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Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War

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Review

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Huston, James L. *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War.* University of North Carolina Press, $45.00 ISBN 807828041

Capital cause

Economics spurred the Civil War

After publishing two important studies on 19th century economic history--one on the Panic of 1857 and its contribution to the coming of the Civil War and the other on the distribution of wealth in America from 1765 to 1900--James L. Huston has now completed an investigation into the causes of the Civil War. And his conclusion, not surprisingly, is that its origins were economic. Economic explanations of the American Civil War have come and gone over the years, but the author claims the underlying cause that he considers critical has been overlooked by most, if not all, historians. A claim of this magnitude is bound to get the pulses of Civil War historians racing. So what is Huston's insight?

After an opening chapter on the role of slavery in the American Revolution and in the deliberations of the constitution-makers at the Founding in 1787, Professor Huston lays out his argument in chapter two, entitled The Origins of Southern Aggressiveness. At the heart of the conflict between the two sections, he argues, was the immensely valuable property that slaveowners held in the form of their human chattel. After examining the 1860 census, the author calculates that the wealth tied up in slaves was greater than that in railroads and manufacturing combined. Totaling about $3 billion, slave property constituted 18.75% of national wealth. And, of course, its owners would try desperately to hold onto it. Indeed, the slaveholders would have had no alternative but to conform to what Huston terms on page 65 the oldest social law that virtually all political philosophers have underlined: many men will kill other men to keep their property or extend [expand?] it. After answering absolutely not to the question of whether the slaveowners would have seceded if their slaves were valued at only $300 million, rather than $3 billion, Professor Huston concludes the chapter on page 66 with the bold assertion that At the root of the controversy over slavery was the wealth invested in slavery. Remove the wealth, and the controversy, like a Cheshire cat, fades away with a knowing grin.

There are a couple of problems with these claims. First, the author seems to be suggesting that the slaveowners would have obeyed the oldest social law about killing to protect one's property only if the value had been very great, that is, a good deal more than $300 million, even though the latter number is hardly chicken-feed. So is there a cut-off point at which nobody would kill or die to protect their property? I imagine there is, but what amount would it have to be? Perhaps there is another social law to determine the marginal value that would compel property owners to start the killing.

The second problem is far more significant, however. After reviewing the historiography of Civil War causation between pages 57 and 65 and dismissing most of it, Huston claims that previous historians have not placed the pecuniary value of the slaves at the center of their interpretations. This charge is unwarranted, if not preposterous. Only a few explanations of the sectional conflict have argued that the southern economy was not prospering or was in a state of crisis or decline in the 1850s, Ulrich B. Phillips and Eugene Genovese being two of them. Rather, the pecuniary value of the slaves to their owners has rarely been questioned. In response to Huston's Cheshire cat analogy, all but a few would say that if you remove the wealth, you would have removed slavery itself. And so of course, the controversy would fade away. Indeed, most historians have added other kinds of value that slaves possessed besides their pecuniary value as an investment and an asset, making slaveowning even more valuable and hard to give up. The three most obvious of examples are slaves' value as the solution to the planters' need for a cheap and coercible labor-force on their labor-intensive plantations, for the status that possession of them bestowed on their owners, and as the foundation of the South's racial order. If worth and value of this kind is added to the monetary one, then slaves were indispensable. And naturally, their owners would have moved heaven and earth to keep them, as in fact they did.

To demonstrate how important the slaves were to their owners as a very valuable property and how this preoccupation fueled the sectional conflict, the author devotes chapters three, four, and five to showing how the issue of property rights was at the center of the acrimonious dispute in all three branches of the federal government during the 1840s and 1850s. In this contest, the southern slaveholders insisted that the rest of the nation acknowledge, in statute and constitutional law, their right to possess property in persons. Furthermore, the same issue was at stake in the western territories as well, where the South's political leaders again tried to obtain national protection for their right to take slaves beyond the states and into such areas of new settlement as New Mexico and Kansas. But this has never been in dispute. The question of whether slavery can be recognized as a nationally sanctioned institution has always been regarded as essentially a matter of property rights.

But actually the dispute was about more than that. For the debate over slavery was also about what kind of labor relations would be the norm in America? Would labor be free or would it be slave? And, in fact, Professor Huston's chapter on the North that follows his seminal chapter two is called Free Labor and the Competition of Slaves. A critical aspect of the sectional conflict that made the contest even more difficult to resolve, an aspect incidentally that has been of consuming interest to historians since Eric Foner's elucidation of the free labor ideology in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1970), was that the question of slavery was not just a pecuniary matter. The matter of slavery also concerned the kind of labor system that would dominate the nation, and the racial composition of the population of the new territories. To isolate the property element of slavery as the primary, or real, cause of the sectional conflict and the ensuing civil war is not very helpful. And perhaps that is why historians in the past have not tried to do so. For slavery was a multi-faceted institution. And all of the features of this species of property, this peculiar property, had, by the late 1840s, succeeded in provoking a visceral response among non-slaveholders outside the South that was extremely hard, in fact impossible, to manage and contain politically.

The last two chapters of **Calculating the Value of the Union** move away from economic origins and the dispute over property rights in persons. Instead, they focus on the collapse of the Whig party in the South from 1846 to 1853 and the rise of the Republicans in the North between 1854 and 1860, two political developments which together produced what has been called the realignment of the 1850s. The theory of party realignment, with its highlighting of certain presidential contests as critical elections, has played a major role in American political science and also in history since the 1970s. Realignment theory explains the course of American political history and development as a series of party systems, the fifth and last of which emerged in the New Deal era after the critical election of 1932. An extremely mechanical, complicated and schematic method of periodizing American political history, this theory has fallen on hard times in recent years, primarily because there has been no critical election or party realignment for 70 years. This development has upset the cyclical appearance of new party systems, a pattern established for the 19th and early 20th centuries when the theory charted the First through Fourth Party Systems. Realignment theory has also been subjected to considerable criticism from political scientists, the most devastating of which was David Mayhew's *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre*, published in 2002.

Despite all this, Professor Huston feels compelled to revitalize this dying theory and, in a 14 page Appendix A, he offers a scheme to resuscitate it. Then, in Appendix B, he demonstrates at great length, for another 29 pages, how the realignment of the 1850s can be used to reconfirm the theory. This realignment broke down the Second Party System of Whigs and Democrats and created the Third Party System of Democrats and Republicans as a result of the critical election of 1860. The upshot of this excursion into electoral realignment is that a book which began with a claim to reinterpret the Civil War as a crisis with economic origins has metamorphosed into a test-case to prove the continuing viability and relevance of a theory of American party development that is no longer as intriguing or fruitful as it once was. In his preface, Professor Huston shared with his readers his initial inclination to prepare several articles laying out his thoughts and speculations on these two topics. He decided instead to put them together and write a long book on the coming of the Civil War. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a book without cohesion that does not offer the broad-ranging reinterpretation of the origins of the American Civil War that it promised. Perhaps James Huston would have been advised to heed his own instincts and publish two provocative articles, leaving to others the task of assessing, and maybe trying to apply, his suggestions.

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