

## *Introduction: Explaining the Civil War (1)*

### I

The slaveholders of the South thought they knew their slaves. They were certain that they understood the capabilities and the limitations of their “negroes.” They believed that, in the main, enslavement suited African Americans and accorded well with their natural endowments, or the lack of them. Historians used to believe the same. Ulrich B. Phillips, for example, referred to the slaves’ “courteous acceptance of subordination” and their “readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort.” American slaves were well-suited to their condition.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, Phillips and the slaveholders of the Old South erred grievously. Historians now know what contemporaries and most scholars of previous generations did not: in most cases, slaves did not want to be slaves and instead yearned for freedom. Although this insight has emerged from the social history of African Americans before the Civil War, it has only recently made an appearance in the historiography of the Civil War itself. In fact, the opposition of the slaves to their own enslavement is the fundamental, irreplaceable cause of the War.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that the slaves were able actively to plan or to seek, or to bring about a civil war between North and South. A war could only come about as a result of a whole series of actions taken within the political arena by those who were legally able to take them. Slaves were not, in this sense, political actors at all. Nor were they able to mount a revolutionary challenge to their masters; slave rebellions in the Old South were rare and comparatively unsuccessful. To this extent, the masters were able to contain their slaves.

1. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge, 1918), p. 291.
2. African-American resistance to slavery was emphasised in the first volume of this study. Since then, it has emerged in some recent writings on the politics of the era – see, for example, William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2003), p. 1.

Nevertheless, to appreciate the importance of slave resistance, one need only imagine how different the history of these years would have been had the slaves conformed to Phillips's stereotype. In such circumstances the great controversies of the prewar decades would have been drained of most of their significance. If slaves had accepted rather than resisted enslavement, they would not have wished to flee from their masters. Hence, there would have been no controversy over fugitive slaves. If slaves had willingly accepted enslavement, there would have been little reason for southerners to fear abolitionist propaganda, whether from hostile northerners, such as William Lloyd Garrison and William Seward, or from southern "traitors" like Hinton Helper. If slaves had willingly accepted enslavement, would there even have been an abolitionist crusade? It seems unlikely.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the free-soil movement, which in southern eyes brought with it the threat of abolition at some future date, would not have been so menacing. If slaves had willingly accepted enslavement, there would have been no danger of servile rebellions, the fear of which struck terror into the hearts of so many of their masters.

Moreover, if the slaves had willingly accepted enslavement, there would have been little reason for the South to engage in the series of actions which were taken in the 1850s and earlier and which did so much to fuel northern fears of a Slave Power. Similarly, it can be argued that southern economic development was severely constrained by the problems of controlling a potentially recalcitrant labor force in cities and in industry. The resulting feature of the southern economy, its limited development, was another huge source of conflict with the North. If the slaves had willingly accepted enslavement, this constraint would probably have been removed.

Historians have been slow to recognize the political significance of this black resistance to slavery. Their analyses have focused on, for example, the struggles over the Fugitive Slave Law, or the series of crises that erupted in Kansas. These struggles and these crises are indeed of importance and the Civil War cannot be explained without full reference to them. But one has only to imagine a series of counterfactuals to appreciate that they cannot compete in importance with black resistance to slavery. One can imagine a civil war taking place without the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and even without the attempt to organise the territory of Kansas in the mid- and late-1850s. But one can scarcely imagine a civil war if the slaves had acted in the way that their masters and previous generations

3. Not only would the abolitionist project, demanding enough as it was, have become immensely more difficult but some of the behaviour of the masters, which called forth the antislavery onslaught, would have been far less in evidence. Thus, whippings would presumably have been far less frequent and separation of families or the threat of it would not have been used so often as a punishment.

of historians believed. From this, one must conclude that black resistance to slavery is a more fundamental and thus a more important cause of the Civil War.

It is a central proposition of this work that such resistance is endemic in slavery. It is also a central proposition of this work that such resistance constitutes class conflict, whether or not the individuals concerned possess class consciousness and regardless of whether they act collectively or individually.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the class conflict that existed between slave and master, though enormously important, was not of itself enough to unravel the southern social fabric. It would be quite wrong to assume that the South in 1860 was on the verge of a servile rebellion or that the resistance of the slaves, without outside pressure from the North, was sufficient to destroy slavery in the region.

