

# Generations of captivity and slavery history essay



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However, upon closer introspection, the texts' portrayal of slavery is anything but alike. Perhaps the most fundamental difference between Kolchin and Berlin is in their approaches to presenting the historiography. Kolchin tries to be as objective as possible, portraying slavery neither from the slaveholders' nor from the slaves' views. Kolchin has definitely considered slavery from the perspective of both the masters and the slaves, but his method of adopting that of neither ends up depicting slaves as socially and politically inert. For example, just consider Kolchin's chapter on The American revolution: the way it has been presented makes one believe that the enslaved people did not actually negotiate for freedom but it was sheer circumstance that allowed a large number to achieve freedom in the North and Upper South. The primary focus is on states enacting laws facilitating exit from slavery, or on the slackened demand for slaves in Chesapeake due to the tobacco crisis accelerating emancipation, thereby completely ignoring slaves' own political quest for freedom. The sentiment that slaves possessed the ability to negotiate their positions in the plantation economy is never evoked throughout Kolchin's book. Neither is it ever made clear that that they could, and in fact did, attain legitimacy from their masters as credible opponents.

In complete contrast, Berlin's approach of portraying slavery largely from the slave's point of view makes it all the more emphatic and seemingly closer to reality. Indeed, Berlin laments that, too often and for too long, scholars have treated slaves as standing outside history, having no definitive role in the world in which they lived. Berlin explicitly states that the text is an outline of the "making and remaking of slavery with an emphasis on the slave". He

does so by focusing constantly on slaves' agency, initiative, and skill at negotiation. Although slavery was "originally imposed and maintained by violence," Berlin maintains that slave-owners and slaves continually "negotiated and then renegotiated" the terms and conditions of slavery. Berlin is at pains to show how slaves themselves modified the system of plantation slavery they found themselves in and forced planters to deal with them as people rather than just as commodities. He goes to great lengths to clarify that African American bondmen and bondwomen struggled consistently, with whatever tools they had at their disposal, to resist the excessive demands of their masters. The resistance took diverse forms ranging from willful ignorance and dressing unsuitably to running away and rebelling. However, the most common form of resistance involved political maneuvers of continuously "negotiating and renegotiating" with their masters for more "breathing space" and better terms. While slave owners definitely had much more brawn in negotiations, slaves did manage to gain informal rights to form families, practice religion, and acquire property, at different points in history. This fact probably outlines the fundamental difference between Kolchin and Berlin: that Kolchin never fully appreciates how bondservants, despite being disenfranchised, used politics to their benefit. Kolchin rather treats the history of slavery as "what was done to them" and conveniently forgets "what they did for themselves".

Moreover, Kolchin, while never denying its evident brutality, often depicts American antebellum slavery as a benign institution. The paternalistic relationship between slaveholders and slaves that emerged in the wake of the American Revolution is a central idea in Kolchin's thesis. Kolchin believes

that the white, slaveholding class began expressing growing concern for the well-being of their “ people”, resulting in improved material treatment of slaves. This they did only to demonstrate, both to themselves and outside critics, slavery’s basic humaneness. Going through the chapter on antebellum slavery, one often gets the impression that it was laws of economics that created and sustained slavery, and that slaves themselves had come to recognize that they were being coerced for their own sakes. Berlin on the other hand, although not explicitly subscribing to any particular analysis of paternalism, implicitly suggests that the slave economy was so productive, efficient and profitable because of the bondservants’ skills of negotiation. One learns, for example, that planters “ were willing to pay slaves for the additional labor necessary to jump start the cotton economy”. Thus, Berlin implies that although slavery was definitely based on coercion and violence, it was the negotiating abilities of the enslaved ones that engendered such a dynamic economy in the nascent United States.

Indeed, one cannot help but disagree that an institution systemically created on coercion, and fundamentally against the very ideals of capitalism could ever be called benign. The rosy picture of antebellum slaves’ working and living conditions that Kolchin paints, where masters and servants are symbiotically working for each other’s betterment, dismisses one very important detail – the second middle passage. Berlin argues that the “ lightning-like expansion of plantation slavery in the southern interior of the United States” led to profound changes for slaves, of such a magnitude that they constituted a second Middle Passage. While comparison to such herculean proportions could easily be deemed hyperbolic, one cannot deny

that the forced migration of at least a million slaves was an important event in the history of slavery. Indeed, Berlin goes on further to argue that it was this internal slave trade that shredded the paternalist pretension of masters. Thus, Kolchin and Berlin also differ in the presentation of finer details of slavery. As another example, the absence of the mention of white indentured servants in the very beginning of American slavery is particularly conspicuous in Berlin's text, especially when one reads Berlin's book after he/she has digested that of Kolchin's. Another notable difference between the two is Kolchin's occasional references to slavery elsewhere in the world, especially the comparison to Russian serfs. While not directly related to slavery in the United States, one can argue that comparisons were invaluable to the comprehension of slavery in the US.

Both texts are powerful syntheses of the history of slavery in the United States. Both present almost the same history of this institution, differing majorly only in their approaches to the presentation of content. Both books emphasize slavery as being non-static, constantly changing with time, albeit differently in different geographic regions. However, I am of the opinion that my essay does elicit the sentiment that I am perhaps favoring Berlin over Kolchin. Indeed I am. I definitely liked Berlin's approach of mentioning repeatedly that slaves struggled consistently for freedom better than that of Kolchin's. While Kolchin and Berlin both dole out essentially the same history, Berlin's approach of writing largely from the slave's point of view makes it more passionate, real, and enjoyably readable. However, in no way am I implying that Kolchin's work is in any way inferior to that of Berlin. Kolchin's adeptness at describing the transition from white indentured

servitude to racial slavery in the southern colonies and the “flexibility” of seventeenth century race relations was very educating indeed. So was his debate on the meaning of “freedom” for the newly emancipated slaves. Therefore, in conclusion, while both texts were immensely educating, I am perhaps biased towards Berlin because of his ability to make me imagine vividly what the generations of captives must have gone through from importation to emancipation.