

WILLIAM L. ANDREWS. *SLAVERY AND CLASS  
IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH: A GENERATION  
OF SLAVE NARRATIVE TESTIMONY 1840-  
1865*. Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. xiv,  
389.

Received 17 March 2022

Accepted 22 March 2022

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In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers  
was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot  
emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.

Karl Marx in *Capital* Vol. 1

The white man is robbed by the slave system, of the just results of his labour [being]  
flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages ... [class  
competition] will, one day array the non-slaveholding white people of the slave states  
against the slave system, and make them the most effective workers against the great  
evil.

Frederick Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*

William L. Andrews's magisterial study of American slave narratives is incisive and authoritative with brilliant close readings of texts from Moses Grandy to Henry Bibb and from James Watkins to Harriet Jacobs. From the obscure texts of Aunt Sally and Old Elizabeth to seminal texts by Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson and Henry 'Box' Brown, this monograph highlights the importance of class to these works. However, despite Karl Marx describing the United States as being key to his formulation of his theories on class, he does not appear once, even as a footnote, in this study. It seems a species of American exceptionalism to ignore his work. For in fact, Marx's theoretical musings in *Capital* and elsewhere are important backdrop to these Narratives as we can see from the similarity of Douglass's quotation (from Andrews's study) to that in *Capital* above and through incidents such as Douglass's interactions with poor white boys whilst working at Baltimore Harbour. Better fed than them, he is able to offer them food bribes to help him learn to read.

His emancipation is (if only in small part) dependent on a cross-racial class solidarity.

Of course, such incidents are not replete throughout these texts but to miss them where they occur means this excellent study is not as complete as it should be. Andrews asserts that "(M)oving beyond a moral critique of the moneyed classes to a more radical analysis of the nexus of racism and capitalism did not engage antebellum African American life writers" (41). Yes, Andrews is right that there is not generally a sustained radical class analysis in these texts; however, a comparative study of black writing that moved beyond American shores to engage with texts such as *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824) by Robert Wedderburn would show radical possibilities in narratives of slavery beyond the American South. Also, Douglass's radicalism abroad particularly in his Scottish and Irish speeches led to his lionisation by working class folk leading to ballads being written in his name and valedictory vernacular texts being written in his support; to one spectator "he seemed a buirdly fellow, ane I shouldna like to hae a tussle wi' aither fesseccally or intellecktually." Such non-American texts and vernacular Transnational responses might be seen to be beyond the scope of the book, but surely footnotes or asides could point to a world beyond the American South and make for a richer discussion.

Despite these reservations, this rich text is to be applauded particularly in its bringing from obscurity many texts from the lower as well as the higher ranks of enslaved workers. Its comprehensiveness means that nuances between different class experiences are brilliantly documented, so that Henry Watson's 1848 narrative is used very effectively to show how "class passing" could be as important as "racial passing" in leading to emancipation for some narrators. Also, detailed here are the problematics of a kind of Gramscian hegemony that means enslaved peoples are encouraged to mimic the manners and attitudes of their masters in their relations to their fellow slaves to show their greater respectability. In their slave narratives both Greensbury Offley and Francis Frederic detail incidents where they try "to be respectable by doing like the rich" to their subsequent chagrin. It is a delight to discover the wealth of material across these previously largely ignored minor narratives and this is one of the great strengths of the book.

There are also excellent discussions about the importance of class hierarchies among slaves and the privileges obtained through them that help to fully explicate troubling aspects of many of these

narratives in the way they talk about those trapped and degraded by the institution of slavery into a kind of lumpen state. In a subtle, multi-layered and brilliantly nuanced discussion of Harriet Jacobs' narrative, Andrews describes how the elevated class position of her grandmother Molly Horniblow protects them all from the worst excesses of racial prejudice and violence whilst exemplifying Horniblow's own class prejudices.

Such nuanced discussions about class positions in slave narratives make this book an essential read for all those who want to understand the complexities of Southern slave society and the contribution of these narrators to revelatory texts. An especially compelling discussion of Douglass's depiction of the overseer Austin Gore's as a "class-hybrid and class mobile social phenomenon in the slaveholding South" (203) shows Douglass moving in his *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) to a less Manichean view of social class amongst white Southerners than in his earlier *Narrative* (1845). This discussion could have been added to by an investigation of Douglass's self-fashioning in the many photographic portraits taken in this period which show his own class hybridity and mobility; however, Andrews is intent on making this a purely textual study which is a shame as a more determinedly interdisciplinary approach would have enabled him to form a fuller picture of some of his subjects whose self-fashioning moved beyond the merely textual. Andrews's contention that the "slave narrators' awareness of class as both a prop for and a potential weapon against entrenched white power played an important role in their narratives' overall attack on race-based privilege" (18) is a sound one and he investigates class thoroughly and incisively in this study even if I for one would have liked him to be bolder and less hamstrung by a narrow literary focus.

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