

# The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition

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## Review

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**Sinha, Manisha** *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. Yale University Press, \$37.50 ISBN 9780300181371

### The New Essential History of American Abolitionism

Manisha Sinha's *The Slave's Cause* is ambitious in size, scope, and argument. Covering the entirety of American abolitionist history from the colonial era through the Civil War, Sinha, Professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, presents copious original research and thoughtfully and thoroughly mines the substantial body of recent abolitionist scholarship. In the process, Sinha makes a series of potent, carefully intertwined arguments that stress the radical and interracial dimensions and long-term continuities of the American abolitionist project.

*The Slave's Cause* portrays American abolitionists as radical defenders of democracy against countervailing pressures imposed both by racism and by the underside of capitalist political economy. Sinha goes out of her way to repudiate outmoded views of abolitionists as tactically unsophisticated utopians, overly sentimental romantics, or bourgeois apologists subconsciously rationalizing the emergent capitalism of Anglo-American "free labor" society. In positioning her work against these interpretations, Sinha may somewhat exaggerate the staying power of that older historiography, as most (though surely not all) current scholars in the field would likely concur wholeheartedly with Sinha's valorization of abolitionists as freedom fighters who achieved great change against great odds. Still, by so emphatically underscoring the movement's radicalism, Sinha clearly establishes abolitionism's many vital contributions to American social and political thought. For example, drawing on the work of Caleb McDaniel,<sup>1</sup> Sinha highlights abolitionists' internationalist advocacy for freedom and self-determination at home and abroad. Another chapter provides a thoughtful analysis of women's rights activism within the abolitionist movement, further fleshing out the antislavery movement's importance as "the midwife of

women's activism (298)." Here Sinha also clarifies how abolitionists on both sides of well-known controversies over "the woman question" frequently transcended their sectarianism in service of the slave's cause. Elsewhere, Sinha presents intriguing, if at times slightly over-argued, claims about ways in which abolitionists, who Sinha shows to have been an economically diverse lot, sought to challenge unfettered capitalism, including through use of the state, in both the slave South and the "free" North.

*The Slave's Cause* also seeks to blur the traditional demarcation between the supposedly deferential and elitist first-wave abolitionism of the Revolutionary and Early National eras and the more aggressive and participatory second-wave abolitionism of the 1830s-1860s. Sinha stresses how strains of abolitionist thought developed in the earlier period, particularly by African Americans, helped inspire the revived and radicalized movement spearheaded by William Lloyd Garrison in the 1830s. Sinha's chapter on the "Neglected Period of Antislavery" especially bridges the two "waves." Making a case for key antecedents of the immediatist mass movement of the 1830s evolving out of the early period and already taking root in the 1810s and 1820s, Sinha emphasizes, but also adds depth to, scholars' understanding that it was black activists who convinced many white northern gradualists to abandon the racist deportation project of the American Colonization Society. This chapter also explicates how the understudied American Convention of Abolition Societies prefigured tactics that second-wave political abolitionists came to deploy in attempts to eliminate slavery in the District of Columbia and halt the institution's westward expansion. In so forcefully making the case for continuity, Sinha may risk somewhat obscuring the important strategic and ideological differences necessitated by confrontation with the booming slave economy of the antebellum Cotton Kingdom and the more institutionally entrenched Slave Power politics of the Second Party System of Whigs and Democrats. Nevertheless, Sinha has done an important service in demonstrating better than any other recent work the extent to which "the history of abolition is marked as much by continuity as by disjuncture (191)." In large part, Sinha is able to call our attention to oft-underappreciated connections between first- and second-wave abolitionism precisely because she focuses so closely on the vibrant black activism that consistently shaped the movement.

