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# Introduction

*Beyond Garrison* is about the politicization of abolitionism in antebellum Massachusetts. It seeks to show how and why a group of abolitionists embraced political action at the turn of the 1830s and where they took the movement over the next two decades. It is not a study of William Lloyd Garrison, not directly anyway. No historian of abolitionism, least of all one writing about the Bay State, can afford to ignore Garrison, for no other abolitionist of the age had such sweeping renown. As the best-known abolitionist in the United States, Garrison was also the one American known to everyone in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Western Europe. Yet each generation of Americans, it seems, needs to rediscover Garrison. In the last half century, nearly a dozen biographies of Garrison and scores of articles on him have appeared, a vast body of work that initially treated his public life and more recently has delved into his upbringing and private affairs. We know him as well as or better than we know any other leading figure in his time.[1]

[1] On Garrison's personal life, see R. Jackson Wilson, *Figures of Speech: The Literary Marketplace, From Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 117–58, and Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Growing Up Abolitionist: The Story of the Garrison Children* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2002). On his public life, see John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963); Walter McIntosh Merrill, *Against Wind and Tide: A Biography of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963); Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); James Brewer Stewart, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Challenge of Emancipation* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: H. Davidson, 1992); and Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).



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There is also much we do not know or do not fully appreciate, not so much about Garrison as about the larger antislavery project. This void stems in part from scholars' enduring fascination with Garrison, a fascination that has left much of the antislavery movement in his shadow. The problem goes beyond the narrow focus of biography as a genre to the tendency of some abolitionist biographers and institutional historians alike to view abolitionism from a Garrisonian perspective on the question of the strategy and tactics needed to end slavery and bring about racial equality.

Such scholars maintain that the tactic of moral suasion, an enduring signature of Garrisonianism in the antebellum years, represented a more exalted order of activity than political action did. Henry Mayer's recent and much acclaimed biography of Garrison, which traces the roots of moral suasion to the Protestant doctrine of the moral autonomy of the individual, accepts the Garrisonian dictum that the reformation of the self had to precede voting or indeed collective action in general. Mayer's perspective reverses a derisive portrait of "the great agitator" sketched by Albert Hobbs Barnes in the 1930s and famously elaborated by Stanley Elkins twenty-five years later. Those historians alternately depicted Garrison and his followers as "anarchists" and "fanatics," driven by a self-defeating "anti-institutional radicalism" that rejected the fundamental institutions of order and authority from political parties and churches down to the Constitution.[2] Barnes facetiously repeated the charge hurled at Garrison in 1836 that the abolitionist "nominated Jesus Christ to be President of the United States and the World," or, more accurately, that Garrison would have done so had he believed in the efficacy of political action.[3] For his part, Mayer sounds very much like Garrison himself, asserting that "voters first had to accept immediatism as their soul-force" before they could be trusted to do the right thing at the ballot box. Otherwise, they were mere "tools of party" and not "free moral agents," just as Garrison had maintained.[4] Mayer takes Garrison's detractors to task for having "narrowed the story of abolitionism" after 1840 by drawing attention to its political stage.[5]

[2] Mayer, *All on Fire*; Albert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1933); and Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963). Also Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 137–63.

[3] Barnes, *Antislavery Impulse,* p. 93.

[4] Mayer, *All on Fire*, pp. 263–4 and 276. Quote is on p. 263.

[5] Ibid., pp. 358–9, 274–7, 368–9, and 381–3.

