



HAL
open science

Was Abraham Lincoln a revolutionist ?

Olivier Frayssé

► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Frayssé. Was Abraham Lincoln a revolutionist?. Les Grandes Figures historiques dans les lettres et les arts, 2020, 9, pp.111-125. hal-03925372

HAL Id: hal-03925372

<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03925372v1>

Submitted on 5 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Olivier Frayssé
Sorbonne Université, HDEA

Was Abraham Lincoln a revolutionist?

The word revolution carries several meanings, three of which are relevant in the case of Abraham Lincoln. The one that is not is the astronomical sense, since Lincoln never went full circle, except from ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Revolution means change, upheaval, and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “especially a dramatic or wide-reaching change in conditions, the state of affairs, etc.” That includes “the overthrow of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it,” the “forcible substitution of a new form of government.”¹ Indeed, some revolutions are dramatic, as they are carried out with visible violence, take place within a short time span and produce a massive change that everyone can readily ascertain in terms of political institutions and social organization. This is the case of the US Civil War, over which Lincoln presided, which led several historians, starting with Charles and Mary Beard, to label it “a second American Revolution.”² But revolution also comes in two other shapes. The second type of revolution also produces a wide-reaching change but is a less immediately traumatic experience for the larger part of the population, because it is carried out over a longer period: a prime example is the “transportation revolution” that occurred between 1820 and 1865, criss-crossing the United States with railroads and canals, opening up the West, unifying markets and bringing competition in every nook and corner of the country. Lincoln was an avid devotee of that revolution from the very start, supporting ambitious internal improvements plans for Illinois in the 1830s, working as a lawyer for the Illinois Central Railroad in the 1850s and ending up a major actor in the end when he picked the route for the transcontinental railroad in 1863. Finally revolution can also refer to changes in the conditions of production and development of new products. Older nations may look down on American enthusiasm for new products and processes and dismiss them as marketing gimmicks, but their cumulative impact is huge. What we are dealing with here is the constant revolutionizing of the conditions of production that capitalism generates, a phenomenon described by Marx and later by Schumpeter, albeit in a different vein, and linked with the spirit of innovation and invention³. Here Lincoln was definitely a revolutionist, thoroughly interested in technical

¹ “revolution, n.” OED Online, June 2018, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164970?result=1&rskey=fUAjG2&>, accessed August 9, 2018.

² Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol. 2, New York, Macmillan, p. 53-54.

³ “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, London, Verso, Kindle edition, p. 38-39. Schumpeter describes the “process of industrial mutation [...] that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in,” Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 83.

progress and the only president in US history to hold a patent⁴.

This article will focus on one of these revolutions, the political and social revolution of the American Civil War, and briefly mention the two others, in their relationship with the first. Our hope is that by addressing this question, we might shed some light on the issue of biography beyond the case in point. And why not start from there and explore in a first section the way generations of biographers have defined Lincoln in terms of an enigma, including on the topic of revolution, which makes our research question interesting both for biographical studies and US history? A second, central section, will examine the question of Lincoln's involvement in the revolution that was emancipation through the debates among biographers and offer what we hope is a valuable addition to this conversation by introducing two concepts that have not been extensively used in that field yet. A much shorter third section, in the shape of a conclusion opening on other research questions, will deal briefly with the larger issues raised by Lincoln's involvement in both the transportation revolution and the revolutionizing of technologies, that is in the workings of capitalism, and suggest an explanation for one of the motivations of writers and readers of biographies. But first, why is the question of whether Lincoln was a revolutionist important both scientifically and for us as citizens?

Why is the question important? The Lincoln enigma

Abraham Lincoln is a most tantalizing figure in American history and in American biography; I would say the most tantalizing. Why is it so? Because biographers have so often called him enigmatic, elusive, and other phrases to that effect. Among the fine books on Lincoln, we can find *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon* (2001) by Gabor Boritt, who also wrote *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (2006), and edited *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows* (1997), titles inspired by Richard N. Current's *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (1958). Then we have *The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America's Most Controversial First Lady*⁵. And many more biographies insist on the elusive character of Lincoln's character, including those about "the real Abraham Lincoln."⁶

What exactly is the Lincoln enigma? I submit that Lincoln is enigmatic to biographers in several intertwined ways, and that this is related to the overlapping of the revolutions mentioned in the introduction.

First, like any person whose life you try to make sense of, what you learn of this person's life questions your own, makes it enigmatic, and here comes the autobiographical dimension I mentioned earlier. Meet your Sphinx, interpret the riddle,

⁴ Lincoln's March 10, 1849 application for a patent "on an Improved Method of Lifting Vessels over Shoals" is to be found in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 2, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1953, p. 32-33. Abraham Lincoln's U.S. patent 6,469 was issued on May 22, 1849.

⁵ Frank J. Williams and Michael Burkheimer (eds.), Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2012.

