

# Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South

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## Review

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**Rothman, Adam** *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South*. Harvard University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 674016742

Slavery, Politics, and the Civil War

The Changing of Face of the Young Republic

Adam Rothman's **Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South** is a timely monograph that reminds scholars about the various ideological and political motivations driving territorial expansion in the United States during the years of Jefferson and Jackson. In just over two hundred pages, Rothman, a protégé of Barbara J. Fields, demonstrates that the story of western expansion is egregiously simplified when it is reduced to the mythology of Lewis and Clark or the Oregon Trail. More importantly, however, is Rothman's well argued thesis that the expansion of territory in which plantation slavery could be established was one of the primary forces that drove settlers and speculators into what is now known as the Deep South. Rothman's retelling of the dramatic interplay between Black, Red, and White in the early republic is a dynamic analytical narrative chronologically situated between Edmund Morgan's groundbreaking analysis of colonial American racial ideology, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (W.W. Norton & Company, ISBN 039332494X, \$16.95 softcover) and Manisha Sinha's study of race, slavery, and political power, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (The University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 0807848840, \$19.95 softcover). With the publication of **Slave Country**, Rothman unapologetically joins a significant historiographical canon that places slavery—and thus race—at the center of American political and ideological history.

Although only five chapters, **Slave Country** is a tightly written monograph that covers a lot of ground. Rothman's most important contribution in **Slave Country** is a recounting of how and why the plantation system spread from

Georgia to Texas. Far from resembling pioneer mythology, Rothman presents readers with an alternative vision of American expansion that takes into consideration the veritable army of forced African-American migrants who effectively doubled the population of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama between 1810 and 1820. Additionally, **Slave Country** also features seemingly disassociated chapters that are given coherence by being organized around the theme of territorial expansion in the new American nation. Included among these topics is an analysis of political and demographical change during Louisiana's transition from indigo to sugar cultivation, a retelling of the nearly hysterical fears of a slave rebellion in the War of 1812, and the invasion of Native American lands to provide the geographical space for the plantation South to expand. Also of interest to some scholars is an examination of the contradictions between Jefferson's imagined empire of yeoman settlers occupying public land and the wave of land speculation accompanying Jacksonian nationalism.

Built around extensive research from over a dozen archival sources, this converted dissertation places conservative counter-revolutionary ideology firmly in the Deep South during the republic's early decades. Rothman best summarizes his position on the Deep South's reactionary politics on page 173 when he states, the stronger a state's planter class was, the more conservative was the structure of its politics. Rothman's position on the political structure of slave states joining the new American nation fits well with Sinha's depiction of reactionary and rhetorically gymnastic South Carolina politicians during the antebellum era that is presented in *The Counter-Revolution of Slavery* and the neo-abolitionist historical political analysis of Leonard Richards in *Slave Power* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807126004, \$22.95 softcover).

Although Rothman's focus is on early America, readers who concentrate on the Civil War should be intrigued by the direction that Rothman extends his argument about American political history. His presentation of expansion links this phenomenon—quite correctly in this reviewer's opinion—with the domestic slave trade. As those familiar with Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Harvard University Press, ISBN 0674005392, \$16.95 softcover) are aware, the domestic slave trade was not only the largest forced migration in American history; it was also an extraordinarily emotional issue that contributed mightily to the ranks and zeal of nineteenth-century abolitionists. Thus, according to Rothman, the territorial spread of slavery is inextricably linked with the geographical expansion of the United States. In sum, American expansionism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is bound

with the spread of slavery, sectional antebellum political struggles, and the coming of the Civil War.

Confronting the specter of slavery and its pervasive influence on social, cultural, and political life in early America may not be the most provocative aspect of **Slave Country**. Rothman expands his historical interpretation of slavery to situate this unfortunate part of the American experience as emblematic of the brutality that a scarcely regulated free market is capable of inflicting. For Rothman, the expansion of slavery and the resulting forced migrations that disrupted tens of thousands of families is analogous to issues in contemporary globalization and the idea that human beings are easily replaced on the labor market. In short, Rothman identifies slavery as an exploitative economic system that rendered human beings disposable. This politically charged argument, however, is secondary to Rothman's excellent archival digging and historical presentation of prebellum American expansion and its many connections to the coming of the Civil War — all of which make **Slave Country** an indispensable read. David Lucander, University of Massachusetts, Department of Afro-American Studies.