

150 years since the execution of John Brown

By Fred Mazelis
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Wednesday marked the 150th anniversary of the execution of John Brown for the failed raid he led on the US Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Although his action was doomed to defeat, the revolutionary abolitionist earned his place in history as the man who prophesied and inspired the Civil War, the struggle that must properly be defined as the Second American Revolution.

Brown led a small band of armed men who briefly seized the armory containing some 100,000 weapons. He hoped to arm slaves and spark a spreading uprising. After a siege of about 36 hours, however, the abolitionists were overpowered by a company of US Marines under the command of Robert E. Lee. Ten of the group, including two of Brown's sons, were killed. Five escaped and seven, including Brown himself, were captured.

Brown and the others were quickly tried by the state of Virginia. On December 2, 1859, having been convicted of murder, conspiring in a slave rebellion and treason, John Brown was executed by hanging.

The Harpers Ferry raid highlighted the insoluble contradiction posed by the continued existence of chattel slavery in the country founded on the principles of the Declaration of Independence. It foreshadowed the war that led to the greatest expropriation of private property the world had ever seen, ushering in the ascendancy of capitalism based on free labor in opposition to slavery.

Brown's audacious act of insurrection was greeted by howls of fury in the South and strenuous disavowals by political leaders in the North, including Abraham Lincoln and other leading figures in the Republican Party. Yet only 16 months after his execution, the final words he submitted to the court as he was led to the gallows—"I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood"—were fully borne out. The four-year Civil War that began in April 1861 took more than 600,000 lives and abolished slavery.

Sesquicentennial observances of the Harpers Ferry raid this year included a four-day program of events in the historic town itself, which is now part of West Virginia, the state formed during the Civil War by an act of secession from the secessionist Confederacy. Harpers Ferry today is home to restored buildings and historical museums. It is part of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, situated in the three states of Virginia, Maryland and West Virginia, where they meet at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers.

Among other commemorative events are two ongoing museum exhibits: one at the Virginia Historical Museum in Richmond, the city that was the capital of the slave states that made up the Confederacy, and the other at the New York Historical Society.

The New York City exhibition, small but full of important material, includes original correspondence, posters and advertisements, photographs and other memorabilia. All of these combine to evoke the period leading up to the Civil War itself, and place Brown's raid in its historical context, apart from which it cannot be understood.

Included are letters between Brown and some of his sons; the well known painting by Thomas S. Noble from 1867, John Brown's Blessing, showing the martyred abolitionist blessing a black infant; a broadside,

entitled "John Brown Still Lives," announcing an anti-slavery rally to be held in Illinois on December 30, 1859, four weeks after Brown's execution; a copy of Julia Ward Howe's famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic," the Civil War anthem for which she wrote the lyrics in 1862, soon after Union soldiers had marched to the same tune, set to the words of "John Brown's Body"; and the texts of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, the Reconstruction Amendments that abolished slavery and granted citizenship and voting rights to former slaves and their descendants.

Brown's legacy has remained a contested one during the entire period since Harpers Ferry. He represented the most extreme left wing of the abolitionist movement in his uncompromising commitment to full racial equality and his attempts to organize the slave population itself in the fight for liberation. The Republican Party, representing the then-progressive interests of Northern capital, hesitated before the task at hand. In the famous words of Lincoln in his 1862 letter to Horace Greeley, "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that..."

Lincoln's greatness was demonstrated by his readiness, when history gave him no other choice, to see the battle through with the determination, eloquence and political and military ruthlessness that were required and that have secured his place in history. It was Brown who insisted on revolutionary struggle, but it was Lincoln and the social forces he represented that led the Civil War to victory over slavery. As historian Eric Foner recently commented, "Brown believed that the only way to overthrow slavery was by violence. Now, that actually turned out to be true."

Brown was revered as a martyr during and after the Civil War. Even before the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, a definite radicalization in the North was reflected in the reaction to the Harpers Ferry raid from such figures as author Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in his diary on December 2, 1859: "This will be a great day in our history; the date of a new Revolution—quite as much needed as the old one. Even now as I write, they are leading old John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue slaves! This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come soon."

From Europe Victor Hugo, then in exile from the regime of Napoleon III in France, appealed for Brown's life and warned, "Politically speaking the murder of John Brown would be an uncorrectable sin...Brown's agony might perhaps consolidate slavery in Virginia, but it would certainly shake the whole American democracy...Let America know and ponder this: there is something more frightening than Cain killing Abel, and that is Washington killing Spartacus."

The significance of Brown's action was reflected as well in the correspondence of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Marx wrote to Engels in January 1860, "In my opinion, the biggest things that are happening in the world today are on the one hand the movement of the slaves in

America started by the death of John Brown, and on the other the movement of the serfs of Russia...”

With the end of the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, John Brown’s stature in mainstream historiography suffered a sharp reversal. The former states of the Confederacy set in place a system of rigid segregation. In the North as well, racism and racial discrimination continued to be the rule, and Brown was vilified by historians and official public opinion. Early biographies denounced him as a madman and bloodthirsty fanatic, while he remained venerated by the descendants of slaves and by working class fighters and socialists like Eugene Debs, who looked to John Brown’s legacy in the fight against wage slavery.

In the mid-20th century, amidst the growing struggle against Jim Crow, John Brown commanded growing attention. In the reactionary political climate of the past three decades, however, there have been continuing attempts to demonize him.

It is not surprising that American capitalism, having long since turned violently against its own revolutionary origins, depicts Brown in the most negative light. This parallels social and political thinking more broadly. The leaders of the American Revolution did not believe in organized religion, but today every capitalist politician must wear his religiosity on his sleeve. The Republican Party of Lincoln is now the party of Bush, Cheney and Sarah Palin. The ruling elite is well aware that the revolutionary legacy of John Brown is a dangerous topic.

