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The contours of a debate

Even at its height in the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans debated slavery. Was it a profitable, progressive, and healthy institution? If so, for whom? For slaveholders in particular? For non-slaveowners? For slaves? For the southern economy generally? (Woodman, 1963; 1972) Was the Old South an acommercial region, populated by premodern slaveowners and less than diligent slaves? The constitutional abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865 did not end this debate. Similar and sometimes identical questions concerning the economic and social character of antebellum southern slavery still inform modern historical debates which have raged with increasing volume and occasional acrimony in the twentieth century. Today, southern slavery is among the most hotly discussed topics in writings on American history and southern history generally, and has attracted the attention of scholars from many countries (Parish, 1989; Adeleke, 1993; Ide, 1993; Salmond, 1993; Wood, 1993). The aim of the present study is to outline the main contours of the debates, summarize the contending viewpoints, and weigh up the relative importance, merits, and shortcomings of these various and competing interpretations. The study concludes by sketching one way in which ostensibly mutually exclusive interpretations of the Old South may be rendered and, in fact, are in the process of rendering themselves, more compatible.

Before sketching the outlines of these debates, it is perhaps helpful first to say a few words about the history of the Old South and, second, to suggest why the debate over slavery has been so important to Americans generally and to historians of the American South in particular.

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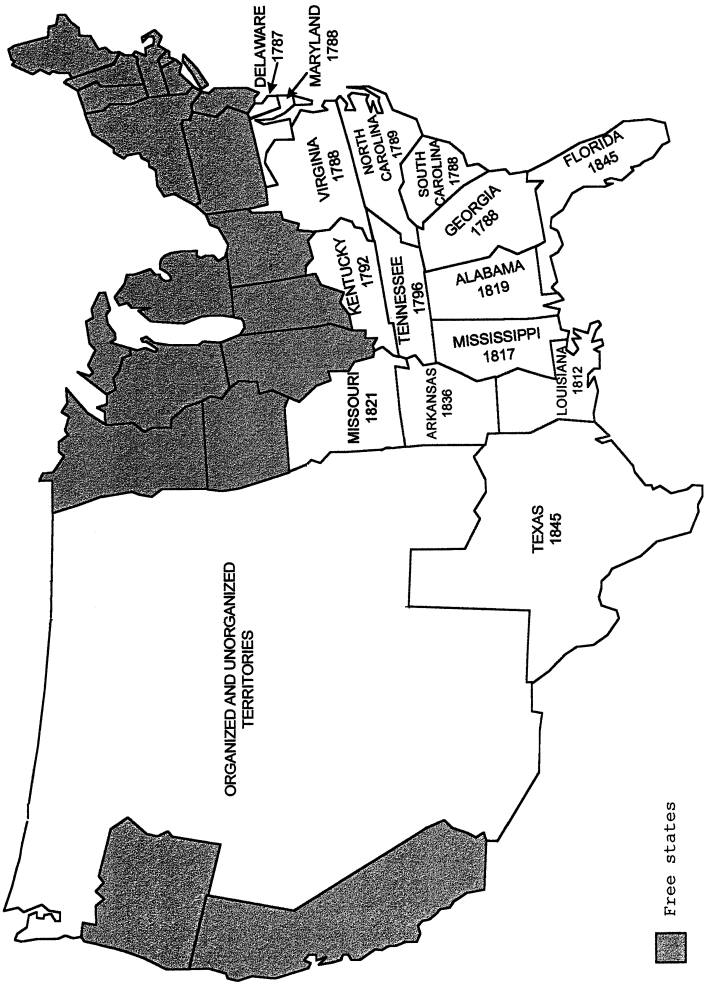

Figure 1.1 The antebellum American South, 1860
Note: Dates indicate the date of admission to the Union

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Describing the slave South has proven easier than labeling it. Scholars continue to disagree on the origins of race-based southern slavery and several historians rightly caution that the growth and subsequent legal entrenchment of slavery during the colonial period of American history was highly contingent on time and place. There is, however, general agreement that by the end of the seventeenth century, racial slavery in the American colonies was recognized socially and endorsed legally (Wiecek, 1977; Higginbotham, 1978; Berlin, 1980). Several factors conspired to ensure that black, not white, people were designated the status of slaves. While the practice of indenturing white servants for a few years was still common in eighteenth-century America, it seems that a predisposition among European, especially English, settlers to regard Africans as innately inferior, the scarcity of white indentured servants after the 1680s, and the growing reliance on profitable staple crops such as tobacco, rice, and indigo served to inspire and subsequently entrench race-based slavery, especially in the colonial South (Handlin and Handlin, 1950; Degler, 1959; Jordan, 1968; Vaughan, 1989).

