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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: $6.95
IN CANADA: $8.95
Book Review by Allen C. Guelzo

Up from Slavery

Harvard University Press, 240 pages, $22.95

University of Georgia Press, 400 pages, $89.95 (cloth), $32.95 (paper)

Self-help has a long tradition in American life. In its earliest form, Puritan self-help manuals offered guidance to the spiritual pilgrim in detecting the signs of grace and whether one was on the path to heaven. The Enlightenment replaced the attainment of grace with the attainment of prosperity, but the titles that charted the new path to Mammon were still cast from the original self-help mold. As the new American republic shuffled off its aristocratic British connections, self-help took the form of books of manners, teaching the American middle class how to attain gentility by keeping up appearances. But the original impulse remained the same: you must find grace yourself, you must acquire success yourself, you must absorb gentility yourself.

There is, however, a darker tradition of self-help, built not on the improvement of the self but on the running down of others. This is what we get in a fairly unvarnished way from free-market narcissists like Robert Ringer in his bestseller Looking Out for Number One (1977): “Life is like a giant pinspotter in a go-lialth’s bowling alley. Over the long haul, most people end up exactly where they deserve to be.” So the best advice is “work hard to look after your own best interests. Leave others to sort themselves out.” But we also get it in a more sophisticated form from Karl Marx. “The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself,” he insisted. This is self-help fired by the determination to remain free from any taint of the impure. The Nazis, in just the same way, announced that “the road to emancipation” for Germany can only come from a “war of liberation” which “draws together the consciously German members of every occupation and rank.” Whether the struggle is a proletarian or an Aryan one, no assistance is welcomed from others, since such assistance could only diminish the purity of the final result.

It is odd, however, to see over the last 25 years the emergence of a similar brand of self-help in the midst of the history of slave emancipation. We may think we know the outlines of emancipation’s history, beginning with the long slough of slavery in colonial America, then the rise of abolition movements, and then finally the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the 13th Amendment. But this is the old history, and that history is now understood as a history besotted with exactly the sort of cooperative condescension that allows emancipation to be a story of what white people did for black people. The implication of the old history is that black people were passive; they accepted freedom from the hands of generous-spirited whites; and they are thereafter expected to tug at their caps, express gratitude, and conform to the expectations of white bourgeois society.

Not incidentally, it was a Marxist, Herbert Aptheker, and a convert to Marxism,
The founding ideas of equal natural rights, natural law, and limited constitutional government are seeds from which the American republic grew. Over the past century, Progressivism has undermined those principles and imperiled our republic. We must recover America’s intellectual heritage before we can succeed in restoring American self-government. The Claremont Institute educates the next generation of young conservatives in how the founders’ principles help to solve today’s problems. We then assist these rising thinkers and statesmen in their careers in state and national politics, in the courts, academia, the media, and conservative think tanks. These conservative leaders are our hope for a healthier America.

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W.E.B. Du Bois, who first questioned the Great White Emancipator history of slavery’s end in the 1930s and attributed emancipation instead to what Du Bois called a “general strike” staged by the slaves. In this scenario, enslaved blacks seized the opportunity of the Civil War’s outbreak as the requisite moment of “crisis” to sabotage the internal economy of the Confederacy and eventually bring it face-down in the dust. It is the story, Du Bois wrote, of “how the black worker won the war by a general strike which transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force.”

But this “self-emancipation thesis” did not achieve popular status until the work of Vincent Harding and Barbara J. Fields (the latter through her appearances in Ken Burns’s documentary series The Civil War in 1990). Self-emancipation now became more than just work-stoppages. Slaves used the disruptions of the war to subtract themselves entirely from the Confederacy by fleeing to Union military lines, by becoming the Union Army’s logistical corps, and by eventually exerting so much pressure on the Lincoln Administration that the president was forced to issue an emancipation proclamation and throw open army recruitment to blacks. At its zenith, self-emancipation has come to mean that the slaves actually started “the war themselves” rather than “simply waiting for either the Lord or the Yankees to give them freedom.” Until “[b]y 1863, there was a full-blown inner civil war going on within the South.” Indeed, agrees Steven Hahn in Lincoln’s Proclamation (2009), “the slaves’ rebellion in the South... was by far the largest of them all.” These are statements of good intentions and, perhaps more to the point, great imagination.

