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Marc Egnal. *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. 432 pp. $16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-1645-7.

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Slavery, Economics, and the Origins of the Civil War

The origins of the Civil War is a subject now firmly back on the historiographical agenda. After a period of at least relative neglect it is once again becoming fashionable. This is surely a welcome development and in this respect Marc Egnal's new book, *The Clash of Extremes*, is itself to be welcomed.

Egnal propounds what seems like a radical, though by no means novel, thesis. He argues that "if the prevailing explanation can be summarized in one word, 'slavery,' the argument in my book comes down to 'economics.'" Slavery "just didn't explain why the sections clashed" and a "slavery" explanation is thus "fraught with problems" (p. 7).[1] This is certainly a radical thesis. It harks back, as the author acknowledges, to the work of Charles Beard (along with Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* [1930]), who also stressed economic factors and actually went much further than Egnal in claiming that slavery deserved only a footnote in the history of the Civil War.

Here, however, we encounter the first problem with Egnal's work. Slavery, as all scholars know, was a labor system that had an enormous economic impact. It also in the United States had a huge political impact. Similarly it generated a profound debate about its morality. Slavery was thus at once an economic, a political, and a moral issue. Its economic aspect is obvious. By 1860 slaves of the Old South represented an investment of several billion dollars. Slavery's enemies, however, held it responsible for the South's failure to keep up with the North in a whole host of areas: for example, the growth of towns and cities; manufacturing; road, railroad, and canal construction; and schools. Virtually all historians who now advance a "slavery" interpretation of the Civil War emphasize not merely the moral issues raised but also the economic dimension (and often the political one). When Egnal rejects a "slavery" interpretation, one would therefore assume that he is rejecting an emphasis on the economics as well as the politics and the morality of slavery. But this is not so. Contrary to the impression that he conveys when announcing his disagreement with "the dominant interpretation," he seems merely to be rejecting the claim that slavery *as a moral issue* was paramount. We can infer this because he cites with approval one of Abraham Lincoln's most famous remarks. "Who," he asks rhetorically, "can disagree with Lincoln's statement that 'all knew' slavery, somehow, 'was the cause of the war'?" (p. 286). If this is not to be seen as a flagrant contradiction of his own earlier statement about the book's very purpose, we must seek to understand his claims about the role of slavery in bringing about the conflict. Evidence for the supposition that he is rejecting not a "slavery" interpretation but rather what might be termed a "morality of slavery" interpretation comes with the very last line of the book. "Economics," he concludes, "more than high moral concerns produced the Civil War" (p. 348).

It is highly regrettable that the book is so opaque and confused as far as its central thesis is concerned. But there are other weaknesses too, equally significant. Again and again, Egnal tells us that for the Republicans in the 1850s "the economic agenda" was "more important" than "antislavery" (p. 253, also pp. 10, 12, 16, 125, 227). This presumably means, once again, morally driven antislavery since on another occasion he acknowledges that free soil was indeed the Republicans' top priority but was viewed "more as an economic than an antislavery policy" (p. 255). This is a highly idiosyncratic use of language; historians almost always class as antislavery those who adamantly opposed the expansion of slavery on economic (or on political), though not necessarily on moral, grounds (even though they rarely demanded slavery's abolition). But like his mentor, Beard, Egnal goes further and assigns huge importance to more narrowly economic issues, like the tariff, River and Harbor Improvements, and the Homestead. When the party was formed in the

mid-1850s, he tells us, the tariff was "the most important economic issue" (p. 239). Since economic issues were, in his view, paramount, this presumably means that the tariff was more important than free soil. This, however, is simply absurd. It is probably the case that for every word spoken or written by Republicans on the tariff prior to the outbreak of war, there were ten, if not a hundred, on the subject of slavery. One suspects that Egnal knows this. But he is insufficiently careful in his use of language and insufficiently clear in his formulations.

Similar problems arise with River and Harbor Improvements. Virtually all historians who have examined the sources have found that this issue was, for the party as a whole, of only minor importance. In some localities it was important but across the entire North, it attracted relatively little attention compared with slavery (with all its political, economic, and moral ramifications). Moreover, like the tariff, the issue, rather than competing with slavery, acquired much of the strength it did possess because of its connections with the slavery controversy. Thus, Southerners opposed the tariff and Rivers and Harbor Improvement measures in part because they feared that this use of federal power would set a precedent for its use against slavery. In themselves these issues were, for most Southerners, irksome but no more. In no sense did they have the power, when sundered from the slavery controversy, to disrupt the Union. When secessionists listed their grievances they often failed even to mention them. Nothing in Egnal's analysis even challenges these basic facts.

