

Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation

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Review

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Majewski, John *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807832516

Economics and the Confederacy

Could it be that the strong central state of the twentieth century—praised by some Americans and lampooned by others—had antecedents in, of all places, an antebellum southern commercial agrarianism that eventually tried to destroy the United States? In this well researched study of southern economic life and reformers, John Majewski suggests that such an irony was in fact the case. In the process this innovative book also helps debunk several others myths about the southern economy and the Confederacy.

Working, literally, from the ground up, Majewski shows how the region's acidic soil forced planters committed to staple crops to leave sizable tracts fallow (sometimes for up to twenty years) before burning them to replenish the soil. Though "shifting cultivation" made economic sense to planters and farmers, it used only about one-third of their lands, compared to just over one-half of northern farms. This environmentally-determined fact—traced through Majewski's careful analysis of census data—indelibly shaped the physical landscape, economic potential, and even the political actions of the region's inhabitants. Population density, and by consequence consumer markets, remained small and separated by acres of unproductive land. Cities were few and far between. Commerce and manufacturing thus remained comparatively sparse and railroads largely unprofitable. Frustration with the region's languishing economy, he argues, framed a reform-minded political agenda that aided the secessionist effort and laid the groundwork for a powerful Confederate state.

Outside observers, especially those of an antislavery bent, saw slavery as the chief culprit for comparatively less economic development. Most recent historians have agreed. But Majewski's data offers a more complicated story,

showing that lands cultivated by slaves actually had higher rates of improvement and suggesting that the institution may, at best, have been a secondary factor in slower economic growth than the North. Furthermore, southerners certainly did not perceive slavery as a weakness. Instead the region's relative decline of southern agriculture led reformers like Edmund Ruffin, James Hammond, and others to urge better agricultural practice and especially the application of marl—all in an effort to lessen the economic and political effects of shifting cultivation. The Virginia and South Carolina reformers—and future secessionists—who frame Majewski's narrative were neither traditionalists nor rustic agrarians. Rather, their missions to modernize the southern economy and preserve slavery, mutually reinforcing in this account, led them down some quite surprising paths, including most critically a steady drumbeat for "state" or "government activism."

Though deeply practical in their goals and approach, intellectually Majewski's thinkers were essentially "neo-Hamiltonian" republicans (9) who also anticipated the Progressive era's concern with "mixing science and state activism" (80). Here *Modernizing a Slave Economy* boldly challenges the common assumption that southerners' commitment to slavery and agriculture led them to resist strong government. Instead, though admitting that few southerners supported an active U.S. federal state, the author shows that frustration with the limited reach of private efforts led reformers to urge state governments to provide significant resources for agricultural surveys, to subsidize agricultural journals and colleges, to use their regulatory powers and the right of eminent domain, and most especially to construct railroads intended to better tie internal economies together. The degree of success at the state and local level varied markedly, generally hindered by intra-state jealousy and a lack of private investment, but the reforming "ethos of collective action and condemning excessive individualism" became deeply imbedded in the southern mind. Reform-minded secessionists were not then libertarians but instead argued that only collective action outside of the union could help end northern economic and political dominance, thus allowing the South to fulfill its commercial greatness. In short, "southern extremists" and "state activism" went hand in hand" (56). Thus Majewski arrives at one of the book's most important claims, arguing that, contrary to the works of Emory Thomas and Richard Bense, "the strong Confederate state was not a radical disjuncture but a natural outgrowth of southern attitudes, established during the antebellum period" and culminating in secession" (7).

During the war, however, “secessionists’ dreams quickly became a wartime nightmare” (139) as ruling elites support for government activism grew into a “Confederate Leviathan.” “Perhaps,” Majewski concludes, “the Confederates lost the war not because their sense of nationalism was too weak, but because it was too strong,” leading to miscalculated policies that eventually undermined the state (152). By dictating everything from the citizenry’s movement, to commodity prices, to conscription, the Confederacy alienated groups within the South, including upcountry yeoman farmers and most obviously slaves, whose actions failed to support and in the later case severely hindered the war effort.

The argument is compelling, clearly presented, aided by a useful statistical appendix, and precise. It joins a bevy of recent work that highlight the problem of viewing the southern mind as perversely backward looking, demonstrating instead that pragmatic problems more than rigid ideals defined political and economic decisions. It also raises some interesting questions not fully explored. Did individuals inhabiting the somewhat fresher and more abundant soils of the Southwest fully share this state-centered view and if not what does that say about secession and the Confederacy? What led some southerners (including many Whigs and Unionists—especially in the Upper South—who presumably were aware of these same problems) to continue to believe that the federal union remained a useful entity, while reform-minded secessionists rejected that claim? Finally, if the underlying economic reality was as bleak as secessionist reformers (and it seems Majewski) argue, how could they seriously believe that the South had the capacity to fight and win a war against such a superior North?

Most historians have answered this last question by assuming that they jumped into it as an exercise in self-delusion, but such an interpretation would not fit the framework presented here. Another, perhaps more likely scenario is that the South’s economy had in fact advanced quite a bit in the previous decades and that the broad swath of the southern population, including many secessionists, retained more optimism than the political-motivated jeremiads of reformers like Edmund Ruffin allowed. A purely North-South dichotomy (though certainly influential) necessarily paints a lamentable picture of decline. But new scholarship also suggests that when compared with other contemporaneous economies in Europe and especially Asia, Africa, and South America, (as planters whose chief competitors were overseas did), the southern economies looks remarkably productive and even modern. This, high staple prices in the 1850s—and some significant political victories at home and abroad—might indicate that a significant amount of confidence worked

alongside frustration to shape secession.

None of these questions, however, undermines the essential power of Majewski's path-breaking synthesis. Historians, political scientists, and the public will continue to debate the precise origins of the modern central state, but after this impressive work no one can safely write the South out of that conversation or ignore the importance of the environment and interest in shaping the region's economic and political past.

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