⁶ Jesse W. Weik, *The Real Lincoln*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1922; Reinhart H. Luthin, *The Real Abraham Lincoln: A Complete One-Volume History of his Life and Times*, Englewood Cliffs (New Jersey), Prentice-Hall, 1960; *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, TV film, National Geographic Television, February 14, 2009 (with historian Allen C. Guelzo); Thomas J. DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War*, New York, Three Rivers, 2003.

and answer for yourself. For that purpose, any literary character will do, of course, but the narrated lives of real people carry more flesh, more baggage, just like we do, and this is all the more true when they are weighted with heavy historical events.

Second, the biography of a person that played an important part in his country's history raises the issue of the national character of that country. And Lincoln here stands out as the great touchstone of Americanness, in a way that no other president, or person for that matter, even remotely approaches. As the introduction of one of so many good books on Lincoln puts it: "Indeed, Lincoln is at the center of our national story—the 'sustaining narrative'—that both orders and challenges us as a people."⁷ Thus, Lincoln biographies offer not only a mirror to the individual, but to a nation. As another introduction adds: "Such a legacy is truly unique in American history; it is at the same time monumental and highly controversial."⁸

This uniqueness of Lincoln's figure is twofold: for the general public outside the heirs of the Ku Klux Klan, right-wing libertarians and outright weirdoes, his death as a martyr made him the founding stone of modern US nationalism, bringing about the second birth of the nation, the "new birth of freedom" he had heralded in his Gettysburg address⁹, a born-again America washed from its original sin that was slavery. As such, he connected American history with the myth of the foundation of nations in sacrificial blood and has therefore become the last and best of the Founding Fathers.

The second element is more relevant to historians than to the general public, although historians have been fascinated by the general public's enduring appreciation of Lincoln. What matters for them is that Lincoln presided over three revolutions. He led the country into the most important test of US institutions, a civil war, resulting in a political revolution: that revolution put an end to slavery and wrought a complete change in the workings of the constitution and the balance of power between South and North, the federal government and state governments. Lincoln also presided over the triumph of industrial capitalism that would propel the country at the first rank among nations and into the Gilded Age, an economic and social revolution.

Also, more than any other president, he confronted the perennial race issue which is the human stain that has blotted America's character from its inception. One can also spot in the unfolding of the Civil War and Lincoln's own evolution a surge of the role of African Americans in the country's fate, the first signs of a social revolution that would fail in the 1870s and had to be revived in the 1960s with the "Civil Rights revolution." This unfinished social revolution overlapped with the political and economic revolutions. And, since Lincoln died prematurely, historians and biographers can only imagine how he would have dealt with the issues raised by the South's political reconstruction, the fate of the freed slaves, and the extraordinary violence of the class struggle that accompanied the consolidation of monopoly capitalism between 1865 and 1913. As a consequence, like Roman haruspices, they are reduced to performing divination by inspection of the entrails of the victim, which is one of the reasons why more has been written in English about Lincoln than on anybody else, with the exception of Jesus Christ.

Finally, Lincoln's life and death carry a universal message. A pure product of the American soil who never set foot abroad became the subject of a volume of essays edited

⁷ Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 1.

⁸ Kenneth L. Deutsch and Richard Fornieri (eds.), *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives*, Washington (D.C.), Potomac Books, 2005, p. 3.

⁹ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 7, p. 23.

by Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, *The Global Lincoln*, which provides ample “evidence that he and his legacy have made a difference to the world beyond the United States.”¹⁰ I have not come across books entitled *The Global Washington*, or *The Global Roosevelt*, *Napoleon*, *Bismarck*, or *Churchill*. While Simon Bolivar might still be a contender, the collapse of the USSR has suppressed any incentive to look into the foreign reception of Russian revolutionary leaders, who saw themselves as citizens of the world.

This is why so much hinges on every question asked by biographers about Abraham Lincoln’s life, for it entails consequences on one’s understanding of every aspect of American history, and, to some extent, of human history and human condition.

The magnitude of the changes that the country underwent in the four years of the conflict over which he presided is impressive: slavery was abolished in several stages, including the confiscation acts of Congress regarding rebel property and the Emancipation Proclamation issued by the president. This movement culminated in the passage of the 13th amendment to the constitution of 1865, which Lincoln not only supported but also shepherded. After Lincoln’s death, in the wake of this amendment, two others were passed, guaranteed citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and the right to vote to colored citizens (at least on paper).

The constitutions of the rebel states were suspended pending reconstruction, i.e. the elaboration of new constitutions respecting the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, and the elected officials of these rebel states were barred from holding office in the new system. One rebel state, Virginia, even lost its jurisdiction over one large part of its territory early in the civil war, when West Virginia was admitted into the Union. More importantly, the Civil War resulted in an immense destruction of capital (probably something like one fifth of the national wealth in 1860) when slavery was abolished without compensation, a complete overhaul of the property rights system¹¹. In that sense, it was even more of a revolution than the War of Independence¹².

