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Reviews

Ira Berlin. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. 497 pp. $29.95.

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At the dawn of yet a new century, Americans are still mired in racism and still searching for solutions. When investigations seek origins, they must quickly confront slavery and the meanings of enslavement in American history. Just as the effort to unravel meanings of blackness turns toward slavery, the American history of bondage surely implicates the meanings of whiteness. African servitude in the colonies and the United States lasted roughly two and one-half centuries. But most generalization only looks back at the thirty or so years preceding the Civil War, the period called "antebellum." But what of the experiences, symbols, laws, and customs that laid the groundwork in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries? Those long years have been less easy to see, at least until now. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* examines the seedtime and the flowering of American slavery, showing that antebellum slavery and the experiences of people enslaved in the nineteenth century cannot simply be read backwards toward an understanding of the very long history that went before. The meanings of slavery and the meanings of race changed, across and within generations of the enslaved and the American regions in which they labored. For Ira Berlin, antebellum slavery took a turn for the worse in the early nineteenth century, away from the "independence" that characterized the lives of slaves in the preceding two centuries.

Berlin's fine synthesis of slavery in the part of North America that became the United States marks a watershed in American historiography and the culmination of a struggle between two ways of seeing the power dynamics of slavery. Berlin not only presents a weighty and nuanced analysis of American slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but he also delineates shifting concepts of race over four regions and three eras. It's no wonder the Organization of American Historians awarded his book an Elliott Rudwick Prize for 1999. Organized around changing material conditions, the analysis is more or less Marxist, but Marxist of a certain sort. Culture receives its full due.

Berlin's vision in *Many Thousands Gone* is bifocal, in the sense that he simultaneously tracks the people who were enslaved as well as the institution of slavery that appears in the book's title; the book might well have been subtitled *The First Two Centuries of North America's Enslaved.* This double vision appears in the book's three parts, each bearing a dual heading: "I. Societies With Slaves: *The Charter Generations,*" "II. Slave Societies: *The Plantation Generations,*" and "III. Slave and Free: *The Revolutionary Generations.*"

Within each time period, Berlin discusses four slaveholding American regions: the North, the Chesapeake, the Low Country, and the lower Mississippi Valley. As befits the politics of slavery, three of these four regions are Southern. The North includes New England and the Mid-Atlantic colonies; the Chesapeake, encompassing the area between Delaware and North Carolina, is known more familiarly as the Upper South; what is commonly referred to as the

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Deep South is called the Low Country (though it includes the South Carolina up country as well); Louisiana is called the lower Mississippi Valley. Splitting Louisiana off from South Carolina, Berlin can focus on the state's unique French-Spanish colonial history.

Berlin associates three different enslaved generations with three kinds of slave societies. The "charter generations" of African immigrants and their seventeenth-century descendants lived in "societies with slaves," in which slavery existed alongside other forms of unfree labor and bound people of Native American and European descent. For them, slavery was not strictly racial, and the economies in which they labored were not slave-driven. Some in the charter generations were able to become free, even prosperous. The late-seventeenth- to mid-eighteenth-century "plantation generations" lived in slave societies in which slaveholders and the dynamics of slave production dominated the political economy. Although these generations of Atlantic creoles were overwhelmed by large numbers of new African immigrants, they began to forge a culture of their own as the American-born once again absorbed the African newcomers. The last part of the book, "Slave and Free," deals with the late-eighteenth-century "revolutionary generations." For them the democratic promise of the French and American revolutions sometimes translated into personal freedom. Throughout all three parts of the book, Berlin traces the balance between "Atlantic creoles," people who were born in the New World or belonged to its trans-Atlantic economy, and transported Africans, whose disorientation, unbalanced sex ratios, high mortality, and low fertility signaled misfortune in American settings.

Families, naming patterns, institutions, mobility, and relative economic autonomy (which Berlin often overstates as "independence") measure the rise and fall of slaves' predicament. Hence the promise of the revolutionary era translated into parents' ability to transmit skills to their children, whom they named for other kin. In the slave societies of the plantation generations, on the other hand, owners hampered the formation of slave families and dictated fanciful names, often indicative of a cruel sense of irony (as in slaves called Cato). History did not portend progress, for in terms of economic mobility, some in the charter and revolutionary generations achieved greater autonomy than the early-eighteenth-century plantation generations. The fates of the three generations also depended on their geographic region, for slavery's strength varied from place to place.

In addition to making an important contribution to American history, *Many Thousands Gone* marks an historiographical victory a decade and a half in the making. In the mid-1980s, two versions of American social history competed. One, associated with Herbert Gutman, stressed the autonomy of people previously seen as powerless (e.g., enslaved and free workers, women). Gutman loved to quote Sartre's gloss on Marx's comment in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," to ask how people make their own history within dismal circumstances. Berlin was Gutman's colleague and edited the 1987 poshumous collection of his work, *Power and Culture.* The other school, associated with Eugene Genovese and his wife Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, emphasized the power of the ruling classes summed up in the term *hegemony* and conveying subalterns' acceptance of the ideology of rulers. Where Gutman looked for working people's agency, Genovese found domination.

Berlin, in his first book, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (1975), inclined toward the masters. Here he stressed masters' power over even people who were not enslaved, and called the latter "slaves without masters," not *free* people. But Berlin changed his position as editor of the Freedmen's Project and co-editor, with Philip D. Morgan, of two anthologies

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on colonial slave life. (Morgan also received a 1999 Elliott Rudwick Prize for *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry.*) If anything, *Many Thousands Gone* overstates the autonomy of the enslaved within a brutal institution. In any case, by 1998 this book anointed Berlin as Gutman's successor.

Although Gutman's death in 1985 seemed to concede victory to the Genoveses, the story has not turned out that way. The Genoveses—grumbling about the capture of the historical profession by the forces of political correctness—have seceded from the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association to form the Historical Society. The new organization (supported by the John M. Olin Foundation and housed at Boston University) promises a return to the "big" historical questions, but even Genovese admits that the society grew out of a meeting of ten "almost-dead white males." Meanwhile, Berlin's widely and favorably reviewed new book received the OAH seal of approval. Herbert Gutman must be smiling in his grave.