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This uncritical acceptance of Garrisonian moral suasion applies to Garrison's position on race as well. A principled foe of racism, Garrison found it impossible to envision emancipation or racial equality without a thoroughgoing transformation of the hearts of men and women. Political abolitionists, said Garrison's early friend Frederick Douglass, looked upon slavery as "the creature of law; we regarded it as a creature of public opinion."[6] This distinction between the morality of race and slavery and their politics forms the core of scholarly assessment of Garrison's activism. Critics see Garrison's perfectionism as a liability. It "defined goals," writes John L. Thomas, "and at the same time denied the authority of institutions through which these goals might be attained."[7] Garrison's admirers, of course, see it differently. Their version of the shift from moral suasion to political antislavery is a declension narrative, a retreat from high-minded egalitarianism to the opportunism of the Liberty Party, the first legitimate antislavery party, formed in 1840, and then of the Free Soil Party, the Liberty Party's successor, formed in 1848. A standard declensionist account argues that the Liberty Party sacrificed on the altar of electoral politics the racial idealism it inherited from Garrisonianism. The party's "sensitivity" to "Northern rights" bore the "makings of a white supremacist's antislavery, an ideology in which racism and sectionalism could easily reinforce one another." The Free Soilers strayed even farther from racial enlightenment, denouncing slavery "as a menace to white society" yet "expressing contempt for black-skinned people."[8] The point of this work is that political abolitionism was essentially racist.

The Garrisonian denigration of politics brings the current political scene to mind. We see it in the entrepreneurs and Hollywood idols who seek office, as H. Ross Perot did in 1992 and Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2003. Such individuals run not so much as antiestablishment figures but as antipoliticians with no political experience. Some observers attribute the current political climate to modern-day culture warriors and

[6] Douglass, quoted in ibid., p. 326.

[7] Thomas, *Liberator,* p. 232.

[8] James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 105. Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 95–100 and 158–60, takes a more balanced view on the Libertyites and the Free Soilers, as does Eric Foner, "Racial Attitudes of the New York Free Soilers," in Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 77–93.

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identity politicians who resemble the Garrisonians, partly in their single-issue zealotry but mostly in their holier-than-thou celebration of the "cultures" of "the other" as morally pure and unerringly correct, and in their condemnation of politics as corrupt. The sociologist Todd Gitlin, for one, assails the rigidity of modern-day culture warriors, whose purity and absolutism "de-moralize the proponents of commonality, choke off the forbearance, the reciprocity, and, yes, the deal-making that are the pre-requisites of a successful democratic politics in a complicated society."[9] The civil rights activist Bayard Rustin was aware of this tendency long before Gitlin. He despaired over the slogan "the personal is political" because it substituted the politics of metaphor and symbolism for the nitty-gritty politics of civil rights and economic equality. As Rustin ruefully put it, "People who seek social change will, in the absence of real substantive victories, often seize upon stylistic substitutes."[10] This is not to suggest that political flexibility ought to be an end in itself. There is obviously much to be said for sticking to principle and for shunning compromises that are unquestionably harmful, as anyone familiar with the Constitution's infamous "three-fifths clause" presumably would concede.[11] But ruling out politics and compromise as a matter of principle is self-defeating.

This contemporary disenchantment with politics extends to historians, who in the last twenty years or so have shown more interest in the study of society and culture than in the study of politics. I will have more to say on this later. Here it is enough to observe that no aspect of the new cultural history is more important than its work on race. The advent of "whiteness studies," as the study of race is now called, has deepened the perception embedded in past work on political antislavery that racism has

[9] Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), p. 35. Also see pp. 126–65. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), goes a step farther in a condemnation of the left, both old and new, for their misguided idealisms headed by rejecting patriotism and incrementalism, only to call in the end for a kind of utopianism. One can regret Rorty's confusion and hackneyed treatment of the left on most issues (save patriotism) and still find merit in his impatience with the politics of identity.

[10] See John D'Emilio, *The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: The Free Press, 2003). Quote is from Michael Anderson, "The Organizer," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Nov. 9, 2003, p. 13.

[11] See, for instance, Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1990), and Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2000).

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long pervaded American culture and politics.[12] Such an analysis makes the racial liberalism of the Garrisons of American history look rather admirable.

