

Long Road to Harpers Ferry

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Long Road to Harpers Ferry

The Rise of the First American Left

Mark A. Lause

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Introduction

The once prominent African American physician James McCune Smith took up the nom de plume of Communipaw from one of the earliest Dutch settlements in Jersey City. Some of the first Europeans in the area of New Amsterdam camped alongside the Hackensack Indians on a peninsula extending into the Hudson River. There, near what became South Cove, Smith envisioned Africans living and laboring alongside native peoples and whites. By the early nineteenth century, the market demands of capital overwhelmed those of the people, and Jersey City had long since obliterated the old settlement.¹ The complex origins of an anticapitalist American Left were inseparably related to a vision beyond that of the “white republic” to the possibilities of a civilization that could value liberty, equality and the willingness of different races to cohabit a place such as Communipaw.

This is a concise history of those origins. Such a work has been needed since I began looking for one half a century ago. The economic collapse of 2008 and the political management of massive bailouts and corporate subsidies created numerous radical critiques of capitalism, particularly among the young. So the time seemed ripe to bring this project to term.

* * *

Historically, conditions predisposed these works to become rather stunted institutional histories of radical organizations. Some of the earlier efforts were predisposed to become the annals of a Teutonic fraternity clinging to its explicit mathematical appreciation of “surplus value,” with little attention to the world moving around it. Not without reason have such preoccupations failed to generate a more powerful and widespread challenge to American capitalism.

This work has a more amorphously “movement” focus. When real rather than aspirational, movements are innately fluid and “move” in differentiated layers based on pace and viscosity. While a movement may have different—even contradictory—effects, several factors dis-

tinguish the core of a movement from the periphery, the most important to me in this work being its dynamic.

Such an approach, of necessity, reflects the fundamental complexities of American civilization and its hierarchies. That civilization, as it now exists, grew from clearly racialized foundations. Shortly after three million residents of Anglo-America attained independence, about 600,000 native peoples lived within the claimed borders, and this fell to less than 340,000 by 1860. Its foundations are no less independent of an "African Holocaust" that seized an estimated 18 to 20 million Africans from their homes from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, of which half a million labored in Revolutionary America, growing by 1860 to nearly four million, the vast majority of which lived as slaves. These harsh realities framed an American understanding of liberty, equality and inclusiveness.

Scholars have reasonably extended Caribbean models to underscore the legal determination of "whiteness." However comparable, conditions on the North American mainland differed significantly from that in the plantations of the Caribbean, where the relatively small population of self-defined "whites" had to cooperate in the subjugation of a massive black majority. The Black Codes from colonial times to the color bars of the nineteenth century represented legal strictures formulated by the rulers and imposed on the entire society.

Then, too, everywhere in the New World experienced "maroons." Some native peoples occupied the least exploitable niches, and large numbers of runaway slaves of both sexes joined them in the swamps, mountains, and other isolated areas. They built homes, raised crops and livestock, organized their defenses, and, provided a place to which others might flee. American slaveholding societies, by their existence, created these "maroons."² Participants included white renegades, intellectually and culturally defined.

These inspired a series of challengers. These included Christian Gottlieb Priber, as well as black leaders such as Cudjoe, Lewis, and "General of the Swamp," who headed their maroon towns in Georgia and North Carolina. For James M. Smith, for example, Communipaw represented a maroon internalized.

One of the most prominent of the antebellum labor radicals borrowed the "comprehensive phrase of a black writer" to describe the exclusions of the society that developed. It had been a white king and his author-

ities who “stole the black man from his land,” took land “from the red men,” and apportioned “the stolen bodies and the stolen land among a few of his own color, to whom he made the remainder of the whites as dependent for the means of existence as were the blacks themselves.”³

The inequalities Euroamerican society imposed upon outsiders reflected the inequalities imposed within. Men remained more likely to immigrate to America and, more so, to head to the frontier, but women constituted nearly half of the two million white residents of the colonies. Almost all women in America remained essentially civic nonentities and, in some cases, little more than domestic slaves. While patriarchal relationships within the family pre-dated capitalism, power turned increasingly on property ownership, custom and law further marginalized half the human race.

