THE CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: Recent Interpretations and New Directions

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In 1960, as Americans prepared to observe the centennial of the Civil War, one of the foremost historians of that conflict published a brief article entitled, "American Historians and the Causes of the Civil War."[1] Most readers probably expected another survey of the changing course of civil war interpretation. Instead the author announced that as a subject of serious historical analysis, Civil War causation was "dead."

Looking back over the decade and a half since David Donald wrote, it would appear that he somewhat exaggerated the death of this field of inquiry. In the 1950's, historians were concerned with investigating periods of consensus in America's past. But in the 1960's, as the issues of race and war came to the forefront of national life, earlier times of civil strife in American history attracted renewed attention.

The 1960's, for example, witnessed a renascence of the study of slavery. It is now no longer possible to view the peculiar institution as some kind of accident or aberration, existing outside the mainstream of national development. Rather, slavery was absolutely central to the American experience, intimately bound up with the settlement of the western hemisphere, the American Revolution and industrial expansion. It was what defined the Old South and drew southern society along a path of development which set it increasingly apart from the rest of the nation.[2]

1 David Donald, "American Historians and the Causes of the Civil War," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LIX (Summer, 1960), 351-55.

2 To cite only a few of the host of works related to this point, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966), and Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *Journal of American History*, LIX, (June, 1972), 5-29 stress the centrality of slavery to the American experience. Douglass North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790 to 1860* (1961), shows how the profits of the cotton trade paid for the economic development of antebellum America. Staughton Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* (1967), Donald L. Robinson, *Slavery and the Structure of American Politics* (1971), Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis, Slavery and the Politics of Jacksonianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXV (Winter, 1966), 55-72, William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War* (1966), and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor,*

At the same time, a striking reversal of interpretations of the abolitionists took place.[3] In fact, there was a paradoxical double reversal. On the one hand the abolitionists, previously castigated as fanatics and agitators, suddenly emerged as the conscience of a sinning nation—much as the Garrisons and Welds had portrayed themselves a century earlier. At the same time, a number of writers argued that not only were the friends of the slave not immune from racism, but, far from being truly "radical," they seemed to accept the middle-class values of northern society.[4]

The flood of studies of slavery, abolitionism, and the race issue does not seem, however, to have brought historians much closer to a generally accepted interpretation of the coming of the Civil War than they were fifteen years ago. As the late David Potter pointed out, the irony is that disagreements of interpretation persist in the face of a greatly increased body of historical knowledge.[5] This is partially because the Civil War raised so many still unresolved issues. Perhaps, however, there is another reason. Historians' methodologies and value judgments have changed considerably over the past fifteen years, but the questions historians have asked of their data have remained relatively static. Like the debate over slavery before the appearance of Stanley Elkins' study in 1959, discussion of the causes of the Civil War continues to be locked into an antiquated interpretive framework. Historians of the Civil War era seem to be in greater need of new models of interpretation and new questions than of an additional accumulation of data.

There have, however, been a number of works in the past fifteen years which have attempted to develop entirely new ways of looking at ante-bellum America and the origins of the Civil War. One of the most striking developments of these years has been the emergence of the "new political historians," who have attempted to recast our understanding of ante-bellum political alignments. They have de-emphasized "national" issues like slavery and the tariff, and substituted ethno-cul-

Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War (1970) place slavery at the center of politics at various points in ante-bellum history. Eugene D. Genovese, _The Political Economy of Slavery_ (1965), makes clear the centrality of slavery to the society of the Old South.

[3] Rather than citing the scores of works on abolitionism, let me simply refer to an admirable historiographical survey: Merton L. Dillon, "The Abolitionists: A Decade of Historiography, 1959-1969," _Journal of Southern History_, XXXV, (Nov., 1969), 500-22.

[4] On the racism of anti-slavery advocates, see, for example, William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Anti-Slavery Ambivalence: Immediatism, Expediency, Race," _American Quarterly_, XVII (Winter, 1965), 682-95; Eric Foner, "Racial Attitudes of the New York Free Soilers," _New York History_, XLVI (Oct., 1965), 311-29; Eugene H. Berwanger, _The Frontier Against Slavery_ (1967); and James H. Rawley, _Race and Politics_ (1969). For the limitations of abolitionist radicalism, see William Appleman Williams, _The Contours of American History_ (London ed., 1961), p. 251; Aileen Kraditor, _Means and Ends in American Abolitionism_ (New York, 1969), pp. 244-53); George F. Fredrickson, _The Black Image in the White Mind_ (1971), pp. 36-37.

[5] David Potter, _The South and the Sectional Conflict_ (1968), p. 146.

tural conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, or between pietistic and ritualistic religious groups, as the major determinants of voting behavior. These works have broadened our understanding of ante-bellum political culture, and demonstrated the inevitable failure of any "monistic interpretation" of political conflict. And they should force historians to abandon whatever economic determinism still persists in the writing of political history. Perhaps most important, they have demonstrated the virtues of viewing voters not as isolated individuals, but as men and women embedded in a complex network of social and cultural relationships.[6]

The "new political history" involves both a new methodology—the statistical analysis of quantitative data—and a distinctive model of historical explanation. The broadening of the methodological tools available to historians can only be applauded, although some writers may at times be guilty of mistaking correlations for causes, and inducing the behavior of individuals from aggregate data. It sometimes seems that the very sophistication of the new methodology has unfortunate effects on these writers' approach to historical data. Not only is undue weight often assigned to historical variables such as ethnicity for which quantifiable data happens to be available, but the definition of basic concepts is reduced to the most easily quantifiable elements. Thus, class is measured by data on occupation and assessed property holdings, culture is reduced to a mixture of ethnicity and religion, and religion is measured purely by Church affiliation.[7]

It is in the realm of explanation, and as a contribution to our under-

[6] The major works of "new political history" dealing with ante-bellum politics are Lee Benson, _The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case_ (1961), Ronald P. Formisano, _The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan 1827-1861_ (1971); Paul Kleppner, _The Cross of Culture_ (1970); the essays collected in Frederick C. Luebke (ed.), _Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln_ (1971); and Michael F. Holt, _Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860_ (1969). The phrase "monistic interpretation" is quoted from Holt, p. 125. I should note that obviously not all these writers agree on every interpretation. Holt, for example, tends to give anti-slavery attitudes more credence as a determinant of voting behavior than do the other writers.

