

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE
Fakulta sociálních věd
Institut mezinárodních studií

PROTOKOL O HODNOCENÍ DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE
(Posudek vedoucího)

Práci předložil(a) student(ka): Denisa Matsche

Název práce: “The Significance of Meaning Shift of the Word “Slave” in Abolishing Slavery in the United States”

Vedoucí práce (u externích vedoucích uveďte též adresu a funkci v rámci instituce): Gyorgy Toth, PhD

1. OBSAH A CÍL PRÁCE (stručná informace o práci, formulace cíle):

“This thesis [...] examines the power role of discourse in maintaining and abolishing slavery in the United States, particularly the proslavery and the antislavery discourse of the antebellum South. [T]he thesis demonstrate[s] that in U.S. social and political discourse, the meaning of [the word] “slave” was not fixed and underwent significant changes over time. This thesis suggests that the abolition of slavery in the United States can be perceived as a result of “a battle for truth” between the proslavery and the antislavery discourse [, which] helped to present the abolition of slavery as essential for the very survival of the Union. As such, it was a powerful argument that eventually helped trigger the war over slavery in the United States.”

The thesis has a clear structure, which logically moves from the introduction (historical context of the rise and fall of slavery in the United States; the definition of Poststructuralist Theory and its application to discourse about slavery in the antebellum United States); to the first chapter (definitions of the concept of slavery in late colonial America and the antebellum U.S.); the second chapter (analysis of the proslavery discourse underpinning a system of bondage based on color); the third chapter (analysis of the antislavery discourse and its use of personal liberties to challenge slavery), through the final chapter (an analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s views on slavery as a threat to the very identity of the young United States as a nation) and the conclusion (recapitulation of the major arguments, and a framework for understanding the discourses of the post-Emancipation era).

2. VĚCNÉ ZPRACOVÁNÍ (náročnost, tvůrčí přístup, argumentace, logická struktura, teoretické a metodologické ukotvení, práce s prameny a literaturou, vhodnost příloh apod.):

I highly commend the author for her innovative application of Poststructuralist Theory from Linguistics for a question of historical causation (what led to the abolition of slavery in the United States). Her thesis makes a scholarly argument with an original application of theory to a historical question – using an approach from Linguistics to contribute to historical scholarship, thus making for an interdisciplinary contribution to knowledge about one of the definitive issues of American Studies/History. This kind of intellectual intervention is the caliber of doctoral studies – mature conceptualization and realization of a scholarly project.

The thesis engages with the existing scholarly literature on the topic; it offers a complementary explanation for the motives behind the US Civil War and the eventual abolition of slavery in the United States.

The work uses a variety of primary sources that range from abolitionist literature and fugitive slave narratives through legal texts, published correspondence, political speeches, slaveholder’s account books, to recorded Congressional debates, and the foundational documents of the United States government. Considering that so much of the contemporary antebellum discussions of slavery has been published and republished, it is not a weakness of the thesis that the author has not done on-site archival research for this project.

As regards the work’s methodological grounding, the interdisciplinarity of this project carries an inherent tension between Poststructuralism, which emphasizes discourse as a force and forum of struggle, and conventional History, which tends to probe the record of the past for motives, causation, continuities and ruptures. The author anticipated this epistemological conflict, and she clearly delineated her intervention, being specific about how “even though the discursive struggle over the nature of a slave did not decide the conflict over the institution of U.S. slavery, it helped present the abolition of slavery as *essential for the very survival of the Union*. As such, it was a powerful argument that eventually helped trigger the war over slavery in the United States.” In her thesis,

the author used this inherent disciplinary tension in a productive way: she generated a new contribution to knowledge.

3. FORMÁLNÍ A JAZYKOVÉ ZPRACOVÁNÍ (jazykový projev, správnost citace a odkazů na literaturu, grafická úprava, formální náležitosti práce apod.):

The thesis has an advanced command of English academic writing, as well as a mastery and fluency in the specific disciplinary terminologies involved in this scholarly project. It has adequate formatting, and a professional use of appropriate quotes and citations. Overall, the formal qualities of the thesis fulfill the requirements of academic writing at the Masters level and beyond. The only exception is the fluke change in font size on pages 38-40.

