

# GHI RESEARCH

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## IN PURSUIT OF “FREEDOM”: AFRICAN-, ANGLO-, AND GERMAN-AMERICAN ALLIANCES IN THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

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*To write the history of slavery and the conditions it generated, and bearing in mind the complex and erratic course of its development, one has to write it as the history of an idea: that of the dispossession of freedom.*

—Marc Bloch

### Protest Across Color Lines

What happened in northern Virginia on October 18, 1859 was on the surface nothing more than a minor skirmish. Still, the news it generated led to a political earthquake. John Brown, veteran of the clashes between pro- and antislavery forces in Kansas, and eighteen of his followers—thirteen whites and five blacks—had seized the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, from where they hoped to launch an insurrection among the Virginia slave population. But the intervention of U.S. marines under the command of Robert E. Lee put an end to Brown’s plans. Most of his party were either killed or captured. Brown himself, severely wounded and imprisoned, was sentenced to death for treason against the state of Virginia. On December 2, Brown was hanged in Charles Town. The death of the militant abolitionist and the manner in which his execution was discussed by a highly agitated public reflect the inner tensions of a nation on the brink of civil war. To some, Brown was chaos and terror incarnate; others saw in him a martyr for freedom, or, to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, the one who made “the gallows like the cross.”<sup>1</sup>

Those siding with Emerson gave expression to the sentiment of John Brown as a God-inspired fighter in a series of public gatherings. In virtually every northern city, abolitionists of various degrees came together to honor a man who, in their eyes, had given his life for the cause of ending American slavery. From New England to Missouri, hymns and

prayers resounded through the streets and church bells tolled in commemoration as the abolitionist community mourned for the deceased antislavery warrior. In New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Detroit, African-American men displayed their grief by wearing black armbands. Henry David Thoreau delivered an address at Concord in tribute to John Brown, while William Lloyd Garrison spoke to an antislavery congregation at Boston's Tremont Temple. Although a pacifist by his own standards, Garrison praised Brown's determination to act unrelentingly against what he deemed the nation's gravest sin.<sup>2</sup>

Another John Brown memorial convention took place in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine district on Sunday afternoon, December 4.<sup>3</sup> In its composition, however, the meeting differed from most others of its kind. Over-the-Rhine was home to Cincinnati's German-Americans. It was a bustling community: Owners of small shops, artisans, craftsmen, apprentices, and ordinary laborers constituted the backbone of a culture that was predominantly working class. Many of these German-born workers were organized in the local *Freimänner-* and *Arbeitervereine*, the freethinking and workingmen's societies that gave public life in this plebeian milieu its distinctively radical features. August Willich, editor of the *Cincinnati Republikaner*, had announced the previous day that the *Arbeiterverein* was to hold a memorial meeting for John Brown. At two o'clock, a formidable crowd of both sexes started marching into the hall of the German Institute. However, not all who attended the meeting were German. Roughly a third of those present were black, and a small group of Anglo-Americans completed the picture. This peculiar mix also manifested itself in how the hall was decorated for the occasion: To the rear of the podium, the American flag was dressed in mourning, just as were the portraits of Washington and Jefferson to its left. In front of and a little to the right of the podium, the black-red-golden flag stood unfolded. After the meeting had begun, a delegation of African-Americans entered the hall, exhibiting a red flag and fastening it to the ground alongside the others. Prolonged cheers and salutes followed and did not ebb until the African-American standard-bearers took their seats.

Among the main speakers was Moncure Daniel Conway, the Virginia-born Unitarian minister of Cincinnati's First Congregational Church. In his address, Conway portrayed Brown as a second Thomas Paine, as the one true heir to the liberal ideas the English-born pamphleteer had disseminated through his writings. Next spoke Peter H. Clark, who was at that time principal of the Western District Colored School. Thanking those who had come to the meeting in solidarity with John Brown, the black abolitionist commended the audience for doing justice to his race; for, by attending, they demonstrated not only their love of freedom but also their willingness to accept and treat people of different color as

equals. Representing the German element, August Willich electrified the crowd with some words of his own. The leader of the *Arbeiterverein* delivered a fiery speech in which he attacked the Democratic Party and its Southern supporters and told his hearers "to whet their sabers and nerve their arms for the day when Slavery and Democracy would be crushed in a common grave."<sup>4</sup> Anybody, Willich went on, who refused to stand up against those who favored the laws of slavery over the principles of freedom was a traitor to the United States. Adopting a policy of compromise would only result in the kind of injustice and oppression under which the German people in Europe suffered to this very day. The interracial crowd responded with thundering applause, indicating a unity Willich later described as "the inner bond of humanity, [which] brought forth a harmonious melody sung by races and nationalities separated by nothing but outward appearance."<sup>5</sup> Willich had found allies, African- and Anglo-Americans who shared his hatred of slavery and his love of freedom.

