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The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform

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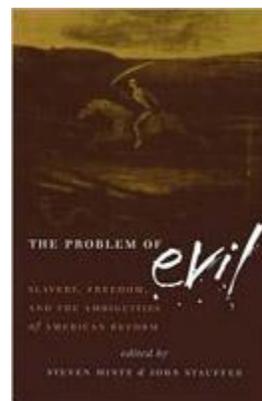
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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Steven Mintz, John Stauffer, eds. *The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform*. Amherst and Boston University of Massachusetts Press, 2007. 405 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-570-8.



Patrick Rael, ed. *African-American Activism before the Civil War: A Reader on the Freedom Struggle in the Antebellum North*. New York Routledge, 2008. viii + 307 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-95726-7; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-95727-4.

Reviewed for H-CivWar by Oleta Prinsloo, Miami University

Reform and Activism in Antebellum America

Two compilations of essays, "The Problem of Evil" and "African-American Activism before the Civil War," have recently been published. The first, edited by Steven Mintz and John Stauffer, two of the leading scholars on American social history and reform, concerns the effects of slavery, racism, economic inequality, and American power on American institutions. Some of the nineteen essays are by scholars who have been defining the historical interpretation of slavery, race, and reform since the 1970s including Orlando Patterson, Ira Berlin, Stanley Engerman, and David Eltis, while others are by well-established and new scholars. Reinhold Neibhur's work on the relation between religion and evil and David Brion Davis's work on the connections between religion, slavery, antislavery, and capitalism inform many of the essays. (Davis has become more interested in issues of religion and morality in his more recent work.) "The Problem of Evil" is wide-ranging in topic and time span. The first of the nineteen essays is Patterson's summary of his work on the philosophical nature of slavery and freedom in the ancient world and the last essay is Jack Holt's examination of how Dwight D. Eisenhower's faith informed his politics during the Cold War.

Putting together a volume on the implications of evil for the study of American history is a tremendously significant undertaking, especially in post-9/11 America. Contributing to the worthiness of this project are the superb introductory essays by the editors. Mintz writes the introductory essays to the volume and to parts 1 and 2, and Stauffer writes the opening essays to parts 3 and 4. While the fashion in American history writing has been for historians to pretend to moral neutrality, Mintz and Stauffer argue that Americans cannot move forward (nor by implication can they honestly contemplate the significance of 9/11) until there has been a moral reckoning with the American past. Mintz writes that "history without a moral dimension is antiquarianism" (p. 1). Their undertaking is modeled on German writers since WW II who have tried to come to terms with the implications of Nazism on the past, an undertaking called "Vergangenheitsbewältigung." Mintz defines the word as the "wrestling with the demons of German history through reflection, remembering, and moral reckoning" (p. 1).

The editors chose the essays according to five criteria: the wrestling with a fundamental moral problem, the centrality of ideas or an ideology "to connect economic and political interests and the realm of ideas" (p. 2), the recognition of culture as involving contests for power, the placing of the U.S. experience into larger processes of modernization, and the relation of slavery to an understanding of modernity. Most of the essays contain themes prominent in history writing on slavery, abolition, reform, and freedom since the 1990s. By historicizing evil, these essays work to undercut the conservative American exceptionalism interpretation of U.S. history.

"The Problem of Evil" is divided into four sections. Part 1 on slavery consists of five essays ending with Robert Bonner's comparison of Confederate racialism to the scientific racism of Nazism. The antislavery section contains seven essays ranging in topic from William Casey King's study on the changing interpretations of sin and ambition in England and America before the American Revolution to Catherine Clinton's study of dominance and submission in the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.

Stauffer, a former student of D. B. Davis, writes the introductions to part 3, "Imaging Emancipation" and part 4, "Post-Emancipation America." Both essays are creative and original. In his first essay, he considers how slavery and race challenged American's millennial mission, and in the second, by referring to Mark Twain's story "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899), he considers questions of power, self-righteousness and national delusion, and the telling of American history. Stauffer, referencing W. E. B. Du Bois, argues that whiteness became the basis of American morality and in the process blinded Americans to

the immoral implications of race and economic disparity. This essay greatly resonates with undergraduate students and assigning it is a way of introducing difficult topics in survey classes. Parts 3 and 4 contain five and four essays respectively. The essays in part 4, by implication, consider America's moral quandaries in the aftermath of 9/11. For example, Michael Fellman looks at American efforts to subjugate (with the use of water-boarding) the Filipinos, Leslie Butler considers the implications of liberals endorsing WWI, and Ellen Dwyer traces the links between the psychiatric profession and racism in the armed forces in WW II (an essay that is even more interesting given the recent shootings by a Muslim psychiatrist at Fort Hood). This volume is strongly recommended as a companion book for survey classes on American history and for historiography classes for its insistence that history writing be morally informed.



"African American Activism," edited by Patrick Rael, focuses more narrowly on changing historical interpretations of the nature of black protest in the antebellum North. This volume contains the most significant essays on the topic published since the 1960s. It includes an introductory essay by Rael and thirteen interpretive essays arranged according to the original date of publication. Themes of the essays include the extent of white-black cooperation in the abolitionist movement (Leon Litwack), the issue of integration versus separatism (Jane Pease and William Pease), the role of uplift and respectability (Frederick Cooper), African American nationalism (George Leveque, Ernest Allen, Jr.), African American gender relations (James Horton), the political significance of slave resistance (James Oakes), Christianity and identity (Albert J. Raboteau), the impact of whiteness on black community making (Emma Lapansky, James Brewer Stewart, and Leslie Harris), and the relationship of black leadership to the market culture (Rael). All students of African American history should be familiar with these essays. "African American Activism" is best suited for an advanced undergraduate or graduate class concentrating on historiographical interpretation in classes on African American history or politics.

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