

Marc Egnal, *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009, \$30.00). Pp. 432. ISBN 10 0 8090 9536 X, ISBN 13 978 0 8090 9536 0.

John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, \$39.95). Pp. 256. ISBN 978 0 8078 3251 6.

"There is nothing more stupid than the chatter about cause and effect in history books; nothing is more wrong-headed, more half-baked." So went the 1947 diary entry of the famous Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Culture and Value* (1984), 62). Already then, there was much chatter about the causes of the American Civil War. With the high tide of the Progressive wave of American historiography, Wittgenstein might have then plucked from the library at Trinity College Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927). He would have learned that the cause of the Civil War was the rise of a northern industrial capitalism, hostile to the agrarian South. Flash forward, and today historians all but sing in a chorus: the cause of the Civil War was slavery. Marc Egnal has written a lively book claiming that the Beards were, essentially, right. The cause of the war was not slavery, but national economic development.

Since 1947, there have been waves of historiographical revision, cresting with the current emphasis on slavery. But also the positivist convictions of historians have waned. Recently, the eminent historian William W. Freehling has written in the second volume of *The Road to Disunion* (2007) that it now "seems indisputable" that "slavery above all else caused this historic war." Yet strident assertions of historical causation "must always be partially distrusted, for personality, accidents, timing -- in a word, contingency -- deflect and condition the most remorseless trends" (531). In this spirit, historians now often write of the war's "coming." As the man himself said in the Second Inaugural: "And the war came." Slavery, Lincoln told a war-weary nation, "was, somehow, the cause of the war." That is essentially what historians now believe. There is no rigorous way to line up a precise "cause and effect." But at the end of the day -- "somehow" -- it was slavery.

"Somehow" was not how the Beards qualified their arguments. Egnal takes up a double charge, then -- first, to put economic change at the center of the origins of the Civil War. Second, he promises a subtler narrative, one with ample room for "[i]ndividuals, religion, and ideologies" (17). Sketches of the biographies of the leading political figures, and of the major and minor political party platforms, grace the book. But throughout Egnal is unflagging. The cause of the war was economic.

He has a fresh approach to make the case. The Beards underscored the antagonism between northern industry and southern agriculture. Egnal deflects attention from the rising northeastern industrial corridor, and centers his analysis on the Great Lakes. Chicago, not Boston, or Charleston, explains the war.

Put bluntly, a shift in national patterns of trade sealed the young nation's bloody fate. The Mississippi River was once the great commercial artery of the West, binding Old Northwest and the Old Southwest. But the Erie Canal opened in 1823, and so did a water route from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. Political connections followed. Only the rise of the Great Lakes economy, Egnal maintains,

can explain the rise of a political party -- the Republican Party -- that by 1860 had won a national election without capturing a single electoral vote below the Mason-Dixon line.

What about the South? The Upper South and border states maintained trade contacts with the North, but the Lower South did no such thing. Their cotton went directly to New York City (no Republican stronghold, to be sure) on its way to Europe, if not directly. Thus, as opposed to the truly national, integrated economy of the mid-antebellum period, by 1860 there were two distinct economies. The Upper North squared off against the Lower South in a "Clash of Extremes."

Economically, there is nothing particularly new in this account, although Egnal accomplishes it with much lucidity and aplomb. If he had stopped there, he would have succeeded in offering a terrific primer on the economic context of the heightened sectional divide of the 1850s. But Egnal pursues a more comprehensive inquiry. Readers will find chapters on the rise of anti-slavery, the great political compromises that warded off disunion, and the balance of power in the South between unionists and secessionists at the moment of truth in 1861. (The only end Egnal leaves dangling is the question why the North did not let the South go. Given how Egnal sets things up, the answer cannot be economic). Often the subplots support Egnal's thesis. Patterns of trade largely explain why secession was rooted in the deep South. Sometimes, they qualify that thesis. Anti-slavery was important, just not as important as most scholars think. The crucial link in the argument, however, is the move from economic context to political action.

Indeed, gauging the success of Egnal's book raises the most vexing issue of historical causation. Egnal is convincing that the rise of the Great Lakes economy should be central to any recounting of the coming of the Civil War. The "Free Soil" part of "Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men" has been emphasized. But Egnal shows how the West was about more than the ideological power of the uncultivated prairies and plains. It was about the nuts and bolts of commercial development: lake and canal infrastructure, subsidies, tariffs, "internal improvements," and the like. Required was the fostering of the federal government, and the Republican Party was willing. Egnal emphasizes the Great Lakes plank of the party's platform. Only with it did Lincoln's party come together.

