Intellectual Trajectories: Why People Study What They Do," *Reviews in American History* 37, no. 1 (2009): 148–159, here 154, emphasis in the original.

to slavery and race. No one introduced him to the scholarship of black historians, and the dominant historical works on American slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction that he read were based on outdated racist caricatures. A fortuitous meeting with Kenneth Stampp, whose book *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) upended the long reign of U. B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918), led Davis to want to do for the history of antislavery what Stampp had done for slavery.[8] Davis published his first two volumes at a time when the new social history of slavery by John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, George Rawick, Leslie Owens, Herbert Gutman, and Lawrence Levine was revolutionizing the field.[9] As the prominent historian of Cuban slavery Franklin Knight noted in his review of *Age of Revolution*, "for the very first time in American historiography, the most eminent scholars and researchers have been focusing on the study of slavery." What distinguished Davis from these historians of slavery was his attention to intellectual history or the history of ideas about slavery. For Davis, ideas mattered, and abolition as a "change in values and expectations constituted one of the few clear-cut examples in human history of what I won't hesitate to call genuine moral progress."[10] In a way, he anticipated the cultural turn in history, even though he is loath to be identified with any particular school of history or theory and averse to what he calls theoretical jargon. Perhaps it is for that reason that his books have been widely read and are influential well beyond the academy.

Davis's initial project was to write a multivolume history of antislavery thought in the West. In *Western Culture*, he argued convincingly that despite being the source of considerable tension in Western philosophical and religious traditions, slavery as an institution was broadly unquestioned by European writers and thinkers until as late as the eighteenth century. Not only had philosophers justified the existence of slavery, starting with Aristotle, who argued in *Politics* that some men were slaves by nature, but slavery had continued to exist in the peripheries of medieval Europe, on the Iberian Peninsula and in Kievan Russia, long after its demise in Greece and Rome. It was not until the emergence of radical dissenting Protestant sects that slavery in Christian thought went from being viewed as a punishment for sin to being perceived as a sin itself. On the secular end, with the exception of the conservative French political theorist Jean Bodin and a few others, Western commentators on law and politics, from Grotius and Pufendorf to Hobbes and Locke, did not condemn slavery, though their arguments departed from orthodox religious and political rationales for it, making the institution more sus-

[8] Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York, 1956); Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (New York, 1918).

[9] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Series One, vol. 1: *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York, 1976); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977).

[10] Franklin Knight, review of *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, by David Brion Davis, and *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*, edited by Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 1 (1976): 109–115, here 109; Davis, "Re-examining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture," 266.

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ceptible to criticism. For instance, according to Locke, slavery lay outside the social contract and was an extension of the state of war. For Locke, as Holly Brewer has recently argued, slavery derived its justification from a monarchical conception of government that he sought to critique.[11]

At the same time, European commercial and geographic expansion into the New World rested squarely on the African slave trade and the growth of modern racial slavery, the enslavement of Native Americans and African Americans. The plantation complex that we so closely associate with the Americas, Davis showed, originated in the Mediterranean islands, which initially used enslaved Slavic labor (hence the modern term "slave" rather than the original Latin word *servus*) before European traders turned to western Africa to supply labor for plantations in the Atlantic islands off the coast of Africa. Slavery in the early modern West was born because of an accident of geography, the growth of plantation economies devoted to producing staple cash crops for the world market, and a preexisting trade in African slaves. A Guggenheim Fellowship that required Davis to spend a research year at the British Library allowed him to trace this remarkable global genealogy of modern racial slavery.

Perhaps not so coincidentally, a growing number of individuals—mainly Quakers and dissenting Protestant clergymen, though Davis also lists early Catholic voices of antislavery—started criticizing the rise of human bondage in the Americas. Davis's achievement in this first volume was not simply to illustrate the Christian and Enlightenment origins of Western antislavery, some of whose effects he was careful to point out could be contradictory, as in justifying the enslavement of the heathen other or those deemed to be inherently inferior and savage compared to literate, Christian, civilized Europeans. Instead, it is the recovery of long-forgotten early antislavery writers, many of whom anticipated the contours of nineteenth-century Anglo-American abolitionism, that makes *Western Culture* a significant text still. The book tellingly ends with the early Quaker abolitionist John Woolman's prophecy of divine vengeance on slave societies.[12]

It is somewhat unfortunate, then, that in his second volume, Davis chose not to write about some of the most influential abolitionist figures of the late eighteenth century or to engage with their words and ideas, as he had done in the previous volume. Perhaps in response to criticism from many reviewers that *Western Culture* was too steeped in intellectual history and ignored political economy, *Age of Revolution* is a different book than its companion volume.[13] The further caveat here is that Davis tended to ignore abolitionists of African descent. The writings of Phillis Wheatley, Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano, and Olaudah Equiano were a crucial part of the Anglo-American movement against the African slave trade. The interracialism of this first wave of abolition lay forgotten as many subsequent historians dismissed this revolutionary phase of abolition as gradualist, conservative, and predominantly white-dominated. The focus of *Age of*

[11] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. It is worth mentioning that Bodin was inspired by a runaway slave. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, Conn., 2016), 10; Holly Brewer, "Slavery, Sovereignty, and 'Inheritable Blood': Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery," *American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (October 2017): 1038–1078.

[12] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 483–493.

[13] See, for example, Howard Temperley's review of *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* in *Journal of American Studies* 1, no. 2 (1967): 289–291, here 291. See also the review of the book by M. I. Finley, "The Idea of Slavery," *New York Review of Books*, January 26, 1967, 7–10.

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Revolution is, as Knight tellingly put it, on "the process of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American abolition."[14]

In a sense, Davis has been his own best critic, as his subsequent books reveal a greater appreciation of the interracial nature of abolition. The first modern scholarly appraisal of black abolitionists, by Benjamin Quarles, was published in 1969, but like the early work on pioneering women abolitionists, it had yet to be integrated into the history of antislavery when Davis was writing *Age of Revolution*. Not surprisingly, Davis paid scant attention to these relatively new histories, an omission he strove to rectify in the last volume of the trilogy, *Age of Emancipation.* But rather than fashion a new interpretation of abolition, this somewhat disappointing conclusion subsumed black and women abolitionists like David Walker and the Grimké sisters within preexisting interpretations of abolitionists as mainstream religious and moral reformers. For example, Davis's understanding of Walker's thought as essentially racial uplift ignores how tightly braided the politics of racial improvement was with that of resistance among African American abolitionists, and his emphasis on the religious inspirations of the Grimké sisters undersells their modern evocations of human rights and gendered oppression.[15]

In *Age of Revolution*, Davis adopted the "Age of Revolutions" framework, illustrating that the revolutionary era problematized the existence of slavery for the first time in Western history. This key insight, widely accepted today, has allowed subsequent historians to extend the conventional chronological parameters of abolition back from the nineteenth century to the eighteenth. Historians of abolition have only recently elaborated on Davis's pioneering insistence on the importance of early abolitionism.[16] R. R. Palmer, who was perhaps most responsible for developing the Age of Revolutions interpretation, focused on European history, particularly the French and American Revolutions, in his influential two-volume *The Age of Democratic Revolutions*, but only briefly discussed the Haitian Revolution and the Latin American Wars of Independence. Palmer ignored the work of C. L. R. James, who had cast the Haitian Revolution as a

[14] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 16; Knight review, 110. For a similar critique, see James A. Rawley's review of *Age of Revolution* in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (1976): 118–119.