More than this, capitalism required the vast majority of the entire people to labor. Conditions on the frontier or in areas characterized by subsistence family farming—especially mountainous districts not conducive to large scale farming—required few hired workers, but the large well-settled commercial farming regions that produced grains in the North or tobacco in the South required a work force beyond the family. The roots of a recognizably modern working class took form in the twenty pre-Revolutionary towns with a population over three thousand and, especially, in the five over ten thousand—Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Newport and Charleston. Such communities needed carpenters, bricklayers and masons for construction or shoemakers, tailors, hatters and others for things to wear. Beyond such artisan crafts, the docks, warehouses, and ships required maritime labor and large numbers of the unskilled as well. Workers and their households accounted for a bit over half the population of the smaller cities and as many as three-quarters of the big cities.

Such mercantile centers became the points of friction between the British Empire and the colonial merchant elite which relied heavily upon the numbers and coherence of working people in the streets. Too, immigrants disproportionately clustered in the large port cities, which mingled numerous Scots and Welsh newcomers and a growing portion tending to be Irish, even as Germans constituted about a third of Pennsylvania. Not surprisingly, many had no great love for the empire, though they found themselves subject to its maritime or military service, the taxes, and the cost of taxes imposed on merchants and employers

passing on their cost. Households, of course, carried this load, including many women struggling to support themselves and their children on their own. So, too, “the market women” prominent in preindustrial bread riots and similar “disorders” reappeared with the “leather aprons” of workingmen in the streets.

Tackling the origins of an American movement against capitalism must recognize the stratifications and ripples in social structures, as they exist in the real world. Indeed, Indians, unpaid black slaves, and the maroons or even women constrained to the spheres of the household superficially existed beyond the developing monetized world around them. To the extent that any of these groups cherished values more important to them than market forces, they could be said to be non-capitalist, if not anti-capitalist. Nevertheless, none of their priorities avoided their ultimate subjugation to the Euroamerican power structure and its economy.

Focusing simply on a structure of “class” read into the very real conflicts between the bosses and workers misses the fundamental unity of a complex process. Although the burdens of empire—and class hierarchies—obviously fell on all those subject to its power, the realization that the weight fell differently on native peoples, Africans, women, immigrants, and workers generally is essential to the project.

So, too, understanding that origins of an American movement against capitalism has to grow from an understanding that transcends the evolution of a vocabulary. Those of and for the “unwashed masses” regularly spoke the language of liberty and equality, using the same words the imperial authorities and colonial elites used. Increasingly, it became clear that those with the wealth and power advocated a liberty to gain more wealth and power, regardless of what it does to other people. They sought a freedom not just to own property, but to buy or sell, acquire or disinvest in that property to best expropriate more of it. Equality acquired a legal meaning that assured access to buying privileges to those with the wealth to do so. On the other hand, this narrow perspective had little meaning for those without the wherewithal to participate, those who embraced a more expansive version of liberty and equality.

Too, the possible impact of such differences turned on one’s definition of community and the obligations of solidarity around that community. Elites generally found themselves rather contented to see

themselves as part of a natural hierarchy, with notions of a community and solidarity turning upon the legitimacy of their authority. Obviously, the emergence of socialist communities, anarchist ideas, cooperatives, trade unions, and political parties challenged this. Over the generations from the Revolution to the Second American Revolution, growing numbers of Americans developed a new realization of what “solidarity” meant . . . or what it had to mean.

Most importantly, the story of how growing numbers of Americans turned against human slavery was ultimately inseparable from how they thought about the prospects of abolishing capitalism as known and practiced in the United States. Read from the inside out, the debate over slavery turned on the argument that economic profitability had priority over people, that the property rights of the owners superseded the most basic human right for those who did not own property.

Obviously, not every person who said something positive about land reform or women’s rights came to articulate radical abolitionist ideas. Nor did all abolitionists generalize their assault on exploitation into matters of gender or class. Nevertheless, the dynamic of events created a common agenda between the core of land reform and early socialism with the more militant, political, egalitarian abolitionism.

