

At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915. WILLIAM COHEN. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. xix, 311 pp. \$42.50 (hardback) and \$16.95 (paperback).

This beautifully written and deeply, if traditionally, researched book raises but does not answer two large questions: why did the extensive late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southern labour-control laws apparently fail to impede black geographic mobility; and why was white (and black?) opposition to such laws seemingly so much more effective than opposition to disfranchisement, Jim Crow, and anti-violence laws?

From 1865 on, white southern planters, northern reformers, lawyers and judges, and African-Americans themselves recognized the central importance of black geographic mobility. Free or mobile labour would prevent a continuation of *de facto* slavery and set limits on the degree of economic exploitation that labourers would suffer. Thus, the post-Civil War 'Black Codes', with their provisions requiring blacks to have employment contracts and forbidding labourers from breaking those contracts and other employers from enticing them away, reflected an effort to impose quasi-slavery by limiting black mobility. But labour shortages and the post-war constitutional amendments and Reconstruction statutes that guaranteed all people at least minimal economic rights undermined both the Black Codes and their racially sanitized successors. Mobility gave freedmen, who were reluctant to work for wages, especially in slave-like gangs, the power to force planters to shift to share or tenant contracts that gave blacks 'vastly more independence than they had had under slavery' (p. 22). Planter cartels were short-lived and, lacking legal enforcement, ineffective (pp. 42-3).

Although the vast majority of moves were almost certainly short-distance ones made by individual families or small groups, Cohen concentrates on long-distance migration episodes that involved hundreds or thousands of people, because these events are better documented in qualitative sources. Both the anti-dependency ideology of the Freedmen's Bureau and the limited funds that it had to support people on the dole led the Bureau to work with private labour agents and often to provide transportation in order to shift back agricultural workers from labour-surplus to labour-deficit areas. After the Bureau's demise in 1870, labour agents, black as well as white, continued to lure black workers west and south, even to Oklahoma and Mexico, often with exaggerated promises of high wages, better homes, and decreased prejudice. The 'exodus' to Kansas in the late 1870s and an even smaller relocation from the Carolinas to Indiana in 1880 were notable chiefly because they became the subjects of a congressional inquiry. And the 2000 particularly poorly informed southern blacks who emigrated to Liberia from 1870 to 1900 under the auspices of the anachronistic American Colonization Society served more as an index of political and social discontent than as a serious migration trend.

Conceived in the late 1960s as an effort to dramatize the importance of what Cohen terms 'involuntary servitude' laws in keeping blacks from moving north, the much revised *At Freedom's Edge* often contradicts itself. On the one hand, Cohen insists on the significance of the laws and details all their ominous provisions (Chapters 2 and 8). On the other hand, he admits that even the gross state-level migration estimates of Simon Kuznets and his colleagues in the 1950s demonstrate very considerable black geographic mobility within the South from 1870 on (Chapter 10). In Chapter 8 he insists that the laws passed in the 1870s and 1880s established the fundamental structure, which statutes of the 1890s and 1900s only embellished, and he attacks the 'Woodward thesis' of a late growth of undifferentiated racist practices. In Chapter 10, Cohen posits a sudden and very temporary growth of peonage in the South around the turn of the century, which, he declares, was partly the product of legal developments and partly the result of an upsurge of white racism - just the trends that Woodward emphasized. In Chapter 8, Cohen chronicles the passage of disfranchisement and Jim Crow laws, and attributes the spread of labour control legislation to a broad racist impulse that all three types of statutes embodied. In Chapter 10 he notes that the labour control laws lost most of their effectiveness by World War I or earlier, long

before the overthrow of the political and social colour bars, which implies that the three were not knitted tightly together in a seamless fabric of racial discrimination. Ideologically uncomfortable with economic or class interpretations of events or trends (xii), he elsewhere declares that blacks who moved 'were in fact making a rational decision about how to maximize their income' (p. 45), that blacks' desire not to sign long-term contracts so as to be free to take high-paying short-term work 'was a rational economic response' (p. 127), and that 'It all came down to the price of labor' (p. 133).

Despite the fact that Cohen summarizes qualitative evidence about large migration episodes and describes changes in relevant state laws more thoughtfully and extensively than anyone else has, his book demonstrates again how unsatisfying impressionistic history is. Without a systematic attempt to measure the amount of small-scale as well as large-scale geographic mobility of the southern black population at different times and places, we cannot really evaluate the effect of lien, anti-labour-agent, vagrancy, or other laws. Without a comparison of the mobility of blacks and whites, we cannot determine the degree of racial discrimination in the administration of such laws, or contrast the motives that led people of each race to move or stay. Without close analysis of the passage and defeat of the laws in state legislatures, we cannot uncover patterns of and reasons for support and opposition, and we cannot reasonably accept Cohen's assertion of a white consensus on legal racism, because he does not put his thesis at risk. Indeed, we cannot even discover whether proposals for such laws ever lost and, if so, whether blacks, before disfranchisement, helped to defeat them. Cohen doesn't consider the possibility and exaggerates the political powerlessness of African-Americans (p. 207). Even a masterful traditional historian like William Cohen, then, undermines his own work by abjuring social scientific approaches to his subject. Until historians and social scientists learn that they must use and respect each other's techniques, we will have no satisfactory analyses of the crucial topic of geographic mobility, and writers will be forced to admit, as Cohen puts it, that 'no precise answer will be found here' (p. 290).

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