### Slavery's Forgotten Enemies

Few subject matters in nineteenth-century American history have been discussed as intensely and conscientiously as the institution of chattel slavery and the people who fought against it. Ever since the emergence of academic historiography, scholars have paid extraordinary attention to abolitionism in particular, as if following the postulate of one of their colleagues that "the abolitionists, certainly the most important of the antebellum reformers, should be studied before the others."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, scholarly interest in the abolition movement remains high, even though questions and approaches have changed over time. The result is an academic edifice to which each generation has added a distinct layer. In the beginning, American abolitionism was depicted as the work of a few "great men," most notably of leading figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Lewis Tappan, and Gerrit Smith. But this traditionalist view, which was chiefly concerned with portraying these protagonists either as heroes or fanatics, has long been superseded by broader perspectives.<sup>7</sup> Historiographical trends coming out of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond have shown that, to tell the "whole story," one needs a different understanding of abolitionism than that of a homogeneous movement headed by an elite of white male Anglo-American Protestants. According to this view, abolitionism is described more adequately as a conglomerate of diverse subgroups that pursued social and political objectives of their own but were held together by one common goal, namely to end slavery.

As historians were widening their scope and readjusting their methodology, they started paying greater attention to abolitionist groups that

had been marginalized by previous generations. The African-American perspective benefited from this historiographical turn, as did those who contended for a stronger recognition of the role of women in the movement. Moreover, new analytical categories such as race, class, and gender helped provide fresh insights into controversial issues related to abolitionism, for example the strategy of non-violence, white paternalism, and biracial cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Interest in interaction between black and white abolitionists has become especially strong during the last decade. While historians had noted the biracial character of the movement before, most of them had done so in a way that emphasized the differences between the two groups. There was, however, a tendency in the 1990s to stress the ability of black and white abolitionists to work together and challenge the racial status quo of their time.<sup>9</sup> Also very influential in the context of shifting approaches have been works that explore the impact of early capitalism on changing concepts of family, labor, and slavery.<sup>10</sup> Still others have devised more sweeping assessments of American abolitionism by placing it in the broader context of contemporary transatlantic exchanges over slavery (mainly those between the United States and Great Britain).<sup>11</sup> No doubt, the boundaries of research on the abolition movement have been constantly redrawn over the last fifty years. Even so, there is still some redrawing to be done.

Their importance notwithstanding, slavery and abolition are not the only major themes in antebellum history. While the decades prior to the Civil War were an age of controversy over the South's "peculiar institution," they were also equally an age of immigration. Between 1840 and 1860, emigration from Europe to the United States rose to unprecedented levels, with more than 4 million people entering the country (compared to the 750,000 from 1820 to 1840).<sup>12</sup> About a third of the newcomers came from the German states. The Germans thus constituted the second-largest immigrant group, outnumbered only by the Irish. Most left their native country for socioeconomic reasons, some because of their disillusionment with political conditions, and others for private reasons. But, if one looks at these cases through individual rather than collective lenses, it was almost always a combination of these factors that induced migration across the Atlantic.

Carrying with them a myriad of social, political, and cultural experiences and attitudes, the Germans arriving in the New World encountered a society in which the engines of political, economic, and social change were running at full speed. Modern systems of production and transportation provided new means of earning one's living and making profit. In the west, a vast continent lay open for the incursion of white men, promising a life of self-sufficiency and freedom from governmental constraint. However, the 1850s were also a time of crisis. The acceleration

of commercial and industrial development cut into old social fabrics and raised new questions concerning the relationship between capital and labor, including slave labor. Secession of the slaveholding states from the Union and the specter of civil war loomed large in the debates over the admission of Kansas and Nebraska, the Republican Party, and the Supreme Court's ruling in *Dred Scott vs. Sanford*. The farther the country expanded in search of its "manifest destiny," the louder the voices of those seemed to grow who wanted to see this destiny fulfilled at home as well. It was during that period that slavery acquired a sociopolitical dimension that made it virtually impossible for any politically conscious person either living in or coming to the United States to remain neutral on the issue. A German immigrant's response to slavery very much affected their acculturation in the New World and eventually pointed to the kind of America they envisioned for themselves.

Frederick Douglass, the famous black reformer, once declared, "A German has only to be a German to be utterly opposed to slavery. In feeling, as well as in conviction and principle, they are anti-slavery." One can only speculate whether Douglass was aware that it had been a group of German Mennonites who were the first to issue a public protest against American slavery in 1688; or whether he knew of Charles Follen, the archetypal German-American abolitionist of the early nineteenth century who lived in Boston in the 1830s and stood in close contact to Garrison.<sup>13</sup> Yet, when writing these lines, Douglass had in mind a specific group. He was referring to those Germans who had come to the United States as refugees of the European Revolutions of 1848–1849, as political exiles who, at one point or another, had withdrawn from the struggles of the Old World, some temporarily, some permanently.<sup>14</sup> A number of these "Forty-Eighters," especially the radicals among them, were quite vigorous in their opposition to slavery. In public speeches and writings, they attacked an institution that, they judged, fundamentally contradicted the founding ideals and democratic promises of the country to which they had immigrated.<sup>15</sup> Of course, there were also large parts of the German-American populace, above all Catholics and traditional Protestants, who did not agree with this kind of opposition to slavery. Discomforted by the missionary fanaticism of the revolutionaries and abolitionists, conservative "Grays" (pre-1848 German immigrants) scolded the "Greens" for their uncompromising aims and methods, which would only cause unnecessary ruptures within a rapidly growing German-America.

