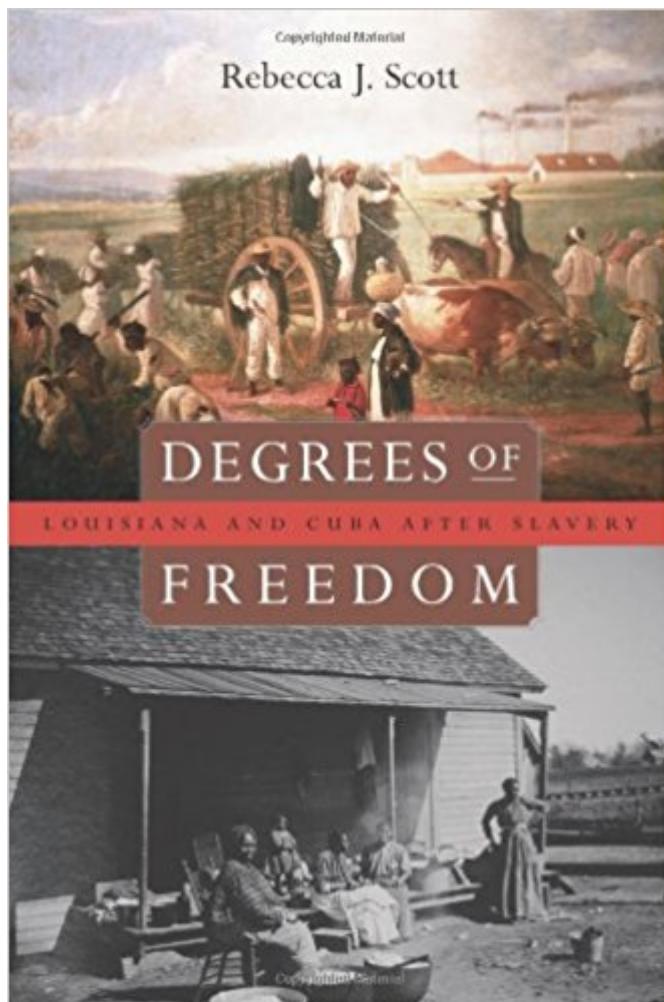


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# Degrees Of Freedom: Louisiana And Cuba After Slavery



## Synopsis

As Louisiana and Cuba emerged from slavery in the late nineteenth century, each faced the question of what rights former slaves could claim. *Degrees of Freedom* compares and contrasts these two societies in which slavery was destroyed by war, and citizenship was redefined through social and political upheaval. Both Louisiana and Cuba were rich in sugar plantations that depended on an enslaved labor force. After abolition, on both sides of the Gulf of Mexico, ordinary people—cane cutters and cigar workers, laundresses and labor organizers—forged alliances to protect and expand the freedoms they had won. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, Louisiana and Cuba diverged sharply in the meanings attributed to race and color in public life, and in the boundaries placed on citizenship. Louisiana had taken the path of disenfranchisement and state-mandated racial segregation; Cuba had enacted universal manhood suffrage and had seen the emergence of a transracial conception of the nation. What might explain these differences? Moving through the cane fields, small farms, and cities of Louisiana and Cuba, Rebecca Scott skillfully observes the people, places, legislation, and leadership that shaped how these societies adjusted to the abolition of slavery. The two distinctive worlds also come together, as Cuban exiles take refuge in New Orleans in the 1880s, and black soldiers from Louisiana garrison small towns in eastern Cuba during the 1899 U.S. military occupation. Crafting her narrative from the words and deeds of the actors themselves, Scott brings to life the historical drama of race and citizenship in postemancipation societies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Tracing the parallel histories of post-slavery Louisiana and Cuba, Scott, a University of Michigan professor of history and law, uses court cases, activist profiles and heart-pounding runaway narratives to slowly draw the reader into the lives of slaves, freedmen and slaveowners (both black and white) of the late nineteenth century Gulf, but dense clots of legal-historic scholarship can prove difficult to navigate for readers not already studied on the subject. Her back and forth cultural contrasts between Louisiana and Cuba are well-crafted, early on laying out her tale's direction: "In Louisiana itself, the space for the discussion of civic and political equality had narrowed almost to the vanishing point. In Cuba in that same year, the space for discussion was still quite open, and different groups of activists debated...the best strategy for asserting their full rights." Though similar economically (both Cuba and Louisiana had agricultural economies that heavily depended on slave labor), the two areas' divergent political climates at the turn of the century saw Louisiana's blacks continue to lose rights, while across the Gulf, voter rolls swelled. Casual history readers may get bogged down by Scott's text, as it assumes more than a nodding familiarity with court precedents and nineteenth century legislation, but oral histories of slaves and their descendants provide refreshing counterpoints to the admirable, though daunting, scholarship. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Scott has given us an epochal work that is the most important comparative analysis of race relations in the Americas since Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White*. What makes the book so important is its truly unusual method, and the great skill and brio with which that method is carried out. It is a triumph of historical investigation. (George Reid Andrews, author of *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*) A model of how comparative history should be written, *Degrees of Freedom* offers strikingly original insights into how former slaves in two of the western hemisphere's most important slave societies tried to breathe substantive life into the idea and experience of freedom. (Eric Foner, Columbia University) *Degrees of Freedom* is a watershed study in the history of post-emancipation societies in the Americas. Rebecca Scott spins a fascinating narrative about race and nationality, political voice and associational activism, the struggle for resources and the quest for respect, the role of labor and the power of law to set limits of the possible. In ranging widely between the large, impersonal structures that constrain change and the ground-level individual and collective struggles that advance it, Rebecca Scott has pulled off a remarkable feat. (Lawrence N. Powell, Tulane University) Scott has written a masterful comparative history, but she has also succeeded in the challenging task of integrating the political, social and economic history of each society into a