By the end of the eighteenth century, the slave-based plantation system was beginning to define the southern cultural, social, political, and economic landscape. Just as plantation slavery was becoming ensconced in the South, however, it was dissipating in the North where climate and geography proved unfriendly to plantation labor and a growing recognition that the principles of the American Revolution were at odds with human bondage was beginning to take hold. Although many New Englanders were not unsympathetic to slavery, between 1774 and 1804 northern states took steps to abolish the institution in a variety of ways, sometimes quickly, sometimes gradually (Tise, 1987). By contrast, slavery expanded in the South. Its existence was increasingly sanctioned through law, and the holding of slaves was important for southern whites' definition of personal freedom (Morgan, 1975; Wright, 1990; Morris, 1996).

The process of sanctioning slavery through law was not without tensions, however, and for much of the antebellum period individual southern states and planters tried to reconcile slaves' legal status as property with their recognition that slaves were also human. While it is impossible to generalize about slaves' legal

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status throughout the entire antebellum South, it is clear that laws governing slavery and slave behavior were intended to help slavery remain economically viable but also reflected a good deal of sentiment and tacitly recognized slaves' dual identity as property and person (Tushnet, 1981; Fisher, 1997, pp. 43–85; Wahl, 1998). Statutes suggested that slaves were property and so, presumably, without thought or volition. To that end, southern law treated the slave as property to be protected by the force of the state. Alternatively, slaves were not to be confused with animals. Bondpeople, after all, acted independently and with thought and sometimes with devastating consequences, as with insurrections. Consequently, laws prohibiting, for example, slaves' acquisition of property remained on the statute books even as masters turned a blind eye to the accumulation of property by property. But there were limits. Should bondpeople transgress too much, should they try to revolt or run away, the full and devastating force of the southern legal system would be invoked. The irony and contradiction were clear, however: to charge a slave with concocting a rebellion was to tacitly acknowledge that he or she was something more than an unthinking piece of property. In short, what slaves were and were not allowed to do was contingent both on the individual master and the law. Contradictory to state statutes, some masters, often under pressure from the slaves themselves, allowed bondpeople to accumulate property, leave plantations temporarily, and even sell their garden produce to local whites. But when such activities began to threaten the safety of southern slave society at large, the law was invoked, often by other planters (Genovese, 1976, pp. 25–48).

Whatever contradictions and tensions plagued the Old South, planters found a certain stability in the plantation system. Most historians agree that the plantation system was central to southern economic and social identity. Spreading from the Tidewater regions and Maryland in the seventeenth century, from their inception plantations produced tobacco for the international market (Kulikoff, 1986). In the eighteenth century especially, the plantation system spread further south to the Carolinas and Georgia where slave labor was used to cultivate rice and indigo (Wood, 1984). In this period, plantation slavery was perceived by planters to be both profitable and racially desirable. But even as

