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Interview

SLAVE COUNTRY: AMERICAN EXPANSION AND THE ORIGINS OF THE DEEP SOUTH

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Adam Rothman is an associate professor of history at Georgetown University, where he teaches courses in Atlantic history, the history of slavery, and nineteenth-century United States history. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 2000. Beyond the Cotton Gin: Dr. Adam Rothman and the Expansion of Slavery in the Deep South

Interview by Neal A. Novak

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Many important colonists who participated in the American Revolution believed that the war was, as George Washington observed, for the purpose of rescuing America from . . . Slavery. Yet he and his fellow Founding Fathers allowed slavery to exist by enshrining it in the Constitution in the form of the Three-Fifth Compromise. How did Washington and those like him rationalize the legalization of slavery despite their initial objections?

Adam Rothman (AR): Many prominent American Revolutionaries recognized that slavery was terribly wrong. It violated the slaves' right to liberty and threatened to corrupt republican society. I tremble for my country when reflect that God is just, Jefferson memorably confessed in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Some revolutionary slaveowners, including Washington, lived up to their anti-slavery ideals by freeing their own slaves. But the founding generation's respect for slaveowners' individual property rights, their racist fears of increasing the free black population, and basic calculations of economic self-interest all formed a heavy counterweight against abolitionism. Trusting in the benevolence of nature and the dream of progress, many critics of slavery in the early national era hoped that slavery would naturally disappear once the importation of slaves was prohibited.

CWBR: Explain the notion of domestication as it relates to the institution of slavery in the Deep South. How did domestication impact slavery in the region? In your opinion, did it allow slavery to become an even more viable economic force during the first half of the nineteenth century?

AR: Between the rise and fall of American slavery was a middle era of change and flux, which I explore in *Slave Country*. I extend Willie Lee Rose's concept of the domestication of slavery to describe the United States' withdrawal from the Atlantic slave trade in the early national period, which severed the North American slave population from its African and the Caribbean roots and forced slaveowners in the Deep South to draw their slave labor from the Upper South, thereby creating a new interstate slave trade. The domestication of slavery was part of a pivotal series of transformations that molded the colonial North American slave system into its nineteenth century shape, and it laid a political and social foundation for the mature proslavery argument of the 1840s and 1850s, which emphasized the reciprocal obligations of masters and slaves. Domestication may have actually hurt slaveowners economically, since it raised the cost of slave labor, but it helped them politically.

CWBR: As you point out, Thomas Jefferson's vision of an agrarian democracy, which hinged on the notion that the United States should annex western territories and encourage the development of agriculturally-based economy and society, played an important role in shaping the institution of slavery in the American South. Given his ambivalent stance on the issue, how did Jefferson envision slavery existing within this broader framework?

AR: He didn't. Jefferson convinced himself, paradoxically, that the expansion of slavery into the southwest would eventually lead to its disappearance in the Union so long as the importation of more African slaves was prohibited. Historians have judged this strategy (known as diffusion) as a total failure, and so it was, but I think it is also important to understand how diffusionism, like colonization, emerged from the tensions and contradictions of Jefferson's logic and political situation. Toward the end of his life, Jefferson seems to have soured on both diffusion and colonization as cures for slavery. He consoled himself with the paternalist fiction that he was at least taking good care of his slaves, and he clung to a faint hope that future generations would somehow get rid of slavery in the United States.

CWBR: Slaveholders residing in the Deep South lived in a state of almost perpetual fear. With slaves comprising more the 50 percent of the population in some regions, masters employed numerous techniques to ensure that their slaves remained docile. During your research, did you encounter an instance when the fear of an insurrection prompted a slaveholder to manumit those whom he or she enslaved?

AR: There were slaves who were manumitted as a reward for informing on conspiracies or assisting their owners in the event of rebellion, but I have never seen any case of a slaveowner emancipating his slaves because he feared they would revolt. Among slaveholders, the fear of insurrection generally provoked greater vigilance, surveillance, restraint, and violence against slaves rather than more leniency. That certainly seems to have been the effect of the rebellion that I describe at some length in my book, the 1811 slave revolt in the Orleans Territory, which was actually the largest slave revolt in U.S. history. As many as three hundred slaves participated. The revolt provoked some talk about the need to restrict the introduction of dangerous slaves from the Upper South and the need to enforce the Black Code, but it did not induce any slaveowners in the region to free their slaves or quit the business. It's quite striking that Wade Hampton, the U.S. military commander who helped to suppress the rebellion, invested heavily in Louisiana sugar plantations shortly thereafter.