4. STRUČNÝ KOMENTÁŘ HODNOTITELE (celkový dojem z bakalářské práce, silné a slabé stránky, originalita myšlenek, naplnění cíle apod.):

I highly commend the author for her innovative application of Poststructuralist Theory from Linguistics for a question of historical causation (what led to the abolition of slavery in the United States). Her thesis makes a scholarly argument with an original application of theory to a historical question – using an approach from Linguistics to contribute to historical scholarship, thus making for an interdisciplinary contribution to knowledge about one of the definitive issues of American Studies/History. This kind of intellectual intervention is the caliber of doctoral studies – the mature conceptualization and realization of a scholarly project.

At the Masters level, this is one of the *very best* theses I have seen in my teaching career in four countries on two continents. I recommend it for special mention at the IMS level.

5. SPOLUPRÁCE S VEDOUCÍM PRÁCE (komunikace s vedoucím práce, schopnost reflektovat připomínky, posun od původního záměru apod.)

Due to the scarcity of sources, in consultation with her adviser, the author shifted the focus of her thesis from American Indians in the Cold War to African Americans in the antebellum period.

Throughout the research and writing process, the author demonstrated exemplary diligence and punctuality in consulting with her advisor. She always delivered drafts on time, and incorporated her advisor's suggestions into her thesis – without compromising her own scholarly integrity and the major thrust of her thesis. At the advisor's request, the author also extensively consulted and worked on her writing with Professor Norma Hervey, an expert on African American history and rights, whose gracious guidance I would like acknowledge here.

6. OTÁZKY A PŘIPOMÍNKY DOPORUČENÉ K BLIŽŠÍMU VYSVĚTLENÍ PŘI OBHAJOBĚ (jedna až tři):

1. Considering that you are examining late colonial British America and the antebellum United States, there is much that changed in this century (1760s – 1861). Can you briefly tell us of the most significant historical changes and how they influenced the competing discourses over slavery?
2. Another question about changes – this is about changes within the abolitionist ranks. In your research, did you see any changes in the anti-slavery discourse of the abolitionists, who over time (especially between the 1830s and 1861) grew more radical? After all, John Brown was not the only abolitionist who took rhetoric to radical and violent action. How did radical abolitionist rhetoric compare with the more general/moderate anti-slavery discourse of the antebellum era?
3. Your focus on discourse as an arena of struggle is commendable, but one of the weaknesses of Poststructuralist Theory is that it can relativize the relationship between language/rhetoric and historical truth. Are you saying that the discursive struggle over slavery was a rhetorical contest in which both sides were equally right? Or was one side fundamentally *more* right, just, or righteous than the other?
4. Please clarify how Poststructuralist Theory (or your own approach, if it is different in this respect) understands the relationship between discourse and action. Accordingly, explain the relationship between the discursive struggle over slavery, and violent action in the antebellum United States, such as

“bleeding Kansas,” John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry and his subsequent execution, and indeed the U.S. Civil War itself.

5. On pages 50-51 you discussed the so-called “Slavery in the Abstract” doctrine, which was a late proslavery argument calling for the enslavement of *all* of the laboring classes in the U.S. (thus divorcing slavery from its earlier racial justification). The logic of this argument seems to coincide with President Lincoln’s late abolitionist argument that if blacks are enslaved and thereby their personal liberties are violated, *anyone* else can also be enslaved in the Union. Were both of these discourses shifting the concept of slavery from ‘race’ to economic and social class? How did this meaning shift relate to the history of capitalism and labor (for example, through industrialization) in the U.S.? We do not expect you to demonstrate a mastery of economic or labor history here; however, do offer some speculative insights.

**7. DOPORUČENÍ / NEDOPORUČENÍ K OBHAJOBĚ A NAVRHOVANÁ ZNÁMKA
(výborně, velmi dobře, dobře, nevyhověl):**

The author’s thesis is impressive, very well-organized and well-written.

At the Masters level, this is one of the *very best* theses I have seen in my teaching career in four countries on two continents. I recommend it for special mention by the IMS / FSV UK administration.

I whole-heartedly recommend it for a defense, with a highest grade of “excellent” / “výborně.”

Datum: Aug 1, 2014

Podpis: Gyorgy Toth

Pozn.: Hodnocení pište k jednotlivým bodům, pokud nepíšete v textovém editoru, použijte při nedostatku místa zadní stranu nebo příložený list. V hodnocení práce se pokuste oddělit ty její nedostatky, které jsou, podle vašeho mínění, obhajobou neodstranitelné (např. chybí kritické zhodnocení pramenů a literatury), od těch věcí, které student může dobrou obhajobou napravit; poměr těchto dvou položek berte prosím v úvahu při stanovení konečné známky.