The Times and the “temptation of terror”

This is the broader relevance of a recent article on John Brown by *New York Times* cultural critic-at-large Edward Rothstein. Rothstein warns in his review of the abovementioned New York City exhibit: “...can we not also be distressed by the implications of Brown’s methods, and worry over their enthusiastic embrace over the past 150 years? In his welcome of martyrdom, his visions of apocalyptic retribution and his unshakable belief in his own virtue, Brown is now so familiar a type on the world scene that we cannot resist being horrified by the temptation of terror that he succumbed to, even if, as in this particular case, we welcome its long-sought goal.”

This comment is typical of petty bourgeois moralism of the sort dissected so well by Leon Trotsky in *Their Morals and Ours* in 1938. Revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence are equated, ignoring the material foundation and historical role of opposed political tendencies.

As Trotsky put it: “A slaveowner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains – let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!”

As a general rule, the methods of individual terrorism, even when directed against the enemies of humanity, are counterproductive and even reactionary. The assassination of the Russian Tsar in 1881, while motivated by revolutionary convictions, did nothing to advance the cause of the struggle against the autocracy. With actions taken against random innocents and on behalf of obscurantist reaction, as in the instances of Timothy McVeigh and Al Qaeda, the character of such methods is even clearer.

Terror in the midst of a civil war, however, is another matter. Sherman’s march through Georgia was part and parcel of the winning of the Civil War. And John Brown’s actions, including Harpers Ferry, although misguided from a military standpoint, must be seen in the context of the Civil War. That is why Civil War historian James McPherson correctly declared in a recent interview that Brown was “more of a freedom fighter than a terrorist,” and David S. Reynolds, in his important 2005 biography, “John Brown, Abolitionist”, explained that comparisons between Brown and terrorists like McVeigh and anti-abortion assassins were extremely misleading.

There was an element of individual terrorism in Brown’s action, in the

conception that the bold initiative of a small group would spark a mass uprising. But that is not all, or even the predominant element in John Brown’s legacy.

The exhibit at the New York Historical Society demonstrates that Brown was part of a growing mass movement. Brown, the son of an abolitionist, dedicated his life to the eradication of slavery. From 1837, in particular, when Illinois journalist Elijah Lovejoy was assassinated by a pro-slavery mob, Brown became increasingly unbending in his outlook.

The decade of the 1850s was the decisive period in the gathering of the opposed class forces that would explode in the Civil War. The Compromise of 1850 showed the continued strength of the Southern pro-slavery camp in Washington. The Fugitive Slave Act, part of this intricate legislation, made the Northern states legally responsible for apprehending escaped slaves, and provoked anger and growing radicalization in the North.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 further inflamed the conflict, creating new territories that were eventually to become states, but allowing settlers in these territories to determine whether they would be slave or free. This was a new means of expanding slavery into the western states in ways that slavery opponents had thought were foreclosed.

Settlers poured into Kansas from both North and South, setting the stage for the battle that gave rise to the term “Bleeding Kansas.” Over the next several years it was to serve as a kind of rehearsal for the Civil War. Four of Brown’s sons moved to Kansas in 1855 and Brown joined them later that year.

May 1856 witnessed several thunderbolts in quick succession. On May 21 the so-called Border Ruffians, pro-slavery settlers in Kansas, sacked the town of Lawrence. One day later, the gathering storm over slavery exploded in the United States Senate, when Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina beat Republican Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts so brutally that Sumner needed three years to recover before returning to the Senate.

This was followed by the infamous Dred Scott decision by the US Supreme Court in 1857, which declared that no slave or descendent of a slave could claim the rights of a US citizen, and that Congress had no authority to outlaw slavery anywhere in the US.

It was in these circumstances that Brown carried out the retaliatory raid in Pottawatomie, Kansas, killing five pro-slavery men. This incident, even more than Harpers Ferry, has been pointed to as proof of Brown’s terrorism, but there is strong evidence that these men were not random victims, that they had threatened abolitionists and the Brown family in particular. As the Harpers Ferry raid further demonstrated, Brown employed violence for definite political purposes and only as a last resort.

Far from a mindless fanatic, Brown met with such figures as Emerson and Thoreau, and with black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Though devoutly religious, Brown numbered among his adherents Jews like August Bondi and agnostics as well.

As Reynolds and others have pointed out, Brown possessed an unusual eloquence. This was not incidental, but was rather the expression of his revolutionary role and consciousness of the class divisions within American society. As he testified to the court at his trial:

“Had I interfered in the manner which I admit...had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right. Every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment...I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by

wicked, cruel and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.”

This is the statement of a genuine revolutionary figure, and was recognized as such at the time.

Which brings us back to the issue of why Brown’s legacy troubles the cultural critic of the *Times*, and what lies behind the refusal to recognize him as one of the authentic revolutionary figures in American history.

What worries Mr. Rothstein is not violence per se. He is perfectly comfortable with the employment of violence by the capitalist state on a colossal scale, but to the masses of people who have no future under capitalism he preaches slavery and submission.

A new “irrepressible conflict” is taking shape in the US and around the world. The profit system of wage slavery, a system that led to the vast development of the productive forces of society in John Brown’s day, has in the past century led to catastrophic world wars, massive poverty and threats to the very survival of humanity.

Future generations will see that the sanctification of private ownership of the means of production has produced the legal enslavement of the vast majority of the population, through the mechanisms of unemployment, crushing debt and social misery.

Apologists for bankrupt capitalism are worried that working people will draw the lessons of John Brown’s life, that revolutionary struggle is necessary to sweep away an outmoded social order.

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