The radical Forty-Eighters, however, held on tightly to what they thought was right. Although the Forty-Eighters were a rather heterogeneous group encompassing a wide spectrum of individuals and perspectives, they all shared a predilection for political activism. And as activists who had influenced the course of events in Germany, they continued to

work in their new American environment for the political ideals they found worth defending. The transplanted revolutionaries were quick to link old hopes with new challenges. "If the friends of freedom are ready to do their duty" in the fight against slavery here, Karl Heinzen predicted, "it will be a turning point towards a better future. This moment of history [...] could be relevant not only for America, but for Europe as well."<sup>16</sup>

The areas where the Forty-Eighters left their mark are diverse, ranging from social, cultural, and political life within the German-American community to the American scene at large. Highly educated and rhetorically versed, they exercised an influence that was greater than their numbers suggest. They introduced new social and cultural organizations—the *Turnverein* is probably the most prominent example here—and nearly doubled the output of the German-American press during the 1850s. Historians have given a fair deal of attention to the Forty-Eighters with regard to their immigration experiences, settlement policies, sociocultural contributions, and their involvement in German-American and American politics up to their participation in the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> However, scholarship on the German-American reaction to slavery—the Forty-Eighter reaction in particular—still lacks depth.<sup>18</sup> Most observers simply state a general sympathy for abolition among the Forty-Eighters without differentiating further or looking at its practical implications. In view of the German-Americans' relative absence from research on the abolition movement, Kathleen Neils Conzen is definitely right to criticize that American historians have scarcely integrated the German-Americans into their more comprehensive interpretations.<sup>19</sup>

There are, though, a few notable exceptions. The most extensive one is Bruce Levine's 1992 book *The Spirit of 1848*, which contains detailed analyses of different German-American responses to events as various as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the presidential elections of 1856 and 1860, and John Brown's Raid. Levine convincingly argues that the bulk of the German-American opposition to slavery came from the Forty-Eighter radical plebeian milieu and the intellectuals associated with it. What is missing in the book, however, is the attempt to put this story into a national context, as Levine rarely broadens his focus beyond German-America. Another significant contribution was authored by Hartmut Keil. In his 1997 essay "German Immigrants and African-Americans in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," Keil hints at the need to investigate the relationships that existed between abolitionists of different ethnic origins. This way, a better understanding of the intercultural exchanges that occurred within the movement could be gained as well as how these exchanges affected the daily lives of those taking part in them. Keil's call for a broader multi-ethnic perspective was answered to some extent by Maria Diedrich's biography of Otilie Assing, the Jewish-German-American journalist who

befriended Frederick Douglass. In *Love Across Color Lines*, published in 2001, Diedrich tells the story of the unique work-love relationship between two decided opponents of slavery and recounts the interethnic dialogue on slavery and freedom that it engendered.<sup>20</sup> With her book, Diedrich moves the study of abolitionism as a multicultural-international protest movement to a new stage. More importantly, she provides a model for those who wish to learn more about how this multiculturalism altered the perceptions, ideas, and social and political practices of the people who engaged in it.

My dissertation project takes over the baton from social and cultural historians such as Levine, Keil, and Diedrich and carries it deeper into the multiethnic, multicultural world of American abolitionism. Doing so presupposes that this movement is not covered in its entirety if one portrays it as an affair managed exclusively by African- and Anglo-Americans. It also presupposes that certain immigrants—radical German-American Forty-Eighter immigrants in this case—were as much a part of the movement as those native-born men and women who have enjoyed the spotlights of historiography on the subject for so long. These parts evolved not in isolation but through an intense exchange of ideas, practices, customs, and expectations across various social, cultural, and ethnic lines.

Abolitionism, in this sense, was more than just a struggle against slavery in the name of lofty ideas. On a pragmatic-everyday basis, it also functioned as a conduit for intercultural exchange. It gave individuals from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to negotiate their differences in a way that not only enabled them to find political common ground, but also helped them to stake out a place they might consider their “home” in an increasingly conflict-stricken society. My study attempts to advance a new reading of American abolitionism, namely that of a forum in which interethnic cooperation existed and transethnic alliances were forged, alliances that encompassed culturally diverse concepts of freedom. On another level, it strives to develop a more pluralistic, more multicultural version of American democracy at a time when the nation was moving toward and through civil war. The abolition movement, I argue, owes its significance not just to its radical disagreement with slavery but also to its potential to bring together reformers and revolutionaries of different shades and colors.

### **From Revolution to Abolition**

Dramatic changes swept through almost every segment of the early and mid-nineteenth-century Euro-American world. In many respects, this period is more deserving of R. R. Palmer’s title “The Age of the Democratic Revolution” than the period to which it was originally applied.<sup>21</sup> On both

sides of the Atlantic, late-eighteenth-century programs for individual freedom and social equality were greeted as events inaugurating the march toward universal human emancipation. This Enlightenment optimism expanded well into the next generations: Demographic growth, technical and economic innovations, and political challenges of various kinds caused profound shifts within the societies of Europe and America. Although these developments found different expressions in specific regional and national contexts, they were at the same time closely intertwined across these very contexts. The ties among the revolutionary movements of the day and their precursors were recognized by those directly involved. Participants of the European uprisings of 1830 and 1848 confessed that the great American and French Revolutions served as powerful inspirations.<sup>22</sup> It is for this and other reasons that Atlantic history scholars believe that a fusion of the hitherto separated histories of Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean is required to fully grasp the era's most important processes of change.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of Atlantic history opens up new vistas for coming to terms with a fundamental paradox of the nineteenth century: ideas in circulation about human equality stood in utter contrast to increasing social inequalities.<sup>24</sup> Appeals to Enlightenment humanism did not close the gap between the richer and poorer classes as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The *Déclaration des droits de l'homme* did not prevent the atrocities modern nation-states committed against indigenous peoples in their various colonization projects. Nor did the Declaration of Independence function as a moral barrier to the expansion of American slavery. On the other hand, it is equally true that this paradox accounts for many of the dynamics of the age. While it bred disappointment and greater unrest, it was also the source of social and political visions striving to bring the real closer to the ideal. Not a few of them centered on a particular form of democracy, and the struggles they provoked were not so much between different nations than between parties in the Atlantic world that disagreed over the boundaries of democracy or over democracy itself.

