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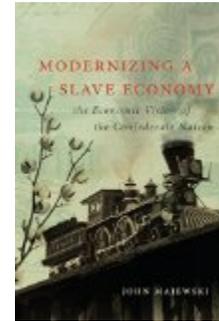
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John D. Majewski. *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation*. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 256 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3251-6.

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To Market, To Market: Southern Agricultural Reform and the Political Economy of Secessionist Thought

John Majewski offers a compelling re-examination of the relationship between southern antebellum debates about political economy and the economic policies of the Confederate government. He identifies political economy as a central component of the acts of imagination engaged in by southerners contemplating the possibilities of separate nationhood for the South.[1] This economic vision included slavery as the major form of labor, but was not confined to a defense of that system of labor. Majewski argues that many southerners who supported secession, and avidly defended slavery, did so not as a defense of tradition, but as a first step toward “a modern economy that integrated slavery, commerce and manufacturing” (p. 3). He focuses his study on Virginia and South Carolina, arguing that secessionists had to craft economic arguments that appealed to both moderate Virginians and radical South Carolinians. While the rationales for secession varied by region and economic interest, certain commonalities such as “the need to protect slavery, the fear of population loss to the West, and an ardent belief in the desirability of economic progress” brought the disparate South together, obscuring the regional differences and projecting an image of a homogeneous white South (p. 4). Stimulating economic growth and using government power and resources to do this, some southerners argued, was the only way to insure the kind of population growth necessary to keep pace with northern states. Economic modernization, secessionists argued, was an important avenue to southern autonomy. Majewski’s discussion of these debates helps us reassess

the assumption that the centralized economic politics of the Confederate government was a departure from states’ rights ideology, justified by wartime necessity.

Majewski integrates political, economic, and environmental history to “better understand both the real world in which secessionists lived and the imaginary worlds they hoped to create” (p. 16). The challenges and complexities of southern agriculture provide a compelling way to understand how the southern economy developed. His discussion of soil conditions and the demands of shifting cultivation provides a new context to understand Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous passage describing the agricultural landscape on either side of the Ohio River. De Tocqueville’s observations of the wild, uncultivated banks on the Kentucky side of the river and the well-tended fields of the Ohio banks are often cited to demonstrate the virtues of free labor over slave labor (p. 47). Majewski complicates this easy contrast, using environmental history to help us understand how difficult it was for southerners to put into practice the ideas that underpinned Henry Clay’s American System. His discussion of the failures that accompanied many reform attempts links the utopian approaches of southern reformers to the practical problems presented by soil conditions and transportation networks. Shifting cultivation limited the growth of population centers necessary to support the development of railroads and other transportation networks that were essential to building links to markets in the West. In spite of the concerted efforts

of agricultural reformers to implement new methods of cultivation that would increase the number of acres in use, foster the growth of rural populations, and sustain the development of transportation networks, most southerners continued to view shifting cultivation as the most successful form of land cultivation. Majewski's focus on South Carolina and Virginia precludes any detailed discussion of cotton farming; at least a brief discussion of the relationship between agricultural production in the older southern states and in the cotton belt would have been welcome.

Majewski challenges the notion that the South was hostile to industry and commerce. He argues that anti-modernism did not dominate southern economic thought. This vision of economic anti-modernism was rooted more in the Lost Cause mythology and the economic agenda of the New South than in antebellum secessionist thinking. States' rights sentimentalists have taken much comfort from the argument that the special conditions of the war "forced" the Confederates to embrace the necessary evil of a strong central government. Majewski demonstrates how the ideas of political economy espoused by many antebellum southerners laid the foundation for a strong government role in economic issues long before the demands of the war effort strengthened the central bureaucracy of the Confederacy. Southern states invested heavily in railroads and embraced the idea that state governments should play an important role in shaping economic development (p. 107). Rather than viewing the "businesslike mentality" of southern planters as an aberration from antebellum southern ideology, Majewski proposes that the successful businessmen and commercial boosters of the antebellum period provide a way to understand how the large and powerful Confederate state came to be in a section known for its championship of states' rights and limited government.

southerners placed great hope in the success of an economic policy, administered at the state level, that encouraged the growth of a diverse economy in the South. Secession was a "counter-revolution" against liberal, egalitarian forces emanating from the North and Europe," and "an exhilarating opportunity to restructure what secessionists saw as weak economy" (p. 10). southerners wanted a modern economy without the dangers and difficulties of modernization they observed in the North.