Was Lincoln a revolutionist during that period? Radical republicans and abolitionists thought he was too slow and conservative, hiding behind constitutional niceties to accommodate loyal slaveholders in the Border States, and that he needed a serious push to move forward towards emancipation. Democrats denounced him as a revolutionary dictator, usurping powers he did not have, suspending the writ of habeas corpus in the face of a Supreme Court’s Chief Justice’s ruling and rushing emancipation as a desperate war measure without color of constitutionality. Lincoln maintained that he had acted constitutionally, not revolutionarily, but some of his public statements and private remarks show that he was not going to let constitutional niceties jeopardize the accomplishment of his constitutional duties. He was a lawyer after all, and the legal professions’ job is to pick, among competing legal arguments, the one that better fits their cause or that of justice¹³.

¹⁰ Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, *The Global Lincoln*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, Kindle edition, 2011, p. 22.

¹¹ James L. Huston, “Property Rights in Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 65, No. 2 (May 1999), p. 249-286.

¹² While the estates of loyalists were confiscated, many of them managed to obtain compensation from the British government, and many, especially the wealthier, won their property back in the US courts. See Brett Palfreyman, *Peace Process: The Reintegration of the Loyalists in Post-revolutionary America*, Binghamton, State University of New York, 2014.

¹³ Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North*, Harvard (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2002, has captured the intensity of partisan struggle during the Civil War. The best account of Lincoln’s legal career and its influence on his thinking is to be found in Roger Billings and

Lincoln tried to control the central narrative of the civil war and emancipation. In this narrative, he was a conservative who had the limited ambition of fulfilling his central campaign promise, which was constitutional, that is the prevention of the extension of slavery to the Western territories. Confronted to a rebellion, he had to exercise the totality of his constitutional duties, no more but no less. That something revolutionary should come of it was to be avoided, that something revolutionary did ensue was not his fault. As he wrote in his Annual Message to Congress of December 3, 1861: “The war continues. In considering the policy to be adopted for suppressing the insurrection, I have been anxious and careful that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle.” And, in his second Inaugural Address of March 4, 1865, he entered a not guilty plea to the revolution that had actually taken place: “Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.”¹⁴

Biographers have continued these traditions. The majority in the center has seen Lincoln as a conservative whose heart was in the right place and who combined prudence and tenacity to do the right thing at the right moment, which in this case amounted to a revolution, a man who had to grow to perform his tasks during a revolutionary epoch. A few, not unlike the Democrats of Lincoln’s days, have defended a vision of the 14th president as either evil or inept, who made the wrong choices regarding the issue of peace and war, some painting him as a hypocritical dictator who threw the constitution overboard and others as not great enough to face up to the task. Another small but growing number have insisted that he was indeed conservative and therefore needed pushing, emphasizing the role of radical Republicans in Congress and the agency of African Americans whose involvement in the war played an essential part in the Union’s victory and emancipation¹⁵, a man who was made to grow¹⁶.

Frank J. Williams (eds.), *Abraham Lincoln, Esq.: The Legal Career of America’s Greatest President*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

¹⁴ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 48; *ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 333.

¹⁵ One of the latest and best books that holds the thesis of Lincoln’s growth is Eric Foner’s *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2010. The case for an inadequate Lincoln who was not able to preserve the country from a terrible civil war was well made by James Randall’s classic *Lincoln the President*, 4 vols, London and Binghamton (N.Y.), Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1947-1955. Randall was the reference Lincoln scholar who wrote the Lincoln entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933, vol. 11, p. 242-259) as well as *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston, D. C. Heath, 1937). His students and followers like David H. Donald or Benjamin P. Thomas never completely disagreed with Randall. A list of extreme critics of Lincoln as deluded would-be dictator could not ignore Dwight G. Anderson’s *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immortality* (New York, Knopf, 1982). Historians in the 1960s started to note the role of the slave’s silent insurrection (the flight to Unionist lines) in the advent of the Proclamation of Emancipation. One of the chief contributors was David Brion Davis, whose *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) builds on his previous research. One of the earliest defenders of the abolitionist wing of the Republican Party was Hans L. Trefousse in *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln’s Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

¹⁶ The best of recent syntheses of debates on Lincoln’s historical role is Eric Foner (ed.), *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, New York, Norton, 2008, which contains several excellent essays on the various interpretations of Lincoln’s role. Among them, Manisha Sinha’s “Allies for Emancipation? Lincoln and Black Abolitionists” (p. 167-196), concludes: “The radical egalitarianism of black and white abolitionists pushed Lincoln and the Republican Party, initially committed only to the nonextension of slavery, to adopt the twin abolitionist goals of immediate, uncompensated emancipation and black rights.”

So which of these interpretations solves the riddle put to Malvolio by Maria in *Twelfth night* (II.v): “some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ’em”? I would like to submit that a combination of two concepts might prove useful to make progress in the understanding of Lincoln’s role in the second American Revolution. One is the mental framework of the Jeremiad and the other is a Marxist approach of the role of the individual in history. This combination would account for Lincoln’s perception of himself as a conservative while he was doing revolutionary things and his final understanding that he had revolutionized the country.

The Revolution and revolution: Uses of the American Jeremiad

From the very start of his political career, Lincoln had positioned himself as a conservative in politics, a Whig that lamented the innovations of Jacksonian democracy. He always used the word “revolutionary” pejoratively in his writings, except when referring to the American Revolution, which of course does not imply a revolutionary frame of mind¹⁷.