The self-emancipation thesis runs like a gold thread through these two new historical surveys—one very short and one very long—of slavery’s end. This is not a surprise, since Patrick Rael was a student of Ira Berlin at the University of Maryland and, when they found themselves both embarked on these projects, they “swapped manuscripts” to let each see where the other was going.

Despite its title, Berlin’s The Long Emancipation is the shorter path; it is simply the expanded text of the Nathan I. Huggins Lectures at the Du Bois Institute at Harvard in 2014. But short as they are, Berlin’s lectures are backed by a substantial amount of scholarly heft. He has (until 1991) directed the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland and overseen the publication of a landmark series of primary sources on slavery’s end in Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation (1982, 1985, 1990, 1993). He is, nevertheless, a true believer in the self-emancipation thesis. Emancipation, he begins cautiously, “was not so much a proclamation as a movement; not so much an occasion as a complex history with multiple players and narratives.” Opened up, however, what Berlin means by this complexity is that

- “primacy” in the story of emancipation belongs to “black people, free and slave,” without whose “resistance to captivity...there could be no movement against slavery.”
- The aim of the slaves was freedom, not just amelioration, and slaves were conscious political actors striving toward the political goal of freedom.
- Once emancipated, they “not only raised the question of their post-emancipation standing,” but “answered it as well” with the demand for equality as well as freedom.
- Undoing slavery required violence, and could not have been accomplished in any other, less bloody, fashion.

Thus, in Berlin’s brief survey of emancipation, slaves undermined slavery by their own initiative, and did so by revolutionary violence, covering a full spectrum from simple flight to armed resistance. In the first case, Berlin claims, “by the middle years of the nineteenth century the slave South was leaking like a sieve,” at a rate of 1,000 to 5,000 fugitives a year between 1830 and 1860. In the second, Berlin believes that slave revolts created “a guerrilla war against slavery,” turning the antebellum South into “a war zone.” Free blacks also had a role to play, holding up the side by rallying in solidarity with the fugitives, and using appeals to the courts to mount a judicial war on slavery. Although white abolitionists could become allies, Berlin insists that white sympathies for blacks were invariably limited, although that limitation had the unlooked-for benefit of forcing black leaders to become more assertive and less deferential. Finally, when Southern secession brought war to Southern doorsteps, slave runaways “forced federal soldiers at the lowest level to recognize their importance to the Union’s cause,” while those still in slavery “did what they could to undermine the Southern war effort.” In so doing, the slaves “drove the issue of emancipation to the top of the wartime agenda.”

Berlin’s pattern conforms nicely to the expectations of self-help. But lurking behind his confident assertions about self-emancipation is the spectre of the Portuguese historian of abolition, João Pedro Marques, whose The Sounds of Silence: Nineteenth-Century Portugal and the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 2006 set off an unholy scurry amongst the self-emancipationists. Marques, who surveyed a vast sample of slave revolts throughout the New World, concluded that slave revolts were essentially self-centered—that is, they were conducted by slaves seeking freedom for themselves (but not for others) who frequently organized maroon colonies which held slaves themselves. More recently, in her essay “Dodging Rebellion: Politics and Gender in the Berbice Slave Uprising of 1763,” (American Historical Review, February 2016), Marjoleine Kars has examined slave rebels in Dutch Guyana and discovered that large portions of the slave population “struggled to dodge all combat- ants, whether the Dutch, their Amerindian allies, or the rebels.” Far from challenging the legitimacy of slavery as an institution, Marques and Kars’s insurgents were simply looking out for their own interests, and were perfectly willing to cut deals with whites, whether those deals helped any other slaves or not. This was self-help of a decidedly un-revolutionary sort (although it could be just as violent) and neither these revolts nor uprisings on slave ships in the notorious Middle Passage had any larger impact on slavery. To the contrary, says Marques, the main concern of slaves who achieved individual freedom by escape or rebellion was not to free other slaves, and they often ended up creating a social structure that involved the enslavement of other Negro and half-breed populations. Their struggle was for revenge, for land, and for individual or group freedom. But they did not seek freedom for all, a goal that is indispensable in the anti-slavery conception of human relations.

