

Eugene D. Genovese ■ The  
Political Economy of Slavery  
■ Studies in the Economy &  
Society of the Slave South

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## Ten ■ The Origins of Slavery Expansionism

Once upon a time in the happy and innocent days of the nineteenth century, men believed that Negro slavery had raised an expansionist slaveocracy to power in the American South. Today we know better. The revisionists have denied that slavery was expansionist and have virtually driven their opponents from the field. Their arguments, as distinct from their faith in the possibilities of resolving antagonisms peacefully, rest on two formidable essays. In 1926, Avery O. Craven published his *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Maryland and Virginia*, which sought to prove that the slave economy could reform itself, and three years later Charles William Ramsdell published his famous article on "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion,"<sup>1</sup> which constituted a frontal attack on the "irrepressible conflict" school.

I propose to restate the traditional view, but in such a way as to avoid the simplistic and mechanistic notions of Cairnes and his followers and to account for the data that has emerged from the conscientious and often splendid researches of the revisionist historians. Specifically, I propose to show that economics, politics, social life, ideology, and psychology converged to thrust the system outward and that beneath each factor lay the exigencies of the slaveholding class. Each dictated expansion if the men who made up the ruling class of the South were to continue to rule.

### ❧ *Roots and Taproot*

Antebellum Southern economic history reinforces rather than overturns the nineteenth-century notion of an expansionist slaveocracy. That notion undoubtedly suffered from grave defects and considerable crudeness, for it insisted on the lack of versatility of slave labor and the steady deterioration of the soil without appreciating the partially effective attempts to reform the slave economy. Yet the revisionist work of the Craven school, which has contributed so much toward an understanding of the economic complexities, has not added up to a successful refutation.

We may recapitulate briefly the main points of the preceding studies, which lead to the economic root of slavery expansionism. At the beginning we encounter the low productivity of slave labor, defined not according to some absolute or purely economic standard, but according to the political exigencies of the slaveholders. The slaves worked well enough in the cotton and sugar fields, when organized in gangs, but the old criticism of labor given grudgingly retains its force.

Slave labor lacked that degree and kind of versatility which would have permitted general agricultural diversification. Slaves could and did work in a variety of pursuits, including industrial, but under circumstances not easily created within the economy as a whole. Division of labor on the plantations and in society proceeded slowly and under great handicaps. The level of technology, especially on the plantations, was kept low by the quality and size of the labor force. Mules and oxen, for example, replaced faster horses principally because they could more easily withstand rough and perhaps vengeful handling. Negro laborers had been disciplined to sustained agricultural labor before being brought to the Americas. Their low productivity arose from the human and technological conditions under which they worked, and these arose from the slave system.

An analysis of Southern livestock and the attempts to improve it reveals the complex and debilitating interrelationships within the slave economy. The South had more than enough animals to feed its population but had to import meat. A shortage of liquid capital made acquisition of better breeds difficult, and the poor treatment of the animals by the slaves made maintenance of any reasonable standards close to impossible. As a further complication, the lack of urban markets inhibited attention to livestock by depriving planters of outlets for potential surpluses. The South boasted an enormous number of animals but suffered from their wretched quality.

Slavery provided a sufficient although not a necessary cause of soil exhaustion. It dictated one-crop production beyond the limits of commercial advantage and in opposition to the political safety of the slaveholders. Planters could not easily rotate crops under the existing credit structure, with a difficult labor force, and without those markets which could only accompany industrial and urban advance. The sheer size of the plantations discouraged fertilization. Barnyard manure was scarce, commercial fertilizers too expensive, and the care necessary for advantageous application unavailable. The shortage of good implements complicated the operation, for manures are easily wasted when not applied properly.

Craven insists that the existence of a moving frontier, north and south, brought about the same result, but as we have seen, the special force of slavery cannot so easily be brushed aside. The North confronted the devastating effects of soil exhaustion and built a diversified economy in the older areas as the frontier pushed westward. The South, faced with the debilitating effects of slavery long after the frontier had passed, had to struggle against hopeless odds.

These direct effects of slavery received enormous reinforcement from such indirect effects as the shortage of capital and entrepreneurship and the weakness of the market. Capital investments in slaves and a notable tendency toward aristocratic

consumption had their economic advantages but inhibited the rise of new industries. The Southern market consisted primarily of the plantations and could not support more than a limited industrial advance. The restricted purchasing power of the rural whites, of the urban lower classes, and indirectly of the slaves hemmed in Southern manufacturers and put them at a severe competitive disadvantage relative to Northerners, who had had a head start and who had much wider markets in the free states to sustain production on an increasing scale. The barriers to industrialization also blocked urbanization and thereby undermined the market for foodstuffs.

Southern industrialization proceeded within the narrow limits set by the social milieu as well as by the market. The slaveholders controlled the state legislatures and the police power; they granted charters, set taxes, and ultimately controlled the lives of regional industries. So long as industry remained within safe limits the slaveholders offered no firm resistance, or at least no united front. Those limits included guarantees against the rise of a hostile and independent bourgeoisie and excessive concentrations of white workers of doubtful loyalty. Since the big slaveholders provided much of the capital for industry and since the plantations provided much of the regional market, the risks remained small, for even the nonslaveholding industrialists necessarily bound themselves to the rural regime and tried to do good business within the established limits. Industry made some progress; industrialization, understood as a self-propelling process, did not.

The South made one form of agricultural adjustment while slavery remained. The great agricultural revival in the Upper South overcame the most serious effects of slavery by reducing the size of slaveholdings, converting surplus slaves into cash, and investing the funds in the supervision, fertilization, and reconversion of smaller estates. This process threatened the economic and ideological solidity of the slaveholders' regime and had other drawbacks, but most important, it broke

on an immanent contradiction. The sale of surplus slaves depended on markets further south, which necessarily depended on virgin lands, on which to apply the old, wasteful methods of farming. Reform in one region implied exhaustive agriculture in another. Thus, the process of agricultural reform had narrow limits in a closed slave system and had to be reversed when it pressed against them. No solution emerged from within the system, but one beckoned from without. The steady acquisition of new land could alone guarantee the maintenance of that interregional slave trade which held the system together.

This economic root of slavery expansionism was only one of several roots, but itself grew strong enough to produce an ugly organism. If we begin with the economic process it is because the external threat to the slaveholders mounted so clearly, objectively and in their consciousness, with each new census report on the material conditions of the contending forces. The slaveholders might, of course, have resigned themselves to Lincoln's victory, accepted the essentials of the Wilmot Proviso, faced the impending crisis of their system, and prepared to convert to some form of free labor. Anything is possible where men retain the power to reason. Such a choice would have spelled their death as a ruling class and would have constituted moral and political suicide. Many contemporaries and many historians ever since have thought that they should have agreed to do themselves in. With this view I do not wish to argue. Neither did they.

The economic process propelling the slave South along expansionist paths had its political and social parallels, the most obvious being the need to re-establish parity in the Senate or at least to guarantee enough voting strength in Washington to protect Southern interests. In an immediate political sense the demand for more slave-state Congressmen was among the important roots of expansionism, but in a deeper sense it was merely a symptom of something more fundamental. Had the

South not had a distinct social system to preserve and a distinct and powerful ruling class at its helm, a decline of its political and economic power would have caused no greater alarm than it did in New England.

A second political root was the need to protect slavery where it was profitable by establishing buffer areas where it might not be. Just as the British had to spend money to secure ascendancy in Tibet so that they could make money in India, the South had to establish political control over areas with dubious potentialities as slave states in order to protect existing slave states. The success of the Texas cause removed the fear of Mexican tampering with slaves in Louisiana, much as annexation removed potential British-inspired tampering. "Texas must be a slave country," wrote Stephen F. Austin to his sister. "The interest of Louisiana requires that it should be; a population of fanatical abolitionists in Texas would have a very pernicious and dangerous influence on the overgrown population of the state."<sup>2</sup> In 1835, when a large Mexican force was reported near the Brazos River, the slaves apparently did attempt to rise. One hundred Negroes were severely punished, some executed.<sup>3</sup>

John A. Quitman, former governor of Mississippi, tried to organize a filibustering expedition to Cuba during 1853-1855, particularly because he feared that abolition there would present dangers to the South.<sup>4</sup> Samuel R. Walker and Albert W. Ely, among others, warned that Britain and France would force a weak Spain to sacrifice Cuban slavery and thereby isolate the South as a slaveholding country.<sup>5</sup> Many far-sighted Southerners understood the danger of permitting the isolation of Southern slavery. They desired Cuba in order to secure political control of the Caribbean, as well as for economic reasons.