In modern times, many staunch conservatives have referred positively to at least one revolutionary episode of their country’s history. In Britain, the legitimate “Glorious Revolution” has been contrasted since Edmund Burke with all the revolutions that inglorious bastards would want to engineer elsewhere and maybe dare export to John Bull’s country. In the US, the War of Independence is referred to as *the* revolutionary war, an episode of *the* American Revolution in the singular, which started with the protest against the Stamp Act in 1765 and ended with the ratification of the second US constitution in 1788, and has been a favorite with quite a few conservative politicians. In our days, the episode of the Tea Party has even become an emblem for the Republican Party’s right wing.

But, in Lincoln’s prose, references to the American Revolution were more than platitudes. They mostly served, in a first phase of his career, to sacralize existing institutions, which were derived from the American Revolution, but also, quite early, to make a roundabout denunciation of slavery as we shall see. In a second phase, after 1854, when he became committed to the fight against the extension of slavery, they focused on the declaration of Independence, and the notion that all men are created equal, which Lincoln affirmed included African Americans in one crucial respect, the right to enjoy the fruits of their labor, the key ideological element that sustains modern capitalism.

¹⁷ Mentions of the word revolutionary with a negative connotation are to be found in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 401 (“factious, nay, even revolutionary”); vol. 3, p. 356, p. 537 (“revolutionary, destructive, or something of the sort,” denying the charge); in vol. 4, p. 27. Eulogy of revolutionary “soldiers,” “pensioners,” for practical matters and “patriarchs,” “fathers,” “sires,” heroes” in symbolic affairs, etc., are to be found in vol. 1, p. 165, p. 170, p. 182; in vol. 2, p. 151, p. 267, p. 283; in vol. 3, p. 413, p. 416. Interestingly, his first Inaugural address combines the two elements: in a first version, he considers the Southern states’ action “treasonable.” Then, in subsequent versions, he substitutes the word “revolutionary” for “treasonable,” but within the framework of an alternative; he calls the secession either “insurrectionary [that would be “treasonable” and “revolutionary” in the traditional pejorative sense] or revolutionary [that would make it as legitimate as the American Revolution].” While he would have recognized the right of Southerners to make a revolution in order to defend their fundamental rights, he denies that these rights are threatened since he does not advocate the abolition of slavery: he respects their property rights, even welcoming the idea of a constitutional amendment protecting slavery in the states where it existed, *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 262-271, especially p. 265, p. 269, p. 271n. The circumstances lead him to reassess the meaning of revolution in his own times...

Discussing a hypothetical African-American woman that his opponent, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, suggested he wanted to marry, Lincoln rebutted: “In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.”¹⁸

This is the basis he chose for a moral condemnation of slavery, without which a fight against its extension would have carried neither meaning nor weight. Lincoln’s argument was that the founding fathers knew slavery, “the peculiar institution,” to be a bad thing and that they had acted to prevent its extension. At the same time, they had respected the right of property of slave-owners and had not challenged slavery where it existed. Finally, they had hoped that it would gradually wither away if contained within a limited territory, if it remained an institution peculiar to some states. This compromise included in both the constitution and the Ordinances that organized the conquest of the West was the mother of all compromises, including the Missouri compromise of 1820 that enabled free white settlers, like Lincoln and his father, to conquer the West north of the Ohio. For abolitionists, the constitution was “a covenant with hell,”¹⁹ for Lincoln it was the bulwark against slavery extension.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed slave-owners to bring their slaves to these territories, was a revolutionary reversal of this founding spirit of compromise and further developments, like the Lecompton constitution and the Dred Scott decision, all pointed to the unraveling of the original compact. Time and again, Lincoln would lament the passing of the Founding Father’s times, when slavery had been placed in the course of ultimate extinction:

Now, I believe if we could arrest the spread, and place it where Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison placed it, it would be in the course of ultimate extinction, and the public mind would, as for eighty years past, believe that it was in the course of ultimate extinction. The crisis would be past and the institution might be let alone for a hundred years, if it should live so long, in the States where it exists, yet it would be going out of existence in the way best for both the black and the white races.²⁰

Lincoln’s outrage was thus, in his mind at least, that of a conservative. But the appeal to former, better times, in terms of virtuous characters and the promotion of just ends, is precisely, when accompanied by a call to action, the principle of the Jeremiad which Sacvan Bercovitch has identified as the central American narrative, born of the Puritan sermons. It consists in lamenting the passing of golden older days when the chosen people knew their mission and followed the commands of their God, then in urging the audience to remember what that mission was, and to reconnect with it. Bercovitch adds that, to evade the charge of patricide that British authorities were leveling at them, revolutionary leaders (Whigs, in his terminology²¹) developed the idea that their fathers were not British

¹⁸ Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 25, 1857, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 405.

¹⁹ William Lloyd Garrison to Rev. Samuel J. May, July 17, 1845, in Walter M. Merrill (ed.), *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973, p. 303.