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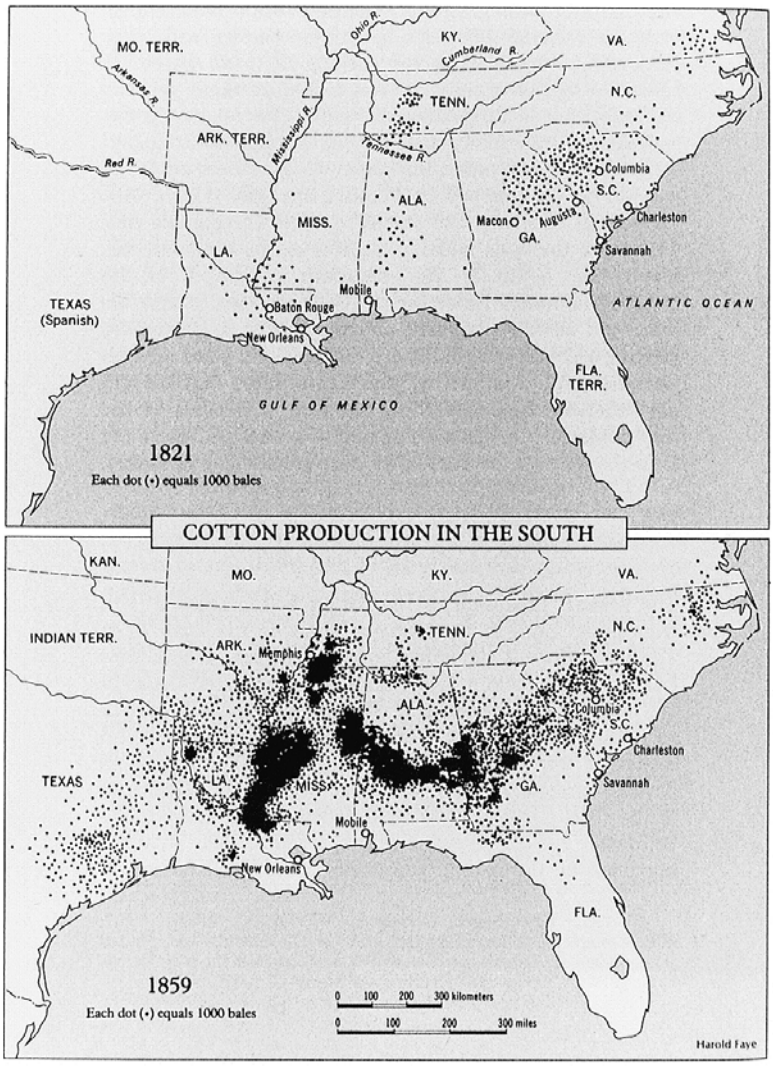

Figure 1.2 The geographic spread of cotton production, 1821–1859 (each dot (.) represents 1,000 bales)
Source: Wright (1978, p. 16)

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slavery tightened its grip, white masters and black slaves found themselves creating a distinctive culture through the exchange of cultural traits and values which contributed to the gradual evolution of a southern identity that was as much a product of African culture as it was European (Sobel, 1987).

Although southern slaves could be found in a variety of occupations in both urban and rural areas, the typical late eighteenth-century slave lived and worked on the plantation. This was even truer with the westward expansion of the plantation system after the 1790s. The invention and subsequent spread of the cotton gin in and after 1793 profoundly affected the nature of southern slavery. In the first instance, the gin enabled planters to cultivate large tracts of short staple cotton. Lands west of the Atlantic coast with their rich soils, ample rainfall, and minimum of 200 frostless days a year proved ideal for growing the crop and the plantation system fingered its way west into Alabama, Mississippi, and eastern Texas in the opening decades of the antebellum period, 1800–1860 (see Figure 1.2) (Moore, 1988; Fogel, 1989, p. 65). Planters in the lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia continued to cultivate other staple crops like rice and long staple Sea Island cotton, tobacco was still grown in Virginia and North Carolina, and sugar became a staple of the Louisiana plantation economy. But the gin and the industrial revolution in New England and Britain, whose burgeoning textile manufactures consumed southern short staple cotton at a seemingly unquenchable rate, had unleashed the cotton boom which was to dominate the South's economy and plantation system up until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 (see Figure 1.3). More than ever, antebellum southern planters found themselves tied to the demands and vagaries of an international economy. Antebellum cotton replaced eighteenth-century tobacco as the South's main export staple and, in the process, provided slaveholders with a firm economic foundation for their slave society.

The second impact of the westward spread of cotton and the plantation system was the increase in the demand by planters for slave labor. From roughly 700,000 slaves in 1790 the South became home to just under 4 million bondpeople by 1860. In this period, putatively paternal masters sent to and traded to the West roughly 835,000 slaves with the aid of an increasingly sophisti-

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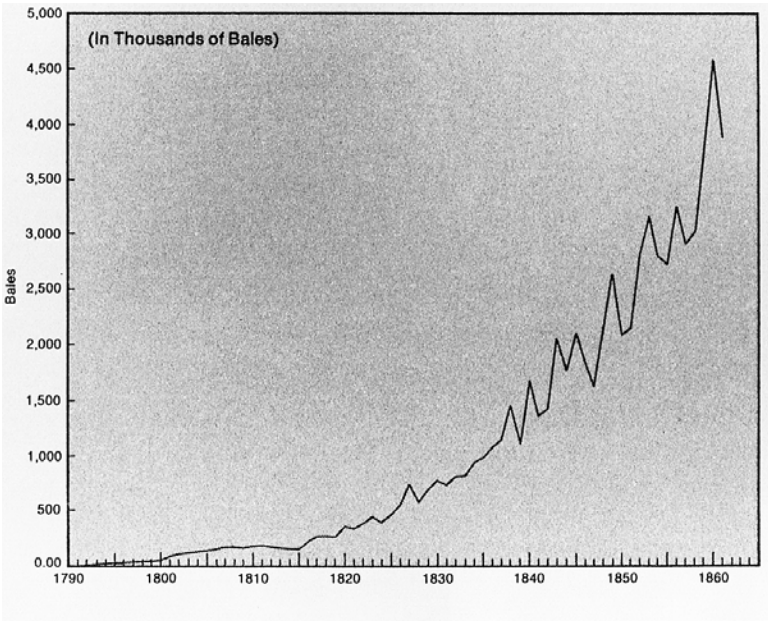