Beyond Cuba and the Caribbean lay Brazil, the other great slaveholding country. "These two great valleys of the Amazon

and the Mississippi," declared the *Richmond Enquirer* in 1854, "are now possessed by two governments of the earth most deeply interested in African slavery—Brazil and the United States . . . The whole intermediate countries between these two great valleys . . . is a region under the plastic hand of a beneficent Providence . . . How is it to be developed?" [sic] With black labor and white-skill. Cuba and Santo Domingo, it continued, were potentially the bases for the control of the whole Caribbean. Such a political complex would cause the whole world to "fall back upon African labor."<sup>6</sup>

The warning of the *Louisville Daily Courier* in 1860 that Kentucky could afford to remain in the Union but that the Lower South could not touch the central issue. Suppose, it asked, Kentucky sold its slaves south. "And then what? Anti-slavery will not be content to rest. . . . The war will be transferred to the Cotton States."<sup>7</sup>

The need to push forward in order to ward off concentrations of hostile power arose from the anachronistic nature of the slave regime. By 1850, if not much earlier, world opinion could no longer tolerate chattel slavery, and British opposition in particular was both formidable and implacable. The transformation of the Caribbean into a slaveholders' lake and an alliance or understanding with Brazil held out the only hope of preventing a dangerous and tightening containment.

Slaveholders also sought additional territory to reduce the danger of internal convulsion. Lieutenant Matthew F. Maury, who helped bring about the American exploration of the Amazon Valley in the 1850s, discussed the eventual absorption of much of Latin America by the United States:

I cannot be blind to what I see going on here. It is becoming a matter of *faith*—I use a strong word—yes a matter of faith among leading Southern men, that the time is coming, nay that it is rapidly approaching when in order to prevent this war of the races and all its horrors, they will in

self-defense be compelled to conquer parts of Mexico and Central America, and make slave territory of that—and that is now free.<sup>8</sup>

Representative Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina told the House that Northerners were “too intelligent to believe that humanity, either to the slave or the master, requires that they should be pent up within a territory which after a time will be insufficient for their subsistence, and where they must perish from want, or from collision that would occur between the races.”<sup>9</sup> Southerners always kept the West Indian experience in front of them when they discussed the racial proportions of the population.

Probably, steady infusions of new land were also needed to placate the nonslaveholders, but we know little about slaveholder-nonslaveholder relationships as yet and little can be said with certainty.

The psychological dimension of slavery expansionism has been the subject of various essays and has, for example, emerged from interpretations of Southern frustration and resultant aggression. We need not pursue esoteric lines of inquiry, especially with formulas so broad as to be able to encompass almost every society in any age, to appreciate that a psychological dimension did exist. As Southerners came to regard slavery as a positive good and as they came to value the civilization it made possible as the world’s finest, they could hardly accept limits on its expansion. To agree to containment meant to agree that slavery constituted an evil, however necessary for the benefit of the savage Africans. That sense of mission so characteristic of the United States as a whole had its Southern manifestation in the mission of slavery. If slavery was making possible the finest society the world had ever known, the objections to its expansion were intolerable. The free-soil argument struck at the foundations of the slaveholder’s pride and belief in himself.

It is difficult but unnecessary to assess the relative strength of the roots of slavery expansionism. Each supported and fed the taproot—the exigencies of slaveholder hegemony in a South that fought against comparative disadvantages in the world market and that found itself increasingly isolated morally and politically. From another point of view, each was a manifestation of those exigencies. Although some appear to be objective, or matters of social process, whereas others appear to be subjective, or matters of psychological reaction to possibly imaginary dangers, the difference becomes unimportant when each is related to the fundamental position of the slaveholders in Southern society. The existence of a threatening economic process, such as has been described, would have been enough to generate fear and suspicion, even without the undeniable hostility arising in the North on political and moral grounds.

### ❧ *The “Natural Limits” Thesis*

With these observations on the origins of slavery expansionism aside, we may consider the revisionists’ objections. Since Ramsdell’s article, “The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion,” most cogently presents the opposing view, let us summarize it as much as possible in his own words:

- [1] Slavery in the territories was the most persistent issue of the 1840s and 1850s. “It seems safe to say that had the question been eliminated or settled amicably there would have been no secession and no Civil War.”
- [2] Free-soilers demanded that slave labor and the plantation system should be excluded from the Western plains to guarantee the predominance there of the free farmer and to prevent any extension of the political power of the

slaveholders. Southerners sought to uphold their constitutional rights in the territories and to maintain sufficient political strength to repulse "hostile and ruinous legislation."

- [3] Slavery expanded "in response to economic stimuli." No conspiracy or political program brought about expansion; in fact, Southerners were too individualistic ever to have agreed on such a program.
- [4] By 1849-1850, "The westward march of the cotton plantations was evidently slowing down." Only in Texas was the Cotton Belt advancing; elsewhere it stopped at given geographic lines.
- [5] Even in Texas there were geographical limits. "Therefore, in the early fifties, the cotton plantations tended to cluster in the river counties in the eastern and southern parts of the state." Elsewhere, small farmers and herdsmen were establishing a free-labor economy, for slavery was unprofitable and could not take root.
- [6] Railroads, if capital could have been raised, would have guided cotton westward up to the black-land prairies of central Texas or the semi-arid plains of western Texas. Beyond that cotton could not go. Woodlands were lacking, and fencing was impossible until the invention of barbed wire in the late 1870s. Here, then, was a temporary barrier.
- [7] Beyond it lay a permanent barrier. "The history of the agricultural development of the Texas plains region since 1880 affords abundant evidence that it would never become suitable for plantation slave labor." Twenty years of experimentation with windmills, dry farming, and drought-resistant food crops were required before cotton farmers could conquer the plains. The experimental

period involved much capital and great risks of a type hard to associate with the plantation system. Labor-saving machinery, not gang labor, was needed.

- [8] Even in the 1850s, Mexican labor was cheaper than Negro slave labor, and the Germans of southwestern Texas had an antipathy to slavery.
- [9] Slavery had less chance beyond Texas. "Possibly, southern California could have sustained slavery, but California had already decided that question for itself. . . . As to New Mexico, the census of 1860, ten years after the territory had been thrown open to slavery, showed not a single slave . . ."
- [10] In Kansas-Nebraska, slavery at best would have come to dominate the hemp regions of eastern Kansas, "but the infiltration of slaves would have been a slow process."
- [11] "To say that the individual slaveowner would disregard his own economic interest and carry valuable property where it would entail loss merely for the sake of a doubtful political advantage seems a palpable absurdity." Southerners knew that slavery would not take root in the Southwest but considered establishment of the principle necessary to a defense against abolitionist attacks on the institution itself.
- [12] "The one side fought rancorously for what it was bound to get without fighting; the other, with equal rancor, contended for what in the nature of things it could never use."
- [13] On expansion into Latin America: there were mixed motives for desiring more annexations, most of them having nothing to do with slavery. In particular, Scroggs has shown that "had [William] Walker succeeded, those

pro-slavery expansionists who had applauded him would most certainly have been sorely disappointed in him." Walker sought a private empire, not annexation by the United States.

[14] The proposal to reopen the slave trade, which was often linked to expansion, failed to arouse necessary support even in the South.

[15] Ramsdell concludes by suggesting that without such expansion slavery slowly would have declined in profitability and would have given way to an alternative system. The great obstacle to peaceful reform would have been the problem of the place of the free Negro in Southern society.

With due respect for Ramsdell's scholarship and with full appreciation for the workmanlike manner in which he presented the essentials of the revisionist argument, I submit that the thesis is self-contradictory, that it confuses slavery expansionism with the prospects for cotton expansion, and that it rests on the untenable assumption that slaveholders were merely ordinary capitalists who happened to have money in slaves but who might have come to see the advantage of investing differently—the assumption, that is, that no deep identification was made by the slaveholders of slavery with civilization, that slave ownership imbued the master class with no special set of values and interests incapable of being compromised.

### ❖ *The Contradictory Nature of the "Natural Limits" Thesis*

The "natural limits" thesis is self-contradictory—and, in one important sense, irrelevant—for it simultaneously asserts that slavery was nonexpansionist and that it would have perished

without room to expand. The only way to avoid judging the thesis to be self-contradictory is to read it so as to state that slavery needed room to expand but that, first, it needed room only in the long run and, second, that it had no room. This reading removes the contradiction but destroys the thesis.