²⁰ Lincoln’s first debate with Douglas at Ottawa, August 21, 1858, in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 18.

²¹ Insurgents saw themselves as heirs to the British Whig tradition of continuing the Glorious revolution and curbing the King’s power. Ex-Federalists adopted the name when Andrew Jackson (a Democrat) became president, nicknaming him “King Harry.” From his first campaign in 1832 to his joining of the Republican Party in 1856, Lincoln was a Whig in that sense.

but those fugitives from England that came aboard the *Arbella* on the shores of *New England* in 1830:

In effect the Whig leaders, in what was clearly an extension of earlier techniques, turned the Jeremiad into a lesson in national genealogy. The lesson led to the familiar figural imperative: what the fathers began, the sons were bound to complete. Revolution meant improvement, not hiatus; obedience, not riot; not a breach of social order, but the fulfillment of God's plan. As an act of filiopietism, independence was America's long-prepared-for, reverently *ordered* passage into national maturity.²²

In a footnote to this passage, Bercovitch makes clear that "this Revolutionary genealogy helped [...] later to celebrate the Civil War as a confirmation of the revolution begun in New England over two hundred years before."²³ He goes on to analyze the language of Lincoln's proclamation of a fast day in 1863 to buttress his thesis that his Civil War oratory was essentially a Jeremiad rooted in religious tradition²⁴. His assertion that "the moral was spoken by Lincoln himself" in this document testifies to his use of secondary sources, since the document was penned by Senator James Harlan of Iowa, who obtained a unanimous vote of the Senate on his proposal of a national prayer and fast day. It was then passed on to Lincoln, who obviously had to endorse it²⁵. But this is definitely not Lincoln's language.

A better analysis of Lincoln's use of the Jeremiad is to be found in Andrew Murphy's *Prodigal nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*, notably the characterization of Lincoln's second Inaugural as "a tentative Jeremiad if there ever was one."²⁶ It defines Lincoln's Jeremiad as "unconventional," since it is infused with ambiguities, including his referring to Americans as God's "almost-chosen people" and his unwillingness to lay the blame squarely on the South only, like the Northern Jeremiahs clamoring for vengeance. While Lincoln's religion has been an enduring subject of controversy, there is little evidence to support Murphy's idea that Lincoln's purported "detachment, framing God's purposes in the war in hypothetical or mystical ways, combined his penchant for understanding God as Judge²⁷ with his essentially mystical understanding of providence as *not* perceptible by human reason."²⁸ Neither Bercovitch nor Murphy were Lincoln specialists and therefore failed to notice that the Jeremiad had indeed been one of Lincoln's favorite rhetoric devices for a long time.

Political scientist Jonathan Keller, while not a Lincoln scholar either, astutely observed that Lincoln had used the Jeremiad in his first elaborated political oration, the Lyceum speech of 1838 on "the perpetuation of our Political Institutions" in which he eulogized the heroes of the American Revolution, a now departed generation:²⁹

²² Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, Madison (Wisconsin), University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p. 123.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁵ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 155-157.

²⁶ Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 12.

²⁷ That Lincoln thought of God as purely a judge was a point made by Allen C. Guelzo in his *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, Grand Rapids (Michigan), William B. Eerdmans, 1999, p. 418, but this interpretation leaves no room for any form of mystical approach.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁹ "Lincoln, the ministers of religion and the American Jeremiad," in *War and Peace: Essays on Religion*

They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence.³⁰

The Jeremiad is conservative in ordinary times, when the call to action is to conform again to old principles of morality, lest things go to hell, and revolutionary in revolutionary times, when it conjures up an imaginary model that has to be restored, which demands a tearing down of the existing one. In the particular case of this speech, Lincoln's rhetoric has all the trappings of the conservative Jeremiad described by Bercovitch, emphasizing "sober reason" vs. the revolutionary passion that was once useful, and needs to be exalted time and again, but definitely not emulated. But it is a paradoxical Jeremiad indeed that absolves the founding fathers from engaging in passionate behavior... And what was the "text" of this sermon?³¹ Lincoln was deploring mob rule in a very specific case: that of the lynching of a Negro in Saint-Louis, Missouri. This is a prime example of Lincoln's early ability to clothe progressivism in the starched garb of conservatism within the Jeremiad's rhetorical system, one step aside of the "ritual of consensus" Bercovitch deplored. Lincoln was definitely a Whig, both in the US sense of an anti-Jacksonian, and in the 18th century's British sense, *à la* Burke. Burke had supported the American Revolution because it was a noble effort to defend the "ancient liberties" of Englishmen.

The text Lincoln was to choose for his sermons in the second half of the 1850s was the declaration of independence. Was the declaration of independence a declaration of rights that had a universal value, as the language suggested, and as Lincoln claimed? The US Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision of 1854 has become infamous for asserting that African Americans "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." It was predicated on what has been called the notion of original intent, how the drafters of the constitution, and of the declaration of independence for that matter, understood what the rights of African Americans were at that time. What the Court declared was that, at the end of the 18th century, African Americans "had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit."³² This was essentially true in point of fact. Now Lincoln, who understood that the decision, which prevented a slave who had been imported into a free territory from suing for his freedom, was paving the way for the introduction of slavery in the free states, preferred to think that the Declaration of Independence was meant originally to include African Americans in principle, but that the realization of its essence had been slowed down by several factors. How just then to

and Violence, Bryan S. Turner (ed.), London, Anthem Press, 2013, p. 75-76.