Bent on controlling these processes instead of being controlled by them, people resorted to a variety of social and political instruments. But they could hardly do so without facing the alternatives of working inside or outside contemporary institutions. As the two primary modes of active change, reform and revolution often existed side by side in those minds to whom change was synonymous with improvement. National historiographies, attuned to such paradigms as exceptionalism and *Sonderweg*, usually distinguish between an age of revolution in France and Germany and an age of reform in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Such positions, however, tend to obscure the fact that the self-understanding of American activists was

in many ways no less revolutionary than that of their European relatives. Charles Beard's and James McPherson's ex post facto interpretations of the Civil War as a "Second American Revolution" are no isolated incidents.<sup>26</sup> They emerged from comments during and immediately before the eruption of the sectional conflict. From Karl Marx to Wendell Phillips, from James A. Garfield to Jefferson Davis, contemporaries noted the war's revolutionary qualities. In a similar vein, a veteran of the German Revolution exclaimed that "the spirit of 1848 has once more awakened" when witnessing the formation and parade of the New York Twentieth United Turner Rifles Regiment, which was composed entirely of men from the local *Sozialistischer Turnverein*.<sup>27</sup>

With these assessments in mind, one can frame an alternative reading of the American 1850s that diverges from the conventional sectional model of a dualistic North-South confrontation. The years prior to the Civil War were a pre-revolutionary period in which various revolutionary cultures influenced each other in mutually reinforcing ways across national boundaries. Abolitionism was one of these transnational revolutionary cultures and, in a way, a democratic revolution in its own right. Many abolitionists campaigned for a restructuring of society that would extend the sphere of democracy to hitherto excluded groups, above all to blacks and women. Abolitionism could flourish in America not only because of the country's internal social and political structures but also because of its openness to "foreign" influences through mass immigration. New modes and strategies of protest and intervention were among the many cultural products with which the German-American radicals enriched the U.S. antislavery movement and, on a larger scale, American democratic culture as a whole. The integration of these products proved at times troublesome, occasionally even impossible. Nonetheless, they added a distinct flavor to American abolitionism, inducing those African- and Anglo-American abolitionists who came to taste it to reconsider, if not reconfigure, their own methods and ideas.

Traditional scholarship has pointed out that radical abolitionism drew much of its interventionist fervor from religious sources. Awakening Protestantism and New England reform culture have been considered as the main stimuli behind the abolition movement ever since Gilbert Barnes's seminal *The Antislavery Impulse*, published in 1933.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, one can sense a certain kinship between the conversion rituals taking place at an evangelical camp meeting and the missionary zeal radical abolitionists exhibited while trying to persuade slaveholders to renounce their "sinful" way of life. However, as Robert Fanuzzi underlines in his recent work *Abolition's Public Sphere*, abolitionism fed on a secular tradition as well. Compared to the emotional-sentimental thrust of antebellum evangelicalism, this tradition was more rational, more intellectual. It entailed

a commitment to critical discussion, the preference of the disinterested citizen over the acquisitive individual, the quest for the common good over partisan policies: in short, a republican concern for communal morality. This republicanism, according to Fanuzzi, was strongly anachronistic in that it defied the Jacksonian mainstream and its faith in individual self-fulfillment and material progress. In a massive publicity campaign including petitions, pamphlets, newspapers, and rallies, abolitionists used republican symbols of protest and resistance to try to create a revolutionary atmosphere similar to late-eighteenth-century precedents. The main architects of this public sphere were less the preachers and ministers but instead the professional printers who emerged from that urban artisan culture, which resonated deeply with Thomas Paine's freethinking-rationalist ideas. For men like Garrison or Elijah Lovejoy, the Illinois editor who was shot in 1837 for his critical articles on slavery, the press came to be a much more effective weapon in the fight against the "peculiar institution" than the pulpit.<sup>29</sup>

While the German societies followed a different path to modernity, they were not excluded from republican influences. At first glance, it seems problematic to look for traces of republicanism in nineteenth-century German states given their "long haul" from feudal foundations to modern nationhood. In spite of unfavorable political-constitutional conditions, however, republican sub- or countercultures, accompanied by processes of party formation, developed in different regions of the German Confederation, especially in the southwest. Republicanism in Germany prior to 1848 had two major strands. The first unfolded on the communal level, where medieval traditions of self-government had been revived in a series of reforms, as in the Prussian Municipal Ordinance of 1808. A second, perhaps more consequential strand was generated by the activities of private associations or societies (*Vereine*). Serving countless purposes, from recreation to social work and political education, this association culture played a vital role in the formation of critical public spheres. Not only did private associations imbue their members with an egalitarian ethos: The organized interest in common causes also bound together people from different ranks. They also gave them the opportunity to practice democratic procedures of opinion-shaping and decision-making that were not yet available in the realm of state politics.<sup>30</sup>