This book runs against the grain of the recent wisdom on antislavery and race. It argues that political action was an effective strategy consistent with moral rectitude and not a naive plunge into a smarmy world of compromise and accommodation. It does not question Garrison's sincerity on political action or race relations, only the efficaciousness of his strategy of moral suasion. Garrison's relentless agitation in the name of equal rights shook a nation that needed plenty of shaking. He tried hard to make antebellum Americans aware of the contradiction between the nation's lofty ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and its disgraceful treatment of African Americans, as well as make them aware of the complicity of Northerners and their institutions – including the Protestant churches – in the maintenance of Southern slavery. But while Garrison may have awakened the conscience of some Northerners, he also led his followers into something of a moral dead end. He steadfastly insisted that the answer to the moral cleansing of individual souls was more moral cleansing, a seemingly endless pursuit of self-purification that mistook the avoidance of politics for progress even as political abolitionism eclipsed his own movement.

Many of the "other" antislavery reformers who appear in this book abhorred slavery and racial discrimination as passionately as did Garrison. Some national leaders in the Liberty Party, it is true, and many more Free Soilers, gradually traded immediate emancipation for the containment of slavery in the South, and they drew back from the racial equality that was the hallmark of Garrisonianism. Not a few of them can be described only as racists. However, their Bay State counterparts pursued a more idealist course. Elizur Wright, Chauncey Langdon Knapp, and Henry Ingersoll Bowditch were but a few of the state's Libertyites turned Free Soilers who fought against slavery and against the exclusion of blacks from public facilities. They reacted strongly to events on the national scene such as the Mexican War and the Fugitive Slave Act without losing sight of the impact of slavery and race on state politics. With the approval and

[12] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991; New York: Verso, 1999). For a critical review of this genre, see Eric Arnesen et al., "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *ILWCH* 60 (Fall 2001): 3–92.

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support of African American activists they worked hard and successfully for laws that offered fugitive slaves some protection from slave catchers, gave black children access to mainline schools, and allowed African American travelers to use public transportation without the humiliation of Jim Crow accommodations. Indeed, few antislavery advocates waged a harder battle against segregation in antebellum Massachusetts than did Bowditch.

If Bowditch and his friends do not fit the image of the racist projected in whiteness literature, neither is it helpful to think of them as though they were modern liberals who believe in racial equality. Rare was the Bay Stater in and around antislavery circles who thought that blacks were the equals of whites.[13] Men like Bowditch were racists of a sort (if by that one means committed to white supremacy), but their racism was different from that of the street-corner toughs and courthouse politicians who sought to harm African Americans in the streets and in politics. My point is that there was no single perspective on race either in antebellum Massachusetts or probably anywhere else at the time; instead, there was a spectrum of opinion bound up with the larger context of racism by benign paternalism and militant colonizationism. Different states and regions were situated at different points on this spectrum, with New England located toward the paternalistic end and Massachusetts at the region's forefront.

Because they were politicians bent on winning elections and exercising political power, Free Soilers had to work out alliances with groups that did not necessarily share their main objective of abolishing slavery. This need for alliances proved to be at once controversial and troublesome. It was controversial because the single-issue men in the Free Soil Party's ranks feared that tacking more planks onto its platform risked distracting the party from ending slavery and improving the conditions of African Americans. Also, some Free Soilers were economic conservatives and as such were uneasy with demands for popular reform that welled from below. It was troublesome because the Free Soilers had to assemble a diverse coalition of groups. Some of these groups were organized into movements, as were the labor reformers, prohibitionists, and African Americans; others were only loosely associated as interests, as were the countryfolk angry at

[13] For an engaging discussion of the problem of race and racial identity, see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Racial Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002). Also see Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1998).

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Boston for its economic and political power. The politics of alliance and coalition enhanced the influence and power of Bay State Free Soilers, but it also unleashed debilitating factional discord.