For this, something else was needed, and it is here that we must give attention to the structure of northern society. Once again, there was no question of revolutionary upheaval: the North in 1860 was no more on the verge of a social cataclysm than the South. But the North was, in the decades prior to the Civil War, making a series of adjustments to the unprecedented growth of wage labor. Without wage labor, it is virtually certain that the northern economy could not have developed to the extent that it did and in such sharp contrast to the economy of the South. Northerners were struck by the differences between their region, where urbanisation and industrialisation were advancing with great strides (especially in the northeast), and the South, where these processes were either retarded or entirely absent. Equally important were the ideological adjustments that northern society was making. Wage workers had, traditionally in European society, been held an extremely low esteem. In the same way, the American democratic tradition, the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and John Taylor of Caroline, looked upon them with suspicion. Wage workers were thought servile, lacking the independence that was the hallmark of republican freedom. In the final antebellum years, these attitudes, though never entirely absent, became far less widespread. Instead, many northerners now took pains to emphasise the advantages that the free, northern wage worker enjoyed. He was free to follow his conscience, he was free to enjoy the benefits of a family “not marketable,” he was free to rise in society. Moreover, his freedom was guaranteed by a set of civil and political rights and underwritten by the esteem in which his labor was held. It is scarcely surprising that these ideological shifts took place: they were occasioned by, and in turn helped facilitate, the development of wage labor in the North. But each of them made slavery seem increasingly unacceptable. Did the slave not

4. These issues are discussed throughout the first volume of this study.

lack the ability to follow his conscience? Was his family not subject to the whim of another: a master who had the right to take his wife and child to market and sell them? What social mobility could there be under slavery for either the slave or, since the plantation employed so few whites, the nonslaveholders of the South? Did slaveholders not scorn the civil and political rights not merely of their slaves but also of their nonslaveholding whites, and set them aside whenever the need arose? And did not the fact that so much labor was performed by a degraded class of slaves result in labor itself being discredited in the South, as some southerners acknowledged? The Republican party, as we shall see, reached the conclusion that slavery disorganised a community politically, economically and, many added, morally. This conclusion reflected not merely the southern social order but also the priorities and perceptions of a northern society that was itself undergoing fundamental changes.

The interpretation in these volumes does not suggest that there is any simple relationship between classes and political parties. Where there was a tendency for certain groups to favour certain parties at certain times, I have pointed this out. Thus, as everyone knows, slaveholders increasingly favored the Democratic party in the final years of the antebellum Republic, while upwardly mobile Protestants in the expanding rural areas of the North, it is equally widely recognised, were much more likely to vote Republican. Thus, party affiliation was, in many instances, linked to socioeconomic position. But there were many exceptions and in no sense can the parties or the party conflict be reduced to simple expressions of class interest or of class conflict.

Instead, we need a more subtle notion of class, one which focuses upon relationships at the point of production. This work identifies a clash between northern and southern labor systems at the heart of the sectional conflict and traces their impact upon the political system. Slavery produced a distinctive set of relations of production, of class relations; wage-labor capitalism produced a different set. The values generated by each labor system, by each set of relations of production, proved increasingly difficult and finally impossible to reconcile. Southerners were able to contain the resistance, actual and potential, from their slaves just as northerners were able to forestall the resistance, actual and potential, from a previously despised class of wage workers. But the elite in each section could manage this accommodation only at the cost of a widening rift with the other section.

The ideology of the political parties and the competition between them are the central concerns of this volume and they reflect, albeit in a highly mediated form, this complex process of struggle, containment, and conflict that was occurring deep within the American social order. The story I relate tells of the rise to dominance of the northern labor system, with

wage labor an indispensable part of it. The challenges to that dominance resulted in more than a decade of mounting strife and, finally, in a Civil War. But northern victory in that war would be both cause and consequence of the superiority of the northern social system, or, conversely, of the inferiority of the slave mode of production. The Civil War would thus confirm that the northern way would become the American way. It would be the United States' bourgeois revolution.

## II

It is scarcely surprising that the Civil War, the largest, most dramatic event in the history of the United States, has generated a huge historical literature. Here, it is only necessary to examine what are perhaps the three major schools of thought, to assess their current viability, and to begin to situate the conclusions of the present work in reference to them.