This kind of "associational republicanism" became an integral part of German-American political culture as well, including the counterculture of the radical Forty-Eighters. It provided a platform on which different radicalisms, within and beyond German-America, could meet and mingle. This interplay was facilitated by the fact that Anglo-Americans had a vivid associational culture of their own. Alexis de Tocqueville elaborated on this in his classic *Democracy in America*. In Tocqueville's

judgment, the desire of individuals to pursue common interests in voluntary associations—such as the abolition of slavery—had developed into a mainstay of American democracy.<sup>31</sup>

Religion, on the other hand, was a rather delicate issue in the conversation between American and German radicals. Enlightened rationalism in connection with anticlericalism was strong among German-American radicals and in some cases translated into full-fledged atheism. Many German democrats who had immigrated to the United States eyed America's Protestant culture with great suspicion. Their remarks concerning American religiosity often betrayed feelings of cultural superiority. "I would feel more comfortable here if there were more paintings, better drama, and less religion!" Otilie Assing wrote to her friend Karl Gutzkow in 1853: "This disgusting garlic smell and the stench of religion permeates all of life."<sup>32</sup> Most churchgoing Anglo- and African-American abolitionists would surely have taken offense if confronted with such points of view. For them, abolition was as much a religious expression as it was a project for secular improvement. Unlike Assing, a convinced atheist, they upheld a version of reform in which efforts toward social and political progress were preconditioned by faith in divine justice.<sup>33</sup>

As the dispute over religion indicates, there was much that separated African-, Anglo-, and German-American abolitionists from each other. It also confirms that abolitionism was no isolated idea. Rather, the fight against slavery was part of an intricate web of different social, political, and cultural threads. Many of these threads were knit together so tightly that the vibration of one thread was often enough to make the others vibrate as well. Instead of standing out as an independent phenomenon, abolitionism featured as one among many interrelated concerns in different individual and collective systems of ideas, beliefs, and values. These ideologies were always and necessarily included when African-, Anglo-, and German-Americans engaged in discussions about slavery.

Hence, what appears to have been a conversation on a single issue was in fact an intercultural exchange comprising a catalog of concerns. Stereotypes and perceptions of the "other" were no less the subject of negotiation in this exchange than more concrete political interests and everyday social practices. The majority of African-American activists did not view abolition as an end in itself but saw it as a first step toward defeating segregationism and implementing racial equality. The Anglo-American crusade against slavery was in large parts inseparable from prohibitionism and Sabbatarianism, the vision of a morally sound America that rejected human bondage, abhorred drinking, and respected Sunday worship. And a radical German-American Forty-Eighter rarely spoke about abolition outside the context of the labor and free thought movements, the European revolution, or the preservation of certain eth-

nocultural traditions of sociability. All this was taking place in a country whose people were increasingly exposed to the ideologies of racism and nativism. Both sought to ascertain the cultural superiority of white Anglo-Saxon America—against blacks on the one side and non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants on the other.<sup>34</sup>

## History and Freedom

One approach to telling the story of two or more cultures is to focus on distances. Another one is to focus on bridges by which these distances are overcome. This project is a story about bridges, about African-, Anglo-, and German-American men and women united by their will to end slavery on the North American continent. It is a story about specific cases of cultural-ideological interaction between African-, Anglo-, and German-Americans under the roof of abolitionism. It follows the different abolitionists from their points of departure, from their first encounters to the alliances they formed in the struggle against slavery. It strives to give an account of personal relationships and reconstruct in terms of both style and content the opinions that were exchanged and the discussions that were led in these relationships. It also aims to show how and to what extent these private negotiations brought about policies for shaping public opinion, particularly through journalism, associations, meetings, and demonstrations. In short, this is a story about men and women who transcended cultural boundaries while fighting a common enemy.

More than just strategic partnerships, the alliances between African-, Anglo-, and German-American abolitionists were spheres of cultural work. In places ranging from the private household to the antislavery convention, the participants learned about each other's successes and failures, hopes and disappointments, about each other's experiences of oppression and expectations for freedom. Stories were shared that extended one's sense of common cause and permitted strangers to become fellows. Empathy was invited to the degree that it was now possible to imagine oneself as being part of something greater than African-, Anglo-, or German-America. Promoting an alternative vision of America, the alliances turned into seedbeds of a new "imagined community."

Benedict Anderson originally coined the term "imagined communities" to signify a new way of looking at nations and their geneses. Nations, Anderson argues, owe their cohesiveness not so much to political and legal institutions as to collective imaginations, to shared habits, rites, traditions, myths, memories, and outlooks. By reading the same books and newspapers, distant citizens would consider themselves bound together in "a deep, horizontal comradeship" even though they "would never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of

them."<sup>35</sup> Anderson's interpretation notwithstanding, I suggest that the term "imagined communities" can also be used to describe processes of community-formation that go beyond nations in the conventional sense. The emergence of communities among African-, Anglo-, and German-American abolitionists was such a process. Unlike the Andersonian nation, these communities were transnational and were demarcated by time rather than by space. Geographical boundaries played a far less important role in how they defined and limited themselves than historical ones. Eager to give their aspirations direction and a deeper meaning, eager to set them apart from their perceived opposites, the abolitionists turned to the past. This is where the communities become "imagined." Connecting the different pasts with a shared present became essential to constructing a collective identity.