So the relationship between slavery and "economic" factors needs to be explored carefully. Egnal does not do this. In fact, his discussion of economic factors is extremely limited in its scope. He examines, in some detail, the rise of the Great Lakes region and also the shifting patterns of trade within and between the North and the South, and this is probably the strongest part of the book. But there is no exploration of other vital factors. He would have strengthened, but also modified, his argument for the primacy of the economy if he had looked at the relationship between the Northern economy and the moral critique of slavery. To take only one of several possible illustrations of this link, abolitionists (and radical Republicans) attached enormous importance to the role of the family in slavery, or rather to its necessarily truncated role within the slave community. According to Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, "the worst abuse of the system of slavery" was "its outrage upon the family."[2] Now it is surely the case that the changing role of the family in the North was vital in generating this critique. And that role was crucially affected by changes in the Northern economy, as a gap opened between work and home and home even came to be viewed as a haven in a heartless world. Egnal, however, seems entirely unaware of these possibilities.[3]

There are countless other problems in his analysis. Historians have recently woken up to the fact that slaves themselves had an impact on the sectional controversy, and thus the outbreak of the war that resulted in their freedom.[4] Acts of resistance, such as rebellion or flight, or equally important, the potential for such acts, produced a reaction on the part of slaveholders. On the one hand, slave masters pressed for Fugitive Slave Laws, and on the other, they sought to curtail discussion of slavery in their communities (lest it promote disaffection among slaves). These actions in turn promoted the Northern attack on slaveholders as a "Slave Power," which did so much to fuel the sectional controversy. But perhaps because it is a "slavery" rather than an "economic" factor and one that has nothing to do with the shifting patterns of regional trade on which Egnal concentrates, slave resistance is not even considered in this work as a contributory factor. Indeed, Egnal's book does not even mention the Republican critique of the Slave Power, though there is a highly respectable school of thought that sees it as the party's central idea.[5]

Finally, it is worth asking why Egnal thinks he should reject a "slavery" interpretation of the Civil War. He gives three reasons, none of which is at all persuasive. First, he argues that a "slavery" interpretation fails because it cannot explain the timing of the war. Since Northerners, he states, had been hostile to slavery "since the beginning of the nineteenth century;" the war cannot therefore be explained in terms of antislavery (p. 5). This is a complete *non sequitur*. Northerners had indeed been opposed to the presence of slavery in their midst for decades and any Northerner who hoped to win office had to share this hostility. Stephen A. Douglas was as much opposed to the reintroduction of slavery into New York as, say William Lloyd Garrison. But this does not mean that antislavery was a constant factor in the North or that Douglas was as opposed to slavery as Garrison. In the final decades of the antebellum Republic, large numbers of Northerners, after ridding their own states of slavery, became increasingly hostile to the existence of slavery elsewhere, some of them to its existence everywhere. In other words, there was a significant movement along the spectrum of antislavery opinion, *even after the creation of a consensus on the undesirability of slavery in the North itself*. What accounts for this shift? The regional patterns of trade described by Egnal (and others) are one factor but they are not the entire story. In fact, it would

be more accurate to suggest that these shifting patterns of trade, which reduced the dependence of the Northern economy on trade with the South, removed a constraint on the growth of antislavery. But it is necessary to explain the reasons for that growth.

Second, Egnal thinks that a "slavery" explanation cannot explain the existence of divided opinions on the sectional controversy within the slaveholding South. Some slaveholding individuals and states wanted to secede before Lincoln took office, others seceded only after the firing at Fort Sumter, others did not secede at all. A "slavery" explanation, he believes, cannot account for this. But once again Egnal's reasoning is shallow, his categorization too crude. It is essential to recognize not merely the existence or the absence of slavery but instead the strength, the intensity, and the nature of the commitment for or against it. As far as the South is concerned, in general, the greater the proportion of slaves in a state, the greater the extent to which slaveholders exercised a hegemonic or even an overt control over the politics of the state. (Again, patterns of inter- and intra-regional trade were one factor in this, but only one.) This is of course only the most obvious of points but it negates one of the arguments on which Egnal's entire thesis rests.

Finally, Egnal argues that his interpretation alone can account for the transformation in the Republican Party that took place after the Civil War. The standard interpretation, he claims, sees the antebellum party of "noble crusaders," "humanitarians, driven by their concern for free farmers and African Americans" mysteriously transformed after the war into "corrupt servants of big business," "the spoilsmen of the gilded age" (p. 7). Once again, we may note the entirely unwarranted assumption that historians view the antislavery of Republicans as purely driven by moral concerns. In fact, the problem to which he refers is easily resolved by a "slavery" interpretation. We need merely suggest that the Republicans before the war were motivated above all by the belief that slavery was a disorganizing force within the nation, economically and politically, and, many (though not all) added, morally too. Once it had been removed, other issues supervened.

There are many other objections that could be made to Egnal's work, if space allowed. His book is highly readable and makes some useful points about the patterns of trade in the antebellum Republic. But as an interpretation of the origins of the Civil War it is woefully inadequate.

Notes

[1]. See Egnal's remarks about his book at http://www.rorotoko.com/index.php/article/marc_egnal_book_interview_

[2]. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: Clark, Beeton, 1853), 257.

[3]. Further discussion of this and other points raised here can be found in my *Slavery Capitalism and Politics*, vol. 1, *Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and *Slavery Capitalism and Politics*, vol. 2, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850-1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[4]. See, for example, William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1; and William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 2, *Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67.

[5]. See, for example, William E. Gienapp, "The Republican Party and the Slave Power," in *New Perspectives on Race and Slavery in America: Essays in Honor of Kenneth M. Stammp*, ed. Robert H. Abzug and Stephen E. Maizlish (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 51-78; and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Wiley, 1978), 189-190.

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