If the slave states would eventually need room to expand, they had to set aside new territory when they could get it or face a disaster in a few years or decades. Hence, wisdom dictated a fight for the right to take slaves into the territories, for ultimately that right would be transformed from an abstraction into a matter of life and death. W. Burwell of Virginia wrote in 1856 that the South needed no more territory at the moment and faced no immediate danger of a redundant slave population. "Yet statesmen," he concluded, "like provident farmers, look to the prospective demands of those who rely upon their forethought for protection and employment. Though, therefore, there may be no need of Southern territory for many years, yet it is important to provide for its acquisition when needed . . ."10

To establish that slavery had no room to expand is not to refute the theory of slavery expansionism. If it could be firmly established that slavery needed room to expand but had none, then we should have described a society entering a period of internal convulsion. The decision of most slaveholders to stake everything on a desperate gamble for a political independence that would have freed them to push their system southward emerges as a rational, if dangerous, course of action.

### ❖ *The Territorial Question*

One of the most puzzling features of Ramsdell's essay is the virtual equation of cotton and slavery. Only occasionally and never carefully does he glance at the prospects for using slave



labor outside the cotton fields. To identify any social system with a single commodity is indefensible, and in any case, Southern slavery had much greater flexibility. Ramsdell's essay is puzzling with respect to these general considerations but even more so with respect to his specific contention that contemporary Southerners viewed the territorial question as a cotton question. They did not.

When the more intelligent and informed Southerners demanded the West for slavery they often, perhaps most often, spoke of minerals, not cotton or even hemp. Slavery, from ancient times to modern, had proved itself splendidly adaptable to mining. Mining constituted one of the more important industries of the Negroes of prequest Africa, and slave labor had a long history there. The Berbers, for example, used Negro slaves in West Africa, where the salt mines provided one of the great impetuses to the development of commercial, as opposed to traditional and patriarchal, forms of slavery.<sup>11</sup> Closer in time and place to the South, Brazil afforded an impressive example of the successful use of slave labor in mining. In the middle of the eighteenth century diamond mining supplemented gold mining in Minas Gerais and accounted for a massive transfer of masters and slaves from the northeastern sugar region.<sup>12</sup> Southern leaders knew a good deal about this experience. "The mines of Brazil," reported *De Bow's Review* in 1848, "are most prolific of iron, gold, and diamonds. . . . The operation is performed by negroes . . . 30,000 negroes have been so employed."<sup>13</sup> The eastern slave states had had experience with gold mining, and although the results were mixed, the potentialities of slave labor had been demonstrated.<sup>14</sup> Planters in the Southwestern states expressed interest in gold mines in Arkansas and hopefully looked further west.<sup>15</sup> "If mines of such temporary value should, as they may, be found in the territories, and slaves could be excluded from these," wrote A. F. Hopkins of Mobile in 1860, "it would present a case of monstrous injustice."<sup>16</sup>

During the Congressional debates of 1850, Representative Jacob Thompson of Mississippi, later to become Secretary of the Interior under Buchanan, expressed great concern over the fate of the public domain of California if she were to be hastily admitted to the Union and expressed special concern over the fate of the gold mines.<sup>17</sup> Ten years later, after a decade of similar warnings, pleas, hopes, and threats, S. D. Moore of Alabama wrote that the South was "excluded from California, not pretendedly even by 'isothermal lines,' or want of employment for slave labor, for in regard to climate and mining purposes the country was admirably adapted to the institution of African slavery."<sup>18</sup> Had it not been for the anti-slavery agitation, Representative Clingman told the House in 1850, Southerners would have used slaves in the mines of California and transformed it into a slave state.<sup>19</sup> Albert Gallatin Brown, one of the most fiery and belligerent of the pro-slavery extremists, wrote his constituents that slave labor was admirably suited to mining and that California could and should be made into a slave state.<sup>20</sup> Even as a free state California demonstrated the usefulness of slave labor. In 1852 the state legislature passed a mischievous fugitive slave law that could be and was interpreted to allow slaveholders to bring slaves into the state to work in the mines and then send them home.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, a Texan wrote in 1852 that a Mississippi and Pacific railroad would secure the New Mexico territory for the South by opening the mining districts to slave labor.<sup>22</sup> During the War for Southern Independence, Jefferson Davis received a communication from his Southwestern field commander that a successful drive to California would add "the most valuable agriculture and grazing lands, and the richest mineral region in the world."<sup>23</sup>

Southerners had long cast eyes toward Mexico and looked forward to additional annexations. "I want Cuba," roared Albert Gallatin Brown. "I want Tamaulipas, Potosí, and one

or two other Mexican states; and I want them all for the same reason—for the planting or spreading of slavery.”<sup>24</sup> Throughout the 1850s, *De Bow's Review* printed articles about Mexico and particularly about Mexican mines. In 1846, Joel R. Poinsett reviewed Waddy Thompson's *Reflexions on Mexico* and noted the extensive mineral wealth in an article that struck no bellicose note.<sup>25</sup> During the same year Gustavus Schmidt, in a humane, nonracist, nonchauvinist account, wrote of Mexico's “inexhaustible deposits of gold and silver.”<sup>26</sup> In 1850, Brantz Mayer of Baltimore estimated that one-fifth of Mexican territory contained excellent mineral resources.<sup>27</sup> Covetous eyes and bellicose projects appeared soon enough.

The mineral resources of Mexico are unquestionably immense. . . . The moment Mexico falls into the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race, every inch of her territory will be explored. . . . The mines of Mexico, which have now been worked near three hundred years, are inexhaustible; and they only need the protection of a good government and the skill of an intelligent and industrious people, to render them productive of the most astonishing quantities of the precious metals.<sup>28</sup>

George Frederick Holmes, in a long, rambling article on gold and silver mines, wrote glowingly of Chile as well as Mexico.<sup>29</sup> H. Yoakum ended an article on Mexico with the warning, “*You must make progress, or you will be absorbed by a more energetic race.*”<sup>30</sup> Southerners and Mexicans took these designs seriously. Confederate troops marched into New Mexico with the intention of proceeding to Tucson and then swinging south to take Sonora, Chihuahua, Durango, and Tamaulipas.<sup>31</sup> The Confederate government tried to deal with Santiago Vidaurri, the strong man of Coahuila and Nuevo León, to bring northern Mexico into the Confederacy, and Juárez was so alarmed that he was ready to go to great lengths to help the Union put down the rebellion.<sup>32</sup>

It is one thing to note that Southerners sought to expand

slavery into Mexico's mining districts or that they lamented the political barriers to the expansion of slavery into New Mexico's; it is another for us to conclude that their hopes and desires were more than wishful thinking. Allan Nevins has presented a formidable case to suggest that slavery had little room even in the mining districts of the Southwest and Mexico. He shows that even in the Gadsden Purchase the economic exigencies of mining brought about the quick suppression of the enterprising individual by the corporation. Western mining, as well as transportation, lumbering, and some forms of agriculture, required much capital and became fields for big business. High labor costs led to a rising demand for labor-saving machinery, but Nevins does not consider that this very condition might, under certain circumstances, have spurred the introduction of slave labor.<sup>33</sup> He writes:

For three salient facts stood out in any survey of the Far West. First, this land of plain and peak was natural soil for a free-spirited and highly competitive society, demanding of every resident skill and intelligence. It was, therefore, even in that Gadsden Purchase country which had been bought at the behest of the slave states, a country naturally inhospitable to slavery. Second, when so much energy was steadily flowing into western expansion, and such wide outlets for more effort existed there, it was impossible to think of the country turning to Caribbean areas for a heavy thrust southward. Its main forces moved naturally toward the sunset, where rich opportunities were hardly yet sampled. The cotton kingdom, which realized that the West gave little scope for its peculiar culture, might plan grandiose Latin American adventures; but it would get little support from other regions. And in the third place, conditions in the West demanded capital and organization on a broad scale; if it was a land for individualists, it was even more a land for corporate enterprise—a land for the businessman. Those who pondered these three facts could see that they held an ominous meaning for the South. The nearer Northwest had already done much to upset

the old sectional balance, and the Far West, as it filled up, would do still more.<sup>34</sup>

On economic grounds Nevins' analysis has much to offer, but his remarks on the competitive struggle in the Southwest and on the inability of Southerners to get national support for Caribbean adventures do not prove nearly so much as he thinks. At most, they suggest that the North was strong enough to block slavery expansionism into the Southwest and frustrate Southern ambitions elsewhere. If so, the case for secession, from the proslavery viewpoint, was unanswerable.

