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Slavery in United States Survey Textbooks

Peter Kolchin

I have taught the first half of the United States history survey course some fifteen times, during a teaching career that has covered almost thirty years at four different state universities. I have assigned several different textbooks in these classes, never with total satisfaction. As the number of textbooks has proliferated, it has become more difficult to assess their relative quality. Students seem to dislike them all: whichever I assign, they complain that it is boring and fact-laden, and (I suspect) they read it only sporadically. Although tempted to dispense with a textbook altogether and to rely only on the primary documents that I also assign, I feel that students need one—and that I too need one, so that I can be selective and interpretive in lecture without worrying that the students are missing important parts of the national narrative. I therefore welcomed the invitation by the editors of the “Textbooks and Teaching” section of the *Journal of American History* to examine the treatment of slavery in survey texts, as a way to inform myself better about the relative merits of a growing number of competing works, each of which is advertised by its publisher’s representative as the best, most up-to-date, and most user-friendly volume available.

In this essay, I sample eight widely used college-level textbooks, in all cases the most recent edition available.¹ The sample does not include every textbook or even every widely used textbook, but it represents a broad cross section of the volumes currently available to college instructors. The books vary in focus, with some stressing political narrative and others social trends. They also vary in the student level at which they are pitched, their interpretive sophistication, the number of authors (which ranges from two to six), and the price (one volume is substantially less expensive than the others).² My goal is not to provide a precise grade for each textbook, but to see, first, how they are doing collectively in presenting a subject that historians have subjected to extensive reinterpretation, second, how they compare with each other—in coverage, approach, interpretation, and organization—and,

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¹ Because most textbooks are revised every three or four years, I have excluded those whose most recent edition appeared before 1994. Of the sampled volumes, 2 appeared in 1994, 3 in 1996, and 3 in 1997. I have looked only at the first volume of the full paperback version, not the condensed volume offered as an alternative.

² George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 4th ed. (New York, 1996), I. Tindall and Shi’s text costs \$27.95; the other texts range in price from \$40 to \$49.

third, which among them are most useful. Although such an exercise inevitably involves subjective judgments, I am less concerned with whether a book agrees with my interpretation of slavery than with such questions as whether its coverage is balanced and clear and its bibliography is usable and up-to-date.

Let me begin by looking at how much attention the textbooks devote to slavery. In considering this question, it is useful to distinguish between slavery narrowly defined and slavery broadly defined (hereafter abbreviated "slavery-n" and "slavery-b"). The first, which is fairly straightforward, includes slavery as a system; the condition, lives, and interaction of slaves and masters; and slave culture and slave resistance. The second is an expanded and somewhat amorphous category that includes—in addition to the narrowly defined items—topics closely connected to slavery: for example, indentured servitude and the emergence of forced labor in colonial America; the impact of slavery on the southern economy and southern social structure; slavery as a political issue, including the abolition and Free-Soil movements and the struggle over the western territories; the postemancipation reconstruction of southern life. Because it was clear that the textbooks' attention to slavery, narrowly or broadly defined, would not be constant over the time periods covered, I divided American history to 1877 into four rough chronological periods: colonial (to 1760), revolutionary-era (1760–1815), antebellum (1816–1860), and Civil War-era (1861–1877).

Some common trends are quickly evident. (See tables 1–3.) Although by definition, slavery-b received more attention than slavery-n, the extent of the disparity is striking: the eight volumes devoted from one-fifth to one-quarter of their overall space to the former, but only 2 to 7 percent to the latter. Clearly, slavery as an *issue* in American history looms much larger in these textbooks than slavery itself.³

All the textbooks give significantly more attention to slavery-b in the antebellum and Civil War than in the colonial and revolutionary eras. Indeed, if the antebellum and Civil War eras are considered as a unit, every textbook devoted at least one-third of its space to the subject, and the average share for the eight volumes was 37 percent. By contrast, their average for the colonial and revolutionary eras combined was 10 percent, and none of the texts reached the 15 percent mark. (See table 3.) There is good reason for the increased attention to slavery-b in the antebellum and Civil War years, when slavery became the central issue in national politics, but the paucity of space allotted to the subject in the revolutionary era—under 8 percent in all cases—is surprising since the nature of freedom was a central issue to the revolutionary generation. In ignoring slavery, I think, the texts miss a major opportunity to come to grips with the meaning of the American Revolution.

