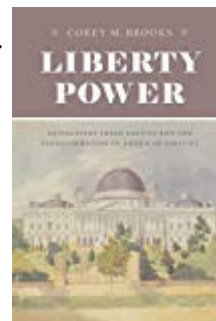
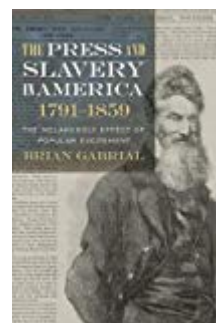


Corey M. Brooks. *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics.* American Beginnings, 1500-1900 Series. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2016. 336 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-30728-2.



Brian Gabriel. *The Press and Slavery in America, 1791-1859: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016. 256 pp. \$49.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61117-603-2.



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In reactionary times, the history of antislavery activism offers guidance and inspiration. Never merely a stain on the American escutcheon, slavery was entrenched in the nation's political system, embedded in its dominant culture, and enmeshed in its economy. Then it was destroyed. There is much left to be written about how this happened, and recent contributions by Corey M. Brooks and Brian Gabriel offer important insights. In particular, both authors illuminate how enslaved people and their allies forced obstinate contemporaries to talk about slavery at all. Slavery's fire-eating champions and lukewarm apologists sought to shield the peculiar institution from

attack by silencing its critics and suppressing public debate. Brooks and Gabriel explore how activists overcame these obstacles. Abolitionists exerted an influence far out of proportion to their numbers, in part by convincing "mainstream" audiences that their own freedoms, as well as those of a marginalized minority, were at stake.

In *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics*, Brooks creatively addresses a venerable question: what was the relationship between abolitionist activity and the coming of the Civil War? A century ago, most writers accepted that abolitionists propelled the nation toward disunion. Some

hailed abolitionists as heroes; others denounced them as villains; all considered them important. As later scholars delved into the intricacies of antebellum party politics, however, they relegated abolitionists to the margins, while students of abolitionism increasingly focused on their subjects' motivations rather than the fruits of their labors. Brooks deftly reconnects these strands of scholarship. He argues convincingly that abolitionists forced slavery into the foreground of mainstream American politics, reorienting debate so that the conflict between proslavery and antislavery partisans became truly irrepressible. Far from being noble but naïve ideologues, Brooks's political abolitionists were adept strategists who knew that disciplined factions of any size could wield real power. The key to their success was third-party politics. Convinced that the Democratic and Whig parties were irreversibly yoked to the planter class, abolitionists used the Liberty Party, Free Soil Party, and, ultimately, the Republican Party to shoulder their way into the political arena. "Driven by intense moral animus against slavery," Brooks writes, "political abolitionists, despite their small numbers, skillfully employed third-party activism to reorder a political system designed to muffle any such challenge. In the process, they planted the seeds of Lincoln's Republican Party and ultimately emancipation" (p. 2).

Brooks demonstrates political history's vitality by using traditional methods to craft a compellingly original narrative of abolitionist activism from the 1830s to the Civil War. Drawing on editorials, correspondence, and congressional debates, Brooks traces how abolitionists turned third parties into agents of liberation. Crucially, they recognized that moral fervor was not enough. What they needed was an argument that could attract a diverse following; they found it in the Slave Power thesis. Brooks shows that this concept, often attributed to moderate critics of slaveholders' disproportionate influence in the federal government, was developed in the 1830s

by abolitionists, who used it not only to denounce proslavery policies like the congressional gag on antislavery petitions but also to excoriate Whigs and Democrats for truckling to slaveholders. Only a new party of freedom could loosen the Slave Power's political stranglehold. This, abolitionists believed, would have emancipatory consequences; it would denationalize slavery by withholding federal support, and it would die.

From the formation of the Liberty Party in 1840 onward, political abolitionists relied on unglamorous but effective tactics to realize this radical dream. They used small voting blocs to throw local and state elections to antislavery candidates—or to produce political gridlock in places where aspirants needed a majority, not a plurality, to win. They forged alliances with major-party luminaries, like John Quincy Adams, who were willing to defy the Slave Power in Congress. They backed their own candidates whose parliamentary prowess could shove slavery into the political limelight. Ultimately, they built larger coalitions, including the Free Soil Party in 1848 and the Republican Party after 1854, which recruited moderates but nevertheless remained devoted to beating the Slave Power and denationalizing slavery. Brooks charts his protagonists' progress in five interludes, each focused on a different contest over the Speaker of the House. Early defeats stung but taught valuable lessons: antislavery Whigs' willingness to vote for a proslavery Speaker in 1839 dramatized the Slave Power's insidious influence but also showed how unified voting blocs could win. When Republicans elevated Nathaniel P. Banks to the Speakership in 1856, they beat slaveholders at their own game. Emphasizing continuity between the successive third parties, Brooks underscores the comparably moderate Republican Party's radical core.

Brooks covers ground that will be familiar to many scholars of antislavery activism, antebellum politics, and Civil War causation. The political salience of the Slave Power argument has been

elucidated by Russel B. Nye (*Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy, 1830-1860* [1949]) and Leonard L. Richards (*The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* [2000]). The early histories of the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican parties have been ably documented.[1] James Oakes has highlighted Republicans' plan to denationalize slavery in *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (2013) and *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (2014). But by weaving these stories together in one thoroughly researched and well-written volume, Brooks has made an immensely important contribution to the scholarship on abolitionism and the origins of the Civil War. Abolitionists were not mere "freedom shriekers." Republicans offered more than watered-down critiques of slavery's expansion. The Slave Power thesis transcended gripes about the number of Virginia-born presidents. The lesson is clear: when idealists dive into the rough-and-tumble of partisan politics, they can protect and extend freedom.