[7] Some of these methodological criticisms are raised in Allen G. Bogue, "United States: The 'New Political History,'" _Journal of Contemporary History_, III (Jan., 1968), 22-24; James E. Wright, "The Ethnocultural Model of Voting," _American Behavioral Scientist_, XVI (May-June, 1973), 653-74; and James R. Green, "Behavioralism and Class Analysis: A Review Essay on Methodology and Ideology," _Labor History_, XIII (Winter, 1972), 89-106. Among other methodological problems is the tendency of some writers to infer the behavior of voters in heterogeneous areas from the actions of those who lived in homogenous ethnic communities, and difficulties created by the use of census data on the number of church seats of each religion in a specified area, as a measure of the breakdown of religious affiliations of that area. There are also simple problems of interpreting data. Formisano, for example, presents a table of the voting of evangelical townships in Michigan in 1860. In eastern Michigan, six of eleven such townships gave Lincoln over 60 per cent of the vote, but Lincoln carried the state with 57 per cent of Michigan's ballots. The table shows that in five of eleven evangelical townships, Lincoln received less than his state-wide percentage. The figures hardly justify the conclusion that evangelical townships voted "strongly Republican" in 1860. Formisano, _Birth of Mass Political Parties_, pp. 312-13.

standing of the coming of the Civil War, that the "new political history" is most open to criticism. First, while rightly rejecting the economic determinism of progressive historians, the new political historians seem to be in danger of substituting a religious or cultural determinism of their own. Indeed, the interpretive framework of the new school is strikingly similar to that of the progressives. Both pose a sharp distinction between "real" and "unreal" issues, both put thousands of persons in the quasi-conspiratorial position of concealing their real intentions, and both take an extremely limited view of individual motivation. For the "economic man" of the progressives, the new political history has substituted an equally one-dimensional "religious man."

Most important, this new mode of explanation is fundamentally ahistorical; its key variables exist independently of historical context. Religion and ethnicity are generally treated as "uni-dimensional concepts, without reference to time, place, rate of acculturation, or individual personality." The point is that all historical variables are interrelated, and change as society develops. To take one key variable—religious belief in this case, or an over-simplified version of class for the progressives—and abstract it from its social context and the processes of historical change, is to distort and fracture historical reality.[8]

The arguments of the "new political historians" have profound implications for the question of Civil War causation. Their basic outlook was announced in 1964, in Joel Silbey's influential article, "The Civil War Synthesis," which chided historians for writing the history of the 1850's solely from the vantage point of the slavery issue, ignoring questions, like nativism, which seemed to have little to do with the coming of war. Subsequent writers have agreed with Silbey that a split existed between northern political elites and the mass of voters. The former were, for a variety of reasons, increasingly anti-southern, the latter were "basically unmoved" by the issues of slavery and sectional conflict and were more concerned with so-called "cultural" questions like immigration and temperance.[9]

While often criticizing traditional historians for using such "elite sources" as newspapers, speeches and letters, this new interpretation of ante-bellum politics has its own elitist bias. It assumes that "large portions of the electorate do not have meaningful beliefs,"[10] that only elites

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[8] Some of these criticisms are noted in the Wright and Green articles cited above, and in David P. Thelen, review of Kleppner, *Civil War History*, XVII (Mar., 1971), 84-86, and Thelen, review of Formisano, *Civil War History*, XVIII (Dec., 1972), 355-57. The quotation is from Wright, "The Ethnocultural Model of Voting," 664. Wright and Green question whether these studies are adequately controlled for class and status variables. All three critics question whether class can be adequately measured by looking at units like "farmers" or "workers," or by measuring the wealth of rural and urban precincts without considering the internal class structure of these units.

[9] Joel H. Silbey, "The Civil War Synthesis in American Political History," *Civil War History*, X (June, 1964), 130-40; Luebke, *Ethnic Voters*, p. xi.

[10] This incredible statement is quoted by Formisano from Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David E. Apter, *Ideology and*

are truly issue-oriented. This kind of reasoning, however, can never illuminate the relationship between political leaders and voters in a democratic political culture. Nor can it explain under what circumstances local issues will dominate politics and when national issues will come to the fore, or tell us why Republicans in the late 1850's were constantly trying to play down the issues of temperance and nativism which had supposedly created their party in the first place.[11] The view of the Republican party as the political expression of pietistic Protestantism can hardly encompass a figure like Lincoln, who was southern-born and whose religious beliefs were akin to the deism of that infidel Thomas Paine, whom Lincoln greatly admired.[12] According to the aggregate data, Lincoln should have been a pro-slavery Democrat. At best, he was a historical accident, an ecological fallacy.

But what of the Civil War? Supposedly, when the scientist Laplace described the Newtonian system to Napoleon, the emperor asked, "But where is God in your system?" To which Laplace replied, "I have no need for that hypothesis." Similarly, the "system" of the new political history has no need for the Civil War. Unfortunately, the Civil War did take place. But the new interpretation leaves a yawning gap between political processes and the outbreak of war. Recently, Lee Benson has tried to bridge this gap by arguing that a "small group" of southern conspirators, taking advantage of the "irresponsible character" of the political system, caused the war.[13] To pursue our Enlightenment analogy and paraphrase Voltaire, if Benson's explanation did not exist, we would have to invent it. If only elites cared about the slavery question, we are logically driven back to a neo-revisionist conspiracy theory of the coming of the war. One does not have to assume that great events always have great causes to believe that conspiracy theories are rarely satisfactory as historical explanations.

