Book credits abolitionists for ‘radical, interracial movement’

February 11, 2016

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

“We let it be remembered,” William Lloyd Garrison often proclaimed, “that the man of color has to labor against wind and tide.”

As Garrison’s uncharacteristically understated comment implied, the treatment of African-Americans in the United States, especially the millions of men, women, and children who were slaves, was horrific. It gave rise, of course, to a movement to abolish slavery that became the cornerstone of Civil War emancipation.

In “The Slave’s Cause,” Manisha Sinha, a professor of Afro-American Studies and History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, seeks to give the abolitionists their due.

Drawing on an avalanche of scholarship by American historians since the 1960s as well as newspapers, pamphlets, books, and letters, Sinha argues that the abolitionists, who were caricatured in their own time and for decades after the Civil War as single-minded fanatics who caused a “needless war,” were, in fact, freedom fighters who launched “a radical, interracial movement” that kept “the peculiar institution” of slavery at or near the top of the political agenda in the 1830s, 40s and 50s. They addressed exploitation and disenfranchisement, and “anticipated debates over race, labor and empire.”

Diverse movement

Her book, which traces the history of abolition from the 1600s to the 1860s, documents its international character and demonstrates the central role played by free and enslaved Blacks, is a valuable addition to our understanding of the role of race and racism in America.

Sinha reveals that while abolitionism did have a few prominent supporters, it was a diverse movement, by no means limited to White, middle-class men and women. African-Americans formed its core constituency, she writes, and many full-time activists. While and Black, “could barely make ends meet.” Indeed, most of the signatures on urban abolition petitions came from skilled and unskilled laborers.

Many of them, she adds, were twenty-somethings, representing a new generation. And Sinha indicates that the connection between resistance to slavery, slave revolts, and abolition “was proximate and continuous.”

‘Free labor’ argument

Sinha’s claim that abolitionists also “developed an incipient critique of capitalism,” linked the emancipation of slaves with that of all laboring people, opposed American imperialism, and supported "the liberation of all oppressed peoples," however, is somewhat less convincing.

To be sure, some abolitionists, including Garrison, did on occasion rail against finance capitalists and manufacturers “who grind the face of the poor.” But many others disagreed (endorsing a contractual relationship between employer and employee) and, in any event, Sinha does not make a compelling case that the issue of the exploitation of "free labor" played a prominent role in the movement.

At times, then, Sinha may claim too much for abolitionists. It is a stretch, to cite one additional example, to credit abolitionists for "building legal precendents for modern law stemming from the fugitive slave cases, including the reading to Miranda rights."

That said, “The Slave’s Cause” provides many good reasons to admire the abolitionists. After all, they risked their reputations and at times their lives in a noble, but highly unpopular cause. And, as Sinha reminds us, they "would have been among the first to call for the abolition of racism, and xenophobia, they forcefully advocated government enforcement of voting rights and denounced segregation, debt peonage, and lynching."

And so, it seems appropriate for Sinha to conclude “The Slave’s Cause” by noting that with its commitment to human rights and its call to action, abolition, the first civil rights movement, remains for many Americans a template of social activism, deserving the accolade given to it by W.E.B. Du Bois: “the finest thing in American history.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.