

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**John Ashworth.** *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850.* New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xii + 520 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-47487-0.

Reviewed by Bill Cecil-Fronsman (Department of History, Washburn University)  
Published on H-CivWar (December, 1996)



John Ashworth's *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* is an attractive mixture of old-fashioned history with new scholarly trends. On the one hand, it is an examination of political developments during the thirty years leading up to the Compromise of 1850. On the other, it draws on a Marxist framework to synthesize studies of antebellum America to set the social, economic, and ideological stage upon which political events were acted out. It breaks new ground by providing a framework for understanding the shifting nature of American political ideology. A study as sweeping as this is bound to have controversial elements that might allow reviewers to pick holes in its analytical structure. But Ashworth's breadth of subject matter, his sophisticated analysis, and his willingness to engage other historians' approaches more than make up for any shortcomings. All students interested in the coming of the Civil War are going to have to wrestle with this book.

The past few decades have seen both a number of studies of antebellum politics and studies of antebellum social and economic history. But there have been relatively few works that merge the findings of these trends. *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics* joins William L. Barney's *The Passage of the Republic* (1986) and Bruce Levine's *Half Slave and Half Free* (1992) in blending social, economic, and political history to explain the Civil War. Ashworth's volume, moreover, is similar in perspective with these other works of synthesis. An unapologetic Marxist, Ashworth maintains that his book's "principal thesis" is that "it was possible for southern slavery and pre-capitalist free labor in the North to coexist, but increasingly difficult, and finally impossible, for slavery and capitalism to coexist" (p. 115).

A central theme is that economic changes forced reluctant Americans to confront slavery. Ashworth suggests that "the United States went from a belief that democracy was incompatible with wage labor (on a large scale) to a feeling that a successful free society and democratic government depend on wage labor and are scarcely possible without it" (p. 11). He begins with an analysis of Jeffersonianism, which he sees as unintentionally protecting the class interests of slaveholders. The Jeffersonian ideology placed slaveholders in the same analytical category as producers and defined the slaves as outside the political arena. Hence it served as a substantial bulwark against slavery's critics. The changing economy of Jacksonian America shattered Americans' ability to push slavery to the periphery. Americans no longer upheld the Jeffersonian ideal of the independent producer. Hence, as northerners came to define free labor in terms of the marketplace, they had to view slave labor as something fundamentally different.

Ashworth charts the shifting attacks both sections employed. As northern capitalism and southern slavery diverged, it is not surprising that northern and southern ideologues would frame their critiques in ways that defended their section's social order. Abolitionists and Free-Soilers, for example, took wage labor for granted. "This was an ideology attuned to the needs of the emerging capitalist order" (p. 168). Slavery's defenders faced a tougher challenge. Ashworth contends that the proslavery position was "weak." He pokes serious holes in both the aristocratic defense of a George Fitzhugh and the egalitarian racist argument. Whereas northerners were able to adjust to the employer-employee relationship, southerners could not. Black resistance to slavery created contradictions in the defenders' positions that left

the institution vulnerable to outside attack.

The rise and eventual collapse of the Second Party System, however, is the core of the book. Ashworth maintains that there is considerable continuity in outlook within the parties. By the close of the 1840s, both Democrats and Whigs were facing serious divisions. Nevertheless, they had not substantially altered their basic outlooks. Rather, Democrats and Whigs adapted their parties' positions to fashion critiques that would defend or attack slavery. Arguably the strongest component of the volume is its ability to demonstrate the degree of ideological continuity that both parties possessed.

Students of Jacksonian politics will find much that is familiar in Ashworth's assessment of the roots of the two-party system. An alliance of slaveholders and farmers created the Democratic Party; an alliance of advocates and allies of merchant capital created the Whigs. Ashworth revives Richard Brown's 1966 thesis on the role of slavery in the creation of the Jacksonian Party. It was a party designed to keep the slavery question out of the public arena. Economic developments, however, forced the issue into the open. Southern Democrats maintained their allegiance to Jeffersonian imagery that portrayed slaveholders as noble cultivators of the earth. Given the ideological weight that agriculture held in Jeffersonian thought, it is not surprising that they defended slavery as the foundation of their social order. By the 1840s, however, some northern Democrats were charting a different course while continuing to maintain allegiance to traditional Democratic positions. As Martin Van Buren had attempted to disassociate the federal government from banks, Salmon P. Chase urged that it disassociate itself from slavery. Northern Democrats who had built their political careers attacking the money power were using the same categories of thought to attack slavery by inserting slaveholders "into the place previously occupied by bankers and manufacturers" (p. 446).

Ashworth sees the Whigs as social conservatives who initially defended all property including slavery. But whereas southern Democrats defended slavery as the "foundation of the southern social order," their southern Whig counterparts viewed it as an interest "to be placed alongside other interests in a relationship of mutual interdependence" (p. 487). They were thus far more amenable to compromise. Although southern Whigs were prepared to compromise with the North, northern Whigs were less willing to look for common ground. Surprisingly, given Ashworth's emphasis on ideological continuity, very little appears that explains how northern

Whigs grew increasingly attracted to an antislavery position. Ashworth discusses the rise of the Conscience Whigs, for example, but does not link their ideology to Whig traditions.

The temptation when reviewing a book such as this is to label it "controversial" and act as though the label added something to the discussion. Such evasions are scarcely in keeping with Ashworth's volume, which picks public quarrels with a dozen or so prominent historians. In fact, one of the engaging qualities of this volume is its willingness to stake out a position and engage those who have written on the subject. This is a controversial work, but even those who disagree with its premises are going to find much that is useful. In addition to his skillful summaries of a wide range of literature, Ashworth has added to his own impressive work on Jacksonian ideology by linking the controversies of earlier decades to the crisis that exploded in civil war. When the second volume of this work is completed, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics* will stand as the most comprehensive work to have traced the ideological flowerings of the 1850s to their Jeffersonian roots.

An inevitable weakness in a book such as this is that scholars who do not accept Ashworth's premises are not likely to be persuaded by his judgments. For example, a central premise of the volume is that the economies of the two sections were diverging. Historians who emphasize similarities between slavery and northern capitalism will not embrace Ashworth's conclusion that the struggles around these alleged differences forced the party system to unravel. Ashworth's Marxism will likewise limit the volume's acceptance. He repeatedly draws attention to the ways that ideologies protected class interests. He emphasizes black resistance to slavery. Those who stress the ways that Americans created consensus will find that Ashworth makes unwarranted assumptions.

Yet, if anything, there are places where Ashworth might strengthen his analysis by being more pointed. Early in the work Ashworth asserts that black resistance to slavery was "a necessary condition to the struggle, a *sine qua non*" (p. 6). There are several places where he points to the role played by the unwillingness of African Americans to be slaves. But far too often this theme falls to the background. There are extensive sections where Ashworth discusses the various factions of each of the parties where the overall themes of the book rarely appear. In this sense, Ashworth is caught between his desire to offer a comprehensive treatment of antebellum politics and his desire to sustain a theoretical discussion.

Not everything fits into his framework.

Nevertheless, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics* is an engaging work that should force a re-examination of antebellum political history. Even those who disagree with elements of Ashworth's analysis or with his premises will find the volume a useful statement of a contradictory position. It is a major work with which all historians in the

field will have to reckon.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu>. [The book review editor for H-CivWar is Daniel E. Sutherland <dsutherl@comp.uark.edu>].

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Bill Cecil-Fronsman. Review of Ashworth, John, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=721>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).