³⁰ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 115.

³¹ The analogy between Lincoln's speeches and sermons based on a scriptural text was first made by his law partner and biographer William Herndon in a footnote to his recital of the Lyceum speech: "Mr. Lincoln's speech was brought out by the burning of a negro in St. Louis a few weeks before by a mob. Lincoln took this incident as a sort of text for his remarks." William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln, the True Story of a Great Life: the History and Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*, Chicago, D. Appleton & Co, 3 vols., 1889, vol. 1, p. 81n.

³² "Dred Scott v. Sandford. Oyez," www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/60us393, retrieved August 16, 2018.

lament the loss of attachment to these essential values that had brought a crisis of unheard-of importance.

Also, the Jeremiad enables the user of that rhetoric to focus the attention of the audience on the one dimension that he wishes to put forward and to ignore competing claims to attention, which is the communication strategy that Lincoln liked and used best³³. In the case of Lincoln's times, which were revolutionary times, using the Jeremiad meant affirming the universal revolutionary nature of the Declaration of Independence as the forgotten mission of the nation. This interpretation was deemed revolutionary by his opponents, and with good cause, too.

Yet this revolutionary seed could not bring fruit immediately, neither in the crucial loyalist border states where slavery existed, Kentucky and Tennessee, nor in Lincoln's conservative but open mind. In a first stage of the war, he argued that he was sworn to uphold the constitution and that the constitution did not give the president nor Congress the power to abolish slavery in the states, rebel or loyal, but certainly gave Congress the power to exclude it from the territories, which it quickly did. He insisted he was not in favor of "revolutionary" measures (which, at that time, for most people, meant emancipation, use of African-American troops, confiscations, etc.). In his first annual message to Congress, on December 3, 1861, he seemed to have been aware that the issue of emancipation could not long be ignored, but he let Congress deal with it as best as they could:

In considering the policy to be adopted for suppressing the insurrection, I have been anxious and careful that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle. I have, therefore, in every case, thought it proper to keep the integrity of the Union prominent as the primary object of the contest on our part, leaving all questions which are not of vital military importance to the more deliberate action of the legislature.³⁴

He maintained that position as long as he needed to make sure the key border states did not defect to the enemy; meanwhile, he signed into law the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act (April 16, 1862), which paid slaveholders to release their slaves, suggested that loyal slave states did the same, and continued to encourage plans to colonize free Negroes, *i.e.* to deport them, on the model of the creation of Liberia³⁵; then, when the loyalty of the Border states had been secured, and as it became evident that the war would grow uglier and longer, he found in that very constitution that he had huge powers as Commander-in-chief and issued a proclamation emancipating slaves in rebel states on grounds of military necessity. And he ended up using all of his political power to secure the passage of the 13th amendment to the constitution abolishing slavery throughout the country. There is no recorded negative use of the epithet "revolutionary" by Lincoln after December 1861...

As a consequence of his slow and steady march towards the immediate extinction of slavery, as he was bringing about huge changes to the nation's makeup, Lincoln

³³ Olivier Frayssé, "Crafty Lincoln and Honest Abe in the Media War: the Homespun Spin and the Question of Authorship," in John Dean and Olivier Frayssé (eds.), *Lincoln in Europe: Political Uses, Popular Images—1860-2014*, *American Studies Journal*, n° 60 (Spring 2016). DOI 10.18422/60-11.

³⁴ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 48-49.

³⁵ Eric Foner, "Lincoln and colonization," in E. Foner (ed.), *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, *op. cit.*, p. 135-166.

increasingly felt that he was but an instrument in the hands of a higher power. This feeling goes a long way to explaining his slow evolution from determinist agnosticism to a form of belief in a greater power that he called “God,” “Providence,” or “my maker” while never identifying as a Christian, let alone as a member of one particular denomination. As Isaac Foot noticed in his Plutarchan *Oliver Cromwell and Abraham Lincoln: A Comparison*, neither of these great men of action thought they were actors, agents, but felt acted upon, instruments³⁶. Max Weber has eloquently given evidence that the Calvinistic belief in predestination is far from incompatible with relentless action, since the elect, in a state of grace, feels he is an instrument of God³⁷. But the Prophet of Islam also felt he was just a mouthpiece of God when he conquered a huge empire.

