

## Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

## Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



# Sean Wilentz, No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)

Frank Towers

Volume 90, automne 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094796ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0024>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Towers, F. (2022). Compte rendu de [Sean Wilentz, No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 90, 316–318.  
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0024>

areas where he detects political inconsistencies and failures. Views on these will vary, but the seriousness of the approach – and the rigorous unearthing of relevant documentation – will encourage debate and further research.

Notably, Palmer documents promising early efforts to formulate an accurate analysis of the nature of black oppression in the US. While sharing Trotsky's emphasis on the centrality of North American revolutionary perspectives in the fight against this racist subjugation, Cannon's comrades mainly disagreed with Trotsky's speculation that African Americans might establish a separate nation-state. Yet the movement led by Cannon did not succeed in hammering out an adequate theory and program regarding the path to black liberation. Beginning in the 1950s, from within the movement, long-time militant Richard Fraser would analyze the key consequences of this failure.

As for trade-union work, while lauding the Trotskyist leaders of the great Minneapolis strikes, Palmer also probes weaknesses in understanding and dealing with "Farmer-Laborism," the dominant force in Minnesota politics. And where in Minneapolis the Trotskyist strike leaders made fruitful alliances with those local Teamster officials who accepted their terms, Palmer's exploration of other fields of trade-union work highlights some blocs in which real damage was caused, on bureaucrats' terms – particularly but not only in maritime.

A book of this breadth will include lapses and instances of imprecision, but I noted a few. I think readers might have benefited from a clearer discussion of the Trotskyists' view of the Spanish events, for example. And while wild horses could not drag me away from this book, now and then a metaphor (about dancing, perhaps?) gallops too far, fast, or frequently... Still, we stay the course, being rewarded

on virtually every page. Including the footnotes! As to its length: somewhere around the 900th page, this reader felt almost as if he were approaching the conclusion of a deeply absorbing novel: is it really going to end so soon? We want more, but we will have to wait for the next volume.

S. SÁNDOR JOHN

City University of New York

**Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)**

IN *NO PROPERTY in Man*, Sean Wilentz provides an insightful account of slavery's place in United States politics from the nation's founding to the start of the Civil War. One of the leading political historians of our time, Wilentz draws on his extensive knowledge of the period to give readers fresh insights into historians' long-running debate over slavery's place in American politics.

Central to this debate is the question of whether the Constitution was a fundamentally proslavery document – a charter that facilitated slavery's expansion – or an antislavery one that was essential to eventually ending the institution. The former outlook found its loudest champions among the South's fire-eating defenders of the institution and, more surprisingly, among some northern abolitionists. On the other side of the question stood mainstream antislavery politicians, such as Republican Party leader Abraham Lincoln, who insisted that slavery could be abolished through the existing constitutional order.

The question has taken on new life in the 21st century as historians revise their understanding of American slavery. Newer studies have challenged an older interpretation of slavery as a dying

institution whose supporters fought a doomed battle to stave off its inevitable demise. In its place, scholars have shown the importance of slavery to the overall economy, the outsized influence slaveholders held in federal politics, and the reach of slavery into northern society through trade, culture, and illegal intrusions by kidnappers. Given the extraordinary wealth and power of southern enslavers, Lincoln's victory in the 1860 presidential seems more like the "revolution" that some called it than the inevitable triumph of a forward-looking North over a tradition-bound South. In this interpretation, the wartime defeat of the slaveholders combined with the Constitutional amendments that outlawed slavery, declared equal citizenship, and granted universal manhood suffrage comprised a second American revolution that overthrew the proslavery republic of the founding.

This new picture of slavery feeds a more pessimistic interpretation of US history, one in which the Revolution's promise of liberty and equality has been systematically undermined by upholders of established hierarchies. For every progressive step forward, a regressive backward counterforce has surged to meet it. Thus, the legacy of the slaveholders' republic remains visible in an array of constitutional protections for minority rule as well as systemic racism. Perhaps Americans would be better off if they broke with their past rather than continue to venerate a founding generation that not only perpetuated slavery but enshrined its repressive vision in the Constitution that continues to govern the US today.

