

6. John Brown and Abraham Lincoln: The Invisibility of Antiracism in American History Textbooks

Perhaps the most telling criticism Frances FitzGerald made in her 1979 survey of American history textbooks, *America Revised*, was that they leave out ideas. As presented by textbooks of the 1970s, "American political life was completely mindless," she observed.⁵

Why would textbook authors avoid even those ideas with which they agree? Taking ideas seriously does not fit with the rhetorical style of textbooks, which presents events so as to make them seem foreordained along a line of constant progress. Including ideas would make history contingent: things could go either way, and have on occasion. The "right" people, armed with the "right" ideas, have not always won. When they didn't, the authors would be in the embarrassing position of having to disapprove of an outcome in the past. Including ideas would introduce uncertainty. This is not textbook style. Textbooks unfold history without real drama or suspense, only melodrama.

On the subject of race relations, John Brown's statement that "this question is still to be settled" seems as relevant today, and even as ominous, as when he spoke in 1859. The opposite of racism is antiracism, of course, or what we might call racial idealism or equalitarianism, and it is still not clear whether it will prevail. In this struggle, our history textbooks offer little help. Just as they underplay white racism, they also neglect racial idealism. In so doing, they deprive students of potential role models to call upon as they try to bridge the new fault lines that will spread out in the future from the great rift in our past.

Since ideas and ideologies played an especially important role in the Civil War era, American history textbooks give a singularly inchoate view of that Struggle. Just as textbooks treat slavery without racism, they treat abolitionism without much idealism. Consider the most radical white abolitionist of them all, John Brown.

The treatment of Brown, like the treatment of slavery and Reconstruction, has changed in American history textbooks. From 1890 to about 1970, John Brown was insane. Before 1890 he was perfectly sane, and after 1970 he

insane, including his mother and grandmother." Two other books finesse the sanity issue by calling Brown merely "fanatical." No textbook has any sympathy for the man or takes any pleasure in his ideals and actions.

For the benefit of readers who, like me, grew up reading that Brown was at least fanatic if not crazed, let's consider the evidence. To be sure, some of Brown's lawyers and relatives, hoping to save his neck, suggested an insanity defense. But no one who knew Brown thought him crazy. He favorably impressed people who spoke with him after his capture, including his jailer and even reporters writing for Democratic newspapers, which supported slavery. Governor Wise of Virginia called him "a man of clear head" after Brown got the better of him in an informal interview. "They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman," Governor Wise said. In his message to the Virginia legislature he said Brown showed "quick and clear perception," "rational premises and consecutive reasoning," "composure and self-possession."⁸

After 1890 textbook authors inferred Brown's madness from his plan, which admittedly was farfetched. Never mind that John Brown himself presciently told Frederick Douglass that the venture would make a stunning impact even if it failed. Nor that his twenty-odd followers can hardly all be considered crazed too." Rather, we must recognize that the insanity with which historians have charged John Brown was never psychological. It was ideological. Brown's actions made no sense to textbook writers between 1890 and about 1970, To make no sense is to be crazy.

Clearly, Brown's contemporaries did not consider him insane. Brown's ideological influence in the month before his hanging, and continuing after his death, was immense. He moved the boundary of acceptable thoughts and deeds regarding slavery. Before Harpers Ferry, to be an abolitionist was not quite acceptable, even in the North. Just talking about freeing slaves—advocating immediate emancipation—was behavior at the outer limit of the ideological continuum. By engaging in armed action, including murder, John Brown made mere verbal abolitionism seem much less radical.

After an initial shock wave of revulsion against Brown, in the North as well as in the South, Americans were fascinated to hear what he had to say. In his 1859 trial John Brown captured the attention of the nation like no other abolitionist or slaveowner before or since. He knew it: "My whole life before had not afforded me one half the opportunity to plead for the right."¹⁰ In his speech to the court on November 2, just before the judge sentenced him to die, Brown argued, "Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, it would have been all right." He referred to the Bible, which he saw in the

courtroom, "which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further, to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction." Brown went on to claim the high moral ground: "I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong but right." Although he objected that his impending death penalty was unjust, he accepted it and pointed to graver injustices: "Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done."¹¹

Brown's willingness to go to the gallows for what he thought was right had a moral force of its own. "It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived," Henry David Thoreau observed in a eulogy in Boston. "These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live." Thoreau went on to compare Brown with Jesus of Nazareth, who had faced a similar death at the hands of the state.¹²

