

Professor links slavery emancipation to other social movements

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When Abraham Lincoln sent Union troops into Southern states during the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of slaves saw their opportunity to break free from years of captivity. A University of Kansas professor in his new book examines how that moment in time helped shake America's foundation related to freedom and human rights.

"The [slaves](#) emancipated themselves in large measure. It was their actions that led to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation," said David

Roediger, KU's first Foundation Professor in American Studies and History. "They found the Union Army and said, 'You don't think yet that the war is about emancipation, but we as slaves realize that it's potentially about emancipation, and here we are.'"

In his new book "[Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All](#)," released this week by Verso Books, Roediger examined both visual and written texts to detail the story of slaves who fought for freedom and how the nation responded to emancipation.

"When studying something like slave emancipation, folklore in particular is so important because we don't really have any sources that reflect the slaves' point of view except for songs and tales," Roediger said. "Slaves weren't really free to write. They were often denied literacy altogether."

In addition, Roediger's book explores how slaves in gaining their freedom laid the groundwork for other important American [social movements](#).

"The book turns to the women's movement and the eight-hour day labor movement as examples of people who were inspired by that movement of the slaves," Roediger said. "That emancipation of slaves, which was unplanned and uncompensated—four million people free more or less overnight—was impossible in U.S. politics in 1861. It was fact by 1865."

To grasp the amount of inspiration women's suffrage and labor rights activists gained from seeing emancipation of the slaves, Roediger said it's important to recognize how slaves seized the opportunity once it was presented to them.

"Slaves had always been trying to run away and get free. Suddenly with the Union Army around, it becomes possible not for a few hundred or thousand to run away a year, but for hundreds of thousands of slaves to

run away," Roediger said. "So the lens of thinking about struggle as both something that's constant and something that at certain points actually dictates the pace and motion of history, I think is a very important contribution to make."

Once that happened, he said, people began to think about other ideas that seemed impossible at the time. The women's suffrage movement became strong, and workers especially in the North aggressively pursued an eight-hour workday.

"I'm trying to connect what slaves did with these broader currents of liberatory thought," Roediger said.

Despite slave emancipation lending fuel and passion to other social movements, it's a complex story, he said. There were challenges. In part it's a sad story about how the movement for slave emancipation and movement for women's suffrage fell out over the question of which came first. For example, Frederick Douglass began to have strong tension with leaders of the women's suffrage movement, Roediger said.

"There was tremendous conflict over the 14th and 15th amendments about whether it was worth it to establish black male civil rights if you couldn't also get women's suffrage at the same time," he said.

Still, Roediger said despite those early disagreements the message from the book is valuable.

"It's hard to build interracial solidarity movements, and that sometimes I think that people who try to build broad, unified movements really beat themselves up about how unsuccessful we are," he said. "Here were the greatest people with long-standing relationships, the most knowledgeable political leaders, the great heroes of dissenting history in the United States, and they couldn't do it in a very crucial period."

Their efforts were still inspiring, and the emancipation era helped pave the way for progress on many social fronts decades in the future, he said.

"We need to think about unity as desirable but never easy," Roediger said. "Even though it seems sometimes that things don't change historically and that for long periods not much happens in the way of furthering emancipatory processes, when they change, they often change very dramatically and very unexpectedly."

He hopes the book's message provides insight for leaders of social movements today.

"Once we see that, we see that the motion of the slaves causes all this other motion," he said. "So in the present, I think we end up in a situation where again, when one group moves it's at least possible that other groups will try to think about how they might ally with that movement and also how they might dream their own kind of dreams of freedom."

Roediger who began his work at KU in July, is also the current president-elect of the American Studies Association. His research and teaching focuses on race, ethnicity, labor and the 19th and 20th centuries.

KU's Foundation Professor initiative is a unique partnership between the university and state of Kansas to attract eminent faculty members to support one of the university's four strategic initiative themes. Roediger was the first of 12 scholars who will join KU, and he will play a leadership role in advancing KU's strategic initiative theme, Building Communities, Expanding Opportunities.

"There is some motion toward a center on social inequality or social equity at KU," he said. "One of the things I'm excited about is trying to think about all of the different people that I meet and how we might

build something like such a center and what that might look like."

Provided by University of Kansas

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