[15] Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels against Slavery* (Boston, 1967); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*. For the vast literature on African American and women abolitionists since, see Manisha Sinha, "Coming of Age: The Historiography of Black Abolitionism," in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York, 2006), 23–40; Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1992); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb, Ill., 2005); Stacey M. Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010).

[16] Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, pt. 1; Julie L. Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2016); Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657–1761* (New Haven, Conn., 2012); Paul Polgar, *Standard Bearers of Equality: America's First Abolitionists* (Chapel Hill, N.C., forthcoming 2019); Sarah Gronningsater, *The Arc of Abolition: The Children of Gradual Emancipation and the Origins of National Freedom* (Philadelphia, forthcoming 2019).

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central and defining event in the history of revolutionary abolition. As Jeremy Adelman writes, arguing for a reevaluation of the democratic revolutions thesis as essentially revolutions of empire, "It would be hard to imagine how one would narrate their stories without placing the slave trade, slave labor, and the explosive struggles for emancipation at the center."[17] This is precisely what Davis did in *Age of Revolution*.

Davis was the first American historian to pay systematic attention to other revolutions in the Americas that resulted in the destruction of slavery. Besides black scholars such as James and Latin Americanists, U.S. historians had for the most part ignored the influence of the Haitian Revolution and the Latin American Wars of Independence on the growth of abolition. In a "Calendar of Events," Davis documented the abolitionist repercussions of these revolutions, which by the 1820s had left only three large slave societies in the Americas intact: the U.S. South, Brazil, and Cuba—and, one could add, smaller slave societies in Puerto Rico and Peru, or what scholars today call the second slavery. Davis ended *Age of Revolution* with an intriguing epilogue; this time Woolman is replaced by the figure of the Haitian revolutionary general Toussaint Louverture, combined with an analysis of Hegel's discussion of the master-slave relationship in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Louverture's "achievements had stunned the world," he wrote, and reverberated in the Atlantic World. Haiti proved for Davis Hegel's considerations that while the slave ultimately obtained his identity through his labor and became truly free, the master remained dependent for his identity on the slave. This idea was the reverse of Aristotle's notion of the slave as a mere extension of the master's will, a talking tool, an *instrumentum vocale*. It also went beyond the traditional Christian hierarchical acceptance of human bondage as a natural part of the social order. Davis concluded this somewhat philosophical meditation with the valuable intuition that "man's true emancipation, whether physical or spiritual, must always depend on those who have endured and overcome some form of slavery."[18]

Davis's conclusion in *Age of Revolution* is more suggestive than definitive. While acknowledging slave resistance, he does not view it as constitutive of abolition or as defining its nature. Even though in his subsequent writings he would further spell out the importance of the Haitian Revolution, he would also claim that contemporary historians had exaggerated the role of slave revolts in the making of abolition.[19] In terms of the abolition movement, historians have gone further than Davis in recognizing the significance of the Haitian Revolution (the only successful slave rebellion in world history, which birthed the first independent modern black nation) in the black and white abolitionist imagination throughout the Atlantic World.[20] It put slaveholders in the Americas

[17] R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolutions: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1959); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1938). On the erasure of the Haitian Revolution from history, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995); Jeremy Adelman, "An Age of Imperial Revolutions," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 319–340, here 321.

[18] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 557–564, quotes from 564.

[19] David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*; Davis, "Re-examining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture," 266. On slave resistance and abolition, see Merton L. Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619–1865* (Baton Rouge, La., 1991); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*.

[20] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2011); Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, eds.,

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on notice, making them more zealous in their mastery, and the Haitian revolutionary example gave the enslaved a model for liberation, albeit a troubled and divisive one.

In *Age of Revolution*, however, Davis had at least drawn attention to the abolitionist nature of the Haitian Revolution and portrayed Louverture rather than Thomas Jefferson as a revolutionary antislavery icon. Jefferson, Davis acutely argued, had far more in common with the proslavery "*philosophes* of the Caribbean," such as Bryan Edwards and Moreau de Saint-Méry, than with the abolitionists of his day, Anthony Benezet and the Abbes Raynal and Gregoire.[21]

Davis also brought a transnational perspective to the study of antislavery in *Age of Revolution*, long before it was fashionable to do so, which accounts to a certain extent for the book's staying power. Before its publication, the dominant historical writing on abolition was confined to national boundaries and shaped by simple, Whiggish ideas of moral progress. In Britain, the work of Sir Reginald Coupland even justified imperialism as an antislavery enterprise.[22] In the United States, the history of the abolition movement tended to ignore the revolutionary era that Davis focused on in *Age of Revolution*. Hundreds of books on rival abolitionist factions—the followers of the preeminent antebellum abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison versus evangelical and political abolitionists, or represented regionally as eastern Garrisonians versus western abolitionists—dominated the historiography, with the authors at times uncritically adopting the positions of their subjects.[23]

When Davis embarked on his project to write a comprehensive history of Anglo-American antislavery, unsympathetic views of abolitionists were dominant in American historiography, with the exception of a few short-lived studies written in the shadow of the civil rights movement. Stanley Elkins's book *Slavery*, known for its "Sambo" thesis, which provoked a whole generation of slavery historians to challenge it, also portrayed abolitionists as irrational and fanatical anti-institutionalists, transcendentalist intellectuals from New England who were armchair philosophers with no well-thought-out program for emancipation. For David Donald, in a scholarly update of slaveholders' criticisms of northern abolitionists, they were a declining New England elite suffering from status anxiety. Davis himself flirted with a crude psychological argument to explain the rise and nature of American abolition in *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (1969), which he thankfully dispensed with in *Age of Revolution*.[24]

African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents (New York, 2010); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 53–64. For an opposing argument, see Mitch Kachun, "Antebellum African Americans, Public Commemoration, and the Haitian Revolution: A Problem of Historical Mythmaking," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 2 (2006): 249–273, also reprinted in Jackson and Bacon, *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution*, 93–106.

