Weekly Feedback

In *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, Ira Berlin traces the development of slavery in four different regions of America over the course of the first two hundred years of the institution's existence in the New World. The regions that he covers, include the North, the Chesapeake region, the lowcountry of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, and the lower Mississippi Valley. Berlin's mission is to complicate our understanding of slavery. In order to do this, he focuses on three generations of Americans, which enables him to demonstrate how gradual and sudden changes between masters and slaves evolved over the course of two hundred years. These generations include, the *charter generations*, the *plantation generations*, and the *revolutionary generations*. Berlin takes us on a journey to unveil how these four regions shifted from "societies with slaves" to "slave societies" and back again with the succeeding generations.

During the *charter generation*, there was not a prevalent separation between what it meant to be black and what it meant to be white. Berlin explains that "through the first fifty years of English and African settlement in the Chesapeake, black and white workers lived and worked together in ways that blurred racial lines (3)." This was not solely the case in the Chesapeake region, but was universally true. Part of the reason for this acceptance was because there were not an overwhelming number of blacks in America. This of course changed with the growth of the slave trade and the creation of the *planter generation* in certain regions of the country. In the lowcountry of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, the desire to mass cultivate rice resulted in an increased desire for slaves. As a result, the lowcountry went from having societies with slaves to becoming slave societies. This was because slaves overwhelmingly became the main source for production in the region. The same fate befell the Chesapeake region when they discovered tobacco.

Feeling pressure from the South, the North increased its dependence on slaves during the *plantation generation*, but this was a fleeting fad as the northern states pledged emancipation with the coming of the American Revolution. The *revolutionary generation* fought to rid the North of its last remnants of slavery, but nevertheless, a small amount of bondage continued to exist up to the Civil War. This was especially from holdouts in the Middle Colonies, where slavery was more deeply rooted. In the southern half of the country, the revolutionary ideology of liberty and equality were used to legitimize the continuation of slavery. They argued that "if indeed all men were created equal and some men were slaves…then, perhaps, those who remained in the degraded condition of slaves were not fully men after all (224)."

This manipulation helped to entrench slavery into the southern way of life. As such, it became the responsibility of each citizen to uphold and to stand-up for the right to have slavery. Perhaps non-slave owners in the South accepted slavery with the hope that they would one-day own slaves. This hope may have served as their wicked lust after the American Dream. It must be noted, however, that while the North felt that slavery should be abolished, its citizens still believed that African-Americans were inferior. Berlin goes as far as to argue that blacks had lost status in the North between 1750 and 1850. But possibly the most intriguing analysis and explanation that Berlin makes about the history of slavery is that whites believed all along that blacks were equal to whites. This would mean that blacks were demeaned in order to elevate and give more importance to whites. Overall, this is a sound conclusion to a meticulously researched, yet well-flowing social history of how much power and status blacks were given in four regions of the country at different points in time during the first two hundred years of slavery in America.