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0521479940 - Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850 - Volume 1

John Ashworth

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The Civil War should be seen as America's "bourgeois revolution." So argues Dr. John Ashworth in this novel reinterpretation, from a Marxist perspective, of American political and economic development in the forty years before the Civil War. In this book, the first of a two-volume treatment of slavery, capitalism and politics, Ashworth focuses on the political struggles of the antebellum period and locates them within the class systems of the North and South.

In conjunction with its sequel, this volume will seek to demonstrate that the conflict largely resulted from differences between capitalist and slave modes of production. The sweeping changes in American society unleashed by the rapid development of capitalism in the nineteenth century led to war as the interests of the rapidly developing wage labor system in the North and the slave society of the South diverged. With a careful synthesis of existing scholarship on the economics of slavery, the origins of abolitionism, the proslavery argument and the second party system, Ashworth maintains that the origins of the American Civil War are best understood in terms derived from Marxism.

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Volume 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850

JOHN ASHWORTH

University of East Anglia



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Preface

This is the first of a two-volume study of slavery and capitalism as they relate to the second party system and the origins of the Civil War. The second volume is to be entitled, "Towards a Bourgeois Revolution." The two volumes are divided chronologically in 1850 but when in this volume I consider abolitionism, the proslavery argument and the economic performance of the two sections, I largely ignore this chronology. Similarly, even though most of the direct discussion of the origins of the Civil War will be in the second volume, I shall attribute primacy to long-term causes, operative, that is to say, before 1850 and thus central to the concerns of the first volume.

Nevertheless, my discussion of the political events of the antebellum decades reflects my concern with the collapse of 1860–1861 in that the treatment of each decade is fuller than that of the previous one. What follows is by no means a complete list of the subjects I address but it does indicate my major concerns. For the reader's benefit I have added a reference to the chapters which most directly relate to each of them. In this work and its sequel I maintain the following propositions:

- (1) The American Civil War is best understood as a bourgeois revolution; indeed it is one of the world's leading examples of such a revolution. (Introduction and conclusion to this volume but primarily Volume 2.)
- (2) The conflict between the sections can only be understood in terms of the differences between capitalist and slave modes of production. (Introduction to this volume, Chapters 1 to 3, also Volume 2.)
- (3) Slavery was deeply rooted in American democracy, largely owing to its privileged (albeit unacknowledged) place within the Democratic party and the Jeffersonian tradition. (Primarily Chapters 1, 5 and 6 of this volume.)
- (4) In the North the growth of wage labor was crucial in generating new and more militant forms of antislavery (Chapter 3, also Volume 2) and in creating economic imbalances between the sections (Chapter 2).
- (5) Slavery is, in certain crucial respects, a weaker form of exploitation than wage labor. (Chapters 2, 4.)

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- (6) The second party system was a struggle between an essentially pre-capitalist alliance of slaveholders and farmers, on the one hand, and the advocates and allies of merchant capital on the other. (Principally Chapters 5 and 6, but also Volume 2.)
- (7) The second party system collapsed primarily because of economic development, national in scope but sectionally variegated. (Chapter 6 but mainly Volume 2.)
- (8) The origins of the Civil War are best understood in terms derived from Marxism but existing Marxist historical writing has not yet adequately considered the problem. (mainly Volume 2.)

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Acknowledgments

In 1971 I began research on American antebellum politics at the University of Lancaster. One of the reasons I chose to go into American history was the receptivity of Americans to the works of foreign scholars, in marked contrast to the outright hostility – at least at that time – of historians in certain other countries. In hoping for fair and even generous treatment from Americans I have not been at all disappointed and it is a pleasure to acknowledge the help and encouragement I have received from a great many of them.

At the same time, however, I owe a great deal to many British scholars. First and foremost I must thank my one-time supervisor at Lancaster, Professor Michael J. Heale, for his friendship and support. He read this typescript in its entirety and gave me enormous encouragement. The same is true of Professors Howard Temperley and Geoffrey Searle of the University of East Anglia. I must also thank Richard Crockatt, also of the University of East Anglia, for his critical reading of the first two chapters, Richard Carwardine and Richard King (of the Universities of Sheffield and Nottingham respectively) for their readings of the second two, and Martin Crawford, of the University of Keele, who also read the typescript in its entirety. My book has undoubtedly benefited enormously from the criticism of all these scholars.

I have also had the good fortune to have the work read and criticized by a number of outstanding American scholars. Eric Foner, who first helped me in my research more than twenty years ago, read the typescript and offered many invaluable criticisms. Joyce Appleby also gave me much encouragement, not only by reading the typescript but also in many highly stimulating conversations I had with her at the University of California at Los Angeles, where I spent the academic year, 1988–89. At that time I was also greatly helped by discussions with Bob Brenner, whose primary research interests are far removed from mine but whose work presents an outstanding example of Marxist historical writing. I have also benefited from extremely valuable criticisms from three readers employed by Cambridge University Press. Paul Goodman's great knowledge of antebellum America allowed him to make some extremely important points. James Oakes wrote me a lengthy critique which launched

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