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“Black Liberty Matters”

“How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”

This was Samuel Johnson’s bitter rhetorical question about the American Revolution, and the conflict it identifies has never been far from the surface of American political and intellectual life. Compared with the societies of 18th and 19th century Europe, the United States was unusually obsessed with the idea of liberty and unusually economically dependent on slave labor. Sometimes Americans like to tell ourselves that the revolutionary idea of liberty is what finally made abolition possible two generations later, but that sidesteps the paradox that the U.S. was one of the last countries to abolish slavery, and did so only after a decades-long expansion.

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