

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 4
Issue 1 *October 1997*

Article 10

10-1-1997

Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850

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Recommended Citation

Ashworth, John (1997) "Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol4/iss1/10>

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John Ashworth, 1995. Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850. Cambridge University Press, New York and Cambridge. xii + 520 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, and bibliography. \$64.95 (cloth).

This volume is an examination of political developments during the thirty years leading up to the Compromise of 1850 that draws on a Marxist framework to synthesize studies of antebellum America to set the social, economic, and ideological stage upon which political events took place. Ashworth's breadth of subject matter, the sophistication of his analysis, and his willingness to engage other historians' approaches mark this as an important volume with which all serious students of the coming of the Civil War are going to have to contend.

The past few decades have seen both a number of studies of antebellum politics and studies of antebellum social and economic history, but there have been few works that attempt to merge the findings of these trends. Ashworth maintains that his book's "principal thesis" is that "it was possible for southern slavery and pre-capitalist free labor in the North to coexist, but increasingly difficult, and finally impossible, for slavery and capitalism to coexist" (p. 115).

While this is sure to be controversial work among historians, even those who disagree with its premises will find much that is useful for Ashworth provides summaries of a wide-range of historical literature. His analysis, while explicitly Marxist, is very powerful and compelling at times. For example, he repeatedly draws attention to the ways that ideological structures protected class interests. He also emphasizes black resistance to slavery, but this theme falls into the background for the most part. There are also places where Ashworth's discussion of the various political factions of the parties loose connection with the overall themes of the book. Not everything fits into his framework. Nevertheless, the volume provides a rich political and economic context for the antebellum 19th century.