

The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation. *By Seymour Drescher*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. ix + 307 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables. \$Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN 0-195-09346-1.

Reviewed by Pamela Scully

In this lively intellectual history, Seymour Drescher examines the importance of social-scientific arguments to the debates about British abolition and slave emancipation. Drescher argues that for much of the era of the Mighty Experiment, from the 1770s through the 1830s, neither abolitionists nor proslavery activists, nor in fact leading theorists such as Adam Smith, put much stock in the inherent profitability of free labor over slave labor.

The Mighty Experiment is divided into thirteen chapters that are organized chronologically. It starts with an examination of the meaning of the slave colonies within European ideologies and practices of labor. Drescher demonstrates that, from fairly early on, a bifurcation occurred between the tendency of Europe to adopt free labor, or varieties thereof, and the increasing reliance of the Atlantic colonies on slave labor. He argues that Europeans naturalized this divergence of experiences of bondage through arguments about climate and demographic necessity. The second through the fifth chapters concentrate on the ambiguous legacies of Smith to the discourse on slavery and antislavery. From Chapter Six on, Drescher turns from theoretical experiments with the idea of free labor to various practical experiments, such as Sierra Leone, Haiti, and various smaller blueprints carried out in the Caribbean. The book's concluding six chapters examine the move toward emancipation in 1834, apprenticeship from 1834 to 1838, and its aftermath.

What the book does, it does very well. Drescher deftly covers developments in the Caribbean, Britain, and India, and considers transitions from slavery to postslavery in Mauritius. His interpretation of how the antislavery movement negotiated (and often tried to ignore) the fact that some of the most profitable areas of the British empire were rooted in slaveholding is particularly nuanced. The earlier chapters, where Drescher leads the reader through Smith's ideas of political economy and elucidates Thomas Malthus's

concepts of demography, are a pleasure to read. Drescher demonstrates that, for much of its history, leaders of the antislavery movement were wary of challenging slavery purely on economic grounds. In the wake of the failure of the Sierra Leone project in the early 1800s and the perceived threat of an independent Haiti to the stability of regimes in the Caribbean, antislavery activists downplayed arguments about the economic superiority of free-wage labor over slave labor. Drescher argues that, in the final analysis, neither metropolitan economists nor “transatlantic economies” (p. 236) had much influence on abolition. In this respect, Drescher’s work supports both his own earlier arguments about the “econocide” of abolition and David Brion Davis’s now classic argument that antislavery was, in the end, more an aspect of a moral transformation of ideas of self and humanity than it was a revolution calculated on profit.

In a way, then, this book is the history of a relationship that never really got underway. Major economists gave short shrift to combating slavery. Drescher shows clearly that intellectuals like Malthus were strikingly passive about, or at the very least disinterested in, one of the central moral problems of their day. How different would the picture look if Drescher had extended his analysis to include the views of British women and of enslaved men and women? (See *A Narrative of Events, since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*, edited by Diana Paton, 2001.) Drescher concentrates on metropolitan debates as well as on key economic texts of the era. In this respect, he takes intellectual history as a self-evident realm: that is (white) men discussing big ideas in public. How, too, might the intellectual history of antislavery’s use or abuse of economics appear if one understood practice as a type of theoretical engagement? For example, one might see the lived experiences of slaves as an intellectual response and critique of slavery. One could interpret former slaves’ refusal to work on plantations as economic calculations cast within moral frames that were similar to those constructed by abolitionists: that is, for slaves, too, the economic bottom line of profit was not perhaps the overriding motivation for being free. It would have been exciting to see Drescher address both sides of the slave–free divide.

A final reservation. The cover of the book displays a wonderful picture of emancipation by Samuel Riven, dated August 1834. It shows a slave man rising free from his chains. To his right, a woman sits on a rock holding her baby in the air, her

figure shielded by the raised right arm of the man. On the ground to his left, a girl looks at him with reverence while behind him two young men actively break the chains of slavery. This contemporary picture demonstrates the significance of ideas about the capacities males and females offered to the project of emancipation. Yet Drescher does not attend to gender at all. Black men are liberated into freedom (the sun shines down from the heavens behind the central figure), and black women and children are liberated into the “protective” paternalism of the nuclear family. Historians have charted the ways in which stereotypical understandings of gender in contract and liberty limited emancipation. (See, for example, Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation*, 1998.) The Mighty Experiment was a new approach to labor, but its outlook on the sexes was strikingly conservative. (See Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853*, 1997.) To what extent were the economists, antislavery activists, and proslavery defenders, whom Drescher so engagingly documents, in agreement about the subordination of women? And how might such agreement on gender relations have shaped their intellectual debates on questions of free labor?

Drescher’s *The Mighty Experiment* is a masterful history. It raises excellent questions about the relation of academic work to practical politics, charts changing ideas about profit, freedom, and labor across a big time span, and is beautifully written. By tackling questions of gender and by framing its theme a bit more broadly, the book would have allowed slaves and women activists also to contribute to the intellectual history of the Mighty Experiment.

Pamela Scully is assistant professor of history at Denison University. Her most recent publication is “White Maternity and Black Infancy: The Rhetoric of Race in the South African Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1870–1930,” in Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race, edited by Ian Fletcher, Laura Mayhall, and Philippa Levine (2000). Two more books are forthcoming: Race and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective, and Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World (edited with Diana Paton).