If the texts slight slavery-b in the revolutionary era, they give virtually *no* atten-

³ Because it is awkward to break page length into fractions smaller than one, figures are rough approximations; all percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.

Table 1
Coverage of Slavery, Narrowly Defined, in Selected Textbooks

<i>Textbooks</i>	<i>Percentage of Pages on Slavery by Era</i>				
	<i>Colonial</i>	<i>Revolu- tionary</i>	<i>Antebellum</i>	<i>Civil War</i>	<i>Total Period c. 1400-1877</i>
Boyer et al.	8	1	7	1	5
Davidson et al.	8	3	8	1	5
Faragher et al.	16	0	7	1	7
Henretta et al.	5	3	6	1	4
Martin et al.	3	0	5	0	2
Murrin et al.	2	5	4	1	3
Norton et al.	11	1	6	0	5
Tindall and Shi	4	1	4	0	3

NOTE: This table lists textbooks alphabetically by the first author. For bibliographical information, see "Textbooks Reviewed" at the end of this article.

Table 2
Coverage of Slavery, Broadly Defined, in Selected Textbooks

<i>Textbooks</i>	<i>Percentage of Pages on Slavery by Era</i>				
	<i>Colonial</i>	<i>Revolu- tionary</i>	<i>Antebellum</i>	<i>Civil War</i>	<i>Total Period c. 1400-1877</i>
Boyer et al.	14	6	36	47	25
Davidson et al.	19	5	43	36	25
Faragher et al.	21	3	36	46	25
Henretta et al.	18	7	28	46	21
Martin et al.	10	5	29	45	20
Murrin et al.	8	7	37	39	22
Norton et al.	18	6	41	49	26
Tindall and Shi	6	3	33	38	19

NOTE: This table lists textbooks alphabetically by the first author. For bibliographical information, see "Textbooks Reviewed" at the end of this article.

tion to slavery-n in either the revolutionary or the Civil War era.⁴ (The major exception here is *Liberty, Equality, Power* by John M. Murrin and others, which places in revolutionary-era chapters material covered earlier in most texts.⁵ Although

⁴ For the Civil War period, figures are depressed by the automatic exclusion of slavery narrowly defined from postemancipation history (since slavery no longer existed); the low numbers for this period indicate inattention to slavery during the Civil War, not inattention to blacks during Reconstruction.

⁵ For convenience, after the first mention, each book is referred to in the text by its first author's surname; thus, Paul S. Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People*, 3d ed. (2 vols., Lexington, Mass., 1996) is referred to as Boyer.

Table 3
 Coverage of Slavery, Broadly Defined, in Selected Textbooks by Combined Eras

<i>Textbooks</i>	<i>Percentage of Pages on Slavery</i>	
	<i>Colonial–Revolutionary</i>	<i>Antebellum–Civil War</i>
Boyer et al.	10	39
Davidson et al.	11	40
Faragher et al.	13	38
Henretta et al.	12	33
Martin et al.	7	33
Murrin et al.	8	38
Norton et al.	11	44
Tindall and Shi	5	34

NOTE: This table lists textbooks alphabetically by the first author. For bibliographical information, see "Textbooks Reviewed" at the end of this article.

Murrin devotes more attention than the other volumes to slavery in the revolutionary era, it gives less attention than the others to slavery in the colonial era.) The lack of attention to slavery in those eras is striking and troubling, because in both slavery changed under the pressure of events, and in both—especially the Civil War era—slavery and slaves profoundly influenced the outcome of events. Ignoring or deemphasizing the interplay between slavery and the nation's two revolutionary wars not only ghettoizes and trivializes the history of slavery but also implies a static approach, in which slavery functions largely divorced from "real" history and exists, largely unchanged, until abolished from without. That is a different story from the one that historians of slavery have been telling during the past generation.