Berlin is clearly bothered by Marques’s “long, contentious essay,” but he does not have Marques’s wide-ranging transnational grasp of slave resistance, and he does little beyond mere assertion to disprove Marques’s significance for the American context. One can hardly blame him, though. There is an element of feel-good and a passion to promote “black agency” in the self-emancipation thesis which makes it difficult to dismiss out of hand. But the study of history is not about the search for what feels good. Self-emancipation, in fact, faces three credibility hurdles before it can be taken seriously and, to date, no one has managed to surmount them.
How many slaves actually liberated themselves by running away? Since no census was kept of such fugitives—about the last thing a fugitive wants is to be counted—the actual numbers are impossible to determine, although they certainly do not lean in Berlin’s direction. DeBow’s Review, the South’s principal commercial magazine, fixed the average pre-war fugitive population at 1,540 per annum. (Over a 20-year period, from 1840 to 1860, that would amount to no more than 30,800 fugitives.) Even at the height of the Civil War, when the conditions for fugitives were at their most opportune, the best estimate anyone offered was Secretary of State William Henry Seward’s off-hand suggestion in 1865 of 200,000, and Berlin’s own Freedmen and Southern Society Project concedes that “the number of black people” who fled slavery for Federal authority “can be estimated only roughly.” In a slave population of over 3.9 million in 1860, these numbers are vanishingly small. In that circumstance, can we realistically talk about a “general strike” by the slaves, a “guerrilla war” against slavery, much less suggest that they possessed the critical political mass that “drove the issue of emancipation to the top of the wartime agenda”?

And in what way were they expected to do this driving? Certainly not through the vote, since not even Northern free blacks were, in most cases, enfranchised until the 14th and 15th Amendments. (2) For those slaves who did succeed in escaping slavery, can it really be said that they “eman cipated” themselves? A fugitive from slavery was, even if successful, still only a fugitive, and under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 could be returned to slavery under procedures which make the words “due process” fail on the lips. What was required for emancipation, and not just escape, was a change in the slave’s legal status, and that could come in only two ways: manumission by an owner, or a mass federal emancipation in time of war, as a military necessity. The latter, of course, was the path Abraham Lincoln took in the Emancipation Proclamation; and even then, he was unsure enough about the standing of presidential “war powers” that he sought a “king’s cure for the evil” in the form of the 13th Amendment. Absent the Emancipation Proclamation, then, every fugitive, every “contraband” sheltered by the Union Army, would have been legally liable to rendition at the close of the war. And had the war ended with the election of George McClellan in 1864 rather than the re-election of Lincoln, then the likeliest result would have been a negotiated peace with an independent Confederacy, in which case rendition would have been made part of the peace settlement (as it had been after the American Revolution and after the War of 1812). What standing would “self-emancipation” have in that environment?