Some two years before the outbreak of war, New York's Republican Senator William Henry Seward described the clash between the sections as an "irrepressible conflict" and, ever since, historians have been debating the proposition. Many have endorsed Seward's view, at least in its barest essentials. Even here, however, there has been no consensus. In accepting that conflict was inevitable, some scholars have insisted that moral issues were uppermost. For them, slavery was at the heart of the sectional controversy and slavery was itself primarily a moral question. This was very much the attitude of James Ford Rhodes, who wrote a highly celebrated multivolume history of the Civil War at the turn of the twentieth century and who believed that the slavery controversy had involved irreducibly moral issues and had indeed generated an "irrepressible conflict."<sup>5</sup>

A second school of thought also found intractable issues at the heart of the conflict but found them in the competition of economic interests rather than the clash of moral values. In its most extreme version, this interpretation dismissed the question of slavery entirely and insisted that the struggle was instead one between rival economic interests, with the North representing the forces of industrial or protoindustrial capitalism and the South embodying the values of agriculture and agrarianism. This tradition owes something to the writings of Karl Marx, who contributed a number of articles on, and in his letters made many references to, the Civil War, it owes more to the vulgar Marxism that was displayed by some of his followers writing in the early twentieth century, and it owes most of

5. James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*. 7 vols. (New York, 1893–1906). Ford was not the first to advocate this view. Indeed, it was held by many of the abolitionists and radical Republicans at the time of the war itself.

all to the work of Charles and Mary Beard, who were themselves almost certainly heavily influenced by these vulgar Marxists. The Beards argued that the Civil War marked no less than a “Second American Revolution,” a crucial dividing line between the agricultural and industrial eras, a time when the grasping industrialists of the North expelled from power the southern planters and their agrarian allies. For the Beards, as for the early Marxists who wrote upon the subject, the Civil War was both cause and consequence of the development of industrial capitalism in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fundamentally different viewpoints of Rhodes and the Beards, they agreed on the intractability of the sectional conflict. The third great school of Civil War historians instead argued that the war could have been averted had not a “blundering generation” failed to find the compromises that could have brought peace to the nation. This interpretative schema, dubbed “Civil War revisionism,” flourished in the 1930s and 1940s. Emphasising the errors of the “blundering generation,” scholars such as Avery Craven and James Randall denied that the differences between North and South were sufficient to justify war. Instead, they found, in the historical record, mistakes and misperceptions, emotionalism, and irrationality, rather than uncompromisable moral values or irreconcilable economic interests. For the revisionists, Seward’s references to an “irrepressible conflict” demonstrated not an admirable awareness of the moral or economic dimensions of the struggles between North and South but rather a lamentable failure to engage in the constructive statesmanship that might have brought an end to them.<sup>7</sup>

### III

Few scholars today are prepared unreservedly to endorse any of these three historiographical positions; modern scholarship has recorded many advances upon the writings of Rhodes, the Beards, Craven, Randall, and their disciples. In this work, I have employed the insights of a veritable army of scholars who have refined, revised, and supplemented the work of these pioneers. Following modern scholarship I argue that the relationship between ideas and interests, for example, was far more subtle and complex than Charles and Mary Beard realised. In common with the vast majority of historians, I accord a central place to slavery in the

6. See Algie M. Simons, *Social Forces in American History* (New York, 1911); Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*. 2 vols. (New York, 1927). II, pp. 2–54. This view too was advanced by contemporaries in the 1850s and 1860s, normally southerners, almost invariably Democrats.
7. Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict 1830–1861* (Baton Rouge, 1939), J. G. Randall, *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg*. 2 vols. (New York, 1945).

sectional conflict and argue that the conflict cannot be reduced to a clash between agriculture and industry. Like most historians, I recognise that slavery generated considerable moral outrage but that the political and economic criticisms of the institution were more frequently heard than the moral indictment. I follow other historians in disputing the claim that the War years occupy a privileged place in the transition from agrarianism to industrialism. I echo other scholars, too, when I reject the notion that the sectional conflict erupted into war because of the failings of a “blundering generation.” In these, and in other respects, the present work reaffirms conclusions that other scholars have offered.

Some arguments, however, will be less familiar to readers.<sup>8</sup> In these volumes, I place a heavy emphasis upon the weaknesses of slavery in comparison with wage labor. I argue that these weaknesses were a result of the conflicts, actual and potential, between slave and master that were endemic to the regime. I suggest that, in the 1850s and at the time of secession, southerners, although they scarcely realised it, were responding to these weaknesses and searching for a means of overcoming them. Secession was the ultimate, drastic remedy. But secession failed for the very reason that it became necessary. The South lost the Civil War essentially because of slavery.<sup>9</sup>

My quarrel with Civil War revisionism is also relevant in this connection. Unlike many contemporary historians, I fully accept the revisionist claim that statesmen on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line made fundamental errors and misperceived much of what was happening around them.<sup>10</sup> I also accept that these errors and misperceptions were of considerable importance in bringing about the Civil War. On the other hand, I suggest that they should not be seen as the products of a “blundering generation” but should be viewed instead as having been structurally generated. These errors and misperceptions were the product of underlying ideas and assumptions which should be understood in terms of the entire ideology of which they were a part. These ideologies were inscribed with, and structured by, certain economic and class interests which they in turn furthered. In other words, there is an intimate connection

8. Although my general approach is heavily derived from Marxist categories and Marxist analysis, I should perhaps point out that neither Marx, nor any scholar working within the Marxist tradition has (to my knowledge) presented an argument along the lines offered here.