Despite these common trends in covering slavery, the eight texts display variations worth noting. (a) In covering slavery in the colonial period, the texts fall into two broad blocs, with those by Paul S. Boyer, James West Davidson, John Mack Faragher, and Mary Beth Norton and their coauthors devoting about one-quarter and those by James A. Henretta, James Kirby Martin, John M. Murrin, and George Brown Tindall and their coauthors about one-fifth of their pages to the subject. As will become evident, however, there is not always a correlation between the number of pages devoted to slavery and the quality of the coverage. (b) Davidson, Faragher, Henretta, and Norton give substantially more attention than the other texts to slavery in the colonial period. (c) In covering slavery in the antebellum period, the texts fall into three groups, with one volume (Faragher) allotting 7 percent of its pages to the subject, four (Boyer, Davidson, Henretta, and Norton) 4 to 5 percent, and three (Martin, Murrin, and Tindall) 2 to 3 percent. (d) Four texts—Boyer, Faragher, Norton, and Tindall—give more attention to slavery in the colonial than in the antebellum period, whereas the other four give heavier weight to antebellum slavery. (e) Some volumes concentrate their attention to slavery in whole chapters—especially in the antebellum period—whereas others provide more dispersed coverage. At one extreme is Faragher,

which confines its treatment of slavery almost entirely to two substantial chapters, one covering colonial and the other antebellum developments. At the other is Murrin, which, attempting to integrate slavery into the mainstream of American history, provides a highly scattered and therefore (as I will suggest below) problematical treatment.

In manner of presentation, the texts share common traits while also displaying significant variations. Most fully participate in the current trend to accentuate visual communication; of the eight, only the low-cost *America* by George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi resists the call to elaborate graphic displays and sharply limits its use of charts, graphs, maps, and illustrations, confining even these to black and white. (The illustrations are so small and obscure that I think Tindall would be better off eliminating them and focusing on the narrative.) Most of the volumes are especially strong in their illustrations and maps (at times the *same* maps); some — most notably Boyer, Faragher, and Martin — have helpful graphs illustrating basic (for example, demographic) trends.

All the texts could do more to provide simple statistical tables designed to drive home basic points to students who are often almost totally lacking in numeracy. (In this respect, Faragher is the best of the lot.) For example, year after year, most of my students have trouble understanding that even though the great majority of antebellum slaveholders owned fewer than ten slaves each, about three-quarters of the slaves belonged to masters with ten or more slaves. Even though I spend several minutes demonstrating this concentration of ownership on the blackboard, many students reveal on exams that they remain confused over a point that should be readily grasped by an eighth-grader. Clearly presented statistics showing the size of holdings, numbers of slave owners and slaves, regional variations within the South, and comparisons between the United States and other New World slave societies would help students understand points that some authors may mistakenly believe are self-evident.

All the textbooks provide students interested in additional reading with bibliographies, which fall into two basic types. Three of the volumes (Henretta, Murrin, and Tindall) provide slightly annotated lists of recommended readings at the end of each chapter; Norton, in a variation on this type, provides an unannotated list. The other four volumes (Boyer, Faragher, Davidson, and Martin) offer two-tiered bibliographies: a short, annotated list of highly recommended books at the end of each chapter and a longer list, at the end of the chapter or the book, of additional recommended readings. I believe that the second of the two bibliographic types is more useful to most students, for whom lists of dozens of additional volumes are often simply confusing.

The bibliographies vary in content as well as format. All include the important revisionist works published in the 1970s that have become part of the canon on slavery. They differ, however, in how extensive, up-to-date, and idiosyncratic their bibliographical recommendations are. Overall, Martin's bibliography strikes me as

the best, followed by those of Davidson and Faragher; significantly, all three are two-tiered. The least useful bibliographies (neither of which is two-tiered) are in Norton, which throws a bewildering listing at students, and Murrin, which is difficult to use because its listings on slavery, like its treatment of the subject, are so scattered.

Despite the multiple readings and revisions to which these texts have been subjected, most contain a surprising number of errors. Some are trivial. Examples include calling Solomon Northup "Northrup" (Martin), referring to Frederick Law Olmsted as "Olmstead" (Murrin), misspelling the first name of the historian Phillip Shaw Paludan as "Philip" (Faragher), and listing the *Freedom* documentary series as one volume, published in 1984, rather than part of an ongoing documentary collection with four volumes published so far (Norton). Others represent statements that, while technically correct, are misleading. Davidson, for example, suggests that "by 1820 the majority of U.S. slaves were native born," whereas the majority mark had been reached about one hundred years earlier, and well over four-fifths of the slaves were American-born by 1820. Similarly, Martin notes that George Washington provided for the posthumous freeing of his slaves, but the book fails to add that Washington's more numerous "dower" slaves, acquired when he married Martha Custis, were *not* manumitted and that even his own slaves were to be freed only after Martha's death.⁶