A second school of historical writing places the coming of the Civil War within the process political scientists have termed "modernization." This is as yet an imprecisely defined concept, but it involves such basic changes in the structure of a society as rapid economic development, urbanization, industrialization, the creation of an integrated national economic and political structure, and generally, the spread of market-oriented capitalist economic relations and of mental attitudes viewing continuous social change as natural and desirable.[14] Within this context, the Civil War becomes the process by which the "modern" or "modernizing" North integrated the "pre-modern" South into a national political and economic system. As Raimondo Luraghi explains, "So, in

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Discontent (1964), p. 245. Formisano, *Birth of Mass Political Parties*, pp. 11-12. Cf. Luebke, *Ethnic Voters*, p. xiv.

[11] On this last point, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, ch. 7.

[12] Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (1958), pp. 58-59.

[13] Lee Benson, *Toward the Scientific Study of History* (1972), pp. 316-26.

[14] See, in general, A. S. Eisenstadt, *Modernization: Protest and Change* (1966), and C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization* (1966).

the nineteenth century, as the industrial revolution was expanding on a worldwide scale, the days of wrath were coming for a series of agrarian, pre-capitalistic, 'backward' societies throughout the world, from the Italian and American South down to India."[15] Aside from Luraghi's work, the modernization framework has not yet been systematically applied to the coming of the Civil War, although in many respects it is compatible with the work of Eugene Genovese on the South and with my own discussion of the Republican party in the 1850's.[16]

As Robert Kelley demonstrates, the ethno-cultural and modernization interpretations are not necessarily incompatible. In his book, *The Transatlantic Persuasion*, the Republicans in America and the Tories in England become the nationalists, homogenizers and cosmopolitans. Intolerant of any social diversity within their societies, they attempted to impose their values on dissident groups—temperance legislation on the Irish immigrants, anti-slavery on the South—while the party of the regional and ethnic minorities (Democrats in America, Liberals in Britain) called for cultural pluralism and local autonomy.[17]

The problem with this analysis is that it views the sectional conflict primarily as a struggle between local and national institutions. It is significant that in Kelley's stimulating book, the institution of slavery is conspicuous by its absence. But slavery was what made the South distinct—it was central to the moral, economic and political antagonisms between the sections.

Nonetheless, this framework has much to offer toward an understanding of the politics of the 1850's. Lincoln's House Divided speech, as J. R. Pole has written, can be viewed as the outlook of a man "who had grasped the essentials of the process of nationalisation that was overtaking the main institutions of American life." Conversely, Stephen A. Douglas's objection to what he termed Lincoln's belief that "there must be uniformity in the local laws and domestic institutions of each and all states of the Union," and his plea for recognition of "diversity and dissimilarity" within the nation, can be read as the cry of all the out-groups

[15] Raimondo Luraghi, "The Civil War and the Modernization of American Society: Social Structure and Industrial Revolution in the Old South Before and During the War," *Civil War History*, XVIII (Sept., 1972), 242.

[16] Also relevant is Barrington Morroe, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), ch. 3. I should note that describing the South as "pre-modern" does not necessarily contradict the findings of Stanley Engerman and Robert Fogel that slavery was a highly profitable investment. Engerman and Fogel, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974). In a forthcoming essay, George Fredrickson applies the concept of modernization to the Civil War itself, and the question of why the North was victorious, but he explicitly denies its applicability to the question of the causes of the Civil War. Fredrickson, "Blue Over Gray: Sources of Success and Failure in the Civil War," in Fredrickson (ed.), *A Nation Divided: Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (forthcoming).

[17] Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (1969).

and backward areas confronted by the process of modernization in the nineteenth century.[18]

Having said this, I hasten to add that there are certain problems in applying this model to the causes of the Civil War. First, there is the imprecision of the term "modernization." At times, it seems to be used more or less interchangeably with "industrialization," and, in effect, becomes a restatement of the Beardian view of the Civil War as a conflict between industrial and agrarian economies. In this form, the model exaggerates the extent to which northern society itself was as yet fully modernized in the ante-bellum years. Historians, indeed, have not yet produced the studies which will enable us to state with assurance what the class structure of the North was, or how far industrialization had advanced by 1860. Before we can assess the effects of modernization, in other words, we need to know exactly what kind of society was undergoing that process. Ante-bellum northern society may well have been "modern" in some respects. Certainly capitalist economic relations and democratic political procedures prevailed, and according to Richard Brown, the "modern personality" had been dominant since colonial days. But the economy was almost certainly pre-industrial, and the ideals of the yeoman farmer and independent artisan, their belief in the natural right of each individual to the fruits of his labor (which became in the hands of Lincoln so damning an indictment of slavery), still permeated society.[19]

Nevertheless, the modernization model does have two great virtues. First, it enables us to see that what happened in nineteenth century America was not a unique or local occurrence, but a process which had deep affinities with events in many other areas of the world. Secondly, it demands that political historians place their work in the largest context of the development of American society, for, as Albert Soboul writes, "all studies of political history entail a study of social history."[20] To me, moreover, it suggests a framework for beginning to answer the crucial question raised by David Brion Davis in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Why does slavery, which for centuries had been considered a normal part of the social order, suddenly come to be

[18] J. R. Pole, *Abraham Lincoln and the American Commitment* (1966), p. 32; Paul Angle (ed.), *Created Equal? The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (1958), p. 18. Cf. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Stanley Elkins' Slavery: The Antislavery Interpretation Reexamined," *American Quarterly*, XXV (May, 1973), 167.