[21] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 177, 184–195.

[22] Sir Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, 1933). Davis, however, acknowledged his debt to Roger Anstey, the prominent historian of British slave trade abolition, who published his book the same year. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 20; Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (London, 1975).

[23] Much of this work remains useful. Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York, 1933); Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850* (New York, 1969). For some early syntheses, most of which concentrated on the antebellum period, see Louis Filler, *The Crusade against Slavery, 1830–1860* (New York, 1960); Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1961); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1976); Ronald Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore, 1976).

[24] See some of the essays in Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), for the portrayal of abolitionists as predecessors of civil rights activ-

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Davis employed, as is commonly overlooked, a more sophisticated psychological explanation for the rise of British abolition in *Age of Revolution*, despite the fact that he deemed the individual motivations of abolitionists irrelevant. *Age of Revolution* was shaped by psychological theories in vogue when it appeared. Davis relied on the theory of transference to explain abolitionists' concern for the enslaved in remote colonies. (The quintessential abolitionist here is of course white and in the metropolis, which in itself is a problematic construction.) In the book's preface, Davis expressed admiration for Erik H. Erikson's muckraking *Gandhi's Truth* (1969) and his use of the Freudian concept of transference to elucidate "the origins of Gandhi's militant nonviolence" in sexual repression. Davis applied the psychoanalytic concept of transference to explain the origins of British abolitionist ideas, even though this was not a major aspect of his argument. "Ironically," he observed, "abolitionism reached its first great success, especially in mobilizing a large part of the total population, in a monarchic and aristocratic nation that also led the way in the Industrial Revolution, with its exploitation of countless men, women, and children in factories and mines."[25]

Abolition could be viewed as a psychological device that transferred worries from nearby evils to distant ones. But Davis did not offer a psychobiography of abolitionists. The problems with subjecting historical subjects to psychological analysis or psychohistory are too numerous to elucidate here, but suffice it to point out that they rarely provide us with convincing explanations of historical change. A recent defense of the field of psychohistory, which lists Erikson, alongside others who are not historians, as a founder, acknowledges that it does not enjoy the currency that it did in the 1970s, when Davis wrote *Age of Revolution*.[26] Davis, however, continued to dabble in psychohistory for his last volume, in which he speculated that African Americans had internalized notions of dehumanization in slavery and struggled to overcome "self-contempt." This argument led Eric Foner to accuse Davis of "practicing psychiatry without a license" in an otherwise favorable review of *Age of Emancipation*.[27]

What defines *Age of Revolution*, though, is Davis's seminal interpretation of the emergence of antislavery and its relationship to British capitalism. Rejecting simplistic as well as instrumentalist explanations of abolition in Britain as either a triumph of moral virtue or a result of the changing economic interests of its ruling classes, Davis situated his argument for the emergence of revolutionary abolition in political economy, social transformations, and, as noted above, psychological imperatives. Writing in the shadow of Eric Williams's classic *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Davis was careful to avoid

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ists. Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), chap. 4; David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, 1956), chap. 2; Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960); David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge, La., 1969).

[25] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 18, 350, 379.

[26] Paul H. Elovitz, *The Making of Psychohistory: Origins, Controversies, and Pioneering Contributors* (New York, 2018).

[27] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, xvi, 225; Eric Foner, "Slavery in the Modern World: Davis Brion Davis's Pathbreaking Study of the Problem of Slavery," *The Nation*, January 29, 2014, https://www.thenation.com/article/slavery-modern-world/. In contrast, see Nell Irvin Painter's evocative "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," chap. 1 in Painter, *Southern History across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), 15–39.

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Williams's deterministic account of the rise of British abolition as an essentially economic decision to shift investment from increasingly unprofitable slave societies to industry. Williams's description of abolition as merely a reflection of the economic interests of British elites also ignored what James, in his critique of Williams, called the self-liberating actions of the enslaved, the continuing profitability of slavery, and the important place of slavery in the emergence of industrial capitalism in England.[28]

If Williams's argument on the central role of slavery and the slave trade in the rise of early capitalism has stood the test of time, his thesis on abolition has not withstood historical scrutiny. As Seymour Drescher and others have illustrated, the British Caribbean slave societies were highly profitable, particularly after the collapse of Haitian slavery, at the time of abolition. In her recent award-winning book *Freedom's Mirror*, Ada Ferrer shows that the destruction of plantation agriculture in Haiti proved to be a windfall for Cuban slavery and sugar plantations. Much like slavery in the U.S. slave South on the eve of the Civil War, slavery in the Caribbean was an economically expansive institution rather than a declining one at the moment of its destruction. Williams also counterposed colonial slavery in the Caribbean to industrial capitalism in Britain, an opposition that recent historians of slavery and capitalism have rejected. For the latter, industrial capitalism was dependent on slavery rather than its economic competitor.[29]

As Davis pointed out, "The continuing economic strength and vitality of slavery actually reinforced my thesis regarding the central importance of ideas, moral perceptions, and public opinion."[30] While he rejected Williams's reductionist account of the rise of abolition, Davis argued that antislavery had the ironic ideological consequence of legitimizing the rise of wage labor and a new industrial social order in Britain. According to Davis, this was precisely the reason why abolition went from being the cause of a few reformers to a successful movement in the nineteenth century that managed to abolish the slave trade and eventually get rid of slavery. Davis's argument about the hegemonic role of antislavery ideology in justifying capital accumulation and labor discipline proved to be not only the most debated aspect of *Age of Revolution* but also the most influential.

Davis's ideological explanation of the success of abolition was clearly influenced by the history of slavery that was in vogue when he wrote *Age of Revolution*. One obvious influence was the late Eugene D. Genovese, who portrayed the slave South as a premodern, pre-capitalist society and its critics as bourgeois reformers. The notion that hypocritical abolitionists critiqued slavery while remaining blind to the sufferings of the

[28] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1944); Heather Cateau and S. H. H. Carrington, eds., *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A Reassessment of the Man and His Work* (New York, 2000); Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge, 1987); Manisha Sinha, "Reviving the Black Radical Tradition," in Deborah Chasman and Joshua Cohen, eds., *Race, Capitalism, Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017), 66–71, here 71.

