COMMENT

One Kind of Freedom: A Comparative Perspective

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Most studies of the adjustments to the ending of slavery in the postbellum South regard the American case as a unique episode, and present explanations that provide little comparison with the problems in other places where slavery was also ended in the 19th century. In addition, the rather sharp changes in racial adjustments that took place within the first three decades of emancipation in the southern states are sometimes downplayed in the presentation of the difficult conditions faced by the exslaves, thus omitting some important aspects of southern history. As the other comments here focus on specific points in One Kind of Freedom, I will deal with the question posed by looking at emancipation in a more comparative perspective and also describing changes in the South over the latter part of the 19th century.

In making comparisons of the American South with the other New World places in which emancipation occurred in the 19th century, it is useful to note similarities and differences in the societies and in the emancipation process. These societies had differences in the natural resource endowments, in the ratio of labor to land, in the crops grown, in the relative numbers of slaves in the population, and in the European background of the white settlers. There were differences in political control, some countries being independent while others were still colonies of European powers. Based on population growth and the legal accessibility of slaves in the transatlantic slave trade, there were differences in the places of birth of the slave population. Perhaps the only commonality was the use of slave labor for production of goods and services mainly within agriculture, but even here the difference in the sizes of producing units for different crops points to some differences in the backgrounds of those freed.

While all New World areas did end slavery in the 19th century, there were also important differences in the means by which this was achieved. In some cases emancipation was to be immediate, more frequently it was to take time either via apprenticeship systems for those already slaves or through the granting of
freedom in a fixed number of years to those born after a specific date. In all cases
but two, emancipation was legislated in peacetime, but Haiti and the United
States ended slavery amidst extensive wartime destruction. In most cases some
form of compensation, in cash, bonds, or labor time, was provided to slave
owners; except in Haiti, emancipation entailed little reduction in the non-slave
property and other legal rights of the former slave owners. The United States was
one of the few cases in which no compensation was paid or given, via a “free
womb” law, to those previously owning slaves. In no case, however, was any
compensation, in cash or in land, paid to any former slaves, and this was true also
for serfs freed in 19th-century Europe. Exslaves, nevertheless, remained primar-
ily in the agricultural sector for several decades after emancipation, and there
were generally only limited changes in patterns of land ownership.

In the planning for the emancipation of slaves in the United States, attention
was paid to the outcome of slave emancipations elsewhere, particularly in the two
major cases of Haiti (prior to 1790 possibly the richest area in the New World)
and the British West Indies. The economic characteristics focused on were the
related declines in the output of staple export crops, the disappearance of the
plantation, a presumed reduction in total labor input, and also a decline in total
output. It was argued that it was necessary to avoid such changes in the United
States, in the interests of both the landowners and the exslaves who would
otherwise revert to a less productive economic position. All societies that
experienced emancipation had introduced policies and controls to alleviate the
labor problems, but success had been limited and, with few exceptions, the
plantation systems ended and export-crop output declined. One important excep-
tion, Barbados, was able to avoid these changes, not because of policy but
basically because its labor/land ratio was so high that exslaves had little choice
but to continue working on the sugar plantations.

Similarly, about two decades after emancipation, Trinidad and Guiana, still
unable to get exslaves back on the plantation, began to import numbers of
laborers under contract from India, China, and various other parts of the world.
Thus a plantation sector was restored, but with few exslaves involved in plan-
tation production. The use of contract labor to replace exslave labor was seen also
in the French West Indies and Surinam, while European labor was important in
the postslave era production of sugar in Cuba and coffee in Brazil, where
emancipation occurred two decades after the United States Civil War. When
exslaves left the plantations it was to live and work on relatively small, family-
sized units producing mainly foodstuffs, with lower measured productivity per
worker than had been the case on the plantation.