More serious are errors that will confuse students or that reflect a confused understanding. Thus, Faragher erroneously puts life expectancy in 1850 at "25.5 years for white people and 21.4 years for African Americans," and Martin, although correctly noting the white life expectancy of "40 to 43 years," puts the figure for slaves at "just 21 or 22 years." (Most estimates put the life expectancy of slaves in the range of 30 to 33 years.) A graph in Henretta and a map in Faragher incorrectly indicate that 39 percent of Virginia's population in 1860 consisted of slaves (the correct figure is 31 percent), evidently because they exclude the population of what later became West Virginia.⁷ Henretta asserts that "the legal status of slaves remained unchanged in the antebellum South," when in fact state laws on slavery changed

⁶ James Kirby Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples: A Mosaic in the Making*, 3d ed. (2 vols., New York, 1997), I, 401; John M. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People* (2 vols., Fort Worth, 1996), I, 334, 648; John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 2d ed. (2 vols., Upper Saddle River, 1997), I, 510; Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, 4th ed. (2 vols., Boston, 1994), I, 496; James West Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic*, 2d ed. (2 vols., New York, 1994), I, 472; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 204.

⁷ Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 319; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 402; James A. Henretta et al., *America's History*, 3d ed. (2 vols., New York, 1997), I, 386; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 334. In 1860, Virginia contained 490,865 slaves in a total population of 1,596,318 (or 30.7%); the state's black population (slave and free), totaled 548,907 (34.4%). Excluding the population of what later became West Virginia, there were 472,494 slaves in a total population of 1,219,630 (38.7%). It is easy to make the kind of mistake that appears in the Henretta and Faragher texts, because statistical compilations are inconsistent in their treatment of West Virginia. One volume, for example, "excludes the area later set off as West Virginia" from Virginia's 1860 figures for total and for slave populations, but "includes the area later set off as West Virginia" in columns indicating Virginia's black and white populations; see Donald B. Dodd and Wynelle S. Dodd, *Historical Statistics of the South, 1790-1970* (University, Ala., 1973), 58, 60, 62, 64.

continually and differed from one another. Boyer declares that “only three organized rebellions occurred in the Old South”; that number includes two conspiracies (Gabriel Prosser’s and Denmark Vesey’s) that hardly qualify as rebellions, since they were nipped in the bud before they occurred, and omits the 1811 revolt in Louisiana that by anyone’s standards should count as a rebellion. The same textbook suggests that “out of millions of slaves, probably fewer than a thousand escaped to the North,” without indicating that this thousand was *per year*. Faragher asserts that the constitutional compromise on congressional representation provided for “counting all of the white population and three-fifths of the black people,” whereas it provided for counting all of the *free* population and three-fifths of *slaves* (“other persons”). The same textbook proclaims that antebellum state legislatures passed “stringent laws forbidding slaves to learn how to read,” whereas those laws, which as Janet Duitsman Cornelius has shown were haphazard and usually ineffective, typically criminalized the behavior not of slaves learning how to read, but of free people teaching slaves how to read.⁸

None of these errors renders a textbook unsuitable. But they are surprising, given the number of people involved in putting together these volumes. Perhaps it is worth noting that virtually none of the textbook authors is known primarily as an expert on slavery. (The one exception is Paul D. Escott, a coauthor of *A People and a Nation*, who has written a thoughtful study of the Federal Writers’ Project slave interviews; Escott did not, however, write the textbook’s section on antebellum slavery.)⁹

The most important considerations in evaluating the textbooks’ treatment of slavery are how well they have assimilated the enormous body of research that during the past thirty years has transformed our understanding of American slavery and how well they convey the complex reality of that slavery to college students. (Although I am concerned with the texts’ treatment of slavery in all four chronological periods, my focus in this section, for comparative purposes, is on antebellum slavery.)

Differences in interpretation and emphasis are widespread. Norton and Martin, for example, stress African survivals and “contributions” to black American culture, whereas Davidson argues that in mainland North America slaves quickly became separated from their African traditions and developed a new, African American culture. Differences are even more evident in the treatment of slave resistance. Norton and Martin emphasize slave rebelliousness. Without amplification or explanation, Martin notes that “one scholar” — presumably Herbert Aptheker — “has identified more than 200 instances of attempted insurrection or rumors of slave resistance between the seventeenth century and the Civil War,” leaving the reader with a vague

⁸ Henretta et al., *America’s History*, I, 388; Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, I, 388–89; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 334–35. Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *“When I Can Read My Title Clear”: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C., 1991).