The cases of Cromwell and Muhammad figure prominently in Plekhanov’s 1898 article “On the Role of the Individual in History.” One of the most distinguished Marxists of his times, Plekhanov thought that these two great leaders had carried out what the laws of history demanded, and, since they did not understand these laws, they called this historical necessity God’s will. He pointed out that “being conscious of the absolute inevitability of a given phenomenon can only increase the energy of a man who sympathises with it and who regards himself as one of the forces which called it into being.”³⁸

Was Lincoln “conscious of the absolute inevitability” of emancipation? On September 22, 1862, he issued what has been called a preliminary proclamation: he would order the emancipation of all slaves in any state that did not end its rebellion against the Union by January 1, 1863. He delivered his annual message to Congress on December 1, 1862, one month before the fateful date. Its conclusion read:

Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. [...] We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best, hope of earth.³⁹

Did Lincoln sympathize with the phenomenon of emancipation? The answer is obviously yes; it was the honorable thing to do. Even his racial prejudices kept receding throughout his presidency. As he became increasingly conscious of the inevitable revolution that the abolition of slavery entailed, he became more energetic, as his fight for the 13th amendment shows. This huge expenditure of energy brought exhaustion to a man in poor health, and there is speculation on whether he would have been able to finish his second term in office even if the assassin’s bullet had not curtailed the number of his years.

In the second Inaugural, he combined the logic of the Jeremiad with the sense of dispossession of one’s agency that had been creeping onto him, probably also as he felt the surge of African Americans’ agency in the war, thereby turning it into “the overthrow

³⁶ Isaac Foot, *Oliver Cromwell and Abraham Lincoln: a comparison*: a lecture delivered before the Royal Society of Literature on April 19th, 1944, London, The Royal Society of Literature, distributed by Simpkin Marshall Ltd, 1945.

³⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1920 text], translated and ed. by Stephen Kalberg, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 126.

³⁸ George V. Plekhanov, *The role of the Individual in History* [1898], New York, International Publishers, 1940, p. 19.

³⁹ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 537.

of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it.”⁴⁰ “The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events,” as Trotsky wrote⁴¹: the blows dealt to the Southern rebellion by black workers fleeing en masse beyond the US army lines, combining the two meanings of “striking” under Lincoln’s pen, then adding a third one as non-combatant auxiliaries relieving US soldiers from non-combat tasks, and finally as effective combat troops, proved fatal to the slaveholders’ regime. Rather than admitting to this extraordinary irruption of the (Black) masses onto the stage where their fate was determined, with the consequence that they disappeared as private property—this sacrosanct foundation of capitalism, especially US capitalism—Lincoln rationalized the situation by falling back on the Jeremiad form:

The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!” If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”⁴²

So, you see, it was not a revolution, it was an Act of God, a risk insurance companies will not underwrite, how could I? In his book, *My Life, An Attempt at an Autobiography*, Leon Trotsky sadly observed: “revolution is a great devourer of men and character!”⁴³ In the case of Lincoln, and of Trotsky for that matter, we can say the revolution devoured them but not their character.

Lincoln as capitalist revolutionist, biography as Jeremiad

A few words might be in order to connect the Emancipation revolution and the other meanings of the word revolution that are relevant to our understanding of Lincoln: his passion for the transportation revolution and for technological progress.

Only two biographers have seriously investigated Lincoln’s economic views, Gabor Boritt famously in his *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* and the present writer, much less famously, directly or comprehensively in his *Lincoln, Land and Labor, 1809-1860*. Boritt wrote about the doctoral dissertation that resulted in the latter volume that it was a case of “historians independently arriving at like insights”⁴⁴ but with

⁴⁰ See note 1.

⁴¹ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, translated by Max Eastman, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1932, online version at <https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/trotsky/history-of-the-russian-revolution/ebook-history-of-the-russian-revolution-v1.pdf>, downloaded August 20, 2018, p. 4.

⁴² Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 333.

⁴³ Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York, Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 536.

⁴⁴ Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*, Memphis (Tennessee), Memphis University Press, 1978; Olivier Frayssé, *Lincoln, Land and Labor, 1809-1860*, translated by Sylvia Neely,

diverging interpretations. He repeated what he had written in his preface to *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*: “Thus, it should be possible, for example, to depict the Lincolnian struggle for equality of opportunity as leading to inequality, and Lincoln as the politician and ideologist of a nascent industrial capitalist class, still upholding its democratic and humanitarian illusions but readying for the climb to power in America.”⁴⁵ In the end, the Hungarian refugee and the French Marxist agreed to disagree, but the nature of the disagreement may not be what these lines suggest.

Boritt explained Lincoln’s fascination with the development of railroads, canals, and the related Whig economic positions regarding banking and the tariff as connected with a faith in the “right to rise,” hence the title of his book, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*. Using the same sources, I was surprised by his own will to rise, resulting in his early association with the local Whig elite, and later with bankers and railroad companies. This I attributed to his rejection of rural life and eager embracing of the transportation and industrial revolutions. In the Smithsonian, there is a model of his patent to buoy boats when reaching shallow waters, an invention he designed after his experience of navigation of the Sangamon River and the Mississippi.

