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Amelioration and Empire seeks to bring together histories often told apart: the development of debates about slavery in the British Caribbean and the American South and the unfolding of pro- and antislavery thought. Dierksheide takes a traditional intellectual history approach to argue that the idea of “amelioration,” or gradual improvement, was at the core of both pro- and antislavery thinking in the Anglo-American world. Defenders and opponents of slavery, she argues, shared a view that the institution could and should be made better, by which they might mean more tolerable for enslaved people, more productive and efficient, or sometimes both. Antislavery thinkers, such as James Ramsay and James Stephen as well as, in Dierksheide’s telling, Thomas Jefferson and South Carolina planter Henry Laurens, thought that amelioration would prepare the way for the end of slavery, while slavery’s supporters argued that amelioration could make it permanent. Thus, although their ultimate aims were significantly different, there was considerable shared thinking between opponents and defenders of slavery.

Dierksheide organizes her book into three sections, dealing with Virginia, South Carolina, and the British West Indies. In each section she focuses on two to four main thinkers, sometimes counterposing their writings to those of other figures to whom she pays less attention. Dierksheide provides close readings of the writings of Jefferson, John Hartwell Cocke, and Thomas Roderick Dew in Virginia; Laurens and William Harper in South Carolina; and Bryan Edwards and John Gladstone in (or, more accurately, about) the British Caribbean. Using published writings and personal correspondence, she shows that each of them used the idea of the amelioration of slavery to frame their approach to the institution. Dierksheide shows that within each geographic region arguments changed over time, from moderate criticism of slavery by reforming slaveholders in the mid-eighteenth century to arguments for the necessity and permanence of an ameliorated slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Dierksheide’s readings and juxtapositions are thoughtful and clear, focusing attention on key themes such as progress, family, and population.
Perhaps the most important of these themes is population, which in the era of Thomas Robert Malthus became an index for “happiness” and thus a core sign of whether or not slavery was a sustainable and morally acceptable system. As Dierksheide notes, the “growth of populations . . . was the primary marker of social progress or degeneracy in the nineteenth century” (61). Across the three regions Dierksheide studies, ameliorative slaveholders encouraged measures to support family units with the goal of increasing fertility. (Dierksheide pays little attention to the way in which such policies were frequently undermined by the reality of sale.) These policies appeared successful in Virginia and South Carolina but not in the Caribbean, although the real determinants of population change were almost certainly not directly related to planters’ policies with regard to family life. At times population growth could also be perceived as negative. In Virginia, where the black population increased rapidly in the nineteenth century, this demographic change became a site for the expression of white fear rather than appreciation, particularly in the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion.

Dierksheide positions her book alongside work that aims to decenter metropolitan-focused intellectual history, describing it as the “provincial counterpart” (14) to David Brion Davis’s monumental studies on the “problem of slavery.”1 Provincial, though, hardly seems an appropriate description of Jefferson. It is even less convincing for the Caribbean slaveholders considered in Amelioration and Empire. Edwards, born in England, lived for a considerable time in Jamaica but made his most important contributions to the debate over slavery while back in England, where he served as a member of Parliament. Gladstone, the owner of more than a thousand human beings in Demerara and the father of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, lived most of his life in Liverpool and never visited the Caribbean. These men were at the heart of the metropolitan defense of slavery. If Dierksheide’s goal was to shift the debate away from the metropole, she might have chosen more genuinely nonmetropolitan examples from the Caribbean—men such as Thomas Thistlewood or George Wilson Bridges, author of A Voice from Jamaica: In Reply to William Wilberforce.2

While the individuals in Dierksheide’s case studies are not all genuinely “provincial,” what they do share is that they all claimed ownership over people. Although some looked ahead to a distant future in which slavery would not exist, none acted to emancipate their own human property. Jefferson, Cocke, and Laurens were certainly critical of slavery, but


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for them to represent the “antislavery” side of the spectrum of arguments about amelioration makes for a limited comparison. Dierksheide’s assertion that pro- and antislavery thinkers shared more than some historians have thought, and in particular that their common ground was an understanding of slavery as an improvable system, is likely to be convincing to those who already know the literature on antislavery and amelioration. It could certainly be made for many, though by no means all, antislavery thinkers. The choice not to devote significant attention to genuinely antislavery ameliorationists such as James Ramsay or William Wilberforce is not explained, but it seems to spring from the project’s focus on the nonmetropolitan. The decision comes at a serious cost, however. Because her examples of the “antislavery” point of view are individuals to whom that term can only be, at best, tentatively applied, Dierksheide is unable to fully sustain her thesis about the overlap between pro- and antislavery ideas. The book might have worked better if presented as an investigation of the significance of the idea of amelioration within the proslavery argument.

While teasing out many important themes in the writings she analyzes, Dierksheide pays little attention to racism as a structuring principle in the worldviews of their authors. She allies her book to Edmund S. Morgan’s argument that (as she puts it) “freedom and slavery were inextricably linked at America’s founding, and that these two concepts ultimately shared the same genesis” (13). Yet, whereas for Morgan the emergence of racism was a crucial part of the explanation of how slavery and freedom worked together, Dierksheide is much less interested in it. She is more concerned to demonstrate the modernity of ameliorationist thinkers but does not investigate the place of racism within modern thought. It is not that she ignores racism—examples are clearly given, from Jefferson’s understanding of America’s black population as a “stain” that must be removed to Edward Long’s comparison of Africans to orangutans. But unlike much recent scholarship, she does not consider racism to be of fundamental importance in understanding the development of proslavery thought. This omission is perhaps related to Dierksheide’s at times surprisingly celebratory approach to proslavery thought, emphasizing its “sophisticated worldview,” “cosmopolitan understanding,” and grand imperial scale, in contrast to what she sees as the abolitionists’ more “parochial” (181) and nationally focused arguments.

Amelioration and Empire provides significant accounts of the thinking of many figures within the slavery debates, including some who have not received much attention until now. However, its lack of analysis of the entanglement of proslavery’s sophistication and cosmopolitanism with racism and white supremacy means that it does not fully address the most important issues raised by these accounts.