TWO

The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions

In 1960, as Americans prepared to observe the centennial of the Civil War, one of the foremost historians of that conflict published a brief article entitled, "American Historians and the Causes of the Civil War."[1] Most readers probably expected another survey of the changing course of Civil War interpretation. Instead the author announced that as a subject of serious historical analysis, Civil War causation was "dead."

Looking back over the decade and a half since David Donald wrote, it would appear that he somewhat exaggerated the death of this field of inquiry. In the 1950s, historians were concerned with investigating periods of consensus in America's past. But in the 1960s, as the issues of race and war came to the forefront of national life, earlier times of civil strife in American history attracted renewed attention.

The 1960s, for example, witnessed a renascence of the study of slavery. It is now no longer possible to view the peculiar institution as some kind of accident or aberration, existing out-

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side the mainstream of national development. Rather, slavery was absolutely central to the American experience, intimately bound up with the settlement of the western hemisphere, the American Revolution, and industrial expansion. It was what defined the Old South and drew southern society along a path of development which set it increasingly apart from the rest of the nation.[2]

At the same time, a striking reversal of interpretations of the abolitionists took place.[3] In fact, there was a paradoxical double reversal. On the one hand the abolitionists, previously castigated as fanatics and agitators, suddenly emerged as the conscience of a sinning nation—much as the Garrisons and Welds had portrayed themselves a century earlier. But simultaneously, a number of writers argued that not only were the friends of the slave not immune from racism, but, far from being truly "radical," they seemed to accept the middle-class values of northern society.[4]

The flood of studies of slavery, abolitionism, and the race issue does not seem, however, to have brought historians much closer to a generally accepted interpretation of the coming of the Civil War than they were in 1960. As the late David Potter pointed out, the irony is that disagreements of interpretation persist in the face of a greatly increased body of historical knowledge.[5] This is partially because the Civil War raised so many still unresolved issues. Perhaps, however, there is another reason. Historians' methodologies and value judgments have changed considerably, but the questions historians have asked of their data have remained relatively static. Like the debate over slavery before the appearance of Stanley Elkins's path-breaking study in 1959, discussion of the causes of the Civil War continues to be locked into an antiquated interpretive framework. Historians of the Civil War era seem to be in greater need of new models of interpretation and new questions than an additional accumulation of data.

A number of works have appeared, however, in the past fifteen years which have attempted to develop entirely new ways

of looking at ante-bellum America and the origins of the Civil War. One of the most striking developments of these years has been the emergence of the "new political historians," who have attempted to recast our understanding of ante-bellum political alignments. They have deemphasized "national" issues like slavery and the tariff, and substituted ethnocultural conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, or between pietistic and ritualistic religious groups, as the major determinants of voting behavior. These works have broadened our understanding of ante-bellum political culture, and demonstrated the inevitable failure of any "monistic interpretation" of political conflict. And they should force historians to abandon whatever economic determinism still persists in the writing of political history. Perhaps most important, they have demonstrated the virtues of viewing voters not as isolated individuals, but as men and women embedded in a complex network of social and cultural relationships.[6]

The "new political history" involves both a new methodology—the statistical analysis of quantitative data—and a distinctive model of historical explanation. The broadening of the methodological tools available to historians can only be applauded, although some writers may at times be guilty of mistaking correlations for causes, and inducing the behavior of individuals from aggregate data. It sometimes seems that the very sophistication of the new methodology has unfortunate effects on these writers' approach to historical data. Not only is undue weight often assigned to historical variables such as ethnicity for which quantifiable data happens to be available, but the definition of basic concepts is reduced to the most easily quantifiable elements. Thus, class is measured by data on occupation and assessed property holdings, culture is reduced to a mixture of ethnicity and religion, and religion is measured purely by church affiliation.[7]

It is in the realm of explanation, and as a contribution to our understanding of the coming of the Civil War, that the "new political history" is most open to criticism. First, while rightly

rejecting the economic determinism of progressive historians, the new political historians seem to be in danger of substituting a religious or cultural determinism of their own. Indeed, the interpretive framework of the new school is strikingly similar to that of the progressives. Both pose a sharp distinction between "real" and "unreal" issues, both put thousands of persons in the quasi-conspiratorial position of concealing their real intentions, and both take an extremely limited view of individual motivation. For the "economic man" of the progressives, the new political history has substituted an equally one-dimensional "religious man."