Majewski has some difficulty categorizing the southerners he discusses. He proposes the term "southern extremist" to avoid some of the complexities of the term

"secessionist," but neither of these terms adequately characterize the men and ideas he discusses. He argues that these debates about the political economy of the South were developed by men who were supporters of slavery, but who understood the challenges that system presented to the development and growth of markets and internal improvements. These developments were essential to the prosperity of older southern states like Virginia and South Carolina, which were not in the throes of a boom economy of cotton production. For some southern political economists, secession could even be justified as a form of economic policy, a way to spark southern economic development despite the constraints of slave labor (p. 106). These men argued for the development of internal markets based on southern economic issues rather than just in reaction to northern critiques of slave labor. Majewski joins Walter Johnson and James Huston, among others, who have taught us to see southerners as active participants in the antebellum market economy rather than just observers of the growth of northern capitalism.[2] Perhaps most important of all is Majewski's insistence that we understand the importance of developing markets in the West, creating "bonds of interest" that would unite the economic interests of southern and western states. These links to western states, southern economists argued, were the foundations of broader links to hemispheric and world markets (p. 103). The expansion of southern economic networks as well as the expansion of the institution of slavery animated the controversies over western expansion. The terms "secessionist" and "extremist" don't resonate because the arguments Majewski presents often seem moderate and pragmatic, challenging us to rethink complexities of secessionist ideas before the winter of 1860-61. By anchoring secessionist thought in the broader scope of political economy, Majewski offers a way to recover the way these terms were used before they were shaped by Lost Cause mythology.

southern independence, men like Edmund Ruffin and George W. Randolph argued, would be an economic wake-up call for both the North and the world, who would be guided by their rational economic interests rather than swayed by the irrational and misguided ideology of the abolitionists. Secession would rationalize the growing economic markets rather than represent a withdrawal of the southern economy into some kind of pre-market agrarianism. The echoes of the American Revolution were not only echoes of the rhetoric about political liberty, but also echoes of the rhetoric about economic independence (p. 125). What these men failed to real-

ize, Majewski notes, is that an economic system hobbled by the inefficiencies of shifting cultivation and slavery could not develop the capital, skilled labor, and specialized manufacturing necessary to create rapid economic growth along the northern model (p. 136).

The final chapter demonstrates the importance of re-imagining how southerners, and eventually Confederates, understood the relationship between the ideology of states' rights and the practical functions of state and federal government, particularly in relation to economic policy. Slaveholders tried to convince non-slaveholders that slavery was an essential part of the foundation of a broader economic development and the creation of market and transportation networks that would benefit all. Slavery would play an essential role in the modernization of the southern economy, Confederate nationalists argued; it was not the anti-modern system that its northern detractors maligned. Although political economist may have found these arguments linking economic development and national identity compelling, many non-slaveholding southerners, especially Upcountry yeomen, remained unconvinced.

The resistance of the Upcountry yeoman to supporting the war effort suggests that the market networks that the South failed to build with the West might well have been important in tying the farmers in these regions to the broader southern economy. Antebellum reformers had been right about the importance of the "bonds of interests." The failure to build stronger links between the slave economies of the tobacco, rice, and cotton regions of the South to these western agricultural interests demonstrated the weakness of the southern economy as an independent entity. In those western regions of the South, the connections to market were through railroad lines that led to the North. Although Confederates asserted that slavery could be part of a modern southern economy, in the end, as antebellum reformers had predicted, without investment in internal improvements and

the development of markets and industry, the modernization of a slave economy proved elusive.

Majewski opens up many fruitful avenues of inquiry in the history of secession. By painting the complex portrait of southern economic motives and ideas he helps embed the familiar debates about the economic viability of slavery as a system of labor in the broader economic discussions of the antebellum South. Complicating our understanding of how southerners understood slavery as part of a system of economic action rather than primarily as a "peculiar institution" to be defended against abolitionist attacks encourages us to re-examine the substance and rhetoric of the secessionist debates. Majewski makes a stimulating argument that calls into question many comfortable assumptions about the development of secessionist thought. Although he does trace the connections between these antebellum acts of economic imagination and the policies of the Confederate government, it is the opportunities for rethinking the economic relationships between the South and the West and highlighting the importance of the "great internal market" that represent his most exciting contributions to the history of political economy of the United States before the Civil War.

Notes

[1]. For a related discussion of antebellum ideas about southern nationalism see Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf, *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

[2]. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); and James Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

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