⁹ Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979).

impression of a virtually continuous state of armed revolt. By contrast, Boyer, Davidson, Henretta, Murrin, and Tindall play down armed rebellion. Faragher offers an intelligent explanation of why successful flight from slavery was confined primarily to the upper South. But when it comes to rebellion, the book simply describes the "big three" (Prosser's, Vesey's, and Nat Turner's) without generalization. Overall, the texts' discussions of slave resistance are somewhat disappointing because they fail to come to grips adequately with its meaning, significance, and context.¹⁰

The volumes also vary in the sophistication with which they depict the complexity and variability of American slavery. For example, whereas Tindall simply asserts that among slaves "the preferred jobs were those of household servants and skilled workers" without mentioning the ambiguities of such "privileged" work, Faragher provides a nuanced description of house service, noting the "constant presence of white people" and the pressure "to act grateful and ingratiating." Norton and Martin stress the harshness of slave treatment, although Martin trivializes this harshness by focusing on external, physical circumstances, proclaiming that "the material conditions of slave life may have been even worse than those of the poorest, most downtrodden free laborers in the North and Europe." Henretta, by contrast, although pointing to the "inhuman, brutal reality" of treating people as "personal property," notes that the slaves' material conditions improved over time and suggests that "most slaves were somewhat better clothed and housed than were the poorest whites in both the South and the North."¹¹ In general, the texts by Boyer, Davidson, Faragher, and Murrin surpass the others in portraying the complexity and ambiguities of slavery, in discussing changes and variations, and in placing southern slavery in broad international context. Boyer, Henretta, Martin, and Murrin offer useful discussions of slavery as a system and of the degree to which it set the South off from the rest of the country, although Boyer and Martin are better at raising the question than answering it.¹²

A special comment on Murrin is necessary. In some ways, this is the best textbook examined. Pitched at a high intellectual level, it is especially strong on slavery broadly defined. It provides unusually good treatment of systems of free and unfree labor in the early modern Western world, the contrast between the Chesapeake Bay area and the lower South in the colonial era, differences between South and North in the antebellum era, the demographic contrast between the slave South and other New World slave societies, the tricky matter of slave owner paternalism, and slavery

¹⁰ Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, I, 319-20; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 404; Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, I, 474-79; Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, I, 323-24; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 405; Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, I, 388-90; Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, I, 472-74; Henretta et al., *America's History*, I, 391-92; Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, I, 363-64; Tindall and Shi, *America*, I, 622-23; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 324-26.

¹¹ Tindall and Shi, *America*, I, 621; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 320; Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, I, 316-19; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 399-402; Henretta et al., *America's History*, I, 388.

¹² Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, I, 382-94; Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, I, 457-61, 470-79; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 312-27; Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, I, 261-67, 333-35, 359-65; Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, I, 370-72; Henretta et al., *America's History*, I, 384-88; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 391-98; Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, I, 261-67, 333-39.

and emancipation during the Civil War.¹³ But its treatment of slavery as an issue is much stronger than that of slavery itself. (Although this gap appears in many of the texts, it is most pronounced in Murrin.) More serious still are organizational weaknesses. Rather than devoting whole chapters or large sections of chapters to slavery, Murrin scatters slavery about in dribs and drabs, seeking to provide a seamless narrative of the American past rather than a segmented history of separate subjects. Thus, discussion of antebellum plantation labor and slave treatment appears in a three-page section of the chapter "The Market Revolution, 1815–1860," whereas six pages devoted to slave life follow in the subsequent chapter, "Toward an American Culture"; suggestions for further reading are similarly dispersed. Although the goal of making the history of slavery part of the broader history of the United States is commendable, the extreme technique adopted to pursue it creates obstacles to using this volume as a teaching tool in history classes. Most instructors will devote whole lectures to antebellum slavery, for example, and will want to assign readings that complement such lectures. Murrin's text does not readily lend itself to this purpose; indeed, because of its unusual organization, in a curious way it provides a narrative that is more, rather than less, choppy and segmented than most.¹⁴

