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Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery

By Rebecca J. Scott



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As Louisiana and Cuba emerged from slavery in the late nineteenth century, each faced the question of what rights former slaves could claim. *Degrees of Freedom* compares and contrasts these two societies in which slavery was destroyed by war, and citizenship was redefined through social and political upheaval. Both Louisiana and Cuba were rich in sugar plantations that depended on an enslaved labor force. After abolition, on both sides of the Gulf of Mexico, ordinary people—cane cutters and cigar workers, laundresses and labor organizers—forged alliances to protect and expand the freedoms they had won. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, Louisiana and Cuba diverged sharply in the meanings attributed to race and color in public life, and in the boundaries placed on citizenship.

Louisiana had taken the path of disenfranchisement and state-mandated racial segregation; Cuba had enacted universal manhood suffrage and had seen the emergence of a transracial conception of the nation. What might explain these differences?

Moving through the cane fields, small farms, and cities of Louisiana and Cuba, Rebecca Scott skillfully observes the people, places, legislation, and leadership that shaped how these societies adjusted to the abolition of slavery. The two distinctive worlds also come together, as Cuban exiles take refuge in New Orleans in the 1880s, and black soldiers from Louisiana garrison small towns in eastern Cuba during the 1899 U.S. military occupation.

Crafting her narrative from the words and deeds of the actors themselves, Scott brings to life the historical drama of race and citizenship in postemancipation societies.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Tracing the parallel histories of post-slavery Louisiana and Cuba, Scott, a University of Michigan professor of history and law, uses court cases, activist profiles and heart-pounding runaway narratives to slowly draw the reader into the lives of slaves, freedmen and slaveowners (both black and white) of the late nineteenth century Gulf, but dense clots of legal-historic scholarship can prove difficult to navigate for readers not already studied on the subject. Her back and forth cultural contrasts between Louisiana and Cuba are well-crafted, early on laying out her tale's direction: "In Louisiana itself, the space for the discussion of civic and political equality had narrowed almost to the vanishing point. In Cuba in that same year, the space for discussion was still quite open, and different groups of activists debated...the best strategy for asserting their full rights." Though similar economically (both Cuba and Louisiana had agricultural economies that heavily depended on slave labor), the two areas' divergent political climates at the turn of the century saw Louisiana's blacks continue to lose rights, while across the Gulf, voter rolls swelled. Casual history readers may get bogged down by Scott's text, as it assumes more than a nodding familiarity with court precedents and nineteenth century legislation, but oral histories of slaves and their descendants provide refreshing counterpoints to the admirable, though daunting, scholarship.

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Review

Scott has given us an epochal work that is the most important comparative analysis of race relations in the Americas since Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White*. What makes the book so important is its truly unusual method, and the great skill and brio with which that method is carried out. It is a triumph of historical investigation. (George Reid Andrews, author of *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*)

A model of how comparative history should be written, *Degrees of Freedom* offers strikingly original insights into how former slaves in two of the western hemisphere's most important slave societies tried to breathe substantive life into the idea and experience of freedom. (Eric Foner, Columbia University)

Degrees of Freedom is a watershed study in the history of post-emancipation societies in the Americas. Rebecca Scott spins a fascinating narrative about race and nationality, political voice and associational activism, the struggle for resources and the quest for respect, the role of labor and the power of law to set limits of the possible. In ranging widely between the large, impersonal structures that constrain change and the ground-level individual and collective struggles that advance it, Rebecca Scott has pulled off a remarkable feat. (Lawrence N. Powell, Tulane University)

Scott has written a masterful comparative history, but she has also succeeded in the challenging task of integrating the political, social and economic history of each society into a unified story, documenting how issues of race, labor, and citizenship were inextricably intertwined. (John Rodrigue, author of *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880*)

Tracing the parallel histories of post-slavery Louisiana and Cuba, Scott uses court cases, activist profiles and heartpounding runaway narratives to slowly draw the reader into the lives of slaves, freedmen and

slaveowners (both black and white) of the late nineteenth century Gulf... Her back and forth cultural contrasts between Louisiana and Cuba are well-crafted... Though similar economically (both Cuba and Louisiana had agricultural economies that heavily depended on slave labor), the two areas' divergent political climates at the turn of the century saw Louisiana's blacks continue to lose rights, while across the Gulf, voter rolls swelled. (*Publishers Weekly* 2005-10-24)

[Scott] gracefully brings the limitations of historical knowledge to our attention. For example, from the fact that census records reveal their residences and common last names, she infers that several individuals who resided near each other after emancipation were slaves on the same plantation, and notes that inferential step. Her subtle references to what we do not and cannot know about the past remind us that there is much we do not--and probably cannot--know about the present or about the general propositions economists urge on us. (Mark Tushnet *Michigan Law Review* 2007-04-01)

Rebecca Scott's book, *Degrees of Freedom*, is a major historical contribution to the comparative study of slavery and race relations in the Americas by a senior and pre-eminent historian... Through painstaking research of court records and legal proceedings, and riveting accounts of individual and collective struggle, Scott has assembled a formidable argument to support her thesis that "degrees of freedom" can make an enormous difference in the evolution of two broadly similar sugarcane regions. (Helen I. Safa *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 2007-04-01)

Rebecca Scott's *Degrees of Freedom*... distinguishes itself from earlier comparative works by taking "the construction of postemancipation society, rather than slavery and race relations, as the subject of comparison." It is solidly grounded in primary sources from a variety of archival sites, and its methodological approach and general style also distance Scott's book from earlier comparative studies. The book raises important issues for debate, and even those differing from the author's conclusions or emphases would recognize that it is a groundbreaking study and a remarkable piece of historical research and analysis. (Jorge Giovannetti *International Review of Social History* 2007-01-01)

This magnificent work will not only satisfy Latin Americanists but also demand attention from the much larger (and historically insular) scholarly audience of U.S. historians. *Degrees of Freedom* eloquently explores the political, social, and economic worlds of Cuba and Louisiana after slavery, bringing Scott's nuanced interpretative lens to both societies, while also setting a new standard for comparative and connected history that will force historians of the United States to engage Latin American history (and historiography)... This work will be both an inspiration and touchstone for scholars studying life after slavery. (James E. Sanders *Journal of Social History* 2007-06-01)

Rebecca Scott's compelling examination of the making of new postemancipation social orders in Louisiana and Cuba, while not dismissive of an earlier post-World War II scholarship pioneered by Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen*, pointedly criticizes the misleading objectivism of this earlier work. The result is a study whose exploration of the dynamics of postemancipation social mobilizations not only vividly illuminates local, particular features of the reconstruction of politics and labor in the sugar growing districts of Cienfuegos and Santa Clara in central Cuba and in southern Louisiana's sugar parishes of Terrebonne and Lafourche west of New Orleans. It also identifies divergences in the histories of the nations that oversaw these emancipations. (Julie Saville *Law and History Review* 2007-09-01)

A fascinating and well-written piece of comparative history... Those who are rebuilding New Orleans would do well to capitalize on what's inside Scott's suddenly extremely timely book. (Ward Harkavy *Village Voice* 2005-09-21)

Review

Scott has given us an epochal work that is the most important comparative analysis of race relations in the Americas since Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White*. What makes the book so important is its truly unusual method, and the great skill and brio with which that method is carried out. It is a triumph of historical investigation. (George Reid Andrews, author of *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*)

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