Most important, this new mode of explanation is fundamentally ahistorical; its key variables exist independently of historical context. Religion and ethnicity are generally treated as "unidimensional concepts, without reference to time, place, rate of acculturation, or individual personality." The point is that all historical variables are interrelated, and change as society develops. To take one key variable—religious belief in this case, or an oversimplified version of class for the progressives—and abstract it from its social context and the processes of historical change, is to distort and fracture historical reality.[8]

The arguments of the "new political historians" have profound implications for the question of Civil War causation. Their basic outlook was announced in 1964, in Joel Silbey's influential article, "The Civil War Synthesis," which chided historians for writing the history of the 1850s solely from the vantage point of the slavery issue, ignoring questions, like nativism, which seemed to have little to do with the coming of war. Subsequent writers have agreed with Silbey that a split existed between northern political elites and the mass of voters. The former were, for a variety of reasons, increasingly anti-southern, the latter were "basically unmoved" by the issues of slavery and sectional conflict and were more concerned with so-called "cultural" questions like immigration and temperance.[9]

While often criticizing traditional historians for using such "elite sources" as newspapers, speeches, and letters, this new interpretation of ante-bellum politics has its own elitist bias. It assumes that "large portions of the electorate do not have meaningful beliefs,"[10] that only elites are truly issue-oriented. This kind of reasoning, however, can never illuminate the relationship between political leaders and voters in a democratic political culture. Nor can it explain under what circumstances local issues will dominate politics and when national issues will come to the fore, or tell us why Republicans in the late 1850s were constantly trying to play down the issues of temperance and nativism which had supposedly created their party in the first place.[11] The view of the Republican party as the political expression of pietistic Protestantism can hardly encompass a figure like Lincoln, who was southern-born and whose religious beliefs were akin to the deism of that infidel Thomas Paine, whom Lincoln greatly admired.[12] According to the aggregate data, Lincoln should have been a pro-slavery Democrat. At best, he was a historical accident, an ecological fallacy.

But what of the Civil War? Supposedly, when the scientist Laplace described the Newtonian system to Napoleon, the emperor asked, "But where is God in your system?" To which Laplace replied, "I have no need for that hypothesis." Similarly, the "system" of the new political history has no need for the Civil War. Unfortunately, the Civil War did take place. But the new interpretation leaves a yawning gap between political processes and the outbreak of war. Recently, Lee Benson has tried to bridge this gap by arguing that a "small group" of southern conspirators, taking advantage of the "irresponsible character" of the political system, caused the war.[13] To pursue our Enlightenment analogy and paraphrase Voltaire, if Benson's explanation did not exist, we would have to invent it. If only elites cared about the slavery question, we are logically driven back to a neo-revisionist conspiracy theory of the coming of the war. One does not have to assume that great events always have great causes to believe that conspiracy theories are rarely satisfactory as historical explanations.

A second school of historical writing places the coming of the

Civil War within the process political scientists have termed "modernization." This is as yet an imprecisely defined concept, but it involves such basic changes in the structure of a society as rapid economic development, urbanization, industrialization, the creation of an integrated national economic and political structure, and generally, the spread of market-oriented capitalist economic relations and of mental attitudes viewing continuous social change as natural and desirable.[14] Within this context, the Civil War becomes the process by which the "modern" or "modernizing" North integrated the "pre-modern" South into a national political and economic system. As Raimondo Luraghi explains, "So, in the nineteenth century, as the industrial revolution was expanding on a worldwide scale, the days of wrath were coming for a series of agrarian, pre-capitalistic, 'backward' societies throughout the world, from the Italian and American South down to India."[15] Aside from Luraghi's work, the modernization framework has not yet been systematically applied to the coming of the Civil War, although in many respects it is compatible with the work of Eugene Genovese on the South and with my own discussion of the Republican party in the 1850s.[16]