Nevins' remarks illustrate the wisdom of other Southern arguments—that the South had to secure new land politically, not by economic advance, and that the South had to have guarantees of positive federal protection for slavery in the territories.<sup>35</sup> The *Charleston Mercury*, climaxing a decade of Southern complaints, insisted in 1860 that slavery would have triumphed in California's gold-mining areas if Southerners had had assurances of protection for their property. It singled out the mineral wealth of New Mexico as beckoning the South and even saw possibilities for slave-worked mining in Kansas.<sup>36</sup> With fewer exaggerations De Bow, a decade earlier, had pointed to the political aspect of the problem: "Such is the strength and power of the Northern opposition that property, which is ever timid, and will seek no hazards, is excluded from the country in the person of the slave, and Southerners are forced, willingly or not, to remain at home. Emigrants, meanwhile, crowd from the North."<sup>37</sup> During the bitter debate in Congress over the admission of California, Senator Jeremiah Clemens of Alabama replied heatedly to Clay in words similar to those used by De Bow. Free-soil agitation, he said, had kept slavery from the territories. "Property is proverbially timid. The slaveholder would not carry his property there with a threat hanging over him that it was to be taken away by operation of law the moment he landed."<sup>38</sup> Representative Joseph

M. Root of Ohio, Whig and later Republican, commented on such charges by boasting that if the Wilmot Proviso had accomplished nothing more than to create a political climate inimical to slavery expansion, it had accomplished its purpose.<sup>39</sup>

The Southern demand for federal guarantees made sense, but even that did not go far enough. Ultimately, the South needed not equal protection for slave property but complete political control. If a given territory could be organized by a proslavery party, then slaveholders would feel free to migrate. Time would be needed to allow the slave population to catch up; meanwhile, free-soil farmers had to be kept out in favor of men who looked forward to becoming slaveholders. Under such circumstances the territory's population might grow very slowly, and the exploitation of its resources might lag far behind that of the free territories. Nothing essential would be lost to the South by underdevelopment; the South as a whole was underdeveloped. In short, the question of political power necessarily had priority over the strictly economic questions.

Even if the South had looked forward to extending the cotton kingdom, the political question would have had to take priority. Douglass C. North has incisively described the rhythm of such extensions:

Long swings in the price of cotton were the result of periods of excess capacity with a consequent elastic supply curve of cotton over a substantial range of output. Once demand had shifted to the right sufficiently to use all available cotton land, the supply curve became rather inelastic. A rise in cotton prices precipitated another move into new lands of the Southwest by planters and their slaves. Funds from the Northeast and England financed the transfer of slaves, purchase of land, and working capital during the period of clearing the land, preparing the soil and raising a cotton crop. There was a lag of approximately four or five years between the initial surge and the resulting large increase in output which caused a tremendous shift to the right in the supply curve and the beginning of another lengthy period of digesting the increased capacity.<sup>40</sup>

Under such circumstances the political safety of slavery, especially during the difficult interlude North describes, always had to be assured before any significant economic advance could occur. Significantly, even the long-range possibility of irrigating the Southwest was noted in *De Bow's Review* as early as 1848.<sup>41</sup>

Slavery certainly would have had a difficult time in Kansas, although as Nevins has shown, greater possibilities existed than Stephen Douglas or many historians since have been prepared to admit. The proslavery leaders there, Atchison and Stringfellow, fully appreciated the importance of the prior establishment of political power, as their rough tactics and ingenious scheme to monopolize the timber and water resources showed.<sup>42</sup> Nevins, on the other hand, questions the ability of the South to provide settlers. We shall return to this objection.

For the moment let us consider Kansas as solely and inevitably a wheat state. Large slave plantations have not proved well adapted to wheat growing, but small plantations were doing well in the Virginia tidewater. In open competition with Northwestern farmers the slaveholders probably would have been hurt badly. They knew as much. When, for example, Percy Roberts of Mississippi maintained that Negro slavery could thrive in the Northwest grain belt, he simultaneously maintained that the African slave trade would have to be reopened to drive down the cost of labor and put the slaveholders in a favorable competitive position.<sup>43</sup> Historians like Nevins and Paul W. Gates have expressed confidence that slavery could not have triumphed in Kansas even if it had been allowed a foothold. They may be right, but only if one assumes that the South remained in the Union. Slavery expansionism required fastening proslavery regimes in such territories, but ultimately it required secession to protect the gains. Had Kansas joined a Southern Confederacy as a slave state, its wheat-growing slaveholders could have secured the same

internal advantages as the sugar planters of Louisiana, and Union wheat could effectively have been placed at a competitive disadvantage in the Southern market.

Ramsdell's dismissal of Southern interest in Cuba and Central America, however necessary for his argument, does not bear examination. Southern sugar planters, who might have been expected to fear the glutting of the sugar market should Cuba enter the Union, spoke out for annexation. They seem to have been convinced that suspension of the African slave trade to Cuba would raise the cost of production there to American levels and that they would be able to buy Cuban slaves cheaply.<sup>44</sup> Besides, as Basil Rauch points out, Louisiana sugar planters were moving to Cuba during the 1850s and looking forward to extending their fortunes.<sup>45</sup> Southerners, like Northerners, often spoke of annexation in nationalist terms and sometimes went to great lengths to avoid the slavery question. J. J. Ampère heard that Cuba had been detached from the mainland by the Gulf Stream and rightfully belonged to the United States. He recommended that France reclaim Britain on the same grounds. He also heard that Cuba had to be annexed to provide a rest home for American consumptives.<sup>46</sup> J. C. Reynolds, writing in *De Bow's Review* in 1850, described appalling losses in the illegal slave trade to Cuba and urged annexation to bring American law enforcement there and to end the terrible treatment of the Negroes.<sup>47</sup> More sweepingly, some argued that without more territory the Negroes of the United States would be extinguished by overpopulation and attendant famine.<sup>48</sup> All for the poor Negroes! Others, like Soulé and Albert Gallatin Brown, bluntly demanded Cuba and Central America to strengthen and defend slavery.<sup>49</sup>

As for William Walker, he said enough to refute the Scroggs-Ramsdell interpretation. His *War in Nicaragua* makes clear that American politics made it necessary for him to appear to renounce annexation and that he was biding his

time. No matter. His purpose there, as he boldly proclaimed, was to expand slavery as a system.

Opposition to territorial expansion by many Southerners has led some historians to deny the existence of an "aggressive slaveocracy" or to assert, with Ramsdell, that Southerners were too individualistic to be mobilized for such political adventures, which were often contrary to their private interests. No conspiracy theory is required. That there were many Southern leaders who sensed the need for more territory and fought for it is indisputable. That individual Southerners were not always willing to move when the interests of their class and system required them to merely indicates one of the ways in which slavery expansionism proved a contradictory process. Southerners opposed expansion for a variety of reasons, but mostly because they feared more free states. Expansion southward had the great advantage of not being cotton expansion, and the economic argument against it was weak. On the other hand, many feared that the annexation of Cuba would provide an excuse for the annexation of Canada or that the annexation of Mexico would repeat the experience of California. This opposition should be understood essentially as a preference for delaying expansion until secession had been effected, although there were, of course, many who opposed both.<sup>50</sup>

### ❧ *The Anguish of Contradiction*

If the slave South had to expand to survive, it paradoxically could not do so when given the opportunity. Unsettled political conditions prevented the immigration of slave property, much as the threat of nationalization or of a left-wing or nationalist coup prevents the flow of American capital to some underdeveloped countries to which it is invited.

"Where," asks Allan Nevins when discussing Kansas, "were

proslavery settlers to come from? Arkansas, Texas, and New Mexico were all calling for slaveholding immigrants, and the two first were more attractive to Southerners than Kansas."<sup>51</sup> Slave property necessarily moved cautiously and slowly. So long as it had to move at the pace set by Northern farmers, it would be defeated. The mere fact of competition discouraged the movement of slaveholders, and if they were willing to move, they could not hope to carry enough whites to win.