[19] Richard D. Brown, "Modernization and the Modern Personality in Early America, 1600-1865: A Sketch of a Synthesis," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, II (Winter, 1972), 201-28. E. A. Wrigeley comments on the imprecision of the modernization concept, and how it often seems to be used simply as a synonym for industrialization, in "The Process of Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, III (Autumn, 1972), 228, 228n. The general question of the persistence of pre-industrial work habits and ideals in nineteenth century America is raised in Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, LXXVIII (June, 1973), 531-88.

[20] Albert Soboul, *The San-Culottes*, trans. Remy Inglis Hall (1972) p. xv.

viewed by large numbers of men and women as a totally unacceptable form of labor and social organization? Why, that is, does an anti-slavery movement emerge?

To answer this question, we must place the Civil War in the context of the general abolition of unfree labor systems in the nineteenth century, from slavery in the western hemisphere, to serfdom in Russia and robot in the Austrian Empire. Within this context, we need to relate the emergence of the modern anti-slavery movement to two related processes—changes in attitudes toward labor and the condition of laboring classes,[21] and the enormous economic and social transformations of the nineteenth century. Of course, American anti-slavery thought did not emerge full-blown in the 1830's. As C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, patterns of derogatory sectional imagery stretch back into the colonial era. Many New England Federalists employed anti-southern and anti-slavery rhetoric highly suggestive of the Republican assaults of the 1850's. They not only condemned the three-fifths clause of the Constitution and southern domination of the national government, but spoke of the superiority of free labor, the economic stagnation of the South, and the differences in "manners, habits, customs, principles and ways of thinking" between the sections.[22]

The elements of an anti-slavery ideology, therefore, had long been present in America, but a coherent critique of slavery had not. Why could the Federalists not develop one? For one thing, until 1800 they had powerful allies in the South, and after then, the dream of a reunited and triumphant Federalist party never entirely disappeared. Moreover, as several recent writers have emphasized, the Federalist world view centered on a society of order, harmony and organic unity, one composed of stable and distinctly separated ranks and orders.[23] It was not until this older organic conception of society broke down that a complete anti-slavery ideology could emerge.

We know of course that in the 1820's and 1830's this older vision was thoroughly disrupted, and replaced by one of a society of competing individuals, a vision more in keeping with the requirements of an expanding, market-oriented capitalist society. Why this ideological transformation occurred is not yet, in my opinion, entirely clear. The transportation revolution was a major determinant, but we know too little about the nature of economic change in the ante-bellum era to be able to

[21] This point is suggested in J. H. Plumb, "Slavery, Race, and the Poor," New York Review of Books, Mar. 13, 1969, 4. After writing this paper, David Brion Davis's new volume, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution forthcoming, came to my attention. Davis relates the growth of anti-slavery in England to changes in attitudes toward labor in a way similar to my argument in the paragraphs below.

[22] C. Vann Woodward, American Counterpoint (1971) p. 8; Linda Kerber, Federalists in Dissent (1970) pp. 24-44; James M. Banner, To the Hartford Convention (1970) pp. 99-108; Richard J. Buel, Securing the Revolution (1972) p. 235.

[23] Banner, To the Hartford Convention, pp. 108-09; Kerber, Federalists in Dissent, pp. 30, 39-65.

place this ideological development in its proper social setting. We do know that the ideological transformation had profound effects on the nature of anti-slavery thought. As Rowland Berthoff observes, "if classes supposedly did not exist, they could not be accepted as constituent institutions of American society; rank or degree was no longer an admissible principle for organizing or even thinking about the social order." That abolitionist thought was utterly individualistic and atomistic has by now become an axiom of historical writing. Historians as diverse in their ideological preconceptions as Stanley Elkins and William Appleman Williams severely chide the abolitionists for viewing slavery not as a functioning institution, embedded in a distinct society, but as a personal sin of the individual master against the individual slave.[24] But it may be that it was only when the ideas of an organic society, and the permanent subordination of any class of men, had been overthrown, that anti-slavery thought could develop in a consistent form. Only a movement which viewed society as a collection of individuals, which viewed freedom as the property of every man, which believed every individual had the right to seek advancement as a unit in competitive society, could condemn slavery as utterly and completely as, in their own ways, abolitionists and Republicans did.[25]

Anti-slavery thus fed on the anti-monopoly, anti-corporate, egalitarian ethos of Jacksonian America. At the same time, as a vision of labor, anti-slavery was curiously ambiguous. Anti-slavery men exalted "free labor," meaning labor working because of incentive instead of coercion, labor with education, skill, the desire for advancement, and also the freedom to move from job to job according to the changing demands of the marketplace.[26] On the other hand, many anti-slavery men

[24] Rowland Berthoff, An Unsettled People (1971), p. 152; Stanley Elkins, Slavery (1959), ch. 4; Williams, Contours, p. 158. Cf. Fredrickson, Black Image in the White Mind, pp. 19-33.

[25] The highly competitive, individualistic nature of ante-bellum society also helps to explain the apparent paradox that both racism and anti-slavery thought became more pervasive in the North at the same time. As Stanley Elkins points out, "in a stratified society with strong aristocratic attitudes, there is no need to define the Negro as hopelessly inferior, because the greater portion of society is inferior in varying degrees." In America, by contrast, where freedom implied the ability to compete for advancement, the idea of freeing the slaves inevitably raised the question of social equality. Elkins, in John A. Garraty, Interpreting American History (1970), I, 188-89. Cf. Fredrickson, Black Image in the White Mind, p. 95, and David Brion Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought," Mississippi Valley Historical Review (Sept., 1962), 209-30, one of the many works which relates the new anti-slavery outlook of the 1830's to a faith, engendered by evangelical religion, in the perfectability of individual men and to a decline in deference to institutions which blocked the path to reform.