As Robert Kelley demonstrates, the ethnocultural and modernization interpretations are not necessarily incompatible. In his book, *The Transatlantic Persuasion,* the Republicans in America and the Tories in England become the nationalists, homogenizers, and cosmopolitans. Intolerant of any social diversity within their societies, they attempted to impose their values on dissident groups—temperance legislation on the Irish immigrants, anti-slavery on the South—while the party of the regional and ethnic minorities (Democrats in America, Liberals in Britain), called for cultural pluralism and local autonomy.[17]

The problem with this analysis is that it views the sectional conflict primarily as a struggle between local and national institutions. It is significant that in Kelley's stimulating book, the institution of slavery is conspicuous by its absence. But slavery

was what made the South distinct—it was central to the moral, economic, and political antagonisms between the sections.

Nonetheless, this framework has much to offer toward an understanding of the politics of the 1850s. Lincoln's House Divided speech, as J. R. Pole has written, can be viewed as the outlook of a man "who had grasped the essentials of the process of nationalisation that was overtaking the main institutions of American life." Conversely, Stephen A. Douglas's objection to what he termed Lincoln's belief that "there must be uniformity in the local laws and domestic institutions of each and all states of the Union," and his plea for recognition of "diversity and dissimilarity" within the nation, can be read as the cry of all the out-groups and backward areas confronted by the process of modernization in the nineteenth century.[18]

Having said this, I hasten to add that there are certain problems in applying this model to the causes of the Civil War. First, there is the imprecision of the term "modernization." At times, it seems to be used more or less interchangeably with "industrialization," and, in effect, becomes a restatement of the Beardian view of the Civil War as a conflict between industrial and agrarian economies. In this form, the model exaggerates the extent to which northern society itself was as yet fully modernized in the ante-bellum years. Historians, indeed, have not yet produced the studies which will enable us to state with assurance what the class structure of the North was, or how far industrialization had advanced by 1860. Before we can assess the effects of modernization, in other words, we need to know exactly what kind of society was undergoing that process. Ante-bellum northern society may well have been "modern" in some respects. Certainly capitalist economic relations and democratic political procedures prevailed, and according to Richard Brown, the "modern personality" had been dominant since colonial days. But the economy was almost certainly pre-industrial, and the ideals of the yeoman farmer and independent artisan, their belief in the natural right of each individual to the fruits of his labor (which became in the hands of Lincoln so

damning an indictment of slavery), still permeated society.[19]

Nevertheless, the modernization model does have two great virtues. First, it enables us to see that what happened in nineteenth-century America was not a unique or local occurrence, but a process which had deep affinities with events in many other areas of the world. Secondly, it demands that political historians place their work in the largest context of the development of American society, for, as Albert Soboul writes, "all studies of political history entail a study of social history."[20] To me, moreover, it suggests a framework for beginning to answer the crucial question raised by David Brion Davis in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Why does slavery, which for centuries had been considered a normal part of the social order, suddenly come to be viewed by large numbers of men and women as a totally unacceptable form of labor and social organization? Why, that is, does an anti-slavery movement emerge?

To answer this question, we must place the Civil War in the context of the general abolition of unfree labor systems in the nineteenth century, from slavery in the western hemisphere, to serfdom in Russia and *robot* in the Austrian Empire. Within this context, we need to relate the emergence of the modern anti-slavery movement to two related processes—changes in attitudes toward labor and the condition of laboring classes,[21] and the enormous economic and social transformations of the nineteenth century. Of course, American anti-slavery thought did not emerge full-blown in the 1830s. As C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, patterns of derogatory sectional imagery stretch back into the colonial era. Many New England Federalists employed anti-southern and anti-slavery rhetoric highly suggestive of the Republican assaults of the 1850s. They not only condemned the three-fifths clause of the Constitution and southern domination of the national government, but spoke of the superiority of free labor, the economic stagnation of the South, and the differences in "manners, habits, customs, principles and ways of thinking" between the sections.[22]

The elements of an anti-slavery ideology, therefore, had long

been present in America, but a coherent critique of slavery had not. Why could the Federalists not develop one? For one thing, until 1800 they had powerful allies in the South, and after then, the dream of a reunited and triumphant Federalist party never entirely disappeared. Moreover, as several recent writers have emphasized, the Federalist world view centered on a society of order, harmony, and organic unity, one composed of stable and distinctly separated ranks and orders.[23] It was not until this older organic conception of society broke down that a complete anti-slavery ideology could emerge.