This study of that convergence and its impact offers us a recognizable “first American Left.” The first part traces the debate around the standard Revolutionary themes of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” the last of which essentially meant solidarity. The second part traces efforts to build permanent organizations and movements around distinctive versions of those themes, with a focus on the overlapping concerns of radical land reform and abolitionism. The third part discusses the distillation of what looked increasingly like vanguards and cadres.

It might be that keeping to this course within the limits of a readable book may leave much to be desired. No doubt. Rightly understood, though, a study like this is always an invitation to a discussion.

* * *

The execution of this project reflects the fact that my predisposition is to write people into the broad sweep of historical currents. Readers will hopefully find some entertaining eccentrics here—from the “Walking Stewart” through Russell Comstock to Eliphalet Kimball. *Long Road to Harpers Ferry* also casts some deserved light on a number of unappreci-

ated figures, such as Gilbert Vale, James McCune Smith, and Ernestine L. Rose. It also offers a different appreciation of some well known in other contexts, such as John Brown and Susan B. Anthony. In the process, we have hopefully done some posthumous justice to figures often misrepresented in their own day and misunderstood by later scholars, such as George Henry Evans and Hugh Forbes.

This book largely represents an attempt to synthesize earlier work, including my own. Where those secondary works provided them, I took the liberty of not bogging down the manuscript with primary sources. I made exceptions for most direct quotes, and where I was introducing material that was not necessarily previously cited, particularly in the closing chapters of the book.

As in earlier projects, I wish to acknowledge the help of my friend and colleague, Janine Hartman, who has long provided me a second pair of eyes on the manuscript. We have both gotten better at this over the years.

In closing, the book is appearing at this particular time due to the goading of my old friend and comrade, the late William A. Pelz. We had been discussing these sorts of questions for decades, and he finally persuaded me to submit the project to Pluto Press. The last exchange I had with him was my informing him as to its progress, after which he texted his ever-encouraging words. In a matter of days, I was told that he had collapsed with a fatal heart attack and we had lost him. It could hardly be more appropriate than to dedicate this work to Bill.

PART ONE

Working Citizens:
From Ideas to Organization

With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor, while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor.

—Abraham Lincoln, Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, April 18, 1864

Let it not be said in future generations that money was made by the founders of the American States an essential qualification in the rulers of a free people. . . . For they are now planting a seed which will arise with boughs, either extended to shelter the liberty of succeeding ages, or only to skreen the designs of crafty usurpers.

—*The People the Best Governors*, 1776

Liberty: Eighteenth-Century Transatlantic Legacies and Challenges

Since the seventeenth century, the debate among English-speaking peoples over the nature of “liberty” periodically spilled out of the salons of the Enlightenment into the streets and onto the battlefields. When business concerns used what they called their liberty to create scarcities that raised prices, and five hundred Bostonians exercised what they called liberty to turn out with drum and fife to escort four merchants out of the city. Shortly, Abigail Adams reported that when “an eminent, wealthy, stingy merchant” who had refused to sell coffee under six shillings per pound, a hundred or so women descended on his warehouse with their carts and truck, insisting on it. When he snubbed them, one of the women grabbed him by his neck and tossed him into the cart, from which he gave up the keys. The women tipped him into the street, unlocked the warehouse and seized the coffee they wanted. Throughout, “a large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction.”¹ Revolutions for liberty required mobilizing broad social currents with diverse and often conflicting interests and ideas of “liberty.”

In contrast, the owners and rulers of the society translated this diversity of perspectives into the institutionalized standards of a white republic, said to subsume and codify the aspirations of that Revolution. The issues of the War for American Independence and the establishment of a new government of the United States pose a broad range of complex issues, so many of which have become hard to distinguish from the subsequent course of the nation. To understand the process from the inside out—from the bottom up—a serious appreciation of the revolutionary content of the movement and the aspirations of the people should be the starting point. Still, the elites in each of the thirteen colonies would define its specific and often contradictory impact.² The limits on the potential of the Revolution become particularly evident

in considering its reaffirmation of the mass exclusions endemic to the colonial condition.

