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Ira Berlin

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Interview

GENERATIONS OF CAPTIVITY: A HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVES

Berlin, Ira
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Interview with Dr. Ira Berlin

by Christopher S. Freeman

Ira Berlin is Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, and author of the prize-winning book Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (Harvard).

Civil War Book Review(CWBR): The opening words of Generations of Captivity are, No one knew slavery better than the slave. How is your history of African-American slavery shaped by this perception?

Ira Berlin (IB): There are many ways to write the history of slavery, for slavery touched everyone in a slave society--masters, free people of color, and white nonslaveholders. I try to write from the perspective of the slave, and try to understand how slaves comprehend their circumstances and how they dealt with them. Getting under the skin of one's subject is the primary job of the historian. However to do this for the slave, I also have to understand the masters' perspective as well as that of free people of color and white non-slaveholders. In other words, every history of the slave must address the entire society, although--I believe--it is appropriate and perhaps necessary to view it from a particular perspective. Mine is the slaves'.

CWBR: How do you distinguish between a society with slaves and a slave society?

IB: In Generations of Captivity as in my earlier work, I distinguish between "societies-with-slaves and "slave societies. Some historians have maintained that the distinction is one of degree of brutal treatment, with the former being milder

than the latter. This is not how I understand the distinction. What distinguished societies-with-slaves was the fact that slaves were marginal to the central productive processes. In societies-with-slaves, slavery was just one form of labor among many. Slaveowners often treated their slaves with extreme callousness and cruelty at times, but no one thought that slavery was the exemplary social relationship. In slave societies, by contrast, slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations: husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, teacher and student. From the most intimate connections between men and women to the most public ones between ruler and ruled, all relationships mimicked those of slavery.

CWBR: Why did Africans become the preferred choice for slaves in North America, as opposed to Europeans or Native Americans? What are some of the important consequences of this choice for the development of American slavery?

IB: The question of why Africans became the slaves of choice in the modern world is a big one. Naturally historians have proposed a variety of answers. These disagree, often violently. In fact, I can think of no question upon which historians disagree more, perhaps because their answers have such momentous implications both for understanding the history of the larger Atlantic world as well as contemporary society. Some maintain that the origins of African slavery were racial, and as soon as Europeans met Africans European (read white) notions of African inferiority, combined with their superior power, led to the enslavement of black people. That is not my contention, if only because other peoples were enslaved and because Europeans did not always enjoy a monopoly of power. If the so-called racial interpretation does not work, what of the economic, social, and psychological interpretations? The debate is a large one. The interpretation I find most insightful is that of Philip Curtin, who maintains that the Africans' superior resistance to the diseases of the Atlantic world made them, in the long run, cheaper, hence the slave of choice in the Americas. Curtin's epidemiological interpretation, however, speaks to the larger Atlantic, not to the origins of African slavery in mainland North America. That is a very different question, perhaps for another time.

CWBR: Was the preeminence of Protestant religion significant in the experience of enslaved African-Americans in the North American British colonies and later the United States?

IB: Of course. It was significant in many ways, not the least of which is that most North American slave masters subscribed to various forms of Protestant Christianity. To understand slavery, we must understand them. But most North American slaves would have nothing to do with Protestant Christianity until well into the nineteenth century. Their religious history has other sources.

CWBR: Does war usually destroy a slave society or was the American Civil War an aberration in that it had this affect?

IB: I know of no slave society in which slavery was eliminated without violence or the threat of violence. Thus the wartime abolition of slavery in the United States was no aberration.

CWBR: What are the challenges faced by an historian trying to study slavery from the perspective of the enslaved?

IB: Often it is thought that sources were the largest problem in writing the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. But once historians took up the challenge, they found many sources. I think the largest problem is one common to the writing of all history--that is, reading the sources critically.

CWBR: Slavery has a unique place in the shaping of American history and memory. How important is it that we understand the differing experiences of African-Americans in slavery?

IB: Critical, I believe. Good history has to be put in the largest context available. Since slavery was nearly ubiquitous in the early modern world, we cannot understand the slave--or slavery--except in the context of the development of that modern world.