We know of course that in the 1820s and 1830s this older vision was thoroughly disrupted, and replaced by one of a society of competing individuals, a vision more in keeping with the requirements of an expanding, market-oriented capitalist society. Why this ideological transformation occurred is not yet, in my opinion, entirely clear. The transportation revolution was a major determinant, but we know too little about the nature of economic change in the ante-bellum era to be able to place this ideological development in its proper social setting. We do know that the ideological transformation had profound effects on the nature of anti-slavery thought. As Rowland Berthoff has observed, "if classes supposedly did not exist, they could not be accepted as constituent institutions of American society; rank or degree was no longer an admissible principle for organizing or even thinking about the social order." That abolitionist thought was utterly individualistic and atomistic has by now become an axiom of historical writing. Historians as diverse in their ideological preconceptions as Stanley Elkins and William Appleman Williams severely chide the abolitionists for viewing slavery not as a functioning institution, embedded in a distinct society, but as a personal sin of the individual master against the individual slave.[24] But it may be that it was only when the ideas of an organic society, and the permanent subordination of any class of men, had been overthrown, that anti-slavery thought could develop in a consistent form. Only a movement that viewed society as a collection of individuals, that viewed

freedom as the property of every man, that believed every individual had the right to seek advancement as a unit in competitive society, could condemn slavery as utterly and completely as, in their own ways, abolitionists and Republicans did.[25]

Anti-slavery thus fed on the anti-monopoly, anti-corporate, egalitarian ethos of Jacksonian America. At the same time, as a vision of labor, anti-slavery was curiously ambiguous. Anti-slavery men exalted "free labor," meaning labor working because of incentive instead of coercion, labor with education, skill, the desire for advancement, and also the freedom to move from job to job according to the changing demands of the marketplace.[26] On the other hand, many anti-slavery men were also opponents of union activity, and were closely involved in other reforms—such as the creation of prisons and asylums, temperance, and poor relief (with the ever-present distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor) which to a certain extent can be interpreted as attempts to transform the life style and work habits of labor in an industrializing society.

One could argue that the anti-slavery movement, by glorifying northern society and by isolating slavery as an unacceptable form of labor exploitation, while refusing to condemn the exploitative aspects of "free" labor relations, served to justify the emerging capitalist order of the North. In fact, it is possible that the growing ideological conflict between the sections had the effect of undermining a tradition of radical criticism within northern society.[27] Men like Horace Greeley, highly critical of certain aspects of their society in the 1840s, became more and more uncritical when faced with the need to defend the North against southern assaults. The choices for America came to be defined as free society versus slave society—the idea of alternatives within free society was increasingly lost sight of.[28]

To develop this point further, many anti-slavery men believed in an ideal of human character which emphasized an internalized self-discipline. They condemned slavery as a lack of control over one's own destiny and the fruits of one's labor, but defined freedom as more than a simple lack of restraint. The

truly free man, in the eyes of ante-bellum reformers, was one who imposed restraints upon himself. This was also the ideal, as David Rothman shows, of the reformers who constructed the prisons and asylums of this era—to transform the human personality so that the poor, insane, and criminal would internalize a sense of discipline, order, and restraint.[29]

There are parallels between this aim and Lincoln's condemnation in his famous lyceum speech of 1838 of "the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country," of vigilanteeism, mob violence, and those who hoped for the "total annihilation of government." For Lincoln, law, order, and union, commonly accepted and internalized, allowed civilization and progress to exist in America, especially given the highly competitive nature of the society. Or, to quote Theodore Weld, "restraints are the web of civilized society, warp and woof." Of course, on one level, slavery, as some pro-slavery writers argued, solved the problem of disciplining the labor force, but the ideal of the reformers was a society of free (self-governing) individuals. Slavery may have been like an asylum or a school in some respects, but it lacked one essential element of those institutions—release, or graduation. Moreover, it allowed full rein to the very passions which so many northerners desired to see repressed—it encouraged greed, self-indulgence, and all sorts of illicit personal and sexual activities on the part of the masters. When Lincoln in 1861 declared, "plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy," he could have chosen no more damning description.[30]