Despite these variations, it is possible to generalize about the texts' common strengths and weaknesses. Among the former, the most notable is the extent to which all incorporate the revisionist approach that came to fruition in the 1970s in the works of such historians as John W. Blassingame, Eugene D. Genovese, and Herbert G. Gutman. That approach focused on the slaves' culture and community, with particular emphasis on families and religion, and portrayed enslaved African Americans as subjects who in interaction with the owners helped shape their world, rather than as passive objects of white action. The ubiquity of this theme in the textbooks indicates that the slavery revisionism of the 1970s has now become part of the standard historical canon.¹⁵

In some other respects, however, the texts are less successful. Although most point out the slow growth of bondage in the seventeenth-century mainland colonies, none gives an entirely clear explanation of why indentured servitude gave way to slavery. (Davidson, Faragher, and Henretta best explore the colonial context for the emergence of forced labor.) None offers more than a perfunctory treatment of proslavery ideology, perhaps in part because it appears so bizarre to current readers. In slighting this subject, the texts miss an opportunity to drive home the extent to which values are historically conditioned. My students are always amazed—and often dismayed—to learn that defenders of slavery relied heavily on Christian arguments; knowing that slavery was wrong, they are certain that it was un-Christian. Exploring biblical (and other) defenses of slavery is an eye-opener to students who think that morality has been unchanging across time and space. Similar important

¹³ Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, I, 12–14, 38–40, 128–29, 337–39, 467–70, 518–24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 333–35, 359–65, 339, 365.

¹⁵ See John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976).

issues that generally receive short shrift, perhaps because addressing them properly requires a recognition of complexity unusual in textbooks, include many whites' ability to square slavery with American republicanism and, later, with American democracy, the close relationship between defenses of slavery and efforts to "humanize" it, and the meaning and extent of planter paternalism. Perhaps the most sophisticated treatment of these subjects appears in Murrin, which has a thoughtful passage on the simultaneous effort to make slavery more efficient and more "humane." But even here "paternalism" will appear to many students as little more than "good treatment," rather than as an ideology or a relationship based on masters' peculiar understanding of reciprocal obligations between themselves and their "people."¹⁶

If the volumes under review incorporate the revisionism of the 1970s, they are less successful in synthesizing more recent slavery scholarship, perhaps because the direction of that scholarship appears less clear-cut and because there is often a lag between the appearance of new scholarship and its assimilation by student-oriented textbooks. New research on slave families, women, and children, for example, appears to have had little impact on these volumes. Boyer, Davidson, Faragher, Martin, and Tindall mention the high rate of child mortality among slaves. But none of the texts discusses recent evidence that, although slave adults are fairly well and were relatively healthy (compared to slaves elsewhere and even to free adults in much of the world), children were malnourished and sickly.¹⁷ None incorporates recent suggestions that revisionists of the 1970s may have exaggerated the cohesion of the slave community—if, indeed, there was such a thing as "the" slave community—and the resemblance between slave families and those of middle-class whites.¹⁸ And none addresses the debate among historians over the "internal" economy in which slaves accumulated their "own" property and engaged in small-scale commercial transactions or considers the extent to which

¹⁶ Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, I, 50–51, 56–76; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 61–63, 89–93; Henretta et al., *America's History*, I, 48–50, 82–85; Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power*, I, 334.

¹⁷ Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, I, 386; Davidson et al., *Nation of Nations*, I, 472; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, I, 319; Martin et al., *America and Its Peoples*, I, 402; Tindall and Shi, *America*, I, 621. On slave health and mortality, see especially Richard H. Steckel, "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity," *Journal of Economic History*, 56 (Sept. 1986), 721–41; Richard H. Steckel, "Work, Disease, and Diet in the Health and Mortality of American Slaves," in *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery: Conditions of Slave Life and the Transition to Freedom: Technical Papers*, ed. Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman (2 vols., New York, 1992), II, 489–507; and Richard H. Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health under Plantation Slavery in the United States," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington, 1996), 43–60.

¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 70 (Dec. 1983), 579–601; Laurence Shore, "The Poverty of Tragedy in Historical Writing on Southern Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 85 (Spring 1986), 147–64; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review*, 93 (Dec. 1988), 1228–52; Clarence E. Walker, *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Knoxville, 1991), esp. xi–xviii; Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Brenda E. Stevenson, "Black Family Structure in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia: Amending the Revisionist Perspective," in *The Decline in Marriage among African Americans: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Implications*, ed. M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (New York, 1995), 27–56; and Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996), esp. 206–57.

there was an economic as well as a cultural basis for slaves' limited autonomy.¹⁹ Dealing with these questions requires attention to complexity, to variations within the United States South, to how American slavery differed from and resembled slavery elsewhere, and to disagreements among historians—a tall order for books trying to make American history accessible to students who may already find the past infinitely confusing.

