

Book Review of

Free Soil Free Labor Free Men by Eric Foner

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By: Michelle Gentile of Whitman-Hanson Regional High School

Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men by Eric Foner was first published in 1970 and the original version was Foner's doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. It is an essential source to anyone studying the causes of the American Civil War. Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men argues that free labor was economically and socially superior to slave labor and that what made Northern society superior to Southern society was the opportunity given to wage earners to become independent and own property.

Foner's evaluation of political ideology in the decades leading up to the war exposes the reasons why the North was willing to go to war with the South. The book's focus is the creation and growth of the Republican Party and the leading factions of the party with careful analysis of their beliefs on slavery, human rights, and labor. Foner states very early in the book: "...we need badly a full-scale examination of the collapse of the Whig party and formation of the Republican party between 1854 and 1856."

Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men was re-published in 1995 with a new introduction by Foner that reassesses the concept of free labor based on the changes of historiography in those twenty five years. In the introduction, Foner spends a great deal of time explaining the meaning of free labor and its history. He writes of the eventual abolition of slavery in the North as setting the stage for the North becoming the home for "free labor." He says by 1850 the number of wage earners in America exceeded the number of slaves for the first time. Those who supported the notion that free labor was superior to slave labor would argue that slavery was more costly than the payment of wages and that people work harder when it's for their own benefit. Defenders of slavery believed that the free laborer was more oppressed than the slave because of exploitation of the market place. According to Foner's study of the Republican Party in the 1850s, "freedom meant prosperity and slavery retarded economic growth."

Also in this introduction, Foner writes that the idea of “free soil, free labor, free men” did not really apply to most Americans, especially women and blacks. This freedom and economic independence *appealed* to all Americans, but despite this appeal, minorities found it difficult to partake in the prospects of a capitalistic society. For women, opportunities for independence barely existed. For the most part, husbands had control of all aspects of a woman’s life, including any wages she may have earned. Single women had a better chance of making and keeping their wages. The 1800s did have some allowances for single women to earn money and spend it as they pleased. It was a way of escaping the “paternalistic bonds and personal dependence of the household.” For free blacks, freedom and economic independence was hindered by the fact that many whites refused to hire blacks or be served by blacks. This information about minorities was not addressed in the original publication of the book.

The remainder of the introduction explains that the Civil War vindicated the free labor ideology but also revealed the contradictions inherent in the concept itself. “Proclaiming the superiority of free labor was easy; implementing that vision proved more troublesome.” Foner discusses the plans for Reconstruction and the rise of the American Federation of Labor in the 1890s. He ends the introduction with a connection to more recent times. He says that “free labor continues to offer a valuable window on the consequences of capitalism’s expansion and the divergent ways Americans respond to them.”

Foner believes that by studying the ideologies of the North and South on the eve of the Civil War that it is possible to understand the causes and nature of the entire conflict. He criticizes revisionists for “drastically under estimating the social and economic differences and conflicts that divided North and South.” There developed two ideologies: Southerners were insisting on slavery as the very basis of civilized life and Northerners came to view slavery as the

antithesis of the good society. “The most cherished values of the free labor outlook-economic development, social mobility and political democracy-all appeared to be violated in the South.” To Republicans, the South appeared as an “alien and threatening society” whose values were in conflict with the North’s values.

The Republican Party ideology professed the existence of a conspiratorial “Slave Power” which had seized control of the Federal Government. “...the Slave Power’s hold on the federal government would have to be broken.” This Slave Power consisted of the 350,000 or so slaveholders of the South. (1% of the nation’s population and 5% of the South’s) Within the slave states, these men totally dominated political power and social life. “When secession finally came, Republicans insisted that it was the final fruit of a conspiracy which had been germinating for thirty years.”

In chapters four, five and six, Foner examines the different factions of the growing Republican Party; the Radicals, the Moderates and the Conservatives. Radicals considered the Republican Party the culmination of years of anti-slavery effort. They viewed political parties as a means, not as an ends, and they were ready to abandon a party if it would help further the anti-slavery cause. The difference between the radical’s attitude toward the Union, and that of moderate and conservative Republican’s was that for many conservatives, the preservation of the Union was an end in itself, and to maintain it they urged the anti-slavery agitation to be abandoned. But, to the radicals, the Union was a means to an end. The conservatives hoped to use the Republican Party to wrest control of the federal government away from the slaveholders. Moderate and radical Republicans disagreed over the timing of eradicating slavery; whether to use federal power to attack it or wait. Moderates were willing to wait.

When it came time to nominate someone for President in 1960, moderate Republicans believed the nominee must be a man “not so mixed up in the conflicts as to lose the support of the moderate man.” Like other moderates, Abraham Lincoln was unwilling to jeopardize the Union by interfering directly with slavery in the states, but he was convinced that once the spread of slavery had been halted, the long process of its decline would begin.

Conservative and Radical Republicans, ex-Democrats and former Whigs all agreed that slavery was the major issue of the 1850s. The free labor assault upon slavery and Southern society, coupled with the idea that an aggressive Slave Power was threatening the most fundamental values and interests of the free states, hammered the slavery issue home to the Northern public. The sense of difference, of estrangement, and of growing hostility with which Republicans viewed the South, cannot be overemphasized. Southerners believed that slavery would not be permanently safe under a Republican administration. Foner believes secession should be viewed as a total and logical response by the south to the situation which confronted it in the election of Lincoln—logical in the sense that it was the only action consistent with its ideology. In the same way, the Republican’s decision to maintain the Union was inherent in their ideology.

This book is clearly intended for a sophisticated audience that is interested in analysis of pre Civil War politics. It has been used for decades as a textbook and I’m assuming it has been used at the college level or perhaps in Advanced Placement High School courses. The book appealed to me because I teach high school American History beginning with Reconstruction. In order for someone to fully understand the Reconstruction period of American history, they must be familiar

with the causes of the Civil War and the make- up of America in the decades preceding the Civil War. This book has enabled me to learn about this information and that will make me a better teacher for my students of Reconstruction.

If I were able to use this book in class, I would have students use particular excerpts from the book that would show the two different ideologies of the North and the South. Students need to know that what antebellum Americans believed about slavery and race affected their actions about westward expansion and eventually about preservation (or not) of the Union. The question needs to be posed: How could a country go to war with itself? The assignment I would give would be to analyze the excerpts provided to answer that question.

The following are some possible examples of excerpts:

Political anti-slavery was an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North—a dynamic, expanding capitalist society, whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man. (p 11)

When Republicans turned their gaze southward, they encountered a society that seemed to violate all the cherished values of the free labor ideology, and seemed to pose a threat to the very survival of what Republicans called their “free-labor civilization.” (p 39)

In the eyes of many Republicans, the South needed not only to abolish slavery but also to adopt the northern way of life, in order to enter the modern world. (p 54)

The American anti-slavery movement, which began as a moral crusade, eventually found that it would have to turn to politics to achieve its goals. (p 73)

Slavery was not only the symbol but also the real basis of sectional conflict, for it was the foundation of the South’s economy, social structure, aspirations, and ideology. (p 311)

Southerners believed that slavery would not be permanently safe under a Republican administration. (p 315)