unified story, documenting how issues of race, labor, and citizenship were inextricably intertwined. (John Rodrigue, author of *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880*) Tracing the parallel histories of post-slavery Louisiana and Cuba, Scott uses court cases, activist profiles and heartpounding runaway narratives to slowly draw the reader into the lives of slaves, freedmen and slaveowners (both black and white) of the late nineteenth century Gulf... Her back and forth cultural contrasts between Louisiana and Cuba are well-crafted... Though similar economically (both Cuba and Louisiana had agricultural economies that heavily depended on slave labor), the two areas' divergent political climates at the turn of the century saw Louisiana's blacks continue to lose rights, while across the Gulf, voter rolls swelled. (Publishers Weekly 2005-10-24) [Scott] gracefully brings the limitations of historical knowledge to our attention. For example, from the fact that census records reveal their residences and common last names, she infers that several individuals who resided near each other after emancipation were slaves on the same plantation, and notes that inferential step. Her subtle references to what we do not and cannot know about the past remind us that there is much we do not--and probably cannot--know about the present or about the general propositions economists urge on us. (Mark Tushnet Michigan Law Review 2007-04-01) Rebecca Scott's book, *Degrees of Freedom*, is a major historical contribution to the comparative study of slavery and race relations in the Americas by a senior and pre-eminent historian... Through painstaking research of court records and legal proceedings, and riveting accounts of individual and collective struggle, Scott has assembled a formidable argument to support her thesis that "degrees of freedom" can make an enormous difference in the evolution of two broadly similar sugarcane regions. (Helen I. Safa European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies 2007-04-01) Rebecca Scott's *Degrees of Freedoms*... distinguishes itself from earlier comparative works by taking "the construction of postemancipation society, rather than slavery and race relations, as the subject of comparison." It is solidly grounded in primary sources from a variety of archival sites, and its methodological approach and general style also distance Scott's book from earlier comparative studies. The book raises important issues for debate, and even those differing from the author's conclusions or emphases would recognize that it is a groundbreaking study and a remarkable piece of historical research and analysis. (Jorge Giovannetti International Review of Social History 2007-01-01) This magnificent work will not only satisfy Latin Americanists but also demand attention from the much larger (and historically insular) scholarly audience of U.S. historians. *Degrees of Freedom* eloquently explores the political, social, and economic worlds of Cuba and Louisiana after slavery, bringing Scott's nuanced interpretative lens to both societies, while also setting a new standard for comparative and

connected history that will force historians of the United States to engage Latin American history (and historiography)...This work will be both an inspiration and touchstone for scholars studying life after slavery. (James E. Sanders *Journal of Social History* 2007-06-01)Rebecca Scott's compelling examination of the making of new postemancipation social orders in Louisiana and Cuba, while not dismissive of an earlier post-World War II scholarship pioneered by Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen*, pointedly criticizes the misleading objectivism of this earlier work. The result is a study whose exploration of the dynamics of postemancipation social mobilizations not only vividly illuminates local, particular features of the reconstruction of politics and labor in the sugar growing districts of Cienfuegos and Santa Clara in central Cuba and in southern Louisiana's sugar parishes of Terrebonne and Lafourche west of New Orleans. It also identifies divergences in the histories of the nations that oversaw these emancipations. (Julie Saville *Law and History Review* 2007-09-01)A fascinating and well-written piece of comparative history...Those who are rebuilding New Orleans would do well to capitalize on what's inside Scott's suddenly extremely timely book. (Ward Harkavy *Village Voice* 2005-09-21)