An area could be safely absorbed by the slave regime only by preventing Northern free-soilers from entering. Danhof has demonstrated that farm making was an expensive business.<sup>52</sup> Northern farmers had a hard time; Southern farmers, without slaves or minimal savings, found it much harder. Traditionally, the more energetic nonslaveholders moved into new land first and cleared it; the planters followed much later.<sup>53</sup> If those early settlers had to secure the territory against free-soilism before the planters and slaveholders moved in, the struggle could not ordinarily be won. Many Southern non-slaveholders could be and were converted to the antislavery banner once they found themselves away from the power and influence of the slaveholders. Charles Robinson bitterly criticized John Brown for his inability to appreciate the possibilities of persuasion: "While our free state colonies were trying to convert the whites from the South and make them sound free-state men, John Brown thought it better to murder them."<sup>54</sup>

Missouri and Kansas, therefore, were worlds apart. W. A. Seay, in an article entitled "Missouri Safe for the South," dismissed suggestions that Missouri would abolish slavery. The nonslaveholding counties, he noted, lay in the southern part of the state and were inhabited by men from other parts of the South who owned no slaves only because they were as yet too poor.<sup>55</sup> Their allegiance to the system rested ultimately

on the ability of the slaveholders to retain political power and social and ideological leadership and to prevent these men of the lower classes from seeing an alternative way of life. Yet, by 1860 even Missouri had become a battleground because of its special geographic position and Northern and foreign immigration. Kansas could never be secured for slavery unless the slaveholders had political control and the migrating Southern farmers were isolated from corrupting influences. As it was, Northerners, according to Representative William Barksdale of Mississippi, went as families, whereas Southerners often went as young adventurers who had no intention of remaining once the excitement was over.<sup>56</sup>

The South's anguish arose from having to expand and being unable to meet the tests of expansion set by life in mid-nineteenth-century America. Like T. S. Eliot's *Hollow Men*, it found that

*Between the desire  
And the spasm  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the descent  
Falls the shadow*

Only if a territory shut out free-soil immigration, quickly established the political hegemony of the slaveholders, and prepared for a much slower development than Northerners might give it, could it be secured for slavery. These conditions negated slavery expansionism, but only so long as the South remained in the Union.

### ✠ *Invitation to a (Self-Inflicted) Beheading*

The South had to expand, and its leaders knew it. "There is not a slaveholder in this House or out of it," Judge Warner of Georgia declared in the House of Representatives in 1856,

"but who knows perfectly well that whenever slavery is confined within certain specified limits, its future existence is doomed."<sup>57</sup> The Republican party, said an editorial in *The Plantation* in 1860, denies that it wants to war on slavery, but it admits that it wants to surround it with free states. To do so would be to crush slavery where it now exists.<sup>58</sup> Percy L. Rainwater's study of sentiment in Mississippi in the 1850s shows how firmly convinced slaveholders were that the system had to expand or die.<sup>59</sup> Lincoln made the same point in his own way. He opposed any compromise on slavery expansion in 1860 because he feared new and bolder expansionist schemes and because he wished to contain slavery in order to guarantee its ultimate extinction.

Nevins' discussion of Lincoln's view illuminates one of the most tenacious and dubious assumptions on which many historians have based their interpretations of the origins of the war:

In view of all the trends of nineteenth century civilization, the terrible problem of slavery could be given a final solution only upon the principle . . . of gradual emancipation. . . . The first step was to stop the expansion of slavery, and to confine the institution within the fifteen states it already possessed. Such a decision would be equivalent to a decree that slavery was marked for gradual evolution into a higher labor system. Slavery confined would be slavery under sentence of slow death. The second step would be the termination of slavery in the border states. Missouri by 1859 stood near the verge of emancipation . . .<sup>60</sup>

The assumption on which these notions rest is that the South, faced with containment, could have accepted its consequences. On the further assumption that men may agree to commit suicide, the assumption is plausible.

If instead of speaking of the South or of the system of slavery, we speak of the slaveholders who ruled both, the assumption is less plausible. The extinction of slavery would

have broken the power of the slaveholders in general and the planters in particular. Ideologically, these men had committed themselves to slaveholding and the plantation regime as the proper foundations of civilization. Politically, the preservation of their power depended on the preservation of its economic base. Economically, the plantation system would have tottered under free labor conditions and would have existed under some intermediary form like sharecropping only at the expense of the old ruling class. The "higher" forms depended on the introduction of commercial relations that would have gradually undermined the planters and guaranteed the penetration of outside capital. We have the postbellum experience to cite here, although it took place at a time when the planters had suffered hard blows, but slaveholders saw the dangers before the war and before the blows. "Python," in a series of brilliant articles in *De Bow's Review* in 1860, warned that emancipation, even with some form of "apprenticeship" for the Negroes, would open the way for Northern capital to command the productive power of the South. Once Negro labor is linked to capital in the open market, he argued, rather than through the patriarchal system of plantation slavery, it will fall prey to a predatory, soulless, Northern capitalism. There will be no place left for the old master class, which will be crushed by the superior force of Northern capital and enterprise or absorbed into them.<sup>61</sup> "Of what advantage is it to the South," he asked, "to be destroyed by Mr. Douglas through territorial sovereignty to the exclusion of Southern institutions, rather than by Mr. Seward through Congressional sovereignty to the same end? What difference is there to the South whether they are forcibly led to immolation by Seward, or accorded, in the alternative, the Roman privilege of selecting their own mode of death, by Douglas? Die they must in either event."

These words demonstrate that the probable effect of a "higher labor system" on the fortunes of the slaveholding class

was not beyond the appreciation of its intellectual leaders. We need not try to prove that so specific an appreciation was general. The slaveholders knew their own power and could not help being suspicious of sweeping changes in their way of life, no matter how persuasively advanced. Their slaveholding psychology, habit of command, race pride, rural lordship, aristocratic pretensions, political domination, and economic strength militated in defense of the status quo. Under such circumstances an occasional voice warning that a conversion to tenantry or sharecropping carried serious dangers to their material interests sufficed to stiffen their resistance.

No demagoguery or dogmatic speculation produced "Python's" fears. Even modest compensation—paid for by whom?—would have left the planters in a precarious position. At best, it would have extended their life as a class a little while longer than postbellum conditions permitted, but Northern capital could not long be kept from establishing direct relationships with tenants and sharecroppers. The planters would have steadily been reduced to middlemen of doubtful economic value or would have merged imperceptibly into a national business class. The change would have required, and eventually did require under disorderly postbellum conditions, extensive advances to laborers in the form of additional implements, fertilizer, household utensils, even food, and innumerable incidentals. This process guaranteed the disintegration of the old land-owning class, however good an adjustment many of its members might have made to the new order.

Those who, like Max Weber, Ramsdell, even Phillips, and countless others, assume that the South could have accepted a peaceful transition to free labor gravely misjudge the character of its ruling class. The question of such a judgment is precisely what is at issue. As noted in the Introduction to this volume, a revisionist historian might accept the empirical findings reported here and even the specific interpretations of their

economic significance and still draw different conclusions on the larger issues. The final set of conclusions, and the notion of a general crisis itself, eventually must rest on agreement that the slaveholders constituted a ruling class and that they displayed an ideology and psychology such as has merely been suggested in these studies.

The slaveholders, not the South, held the power to accede or resist. To these men slaves were a source of power, pride, and prestige, a duty and a responsibility, a privilege and a trust; slavery was the foundation of a special civilization imprinted with their own character. The defense of slavery, to them, meant the defense of their honor and dignity, which they saw as the essence of life. They could never agree to renounce the foundation of their power and moral sensibility and to undergo a metamorphosis into a class the nature and values of which were an inversion of their own. Slavery represented the cornerstone of their way of life, and life to them meant an honor and dignity associated with the power of command. When the slaveholders rose in insurrection, they knew what they were about: in the fullest sense, they were fighting for their lives.

## N O T E S

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- 2 Quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1963), pp. 32-33.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 4 C. Stanley Urban, "The Abortive Quitman Filibustering Expedition, 1853-1855," *JMH*, XVIII (July 1956), 177.