The narratives the abolitionists resorted to for this purpose were diverse but nonetheless revolved around similar motifs. They condemned oppression, persecution, slavery, and their alleged agents: slaveholders who denied their slaves basic human rights; European monarchs who kept their subjects in political bondage and held them in ignorance about their true potentials; and the U.S. government, which sanctioned the expansion of slavery while branding its opponents enemies of all social and political order. Abolitionists invoked equality, justice, and freedom, values that they deemed to be fully attainable in a world governed by the laws of progress. History, they believed, was moving to some better future, and through their endeavors they wanted to make sure that the far-off condition they were striving for would become reality in a time not so far-off. Free African-Americans, Anglo-American reformers, and German-American veterans of the uprisings of 1848–1849 imagined a universal revolutionary continuum in which the fight against slavery was one among many social projects on the road to secular perfection.

Nowhere does this longing for change become more apparent than in the abolitionists' use of the term freedom. A catchword of the movement, freedom played a central role in defining what abolition stood both for and against. Eric Foner once argued, "No idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom."<sup>36</sup> This is particularly true of those Americans who fought against slavery. In looking at how African-, Anglo-, and German-American abolitionists drew on the idea of freedom, I do not claim to give a comprehensive account of the history of American abolitionism. But viewing that history with freedom as the organizing theme allows us to shed light on unfamiliar elements, and to see familiar elements in new ways. Obviously, there was not one single way in which the different groups approached freedom and defined its meaning. Since the readings were diverse, it would make little sense to think of freedom as an unchanging

universal or prefixed category. Instead, I understand freedom as an essentially dynamic and therefore elusive and contested term whose meaning is constantly reshaped in accordance with prevailing discursive conditions. The story of freedom in the abolition movement as I want to tell it is not so much concerned with the emergence of a single definition as with how specific definitions, as well as the interplay of these definitions, prompted specific actions. By reconstructing the debates through which freedom acquired concrete meanings, I intend to uncover the "multiple purposes to which the idea [was] put, and the broader belief systems these usages illuminate."<sup>37</sup> Interpreting freedom in this manner, then, opens a window into the processes of cultural exchange between African-Americans, Anglo-American abolitionists, and radical German-American revolutionaries.

Rather than moving on an abstract ideological level, I focus on the concrete language the abolitionists employed in making their case for freedom. Evidence of this language can be found in private manuscripts and letters as well as in newspaper articles, pamphlets, speeches, and other printed sources. While I assume that those partaking in the abolition movement were using the same political vocabulary, I also assume that this vocabulary carried different connotations for antislavery activists from different ethnocultural backgrounds. What did slavery, oppression, persecution, and, above all, freedom mean to a fugitive slave living in one of the free African-American communities in the North; what to a veteran of the German uprisings of 1848–1849 who had relocated to the United States; what to an Anglo-American reformer working in one of the many American antislavery societies of the Civil War era? Even though there might have been deviating interpretations and political objectives, did they not fade before the common goal of ending slavery? Not only did the alliances constitute themselves on the basis of a shared political vocabulary; this shared vocabulary also mitigated ideological discrepancies among the participants.

When mediating across ethnocultural lines, the abolitionists helped to articulate a transethnic, transnational imagined community. They were intellectuals who combined social criticism with community-building. In negotiating how to unite forces against slavery, they provided the cultural and imaginary products for a broader consciousness of belonging together. They shaped collective memories, interpreted traditions, explained the present, and discarded that which went against their communal visions. The democratic culture these intellectuals nurtured resembled that of a deliberative democracy. An offshoot of Jürgen Habermas's political theory, deliberative democracy stresses the value of public discourse and rational forms of decision-making.<sup>38</sup> It postulates that the essence of democracy does not rest in governmental institu-

tions—parliaments, courts, elected leaders—but in citizens debating and evaluating all kinds of approaches to a specific policy issue. Although it was originally designed as a normative model, I suggest that deliberative democracy also works as a methodological tool for historians.

The abolitionist intellectuals I deal with in this project established networks, small-scale deliberative democracies, in which they opened up channels of critical exchange and deliberated about their common affairs. Opposition to slavery was one, if not the constituting element of these networks. But it was equally a point of departure for men and women who discovered that, with regard to their egalitarian visions, they were only part of a greater concert. In this sense, conversations about slavery and abolition between the three subgroups I have outlined were at the same time conversations about the chances and limits of democracy in an international, multicultural setting. So as these three groups, African-American intellectuals, Anglo-American abolitionists, and German-American Forty-Eighter revolutionaries, were pursuing “freedom,” each according to their own political and cultural understanding, they learned how and to what extent their definitions of freedom and democracy diverged from each other. They added another dimension that is still fairly unknown to Abraham Lincoln’s famous observation that liberty had become a universal slogan; “But in using the same word,” he went on, “we do not all mean the same thing.”<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William H. Gilman et al., eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, XIV (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 333. Emerson apparently borrowed this phrase from Mattie Griffith, a Southern abolitionist who manumitted all her slaves.

<sup>2</sup> Compare to Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst, 1984), 354–355, and David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The following account is based on reports in the December 6, 1859 editions of the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* and the *Cincinnati Volksfreund*, and on the December 2, 3, and 5, 1859 editions of the *Cincinnati Republikaner*. See also Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chicago, 1992), 223.

