Debating slavery
New Studies in Economic and Social History

Edited for the Economic History Society by
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This series, specially commissioned by the Economic History Society, provides a guide to the current interpretations of the key themes of economic and social history in which advances have recently been made or in which there has been significant debate.

In recent times economic and social history has been one of the most flourishing areas of historical study. This has mirrored the increasing relevance of the economic and social sciences both in a student’s choice of career and in forming a society at large more aware of the importance of these issues in their everyday lives. Moreover specialist interests in business, agricultural and welfare history, for example, have themselves burgeoned and there has been an increased interest in the economic development of the wider world. Stimulating as these scholarly developments have been for the specialist, the rapid advance of the subject and the quantity of new publications make it difficult for the reader to gain an overview of particular topics, let alone the whole field.

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The series has been edited since its inception in 1968 by Professors M. W. Flinn, T. C. Smout and L. A. Clarkson, and is currently edited by Dr Michael Sanderson. From 1968 it was published by Macmillan as Studies in Economic History, and after 1974 as Studies in Economic and Social History. From 1995 New Studies in Economic and Social History is being published on behalf of the Economic History Society by Cambridge University Press. This new series includes some of the titles previously published by Macmillan as well as new titles, and reflects the ongoing development throughout the world of this rich seam of history.

For a full list of titles in print, please see the end of the book
Debating slavery

Economy and society in the antebellum American South

Prepared for the Economic History Society by

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For Catherine
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Preface

How we measure our freedom is as much a product of how we evaluate and assess our past as it is of how we characterize and experience our present. The subjects of this study, economic and social aspects of slavery in the antebellum American South, are as relevant to our understanding of contemporary society and liberal capitalism as they are to our historical understanding of southern slavery. With the recent fall of the other major alternative to democratic capitalism, communism, we are perhaps more inclined than ever to view liberal democratic capitalism as the true form of all historical freedoms. Yet, as the stupendous economic growth of politically conservative, totalitarian societies like China reminds us, other alternatives that promise tremendous economic profit while simultaneously denying political freedom do exist. Southern slavery is an historical reminder of another alternative that, up to 1865, was vigorously embraced by a substantial proportion of the United States. In many ways this study is an indirect answer to a direct question: how different was antebellum slavery from modern democratic capitalism? The study is dedicated to showing how various historians have answered this question.

My former students at the University of Birmingham, England, and my current ones at the University of South Carolina have heard and, in turn, helped shape, much of what is in this study. Students demand clarity in the presentation and construction of arguments and it is with this demand in mind that I have written.

If there has been an unpalatable aspect to writing this study, it has been my necessary slighting of some excellent historical treatments of the slave South. Only limitations of space kept me from dealing with this work and I hope the bibliography succeeds
Preface

in guiding interested readers to some of it. The jacket illustration of workers hoeing cotton in Jones County, Georgia, c. 1900 is reproduced courtesy of the Georgia Department of Archives and History.

For his patience, counsel, and encouragement, I thank Michael Sanderson who shepherded this study to completion. Peter Parish kindly read the entire manuscript and saved me from errors. Judicious, generous, and astute, Peter’s comments helped improve the final product enormously. Lacy Ford generously read a version of chapter 3 and for his characteristically perceptive observations and recommendations, I am extremely grateful. Shortcomings and oversights are, of course, mine alone.