

Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina

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Review

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Ochiai, Akiko *Harvesting Freedom: African American Agrarianism in Civil War Era South Carolina*. Praeger Publishers, \$64.95 ISBN 275979350

Pursuit of property

Policies frustrated freed slaves' quest for land

The Reconstruction era continues to fascinate scholars around the world. In 1928, French statesman Georges Clemenceau published his *History of American Reconstruction*, and it is not unlikely that his participation in the peace settlement at Versailles in 1919 drew him to an earlier period of postwar reconstruction. During the mid-1980s, this London-born reviewer first encountered Reconstruction studies in American graduate school, and has been hooked on the period ever since. Japanese scholars have been writing about the subject since at least 1970 according to publication dates listed in this book's bibliography. It was as a college junior that the book's author--currently an Associate Professor of American History at Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan--first became interested in the question of how African Americans handled the disadvantages of minority status. This book on freedpeople's struggles for land during Reconstruction represents an extension of this interest and a partial response.

Dr. Ochiai approaches her subject through the notion of African-American agrarianism. On page 5, this is defined as the dream of owning and tilling their own land as self-determined, landowning yeomen. This theme draws upon several recent studies of postwar African-American agrarianism and struggles for autonomy including Nancy Cohen-Lack for Texas, James T. Currie for Mississippi, Paul K. Eiss for Louisiana, and Sharon A. Holt for North Carolina. The time and place for this particular study of freedpeople's land struggles is the South Carolina Sea Islands, especially St. Helena Island, between late 1861 and 1870. It was in this region, Ochiai writes on page 3, that freedpeople demonstrated the very competence, abilities, and fitness for freedom that were

being denied across the South. While some might argue that the experience of lowcountry African Americans was exceptional rather than representative, these unique conditions brought them closer to their ideals than freedpeople in many other areas, [and] they proved what African Americans could accomplish on their own if given a fairly unhindered chance. This local illustration of freedpeoples' fitness for freedom constitutes the historical significance of **Harvesting Freedom** for Reconstruction scholarship.

The concept of African-American agrarianism is examined in evolutionary and processional terms. The book's seven chapters are arranged chronologically culminating in the emergence of an independent black peasantry on St. Helena Island by the late 1860s. The first chapter explains the origins of the region's unique system of semi-autonomous slavery. Each of the key elements of the local slave system--slave drivers, the task system, large, stable communities, and, the slave's internal economy--are described in detail. This latter element represents a central component of many recent slave studies that focus on the economic rather than cultural autonomy of slave communities. The second chapter describes the Port Royal Experiment from late 1861 to mid-1862, and the clash between northern wage labor ideologues of cotton plantation production and those advocates of an independent land-owning yeomanry, especially over the question of free labor versus free time. It should be noted, however, that Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal For Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* published in 1964 continues to be the final word on this clash.

The heart of **Harvesting Freedom** lies in the three chapters that explore the conflict between freedpeople's pursuit of land, the dictates of the plantation economy in wartime conditions, and federal policies between 1863 and 1865. The Direct Tax Act of June 1862 provided unconditional fee-simple title to buyers of abandoned and confiscated lands. Freedpeople made it clear they wanted this land. Ochiai quotes a freedman on page 94: What's the use to give us our freedom if we can't stay where we were raised, and own our houses where we were born, and our little pieces of ground? These aspirations were often thwarted through a combination of delayed wages, abusive soldiers, and broken promises of northern wage-labor ideologues like Edward P. Philbrick. In late 1863, President Lincoln provided African Americans with the right to preempt confiscated lands without having to compete with white speculators. The freedpeople, however, gained access to far less than the preemption total of 40,000 acres. The obstacles they encountered included homeland buy-ups by big landowners like Philbrick, the clash between modern surveying methods of

straight lines and sea islanders' local familial traditions of natural borders (streams and paths), and obstructionism in carrying out the preemption policy on the ground. Although freedpeople did benefit from the creation of the Sherman Reserve and its promise of 40 acres and government-loaned mules in early 1865, their expectations were thwarted by President Johnson's policy of amnesty and land restoration to former slaveholders. The author explains that this was due to the sanctity of private property rights, although this does not account for the policy of slave emancipation--surely the greatest confiscation act in the history of the United States.

In the concluding chapters, Ochiai analyzes political and communal organizing among lowcountry South Carolinians, arguing, as on page 231, for the revolutionary possibilities of autonomous agrarian life at the very time when capitalistic and industrial forces were dominating American life. Although these chapters provide some additional insights into grassroots mobilization, they are less efficacious than Julie Saville's notion of corporatism, defined as collective, quasi-communitarian identity, in *The Work of Reconstruction* published in 1994.

Harvesting Freedom is very well argued, organized, and documented. The author has mined African-American narratives, memoirs, and oral evidence, as well as letters, memoirs, reports and articles written by planters, missionaries, army officers, and newspaper reporters. The book would have benefited from the inclusion of maps, photographs and images, all of which are strangely absent. Although the notion of African-American agrarianism and its slave roots is persuasive, this reviewer has three questions. First, how important was the notion of African agrarianism to African-American agrarianism? Dr. Ochiai clearly demonstrates that the motivations and worldviews of African Americans differed from European and southern agricultural peoples. And the author refers to the importance of the slaves' partial retention of their African heritage. Yet nothing is said about African-derived notions of land and work. This is an unfortunate oversight, especially since the author notes on page 37 that northern teachers visiting the sea-islands after Union occupation encountered slaves born in Africa who vividly remembered their native countries. (There is a book to be written here). Similarly, the author's reference on page 72 to the African American communitarian notion of labor, originating perhaps as far back as the pre-American African work ethic, remains undeveloped. These were peculiar people, to paraphrase historian Margaret Washington Creel in her cultural study of the West African provenance of lowcountry South Carolinians. One is reminded of Michl Gomez' insistence that scholars of slavery (and abolition)

must also be African as well as American historians.

Moreover, although African-American agrarianism was grounded in African as well as slave provenance, what impact did American conditions and ideology have upon its definition? On page 9, the author wonders how African Americans marshaled their resources and tactics through each phase of the Civil War and Reconstruction, demonstrating a tremendous ability to adjust themselves to ongoing circumstances and tirelessly pursuing their agrarian dreams in a sophisticated manner. One answer is that some northerners supported the formation of an independent yeomanry based upon the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal. This must have had some impact on freedpeople who recognized the similarity of the links between land, economic independence and freedom. On page 112, for instance, Prince Rivers, African-American sergeant of the First South Carolina Volunteers, pointed out: We shall still be slaves, until eb'ry man can raise him own bale ob cotton, and put him brand upon it, and say, *Dis is mine*. What is striking about Prince Rivers' remark is its emphasis on economic independence, individualism, and private property, the hallmarks of Jeffersonian republicanism.

I remain skeptical of the relevance of the lowcountry for much of the Reconstruction south. It was unique (peculiar) compared to other regions and this made the success of freedpeople in gaining land much more likely. (Perhaps this explains the enormous amount of scholarly attention the region has received compared to many other places?) We can interpret this as a realization of ideals unrealized elsewhere, but the historical reality was the lack of suitable conditions in most of the post-emancipation South.

In conclusion, why is this historical study of African-American agrarianism important to us today? According to Dr. Ochiai, the subsistence farming and familial collectivism of postwar sea islanders offers a preferable alternative to the modern marketplace of capital accumulation. This makes eminent sense if the author's nod is toward principles of solidarity, community and social justice. In the face of the ravages of postwar de-industrialization, urban decay, and day-to-day racist practices in the United States, however, such political views smack of quaint nostalgia.

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