[29] Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, 1977); Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2014). On the continuing profitability of slave-grown sugar, see also William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford, 1976); and James Walvin's recent *Sugar: The World Corrupted—From Slavery to Obesity* (New York, 2018). For an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to revive Williams's thesis on abolition, especially since it is limited to the period of slave trade abolition, see David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783–1807* (Cambridge, 2009).

[30] Davis, "Re-examining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture," 265.

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working poor closer to home had of course originated with southern defenders of slavery, whom Genovese quixotically admired as conservative critics of capitalism. As fellows at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, Genovese and Davis wrote their respective magnum opuses, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) and *Age of Revolution*, in conversation with each other. It is quite likely that Genovese learned about the Hegelian idea of the master-slave relationship from Davis, although Hegel's argument is the polar opposite of Genovese's on slaveholders' ideological hegemony. Genovese's book, of course, became one of the most important works ever written on American slavery, its central ideas criticized but unchallenged until very recently.[31] While Genovese's influence is apparent in *Age of Revolution*, Davis's theoretical inspirations did not come from Marxism; they lay elsewhere.

The most obvious model for Davis's pivotal fifth chapter, "The Quaker Ethic and the Antislavery International," is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In his first volume, Davis had noted that many of the early Quaker abolitionists—Elihu Coleman, a Nantucket carpenter; John Hepburn, an indentured servant; Benjamin Lay, a sailor; Woolman, who began his working life as a tailor; and Benezet, a teacher—were men of humble origins. They, like the Quaker founder George Fox, subsumed their criticism of slavery under a broader critique of commerce, warfare, wealth-making, and empire, and in the case of Woolman, also the human and environmental costs of early industrialization in Britain.[32] But here in the subsequent volume, Davis argued that Quakers had perfected values that were conducive to the rise of capitalism, and that their critique of slavery had the important side effect of legitimizing wage labor. In this respect, Davis's argument was compatible with those of some contemporary labor historians, who contended that antislavery acted as a mechanism of social control in the northern states and distracted labor from its quest for economic democracy. Recent labor historians have argued instead for considerable overlap between early labor and antislavery radicalism, reviving Betty Fladeland's interpretation of Anglo-American abolition. The war actually accelerated working-class activism rather than dampened it.[33]

The quintessential antislavery Quakers in *Age of Revolution* were the Barclay and Lloyd banking families, the mercantile elite, and manufacturers—in short, a newly

[31] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). On Genovese's long reign over the historiography of slavery, see my "Eugene D. Genovese: The Mind of a Marxist Conservative," *Radical History Review*, no. 88 (Winter 2004): 4–29.

[32] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, chap. 10. On early Quaker abolitionism, see Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 12–24; Marcus Rediker, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (Boston, 2017); Gary B. Nash, *Warner Mifflin: Unflinching Quaker Abolitionist* (Philadelphia, 2017); Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia, 2012); Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism* (Philadelphia, 2009).

[33] See, for example, Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York, 1978); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976). On whiteness and the working class, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Gunther Peck, *Race Traffic: Historicizing the Global Origins of Whiteness and Resistance to It* (Chapel Hill, N.C., forthcoming 2019); Betty Fladeland, *Abolitionists and Working-Class Problems in the Age of Industrialization* (Baton Rouge, La., 1984); Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (Cambridge, 2005); Mark A. Lause, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* (Urbana, Ill., 2015).

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emergent industrial bourgeoisie. As Davis put it, "The very embodiment of the capitalist mentality, the English Quakers were in the vanguard of the industrial revolution" and "The Quakers engaged in the antislavery cause were also deeply concerned over domestic problems of labor discipline." If in *Western Culture* Quaker abolitionists were lineal descendants of the radical dissenting sects of the English Civil War, in *Age of Revolution* they became the progenitors of England's haute bourgeoisie. In fact, Quaker elites, many of whom were slaveholders, had to be dragged kicking and screaming down the path of abolition. As Davis himself pointed out, abolitionists were the most activist segment of the antislavery movement. By his own definition, the Barclays and Lloyds can hardly be called abolitionists. Abolitionists succeeded despite rather than because of political and economic elites, many of whom were complicit in the political economy of slavery and would spend a lot of time containing abolition's reach after emancipation. But in *Age of Revolution*, Davis explained the triumph of antislavery in British society as the triumph of capitalism: "by defining slavery as a unique *moral aberration*, the [antislavery] ideology tended to give sanction to the prevailing economic order." As he concluded, "The antislavery movement, like Adam Smith's political economy, reflected the needs and values of the emerging capitalist order."[34]

Genovese had appropriated Antonio Gramsci's notion of the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie in advanced twentieth-century capitalist democratic societies to explain slaveholders' rule in the South, which one might counter relied far more on brute force than on institutional legitimacy. Davis used Gramsci to argue for the allegedly hegemonic function of antislavery ideology in industrializing Britain. He contended that antislavery in Britain was ultimately "a vehicle for social control."[35] Davis was careful to limit his use of ideological hegemony to British abolition, but John Ashworth extended it to mid-nineteenth-century American abolition and the free labor ideology of the Republican Party. For Ashworth, abolitionists were indeed "bourgeois reformers," and he sought to uncover the connection between abolition and "the emerging capitalist order of the North" in a manner that mirrored Davis's argument. Even more than Davis, Ashworth developed a functionalist argument for abolition, tying it to the emergence of wage labor as well as the cult of domesticity and true womanhood. His view of American abolition would find it difficult to account for the emergence of the women's rights movement from abolition or the untoward sympathy of northern bankers, manufacturers, and merchants for southern slaveholders, to whom they were tied by complementary political, ideological, and economic class interests. In his description of the relationship between the antislavery Republican Party and capitalism, while noting that it would be "an error therefore to assume that Republicans were uniformly complacent about the northern social order" and that their "antislavery crusade was in any way intended to divert attention from the social problems of the north," Ashworth nonethe-

[34] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 233, 252, 254, 350, emphasis in the original. Roger Anstey criticized Davis's argument, because "the new commercial and industrial classes" were not "in the vanguard of antislavery." See his review of *Age of Revolution* in *English Historical Review* 91, no. 358 (1976): 141–148, here 144. Robert McColley made the same point in his review in *Agricultural History* 50, no. 2 (1976): 439–440. John Ashworth also notes the proslavery sympathies of northern factory owners; "The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," 828 n. 40. See also Philip S. Foner, *Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (London, 1986).

[35] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 379.

