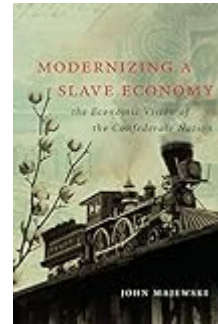




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Imagining the Confederate Leviathan

In many popular histories of the American Civil War, Edmund Ruffin serves as the embodiment of the Confederacy. This proud Virginian pulled the lanyard in Charleston to fire the first shot at Fort Sumter in April 1861, and the image of the elderly Ruffin, proud and defiant in his Palmetto Guard uniform, is a vivid image used to capture the haughty days of secession and the fighting spirit of the Confederacy. His unmitigated hatred to Yankee rule found in his diary entry on the day of his death—Ruffin was so despondent over Robert E. Lee's surrender and the failure of secession that he took his own life—is the stuff of historical legend. But like many of the stories that litter our collective memory of that conflict, Ruffin's military experience was a brief, albeit colorful, episode in a long and very different career. His lengthy service as an editor and musings on political economy, for example, dwell in the shadow of his eccentric turn as the Confederacy's oldest volunteer soldier. Rather than focus on Ruffin's pathbreaking work in agricultural reform and his insistence that southern planters break from the old methods of raising crops, popular nar-

ratives use his suicide as a metaphor for the death of the Old South. As he lost his life, the South romantically lost their cause.

John D. Majewski's book, *Modernizing a Slave Economy*, peels back the lost cause patina to examine how southern political economists like Ruffin really envisioned their economic future either with or without their northern countrymen. He begins with an interesting rumination on economic imagination. "However much secessionists imagined the economy they wanted," he argues, "they faced a concrete set of conditions that influenced their outlook" (p. 16). By fusing the idealism of southern political economists to the reality of economic conditions, Majewski is able to draw from a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources, thus making his argument a creative one that should be relevant to historians of all stripes. There are statistics and regressions here, to be sure, but the most impressive aspect of *Modernizing a Slave Economy* is the adroit use of such a wide range of historical evidence to support a wide sweeping topic. Majewski successfully brings together numerous

tables presenting data on such topics as land improvement, capital investment, and tariff revenue projections along with more speculative musings on the South's economic future from Ruffin, Thomas Dew, and Louis Wigfall in a tightly knit, well-written, and cogently argued narrative. In the end, *Modernizing a Slave Economy* offers an outstanding example of how modern political economy can be interdisciplinary, empirically rigorous, and accessible.

The central problem tackled in *Modernizing a Slave Economy* is whether or not the heavy hand of the Confederate state in economic matters was a creation of wartime exigency or the continuation of antebellum trends. Majewski's argument falls clearly into the latter camp; in this regard, he pushes against the prevailing notion that the Confederate Leviathan was the product of wartime desperation. Rather, he suggests, antebellum southerners had always envisioned a role for public policy in economic development and the strong Confederate state was not a radical disjuncture but a natural outgrowth of southern attitudes established during the antebellum period (p. 7). The region's dependence on slave labor did little to weaken the role of the state in the southern economy. Modernizers easily reconciled the South's economic aspirations with slavery, even as it undermined the efficacy of public investment by reinforcing wasteful agricultural practices and inhibiting capital formation throughout the region. Although Majewski focuses largely on the idea of an imagined Confederate economy, by highlighting the continuity between antebellum and secessionist ideas, *Modernizing a Slave Economy* is in line with other recent studies of secession and the southern economy, most notably Chad Morgan's recent case study of Georgia which concludes that Confederate industrialization was an elaboration and acceleration of existing tendencies.^[1] Virginia and South Carolina form the crux of Majewski's study, but within these case studies lay broad implications for a reevaluation of the entire South's political economy during secession and wartime.