- 5 William Walker, *The War in Nicaragua* (Mobile, Ala., 1860), Chap. VIII; Ely, "Spanish and Cuban Views of Annexation," *DBR*, XVIII (March 1855), 305-11, esp. 311.
- 6 "The Destiny of the Slave States," reprinted in *DBR*, XVII (Sept. 1854), 281, 283.
- 7 Dec. 20, 1860 in Dwight L. Dumond (ed.), *Southern Editorials on Secession* (New York, 1931), p. 360.
- 8 Quoted in Aptheker, *Slave Revolts*, p. 34.
- 9 Clingman, *Speeches*, p. 239.
- 10 "The Policy of the South—Suggestions for the Settlement of Our Sectional Differences," *DBR*, XXI (Nov. 1856), 478.
- 11 J. D. Fage, *An Introduction to the History of West Africa* (3rd ed.; Cambridge, Eng., 1962), p. 14; Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa, passim*.
- 12 João Pandiá Calógeras, *A History of Brazil* (tr. Percy Alvin Martin; Chapel Hill, N.C., 1939), pp. 40-41; C. R. Boxer, *The Golden Age of Brazil, 1695-1750* (Berkeley, Cal., 1962) devotes a chapter and additional space to a splendid discussion.
- 13 "The South American States," *DBR*, VI (July 1848), 14.
- 14 Cf. Fletcher M. Green's articles on gold mining in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia: *GHQ*, XIX (June 1935), 93-111 and (Sept. 1935), 210-28; *NCHR*, XIV (Jan. 1937), 1-19 and (Oct. 1937), 357-66. Significantly, the Southeastern developments were discussed in relation to California. See *DBR*, XVIII (Feb. 1855), 241-50.
- 15 See, e.g., Francis Terry Leak Diary, July 7, 1855.
- 16 *DBR*, XXVIII (March 1860), 281.
- 17 *Congressional Globe*, XIX, Part 2, 31st Congress, 1st Session, HR, Sept. 7, 1850.
- 18 "The Irrepressible Conflict and the Impending Crisis," *DBR*, XXVIII (May 1860), 535.
- 19 Clingman, *Speeches*, p. 239 (Jan. 22, 1850).
- 20 *Speeches, Messages, and Other Writings* (ed. M. W. Cuskey; Philadelphia, 1859), p. 181.



- 21 Delilah L. Beasley, "Slavery in California," *JNH*, III (Jan. 1918), 40-41.
- 22 "Public Lands of Texas," *DBR*, XIII (July 1852), 54.
- 23 Quoted in W. H. Watford, "Confederate Western Ambitions," *SHQ*, XLIV (Oct. 1940), 168.
- 24 Brown, *Speeches, Messages*, p. 595; speech at Hazlehurst, Miss., Sept. 11, 1858.
- 25 "Mexico and the Mexicans," *DBR*, II (Sept. 1846), 164-77.
- 26 "Mexico, Its Social and Political Condition," *DBR*, I (Feb. 1846), 117.
- 27 "Mexican Mines and Mineral Resources in 1850," *DBR*, IX (July 1850), 34.
- 28 "Mexico in 1852," *DBR*, XIII (Oct. 1852), 325-54, quotes on pp. 336 and 338.
- 29 "Gold and Silver Mines," *DBR*, XXI (July 1856), 55.
- 30 "The Republics of Mexico and the United States," *DBR*, XXI (Oct. 1856), 361. Original emphasis.
- 31 Watford, *SHQ*, XLIV (Oct. 1940), 167.
- 32 J. Fred Rippey, "Mexican Projects of the Confederates," *SHQ*, XXII (April 1919), 294, 298-99.
- 33 *The Emergence of Lincoln* (2 vols.; New York, 1950), I, 330-31.
- 34 *Ibid.*, I, 342.
- 35 I find it strange that Nevins attacks this late antebellum demand as an abstraction; his own evidence indicates that it was of central importance to the slavery cause.
- 36 Editorials, Feb. 28 and March 31, 1860, in Dumond (ed.) *Southern Editorials*, pp. 41, 45, 65.
- 37 J. D. B. De Bow, "California—The New American El Dorado," *DBR*, VIII (June 1850), 540.
- 38 *Congressional Globe*, XIX, Part 1, 31st Congress, 1st Session, Senate, Feb. 20, 1850, p. 397.

- 39 *Congressional Globe*, XIX, Part 2, 31st Congress, 1st Session, HR, June 7, 1850, p. 1149.
- 40 *Economic Growth*, pp. 128-29.
- 41 Dr. Wislizenus' report as extracted and printed in J. D. B. De Bow, "California, New Mexico and the Passage Between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans," *DBR*, VI (Sept. 1848), 223.
- 42 Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (2 vols.; New York, 1947), II, 116-17, 310.
- 43 "African Slavery Adapted to the North and Northwest," *DBR*, XXV (Oct. 1858), 379-85.
- 44 J. S. Thrasher, "Cuba and the United States," *DBR*, XVII (July 1854), 43-49.
- 45 *American Interest in Cuba, 1848-1855* (New York, 1948), p. 200; James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), pp. 127 ff; John S. C. Abbott, *South and North; or Impressions Received during a Trip to Cuba* (New York, 1860), pp. 52, 53. Texans, too, wanted Cuba. See Earl W. Fornell, "Agitation in Texas for Reopening the Slave Trade," *SHQ*, LX (Oct. 1956), 245-59.
- 46 Ampère, *Promenade en Amérique* (Paris, 1855), II, 223-24.
- 47 "Cuba—Its Position, Dimensions and Population," *DBR*, VIII (April 1850), 13-23.
- 48 Dr. Van Evne, "Slavery Extension," *DBR*, XV (July 1853), 10.
- 49 J. Preston Moore, "Pierre Soulé: Southern Expansionist and Promoter," *JSH*, XXI (May 1855), 206; Brown, *Speeches, Messages*, p. 329.
- 50 *SQR*, XXI (Jan. 1852), 3; see the arguments advanced by William Walker for avoiding an attempt to link Nicaragua with the Union, *The War in Nicaragua*, Chap. VIII.
- 51 *Ordeal of the Union*, II, 304.
- 52 Clarence H. Danhof, "Farm-making Costs and the 'Safety Valve,'" *JPE*, XLIX (June 1941), 317-59. Cf. Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, I, 159, on Kansas in the 1850s.

Thomas Le Duc has argued that many farmers could and did squat in squalor while slowly building a farm: "Public Policy, Private Investment and Land Use in American Agriculture, 1825-1875," *Agr. Hist.*, XXXVII (Jan. 1963), 3-9. Even with this qualification, capital and resources were a big factor, and the competitive advantage of Northern farmers over Southern is beyond doubt. Only when circumstances permitted the massive movement of planters and slaves could the result be different.

53 Yarbrough, *Economic Aspects of Slavery*, p. 104.

54 Quoted in Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, II, 24, n. 37.

55 *DBR*, XXIV (April 1858), 335-36.

56 Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, I, 160.

57 Quoted in George M. Weston, *The Progress of Slavery in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1857), p. 227.

58 *The Plantation* (March 1860), pp. 1-2.

59 "Economic Benefits of Secession: Opinions in Mississippi in the 1850's," *JSH*, I (Nov. 1935), 459 and *passim*.

60 *Emergence of Lincoln*, I, 344.

61 "The Issues of 1860," *DBR*, XXVIII (March 1860), 245-72.

## A Note on the Place of Economics in the Political Economy of Slavery

### ✻ *On Recent Contributions to an Endless Debate*

In 1958 the debate on the profitability of slavery, which has raged since antebellum days, took a new turn with the publication of the now famous Conrad-Meyer study.<sup>1</sup> Their paper has been followed by several others by economists who have used somewhat different routes to the same place. They conclude that slavery generated a high level of profits and that investments in slave plantations yielded as high a return as investments in alternative industries.<sup>2</sup> Had matters been left there, no great issue would be involved, but the most sweeping social and political questions have been thought to be hanging on the calculation of profit and loss.