To all of this Sean Wilentz disagrees. Historians arguing for the proslavery character of the Constitution, he says, "have missed the crucial subtlety, which is this: although the framers agreed to compromises over slavery that blunted

antislavery hopes and augmented the slaveholders' power, they also deliberately excluded any validation of property in man." (1–2) Recognizing that some may see the "property in man" issue as a distinction without a difference, Wilentz argues that by making slavery "solely a creation of state laws," the denial of property rights in the Constitution "opened the prospect of a United States free from slavery" (2) that antislavery activists, over considerable time, achieved. This paradox of "a Constitution that supported slavery but did not sanction it" (200) defined sectional politics for the next three generations.

The first half of *No Property in Man* examines the origins of the antislavery movement and the post-Revolutionary settlement that culminated in the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. Wilentz emphasizes the novelty of antislavery in the 18th century British Empire, which had made human property central to its lucrative Atlantic colonies. The American Revolution furthered calls for abolition among supporters of natural rights, who helped secure gradual emancipation in New England and Pennsylvania, but it left slavery untouched in the rest of the new nation. In this light, the framers' exclusion of property in man looks more like a surprising victory for freedom than a feeble coverup of proslavery intentions.

Two concluding chapters take readers through the sectional conflict, with special attention paid to the evolving pro- and antislavery readings of the Constitution. Wilentz sees the 1819–21 crisis overextending slavery to the new state of Missouri as a turning point in the development of proslavery constitutionalism. Faced with determined opposition in the North, proslavery politicians led by South Carolina's John C. Calhoun insisted that the Constitution required federal protection for slavery everywhere. Over time proslavery constitutionalism

became more extreme, resulting in the Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision nullifying the Missouri Compromise and southern demands for a federal slave code throughout the territories.

In recounting the antislavery campaign Wilentz explores the dispute between the more numerous group who sought to work within legislative politics versus the smaller number led by William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator* and co-founder of the American Antislavery Society, who scorned the major parties as well as the Constitution, which Garrison called a "covenant with death." Over time many of Garrison's allies, particularly African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, came over to the antislavery interpretation of the Constitution. In addition to its intrinsic merits, this position had more potential to mobilize voters around the idea of fulfilling the nation's promise than did the case for overthrowing it. During the crucible of the late 1850s, when Dred Scott and Bleeding Kansas soured northerners on further concessions to the South, the antislavery constitutionalism of Douglass and Lincoln triumphed over the murkier popular sovereignty doctrine of Democratic Party leader Stephen A. Douglas.

Wilentz concludes that Douglass and Lincoln not only pursued the better political strategy but also had the correct reading of the Constitution to back them. As earlier reviews have shown, this book will not end the debate over the character of the Constitution, a point Wilentz notes in his preface to the 2019 paperback edition. For this reviewer, more attention to the Constitution as a living document – an ever-changing code shaped by the partisan context of the times – would enhance this debate. As recent scholarship has shown, jurists and their decisions were entangled with partisan politics at both the federal and local level. Perhaps the original intent of the framers

mattered less than the contemporary balance of power and the always crucial question of how legal doctrines were enforced. However, Wilentz clearly shows that Americans cared about the original meaning of the Constitution and its implications for slavery. In this respect and others, he makes a brilliant case for the antislavery implications of the republic's founding in a highly readable, informative book that will interest beginners as well as seasoned professionals.

FRANK TOWERS

University of Calgary

**Stephen Dale, *Shift Change: Scenes from a Post-Industrial Revolution* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2021)**

EVEN BEFORE BEING hit by the biggest pandemic in a century, cities across Canada and the Global North were struggling with a series of concurrent and interconnected crises. These include a housing crisis, a crisis in policing, a crisis of low wages and precarious employment, and a crisis of racism and discrimination. These crises did not appear overnight, and there have been excellent recent scholarship that identifies their roots in the neoliberal restructuring and deindustrialization of the late 20th century. However, we lack a full understanding of the way that these crises are currently reshaping everyday urban life in Canada and of how communities are finding ways to fight back. Stephen Dale's textured analysis of urban change and conflict in his hometown of Hamilton is thus a timely study and potential model for future research.

As Canada's "Steel City", Hamilton has undergone a difficult post-industrial transition in recent decades. However, it is relatively unique among smaller post-industrial cities in its close proximity to a major global metropolis. Seventy