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less concluded that they were "apologists for northern society and the northern labour system."[36]

Davis's interpretation of the connection between antislavery and the rise of capitalism became fodder for historiographical debate with the publication of Thomas Haskell's essays on the relationship between the growth of humanitarianism and capitalism. Davis himself had given humanitarianism an important role in the rise of antislavery sentiment in his first volume, but for him humanitarianism was part and parcel of the many new ways of thinking that we associate with the Enlightenment. Haskell, on the other hand, assigned the rise of "humanitarian sensibility" to the growth of the world market, which he argued expanded "the conventional limits of moral responsibility" and established its "cognitive precondition[s]." Even the market language of contract, long vilified by Marxists for its false imposition of formal legal equality between the powerful and the powerless, in Haskell's telling bolstered "promise keeping" and hence humanitarian action. Haskell's argument drew swift responses from Davis and Ashworth, who faulted his definition of capitalism as market society instead of wage relations. Ashworth remained impressed by Davis's description of abolitionists' alleged "selectivity of concern" and, as in his book, added bourgeois notions of family and individual conscience to explain abolitionist ideology.[37]

In his rejoinder, Davis restated his argument accusing Haskell of confusing his position on the origins of antislavery, which he had discussed in his first volume, with the purported success of antislavery in Britain, which he described in the second book. The onus here shifts, then, from abolitionists themselves to the British government and society at large. Davis acknowledged that some "radical Garrisonians and labor reformers . . . could assert that both distant and nearby evils arose from a common cause." He also referenced the role of black radicals like Robert Wedderburn (albeit in a footnote that downplayed the mutual admiration between Wedderburn and the politically cautious William Wilberforce) and women in abolition, hardly your stereotypical dominant segments of society. In a separate article, Davis had brought to light the fact that the British Quaker abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick was the first to issue the call for immediate abolition in the Anglo-American world. One might add that Heyrick, like many abolitionists of the Jacobin stripe, including Thomas Clarkson, also defended slave rebellions and was a champion of labor and women's rights. Haskell, too, used the example of Wendell Phillips, showing that Phillips considered slavery a greater enormity than wage labor before the Civil War and yet took up the cause of labor after the war. Davis's conclusion here was also more nuanced, as he reframed his argument in terms of "not . . . any rigid or mechanical notion of social control but . . . the broad moral, political, and cultural transformations that accompanied the triumph of capitalism."[38]

[36] John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, vol. 1: *Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (Cambridge, 1995), 125, 127, 144; and vol. 2: *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (Cambridge, 2007), 292. On the mutual interdependence of the various sectors and regions of the U.S. economy, see the original framing by Douglass C. North in *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* (New York, 1966).

[37] Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1," 356; Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 2," 553–559, 560, 563; Ashworth, "The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," 815, 828; Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Slavery," 862–863.

[38] Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," 800, 806–807 n. 15, 812; Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Slavery," 872–878; David Brion Davis, "The

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In his last rebuttal, which he aptly titled "The Perils of Doing History by Ahistorical Abstraction," Davis went further from his original argument in *Age of Revolution*, acknowledging again that "I also knew that in both Britain and the United States, antislavery acquired truly radical characteristics, spawning or serving as a model for other movements that challenged inequalities and prevailing forms of domination." But he still concluded that "the growing power of antislavery in early industrial Britain was at least partly a function of the fit between antislavery ideology and the interests of an emergent capitalist class," and that "the growth and triumphs of antislavery had the long-term effect, regardless of the abolitionists' intentions, of legitimating and morally sustaining the new industrial capitalist order." This was, to say the least, ideological hegemony run amok, where motivation and action, human agency, have little explanatory power. Davis reiterated this idea in the last volume of his trilogy: "British abolitionism could exercise this dual character, both promoting broader moral progress and unintentionally supporting the status quo." For all his vaunted claims about the ideological affinity between antislavery and capitalism in his second volume, Davis perceptively noted that Friedrich Engels borrowed "the conceptual framework of the abolitionists" for his exposé *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), calling it "one of the greatest antislavery tracts."[39] Indeed, the parliamentary hearings on child and factory labor in the nineteenth century that this agitation evoked were modeled after the hearings on the slave trade in the eighteenth century that abolitionist protest engendered. The real ideological affinity lay not so much between abolitionists and capitalists, one could easily conclude, as between abolitionists and critics of capitalism.

In the end, one is struck less by the differences between Haskell, Ashworth, and Davis than by the essential similarities in their methods and interpretations, albeit from very different political and historical perspectives. Davis was correct to allude to the highly abstract nature of the debate, which at times paid very little attention to troublesome historical facts. Perhaps intellectual history is not the only mode for unpacking the nature and effects of a social movement as long-lasting and diverse as abolition. More importantly, Davis and Haskell shared a fundamental assumption that antislavery was a byproduct of the rise of capitalism, no matter how differently each defined capitalism and the differing value that each put on it. And all of them failed to explain why the Dutch, whose engagement with early capitalism matched that of the British, did not develop a robust antislavery tradition. Not only does *The Antislavery Debate* then have the quality of a clash of tin swords about it, but the essential premise of all the contributors—that abolition was a function of capitalism, whether to legitimate class relations in free labor societies or the humanitarian product of the expansion of the market—is untenable in light of recent scholarship on the relationship between slavery and capitalism. Modern slavery, in this reading, not only was integral to capitalist development but was itself a form of capitalism. As Ashworth also asked Haskell, why did the slave South,

Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought," *Journal of American History* 49, no. 2 (1962): 209–230; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 179–180, 197–198.

[39] David Brion Davis, "The Perils of Doing History by Ahistorical Abstraction: A Reply to Thomas L. Haskell's *AHR* Forum Reply," in Bender, *The Antislavery Debate*, 290–309, here 306, 308, 308–309; Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," 800, 806; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, 304; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 467, 468.