<sup>4</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, 6 December, 1859.

<sup>5</sup> *Cincinnati Republikaner*, 5 December, 1859: “Es war vielleicht zum ersten male, dass sich dieselbe Grund-idee, dasselbe Gefühl, mit einem Worte, dass innere geistige Band der Menschheit, zu einem so schönen harmonischen Einklang aus den in der Form verschiedenen Nationalitäten und Rassen bildete.”

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform, 1830–1860* (Wheeling, 1967), 94. Everyone dealing with abolitionism faces the problem of how to define the term. In many cases, historians do not adequately differentiate between those who were abolitionists in a strict sense and those who merely wanted to prevent the expansion of slavery. As Larry Gara shows in his perceptive article “Who Was an Abolitionist?” in *The Antislavery Vanguard*, ed. Martin Duberman (Princeton, 1965), 32–52, even contemporaries could not agree on who was an

abolitionist and who was not. Here the term "abolitionist" is applied to somebody who, either as a gradualist or immediatist, made the abolition of slavery an integral part of his or her moral and/or political agenda.

<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the white Anglo-American male protagonists of the movement, liberal-consensus scholars venerated Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and others as champions of the natural rights tradition. Revisionists, on the contrary, tended to portray these men in terms of extremists anxious about social status whose actions only frustrated moves toward a peaceful settlement of the slavery problem. Mertin L. Dillon, "The Abolitionists: A Decade of Historiography, 1959–69," *Journal of Southern History* 35 (1969): 500–22, and Betty Fladeland, "Revisionists vs. Abolitionists: The Historiographical Cold War of the 1930s and 1940s," *Journal of the Early Republic* 6 (1986): 1–21, provide good overviews of earlier debates about the abolitionists' legacy. Richard Hofstadter's approval of Wendell Phillips in his *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1951) is representative of the liberal-consensus view of abolitionism. Positive assessments also dominate in Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, 1961) and Louis Filler, *The Crusade against Slavery, 1830–1860* (New York, 1960). Among the revisionist perspectives on abolitionism, Avery O. Craven, *The Repressible Conflict* (Baton Rouge, La., 1939), and David Donald, "Toward a Reconsideration of the Abolitionists," in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era*, ed. David Donald (New York, 1956), 19–36, have been the most influential.

<sup>8</sup> Women in the abolition movement are examined in Alma Lutz, *Crusade for Freedom: Women of the Antislavery Movement* (Boston, 1968) and in Jean Fagan Yellin and John Van Horn, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Cultures in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, 1994). The first major work about Afro-American antislavery activists was Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969). Others followed, most prominently Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–61* (New York, 1974) and R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1983). The theory that northern women who fought against patriarchy introduced a new feminized masculinity into the movement which encouraged abolitionists to embrace nonviolence is put forward in John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harold, eds., *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America* (Knoxville, 1999). As to racial prejudice among white abolitionists and paternalism toward blacks, one should consider Leon Litwack, "The Emancipation of the Negro Abolitionist," in *The Antislavery Vanguard*, 137–155, and Pease and Pease, "Ends, Means, and Attitudes: Black-White Conflict in the Antislavery Movement," *Civil War History* 18 (1972): 117–28.

<sup>9</sup> Recommendable works on this subject are Donald M. Jacobs, *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington, 1993); John R. McKivigan, "The Frederick Douglass-Gerrit Smith Friendship and Political Abolitionism in the 1850s," in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York, 1996), 205–37; and Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975); John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* (New York, 1995); Mark Noll, ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790–1860* (New York, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context, 1830–1860* (Athens, 1979), and a more recent work by Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> According to official statistics, the number of immigrants coming to America in the 1840s and 1850s amounted to almost 30 percent of the nation's free population in 1840. Proportionally this influx of immigrants was the largest in the history of the United States. See also Levine, *Spirit of 1848*, 2. For more detailed figures see Theodore Hamerow, "The Two Worlds of the Forty-Eighters," in *The German Forty-Eighters in the United States*, ed. Charlotte Brancaforte (New York et al., 1989), 20–22.

<sup>13</sup> Leroy T. Hopkins, "The Germantown Protest: Origins of Abolitionism among the German Residents of Southeastern Pennsylvania," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* (1988); Edmund Spevack, *Charles Follen's Search For Nationality and Freedom: Germany and America, 1796–1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Adopted Citizens and Slavery," *Douglass' Monthly* (August 1859). In the same text, Douglass praised the "many noble and high-minded men, most of whom, swept over by the tide of the revolution of 1848, have become our active allies against oppression and prejudice." According to rough estimates, some 3,000 to 5,000 political refugees crossed the Atlantic in the late 1840s and 1850s; see also A. E. Zucker, ed., *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848* (New York, 1950), 269.

<sup>15</sup> That Enlightenment traditions revived in the European revolutions of the late 1840s may account for the sympathy for abolitionism in certain segments of the German immigrant population was reaffirmed by Hartmut Keil, "German Immigrants and African-Americans in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in *Enemy Images in American History*, ed. Ursula Lehmkuhl and Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase (Providence, 1997), 137–57.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Heinzen, "Republik und Sklaverei" (Pionier, January 6, 1856), in *Teutscher Radikalismus in Amerika*, ed. Karl Heinzen, IV (Boston, 1879), 139.