During the rest of November, Brown provided the nation graceful instruction in how to face death. In Larchmont, New York, George Templeton Strong wrote in his diary, "One's faith in anything is terribly shaken by anybody who is ready to go to the gallows condemning and denouncing it."¹³ Brown's letters to his family and friends softened his image, showed his human side, and prompted an outpouring of sympathy for his children and soon-to-be widow, if not for Brown himself. His letters to supporters and remarks to journalists, widely circulated, formed a continuing indictment of slavery. We see his charisma in this letter from "a conservative Christian"—so the author signed it—written to Brown in jail: "While I cannot approve of all your acts, I stand in awe of your position since your capture, and dare not oppose you lest I be found fighting against God; for you speak as one having authority, and seem to be strengthened from on high."¹⁴ When Virginia executed John Brown on December 2, making him the first American since the founding of the nation to be hanged as a traitor, church bells mourned in cities throughout the North. Louisa May Alcott, William Dean Howells, Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Walt Whitman were among the poets who responded to the event. "The gaze of Europe is fixed at this moment on America," wrote Victor Hugo from France. Hanging Brown, Hugo predicted, "will open a latent fissure that will finally split the Union asunder. The punishment of John Brown may consol-

idate slavery in Virginia, but it will certainly shatter the American Democracy. You preserve your shame but you kill your glory."¹⁵

Brown remained controversial after his death. Republican congressmen kept their distance from his felonious acts. Nevertheless, Southern slaveowners were appalled at the show of Northern sympathy for Brown and resolved to maintain slavery by any means necessary, including quitting the Union if they lost the next election. Brown's charisma in the North, meanwhile, was not spent but only increased due to what many came to view as his martyrdom. As the war came, as thousands of Americans found themselves making the same commitment to face death that John Brown had made, the force of his example took on new relevance. That's why soldiers marched into battle singing "John Brown's Body." Two years later, church congregations sang Julia Ward Howe's new words to the song: "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free"—and the identification of John Brown and Jesus Christ took another turn. The next year saw the 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment parading through Boston to the tune, en route to its heroic destiny with death in South Carolina, while William Lloyd Garrison surveyed the cheering bystanders from a balcony, his hand resting on a bust of John Brown. In February 1865 another Massachusetts colored regiment marched to the tune through the streets of" Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁶

That was the high point of old John Brown. At the turn of the century, as southern and border states disfranchised African Americans, as lynchings proliferated, as blackface minstrel shows came to dominate American popular culture, white America abandoned the last shards of its racial idealism. A history published in 1923 makes plain the connection to Brown's insanity: "The farther we get away from the excitement of 1859 the more we are disposed to consider this extraordinary man the victim of mental delusions."¹⁷ Not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s was white America freed from enough of its racism to accept that a white person did not have to be crazy to die for black equality. In a sense, the murders of Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman in Mississippi, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo in Alabama, and various other white civil rights workers in various other southern states during the 1960s liberated textbook writers to see sanity again in John Brown. *Rise of the American Nation*, written in 1961, calls the Harpers Ferry plan "a wild idea, certain to fail," while in *Triumph of the American Nation*, published in 1986, the plan becomes "a bold idea, but almost certain to fail."

Frequently in American history the ideological needs of white racists and black nationalists coincide. So it was with their views of John Brown, During

the heyday of the Black Power movement, I listened to speaker after speaker in a Mississippi forum denounce whites. "They are your enemies," thundered one black militant. "Not one white person has ever had the best interests of black people at heart." John Brown sprang to my mind, but the speaker anticipated my objection: "You might say John Brown did, but remember, he was crazy." John Brown might provide a defense against such global attacks on whites, but, unfortunately, American history textbooks have erased him as a usable character.

No black person who met John Brown thought him crazy. Many black leaders of the day—Martin Delaney, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and others—knew and respected Brown. Only illness kept Tubman from joining him at Harpers Ferry, the day of his execution black-owned businesses closed in mourning across the North. Frederick Douglass called Brown "one of the greatest heroes known to American fame."⁸ A black college deliberately chose to locate at Harpers Ferry, and in 1918 its alumni dedicated a memorial stone to Brown and his men "to commemorate their heroism." The stone stated, in part, "That this nation might have a new birth of freedom, that slavery should be removed forever from American soil, John Brown and his 21 men gave their lives."

Quite possibly textbooks should not portray this murderer as a hero, although other murderers, from Christopher Columbus to Nat Turner, get the heroic treatment. However, the flat prose that textbooks use for Brown is not really neutral. Textbook authors' withdrawal of sympathy from Brown is perceptible; their tone in presenting him is different from the tone they employ for almost everyone else. We see this, for instance, in their treatment of his religious beliefs. John Brown was a serious Christian, well read in the Bible, who took its moral commands to heart. Yet our textbooks do not credit Brown with religiosity—subtly they blame him for it. "Believing himself commanded by God to free the slaves, Brown came up with a scheme . . .," in the words of *Land of Promise*. *The American Pageant* calls Brown "narrowly ignorant," perhaps a euphemism for overly religious, and "God's angry man." "He believed that God had commanded him to free the slaves by force," states *American History*. God never commanded Brown in the sense of giving him instructions; rather, Brown thought deeply about the moral meaning of Christianity and decided that slavery was incompatible with it. He was also not "narrowly ignorant," having traveled widely in the United States, England, and Europe and talked with many American intellectuals of the day, black and white.