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which had a well-developed market in human beings and cash crops, not give birth to humanitarian sensibility and antislavery?[40]

If slavery lies at the heart of the development of Anglo-American capitalism, as some recent historians contend, then surely the movement to abolish it can be seen as, at the very least, its obverse, and anti-capitalist in its very premise, the emancipation of labor.[41] The first scholar to make this claim was W. E. B. Du Bois in his Marxist phase. Du Bois characterized emancipation, especially his notion of a "general strike" by the enslaved during the Civil War, as a revolt of labor against capital, and the Reconstruction of American democracy after the Civil War as "a dictatorship of the proletariat."[42]

The new history of slavery and capitalism is forcing us to rethink pristine narratives of Western capitalism that have ignored their unseemly complicity in modern racial slavery, the second serfdom of Eastern Europe, and the colonization of the rest of the world. Despite its not inconsiderable number of critics, this work has resulted in a paradigm shift in the historiography of American slavery. To parse this shift out as "minimalist," apparently acceptable, or "maximalist," apparently objectionable, misses the point.[43] It represents a fundamental break from Genovese's view of southern slavery as pre-capitalist and his later iteration of the slave South as *in* but not *of* the world market. For Genovese, slavery in the Caribbean and later Cuba was capitalist, but the American South and Brazil, he contended, were more "seigneurial," pre-modern, and semi-feudal.[44] Similarly, to argue that modern racial slavery was an integral part of the capitalist world is not the same as saying that capitalism is slavery, for the simple reason that the legal regime of the former has long outlasted the latter. But historians of slavery and capitalism today do not view slavery as antithetical to capitalism, and in fact trace

[40] John Ashworth, "Capitalism, Class, and Antislavery," in Bender, *The Antislavery Debate*, 263–289, here 264. For studies of the Dutch Empire and early capitalism, see the work of Wim Klooster, especially his recent *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2016).

[41] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013); Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815–1860* (New Haven, Conn., 2015); Jeff Forret and Christine E. Sears, eds., *New Directions in Slavery Studies: Commodification, Community, and Comparison* (Baton Rouge, La., 2015); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, 2016); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, 2017); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018).

[42] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935), chap. 4, 307; Andrew Hartman, "W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and the New (Marxist) Historiography," Society for U.S. Intellectual History, November 1, 2017, https://s-usih.org/2017/11/w-e-b-du-boiss-black-reconstruction-and-the-new-marxist-historiography/.

[43] John J. Clegg, "Capitalism and Slavery," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 281–304; Scott Reynolds Nelson, "Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery?," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 2 (2015): 289–310; James Oakes, "Capitalism and Slavery and the Civil War," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 89 (Spring 2016): 195–220; Amy Dru Stanley, "Histories of Capitalism and Sex Difference," *Journal of the Early Republic* 36, no. 2 (2016): 343–350; Charles Post, "Slavery and the New History of Capitalism," *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (2017): 172–193; Stephanie McCurry, "Plunder of Black Life: The Problem of Connecting the History of Slavery to the Economics of the Present," *Times Literary Supplement*, May 17, 2017, 23–24, 26.

[44] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983); Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York, 1969).

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many features of capitalism, commodification, management techniques, technological innovations, international credit flows, and the creation of financial instruments to plantation slavery. In uncovering the deep global connections between the expansion of slavery, unfree labor, and empire and the growth of capitalism, these historians have linked the history of capitalism to not just the coercions of the invisible hand of the marketplace and bourgeois legal fictions as it had been done conventionally for so long. They have implicated capitalism in its complicity with militarism, imperialism, racism, dispossession, torture, and enslavement. What slavery represented was an extreme in the exploitative tendency of capital to oppress labor, a point that the emerging class of wage workers and labor leaders recognized by referring to their condition as "wage slavery."[45]

Slavery, in my opinion, can be viewed as a monstrous hybrid that combined the brutality of an archaic labor system with the rapacious efficiencies of modern capitalism. Karl Marx, who was actually alive and composing his works on the overt and hidden oppressions of labor at this time, recognized that modern racial slavery represented the ultimate degradation of labor, and lauded both abolitionists and antislavery politicians such as Garrison, Phillips, Gerrit Smith, and Abraham Lincoln as champions of the working class. The American labor movement, he wrote in the first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867), "was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."[46] In these short sentences, Marx clearly pointed to the anti-capitalist nature of abolition. Like most abolitionists, Marx argued that the liberation of black slaves was the essential precondition for the rise of any labor movement in the United States, which he saw embodied in the postwar eight-hour day movement. Unlike many subsequent historians of slavery and labor, Marx viewed the enslaved as part of the American working class. In short, Marx himself, *pace* his many followers, was not wedded to the idea that societies that were not based on free labor were not capitalist, but he did predict that capitalism would ultimately develop into wage labor societies. These were not just throwaway remarks. They were precisely what led Genovese to critique Marx's understanding of the slave South and refer to himself as not a Marxist but a Marxian, one who adopted Marx's theories but not his understanding of modern racial slavery as capitalist, unlike slavery in antiquity.[47]

[45] Jonathan Glickstein, "The Chattelization of Northern Whites: An Evolving Abolitionist Warning," *American Nineteenth Century History* 4, no. 1 (2003): 25–58; Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), chap. 4; Philip S. Foner and Herbert Shapiro, eds., *Northern Labor and Antislavery: A Documentary History* (Westport, Conn., 1994); Bernard Mandel, *Labor, Free and Slave: Workingmen and the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States* (New York, 1955); Joseph G. Rayback, "The American Workingman and the Antislavery Crusade," *Journal of Economic History* 3, no. 2 (1943): 152–163. For an excellent study of the early labor movement, see Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2015).

[46] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York, 1889), 287.

[47] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, ed. Andrew Zimmerman (New York, 2016), 194–195; Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London, 2011); August H. Nimtz, "Marx and Engels on the US Civil War: The 'Materialist Conception of History' in Action," *Historical Materialism* 19, no. 4 (2011): 169–192. On German socialist abolitionists, but positing a dichotomy with New England immediatists, who were also opposed to the property regime of slavery, see Andrew Zimmerman, "From the Rhine to the Mississippi: Property, Democracy, and Socialism in the American Civil War," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 1 (2015): 3–37; Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York, 1971).

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Oddly enough, most historians of slavery and capitalism persist in viewing abolitionists as champions of free trade and the free market, the default position of most southern slaveholders, with the exception of the sugar planters, who were dependent on a tariff. Nonetheless, their scholarship points toward a long-overdue reevaluation of the relationship of antislavery to the emergence of capitalism and of Davis's thesis in *Age of Revolution*, a paradigm shift that parallels the one in slavery and capitalism studies. Many abolitionists critiqued the economics of slavery and the oppressive nature of early capitalism. Some flirted with utopian socialism and labor and land reform movements. In my own reading, the abolitionist international of the nineteenth century, which included radical republicans, communitarians, feminists, pacifists, and anti-imperialists, was far removed from the bourgeois antislavery Quaker international described by Davis in *Age of Revolution*. This point is easy to miss when, instead of fully engaging abolitionist archives, we describe antislavery in broad, systemic terms, where abolitionism becomes merely a subset of imperialism and capitalism rather than a radical, vibrant, interracial social movement of ordinary men and women, blacks and whites. We can trace this method for understanding abolition, which many still continue to find compelling, to the interpretive scaffolding first erected by *Age of Revolution*. As Plumb noted in an otherwise highly favorable review of the book, Davis should have included "[a] chapter on the social background of abolition."[48]