[26] On notions of "free labor," see Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Man, ch. 1; David Montgomery, Beyond Equality (1965) ch. 1. Cf. the remark by sociologist Wilbert E. Moore, "If one were to attempt a one-word summary of the institutional requirements of economic development, that word would be mobility. Property rights, consumer goods, and laborers must be freed from traditional bonds and restraints, from aristocratic traditions, quasi-feudal arrangements, paternalistic and other multi-bonded relations." Moore, "The Social Framework of Economic De-

were also opponents of union activity, and were closely involved in other reforms—such as the creation of prisons and asylums, temperance, and poor relief (with the ever-present distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor) which to a certain extent can be interpreted as attempts to transform the life style and work habits of labor in an industrializing society.

One could argue that the anti-slavery movement, by glorifying northern society and by isolating slavery as an unacceptable form of labor exploitation, while refusing to condemn the exploitative aspects of "free" labor relations, served to justify the emerging capitalist order of the North. In fact, it is possible that the growing ideological conflict between the sections had the effect of undermining a tradition of radical criticism within northern society.[27] Men like Horace Greeley, highly critical of certain aspects of their society in the 1840's, became more and more uncritical when faced with the need to defend the North against southern assaults. The choices for America came to be defined as free society versus slave society—the idea of alternatives within free society was increasingly lost sight of.[28]

To develop this point further, many anti-slavery men believed in an ideal of human character which emphasized an internalized self-discipline. They condemned slavery as a lack of control over one's own destiny and the fruits of one's labor, but defined freedom as more than a simple lack of restraint. The truly free man, in the eyes of ante bellum reformers, was one who imposed restraints upon himself. This was also the ideal, as David Rothman shows, of the reformers who constructed the prisons and asylums of this era—to transform the human personality so that the poor, insane and criminal would internalize a sense of discipline, order and restraint.[29]

velopment," in Ralph Brabanti and Joseph J. Spengler (eds.), *Tradition, Values and Socio-Economic Development* (1961), p. 71.

[27] Of course certain northern intellectuals, alienated from the more materialistic aspects of their own culture, turned to the South for the qualities lacking in northern society—"the vestiges of an old-world aristocracy, a promise of stability, and an assurance that gentility . . . could be preserved under republican institutions." William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee* (1961), p. xvii and *passim*. I would argue however, that by the 1840's and 1850's most northerners saw much more to criticize than to admire in southern life.

[28] This argument would suggest that the process, described by George Fredrickson, in which ante-bellum radicals abandoned their position as independent critics of American institutions and uncritically identified themselves with their society—which he attributes to the Civil War experience—may have already begun during the 1850's. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War* (1965). John Thomas makes an argument similar to Fredrickson's in "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," *American Quarterly*, XVII (Winter, 1965), 656-81. However, Richard O. Curry has criticized both these works, arguing that anti-institutional radical thought persisted after the Civil War. Curry. "The Abolitionists and Reconstruction: A Critical Appraisal," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXIV (Nov., 1968), 527-45.

[29] David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (1971), pp. 107, 129, 214. Two works which deal with the transformation of personality and life styles required by industrial society are Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Indus-

There are parallels between this aim, and Lincoln's condemnation in his famous lyceum speech of 1838, of "the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country," of vigilanteeism, mob violence and those who hoped for the "total annihilation of government." For Lincoln, law, order and union, commonly accepted and internalized, allowed civilization and progress to exist in America, especially given the highly competitive nature of the society. Or, to quote Theodore Weld, "restraints are the web of civilized society, warp and woof." Of course, on one level, slavery, as some pro-slavery writers argued, solved the problem of disciplining the labor force, but the ideal of the reformers was a society of free (self-governing) individuals. Slavery may have been like an asylum or a school in some respects, but it lacked one essential element of those institutions—release or graduation. Moreover, it allowed full rein to the very passions which so many northerners desired to see repressed—it encouraged greed, self-indulgence, and all sorts of illicit personal and sexual activities on the part of the masters. When Lincoln in 1861 declared, "plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy," he could have chosen no more damning description.[30]

Thus the anti-slavery movement exalted the character traits demanded by a "modernizing" society while it condemned an institution which impeded that "modernization." Interpreted in this way, the modernization thesis can assimilate some of the insights of the new political history. For example, the ethnoculturalists never deal directly with the relationship between ethno-cultural identity and class relations in the setting of a modernizing society. We know how closely related certain ethnic and class patterns were—how, in urban areas, Irish immigrants were overwhelmingly lower-class unskilled laborers, and how, to quote Ronald Formisano, "prosperity and evangelical political character often went together." It is also well known that class and ethnic prejudices were inextricably linked in nativist attacks on Irish immigrants.[31]

If we do expand our notion of culture beyond a relatively narrow

trializing America, 1815-1919," and E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, XXXVIII (1967), 58-97.

[30] Roy F. Basler, *et al.* (eds.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953-55), I, 108-15; IV, 268. Weld is quoted in Ronald G. Waters, "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," *American Quarterly*, XXV (May, 1973), 187. Weld's statement suggests that abolitionists' "anti-institutionalism" may be interpreted as a belief that in the absence of powerful social institutions, "restraints" usually imposed by those institutions would have to be internalized by each individual. Also relevant to the above discussion is George Dennison's argument that the forcible suppression of internal disorder in the North in the 1830's and 1840's set a moral and legal precedent for the northern refusal to allow peaceable secession in 1861. Dennison, "The Idea of a Party System: A Critique," *Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal*, IX (Apr., 1972), 38-39n.

