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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mark M. Smith. *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xii + 117 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-57158-6.

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Published on EH.Net (July, 2000)

This book is something between a textbook and an interpretative monograph. It is part of the Economic History Society's series, "New Studies in Economic and Social History." As the back cover explains, "This series provides a concise and authoritative guide to the current interpretations of key themes in economic and social history. Each book in the series summarizes the significant debates and advances in a major field of study. ... The books ... are intended for students approaching a topic for the first time, and for their teachers." Based on my own experiences as both student and teacher, I must confess that I am not a fan of this sort of book. I suppose that giving students just a small taste of the historical feast could whet their appetites and entice them to dig in heartily. But I suspect that for most students and many teachers, such books are a substitute for reading and thinking about history. To summarize my personal bias: if history is a banquet, then books like this are Spam (at best) or Olestra (at worst). Having acknowledged that bias at the outset, I'll try to put it aside and review *Debating Slavery* on its own terms.

The book has seven chapters, as well as a preface and bibliography. The first chapter offers an overview of some of the history and historiography of Southern slavery. The final chapter attempts a synthesis. Each of the middle five chapters summarizes and discusses an aspect of antebellum southern society. The book would have been more accurately titled *Debating the Slave South*, rather than *Debating Slavery*. It does not have a narrow focus on slavery, but instead covers competing views on many of the big issues in the social and economic history of the Antebellum South. One major field it does not deal with is "political" history, thus Whigs and Democrats are not in the index, nor are Potter, Cooper, Thornton,

and Barney (to name just a few who excited students in decades past). Instead, the chapters lay out debates in social history and economic history. The social history tends to revolve around Genovese's work, and the economic history tends to revolve around Fogel and Engerman's. Especially with the social history, Smith demonstrates an admirable command of the vast literature from which he samples.

In many ways, the Preface and Chapter 1 provide a strong introduction to the book. The Preface might get students thinking about the nature of freedom and differences between democracy and capitalism. Chapter 1 starts with a useful overview of the history of the slave South from colonial times to the Civil War. However, there follows an effort to suggest that most views of the slave South can be assigned to one of two camps. One, which Smith associates with Genovese and others, sees the South as "a non-capitalist, unprofitable, and largely inefficient society." The other, which Smith associates with Fogel and Engerman, Oakes and others, "argues the opposite." I think this a misstep, because two camps cannot contain the rich variety and subtlety in the scholarship on the antebellum South.

Chapter 2 addresses competing views of slaveowners, with an emphasis on planters (typically, those with twenty or more slaves). The key issue Smith tackles here is whether planters were "non-capitalist" (Genovese) or "capitalist" (Fogel and Engerman, Oakes). Much of the discussion here turns on competing perspectives on the economics of slavery which are developed more fully in Chapter 5 and 6. Students would have been better served if those chapters had come first, introducing students to two key questions: "Was slavery profitable to planters?"

and “How did it affect economic development?” Then they could learn that everyone now agrees that the answer to first question is “usually” (subject to geographic and temporal variation), and that most of us are still arguing about the second. Then students could tackle the implications of those economic questions for the more slippery questions of planter mentalite and the nature of southern white society. Thus, before working on the question of “capitalist or not?” students would know that slaveowners got rich off of their slaves and that the southern slave economy did not industrialize. Then they could grapple with the interpretive questions such as the distinction between “acquisitive” and “capitalistic.”

With the different organization, students would have an easier time figuring out that Genovese’s fundamental insights are consistent with evidence that slaves worked hard and masters profited thereby. Paternalism can help us to understand why the people worked hard. As it is, Smith attributes to Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* the view of the slave South as “a plantation society headed by masters anxious to make money from their investment but unable to do so because of the paternal relationship they had created with their slaves” (p. 22). Each of us is free to read *Roll, Jordan, Roll* as she/he sees fit; but I don’t recall that the planter aristocrats described there were “unable to make money” from their slaves. More generally, I think Smith makes a strategic mistake by adopting the dichotomy capitalist or not, because although the term capitalist may be rich in connotation, there is no agreement on what it means. The very question “capitalist or not?” can easily distract us from the fascinating similarities and contrasts between the South and North. This is not to suggest that Smith invented the debate, but to lament that he did not reformulate it at the start.