No sooner had the old question of profitability ostensibly been laid to rest, with appropriate hosannas to the wonderful achievements of the "new economic history," as some econometric historians modestly style their discipline, than the counterattack began. On the technical level Edward Saraydar,

in an able reply, presented alternative calculations based on better data and the correction of errors. He concluded that slavery had not at all been significantly profitable.<sup>3</sup> The problem of data goes far beyond what even Saraydar suggests: there is hardly a figure in the Conrad-Meyer article, as well as the alternative studies, that cannot effectively be challenged. To cite a few cases, not previously examined by critics:

(1) *Medical care.* Conrad and Meyer have made a guess based on the previous guessing of historians and set the annual cost at \$1.50–2.00. Let us put aside Saraydar's insistence that they confuse costs per hand with costs per slave. An inspection of plantation manuscripts, medical journals, and physicians' accounts does not settle the matter but does suggest that their figures are probably half what they should be. A study of the sources, still involving more guesswork than we would like, suggests about \$3.00 per slave.<sup>4</sup>

(2) *Supervision.* A planter with twenty slaves in Mississippi in the 1850s could hardly expect to get a suitable overseer for \$15 per hand, or \$150. Even at \$15 per slave, or \$300, the figure is about 50 per cent too low. My estimate would be \$450; John Hebron Moore gives an estimated range of \$350–500 for the period 1830–1860.<sup>5</sup> William K. Scarborough, whose book on the Southern overseer will appear soon and who qualifies as our best authority on this subject, independently arrived at a range of \$200–1,000 with an average of \$450 for the Cotton Belt. He provides these figures under some protest, for "there are so many variables—size of plantation, length of tenure with current employer, age and experience of overseer."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the cost should be \$22.50 per slave, exclusive of an entrepreneurial salary for the planter himself.

(3) *Work Animals.* Conrad and Meyer, in their capital costs, provide a figure for the initial cost of work animals and assume that they were thereafter self-reproducing. Since the great bulk of the work animals consisted of mules and oxen,

the assumption is regrettable. Equally distressing, competent observers agreed that even the horses were so abused by slaves that replacement costs proved a recurring headache.

(4) *Food and Clothing.* Their figures (\$7.00–10.00 per slave, which Saraydar corrects to \$14.00–20.00) are much too low. Little clothing was produced at home, as we have seen, and the cost of such minor items as shoes and blankets alone was at least \$2.00 per slave. Total clothing costs were probably about \$16.00, and food costs varied enormously according to the size of the estate but were certainly much higher than Conrad and Meyer imagine.<sup>7</sup> An estimate with which we can work with safety will be established only after much work has been done with the data in the manuscript census returns and only if certain technical difficulties are removed. For example, if we can get a solid figure for the average weight of hogs on the plantations, we could estimate pork production from the number of hogs reported and use that figure, together with corn output, to measure plantation self-sufficiency. Until then, everyone's guess is equally valuable, and all can play the game.

If these or other figures are shifted upward a little, the results will be substantially altered. Surely, we cannot continue to work along these lines and think we are solving anything.

The Conrad-Meyer study, and the other economic studies as well, turn decisively on estimates of slave longevity, but the data problem here is especially grave. Those who think they can use census statistics on slave ages for close quantitative work ought to consider the testimony of innumerable planters. George S. Barnsley of Georgia took a slave to a Major Wooley for an estimate, but the two men differed by seven years.<sup>8</sup> Slave ages in plantation books were often recorded as "about" without pretense of accuracy.<sup>9</sup> Ernest Haywood of North Carolina had lists of slaves "with their supposed ages."<sup>10</sup> The following note from a planter to an overseer reveals a common situation: "There are also others whose names and ages are

misplaced. You must try to find them out and guess at their ages if you can not ascertain from the fathers or mothers of them."<sup>11</sup> A perusal of manuscript census returns strongly suggests that slave ages were recorded haphazardly and that great variations in the ages of the same slaves appeared from one census to another. The use of such data in close computations can only lead to gross distortion. The census statistics on mortality, which normally would have been helpful and have been relied upon often by historians, are almost useless. J. D. B. De Bow, who directed the census of 1850, said as much; and in any case, the underreporting of deaths by one-third, under conditions in which no assumption of equal effects on whites and blacks is tenable, makes all calculations guesswork.<sup>12</sup>

Other kinds of costs slide from view. Many and probably most planters gave their slaves Christmas presents at a cost of several dollars per slave. On a broader social level, they had to spend large sums to educate their children by tutors and at academies, finishing schools, and colleges, not to mention the additional sums necessary to permit their children to live in the appropriate manner. Such items extend in many directions and suggest two conclusions. First, such incidentals as Christmas presents must be included in any assessment of plantation costs. Second, we must not confuse profits, nicely defined to fit some scheme developed to accommodate bourgeois practices, with capital accumulation in a system in which the social leakages alone were enormous. (Those regular and expensive vacations in watering places, Northern resorts, and abroad were not so much evidence of household affluence or some alleged rural indifference to thrift as they were vital parts of a total social setting.) If an economist objects that the cost of education in a society incapable of producing adequate public facilities or the cost of Christmas presents and other incidentals for slaves cannot be considered "business expenses," we must answer that plantation slavery was no mere business and that a

system of accounting that limits itself to "business expenses" is a waste of time.

If the investigation of broad social and political issues did in fact rest on the solution of the profitability question, strictly defined, we should be in a sorry state, for no such solution has been offered or may ever be. Fortunately, we are not so badly off. Harold D. Woodman has come to the rescue and helped to restore order.<sup>13</sup> We are indebted to him for, among other things, making it unnecessary to review the whole irritating debate, which has gone on since antebellum days. He has patiently done it for us, and those interested may consult his article with the assurance that he has done it fairly.

The burden of Woodman's critical analysis rests on his correct insistence that two separate issues have been confused. First, some have asked: Did planters make money and did they make as much as they might have elsewhere? Considered thus: "Profitability relates only to the success or failure of slave production as a business and ignores the broader questions of the effects of this type of enterprise on the economy as a whole." Second, some have viewed slavery as an economic system. "The issue of profits earned by individual planters is subordinated to the larger problems of economic growth, capital accumulation, and the effects of slavery on the general population." He properly notes that Ulrich B. Phillips—let us add, the much-maligned Phillips, whose work remains the best starting point for any study of slavery in the United States—never let himself be confused but that after his death "a subtle shift" occurred from a primary concern with the second problem to a primary concern with the first. This shift, which the Conrad-Meyer article, with its brilliant technical apparatus and sophisticated discussion, completed, has carried with it a potential disaster for efforts to understand the slave South.

Woodman's article has helped immeasurably to bring the

debate back to reality, but it is not altogether free of the confusion against which he has struggled so well:

Those who argue that slavery prevented diversification must prove (1) that economic diversification did take place in nonslave agricultural areas and (2) that it was slavery and not other factors which prevented diversified investment in the South.<sup>14</sup>

If Woodman means "nonslave agricultural areas" within the South, then he has missed the very point he previously saw so clearly, for slavery wrought its worst devastation precisely there. If he means outside the South, then there is nothing left to prove. When he writes that we must prove that "slavery and not other factors" prevented diversified investment, he again misses the point, for to us slavery was no mere factor but the foundation of the social system in which the various factors operated and by which they were shaped. Having argued these matters explicitly and implicitly throughout these studies, I shall not belabor them here.

### ❧ *From Economics to Political Economy: Eight Theses*

- I. *In a strict accounting sense farms and plantations must have been profitable, for, considered as a whole, they survived for decades.*
- II. *Slave farms and plantations might and probably would have continued to produce earning less than the rate of interest.*

The qualifying phrase, "in a strict accounting sense," in Thesis I is necessary for two reasons. First, slaveholding determined status and social power. Second, however brisk the slave trade, considerable sentimental pressure existed to inhibit a purely rational approach to buying and selling slaves. Any notion that the slaveholders as a class could or would

have abandoned their estates to invest in more remunerative pursuits in the free states or even within the South—in other words, to transform themselves into ordinary capitalists—rests on a vulgar economic determinist outlook, contradicts the actual historical experience, and ignores the essential qualities of slave-based Southern life.

- III. *The question of whether or not the slaveholders earned a return equal to that accruing to Northern capitalists is not an especially significant political or social question.*

Economists have assumed that an affirmative answer would prove slaveholding to have been just another business. Such a conclusion would be a nonsequitur; as Schumpeter warns us, statistics can never disprove what we have reason to know from simpler and more direct methods.

- IV. *The question of profitability, strictly considered, can and should be approached as an empirical economic problem having only tangential relation to the large political and social issues. Both the traditional and revisionist interpretations of the origins of the war can absorb either positive or negative findings.*

*Irrepressible Conflict Case A.* The existence of an economically profitable plantation system made the slaveholders anxious to protect their valuable property against outside interference and made them especially furious with ignorant criticisms of their system of economy. It emboldened them to strike out on their own rather than to tolerate Northern criticism and encirclement. *Ergo*, secession and the risk of war were necessary to the defense of a healthy society.