The extent to which the textbooks assimilate the research of the 1970s but ignore what came later becomes clear from a comparison of the fourth (1994) edition of the text by Norton and her coauthors (examined for this essay) with the second edition, published eight years earlier.²⁰ All the illustrations are changed: three former pictures are replaced by six new ones plus a new graph showing the percentage of native-born African Americans, somewhat misleadingly captioned "Percentage of Slave Population Naturalized." Despite some alterations in wording, however—"Slaves also developed a sense of racial identity" becomes "Enslaved African-Americans also developed a sense of racial identity"—the substance of the text's narrative is unchanged. The bibliographic lists that appear under the two headings "Conditions of Slavery" and "Slave Culture and Resistance" each contain only one entry not included in the second edition.²¹

Perhaps the biggest weakness of these texts is their failure to convey a sense of slavery as a subject of extraordinary historical research, debate, and reinterpretation, and of the ensuing excitement. Of the eight texts, only Tindall mentions the shift in historians' focus from slave treatment to the lives of slaves and "the slave community," a shift based on "taking seriously firsthand accounts previously discounted as unreliable." Too often (for example, in Boyer's text) when these volumes pay any attention to how historians interpret slavery, the focus is on an area that has *not* elicited much scholarly debate: whether slavery was harsh or lenient. No major scholar of slavery during the past two decades has questioned its oppressiveness; the significant debates have involved other issues, such as the impact of slavery on southern economic growth, the degree to which slavery set the South off from the capitalist North, the nature and implications of planter paternalism, the meaning of "community" among slaves, and the structure and character of slave families.

¹⁹ See Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1770 to 1880," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (Oct. 1982), 563–99; Philip D. Morgan, "The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Low Country," *Journal of Southern History*, 49 (Aug. 1983), 399–420; Lawrence T. McDonnell, "Money Knows No Master: Market Relations and the American Slave Community," in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. Winfred B. Moore Jr., Joseph E. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler (Westport, 1988), 31–44; the special issue "The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas," ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, *Slavery & Abolition* (London), 12 (May 1991); Roderick A. McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1993); and Larry E. Hudson Jr., *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens, Ga., 1997).

²⁰ Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, 2d ed. (2 vols., Boston, 1986), I. In comparing the two editions of Norton, I have focused on the part of Chapter 11—"Slavery and the Growth of the South, 1800–1860"—that deals with the slaves themselves, 310–20 (2d ed.) and 316–28 (4th ed.).

²¹ Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, 4th ed., I, 320; Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, 2d ed., I, 314; Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, 4th ed., I, 321; Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, 2d ed., I, 321; Norton et al., *People and a Nation*, 4th ed., I, 329.

In failing to explain the heated debates on such issues, the texts miss a major opportunity to expose students to what history is all about and to show why it is exciting. No wonder so many students find textbooks—and history—boring.²²

In many ways, the textbooks under review do a good job. They provide considerable attention to slavery—especially slavery broadly defined, as an issue in American history—and, in varying degrees, satisfactory syntheses of the revisionist scholarship of the 1970s. Most are handsomely packaged and contain an abundance of visual aids, including attractive illustrations, helpful maps, and (less consistently) informative graphs and tables. The best of their bibliographies point students toward a few highly recommended books while also guiding those interested in more extensive reading.

I think that the texts still leave considerable room for improvement. Most of their bibliographies could provide clearer, more up-to-date guidance for students familiar with virtually none of the names and titles thrown at them, and their maps and illustrations could be accompanied by statistical tables that would clarify demographic and economic trends. More important, the texts could give more information on slavery during the revolutionary and Civil War eras and could better introduce students to major interpretive issues at the center of recent historical research on slavery. Perhaps most important, I would like to see the texts do more to convey to students the excitement with which historians have reinterpreted and continue to reinterpret the nature of American slavery. Five years after taking a survey course in United States history, students will remember few of the details they memorized while preparing for exams; but it may be hoped that they *will* remember interpretive themes to which they were exposed, something of how historians go about constructing and reconstructing the past on the basis of historical evidence, and how absorbing such historical creation can be.