Thus the pattern of labor adjustment in the postbellum South had some basic
similarities to those elsewhere. The same concerns regarding labor withdrawal
were discussed for the earlier emancipation in the United States North. Exslaves
left the plantation work-regime and located on family farms, while output per
capita in the South declined sharply and remained below antebellum levels for
several decades. The freedmen were given no land at emancipation but were able
to acquire some land out of earnings made in agricultural employment. All of this
describes the South as well as much of the Caribbean and Latin America, which
is perhaps surprising given the many differences in these societies. The United
States did have one significant difference in its pattern of labor supply adjustment
after emancipation. Unlike in other areas, there was no major attraction of
immigrants, whether as contract labor or free labor, and there was ample land for
the exslaves to be able to avoid plantation work. While the shift of exslaves from
plantations to small farms producing cotton did not mean there were fewer blacks
involved in cotton production, the decline in productivity meant a large increase
in cotton farming and production by the whites previously outside the export
sector. Slave emancipation changed working conditions for exslaves but also
changed the patterns of production for many white farmers, now more frequently
producing cotton, but on family farms not plantations.

Focus on the limited gains made by exslaves into the middle of the 20th
century can often lead us to ignore the rather significant variations in black status
over time, as well as to overlook the differences between the immediate and the
long-term impact of emancipation. It often seems to be assumed that, in a true
"Whiggish" manner, things get better over time and that there are more success-
ful adaptations to new conditions as the memory of past circumstances fades
away. In the postbellum South, however, the situation goes the other way, with
black gains, however limited, being somewhat greater in several important
dimensions between 1865 and 1890 than they were to be between 1890 and 1940.

At the end of the Civil War, and for the next quarter century, black voting and
political participation was greater than it was to be for the first half of the 20th
century. There were substantial gains in black education, with rapid growth in
school enrollment, literacy, and expenditures for black education relative to that
for whites. There were increases in black income and wealth, as well as rural land
ownership, often financed out of black agricultural earnings. Within the South,
black geographic mobility was high, and there was a frequent presence of
two-parent households in the black community. All of this demonstrates patterns
of behavior that blacks brought out of slavery, and the ability of exslaves to
achieve some degree of progress, within clear limits.

Much of this was to change after 1890, and the effects of these changes often
persisted for up to half a century. There were important changes in economic,
political, and social conditions. Blacks lost the ability to vote in most elections
in the South, as well as the possibility of becoming elected officials. There was
a sharp decline in relative and, at times, absolute expenditures on education, and
states and localities also passed laws to restrict black occupational opportunities
and to permit segregation in employment, residential choice, and travel. The
number of lynchings of blacks increased, and the legal system in the South did
little, if anything, to protect blacks. Some of the changes reflected earlier trends,
but the system of segregation and racism had become more firmly a part of
southern life. This pattern of segregation continued, even with the movement of
blacks to the North during and after World War I, and with the immigration
restrictions introduced in the 1920s. The depression of the 1930s had a further major impact on blacks, the high unemployment and reduced agricultural production in the South led to increased family instability, a pattern that was to increase dramatically over the next three-quarters of a century.

The political, social, and economic conditions of black America improved in the period after 1940, quite rapidly in many regards through at least the 1970s. Change reflected the increased labor demand due to World War II and its aftermath, as well as legal, judicial, and legislative measures which were intended to reverse the previously existing conditions with regard to voting, education, and segregation in many aspects. The post-1940 experience was based upon economic growth, while the worsening conditions of the 1890s had reflected a collapse in the international cotton market, influencing the income conditions of southern whites as well as blacks. The variations in black economic and social conditions since emancipation indicate the important role played by national and regional economic changes, influencing directly the income of blacks but also, by their impacts on whites, racial attitudes and the use of the political system to set patterns of race relations. And, to return to the issue of comparisons, variations in change over time similarly characterized other New World societies, with periods that might be considered to yield progress alternating with years of setback and decline.

Thus, as dramatic and important as the ending of legal slavery is, as is the achievement of any kind of freedom, in few cases does it lead to equally dramatic changes in relative economic, political, social, and cultural conditions, in either the short term or even the long run. And the longer the passage of time the greater the influence of contemporary conditions relative to those determined under slavery. *One Kind of Freedom* describes some of the changes in the first half-century of freedom, in some parts of the South, portraying decline and limited economic growth for the exslaves in the years prior to the start of the northward movement, a movement made possible by the type of freedom granted in 1865, even if it was infrequently exercised before the start of the 20th century. Ransom and Sutch thus indicate that even “one kind of freedom” was a concept that was not unchanged after emancipation, but provided new opportunities for change in the future.