This is not to develop an exclusive definition of who was an abolitionist, but rather a historically accurate one. In American historiography, the standard definition of an abolitionist has always been someone who not only opposed the existence of slavery but also demanded African American citizenship. In contrast, antislavery could include a range of positions against slavery and no necessary commitment to black equality, even though most antislavery politicians were more open to the possibility of black civil and political rights than their peers. Moreover, the free labor ideology of the antebellum Republican Party was not so much a vindication of wage labor as it harked back to the world of economically independent male republican proprietors, a vision that would become obsolete with the industrial takeoff in the United States from 1870 to 1920.[49]

Davis's thesis domesticated antislavery radicals and Jacobins, some of whom were of working-class origins, and it also had the unintended effect of confusing abolition, the radical social movement, with the British state, government, and society. Some historians have come to see abolition as the progenitor of not just British capitalism but also imperialism, paying scant attention to abolitionists' anti-imperialist views. It is a factual and analytical mistake to conflate the British state and its colonial functionaries, even after it adopted antislavery as a justification for empire, with the grassroots social movement that

[48] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, chap. 11; Plumb, "The Beginning of the End," 2. Knight makes the same point in his review, 113; as do David Grimsted in his review in *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1976): 531–534; and Howard Temperley in his review in *Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 1 (1976): 111–113.

[49] For a recent overview that defines antislavery ideology in a similar broad, systemic manner, see W. Caleb McDaniel, "The Bonds and Boundaries of Antislavery," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 1 (2014): 85–104; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York, 2013); Oakes, *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 2014); Corey M. Brooks, *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago, 2016); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, chap. 14; Eric Foner, "The Civil War and Slavery: A Response," *Historical Materialism* 19, no. 4 (2011): 92–98.

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was abolition. One must then distinguish abolition as a diverse social movement from industrial capitalism, the British government, and empire, whatever antislavery rationale it adopted for imperialist policies. According to Richard Huzzey, antislavery ideology long outlived the abolition movement and its organizations as "antislavery imperialism." Ironically, it was Coupland who had originally equated British imperialism with antislavery, though in his opinion the empire was a positive force for moral uplift and civilization. As in the Davis-Haskell debate, in which opponents operated from the same premise, contemporary scholars of British antislavery imperialism share Coupland's faulty logic, though unlike him, they are no apologists for empire. And as in the antislavery and capitalism debate, one could argue more accurately that the enslavement of labor, racial subordination, and expropriation remained the actual engines of British imperialism rather than the weak façade of any antislavery motives. In the United States, black and white abolitionists schooled for years against the proto-imperialist, civilizationist, and missionary rhetoric of the American Colonization Society were early critics of British imperialism despite being enamored with British abolitionists.[50]

For British abolition, which primarily concerned Davis in *Age of Revolution*, it is particularly important to maintain the distinction between the state and the social movement. Only a few abolitionist parliamentarians, like Wilberforce, occupied official positions, though they did not necessarily have access to political power. The long and tedious road to slave-trade abolition after over twenty years of agitation reveals the relative political weakness of abolitionists rather than their strength. The British elite tended to be either indifferent or actively proslavery, as the debates and votes on bills to regulate, restrict, and abolish the slave trade amply illustrate. According to Christopher Brown, the British government moved on the abolition of the African slave trade after the American Revolution, despite many years of gestation of early British antislavery thought, which he carefully delineates, to accrue "moral capital" in the face of military defeat. The virtue in Brown's accounting—which he ends with a discussion of Benezet, the adept tactician of the first wave of organized Anglo-American abolition—is precisely in detailing early antislavery thought and state policy and why they intersected at a particular moment. As Drescher has recently pointed out, the impetus for abolition came from the movement and not the government. No contemporary historian does a better job of capturing the nature of British abolition as a popular social movement than J. R. Oldfield, whose books are steeped in abolitionist archives rather than in oft-repeated generalizations and apocryphal stories with thin or no evidentiary basis. Emancipation, as regulated by the British state, was a process that many abolitionists found piecemeal, including compensation to slaveholders and long periods of apprenticeship that condemned former slaves to a liminal state between slavery and freedom.[51]

[50] Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2012); Trevor Burnard and Richard Follett, "Caribbean Slavery, British Anti-Slavery, and the Cultural Politics of Venereal Disease," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (2012): 427–451; Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 2017). For the conflation of antislavery with proslavery imperialism, see Christopher M. Florio, "From Poverty to Slavery: Abolitionists, Overseers, and the Global Struggle for Labor in India," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 4 (2016): 1005–1024. See also Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia, 2017); Brooke N. Newman, *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven, Conn., 2018); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 371–380.

[51] Brown, *Moral Capital*; Seymour Drescher, "The Shocking Birth of British Abolitionism," *Slavery and Abolition* 33, no. 4 (2012): 571–593; J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The*

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In American historiography, the Civil War and Reconstruction were long described as imperialist ventures by Progressive historians, where northern industry under the guise of antislavery reduced the agrarian South to the position of an internal colony. This incorrect economic narrative ignored not only the centrality of slavery to the Civil War but also the predominantly agrarian nature of the northern economy on the eve of the war. It should finally be put to bed by recent scholarship that has highlighted the complementary rather than competitive nature of the relationship between northern industry and southern slavery, what economists call the theory of comparative advantages. The notion of the Civil War as a "bourgeois revolution" cannot explain the radical nature of emancipation, the only large uncompensated expropriation of private property (with the exception of abolition in the District of Columbia) in American history, and the attempt to create an antislavery state during Reconstruction.[52] Some historians have tried to revive Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" to highlight the centrality of slavery and racial subordination in the development of American and Western capitalism. African American scholar-activists like Du Bois long espoused an intersectional notion of labor oppression in the history of capitalism, one that Lenin argued for on a global scale in his theory of European imperialism as "the highest stage of capitalism."[53] If anything, emancipation signaled a setback for global capitalism, albeit a short-lived one, as new forms of labor coercion and the hunt for new lands and resources inaugurated the era of empire and capital.