Of course, politics is not limited to oratory and deal making, and not all conflicts are resolved at the ballot box. In *The Press and Slavery in America 1791-1859: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement*, Gabriel analyzes the political fallout of the much grittier resistance waged by enslaved people and their allies. Brooks's central figures forced their opponents to debate slavery by giving speeches and casting votes. Gabriel's subjects provoked discussion of race, slavery, and freedom by fighting and dying.

Gabriel divides his book into two parts. In part 1, he briefly recounts the events and newspaper coverage of six uprisings: the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), Gabriel Prosser's conspiracy (1800), the German Coast Revolt in Louisiana (1811), Denmark Vesey's conspiracy (1822), Nat Turner's rebellion (1831), and John Brown's foray in Harper's Ferry (1859). Along the way, he also

documents the growth of the United States from a postcolonial republic into a continental empire and the simultaneous transformation of the American newspaper from an elite luxury into a popular industry, through which far-flung correspondents could directly address thousands of readers back home. The handling of these momentous issues is terse but adequate to the book's purpose, despite some nagging errors: the US government is described as being less than ten years old in 1800; the Wilmot Proviso and the Sack of Lawrence are misdated; and states' rights (the much-debated reserved powers of the states, often used as a political battle cry) are conflated with proslavery ideology (a web of economic, pseudoscientific, theological, political, and sociological arguments about the proper relationship between members of ostensibly disparate races and classes).

The book hits its stride in part 2, in which Gabriel explores discourses that shaped newspaper coverage of slave revolts, particularly the Prosser, Vesey, Turner, and Brown episodes. He is especially good at showing how slaveholders selfishly distorted these discourses in order to enlist nonslaveholding whites in the defense of slavery. The Slave Power's fingers grasped the journalist's pen. By defining enslaved rebels and their white allies as enemies of the state, proslavery editorialists channeled patriotism into preserving the security and property of an entrenched elite. By characterizing antislavery revolutionaries as religious fanatics, newspaper correspondents maintained the fiction that slaves were ordinarily content and docile and demonized those who stirred them to revolt. Early in the nineteenth century, most northern newspapers echoed the southern press, in part because they depended on local reports for information about rebellions. By 1859, however, the press, like the nation itself, had become thoroughly sectionalized, and antislavery editors added a third element to the discourse about slavery: it threatened the stability and values of the whole country. They rebuked proslav-

ery authors' threats of secession and denounced the suppression of the civil liberties—including of free blacks and whites—that followed Brown's execution. Brown himself used the press masterfully, capitalizing on opportunities to spread his message to once-skeptical northerners, much as political abolitionists used crises, such as the Mexican War and Bleeding Kansas, to broadcast their warnings about the Slave Power.

Gabrial's book has much to offer. It illuminates a previously under-explored aspect of the Slave Power's national influence and recasts slave rebellions and conspiracies as moments in which slavery burst onto the stage of American politics, forcing even the most stubborn of moderates to confront slavery's contradictory presence in a liberty-loving republic. Gabrial's analysis of proslavery accounts, which insisted that enslaved rebels lusted after slaughter and rape, thereby eliding their thirst for freedom, is especially insightful. Slave revolts might have exposed the limits of slaveholders' power and the inherent fragility of their society, but they managed to describe these terrifying events in terms that reaffirmed their racist assumptions about blacks' motivations and helped to reconcile slavery with the ideals of the American Revolution. By teasing out important patterns from a mass of evidence culled from dozens of newspapers, Gabrial has clarified the diverse meanings that white Americans attached to the "horrors of Saint-Domingue."

In building an overarching interpretation of the political significance of slave rebellions, however, Gabrial at times draws conclusions at variance with that mountain of evidence. Throughout the book, he returns to the theme of states' rights and the contested role of the federal government, framing the Civil War as a clash between rather timeless "conservative" and "liberal" ideas about federal power. Some readers might find the terminology anachronistic; more important, Gabrial's evidence reveals considerable discussion about race, freedom, slavery, and security, but almost no

systematic debate over federalism. This is not surprising. As Arthur Bestor showed in an extensive 1961 article, states' rights was slaveholders' ace in the hole: they saved it to justify secession if and when the time came. Up until 1861, however, they demanded, and received, protection from a federal government empowered to seize Mexican territory, recover fugitive slaves, and, not coincidentally, suppress slave revolts.[2] White Virginians did not bat an eye when US Marines trod the Old Dominion's sacred soil to capture Brown. By investigating how race and racism have framed popular distinctions between proper and improper uses of government power—between, say, "law and order" and "federal overreach"—future scholars might build on Gabrial's illuminating evidence to explore the complexities and contradictions of American political thought in the nineteenth century, and undoubtedly in the twenty-first as well.

Notes

[1]. Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009); Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); John Mayfield, *Rehearsal for Republicanism: Free Soil and the Politics of Antislavery* (Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1980); and Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[2]. Arthur Bestor, "State Sovereignty and Slavery: A Reinterpretation of Proslavery Constitutional Doctrine, 1846-1860," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 117-180.

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