RESSENYES

IRA BERLIN. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America.*
Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press, 1998.

MANY THOUSANDS GONE IS A BROAD and cogent argument about the development of African and African-American slavery in the North American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While the book's main public is clearly historians of slavery in the United States and the colonies that would become the United States, it offers important tools for historians of slavery in other Atlantic settings. Of particular interest are Berlin's conceptualization of the Atlantic world as a cultural and economic space, his argument about the mutability of slavery and race over time, and his close analysis of the role of slaves and free people of color in shaping the nature of slavery and freedom.

The book is divided into three sections, sandwiched by a prologue and epilogue: "The Charter Generations", "The Plantation Generations", and "The Revolutionary Generations". Each represents a decisive phase in the trajectory of slavery, freedom, and race in colonial North America. In each section, Berlin analyzes four geographic regions characterized by distinctive economic, social, and environmental factors: the Chesapeake (Maryland and Virginia), the North (New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania), the Lowcountry (the Carolinas, Georgia, and East Florida), and the Lower Mississippi Valley (principally New Orleans and its environs). Berlin himself is one of the major scholars of slavery and emancipation in the United States. For this earlier period, he synthesizes a vast historical literature.[1]

"The Charter Generations" were those slaves brought to North America once European, especially the English but also the French, Spanish, and Dutch, had established permanent footholds on the continent in the early seventeenth century. The remarkable characteristic of this first generation of slaves is that most were what Berlin calls "Atlantic creoles". This concept is one of the richest features of the book and one that extends far beyond the study of North American/U.S. slavery. Atlantic creoles were Africans who hailed from the Atlantic rim —for instance from the west coast of Africa, islands like São Tomé, or southern Iberia— and had interacted with Europeans before enslavement or the Middle Passage. They had assimilated significant aspects of European ways into their own sense of self and com-

[1] Especially notable are the many articles of Philip D. MORGAN. His book, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, was published in the same year as Berlin's.

munity. Many spoke European languages, especially Portuguese, practiced Christianity, and were familiar with European laws and concepts of property, work, and wealth. Many were of mixed race. Atlantic creoles were thus a hybrid people, intermediaries between Africa and Europe. Moreover, because of their familiarity with the culture and economy of the enslavers, they were able to attain freedom once enslaved in the Americas. Their ability to use the law, to engage in various crafts or businesses to earn money to purchase their freedom, and their intimacy with the master class, expressed through shared religion, language, or family, made them more than chattel.

Such was especially true in the earlier seventeenth century in the northern colonies and the Chesapeake. Plantation agriculture had not taken root there so slavery, while important, was still marginal to the local economy. These were still what Berlin calls "societies with slaves" where the space for slave autonomy and avenues to freedom were relatively ample. The same was not necessarily true of the Lowcountry and the Lower Mississippi Valley in their early days. From the start, these were "slave societies", dominated by labor intensive plantation agriculture. Freedom was harder to come by and the sense of racial and cultural difference between master and slave was not only wider but also expressed in repressive law codes that curtailed the autonomy of slaves and free people of color.

The Chesapeake and the North soon came to share many of these characteristics as the plantation revolution spread through North America (though the movement in the Lower Mississippi Valley was in the opposite direction because the Natchez revolt of the early eighteenth century stopped French plantation agriculture dead in its tracks). Tobacco in the Chesapeake and the growth of rice in the Lowcountry soon led to a loss of freedom by the Charter Generation and plunged the Plantation Generation of slaves into a far harsher bondage. With the increased demand for slave labor, slaves began to arrive not from the Atlantic rim but from the interior of Africa. These slaves were unfamiliar with the Atlantic culture of the Charter Generation. Thus, the gulf between them and the master class, and between them and African-Americans, was enormous. Differences of language, religion, and culture left the newly enslaved in a completely vulnerable position. Moreover, the intensification of plantation agriculture subjected them to harsh labor discipline. In the Chesapeake, "Africanization again marked the debasement of black life" (p.122), by which Berlin means that not only did slaves suffer more but free blacks saw the relative freedom of the early colonies curtailed by new legislation that heavily discriminated against blacks, slave or free. Thus, Africanization led to the development of an ideology of white supremacy and effaced the many bonds between black and white that had existed earlier. Plantation slavery and racism marched hand-in-hand: "The growth of a slave society and the degradation of free people of African descent were part of the same process of making slavery and making race" (p.126).