Figure 1.3 The course of cotton production in the South, 1791–1860
Source: Fogel and Engerman (1974, I, p. 90)

cated internal slave trade and improvements in transportation (see Figure 1.4) (Sutch, 1975; Fogel, 1989, pp. 65–67; Tadman, 1989). Most of this growth took place between 1808, when the United States banned the further importation of slaves, and 1860, when the slave population had more than tripled. In this respect, southern slavery was unique, for, unlike other nineteenth-century slave societies which were dependent on the continued importation of chattels, southern slavery was able to sustain itself.

The consequences of this self-sufficiency were important for shaping antebellum plantation life. Cognizant that the future of their slave society depended on the natural reproduction of their workforce, antebellum planters became increasingly paternalistic toward their slaves and encouraged the formation of slave families and slaves' instruction in a rather slanted version of Christianity (Genovese, 1976). These developments inevitably affected slaves. The natural reproduction of southern slaves helped equalize the sex ratio, which in turn contributed toward the formation of

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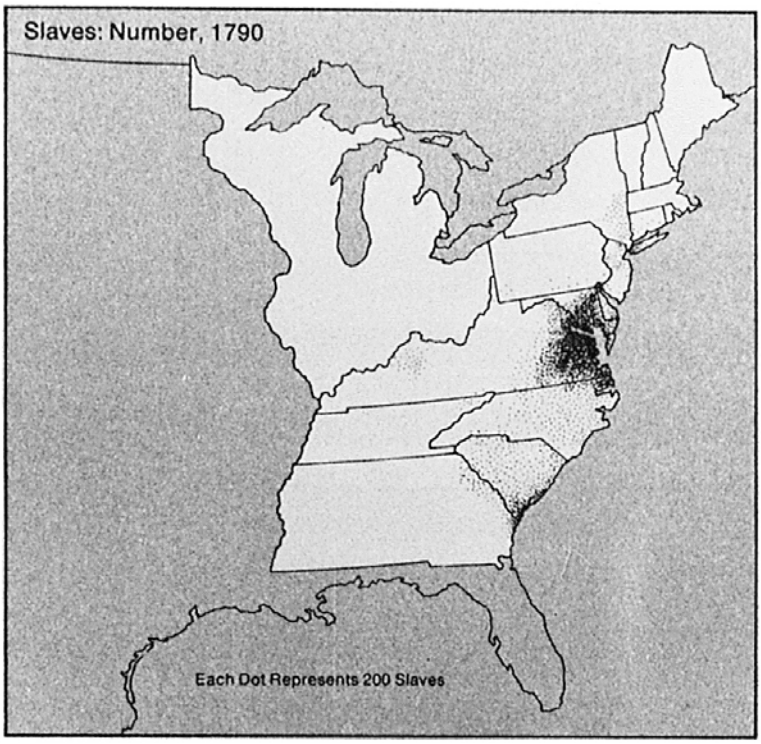

Figure 1.4 The distribution of the slave population, 1790 and 1860
Source: Fogel and Engerman (1974, I, p. 45)

strong, sustainable slave families. Without fresh infusions of African slaves after 1808, antebellum slaves also became increasing American-born and hence African American in their cultural propensities (Rose, 1982). By the 1830s, then, the slave–master relationship, buttressed by the economic imperatives of an export-oriented plantation system, undergirded by closer black–white interaction, and premised on slaveholders' cultural need to see themselves as masters of capital and guardians of chattels, had become firmly entrenched in the American South (Genovese, 1976). With the admission of Texas as a slave state to the Union in 1845, slavery's future seemed secure.