[31] Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, pp. 231-32; Gutman, "Work, Culture and Society," 583; Douglas V. Shaw, "The Making of an Immigrant Community: Ethnic and Cultural Conflict in Jersey City, New Jersey, 1850-1877," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1972), pp 27-40, 75, 119; Formisano, *Birth of Mass Political Parties*, pp. 146-47.

definition of ethnicity and religious belief, we may find that "pietists" were much more hospitable to the Protestant work ethic and the economic demands of a modernizing society than were "ritualists" and Catholic immigrants.[32] Is it possible that the resistance of the Irish to "Americanization," rather than simply a desire to maintain cultural identity, was the attempt of a pre-industrial people to resist the hegemony of a modernizing culture, with all that that implied for character structure, work patterns and life styles? May we view the Democratic party as the representative of the great pre-modern cultures within American society—the white South and the Irish immigrants—and perhaps then better understand why the nativist image of the Irish and the anti-slavery critique of the southern slaveholder stressed the same "undesirable" traits of lack of economic enterprise and self-discipline, and the attack on the Slave Power and Catholic Church denounced corporate monoliths which restricted individual freedom? Was the northern Democratic machine at the local level attuned to the communal, traditionalist behavior of the peasant immigrants, while the intense individualism of the Republicans had little to offer them?

Before we attempt to locate the crusade against slavery within the social history of ante-bellum America, there is a more basic historical question to answer. We still do not understand the social composition of that movement. We do have information about the abolitionist leadership, but also disagreement as to whether abolitionists were a declining elite, using reform as an effort to regain a waning status,[33] or a rising group, challenging older elites, North and South, for social dominance. This latter would seem to be the implication of Leonard Richards's recent study of anti-abolitionist mobs, which concludes that in Utica and Cincinnati, the mobs were composed of members of the pre-industrial upper class of commercial and professional men, while abolitionist membership drew much more heavily on artisans, manufacturers, and tradesmen.[34] Generally, however, to quote David Davis, "little is known of the rank and file members, to say nothing of the passive supporters, of a single reform movement."[35] Historians of reform over the past fifteen years have been much more successful in explicating ideologies than in giving us a clear picture of the movements' social roots.

Without such studies, we have been guilty of accepting an oversimplified version of reform, e.g., the temperance movement was an effort

[32] This is suggested in James R. Green, "Behavioralism and Class Analysis," 98.

[33] This is suggested in David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (1956), pp. 19-36, and Clifford S. Griffen, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States 1800-1865* (1960).

[34] Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing* (1970), ch. 5.

[35] David Brion Davis (ed.), *Ante-Bellum Reform* (1967), p. 10. A recent study which attempts to probe this question is Joseph E. Mooney, "Antislavery in Worcester County, Massachusetts: A Case Study," (Ph.D. dissertation, Clark University, 1971). It is marred by the use of categories like "the common man" as units of social analysis, but its study of signers of an anti-slavery document of 1840 finds a large majority of farmers and artisans. (278-79).

of middle-class Yankees to exert their cultural dominance over immigrant Catholics and the unruly poor. That for many supporters the movement did have this character cannot be doubted, but we need only to read Brian Harrison's study of the English temperance movement to see that our studies have been noticeably one-dimensional. Harrison showed that temperance was a cross-class movement which had deep roots in the working class, appealing to aspirations for self-help and social betterment. It was not simply an attempt "to impose middle-class manners on the working class."[36] The same, I suspect, can be said for temperance in this country, and for other reforms, such as the movement for expanded public education, which have been interpreted through the eyes of their middle-class proponents, without considering the very different aims of workingmen who also supported the reform. But at present, we know far too little of the extent to which workers, skilled or unskilled, were sympathetic to one phase or another of the anti-slavery movement, or whether anti-slavery workingmen viewed slavery differently than did its middle-class foes. Thus, while Garrison drew a sharp distinction between slavery and the northern system of free labor, how many workingmen were impressed by the *similarities* between the chattel slavery of the South and the "wage slavery" of the North?

Many labor spokesmen were initially hostile to the abolitionists precisely because they believed the Garrisons and Welds were diverting attention from the pressing social problems of the industrializing North. But in the late 1840's and 1850's many workingmen were attracted to free-soilism and the Republican party by the issues of land reform and opposition to the expansion of slavery.[37] To what extent did workingmen oppose the extension of slavery to preserve the safety-valve which, they believed, guaranteed the independence of the northern laborer, and prevented him from being subjected to the degrading discipline of the factory or from being permanently trapped in the status of wage-earner? In other words, anti-slavery could have served as an ideological vehicle for both the proponents of modernization and for those whose objective was to preserve the pre-modern status of the independent artisan.

In a similar vein, many questions remain about the social history of ante-bellum South. Several recent studies emphasize the "obsession" of the secessionist leadership with internal unity, their fear that slavery was weak and declining in the border area and that the loyalty of the

[36] Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (1971). The quotation is from page 24.

[37] This is suggested in Williams, *Contours*, p. 280, and in Bernard Mandel, *Labor: Free and Slave* (1955). Michael Holt shows that in the mid-1850's, Know-Nothing lodge membership came disproportionately from manual workers and skilled artisans. Many of these workers presumably went into the Republican party. Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know-Nothingism," *Journal of American History*, LX (Sept., 1973), 329-31.

non-slaveholding whites was questionable. The secession of the South on the election of Lincoln, these works argue, was motivated not by paranoia or hysterical fear, but by a realistic assessment that the unity of their society could not survive the open debate on the future of slavery which Republicans seemed determined to stimulate within the South.[38]

Before we can assess this interpretation, we must take a new look at the social and economic structure of the Old South. The non-slaveholding whites are probably the least studied of all our social classes. Of course, such an investigation may indeed reveal that the hegemony of the planter class was complete.[39] Or we may find that the loyalty of the non-slaveholders, while real, was unstable; that, especially in the backwoods areas outside direct planter control, there had developed a culture which was in many ways hostile to planter rule, while at the same time, cut off from both the market economy and from effective political power.