In *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery*, Rebecca Scott writes that at the most basic level, violence played a key role in the transition from slavery to freedom in Louisiana through the Civil War. While Louisiana was under Union occupation, the presence of black soldiers played a key role in encouraging freedpeople to agitate for their rights. Later, freedpeople insisted on their public rights in order to assert themselves after years in which white authorities denied them. Even in the face of armed resistance and massacres, like that at the Colfax Courthouse, African Americans remained committed to asserting their basic rights in a free Louisiana. Finally, the elections of 1874 and 1876 demonstrated the deeply partisan nature of Louisiana politics through intimidation and opportunism. Scott writes, "In central Cuba, the interplay of free, enslaved, and semi-enslaved (including indentured Chinese workers) was almost continuous." Slaves were in constant contact with Chinese contract laborers who worked at the same tasks but under different rules. Later, during the Ten Years' War, the Spanish military treated free blacks and indentured Chinese equally, as a force for labor or a "runaway" group to be captured and put to work. Later, the 1887 census included the Chinese as persons of color. By the very presence, Chinese laborers offered an alternative to slave labor and the roles available to free blacks. Following emancipation, Chinese Cubans could act as electors in the new post-slavery society, demonstrating their assimilation. Scott writes, "The key legacy in both Cuba

and Louisiana was a contest over the right to respect and resources, which increasingly encompassed a contest over the boundaries of citizenship. Louisiana is distinguished from Cuba by the ways in which the scope of this contest came to be successively narrowed. In Louisiana, the effects of constitutional disenfranchisement were at once practical, symbolic, and punitive, and they were deigned to undercut alliances along and across class lines and permanently. African Americans' political gains resulted from a war that divided the white citizens of Louisiana and the nation, so their disenfranchisement helped to reunify whites in the North and South. In Cuba, the dominant national narrative of a raceless society worked to undermine attempts to unify along racial lines. While this limited Cubans of color from forming their own alliances, as in the case of the Independent Party of Color, voting and officeholding by men of color were now commonplace after 1898. Scott writes, "The official ideology of the rebels portrayed racism as a legacy of slavery and colonialism, destined to be eliminated in a democratic Cuban republic."

The subject is of interest to me, combining as it does both historical and legal issues in a nexus of great immediacy, i.e. the extent to which human beings could dispose of themselves and their bodies or be considered chattel. There was a wealth of information which was new to me. This is a book of discovery for the reader, the result of excellent research, and the text itself is lively and engaging, making it an extremely interesting book to read. A work of scholarship which can be easily read by the non-specialist is always a winner.

Scott lays out a well organized argument and supports her thesis with substantial documentation. Perhaps a bit of overkill on the documentation and stories in some areas but overall she makes a strong argument and provides illuminating insights to a transnational/comparative history topic that reveals a great deal about the dichotomy in attitudes regarding slavery in post Civil War American and in Cuba.

Very light printing. Made it a little hard to read. I had to be sure I used my reading glasses.

There are no page numbers? This is completely worthless for a student who needs to be able to analyze the work in depth and discuss it critically in class. I am pretty upset.

First, disclosure of potential conflict of interest. The author and I are both faculty at the University of Michigan, though not in the same department. This is a very good comparative study of the aftermath of emancipation in Louisiana and Cuba. In Louisiana, emancipation was followed by the burst of African-American political participation during the Reconstruction period, then the gradual extinction of African-American civil rights that was the imposition of Jim Crow. In Cuba, on the other hand, emancipation was bound up with the cause of Cuban independence and the attainment of nationhood was accompanied by considerable political participation on the part of Afro-Cubans, and this became an enduring feature of Cuban life. In important respects, Louisiana and Cuba had important common features. Both were slaveholding societies with sugar plantation economies. Antebellum Louisiana, particularly the sugar producing parishes (counties) that are the focus of Scott's narrative, was a highly stratified 'slave' society with relatively small numbers of white owners lording over a large group of slave workers. Free blacks, and whites engaged in plantation labor were relatively sparse. The most important free black community in Louisiana was the urbanized and creolized community of New Orleans. Pre-independence Cuba, in contrast, was more diverse in some respects. There were substantial numbers of free Afro-Cubans, many whites who performed plantation labor, and other forms of ethnic diversity such as significant numbers of Chinese indentured laborers. Emancipation in Louisiana resulted from the Northern triumph in the Civil War (to which large numbers of southern black soldiers and sailors made crucial contributions) and the post-war maintenance of African-American civil rights depended on the sympathy of Northern politicians. The intensification of Northern racism and the desire to placate Southern whites led to the imposition of the Jim Crow system. In Cuba, the long struggle for independence was a multiracial, multiethnic phenomenon in which Afro-Cubans occupied prominent leadership roles. The nature of the Cuban society and the struggle for independence made imposing a Jim Crow like system difficult in Cuba. This was despite the American occupation of Cuba as the American overlords would clearly have preferred a system more like that of the American South. Well written and documented, this book features a number of interesting aspects beyond the main analysis. The narrative about Louisiana is a very good case study of the imposition of Jim Crow. None of this will be novel to knowledgeable readers but this is one of the best 'bottom up' descriptions of this tragic process I've read. Scott provides some interesting discussion of the roles of New Orleans Creole leadership and their pan-Caribbean perspective. All the discussion of Cuba will be new to most American readers and is very interesting. While the topic of this book appears relatively narrow, it is generally illuminating.

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