But the last thirty or so years of the antebellum period, while demonstrating the economic and social vitality of the South's

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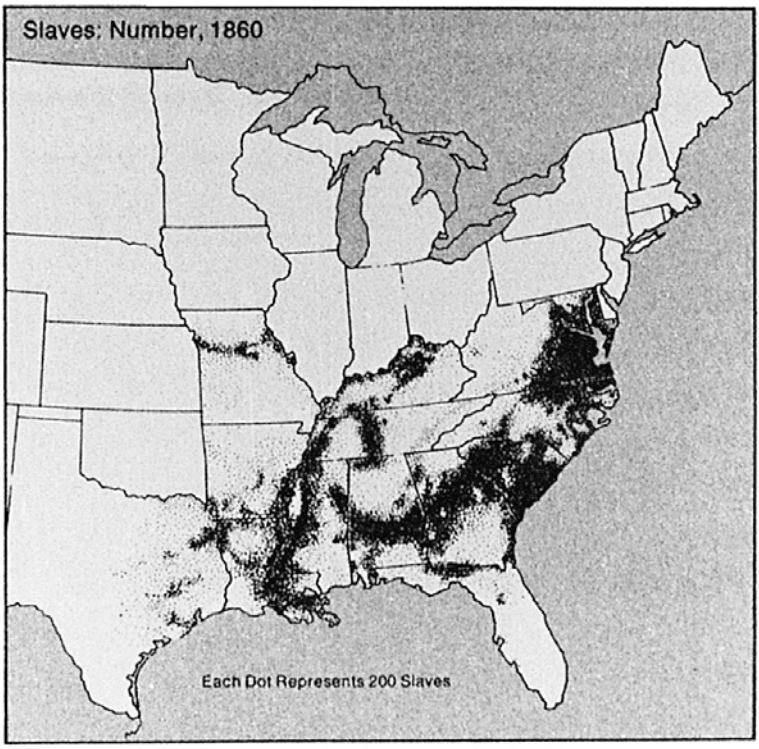

peculiar institution, also witnessed slavery's undermining from within and without. The aborted Denmark Vesey slave uprising in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822 and the bloody Nat Turner insurrection of 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia exposed the fallacy of masters' conviction that their bondpeople were content and happy (Aptheker, 1943; Freehling, 1966; Oates, 1975; Lofton, 1983). Slaveholders' subsequent clamp-down on the non-work activities of slaves and on urban free blacks from the 1830s onwards only added fuel to a blistering moral and essentially sectional critique of southern slavery by northern abolitionists who charged southern masters with moral turpitude (Dillon, 1990). More damning still was the growing criticism among northern wage labor advocates who contended that, regardless of its immorality, slavery was an archaic, inefficient institution, inferior to northern free wage labor (Foner, 1970). Unlike southern

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slaveowners who doubted the competency and diligence of the laboring class, especially if it was black, those championing the benefits of northern free wage labor supposedly entertained a more benign view of human nature. It was argued that although the laboring classes should not be entrusted with the means of production, workers were none the less worthy and capable of wielding the vote and as much shareholders in the work ethic and acquisitive spirit as were their employers (Smith, 1997, pp. 4–8).

Anxious to defend their beloved institution, some southern intellectuals fashioned elaborate defenses of slavery. These proslavery ideologues contended, among other things, that slavery was the basis of the nation's wealth; that northern industrialism depended as much on the labor of slaves and the cotton it produced as did the social identity and economic security of slaveholders themselves; that slavery was sanctioned by God himself; that northern and European "wage slaves" fared far worse than did their southern slave counterparts; that slaves were genetically, morally, and socially inferior to white men and so unsuited to economic and political freedom; and that southern states retained the constitutional right to manage and transport their property (including slaves) free from interference by the federal government (Fredrickson, 1971; Faust, 1981; McPherson, 1988). This defense of slavery was bolstered by planters' efforts to modernize slavery through the introduction of labor-saving equipment and modern management techniques to southern plantations beginning mainly in the 1830s (Wyatt-Brown, 1982).

By 1854, northern free wage labor advocates had created a political vehicle for their condemnation of southern slavery in the form of the Republican party. The party of Lincoln argued that slavery's economic inefficiencies and undemocratic influences must not be allowed to expand westward. Interpreting this as a palpable and imminent threat to their very way of life, slaveholders became increasingly defensive of slavery and ever more jittery about their future. The election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860 convinced many southerners that secession from the Union was the only way to preserve slavery and their freedom. Secession led quickly to the Civil War, and war in turn led to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the constitu-

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