Thus, the book's weightiest, most striking, and, in many cases, most original arguments, come in Sinha's efforts to further foreground black reformers, radicals, and rebels. Sinha elucidates how black abolitionists repeatedly

introduced crucial elements of abolitionist ideology and strategy. Throughout the book, Sinha brings us as rich and textured a portrait of black abolitionism as previous scholars have developed of white abolitionism. Among the many black abolitionist contributions Sinha highlights are extensive political agitation against slavery and for equal citizenship, generation of a subversive antiracist (and in some cases also feminist) literary tradition, advocacy of Canadian and Haitian emigration as a means of rejecting American racial inequality, innovative and sophisticated intellectual rebukes to early "scientific" racism, and active resistance to the seizure of fugitive slaves and kidnapping of free African Americans.

But it's not just free black northerners who figure prominently in Sinha's story. Sinha also affords a critical role for the resistance of southern slaves. Here *The Slave's Cause* reflects and enlarges upon a new trend in the literature on abolitionism, as exemplified in the work of Stanley Harrold,<sup>2</sup> identifying collaboration between free (white and black) abolitionists and resistant southern slaves, especially in coordinating escapes and sheltering and protecting fugitives. Runaway slaves, Sinha notes, forced political debates about the nature of freedom in America and helped antislavery legal thinkers like Salmon Chase and James Birney hone arguments that would ultimately undergird the antislavery politics of the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican parties. As Sinha's chapter on slave resistance in the 1830s and 1840s concludes: "Abolitionists justified the actions of slaves who stole themselves, fought back in self-defense, and rebelled," and thus "slave resistance not only revolutionized the abolition movement but also impacted the national and international politics of slavery." Moreover, "The political significance of slave resistance complemented the simultaneous emergence of antislavery politics in the North, and fugitive slaves became abolition's most effective emissaries (420)." Former fugitives became key leaders and spokespeople in nearly every wing of the antebellum abolitionist movement. And after 1850, the notorious new Fugitive Slave Act mobilized black and white abolitionists across the North, unified previously squabbling factions, transformed many abolitionists' perspectives on the exercise of righteous violence in self-defense, and heightened anxieties over, and attention to, the Slave Power's political sway.

This book's discussion of the politics of antebellum abolitionists and their engagement with the party system is the one place where I would have liked to see *The Slave's Cause* incorporate more detail. The chapter on "The Politics of Abolition" summarizes very well many of the most important developments, but,

in a book this long, the chapter felt a bit rushed. Perhaps the fundamentally political, and often fundamentally partisan, nature of so much key antislavery activism pursued under the auspices of the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican Parties, might have been more fully conveyed by allowing these stories to course through the entire section on second-wave abolitionism, instead of being mostly relegated to a few specific chapters.

Overall though, this reviewer comes away from reading *The Slave's Cause* deeply impressed, notwithstanding the few quibbles noted. Sweeping yet nuanced, and augmented with two-dozen pages of well-chosen portraits and other illustrations, *The Slave's Cause* should instantly be recognized as the go-to reference on the American antislavery movement and the best synthesis of the last few decades' rich abolitionist scholarship, much like James Brewer Stewart's *Holy Warriors* was for the scholarship of Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights eras.<sup>3</sup> That *The Slave's Cause* is so much longer and denser reflects Sinha's able engagement with the past few decades' incredibly extensive and variegated research, including her own, on American antislavery activism. In *The Slave's Cause*, Sinha has produced the most comprehensive single volume on abolitionism in America. This book will long be a must read for expert and lay readers alike who want to truly understand the history of the nation's most important and revolutionary movement for radical social change.

Throughout *The Slave's Cause*, Sinha persuasively depicts abolitionists as indispensable "pioneers in developing" and fighting for "the modern concept of human rights (249)." In so doing, Sinha not only sheds further light on this crucial centerpiece of the American story, but also showcases an important, inspirational model of the "potential of democratic radicalism" that we would do well to remember and fully understand today (591).

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<sup>1</sup> W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists & Transatlantic Reform (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State*

*University Press, 2013).*

<sup>2</sup> *Stanley Harrold, Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004); Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).*

<sup>3</sup> *James Brewer Stewart, Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976).*