

van der Linden, Marcel (Hrsg.): *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations. The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2011. ISBN: 978-90-04-18853-2; 556 S.

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This edited collection, stemming from a colloquium organized in Amsterdam in 2008, is a product of the profuse public and academic engagement in commemorating the bicentennial of the British and American measures for the abolition the slave trade. Instead of exploring the actors and their motives, or the abolitionist campaign itself – like the bulk of the scholarship produced for the occasion –, the authors gathered for this volume provide a multi-faceted view of the long-term consequences of the abolition of the African slave trade and slavery in various regions of the world, with a particular eye for labor relations developed after slavery. Edited and introduced by Dutch labor historian Marcel van der Linden, of the University of Amsterdam and the International Institute for Social History, the book reflects the rich, ongoing, dialogue among scholars in the fields of slavery and abolition and labor history and demonstrates the potential contribution of the „global social history“ approach to the growing field of post emancipation studies.

In slavery and abolition studies, historians have been paying closer attention to the conditions of „freedom“, both during and after slavery. From works on manumission and free blacks to explorations of post-emancipation labor organization and protests, recent historiography has striven to avoid treating slave emancipation as a watershed that changed conditions overnight, and, this way, has managed to break away from the schematic view of a „transition from slave to free labor“ where „free“ often implied „wage“ labor. A variety of labor arrangements have thus come under close scrutiny, even if analyzed under the shadow of slavery. Labor historians, in a parallel movement, have also been drawn to expand their subjects of inquiry and look beyond wage laborers and industrial labor relations, considering arrangements formerly per-

ceived as „pre-capitalist“ in their analyses. On both ends, much effort has been put into exposing the contradictions and unfulfilled promises of liberal ideology, accounting for the changes in the forms of exploitation, and identifying the mechanics for the reproduction of inequalities.

Seen through this light, abolitionism serves as a common theme that helps to connect parallel processes happening in different parts of the world from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century that culminated in the condemnation and ultimate abolition of both the slave trade and slavery. *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations* touches three of the many currents of the scholarship on abolitionism: most chapters are dedicated to discussing the transformation of labor relations, but the responses to abolitionist ideology and the public memory of slavery are also addressed. The book is divided into four sections that largely reflect this division.

The first section, „Politics of Memory“, puts forward a timely discussion of the contemporary political appeal of the history of slavery and emancipation. Taking stock of the commemorations of the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, James Walvin recognized that they spoke to a range of modern social and political issues which deeply influenced the interpretation of the historical events, the choice of individuals and themes to highlight. Academic history had only limited influence on the public displays, exhibits and other commemorative events, as it turned out, although African agency seems to have become a central interpretive tool where other actors and explanations dominated. Social inclusion and the contours of national identity in a post-colonial setting also drive the quest for reinterpretation of the Dutch colonial past, as discussed by Angelie Sens. The author surveys the struggles against racial discrimination that have been advanced by Surinamese militants and others for many decades, and advocates that „lifting the historiographical veil“ on the themes of race and racism would allow for the rethinking, rewriting and disseminating of a new, inclusive, narrative of Dutch history. Both chapters demonstrate vividly that abolition is as much a contemporary theme as any other.

The second section, „Abolitions“, engages the responses to British and American abolitionism and the effects of the campaign to suppress the slave trade. Recent research – and particularly on the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database – has allowed for a revision of each country’s participation in the trade, and origins, destinations and volumes, and thus a more detailed assessment of the impact of legal measures taken against the slave trade. As David Eltis pointed out, 1807 has meant a great deal for the North Atlantic trade, but very little for the South Atlantic one. Abolition did not prevent three major plantation systems from emerging in the United States (cotton), Cuba (sugar) and Brazil (coffee), all based on slave labor. Yet he rejects treating abolition as void and simply ineffective, arguing that without it the demand that generated the internal slave trades in the United States and in Brazil in the nineteenth century would have been met by a renewed flow of transatlantic coerced laborers instead of European immigrants. Stanley Engerman and Dick Geary address the impact of abolition in the United States, the British West Indies and Brazil and expose the uneven treatment of those areas by the historiography. The abolition of the slave trade to the United States remains very little studied, despite the classic work by W. E. B. Du Bois, while in Brazil the theme is being revisited. Geary’s chapter tries to tackle the very difficult question of the longevity of the Brazilian slave system, yet fails to sort through outdated and revisionist interpretations. By attributing the longevity of Brazilian slavery to its social complexity – widespread slave ownership, diverse demographics, high manumission rates – the author overshadows the political dynamics launched by abolitionist pressure, which left a long-lasting conservative legacy in the South American country and may well hold more explanatory power than is acknowledged. Robin Blackburn and Andreas Gestrich’s chapters address precisely the wider social and political context in which abolitionism developed in the Americas and in Continental Europe and expose the varieties and alliances of the movement. This exploration of local responses, often broken down by class, and engagement with counter-discourses on slavery and emancipation holds

a strong comparative potential that has yet to be fully explored. Nicole Ulrich’s chapter looks at yet another angle of this theme: the impact of abolitionism on subaltern classes. Through a revolt that united seafarers, servants and slaves in Cape Colony in 1808, the author demonstrates that ideas about anti-slavery and revolution were at the basis of the rebels’ demands. Ulrich’s claim that the revolt stands at the beginning of the cycle of protest that culminated with slave emancipation in the British Empire requires supportive evidence of their connections, but is highly suggestive.

The third section of the collection, „Consequences“ deals more directly with transformations in labor relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It builds on the literature on post-emancipation labor in the Americas, Africa, and Asia as well as on unfree labor more generally. Working under the assumptions that slave emancipation was not followed by the spread of wage labor and that capitalism was in no way incompatible with coerced labor, the chapters address the effects of abolition on labor relations from a variety of perspectives. The role of colonial states in sponsoring or supporting coercive labor systems is discussed in almost every one of them. Andreas Eckert exposed the intricate connections between German abolitionist rhetoric and the extensive exploitation of coerced labor in German colonies in Africa, Julia Seibert discussed the implications of the use of the „colonial labor force“ in the Belgian Congo, and Pieter Emmer addressed in comparison the British, French and Dutch policies regarding colonial labor. Both Roger Knight and Claus Fullberg-Stolberg call for a fresh approach to old narratives. Fullberg-Stolberg surveys land policies in Jamaica for the century following emancipation and identifies in the historiography a void opposition between peasantry and wage labor, for the combination of the two systems („occupation multiplicity“) was prevalent as a strategy of economic survival. Knight questioned the use of „indenture“ as a blanket definition for most post-emancipation labor contracts and called for a closer look at the terms and conditions for a more nuanced understanding of labor in the Dutch East Indies in the last dec-

des of the 19th and early decades of the 20th century. The microhistorical approach is also advocated by Michael Zeuske and Norbert Finzsch in their piece on post-emancipation in Cuba and the United States. Suggesting a person-oriented perspective rather than a state-oriented one, they list three sets of problems that could guide researchers in comparisons of post-emancipation societies: investigations into the spaces of freedom, the meanings of freedom and the limits to freedom.

The last section, „Perspectives“ is a fitting end to the collection, as Susan Zimmermann's chapter deals with the trajectory of anti-slavery as a social movement from a long-term view. Even if abolitionism cannot be considered the sole motor for the changes discussed, in this volume the British-led international campaign serves as a unifying thread for thought provoking and path-breaking research on the transformations in labor relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One gap should be noted: a discussion of urban labor is largely missing from post-emancipation and colonial labor narratives included in this volume, and could well help bring the fields of slavery and abolition and labor history even closer together.

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