

Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore

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Review

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Rockman, Seth *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$25.00 softcover ISBN 9780801890079

Slavery in an American City

Women and men who eked out an existence—the laboring poor whose work was short term, menial, and hard and whose lives often remain hidden from the historical record—come into sharp relief in the aptly named *Scraping By*. In his new work, Seth Rockman immerses readers in daily struggles of the immigrant, native-born, African-American, European-American, enslaved, indentured, apprenticed, and free workers of the thriving “boom port” of Baltimore, Maryland. What these disparate groups shared was constant toil that yielded no economic security and an impoverished condition on which early republic capitalism thrived. Rockman not merely buttresses the argument that our capitalist political economy “treated human labor as a commodity readily deployed in the service of private wealth and national economic development,” but also argues that capitalism was built upon this opportunity to exploit, with no holds barred, a motley pool of workers all of whom were denied the liberty “fully to claim the prerogatives of market freedom.” His goal, then, in unearthing these struggling widows, enslaved mariners, Irish domestics, free black mechanics, and American-born mudmachinists, and situating them within the larger narrative of America’s developing political economy, is to spotlight “capitalism’s systemic dependence” on a diverse array of exploited people (4, 8, 10). Rockman acknowledges that he has built his ambitious work on a burgeoning body of scholarship seeking to give voice to those who had little or none when they were alive and to answer questions regarding their survival strategies, constraints, and opportunities, all of which differed according to race, gender, ethnicity, and legal status. Ultimately he asserts provocatively that early workers were not united by a shared preindustrial work culture or shared republican ideology, but rather by their mutual exploitation which yielded

near-perpetual insecurity and deprivation; therein lies the origin of America's working class. This positing of an "either/or" explanation is debatable; the reality likely embraces all these explanations, so Rockman's contention should stimulate further discussion of the political economy of the early republic.

Following the introduction, in which he lays out his argument in vigorous prose and convincingly makes his case for Baltimore as an exemplar of the challenges, promises, and pitfalls of the early American republic, Rockman gets to the heart of the matter. Chapter one, "Coming to Work in the City," reveals the myriad ways in which the meteoric growth and development of America's commercial cities was predicated upon grueling, menial labor. But at stake here, and embedded in this familiar story of urbanization and American expansion, is a larger reality that historians of slavery have been elucidating for decades and that Professor Rockman emphasizes on pages 259 and 262 of his conclusion: telling the grand narrative of "American opportunity and freedom also requires telling the story of brute labor, severe material privation, and desperately constrained choices" and we should not gloss over "the centrality of hirelings and slaves to whatever claims this nation can make to being the land of the free and home of the brave." Rockman illuminates precisely who built Baltimore, revealing the painstaking research required in bringing to life the struggles and schemes of this motley collection of children and adults. Of necessity we meet them through the lens, pens, and voices of the city's boosters, entrepreneurs, employers, and municipal officials, but the fact that they are all juxtaposed on the teeming streets constitutes the great strength of this work.

Rockman focuses not merely on a particular group of laborers but also on the physical space where they could be found hard at work. A digitally recreated 1823 city map included in the front material creatively encourages readers to step into the tattered boots of the people who built Baltimore by including a list of chapter titles each linked to a unique, representative landmark flagged on the map. Rockman tells the multifaceted tale of the process of both labor recruitment and job procurement through the lives of five men. A simple but profound truth emerges from the evidence: it was not just the work itself that was difficult, but also getting hired. He also reveals that mixed-race crews were common on Baltimore job sites requiring nasty, brutish labor, and that employers—and urban development in general—benefitted from the "micropolitics of difference" (68) or their ability to master the widely understood hierarchies of power based on race, sex, ethnicity, age, and legal status (slave or free) to extract the most labor in the shortest time for the least amount of money and trouble and thereby to

maximize profits.

Triumphing over the thorn in the side of labor historians—the fact that most menial labor was short term and undocumented—Rockman elucidates and analyzes the wage-earning ability of mudmachinists who kept Baltimore’s harbor open over a period of ten years. They were simultaneously typical and atypical menial laborers; the former because they owned no tools, “exchanged brute strength for cash wages,” remained vulnerable to exploitation by their employer, and had no job security (77). They were, however, overwhelmingly white European immigrants and therefore did not represent a cross-section of the city’s laboring poor whose ranks included many who were much more vulnerable, notably children, women, free African Americans, and slaves. Nevertheless, Rockman presents rare labor statistics including annual days of employment and comparative annual incomes associated with this ongoing dredging project. In a kind of triumph over the odds (given the general lack of evidence on menial workers), the author concludes that “manual labor was not a life stage to be outgrown, but a career” (99).

Central to Rockman’s work is the proposition that employers in the early republic could purchase labor by the day, week, month, year or, in the case of slaves, lifetime, and, thereby fully exploit all the benefits of a burgeoning market economy that, in turn, provided common laborers startlingly little in return. This unequal exchange, he says, is crystal clear among domestic workers, the largest cohort among Baltimore’s women workers, the group he analyzes in chapter four. By Rockman’s own admission, the statistics are woefully lacking—for example neither census data nor occupational surveys reveal accurate numbers of households with servants and we do not know the number of domestics as a percentage of all female menial laborers—but this chapter describes the calculated exploitation of a labor pool that comprised free and enslaved, American-born and immigrant women. While neither this chapter nor the work as a whole contains new information about urban slavery, the multiple variations on slave hiring, the rentiers who subsisted in whole or in part by hiring out their human property, or term slavery, the strength of *Scraping By* is Rockman’s integration of slaves and free people of color into his labor history.

Rockman demonstrates clearly and with a wealth of solid evidence, how even the most determined and industrious working woman could never earn a living wage. He dissects the events and public discussion surrounding the 1833 strike of Baltimore’s seamstresses “who sought economic justice as exploited

laborers in a competitive market society" but received only "public sympathy as females deprived of male support in a persistently patriarchal society" (132). His strength in weaving multiple threads through the narrative, in this case drawing together contemporary gender and class analysis and debates over the emerging capitalistic political economy, is patent. This, along with ample evidence and his characteristic use of pithy and effective subheadings, combine to make this chapter one of his strongest.

Chapters six and seven clearly and, thus, sadly document how "the rules of the game had been set up to make being poor incredibly expensive and labor intensive," and when and how laboring people employed manifold "strategies of makeshift," including periodic stays in the almshouse (159, 185). Rockman includes a wonderful analysis of the ways in which the poor and the benevolent engaged in mutual exploitation reminiscent of enslaved people and slave owners. Although the power relations were inherently unequal, the working poor attempted to exploit their exploiters; doing so represented yet another survival strategy for people whose ongoing reality was "work and starve" (230).

In his final chapter, the slave trading district becomes Rockman's geographic focus and the "potent interaction" between freedom and slavery his analytical one. Again, the strength here is not that he reveals new information about the latter institution, but rather his constant juxtaposition of the two. He concludes that the persistence of slavery and the interregional trade plus the growth of free labor in Baltimore "ensured that labor and those performing it would be understood interchangeably as commodities, while leaving all working people increasingly exposed to the vagaries of the market" (233). All working people remained vulnerable and lived lives of economic privation; they barely scraped by.

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