Lincoln was later to lecture on inventions and discoveries, to show impressive understanding of technology in a patent case concerning the McCormick reaper, and, during the war, he encouraged and closely supervised new weapons development⁴⁶. So what I had in mind was rather the Marxist notion that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society,”⁴⁷ so that Lincoln’s association with the “nascent industrial capitalist class” was natural in that respect too. On the issue of emancipation, Lincoln’s reluctance to deal with the property rights of Southern rebel slaveholders mirrored the Northern capitalists’ early lack of enthusiasm for the disruption of business as usual at the beginning of the Secession movement. But, as the war went on, new ways of waging it and of making money were found.

We know now how that capitalist class would deal with the rising industrial working class which started organizing in the Gilded Age, with machine guns and bayonets, while it struck a long-lasting peace with the Southern landed aristocracy after 1877. We know that Lincoln’s head of intelligence, Allan Pinkerton, was to found the Pinkerton Agency that spied on workers, hunted organizers and broke strikes, and that the Union Army was called in to repress strikes. What we don’t know, of course, is how Lincoln would have reacted under those circumstances.

The conduct of the war was an all-encompassing task, pushing labor issues and class antagonisms in the North into the background, much like the fight for “free soil, free labor, free men”⁴⁸ had in the immediate Ante-Bellum period. On the crucial matter of

Urbana, Illinois University Press, 1994; Gabor S. Boritt (ed.), *The Historian’s Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 104n.

⁴⁵ Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁴⁶ “First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” April 6, 1858, in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 437-442; “Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” February 11, 1859, *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 356-363. See Emerson Hinchliff, “Lincoln and the Reaper Case,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 33.3 (September 1940), Urbana, Illinois University Press, p. 361-365; Robert V. Bruce, *Lincoln and the Tools of War*, Urbana, Illinois University Press, 1989.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, London and New York, Verso, Kindle edition, 2010, p. 38.

⁴⁸ See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970.

class struggle within the Northern industrial system, Lincoln did commend in 1860 the right of workers to strike, but presented it ambiguously, so that it could be interpreted as a mere right to quit when dissatisfied with one's job, and kept the issue within the bounds of the antislavery rhetoric:

I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers CAN strike when they want to [Cheers], where they are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay them or not! [Cheers.] I like the system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere.⁴⁹

And, in the same breath, he proceeded to deliver a vibrant defense of the American Dream in typical bourgeois terms of equality of opportunity, and a quite different use of the word strike:

One of the reasons why I am opposed to Slavery is just here. What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. [Applause.] When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor, for his whole life. I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat—just what might happen to any poor man's son! [Applause.] I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him! That is the true system. Up here in New England, you have a soil that scarcely sprouts black-eyed beans, and yet where will you find wealthy men so wealthy, and poverty so rarely in extremity? There is not another such place on earth! [Cheers.] I desire that if you get too thick here, and find it hard to better your condition on this soil, you may have a chance to strike and go somewhere else, where you may not be degraded, nor have your family corrupted by forced rivalry with negro slaves.⁵⁰

The latest research shows that, during the war, Lincoln's heart was rather in favor of labor and that, while maintaining a general principle of government neutrality in industrial disputes—which his successors soon put aside—he even managed to intervene on behalf of workers' claims on a few occasions⁵¹. Meanwhile he continued to push aggressively for measures that helped further the consolidation of wealth and power with the expansion

⁴⁹ Speech at New Haven, Connecticut, March 6, 1860, in Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 24. In his speech at Hartford, Connecticut of the previous day (March 5, 1860), Lincoln had directly addressed the fears of the extension of slavery to the Northern states and the specter of slave/black labor competition. The *Hartford Daily Courant*, March 6, 1860 version of that speech, has: "And I am glad to know that there is a system of labor where the laborer can strike if he wants to! I would to God that such a system prevailed all over the world. [...] slavery comes in, and white free labor that can strike will give way to slave labor that cannot!" *ibid.*, p. 8-9. The *Hartford Evening Press*, March 6, 1860 version has: "If you give up your convictions and call slavery right as they do, you let slavery in upon you—instead of white laborers who can strike, you'll soon have black laborers who can't strike," *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24-25.

⁵¹ Mark A. Lause, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2015, especially p. 153n.

of railroads, the reorganization of the financial system with the creation of National Banks, and the triumph of the wage-based society, “the free labor system,” i.e. the very capitalism that would crush labor claims under its “iron heel.” All in all, he was the head of state, a state whose function is to be an arbiter between classes for the benefit of the dominant class, trying to keep a balance, but one that is always tilted. On the few occasions when he was confronted with the issue directly, he was instrumental in tilting it slightly on the side of labor while his economic policies were tilting it heavily in favor of business. So one could make a guess about what would have happened had he been able to continue in office, or in political life until the Gilded Age. The industrial and financial interests that he had served so well throughout his career would perchance have had to find a replacement for the dirty job of putting down the rebellion of labor. Obviously, his heart would not have been in it. But that may well be wishful thinking.

Is not this type of wishful thinking, this idea that some famous characters of the past can provide us with better models to deal with the realities of the present than their latter-day successors, that drives us to look into their biographies as ardently as Puritan divines scrutinized both the Scriptures and the signs proffered by the times? In that sense, could it not be argued that biographies are Jeremiads?