The central importance of coalitions in the making of antislavery politics in Massachusetts has decisively shaped the perspective of this book. It quickly became clear to me that it made no sense to reproduce the conventional angle of vision on the reform groups radiating around antislavery from the core of the movement to its periphery. We already have a pretty good idea of how abolitionists perceived labor reformers and feminists, but we have a poorer one of how those reformers looked upon antislavery. This is especially true for groups that have received scant attention, such as African Americans, villagers, and townsfolk. Therefore I dedicate much space in this book to social movements and, in particular, to their relationships to antislavery. I thus build on the pioneering work done on Bay State politics by Ronald P. Formisano, who studied the fit between popular movements, on the one hand, and regular politics and third-party insurgencies, on the other.[14]

The politics of race (and class) is an important part of my story. Recent scholarship on "whiteness" identifies working people as the shock troops of racism. This mounting body of work, based deeply in popular culture, is necessarily inferential.[15] It assumes, for example, that workers who attended Jim Crow concerts, one of the more popular amusements for the many, accepted the racist stereotypes in such entertainment. Such an approach is understandable given the paucity of direct evidence; one searches labor papers and private correspondence in vain for commentary by ordinary workers on race. Working people were even more reticent on the topic than their social betters, forcing historians to look for other evidence. Two other sources, which inform this book, offer a different picture. One source is the social composition of antislavery societies in Massachusetts. Recent studies show, as this one does, that wage-earning workingmen and workingwomen were a significant segment of a larger social configuration consisting of middling people, that is, mechanics, small retailers, and petty professionals.[16] The question is how to interpret

[14] Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983).

[15] See also Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[16] Edward Magdol, *The Antislavery Rank and File: A Social Profile of the Abolitionists' Constituency* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986); John B. Jentz, "The Antislavery Constituency in Jacksonian New York City," *CWH* 27 (June 1981): 101–22; and

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such a finding. Because local antislavery societies expressed sympathy for slaves and for free blacks we can dismiss the possibility that such workers were the sneering racists featured in the literature. The other source on race is politics. Voting patterns for the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party point in the same direction as the antislavery societies, if in a qualified way. Workers who voted for the Libertyites were probably closer to the abolitionist spirit than workers who were Free Soilers. The Free Soil Party drew a wider popular vote that likely included men animated by racial hatred and by the region's historic antipathy to the South, an antipathy heightened by the tightening of sectional tensions at the turn of the 1840s and into the 1850s. Nonetheless, Free Soil lawmakers in places like Lynn and Lowell had liberal voting records on race, and these politicians presumably reflected the views of their constituents. This is not to suggest a direct correspondence between the voting records of politicians and the attitudes of their electorates; nor is it to claim that workers and ordinary men who voted for antislavery politicians had race in mind when they went to the ballot box. Many of the voters may well have been venting anger at the South, or at Catholic immigrants, or at both. A voter could be, and many were, anti-Southern and anti-immigrant as well as more open-minded on race than the conventional wisdom on popular racism would have us believe.

What are we to make of this? Two forces shaped workers' views on slavery and race. One influence was religion. Libertyism and to some extent Free Soilism did best in towns with large concentrations of evangelical churches drenched in religious perfectionism. That the Quaker strongholds of Lynn and New Bedford delivered strong antislavery votes is no accident.[17] Also, it is clear that evangelicalism reached only so far. The other influence was politics. Years of agitation against the proslavery policies of the Democratic Party – especially the controversial "gag rule" – and in favor of civil rights influenced voters who were from the working

Mark Voss-Hubbard, "Slavery, Capitalism, and the Middling Sorts: The Rank and File of Political Abolitionism," *ANCH* 4 (Summer 2003): 53–76.

[17] On Lynn, see Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1981), and on New Bedford, see Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2001). Also see John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County Massachusetts, 1713–1861* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 353–88, and Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture,* pp. 327–9. Goodman, *Of One Blood*, pp. 103–21, doubts that evangelical religion alone motivated antislavery because many activists were orthodox Protestants.