Thus the anti-slavery movement exalted the character traits demanded by a "modernizing" society while it condemned an institution which impeded that "modernization." Interpreted in this way, the modernization thesis can assimilate some of the insights of the new political history. For example, the ethnoculturalists never deal directly with the relationship between ethnocultural identity and class relations in the setting of a modernizing society. We know how closely related certain ethnic and class patterns were—how, in urban areas, Irish im-

migrants were overwhelmingly lower-class unskilled laborers, and how, to quote Ronald Formisano, "prosperity and evangelical political character often went together." It is also well known that class and ethnic prejudices were inextricably linked in nativist attacks on Irish immigrants.[31]

If we do expand our notion of culture beyond a relatively narrow definition of ethnicity and religious belief, we may find that "pietists" were much more hospitable to the Protestant work ethic and the economic demands of a modernizing society than were "ritualists" and Catholic immigrants.[32] Is it possible that the resistance of the Irish to "Americanization," rather than simply a desire to maintain cultural identity, was the attempt of a pre-industrial people to resist the hegemony of a modernizing culture, with all that that implied for character structure, work patterns, and life styles? May we view the Democratic party as the representative of the great pre-modern cultures within American society—the white South and the Irish immigrants—and perhaps then better understand why the nativist image of the Irish and the anti-slavery critique of the southern slaveholder stressed the same "undesirable" traits of lack of economic enterprise and self-discipline, and the attack on the Slave Power and Catholic Church denounced corporate monoliths which restricted individual freedom? Was the northern Democratic machine at the local level attuned to the communal, traditionalist behavior of the peasant immigrants, while the intense individualism of the Republicans had little to offer them?

Before we attempt to locate the crusade against slavery within the social history of ante-bellum America, there is a more basic historical question to answer. We still do not understand the social composition of that movement. We do have information about the abolitionist leadership, but also disagreement as to whether abolitionists were a declining elite, using reform as an effort to regain a waning status,[33] or a rising group, challenging older elites, North and South, for social

dominance. This latter would seem to be the implication of Leonard Richards's recent study of anti-abolitionist mobs, which concludes that in Utica and Cincinnati, the mobs were composed of members of the pre-industrial upper class of commercial and professional men, while abolitionist membership drew much more heavily on artisans, manufacturers, and tradesmen.[34] Generally, however, to quote David Brion Davis, "little is known of the rank and file members, to say nothing of the passive supporters, of a single reform movement."[35] Historians of reform over the past fifteen years have been much more successful in explicating ideologies than in giving us a clear picture of the movements' social roots.

Without such studies, we have been guilty of accepting an oversimplified version of reform, e.g., the temperance movement was an effort of middle-class Yankees to exert their cultural dominance over immigrant Catholics and the unruly poor. That for many supporters the movement did have his character cannot be doubted, but we need only to read Brian Harrison's study of the English temperance movement to see that our studies have been noticeably one dimensional. Harrison showed that temperance was a cross-class movement which had deep roots in the working class, appealing to aspirations for self-help and social betterment. It was not simply an attempt "to impose middle-class manners on the working class."[36] The same, I suspect, can be said for temperance in this country, and for other reforms, such as the movement for expanded public education, that have been interpreted through the eyes of their middle-class proponents. Historians have often ignored the very different aims of workingmen who supported these reforms. But at present, we know far too little of the extent to which workers, skilled or unskilled, were sympathetic to one phase or another of the anti-slavery movement, or whether anti-slavery workingmen viewed slavery differently than did its middle-class foes. Thus, while Garrison drew a sharp distinction between slavery and the northern system of

free labor, how many workingmen were impressed by the *similarities* between the chattel slavery of the South and the "wage slavery" of the North?