Fear of internal disunity can explain the belief of Edmund Ruffin that a Republican government could accomplish "the ruin of the South" without a direct assault upon slavery.[40] Ruffin was convinced that in the event of civil war, a Southern victory would ensue, a belief he predicated on the continued loyalty of the slaves. But if we are to look at the question of internal disunity and its relation to secession, the slaves themselves cannot be ignored. Southerners knew that to exist as a regional institution within a larger free society, slavery required a community consensus, voluntary or enforced. Division among the whites had always been disastrous for discipline of the slaves. This was why the South had suppressed its own anti-slavery movement and continually demanded the silencing of northern abolitionists. Once a Republican administration was inaugurated, who knew what ideas would circulate in the slave quarters? Before we can answer these questions,

[38] William Barney, *The Road to Secession* (1972); William W. Freehling, "The Editorial Revolution, Virginia, and the Coming of the Civil War: A Review Essay," *Civil War History*, XVI (Mar., 1970), 64-72; Michael P. Johnson, "Secession and Conservatism in the Lower South: The Social and Ideological Bases of Secession in Georgia, 1860-1861" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1973).

[39] Carl Degler concludes that southern dissenters were remarkable largely for their weakness. Degler, *The Other South* (1974). Cf. Otto Olsen, "Historians and the Extent of Slave Ownership in the Southern United States," *Civil War History*, XVIII (June, 1973), 101-16. On the other hand, William Barney suggests that there were severe divisions within the slaveholding class itself. The upper echelons of that class, he argues, became an increasingly closed elite in the 1850's, and younger and lesser planters found the route to upward mobility blocked by the rising price of slaves and concentration of wealth. Secession and slave expansionism, for them, was a route to renewed social mobility. Barney, *The Road to Secession*, p. 135.

[40] [Edmund Ruffin], *Anticipations of the Future* (1860), pp. viii-ix. Published in the fall of 1860, Ruffin's book in a sense is the first contribution to civil war historiography. It details the administrations of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and William Seward, and the course of a war in 1867 in which the South wins a glorious military victory, New York City is destroyed by a mob, and Washington becomes the capital of a new southern republic.

we need to know more about how the slaves themselves were affected by, and perceived, the vast changes which took place in the South in the fifty years preceding secession—the ending of the slave trade, the rise of the cotton kingdom, and the expansion of slavery southward and westward.

In this connection, one of the most intriguing findings of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's new study of the economics of slavery is the extent to which the lower level of the slave system was in the hands of blacks—how slaves were becoming a larger and larger proportion of the drivers and managers on plantations. This is precisely the class which, in the British West Indies, during the agitation of the years 1816-1833, was most strongly influenced by humanitarian anti-slavery ideas and which developed a campaign of non-violent resistance which undermined West Indian slavery in the years immediately preceding emancipation. Of course, the situation in the United States was vastly different from that in the islands, but the experience there and similar events in the 1880's in Brazil should remind us again of the dangers of subversive ideas among the slave population, and the reality of southern fears that the very existence of a hostile central government was a threat to the stability of their peculiar institution.[41]

Having previously called on political historians to pay more attention to social history, I would like to conclude by reversing this equation. Of course, our knowledge of the social history of ante-bellum America is still in some ways in its infancy. One of the striking features of the writing of the past fifteen years is the curious disjunction between a growing body of knowledge about nineteenth century American society, and the reluctance or inability of social historians to relate this information either to the politics of the period or the question of Civil War causation.[42] As one of our most creative social historians, Rowland Berthoff, reminds us, "any basic interpretation of American history will have to account for . . . the coming of the Civil War." And no such interpretation can be complete which does not encompass the course of American political development. "Politics bears critical importance to

[41] Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, pp. 39-40. My analysis of the situation in the British West Indies is derived from a dissertation in progress at Columbia University by George Tyson. Robert Brent Toplin shows how Brazilian slaveholders actually experienced in the 1880's what southerners may have feared in 1861—the emergence of abolitionism near plantations, slaves running away in large numbers, and the gradual disintegration of control over the slave population. Toplin, "The Specter of Crisis: Slaveholder Reactions to Abolitionism in the United States and Brazil," *Civil War History*, XVIII (June, 1973), 129-38.

[42] It is perhaps appropriate to add that this disjunction exists for other periods of American history as well. Writings on the social history of the American Revolution seem to be as devoid of a clear linkage between social and political history as does Civil War historiography. For a speculative attempt to relate the two situation, see Kenneth A. Lockridge, "Social Change and the . . . of the American Revolution," *Journal of Social History*, VI (Summer, 1973) . . . ; Jack P. Greene, "The Social Origins of the American Revolution: An Evaluation and an Interpretation," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXVIII (Mar., 1973), 1-22.

the history of society, for politics affects the social structure, the economy, and the life of a people."[43]

In other words, the social cleavages that existed in ante-bellum America were bound to be reflected in politics. This was an era when the mass political party galvanized voter participation to an unprecedented degree, and in which politics formed an essential component of American mass culture. Politics became the stage on which the sectional conflict was played out, and it was not an accident that the break-up of the nation succeeded by less than one year the break-up of the last major national party, or that it was a presidential election, not any "overt act" which precipitated the final crisis.[44]

Lawrence Stone has identified as an essential prerequisite to any revolution the "polarization into two coherent groups or alliances of what are naturally and normally a series of fractional and shifting tensions and conflicts within a society."[45] For most of the ante-bellum period, the political system served to prevent such a polarization. The existence of national political parties necessitated both the creation of linkages and alliances between elites in various parts of the country, and the conscious suppression of disruptive sectional issues. We can, in fact, view the political history of the coming of the Civil War as an accelerating struggle between the demands of party and those of sectional ideology, in which the latter slowly gained the upper hand. But the triumph was late and never complete. As late as 1860 major political leaders like Stephen A. Douglas hoped to curtail sectional controversy by restoring the political system to its traditional basis, with slavery carefully excluded from partisan debate.