(3) Did the slaves really create a fifth column of resistance that collapsed the Confederacy from within? It is hard to see how, considering that the Confederacy held out for four years under the pounding of Northern military might without any significant internal challenge, black or white. Herbert Aptheker struggled to uncover evidence of slave revolts in American Negro Slave Revolts (1939), and most recently, in “Rose’s War and the Gendered Politics of a Slave Insurgency in the Civil War” (Journal of the Civil War Era, December 2013), Thavolia Glymph has offered an account of a slave uprising in Pineville, South Carolina, that was both racial and gendered—but which only took place in the last week of March 1865. If anything, Ohio congressman William Holman was annoyed that “three and a half or four millions of Africans remain right in the very hotbed of this rebellion”; yet, “they have remained perfectly indifferent and passive until your Army has reached them, idle spectators of the war.” Bear in mind, though, that the failure of the
emancipated slaves to stage such a revolt was actually offered as an argument in favor of emancipation, since it proved the restraint and self-control the slaves possessed, even in the face of easy and bloody opportunity. “Nine-tenths of the able-bodied Southern population have been in arms for more than two years” and “the President’s Emancipation Proclamation was made public nearly a year ago,” concluded Francis Wayland, Jr., in the Atlantic Monthly, and yet none of “the old men, women, and children remaining at home” had been slaughtered, massacred, or brutalized. This was not because the slaves loved the ol’ massa or found slavery the easy yoke Southern apologists tried to make it appear; but because the risks of revolt were so high and the federal armies sufficiently near. “When the negroes can gain nothing by rising against their masters,” Joel Prentiss Bishop remarked, “but everything by keeping quiet, they will not rise.”

And yet, there is no quick jump from this point to the smarmy assumption that the slaves were simply inert all during the war. Over 179,000 blacks, mostly from the Confederacy, fought in Union blue; another 18,000 served in the U.S. Navy. By donning the uniform of the United States, they fashioned an argument for their permanent freedom that few among even the most recalcitrant white politicians would have found easy to deny. But in a much larger sense, the slaves did not need to resort to flight to destabilize the Confederacy. They destabilized it just by remaining where they were, and letting white slaveowner fantasies about slave insurrections keep critical numbers of white males out of the Confederate armies and in local slave patrols and militias.

If the slaves in any way moved Northerners closer to supporting emancipation, it was not by flight, but by being drafted for menial duty by the Confederate armies. Northern whites did not relish the prospect of their sons digging and toiling in trenches under a Southern sun, while white rebels used black slaves to do the same thing, and then used the entrenchments to shoot Northern soldier-boys. In his splendid study of The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation (2012), Glenn David Brasher makes the telling point that “if the North did not emancipate the slaves, the Confederacy would use them on a larger scale.” Hence, an Emancipation Proclamation was just the thing to entice the slaves to desert the labors imposed on them by their Confederate military masters. This is as much an example of “black agency” as self-emancipation. But notice the order: the Proclamation first, the flight from slavery following.

Patrick Rael’s Eighty-Eight Years— with 329 densely packed pages of text—constitutes a much longer road to emancipation than Berlin’s, and one which is substantially more attentive to the details. Rael organizes his account of the long-term demise of slavery around sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world-systems” analysis, which casts the workings of a society in terms of its geography—the metropole, the semi-periphery, and the periphery. Almost all of the great slave emancipations of the 19th century occurred as they did because slavery was a feature of a regime’s periphery; emancipation could take place without excessive conflict because slaveholding was located far from the metropole, where the decisions about slavery were really made. Think of West Indian emancipation. The abolition, first of the slave trade, then of slavery itself, was a decision made in Westminster about a labor institution on the British empire’s periphery; the resistance of the West Indian planters in Parliament grew increasingly feeble, and finally had to yield. In the United States, however, slavery and slaveowning politics sat in the very seats of the metropole in Washington, thus making