CWBR: In chapter two, you discuss the efforts of the United States government to civilize certain members of the U.S. population. As it related to Native Americans living in the American South and West, this policy often involved education programs designed to indoctrinate them with the values of American society. Government officials refused, however, to take similar measures to civilize African-American slaves. How do you account for this discrepancy? Does this fact reveal something larger about Americans' attitudes about race and ethnicity during first decades of the nineteenth century?

AR: Certainly most white Americans in that era believed that both blacks and Indians needed to be civilized, but political realities determined that the strategy for civilization had to be different for each group. Because the Indians formed quasi-sovereign nations, the United States sent ambassadors to instruct them, while in the case of enslaved African Americans, the government left it to their owners to accomplish that task. In the Deep South in particular, white

southerners' vision for the expansion of republican civilization demanded different things from different people. It's clear that the underlying purpose of the U.S. government's civilizing efforts among the southern Indians was to induce them to sell their surplus lands to the United States. At the same time, the U.S. government implicitly recognized that black slavery provided the labor needed to turn the wild' southern frontier into a civilized agricultural society. So slavery and Indian removal were two sides of the coin of progress in that region.

CWBR: An era of nationalist feeling washed over the United States during the years immediately following the War of 1812. For many, the American victory finally secured their country's independence from Britain and, as you state in chapter four, [t]he idea of freedom rippled through the deluge of nationalist propaganda. How did Americans—and particularly Southerners—reconcile this burgeoning notion of individual freedom with the fact that the U.S. was one of the last Western nations to allow slavery?

AR: White Southerners increasingly rejected the Jeffersonian critique of slavery. Instead they yoked slavery to the progress of republican civilization across North America, arguing that black slavery made freedom and equality possible for white people. They began to view abolitionism as a tyrannical invasion of their legitimate property rights and a potentially catastrophic inversion of what they perceived as the natural, God-given racial order. I would emphasize the international context in a different way. The slave revolt in St. Domingue and Haitian independence powerfully reinforced southern slaveowners' opposition to the transatlantic antislavery movement, and later in the nineteenth century they concluded that abolition had crippled plantation agriculture in the British West Indies. It's really no wonder that historians have been fascinated with the emergence of proslavery ideology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It offers a particularly vivid example of the elaborate moral rationalization of economic self-interest.

CWBR: During the decades prior to the Civil War, the city of New Orleans boasted the largest free black population (per capita) in the United States. Even so, free people of color were the target of discrimination, forbidden to carry firearms, marry whites, or participate in state government. City officials even expected free blacks to assist in the enforcement of certain slave codes. What do these policies reflect about American society and about the institution of slavery itself?

AR: People of color made up an astonishing forty percent of the free population of New Orleans in 1810. They were a diverse group of creoles and immigrants, men and women, rich and poor. Some were even fairly wealthy slaveowners. The challenge for city and state officials was to preserve white supremacy without driving the free colored population into a dangerous alliance with slaves, which explains the schizophrenic quality of the law. Although free people of color were implicated in a number of the conspiracies that roiled New Orleans in these years, they also served on slave patrols, helped to suppress the 1811 rebellion, and most famously, defended their country in the Battle of New Orleans. Their story is remarkable but not all that unusual from a comparative perspective. Free people of color carved out niches for themselves throughout the slave societies of the Americas, including the southern United States, in the face of deeply racist structures of power, and in most cases they made an uneasy peace with slavery.

CWBR: Did you learn something new or particularly intriguing while researching the history of slavery in the Deep South?

AR: One of the first things we all learn about American history is that the invention of the cotton gin led to the expansion of slavery, and I think a lot of people accept that technological fable. *Slave Country* shows that there's more to it than that. The book demonstrates that the expansion of slavery in the Deep South in the early national period involved a multi-dimensional struggle encompassing many different groups of people in a variety of arenas of life, from the halls of Congress to the farms and plantations of the Deep South. It's a sordid and violent history, but enormously important for understanding why the United States would eventually tear itself apart in the Civil War. For me, the most intriguing aspect was the richness and diversity of experiences of people of African descent in the Deep South in the early national era. It was especially rewarding to dig into the original sources and find flesh-and-blood people with names and stories of their own. Their individual histories enliven the abstract categories that we often use, like slave or free person of color, which callously identify large aggregations of people according to their legal status. Some of their stories are truly amazing. They reveal a history of epic odysseys, tremendous courage, and terrible despair.