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FREE LABOR, EMANCIPATION & RECONSTRUCTION'S GLOBAL LENS

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When Charles Hale arrived in Cairo in October 1864, he brought the Civil War with him. The new Consul-General of the United States in Egypt, Hale had made his name as a journalist, and as a politician, having served in the Massachusetts state legislature. A Boston brahmin who came of age in the 1840s and 50s, Hale saw the world through the prism of a titanic global struggle between slavery and freedom. So when a case crossed his desk only a few months after the end of the Civil War, it is perhaps not surprising that Charles Hale saw an opportunity to carry on that struggle, even if thousands of miles from home.^[1]

(applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftn1)

A Danish explorer, Alexandrine Tinné, had prevailed upon Hale in the autumn of 1865 to protect a number of African servants who had travelled with her on her explorations of the White Nile. To shield them from potential enslavement, she had paid to place them as students in the American Mission School. To add to their protection, Tinné wanted Hale to make them protégés of the American consulate—that is, foreign persons protected by the United States, short of enjoying rights as citizens. She didn't have to work hard to convince him. Slavery, argued Hale in a letter to his superiors, was alive and well in Egypt, and given “the superb position which our country at this moment occupies in the face of the world, with reference to slavery and the negro race,” it was incumbent on the State Department to extend protection abroad to persons under threat of enslavement, just as African Americans and their allies were struggling to protect freedpeople from re-enslavement at home. To up the ante, Hale recounted how British authorities in Egypt had undertaken much the same action. The “same principles which lead Great Britain to object to forced labor on the Suez Canal,” argued Hale, “and to involuntary domestic servitude in Egypt,” ought to apply in the application of American power abroad as well. Ultimately, Hale was unsuccessful. Yet, both his attempt and his failure is instructive. All but daring the State Department to flex its muscles, Charles Hale saw Egypt as a new front in a global conflict: a conflict in which free labor was anything but ascendant.^[2] **(applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftn2)**

By the middle of the 1860s, free labor had never seemed more pervasive, or more fragile. In the nineteenth century, driven largely by an age of emancipation that brought about the slow, halting collapse of the transatlantic slave trade and, later, slavery itself, free labor emerged as a force in its own right. This was

particularly true in the United States, where free labor served as the ideological bedrock of the Republican Party.^[3] (applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftn3) But what had seemed like *the* answer to solving the “slavery question” looked threadbare, even by the beginning of the Civil War. By then, emancipatory projects in the Caribbean had demolished the idea that free labor would bring about the flowering of former slave colonies, as political economists had claimed it would.^[4]

(applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftn4) Formerly enslaved people threw innumerable wrenches in the works as well, demonstrating that would-be free laborers wanted more than just a wage. And while wage laborers in Northern Europe and the United States grew in number, their wages and living conditions remained poor, in spite of widespread labor organization that sought to reverse the trend.^[5]

(applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftn5) Free labor may have been on the march in parts of the American South by the later stages of the Civil War, but for roughly three decades, the movement of hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers from India and China to the Americas had showed at least by the 1840s, that coercion could come in many forms.^[6] (applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftn6) Though American advocates deemed free labor a grand experiment, many parts of the Atlantic World had already tried it. The results had been checkered at best.^[7]

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Not all U.S. consuls were like Hale, burning with conviction about role of the United States as a global leader in the march of free labor. Most were men on the make—fortune seekers on the ragged edges of a globalizing capitalist economy, with diplomatic passports in their pockets and their ears tuned to insider information on the docks. But though self-interested, American consuls faced big questions all the same: about the place of the United States in the world, the role that the republic might play in an increasingly dominant capitalist economy and, for men like Hale, the limits of the United States’ devotion to the principles of free labor.

What Charles Hale’s adventures in Egypt suggest to us is that there are some powerfully important stories to be told about the history of free labor that place Reconstruction in a broader, global frame. While he might have seen the victory of free labor over slavery in the United States as a triumph, Hale’s experience suggests just one facet of a larger story of emancipation: as a long, halting process that continued on through the Civil War, and remains a shadow cast over our own moment in the present day. Reckoning with the history of slavery and capitalism by focusing not only on the moment when these two forces came to form a seamless whole, but instead on what happened when coerced labor began to change its shape, offers opportunities to check the historical victories we all-too easily declare in broader national narratives. Systems of coercion not only withstood the age of emancipation, but became ever more difficult to disentangle, as capitalism entered into an age of consolidation, and searched an imperial globe for cheap labor, at a distance from consumers. This was the world Charles Hale looked out on.

^[1] (applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref1) For a biography of Hale, see *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1928-58), 8: 96-97.

^[2] (applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref2) Charles Hale to William Seward, 9 September 1865 and 27 October 1865 (roll 4), Despatches from United States Consuls in Alexandria, Egypt, 1835-1873 (T45), Department of State (RG 59), National Archives, Washington DC.

^[3] (applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref3) For the backdrop to this history, see Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Christopher Tomlins, *Freedom Bound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity in Colonizing English America, 1580-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the political valences of free labor in the American context, the classic remains Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (1970; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[4] ([applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref4](https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/author/mathisen-erik/)) Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) and Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[5] ([applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref5](https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/author/mathisen-erik/)) David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

[6] ([applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref6](https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/author/mathisen-erik/)) On British indentured labor from India, beginning in the 1830s and 40s, see, for example, Brian Connolly, "Indentured Labour Migration and the Meaning of Emancipation: Free Trade, Race, and Labour in British Public Debate, 1838-1860," *Past & Present* 238 (2018): 85-119. For Chinese indentured labor, see, for example, Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013) but also Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[7] ([applewebdata://130BA4A4-A385-4942-9E96-0943361417F1#_ftnref7](https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/author/mathisen-erik/)) On the question of free labor's blindspots, one of the best works remains Amy Dru Stanley's *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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