*Irrepressible Conflict Case B.* Faced with an inability to earn a decent living under conditions of deteriorating soil and falling profit rates, the slaveholders had to stake

everything on a political independence that could lead to the acquisition of virgin soils. *Ergo*, secession and the risk of war were necessary to shore up a faltering economy.

*Repressible Conflict Case A.* With a prosperous economy strengthening the conservative tendencies of the planters and giving them too much to risk on foolish adventures, the South would have faced the moral issue of slavery in due time. Since the whole country benefited from Southern prosperity, both North and South had an interest in resolving the slavery issue in such a way as to prevent the slaveholders from suffering economically and to maintain the Negroes in a system within which their labor could be guaranteed and their behavior properly controlled. With time and good will slavery would have gradually yielded to a more humane system without convulsions and without any interruption in the economic process. *Ergo*, demagoguery and blundering produced a needless bloodbath.

*Repressible Conflict Case B.* With a low or negative profit rate Southerners would have had to rid themselves of slavery before long. It was time for Northerners to come forward with sympathetic and constructive proposals designed to compensate the slaveholders and help them re-establish a healthy economy under their own experienced direction. *Ergo*, a bloody and destructive war was fought to gain what necessarily had to come about peacefully in the near future.

Any reader could, with a little effort, double or triple the number of possibilities within each case. Great social transformations do not come about as a result of a kind of popular income accounting. An accurate knowledge of profit or loss will not tell us much about the origins of the secession crisis.

V. *Even if it could be established that plantation profit levels did stay high and that long-range prospects looked good, it would not follow that capital was being accumulated in a manner guaranteeing a politically viable economic development.*

- A. To speak of the viability of the South is meaningless; of slavery, misleading. It is the political viability of the slaveholders, and the necessary economic basis of that viability, that are in question.
- B. The structure of income distribution needs to be more closely analyzed, but we already know that slaveholders in general, and planters in particular, got a disproportionately high share. Planters siphoned off much of the yeomen's cotton profits by charges for ginning and other services and through a cotton market that operated to give big producers higher prices than small producers. Average cotton prices disguised a big spread in the returns to social groups.
- C. Therefore, even if general profit levels remained high, the level of capital accumulation would have been seriously undermined by a high propensity to consume and a tendency toward seigneurial display.
- D. On a strictly economic plane, the continued capitalization of labor may have paid and may be considered part of the process of capital accumulation; but it necessarily restricted the accumulation of capital for broad regional development.
- E. The high propensity to consume—and squander—presents no mystery or metaphysical problem. Pre-capitalist landowning classes generally exhibit such a propensity, which arises naturally from their relationship to labor and other classes. An ideological and psychological assessment of the Southern slaveholders is essential to an understanding of Southern political economy.

VI. *The economic prospects facing the slaveholders in 1860 contained serious dangers to their hegemony.*

- A. The long-range prospects for cotton planters do not seem to have been bright. Increasingly, their region would have found itself in the position of those underdeveloped countries whose problems Raúl Prebisch and others have recently brought to the attention of the United Nations and world opinion. Those countries must sell their agricultural and primary products in markets in which prices are set under conditions of vigorous competition but must buy finished goods in markets in which prices are set under conditions of oligopolistic manipulation.
- B. Southerners had not anticipated Prebisch's thesis during the 1850s but had begun to worry about the permanence of their near-monopoly of raw cotton and, in a general way, about their long-range prospects for dealing with European and Northern business.
- C. Short-range prospects underscored their fears. The English textile depression of 1861-1865 had long been attributed to the wartime cotton famine, but recent work suggests a crisis of overproduction.<sup>15</sup>
- D. Therefore, objective and subjective data suggest some Southern uneasiness about economic prospects at a moment of great political agitation. Even if profit levels had been as high during the 1850s as many now believe, the memory of the 1840s and the doubts about the future might have had considerable political effect. These considerations cannot explain the origins of the secession crisis but do suggest the need for further study to determine to what extent economic pressures affected the pace of political events.

VII. *The South moved steadily into a crisis as its slave system matured, but this crisis must not be confused with economic crises of either a cyclical or secular type.*

- A. There is no necessary relationship between the unfolding crisis of the slave South and any cyclical economic crisis. Even if cotton prices and profits had remained permanently at their average levels for the 1850s, the crisis would have continued to deepen. Yet, the specific cyclical conditions of the 1850s might and probably did affect the pace and quality of the political response of the slaveholding class.
  - B. A prospective secular decline in the price of cotton and other Southern staples relative to the price of Southern imports, even if such a decline could be firmly established, should not be confused with the general crisis described here. Such a decline under other social conditions might merely have occasioned the shift of capital to alternative pursuits. Yet, a secular decline would necessarily be indistinguishable from the economic aspect of a general crisis.
- VIII. *The general crisis manifested itself in all spheres of life.*
- A. The political, economic, and ideological barriers to capital accumulation, to the development of a home market, and to the rise and consolidation of independent middle classes effectively prevented the South from keeping pace with Northern material development.
  - B. The attendant sapping of Southern political power in the Union threatened to sap slaveholder hegemony in the South.
  - C. The declining power of the South made the defense of Southern values especially difficult in a world in which they were already under widespread attack.
  - D. Therefore, the general crisis had its economic as well as political, social, ideological, and psychological aspects, but was not essentially an economic crisis. It was the crisis of a social class and of the civilization it was painfully struggling to build.

## N O T E S

<sup>1</sup> "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South," *JPE*, LXVI (April 1958), 95-130; reprinted in Conrad and Meyer, *The Economics of Slavery and Other Econometric Studies* (Chicago, 1964). Their book includes criticisms of their paper by Douglas F. Dowd and John E. Moes and rejoinders, as well as a "Polemical Postscript on Economic Growth," which replies to a paper by Moes, "The Absorption of Capital in Slave Labor in the Ante Bellum South and Economic Growth," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, XXI (Oct. 1961), 535-41, and also to the paper that constitutes Chapter VII of this book.

In that "Polemical Postscript" they write: "Insofar as income increases are both a measure of and a potential support for growth—we could say that slavery was not inconsistent with growth in purely economic terms. Finally, inferring from the effectiveness of the interregional capital market and some evidence of the use of slave labor outside of staple agriculture, we argued that slavery was not inconsistent with economic diversification."

Although a full discussion of their essay would not be in order here, I should like to make a brief reply. It is precisely the "purely economic terms" with which I should quarrel. Absolute growth is not in question; a politically viable growth is. In short, a strictly economic approach is not helpful, however valid it might be in its own terms. On the broader questions, I must stand on this essay and the others in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Robert Evans, Jr., "The Economics of American Negro Slavery," National Bureau of Economic Research, *Aspects of Labor Economics* (Princeton, N.J., 1962), pp. 183-256, including critical comments by Thomas P. Govan and John E. Moes. Of the three items by Moes mentioned in these notes, this is his strongest and deserves careful atten-

tion. He argues, in effect, that the natural economic tendency was toward gradual emancipation but recognizes that such a tendency was inhibited by noneconomic factors.

- <sup>3</sup> "A Note on the Profitability of Ante Bellum Slavery," *SEJ*, XXX (April 1964), 325-32.
- <sup>4</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, "The Medical and Insurance Costs of Slaveholding in the Cotton Belt," *JNH*, XLV (July 1960), 141-55. Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, La., 1962), p. 104, independently arrived at a similar figure.
- <sup>5</sup> "Two Documents Relating to Plantation Overseers of the Vicksburg Region, 1831-1832," *JMH*, XVI (Jan. 1964), 32.
- <sup>6</sup> Personal correspondence, Oct. 1, 1964, quoted with permission.
- <sup>7</sup> See the appendix to my unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Limits of Agrarian Reform in the Slave South," Columbia University, 1959.
- <sup>8</sup> Barnsley Papers, Jan. 9, 1860, University of North Carolina.
- <sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Bruce Papers, Box II, Folder 1855.
- <sup>10</sup> Ernest Haywood Papers, *passim*.
- <sup>11</sup> A. H. to Joseph Arrington, March 12, 1860.
- <sup>12</sup> *Mortality Statistics of the Seventh Census of the United States*, esp. pp. 8-9.
- <sup>13</sup> "The Profitability of Slavery: A Historical Perennial," *JSH*, XXIX (Aug. 1963), 303-25.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.
- <sup>15</sup> Eugene A. Brady, "A Reconsideration of the Lancashire 'Cotton Famine,'" *Agr. Hist.*, XXXVII (July 1963), 156-62.