Finally, let me turn to practical recommendations for those concerned with choosing among competing textbooks. All the volumes considered for this essay are acceptable, but their different strengths and weaknesses render some more useful than others, depending on the user's goals. For example, Martin has the best bibliography, followed by Davidson and Faragher. Faragher provides the most impressive graphics, with Boyer and Davidson, and then Henretta and Martin, not far behind. Murrin is pitched at the highest intellectual level but suffers from quirky organization and is stronger on slavery's impact than on actual slave relationships; Henretta and Martin also probe how slavery set the South off from the North better than they delineate the complex character of slavery. Norton, once a pioneer in addressing social history, no longer seems to be on the cutting edge. Although it satisfactorily summarizes slavery on the basis of 1970s revisionism, it is not so well grounded in more recent historiography and is less effective than the best of the other texts in putting American slavery in wider context or in examining its

²² Tindall and Shi, *America*, I, 624; Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, I, 382.

variations. Tindall provides a straightforward but skimpy treatment of slavery, one that sacrifices context, detail, and nuance for narrative flow and economy; it is by far the least “textbookish” of the volumes under consideration, but some students may find its “literary” style difficult. Murrin, Davidson, and Norton assume a little more of their readers than the other texts, using longer sentences, more difficult words, and more complex sentence structure. At the opposite extreme, Faragher and Martin manage to express surprisingly complex ideas in simple language. Taking everything into account but giving special weight to coverage, balance, interpretation, sophistication, and usability, I would suggest that Boyer, Davidson, and Faragher are at the top of the pack (although Boyer and especially Faragher are plagued by too many annoying errors).

Whichever text one assigns, I would emphasize the importance of using supplementary readings. Primary documents, which require careful discussion either in lecture or discussion sections, help students understand how historians go about interpreting slavery, something that none of the textbooks manages to do. Two primary assignments that I have found effective in illuminating antebellum slavery are *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and excerpts from the Federal Writers' Project interviews with former slaves; for the eighteenth century, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is useful. And for insight into the mind of the masters, Drew Gilpin Faust's collection of proslavery polemics, *The Ideology of Slavery*, remains unsurpassed.²³

I have looked at only eight textbooks; others on the market may offer superior coverage of slavery. In examining these volumes, I have looked only at the way they deal with slavery; an effort to assess their treatment of other subjects might yield very different conclusions. In any case, when it comes to improving coverage—of slavery or other subjects—there is always the next edition.

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED

America: A Narrative History. Vol. 1. Fourth edition. By George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi. (New York: Norton, 1996. xvii, 795 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-393-96873-1.)

America and Its Peoples: A Mosaic in the Making. Vol. 1. Third edition. By James Kirby Martin, Randy Roberts, Steven Mintz, Linda O. McMurry, and James H. Jones. (New York: Longman, 1997. xxviii, 561 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-673-98074-X.)

America's History. Vol. 1. Third edition. By James A. Henretta, W. Elliot Brownlee, David Brody, Susan Ware, and Marilyn S. Johnson. (New York: Worth, 1997. xxix, 515 pp. Paper, ISBN 1-57259-213-3.)

²³ Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845). The least expensive edition is published by Signet/New American Library. For good collections of interviews from the Federal Writers' Project, see Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York, 1970); and Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Bloomington, 1980). Equiano's narrative (originally 1789) is available in a new paperback edition from Bedford: *Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Boston, 1995). Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1981).

The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People. Vol. 1. Third edition. By Paul S. Boyer, Clifford E. Clark Jr., Joseph E. Kett, Neal Salisbury, Harvard Sitkoff, and Nancy Woloch. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1996. xxix, 533 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-669-39772-5.)

Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People. Vol. 1. By John M. Murrin, Paul E. Johnson, James M. McPherson, Gary Gerstle, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Norman L. Rosenberg. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996. xv, 656 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-15-500580-4.)

Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic. Vol. 1. Second edition. By James West Davidson, William E. Gienapp, Christine Leigh Heyrman, Mark H. Lytle, and Michael B. Stoff. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994. xxiv, 644 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-07-015635-2.)

Out of Many: A History of the American People. Vol. 1. Second edition. By John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan H. Armitage. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997. xxix, 543 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-13-191065-5.)

A People and a Nation: A History of the United States. Vol. 1. Fourth edition. By Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, and William M. Tuttle Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994. xvi, 496 pp. Paper, ISBN 0-395-67818-6.)