

Malka, Adam, *The Men of Mobtown: Policing Baltimore in the Age of Slavery and Emancipation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 352 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-3629-0.

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As a graduate student of Eric Arnesen, I was exposed to his now infamous diatribes against “whiteness.” At the time, I suspected that Arnesen overstated his case. The first half of this book made me think Arnesen was right.

Adam Malka argues that from their creation, the Baltimore police were an example of “the white mob.” They represented little more than the extension of the power of “white men,” clothed now in the garb of the state. But portraying white men as a unitary category, all exercising power, keeps Malka from explaining the nuances of Baltimore’s police politics.

For instance, Malka writes, “In antebellum Baltimore, white men built the police force and penal institutions. As a result, policemen and prisons represented more an extension of white male power than that power’s replacement” (53). Of course, white men built the police. But class, religion, politics, ethnicity, immigrant status, and many other things divided “white men.” Malka’s own evidence shows how the police and penal institutions were in fact created by some white men to control others, since black people were, as he shows, largely policed by the mob and by extra-legal violence.

While Malka acknowledges that the police were largely created to protect property, at various points he defines wages, familial dependents, and even whiteness itself as property. Certainly, in a society with slaves, the ability to keep one’s wages mattered—Malka provides a powerful Frederick Douglass quote illustrating this. But at the same time, as Malka (and Frederick Douglass) shows, most wage earners were in dire poverty as the wage labor economy developed. Calling their wages property, without differentiating them from the shipyards, factories, warehouses, and workshops owned by the actual capitalists, leads Malka to make overgeneralizations about the power and privilege of all white people.

For example, Malka cites two strikes by white workers that police refused to put down. One was crushed by the militia, and the other was victorious. In neither case did the police actually intervene on the side of the strikers against business owners. Yet Malka writes of these events that “Certain workers were thus capable of marshalling state power on their behalf” (114). How is having the police not intervene a version of marshalling state power? The single largest “mob” in Baltimore history was the railroad strike of 1877, which took place conveniently right after Malka’s book ends. This pitted thousands of working-class “white men” against the police, with 500 additional “white men” deputized to break the strike, and the state militia and army called in as reinforcements. When workers threatened the entire capitalist order, it became quite obvious which white men could marshal state power, and which could not.

A key problem is that Malka doesn’t engage with the extensive literature on political machines. This literature provides a much more nuanced explanation of why police

sometimes worked with mobs, and sometimes fought them, depending on shifting political alliances. Police did not simply act as hired thugs of the capitalists in any city. They were embedded in patronage systems and ethnic politics that also helped maintain a system that, as Malka himself shows, kept the majority of wage earners, black and white, in poverty.

Despite these weaknesses, this book has some saving graces. Malka is a careful-enough historian to provide plenty of evidence and explain it clearly. While I obviously find his whiteness framework distracting and unconvincing, at other times, Malka indicates a more reasonable interpretation. The Baltimore police were founded in the antebellum period to protect the property of some elite Baltimoreans from the threat posed by both white and black wage labor. And both in order to gain legitimacy and because their members were drawn from the white working class, the police tolerated and sometimes participated in a great deal of racist violence against the free black population. They also tolerated some other mob action by white workers, especially when it was backed by at least an important layer of the elite. This violence maintained a racial hierarchy within the working class, blocking the free black population from competing with white workers for desirable jobs, from becoming independent householders, and from exercising full citizenship rights. It also reinforced the power of the businessmen who, in fact, ran Baltimore.

The second half of *The Men of Mobtown*, written from the perspective of the Baltimore's largely free black population, is almost an entirely new, much more insightful and convincing, book. In this portion, Malka shows how the entire political and economic system of Baltimore was set up against the free black people who made up the large majority of the city's black population. He shows here how the liberal construction of freedom and manhood, which required that men be independent, wage-earning householders, put free black Baltimoreans in a trap. They were blocked from conforming to these liberal ideals by the entire racist structure of Baltimore's political economy, and were then critiqued by political commentators of all stripes for failing to conform to them.

Malka also uses this framework to explain why mass incarceration flowed from emancipation, from the "crime of freedom," as Malka eloquently put it. The most arresting insight in the book is that in the antebellum period, black people were under-represented in the city's penal institutions. He convincingly argues that this was because black people often faced violence on the street rather than arrest, were punished for crimes by being sold into slavery rather than imprisoned, and were considered unfit for rehabilitation. After emancipation, which he describes as a major victory, the black population faced dramatically increased policing and imprisonment, as a fear of black crime swept Baltimore. This fear had little basis in reality, but by blocking black Baltimoreans' ability to conform to liberal norms of behavior and manhood, the liberal ideology of emancipation created a self-fulfilling prophecy of black crime. Black freedom was, in this sense, a crime in itself.

Given the excellent second half of this book, including a persuasive conclusion that barely makes mention of the ideas that I found so problematic in its first half, along with Malka's wealth of interesting research, the excellent book this could have been is itself a victim of whiteness.