Davis's influence on the field, however, ranges beyond the abolition and capitalism debate engendered by the publication of *Age of Revolution.* His long professional tenure, his training of some of the leading figures not just in abolition studies but in American social and cultural history, and his founding of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University have ensured that subsequent generations of historians will not confront the paucity of historical scholarship on slavery and antislavery that he did as a student. Davis's mentees, some of them leading historians of abolition themselves, have done much to unpack its nature. Lewis Perry's book on Garrisonian abolition and radical anarchism and Amy Dru Stanley's book on gender, emancipation, and the market built on Davis's approach to understanding antislavery through the lens of intellectual history and political economy. John Stauffer's work on radical interracialism and empathy in American abolition effectively addresses questions of abolitionist motivation raised by Davis's critics. Two festschrifts written in Davis's honor contain some of the best essays on abolition by Perry and Stanley,

Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807 (Manchester, 1995); Seymour Drescher, *This Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York, 2002); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992); Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge, 2010).

[52] Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York, 1927). On the Civil War as a capitalist, democratic revolution, see Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966), chap. 3; Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, 2: 647.

[53] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983); V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (1917; revised trans., Moscow, 1934); Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to an Economic Explanation of Imperialism* (1913), https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1913/accumulation-capital/index.htm.

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highlighting the pivotal intellectual and tactical roles of African Americans in the abolition movement.[54]

The field of abolitionist historiography has recently been invigorated by some new ways of understanding the transnational movement to destroy slavery. Current work on the connections between abolition and the early labor movement, Native American rights, women's rights, the emergence of abolitionist print culture as a counter-public to a capitalist printing industry, the cosmopolitan nature of transnational abolitionist networks of protest, and global histories of abolition point in this direction. The comparative turn in abolitionist historiography should draw attention to later trajectories and antislavery in Brazil and Cuba.[55] This work fundamentally questions the all too common top-down depiction of abolition as white, bourgeois, and conservative, with blacks, women, and radicals ghettoized and contained, playing no role in determining the overall nature, ideology, and tactics of this oppositional movement in which the disfranchised themselves played an outsized role. New social histories of abolition, especially of the abolitionist underground and fugitivity, long dismissed by academic historians as the realm of myth and memory, point to ways in which we can reconceptualize the movement and tease out its radical implications.[56]

Perhaps the most important recent development in abolition studies has been the shift from the nineteenth-century language of moral and religious reform for understanding abolition to unearthing its forgotten history as a radical social movement, a progenitor to our modern conceptions of human rights and citizenship. Amy Dru Stanley's recent work on the nineteenth-century antislavery origins of human rights reimagines it as a far broader and more inclusive concept than its Enlightenment antecedents and twentieth- and twenty-first-century framing within Western history. Robin Black-

[54] Marc Parry, "The Long Reach of David Brion Davis," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 3, 2014, https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Long-Reach-of-David-Brion/144287; Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (1973; repr., Knoxville, Tenn., 1995); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1998); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002). The essays by Lewis Perry and Amy Dru Stanley are in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998); Steven Mintz and John Stauffer, eds., *The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform* (Amherst, Mass., 2007).

[55] See essays by Joseph Yannielli, Natalie Joy, Sean Griffin, and Peter Wirzbicki in *The Future of Abolition Studies*, Special Issue, *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (June 2018); Michaël Roy, Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, and Claire Parfait, eds., *Undoing Slavery: American Abolitionism in Transnational Perspective, 1776–1865* (Paris, 2018); J. R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c. 1787–1820* (Cambridge, 2013); W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge, La., 2013); Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1889* (Princeton, N.J., 1985); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999). See the essays in Rebecca J. Scott, Seymour Drescher, Hebe Maria Mattos de Castro, George Reid Andrews, and Robert M. Levine, *The Abolition of Slavery and the Aftermath of Emancipation in Brazil* (Durham, N.C., 1988); Josep M. Fradera and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, eds., *Slavery and Antislavery in Spain's Atlantic Empire* (New York, 2013); Celso Thomas Castilho, *Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship* (Pittsburgh, 2016). For an earlier period, see Bianca Premo, *The Enlightenment on Trial: Ordinary Litigants and Colonialism in the Spanish Empire* (New York, 2017).

[56] Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010); Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015); Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America's Fugitive Slaves* (New York, 2015); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, chaps. 12, 13, and 15; R. J. M. Blackett, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (Cambridge, 2018); Andrew Delbanco, *The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York, 2018).

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burn has also documented the broader legacy of abolition in originating modern notions of human rights, even though he claims that abolitionists did not widely use the term. Jenny Martinez has documented the first systematic use of the term "human rights" among opponents of the slave trade. In my book on abolition, I find that American abolitionists and feminists continuously evoked the concept of human rights and even named a journal *Human Rights*. The vast interdisciplinary scholarly literature on human rights is wide-ranging but relentlessly presentist. As in conventional histories of abolition, these works tend to ignore the contributions of the disfranchised in Western societies as well as the role of those outside the West (the rest) as co-creators as well as interlocutors of concepts of democracy, citizenship, social justice, and human rights.[57]

Like the system of enslavement it opposed, the movement to abolish slavery must also be understood as a hybrid, composed of old-fashioned religious moralizers as well as modern exponents of human rights. Abolition, then, especially if we take it as a starting point for a radical and alternative discourse of human rights that questioned the sanctity of liberal property rights, was a triumph of democracy, not capitalism. The history of capitalism illustrates that it has rarely marched in lockstep with democracy. The fraught relationship between capitalism and democracy is characterized more by contestation. If we understand abolition as a radical democratic movement that questioned the enslavement of labor and the property regime of slavery, it appears as essentially anti-capitalist. Not surprisingly, though, its promise was contained, attenuated, and eventually overthrown in the Age of Capital.[58] While one may then construct a very different narrative of the relationship between antislavery and capitalism from that outlined in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, nearly all historians of abolition must still begin with Davis's initial attempt to delineate it. In that sense and many others shown above, the historiographical legacy of *Age of Revolution* is enduring.

[57] Amy Dru Stanley, "Instead of Waiting for the Thirteenth Amendment: The War Power, Slave Marriage, and Inviolate Human Rights," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 3 (June 2010): 732–765; Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London, 2011); Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (New York, 2012); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 53–64. See also Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2008). For twentieth-century and modern readings of human rights as a nationalist and neoliberal exercise that constricts rather than expands emancipatory possibilities, see Eric D. Weitz, "Self-Determination: How a German Enlightenment Idea Became the Slogan of National Liberation and a Human Right," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (April 2015): 462–496; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018).

[58] On democracy and capitalism, see Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development, and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Leiden, 2011), 254–277; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (London, 1995); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London, 2000); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985), especially chap. 4; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York, 1942); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (New York, 1975).

Manisha Sinha is the Draper Chair in American History at the University of Connecticut. She is the author of *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (Yale University Press, 2016). She is currently writing a book on the "Greater Reconstruction" of American democracy and capitalism.

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