9. One historian who has stressed the role of slavery in bringing about Confederate defeat is William W. Freehling. See Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York, 2001). See also John Ashworth, “William W. Freehling and the Politics of the Old South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* V (2004), pp. 1–29.

10. Most scholars, it is fair to say, note these errors almost in passing, without acknowledging the support they afford to the revisionist position.



between misperceptions and economic interests. The dichotomy between errors and economic interests implied by revisionism must therefore be dissolved.

Similarly, when I look briefly at the impact of the war, I also attempt to embrace a wider view of economic interests. Thus, although I claim that the war constituted a bourgeois revolution, I do not argue, as some Marxists have done (and as Beard came close to doing), that the war was needed to remove impediments to the continued development of northern capitalism. Instead, I suggest that one must again transcend the division between interests and values by emphasising that the triumph of free labor and the demise of slavery made capitalist ideology itself triumphant. Although no economic historian has even attempted to place a value upon this ideological shift, there can be no doubt that especially over the long haul it was in financial terms immensely advantageous to the employers of labor and their allies. Its value indeed was, in both senses of the term, incalculable.

#### IV

This volume is essentially a history of American politics between 1850 and 1861. Although it locates the ultimate cause of the sectional conflict in the different relationships entailed by wage labor and slave labor economies, its focus is not upon this underlying social history or upon the underlying labor systems but rather upon their political repercussions. Thus, the reader who believes (despite the mountain of historical scholarship to the contrary) that African Americans were quite content to be slaves will find very little evidence marshalled here to challenge his preconceptions. More important, those who are curious to know how the traditional suspicion of wage labor shaped the history of the American labor movement in the North will also find little in these pages that addresses this important question. On the other hand, the reader who wonders how that suspicion fed into the sectional conflict or the reader who understands that African Americans were far from content to be slaves but wonders how this contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War will, it is to be hoped, find a great deal more. In other words, this volume, like its predecessor, builds upon the work of social historians, especially those who have studied the slaves of the South, and traces the political effects of their findings. Some readers have observed that the dramatis personae of my account, the white politicians whose views fill most of the pages of this volume, and its predecessor, are not those to whom, in explaining the Civil War, causal primacy is accorded. This is an accurate observation. But, if this is an unusual approach, it is, I hope, neither contradictory nor perverse.

Most histories of the 1850s and of the secession crisis adopt a narrative and chronological approach to their subject, the advantages of which



are perhaps too obvious to be spelled out. Such an approach does, however, entail certain disadvantages too. I believe that to a very considerable extent, the events of the 1850s and early 1860s are to be understood by reference to the ideologies of the principal protagonists, and I have, therefore, striven to present those ideologies as systematically as possible. This work is thus divided primarily by reference to sectional, political, or ideological affiliation and stance and only secondarily according to chronology. I present the events of the period from four different perspectives, those of southern militants, of Republicans, of (primarily northern) Democrats, and of what I term “Whigs and neo-Whigs,” and I seek to achieve an empathic understanding of the events from each of those perspectives. As a result, some of the key events or processes of the period recur in each chapter. Secession, for example, features in each chapter, although with a different focus in each. Similarly, I consider the Kansas-Nebraska Act in each chapter, in two of them (those dealing with southern militants and northern Democrats) concentrating upon the origins of the Act; in the others assessing its impact (upon Republicans, Whigs and the party system, in general). The attitudes of the various groups towards the economic changes of these years mean that the banking and tariff questions are treated on more than one occasion, although again with a different focus each time. Readers will decide for themselves whether this arrangement of materials is, or is not, an appropriate one. In any event, I should perhaps state that I have found much that is ironic in the history of these years and, as I have already noted, not a few misperceptions and errors on the part of its leading statesmen. I have also, however, found little that, once placed within its ideological context, was irrational, foolish, or unintelligible.<sup>11</sup>

11. Some repetition is inevitable, but I have tried to keep this to a minimum. It is, of course, the case that some topics could as easily have been treated in one chapter as in another.

PART I

*Slavery versus Antislavery*