Many labor spokesmen were initially hostile to the abolitionists precisely because they believed the Garrisons and Welds were diverting attention from the pressing social problems of the industrializing North. But in the late 1840s and 1850s many workingmen were attracted to free-soilism and the Republican party by the issues of land reform and opposition to the expansion of slavery.[37] To what extent did workingmen oppose the extension of slavery to preserve the safety-valve which, they believed, guaranteed the independence of the northern laborer, and prevented him from being subjected to the degrading discipline of the factory or from being permanently trapped in the status of wage earner? In other words, anti-slavery could have served as an ideological vehicle for both the proponents of modernization and for those whose objective was to preserve the pre-modern status of the independent artisan.

In a similar vein, many questions remain about the social history of the ante-bellum South. Several recent studies emphasize the "obsession" of the secessionist leadership with internal unity, their fear that slavery was weak and declining in the border area and that the loyalty of the non-slaveholding whites was questionable. The secession of the South on the election of Lincoln, these works argue, was motivated not by paranoia or hysterical fear, but by a realistic assessment that the unity of their society could not survive the open debate on the future of slavery which Republicans seemed determined to stimulate within the slave states.[38]

Before we can assess this interpretation, we must take a new look at the social and economic structure of the Old South. The non-slaveholding whites are probably the least studied of all our social classes. Of course, such an investigation may indeed reveal that the hegemony of the planter class was complete.[39] Or we may find that the loyalty of the non-slaveholders, while

real, was unstable; that, especially in the backwoods areas outside direct planter control, there had developed a culture which was in many ways hostile to planter rule while, at the same time, cut off from both the market economy and from effective political power.

Fear of internal disunity can explain the belief of Edmund Ruffin that a Republican government could accomplish "the ruin of the South" without a direct assault upon slavery.[40]* Ruffin was convinced that in the event of civil war, a Southern victory would ensue, a belief he predicated on the continued loyalty of the slaves. But if we are to look at the question of internal disunity and its relation to secession, the slaves themselves cannot be ignored. Southerners knew that to exist as a regional institution within a larger free society, slavery required a community consensus, voluntary or enforced. Division among the whites had always been disastrous for discipline of the slaves. This was why the South had suppressed its own anti-slavery movement and continually demanded the silencing of northern abolitionists. Once a Republican administration was inaugurated, who knew what ideas would circulate in the slave quarters? Before we can answer these questions, we need to know more about how the slaves themselves were affected by, and perceived, the vast changes which took place in the South in the fifty years preceding secession—the ending of the slave trade, the rise of the Cotton Kingdom, and the expansion of slavery southward and westward.

In this connection, one of the most intriguing findings of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's controversial study of the economics of slavery is the extent to which the lower level of the slave system was in the hands of blacks—how slaves were becoming a larger proportion of the drivers and managers on

* Published in the fall of 1860, Ruffin's *Anticipations of the Future* might be considered the first contribution to Civil War historiography. It details the administrations of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and William Seward, and the course of a war in 1867 in which the South wins a glorious military victory, New York City is destroyed by a mob, and Washington becomes the capital of a new southern republic.

plantations. This is precisely the class which, in the British West Indies, during the agitation of the years 1816–33, was most strongly influenced by humanitarian anti-slavery ideas and which developed a campaign of non-violent resistance which undermined West Indian slavery in the years immediately preceding emancipation. Of course, the situation in the United States was vastly different from that in the islands, but the experience there, and similar events in the 1880s in Brazil, should remind us again of the dangers of subversive ideas among the slave population, and the reality of southern fears that the very existence of a hostile central government was a threat to the stability of their peculiar institution.[41]

Having previously called on political historians to pay more attention to social history, I would like to conclude by reversing this equation. Of course, our knowledge of the social history of ante-bellum America is still in some ways in its infancy. One of the striking features of the writing of the past fifteen years is the curious disjunction between a growing body of knowledge about nineteenth-century American society, and the reluctance or inability of social historians to relate this information either to the politics of the period or the question of Civil War causation.[42] As one of our most creative social historians, Rowland Berthoff, reminds us, "any basic interpretation of American history will have to account for . . . the coming of the Civil War." And no such interpretation can be complete which does not encompass the course of American political development. "Politics bears critical importance to the history of society, for politics affects the social structure, the economy, and the life of a people."[43]