<sup>17</sup> Overviews and introductions to these aspects can be found in: Brancaforte, *The German Forty-Eighters in the United States*; Wolfgang Hochbruck, ed., *Achtundvierziger/Forty-Eighters: Die Deutschen Revolutionen von 1848/49, die Vereinigten Staaten und der amerikanische Bürgerkrieg* (Münster, 2000); and Trommler, *Deutsch-Amerikanische Begegnungen*. Helpful overviews, albeit of older age, are Zucker, *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848*, and Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution: The German Forty-Eighters in America* (Philadelphia, 1952). On the problem of German-American integration, Kathleen Neils Conzen's articles are still state of the art, in particular "German-Americans and the Invention of Ethnicity," in *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, ed. Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, I (Philadelphia, 1985), 132–47, and "Die Deutschen und die Entstehung des pluralistischen Amerikas," in *Deutsch-Amerikanische Begegnungen: Konflikt und Kooperation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Frank Trommler and Elliot Shore (Stuttgart, 2001), 31–45.

<sup>18</sup> More recent biographies of prominent mid-nineteenth-century German expatriates contain sporadic, while relatively isolated, information on their hostility to slavery: e.g. Sabine Freitag, *Friedrich Hecker: Biographie eines Republikaners* (Stuttgart, 1998); Justin Davis Randers-Pehrson, *Adolf Douai, 1819–1888: The Turbulent Life of a German Forty-Eighter in the Homeland and in the United States* (New York, 2000); Axel W.-O. Schmidt, *Der rothe Doktor von Chicago—ein deutsch-amerikanisches Auswandererschicksal: Biographie des Dr. Ernst Schmidt, 1830–1900* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003); Ansgar Reiß, *Radikalismus und Exil: Gustav Struwe und die Demokratie in Deutschland und Amerika* (Stuttgart, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Conzen, "Die Deutschen und die Entstehung des pluralistischen Amerikas," 36.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines: Ottillie Assing and Frederick Douglass* (New York, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959–1964).

<sup>22</sup> For the kinship between American and German revolutionary traditions, see Keil, "German Immigrants and African-Americans" and Günter Moltmann, *Atlantische Blockpolitik im 19. Jahrhundert: Die Vereinigten Staaten und der deutsche Liberalismus während der Revolution von 1848/49* (Düsseldorf, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Good and very recent introductions to the discipline of Atlantic history are Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), and the preface to Hermann Wellenreuther et al., eds., *Niedergang und Aufstieg: Geschichte Nordamerikas vom Beginn der Besiedlung bis zum Ausgang des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Münster, 2001). Wellenreuther defines Atlantic history basically as a "history of the transfer of peoples, goods, information, and ideas between the Old and the New World."

<sup>24</sup> A similar argument was made by Ira Berlin in his "Comments on Jürgen Osterhammel's 'In Search of a Nineteenth Century,'" *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Washington DC* 32 (2003), 32.

<sup>25</sup> The German *Sonderweg* paradigm has been revisited by Jürgen Elsässer, *Der deutsche Sonderweg: Historische Last und Politische Herausforderung* (Munich, 2003). Examples of the traditional school of American reform historiography are Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform*, and the classic by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945). The persistence of exceptionalism as a distinct interpretation of American history is demonstrated by John Patrick Diggins, *On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History* (New Haven, 2000), 101–124.

<sup>26</sup> Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol. 2 (New York, 1927), 53–54, and James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> McPherson, "The Second American Revolution," in *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 3–7. *New Yorker Criminal Zeitung und Belletristisches Journal*, April 26, 1861: "Der Geist von Achtundvierzig ist wieder erwacht." See also Levine, *Spirit of 1848*, 256.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (Gloucester, 1933); see also John L. Thomas, *The Liberator, William Lloyd Garrison: A Biography* (Boston, 1963). Barnes's and Thomas's arguments have been enhanced over the years by studies like James B. Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The American Abolitionists and Slavery* (New York, 1976); John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism in the Northern Churches, 1830–1865* (Ithaca, 1984); and John R. McKivigan, ed., *Abolitionism and American Religion* (New York, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition's Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, 2003). The public sphere as a category of social and historical analysis goes back to Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Munich, 1962). American dimensions of nineteenth-century publicity are discussed in Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 289–339, and Michael Schudson, "Was There ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 143–63; see also Alfred F. Young, *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1993).

<sup>30</sup> See *Republicanism and Liberalism in America and the German States, 1750–1850*, ed. Jürgen Heideking and James A. Henretta (Cambridge, 2002), above all the essays by Rudolf Vierhaus and Paul Nolte.

<sup>31</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, 2000), 180–186.

<sup>32</sup> Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines*, 104.

<sup>33</sup> David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) is a powerful example of the appropriation of an Old Testament liberation theology for the cause of ending slavery which was particularly strong in the African-American camp.

<sup>34</sup> On the history of racism in nineteenth-century America, see Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore, 1996), and Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, 2000). A useful overview of antebellum nativism and its relation to slavery can be found in Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991), 5–7.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1999), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Foner, *Story*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Deliberative democracy has become both a political movement and a blossoming field of research. Other important theorists are Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958) and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). See also James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997) and Michael R. James, *Deliberative Democracy and the Plural Polity* (Lawrence, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Address at Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, April 18, 1864," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 7 (New Brunswick, 1953), 301.