Changes in the political system itself, changes related in ways still obscure to changes in the structure of American society, doomed the old basis of sectional political balance. If the anti-slavery crusade could not have emerged without the transformation of northern society, it could not have entered politics until the instruments of mass democracy had developed. It was no accident that the same decade witnessed the rise of the anti-slavery movement and the height of "Jacksonian democracy." The same institutions which created mass participation in politics also made possible the emergence of the sectional agitator— the radical, North and South, who consciously strove to influence public opinion through speeches, newspapers, lectures and postal campaigns. This was now an efficacious way both to affect political de-

[43] Berthoff, *An Unsettled People*, p. 510; Michael Kammen, "Politics, Science and Society in Colonial America," *Journal of Social History*, III (Fall, 1969), 63.

[44] The paragraphs which follow are based on my essay, "Politics, Ideology, and the Origins of the American Civil War," which will appear in George M. Fredrickson (ed.), *A Nation Divided: Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (forthcoming).

[45] Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (1972), p. 10.

cision-making and, if Richards is right, to challenge the social and political dominance of older entrenched elites.

Just as the abolitionist assault emerged in the 1830's, so too, spurred by it, did the coherent southern defense of slavery. The process of ideological response and counter-response, once set in motion, proved extremely difficult to curtail. In the next two decades, these sectional ideologies became more and more sophisticated. As each came to focus on its lowest common denominator, with the widest possible base of support in its society, the political system proved incapable of preventing first the intrusion, then the triumph of sectional ideology as the organizing principle of political combat.

The Civil War was, at base, a struggle for the future of the nation. Within the context of modernization, one can agree with Luraghi that it became part of the process of "building a modern, centralized nation-state based on a national market, totally and unopposedly controlled by an industrial capitalistic class."[46] But is not there a danger here of transposing consequences and causes? It might be more accurate to say that each side fought to preserve a society it believed was threatened. Southerners fought to preserve the world the slaveholders made. As for the North, Lincoln expressed the hopes of his section when he defined the union cause as a struggle to preserve a system in which every man, whatever his station at birth, could achieve social advancement and economic independence. Lincoln's Union was one of self-made men. The society he was attempting to preserve was, in this respect, also pre-modern—the world of the small shop, the independent farm and the village artisan. Republicans certainly condemned slavery as an obstacle to national economic development and as a "relic of barbarism" out of touch with the modern spirit of the nineteenth century. They exalted the virtues of economic growth, but only within the context of a familar social order. If modernization means the growth of large-scale industry, large cities and the leviathan state, northerners were no more fighting to create it than were southerners.

Yet modern, total war, against the intentions of those who fought, was a powerful modernizing force.[47] In the South, the war experience not only destroyed slavery, but created the opportunity for the two subordinate pre-modern classes, the poor whites and the slaves, to organize and express their resentment of planter control. In the North, the war gave a tremendous impetus to the rationalization of capitalist enterprise, the centralization of national institutions, and, in certain in-

[46] Luraghi, "Civil War and Modernization," 249. To be fair, Luraghi elsewhere observes that the Civil War "had not so much the task of making free a complete capitalistic structure yet existing, but mainly that of creating the conditions for such a structure to grow." (241).

[47] For the South, see Emory Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (1971); for the North, Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union: The Organized War 1863-64* (1971), and *The War for the Union: From Organized War to Victory, 1864-65* (1971).

dustries, mechanization and factory production. The foundations of the industrial capitalist state of the late nineteenth century, so similar in individualist rhetoric yet so different in social reality from Lincoln's America, were a large extent laid during the Civil War. Here, indeed, is the tragic irony of that conflict. Each side fought to defend a distinct vision of the good society, but each vision was destroyed by the very struggle to preserve it.

THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION, 1861-1877:

A Critical Overview of Recent Trends and Interpretations

Richard O. Curry

PROFESSOR FONER, IN HIS PAPER, has concentrated primarily on the politics of the 1850s, the secession crisis, and that historical perennial, the causes of the Civil War.[1]

The major themes I have chosen to deal with are: an evaluation of Civil War party struggles in the North; an assessment of Lincoln's role as war leader; the aims, objectives and ideological commitments of Congressional Republicans; the impeachment of Andrew Johnson; the role of the Supreme Court in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods; an analysis of Congressional Reconstruction in the South—with particular emphasis upon the role of blacks; the identity, location and motives of "Scalawags" and a brief evaluation of the recent exchange between Professors Woodward and Peskin as to the reality and significance of the Compromise of 1877. In addition, we need to consider the implications of recent studies which have extended the scope of Reconstruction historiography to embrace both border and northern states. Recent methodological innovations, especially in the behavioral and quantitative realms also demand attention, as well as important new research currently in the planning or writing stages.

First, let me say that the politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction era ought to be considered as a unit. In recent years Harold Hyman, Herman Belz, Hans Trefousse, Peyton McCrary and others, have emphasized that the analysis of Reconstruction historiography properly begins with 1861, with greater emphasis upon the wartime origins of

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[1] An abbreviated version of this paper was read in the Civil War and Reconstruction Overview Session at the meetings of the Organization of American Historians in Denver, April 19, 1974. No one, of course, is aware of everything going on in any field; but during the planning stages for this paper a number of scholars were considerate enough to share with me their own thoughts about the period, and in several instances provided extended written commentaries on their current projects. Especially helpful were: Thomas B. Alexander, Steven Channing, Joanna Cowden, Robert Cruden, Leonard Curry, Carl Degler, Charles Dew, Robert Dykstra, Eric Foner, William Harris, W. D. Jones, Frank Klement, Stanley Kutler, Peyton McCrary, James Mohr, John Niven, Walter Nugent, William Parrish, J. R. Pole, Thomas Pressly, James Roark, Loren Schwenninger, Joel Silbey, Russell Weigley, Robin Winks and Bertram Wyatt-Brown.