Revolutionary Stirrings

The Stamp Act in 1765 got the independent craftsmen—and those artisans and laborers rampaging through the cities of British America—chanting “Liberty, property, no stamps!” Though many officials complained of “the mob,” one British official opined that “the inferior people would have been quiet” had their social “betters” not agitated them. He thought that the sailors “are the only People who may be properly Stiled Mob, are entirely at the Command of the Merchants who employ them.” The gentlemen dominated the “Sons of Liberty” which hoped would mobilize the craftsmen and laborers of the port cities where they might block the collection of the taxes. Still, it became quickly obvious that the “mechanics” meant something rather distinct from the merchant princes when they spoke of their “liberty, property.” “What will it avail to secure a nominal independence,” asked one rebel, “if we suffer our property which is the essence of it, to be wrested from us?”³

Once mobilized to resist the Stamp Act, the crowds set a course of their own. The Boston’s Sons relied on Ebenezer Mackintosh, a twenty-eight-year-old cordwainer. The descendant of Scottish rebels and the son of a man so poor he had been “warned out” of several Massachusetts towns, Mackintosh had deep roots in the community as a veteran and a member of the militia leader, the fire company, and the South End gang, which had clubbed its way to victory in the annual “Pope’s Day” brawl the previous November. In August 1765, he led a large crowd from “the Liberty Tree” on the Commons and to the Town House, as planned, but then began a three-day rampage by continuing to the docks where it reduced the half-built warehouse of a local Loyalist to kindling. At Newport, John Webber, a young sailor led a similarly independent rampage, after which the local Sons arrested him only to find the threatening “mob” on their own doorsteps.⁴ The Sons of Liberty learned early that the people they sought to use learned how to act in their own interests.

From his refuge in Boston Harbor, the royal governor warned that once one permitted popular challenges legitimacy, “Necessity will soon

oblige and justify an Insurrection of the Poor against the Rich, those that want the necessaries of Life against those that have them.” “Both employers and the employed,” wrote another, “much to their mutual shame and inconvenience, no longer live together with anything like attachment and cordiality on either side; and the laboring classes, instead of regarding the rich as their guardians, patrons, and benefactors, now look upon them as so many overgrown colossuses, whom it is no demerit to wrong.”⁵ Similar fears moved many resistance leaders to revise their approach to the problem.

It would be the working people of the city that faced down the imperial authorities. On March 5, 1770, British soldiers opened fire on a civilian crowd in Boston. Said to be the first American killed in the Revolution, Crispus Attucks remains a terribly obscure figure, though certainly a man of color. Almost certainly a seaman of mixed African and native background, likely held as a slave until his escape around 1750, after which he went to sea. Attucks stood at the fore of a crowd armed with clubs advancing on redcoats at the Old State House. When the troops opened fire, Attucks and four others died and six were wounded. Many years later, William Cooper Nell and other black abolitionists started the celebration of a “Crispus Attucks Day.”⁶ In the immediate aftermath, both sides pulled back from open conflict.

Yet, “anarchy” of “the mob” unfolded most clearly in the larger Mid-Atlantic cities—Philadelphia and New York—which concentrated them in the most numbers. At the latter, “The mob begin to think and reason,” wrote Gouverneur Morris at New York.⁷ Yet, the British occupied the city early in the war, providing an immediate common enemy that stymied the debate among the revolutionaries about the nature of the liberty for which they contended.

Certainly, some of the resistance embraced the possibilities of a thinking “mob.”⁸ After his training as a physician, Dr. Thomas Young had settled in rural New York, where he faced prosecution in 1756 for declaring Jesus Christ “a knave and a fool.” By then, his travels had already taken him across the state line into Connecticut where he befriended the youthful Ethan Allen. Together they completed a massive tome entitled *Reason the only Oracle of Man*, later more popularly known simply as *Ethan Allen’s Bible*.

Having suspended assumptions about the divine origins of human institutions, men such as Young or Allen anticipated a rational recon-