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class and not simply from the fabled middle class universally described as antislavery's best friend. But politics was not a one-way street in antebellum Massachusetts any more than it is today. Antislavery agitation provoked a virulent reaction from conservative Democrats, who leaned on white supremacy harder and harder to attract voters at home and to ingratiate themselves with their friends in the South. The Democrats soon learned, however, that pro-Southern, or "doughface," politics wore thin in Massachusetts. They also learned that for all the attention showered on Garrison, his camp was far outnumbered by antislavery activists – black and white, male and female – who bent their energies toward the ballot box. Politics had meaning and significance extending beyond Garrison.

The passion of antislavery activists for political engagement flies in the face of recent work that questions the popularity of politics. In *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century,* Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin tell us that Americans were not as enthusiastic about the "second party system" as "new political historians" would have us believe.[18] Never mind the cider-soaked picnics, the dazzling parades and processions, or the huge voter turnouts, warn Altschuler and Blumin, explaining that these were merely episodes on the political calendar, not part of everyday life. Besides, the participants did not turn out on their own volition; they had to be coaxed out by paid operatives who often had to pay them to participate. The criticism that this interpretation of popular politics gives a distorted picture that ignores urban centers of political power in favor of a few country towns is correct in the abstract but not for this book. *Beyond Garrison* draws heavily on the kinds of communities profiled in *Rude Republic* but has difficulty accepting that book's claims. It is facile to dismiss voter turnout of some eighty percent as the result of bribery or coercion or both. Even if participants had to be dragged or lured to the parade or the polling booth, the fact is that they showed up. They showed up because so much was at stake, if not in the posturing of political debate, then surely in the formation of policy over slavery, civil rights, and liquor licensing. Few Bay Staters were indifferent to these issues. They were engaged and even fervent, moreover, because when it came to crafting legislation politics may have been something of a private club. There politics ended; it began, however, in the streets and meeting halls filled by the myriad mass movements of the age that took shape in the shadows of the parties and gave the parties motion and

[18] Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

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momentum. The historian who looks for "politics" in the parties alone misses this critical dimension of politics.[19]

*Beyond Garrison* opens at the beginning of the abolitionist movement in the early 1830s. I ask the reader's forbearance as Chapter 1 moves over the familiar ground of the movement's origins to establish several key points about its prepolitical stage. The Bay State abolitionist movement was based in the countryside, in small rural towns and rising industrial centers; it was decidedly weaker in Boston and other urban centers inland and along the coast. It also enjoyed strong support from women, including younger women often influenced by their parents and the clergy, as well as by their employers. Moreover, the antislavery movement did not make a sudden and unexpected veer into politics; in Massachusetts, as elsewhere, activists had waded into the political arena as petitioners in the great "postal campaign" of 1835. This campaign made a huge impression on Elizur Wright and his friends in the central office of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York City and on such movement stalwarts as William Goodell and Gerrit Smith farther upstate. In 1837 the New Yorkers experimented with the political strategy of "vote scattering," a strategy that was pursued the following year in Middlesex County, Massachusetts. Chapter 1 ends with a close look at vote scattering to give the reader a deeper appreciation for the potential and pitfalls of political abolitionism.

Chapter 2 deals with the formation of the Liberty Party in 1840 and the party's development through the next decade. It places Libertyism in the political context of the Second Party System, discussing the party's social base and the competition the Libertyites faced from Whigs and Democrats. It suggests that the insurgency benefited not only from the strength of abolitionism in Massachusetts but also from the congressional fight over gag rule, winning over some Democrats disillusioned with their party's seeming subservience to its Southern wing. The chapter also suggests that the antislaveryism of the Whigs, however weak and feeble it appeared to be from the outside, was strong enough to sustain the loyalty of country Whigs. The strength and durability of Whiggery constrained the growth of Libertyism; the growing dispute over slavery, however, nurtured it. Party lieutenants deftly exploited popular outrage over the case

[19] For an illuminating discussion of the impact of extrapolitical associations on modern U.S. politics, see John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). Also see their "For Conservatives, Mission Accomplished," *New York Times*, May 18, 2004, p. A 25.

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