Agricultural reform offers one example of this theme. As southern farms suffered from poor soil quality and hard rains, made worse by exhaustive cultivation practices with nutrient-leaching crops like tobacco and cotton, the need for agricultural reform became quite apparent by the 1820s and 1830s. Ruffin's leadership in this cause is well-known; what is less recognized is his willingness to enlist public officials in a whole host of state-sponsored programs—surveys and experimental farms, boards of agriculture, publications—in order to preserve the slave-based agricultural system of the South. Al-

though Majewski documents the efforts of various reformers to pull their legislatures into the reformist camp, these campaigns ultimately failed as the benefits of agricultural research remained diffused and uncertain; it was never clear how much an individual farmer would benefit (p. 77). Despite these failures, the mere presence of reformers in the South's antebellum political landscape plays against the persistent stereotype of the unyielding southern economic conservative; here were thoroughly modern voices for widespread change in southern agriculture. They are characterized as such because, as Majewski demonstrates, they viewed a more rational and scientific agricultural sector as the South's best hope in the future and saw contemporary practices not as time-honored traditions, but instead as bad habits. In this regard, they did not renounce the northern approach, but sought to emulate it. As David R. Meyer's recent study of northern economic development (*The Roots of American Industrialization* [2003]) demonstrates, a healthy agricultural sector propelled New England's economy as much as its budding factories. Well-read activists like Ruffin knew this, and tried to act accordingly. Although their cause was tangled in the preservation of slavery, their program of agricultural reform attempted to adapt the northern model to the southern situation.

Railroads are another area in which Majewski again finds a strong, yet ineffective, presence of southern statism. Dreams of linking Charleston and Richmond to western markets, creating a vibrant industrial sector, and moving beyond the ruinous agricultural practices that impoverished the land fueled the move to build railroads with public backing. Direct trade with Europe and South America also figured into this imagined southern economy. Yet, despite aggressive public financing, the South's railroad network had little impact on the overall economy by the 1850s. This is not surprising, Majewski argues, as these ventures did painfully little to address the two fundamental problems of the southern economy: slavery and shifting cultivation (p. 104). Slavery either directly or indirectly exacerbated the South's failure to develop sources of urban capital, growing consumer markets, and a diverse agricultural and manufacturing sector that could rival the North's. Without directly engaging the impact of slavery, then, southern railroads could hardly be expected to transform the economy on their own. The failure of railroads, moreover, to transform the South's prospects within the Union became a selling point for secessionists. The region's only hope, these radicals argued with growing confidence and vigor, was to separate and pursue its own fortunes in the world

economy.

Free trade forms the final link between antebellum and Confederate statism. Tariff policy was a longstanding complaint among southern nationalists, as they denounced protective duties that favored northern manufactures again and again. Free trade thus became a panacea, like railroads, for an independent South. And once again, slavery and the South's prosperity as a separate nation march lockstep in these futuristic visions. It is no coincidence that South Carolina's John Townshend combined fears of an abolitionist Abraham Lincoln administration with resentment over federal tariff policy in his pro-secessionist pamphlet, or that Ruffin made a free-trade Norfolk, not New York, the leading American port in his 1860 novel, *Anticipations of the Future to Serve as Lessons for the Present Times*. "The stability of the South's slave society, presumably," Majewski says of Ruffin's futuristic vision, "enables Norfolk and other southern cities to claim the mantle of commercial greatness without falling victim to the seething tensions that had engulfed New York and other northern cities" (p. 116). Despite all the fuss over free trade, however, Confederates actually enacted a revenue tariff designed to punish northern manufacturers and protect southern industries should trade ever open up between the warring

sections. Although they never tested this idea, Majewski uses the Confederate hedging on free trade as yet another example of the secessionists's willingness to employ a strong policy hand to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

In the end, *Modernizing a Slave Economy* packs quite a bit into a relatively slim volume. Majewski has forced us to rethink the easy dichotomy between southern "states' rights" and northern "statism" in a short space of time. His assertion that the prominent role of the Confederate state was decades in the making, rather than a wartime necessity, is a provocative one with implications not only for future studies of the Civil War but for antebellum political economy as well. The volume's brevity is both a blessing and curse. There is, perhaps, less emphasis on the actual Confederate economy than many Civil War historians might expect. Rather than provide a full narrative account of the wartime economy, Majewski takes the strong Confederate state as a given. This small drawback, though, does little to undermine the many achievements of this book.

Note

[1]. Chad Morgan, *Planters' Progress: Modernizing Confederate Georgia* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 2.

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