In other words, the social cleavages that existed in ante-bellum America were bound to be reflected in politics. This was an era when the mass political party galvanized voter participation to an unprecedented degree, and in which politics formed an essential component of American mass culture. Politics became the stage on which the sectional conflict was played out.[44]

Lawrence Stone has identified as an essential prerequisite to any revolution the "polarization into two coherent groups or alliances of what are naturally and normally a series of fractional and shifting tensions and conflicts within a society."[45] For most of the ante-bellum period, the political system served to prevent such a polarization. The existence of national political parties necessitated both the creation of linkages and alliances between elites in various parts of the country, and the conscious suppression of disruptive sectional issues. We can, in fact, view the political history of the coming of the Civil War as an accelerating struggle between the demands of party and those of sectional ideology, in which the latter slowly gained the upper hand. But the triumph was late and never complete. As late as 1860, major political leaders like Stephen A. Douglas hoped to curtail sectional controversy by restoring the political system to its traditional basis, with slavery carefully excluded from partisan debate.

Changes in the political system itself, changes related in ways still obscure to changes in the structure of American society, doomed the old basis of sectional political balance. If the anti-slavery crusade could not have emerged without the transformation of northern society, it could not have entered politics until the instruments of mass democracy had developed. It was no accident that the same decade witnessed the rise of the anti-slavery movement and the height of "Jacksonian democracy." The same institutions which created mass participation in politics also made possible the emergence of the sectional agitator—the radical, North and South, who consciously strove to influence public opinion through speeches, newspapers, lectures, and postal campaigns. This was now an efficacious way both to affect political decision-making and, if Richards is right, to challenge the social and political dominance of older entrenched elites.

Just as the abolitionist assault emerged in the 1830s, so too, spurred by it, did the coherent southern defense of slavery. The process of ideological response and counterresponse, once

set in motion, proved extremely difficult to curtail. In the next two decades, these sectional ideologies became more and more sophisticated. As each came to focus on its lowest common denominator, with the widest possible base of support in its society, the political system proved incapable of preventing first the intrusion, then the triumph of sectional ideology as the organizing principle of political combat.

The Civil War was, at base, a struggle for the future of the nation. Within the context of modernization, one can agree with Luraghi that it became part of the process of "building a modern, centralized nation-state based on a national market, totally and unopposedly controlled by an industrial capitalistic class."[46] But is not there a danger here of transposing consequences and causes? It might be more accurate to say that each side fought to preserve a society it believed was threatened. Southerners fought to perserve the world the slaveholders made. As for the North, Lincoln expressed the hopes of his section, when he defined the Union cause as a struggle to preserve a system in which every man, whatever his station at birth, could achieve social advancement and economic independence. Lincoln's Union was one of self-made men. The society he was attempting to preserve was, in this respect, also premodern—the world of the small shop, the independent farm, and the village artisan. Republicans certainly condemned slavery as an obstacle to national economic development and as a "relic of barbarism" out of touch with the modern spirit of the nineteenth century. They exalted the virtues of economic growth, but only within the context of a familar social order. If modernization means the growth of large-scale industry, large cities, and the leviathan state, northerners were no more fighting to create it than were southerners.

Yet modern, total war, against the intentions of those who fought, was a powerful modernizing force.[47] In the South, the war experience not only destroyed slavery, but created the opportunity for the two subordinate pre-modern classes, the poor whites and the slaves, to organize and express their resentment

of planter control. In the North, the war gave a tremendous impetus to the rationalization of capitalist enterprise, the centralization of national institutions, and, in certain industries, mechanization and factory production. The foundations of the industrial capitalist state of the late nineteenth century, so similar in individualist rhetoric yet so different in social reality from Lincoln's America, were to a large extent laid during the Civil War. Here, indeed, is the tragic irony of that conflict. Each side fought to defend a distinct vision of the good society, but each vision was destroyed by the very struggle to preserve it.

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