However debasing the new regime was in the plantation colonies of the Chesapeake and Lowcountry, and however much racism and slavery hardened in the

North despite a quite different economy, slaves and free people struggled to preserve or to gain new rights and forms of freedom and autonomy. These struggles were manifold and revealed themselves in complex ways. For instance, in the Lowcountry where rice cultivation relied on brutal labor in an unhealthy climate, slaves nonetheless enjoyed some space to recreate aspects of African cultures. Because many Lowcountry planters were absentees, and the plantation zone was cut off from the currents of the Atlantic world, slaves on Lowcountry rice plantations were "culturally closer to Africa than any other black people in continental North America" (p.143). Africans names, religion, architecture, and family structure persisted long after the Middle Passage. In contrast, slaves in the North and the Chesapeake lived and worked under much closer scrutiny by white masters. The greater interaction between country and city and the prevalence of urban slavery in these regions —in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, for instance— allowed some slaves to learn trades and skills that would eventually endow them with economic and cultural capacities similar to those of the Charter Generations. That is to say, through peasant production and marketing or the acquisition of skilled trades, slaves in those regions began to carve out autonomous spaces for themselves in the shadow of the plantation.

These struggles against the dehumanizing tendencies of plantation slavery took on new shapes during the Atlantic world's Age of Revolution. "The Revolutionary Generations" strove to escape from slavery in great numbers, though most were ultimately unsuccessful. Two factors were decisive and will be familiar to students of St. Domingue, Cuba, and the Spanish American revolutions. On the one hand, revolutionary ideology, the belief in liberty and equality, espoused by revolutionary leaders, many of whom were slaveowners, spread throughout American slave societies (here Berlin frequently cites Julius Scott's influential dissertation "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution"). Moreover, rumors of freedom, enacted by revolutionaries or distant monarchs, recurred in slave quarters and gathering places in North American cities. On the other, the breakdown of plantation authority caused by the American Revolution gave many slaves the opportunity to flee the plantation, either to insurgent or loyalist forces. Indeed, loyalists in particular sought to undermine the revolutionaries by promising freedom to their slaves.

The end result of the revolutionary crisis was paradoxical.[2] In the North, most states began to enact emancipation but under grudging terms that favored the interests of slaveholders. In the South, though slaves had challenged their masters as never before, the master class emerged stronger than ever. Charleston and New Orleans clamored for the reopening of the African slave trade. Planters opened new territories —such as Kentucky, Tennessee, and the uplands of South Carolina— and introduced new plantation crops like cotton and sugar that furthered their de-

[2] See also Robin BLACKBURN, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848*. London: Verso, 1988.

pendence on slave labor. With the plantation's spread westward from the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry, and its consolidation in the Lower Mississippi Valley, a massive internal slave trade developed in the independent republic. "As the Age of Revolution receded", Berlin concludes, "the plantation revolution roared into the nineteenth century" (p.357), as it would in Cuba and Brazil.

Berlin's book ends on this grim note: slavery affirmed with the birth of the new nation. However, as he indicates, the story is more complex. The slaves of the antebellum South were not mere chattel but African-Americans who over generations in the Americas had attained skills that would enable them to resist and alter their servitude in numerous ways. The next major military crisis on the North American continent, the U.S. Civil War, would provide many with the opening not only to flee the plantation but also to challenge the institution of slavery head-on through military service.[3] Moreover, though the racist North offered free blacks cold comfort, it nonetheless became an important base of operation against slavery, either as a refuge or transit point for runaways, or as the home to increasingly fervent abolitionist campaigns. Slavery in the United States, as in other parts of the Americas, was not a static institution, but one with a tortuous and contested history that not even the most powerful planters could escape or efface.

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[3] Berlin has directed a multi-volume project on the breakdown of slavery during the Civil War that emphasizes the role of slaves in the process and black participation in the war against slavery. For instance, see Ira BERLIN, Joseph REIDY, and Leslie ROWLAND (eds.), *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. For reflections on the destruction of slavery in the United States, see Ira BERLIN *et al.*, *Slaves No More. Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.