Alright -- but is this causation or context? Must there be a singular cause of the Civil War? In truth, the current literature argues for slavery as the overarching context of the war's coming, the one river that most effectively gathers the many streams and tributaries that converged in the rush to war. In his exuberance, Egnal slightly caricatures this literature. He writes on the concluding page, "many writers argue that the Civil War was all about freeing the slaves" (348); perhaps many writers do, but not many professional historians. In the opening pages, Egnal positions himself against the leading scholar of Civil War studies, James McPherson. McPherson has recently written, "It was not the *existence* of slavery that polarized the nation to the breaking point, however, but rather the issue of the *expansion of slave territory*" (*This Mighty Scourge* (2007), 13, added emphasis). That is the gist of current scholarship. Ultimately, in western expansion, both regions saw something fundamental at stake about their respective ways of life. *The*

Clash of Extremes can be read to validate this interpretation. Only with the commercial development of the Great Lakes could a western expansion directed by the free North so frighten the slave South. And only with it could a western expansion directed by the slave South so have frightened the free North. So much so that over it the two regions might come to blows.

Cut out the annoying anti-slavery bit, and John Majewski claims to have found a large chunk of Egnal's Republican Party in the Confederate economic imagination. Looking to South Carolina and Virginia, the brief and succinct *Modernizing a Slave Economy* argues that one of "the most enduring continuities of southern history" was "the quest for a dynamic, diversified, and modern economy" (161). In the context of the slave South, this meant more railroads, industry, and cities. Majewski claims that the image of southern pastoralists staunchly opposed to a rising northern, urban, industrial modernity is incomplete. There were in fact ardent secessionists who wanted what Majewski calls economic modernity.

Majewski, however, is not among those economic historians who harp on the relative modernity of the slave South, whether because of the high labor productivity of its slaves, the sophistication of its markets, or its nascent attempts at industrialization in the 1850s. Rather, the South was backward. Not because of its social system, mind you, but because of its soils. High acidity meant "shifting cultivation." Unlike the Northeast, which was then intensifying land use, southerners yearly planted cash crops until the soil gave out, and then abandoned fields for a decade or more. This led to a diffused geographical scale of economic development, with many "black holes" of wasted space. Markets were not dense enough for the onset of urbanization, agricultural diversification, and industrialization. Thus, to achieve those goals, Majewski's band of would-be modernizers *had* to turn to the state. Pro-slavery, they could not turn to a federal government potentially captured by northern abolitionists. And so they turned to the Confederacy.

The two issues are Majewski's vision of the antebellum southern economy, and the relative importance of the modernizing vision within what he admits was a much larger Confederate imagination. The shifting-cultivation thesis is intriguing. But was this the motor of the peculiar geography of southern economic development, or its consequence? As Gavin Wright has recently emphasized in *Slavery and American Economic Development* (2006), slaveholders could take their slaves and put them to work anywhere. With fresh land available west, with cotton prices up, why mind those eastern "black holes?" The incentives of property rights in slaves, rather than the poor soils of the southern Atlantic seaboard, seem more the culprit.

Nevertheless, southern agriculture depleted many already inhospitable soils. To this, there were two responses. Pursue fresh lands to the west, the logic of the deep South planters, or -- and here we find Majewski's bloc in Virginia and South Carolina -- modernize. And so we return once more to the politics of slavery in the western territories.

Majewski has convincingly added heft to the eastern, modernizing bloc in the Confederate coalition. He claims that the modernizers, not just wartime

exigency, are crucial to understanding the centralized power of the Confederate state. From his evidence it is difficult to tell just how much. Likewise, perhaps, relative to the bloc of deep South planters, he has given the modernizers too much weight in the run-up to secession. But the ironies still abound. Just like, in Egnal's story, the Republican Party snapped together northeastern industrializers, Great Lakes boosters, and prairie free-soilers, the Confederacy brought together land-hungry slaveholders with eastern boosters of southern industrialization. Indeed, the slave modernizers wanted internal improvements, railroads, tariffs - basically everything in the Republican platform, plus slavery.

Certainly, Majewski uncovers more than enough to undermine Egnal's claim that the Upper South states had no economic interest in secession, and were simply swept along by the storm of events in 1861 that was the Clash of Extremes. But reading Majewski, as for state-led economic development, what many southerners hoped for in the Confederacy was exactly what many northerners hoped for in the Union.

The only bugbear was slavery. Together, then, these two books explain what happened after the Civil War as much as what caused it. They help explain why both regions so quickly reconciled after the Civil War to launch a national, state-led industrialization -- trampling over the former slaves in the process. Take slavery out of the equation and the necessary mix of political-economic and ideological forces, across the Mason-Dixon line, was already present before the first drop of blood was spilled. Perhaps, after all -- "somehow" -- the Beards were right.

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