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the task of ripping slavery up by the roots infinitely more difficult, and, ultimately, impossible short of civil war. Rael is shy of speaking of this as an example of American exceptionalism, but he does admit that, in this case, abolition "took a unique form in America." Rael's book is a comprehensive history of slavery's end, well-informed, subdued in tone, and in most cases forgiving. He does not believe (as David Waldstreicher, Paul Finkelman, and George van Cleve do) that the founders were unqualified hypocrites who cunningly crafted a pro-slavery Constitution, and he is more willing than most to acknowledge that it was the rise of bourgeois notions of property rights which made property in human beings seem repulsive in an age which had abandoned hierarchy as the governing principle of social life. The Constitutional Convention, Rael says, made three—but only three—bargains with slaveholding (the three-fifths clause, the rendition of fugitives, and delaying the criminalization of the foreign slave trade until 1808), and even then only because the members of the Convention were confident that the institution of slavery was on its way out anyway. That was before, of course, the unlooked-for explosion of a single commodity—cotton—as the most valuable raw material of the new industrial age. In pursuit of cotton profits, Southerners forget all about their embarrassment over slavery and promoted whatever policies would help slavery thrive: Indian removal, nullification, opposition to internal improvements, the gag rule, censorship of the mail, Texas annexation, and finally, the Mexican War. But not even Rael can resist the obligatory bow to self-emancipation. As Southerners made more and more outrageous demands for special treatment, their Northern neighbors began lending a sympathetic ear to the complaint of free blacks and escaped slaves. These black activists, insists Rael, created strategies of direct action, while the fugitives presented insoluble moral and political problems. (No one illustrated those problems more dramatically than Harriet Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom's Cabin, but Stowe gets only five sentences in Eighty-Eight Years.) The ultimate symbol of the willingness of free blacks and Northern whites to take action was John Brown. The raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 was a sign of a new conjoining of slave resistance and metropolitan sympathy, and a cause of white Southern horror that led directly to secession. The ensuing Civil War brings emancipation, but Rael is careful to remind us that "African Americans in the South...were not property, lacking agency and will." There are moments when I wish Rael was right, and that emancipation represented a "rainbow" moment of racial oneness and united racial heroism. The problem is that most white Northerners (including more than a few abolitionists) were more interested in attacking slavery as a medieval and aristocratic labor system, to be replaced by free markets and free labor, than they were in liberating black people from bondage. The United States of the 1860s was not yet the industrial giant it would become before the century's end, and the most important issue for Northern whites was whether the western territories could be set aside for free labor and family farms, rather than swallowed up by slavery and plantations. Slave labor was synonymous in their minds with tenancy for whites (and no wonder, since Southerners owning more than 50 slaves owned 42.7% of the South's cultivated land). Rather than acquiesce in the prospect of being reduced to a peasantry, Northern whites fought back against Southern aggrandizement, and hence the Civil War. As Lincoln explained in the Peoria speech of 1854, We want them [the territories] for the homes of free white people. This they cannot be, to any considerable extent, if slavery shall be planted within them. Slave States are places for poor white people to remove from; not to remove to.

Saddly, peasantry is in fact what triumphed—not in the territories, but in the South. The slaveholding states had been drifting away from the Enlightenment origins of the American polity for 40 years before the Civil War, egged on by Romantic enthusiasts for hierarchy and vassalage like James Henry Hammond and George Fitzhugh. Stymied by the Civil War from building hierarchy on slavery, they did the next best thing, which was to build it on tenancy. Protected in their landownership by the folly of President Andrew Johnson's amnesties, the defeated planter class, as Rael says, set about regulating the lives of the freedmen, economically and socially, around vagrancy laws "[r]esurrected from medieval origins." Which, in turn, raises the question of "black agency" from a different perspective: if free blacks and fugitive slaves were as effective in undermining slavery as Apleheker, Du Bois, Hahn, and Berlin want them to be, what accounts for the ease with which the old plantation elite, its war-damaged condition, imposed its new serfdom on them in Reconstruction? Many Marxist historians of Reconstruction, from Eric Foner to Robin Blackburn, construe Reconstruction as a missed moment for uniting the labor energies of black agricultural workers and Northern factory workers in a single revolutionary phalanx. I suspect, however, that the real story of Reconstruction is not about how free labor managed to subvert this budding proletarian alliance, but about how serfdom and vassalage, in their new Romantic forms, defeated free labor and free markets in the South. In the hierarchical world created by black codes, sharecropping, and Jim Crow, any appeal to self-help had little opportunity of being heard.

Allen C. Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, and the author, most recently, of Gettysburg: The Last Invasion (Alfred A. Knopf).
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