Chapter 3 (“Yeoman and nonslaveowners”) follows the convention in southern social history (since the 1980’s) that treats small-scale slaveowners (with as many as five slaves) and non-slaveowning farmers as a single class, the “yeomen.” Faithful to that literature, Smith does not question whether the distinction between slaveowner and non-slaveowner really was less important than that between planter and less affluent white farmers; and he does not attempt to assign them to the two camps identified in Chapter 1. Smith gives the impression that there is a consensus that the yeomanry had and preserved aspects of a “traditional, premarket mentality.” I cannot dispute that, but it will lead me to revisit the literature and see for myself. Finally, Smith shares a valuable insight when he notes that “much of the work on the southern yeomen tends to cast the southern planter class

in a market-oriented light” (p. 40).

Chapter 4 (“Slaves”) explores various views on slave work and culture. This chapter returns to the capitalist non-capitalist dichotomy, sometimes usefully. There is interesting attention to the links between work and culture, and to variations over time and across space. On my reading, there is surprisingly little attention to some major issues, for example, the slave family, African carry-overs, and religion. There is also surprisingly scant attention to the material conditions of black life (but there is some attention to slave diets in the chapter that follows). I do not recall any attention to Fogel and Engerman’s repeated claims that slaves’ material conditions were “better than what was typically available to free urban laborers at the time” (as Fogel put it in *Without Consent or Contract*, New York: Norton, 1989, p. 391). Nor to the opposing perspective suggested by Steckel’s arresting finding that the infant mortality rate of antebellum slaves was as ‘dreadfully’ high as in the poorest urban slums of India in the twentieth century. There is much attention given to relatively recent scholarship on the “slave’s economy,” fostering the view that slaves had significant amounts of “time to call their own” when they could produce goods (of their own) for consumption or sale. Faithful to the literature, Smith does not dwell on the scanty empirical basis of studies of the “slave’s economy,” nor on the extent to which masters were simply making slaves provision themselves. The chapter includes a misleading rendering of an example from Fogel and Engerman (p. 53). They describe incentive bonuses that were given to entire families, but Smith’s account implies that such sizable bonuses were given to individual slaves.

As noted above, Chapter 5 (“The profitability of slavery as a business”) and Chapter 6 (“The profitability of slavery as a system”) tackle the economics of slavery. These are not the strongest chapters in the book. Chapter 5 looks at slavery at the level of the individual farm and plantation. It takes much too long to come to a conclusion on the profitability issue, and then, it fails to clarify the consensus that exists: typically, Southern slaveowners made money off of their slaves (and to be more precise, they could expect to earn about as much from investing in slaves as in alternative assets). There is too much attention to long-outdated sections of Genovese’s *Political Economy of Slavery*, and virtually no attention (i.e. too little) to key debates between Fogel and Engerman and their neoclassical critics. Arguably, the single most important finding of Fogel and Engerman was that a given amount of labor, capital, and land produced about one-third more income when it was it was organized

in a single slave plantation than when it was organized in a number of smaller farms (put technically, that the relative efficiency of plantation slavery was about one-third greater than smaller scale farms). In their view, the greater efficiency of plantation slavery resulted from the intense, arduous, and coordinated labor-effort that could be forced from slaves working in gangs. Other neoclassical economists have disputed these views, with gusto. The failure to take up this issue leaves a huge gap in the presentation of this aspect of the economics of slavery. That said, I think that the responsibility for the gap lies more with economic historians, than with historians; and more with all of us, than with Smith. Probably Smith's omission of the issue is faithful to the history literature, but not to the economic history literature.

Chapter 6 finds Smith on more solid ground. He cites much of the relevant literature to identify the crucial questions that are still unresolved: why were industrialization and urbanization so limited in the South compared to the North? He falters a bit in his discussion of Fogel and Engerman's evidence of growth in southern per capita incomes in the period 1840-60. Smith relies on Ransom to suggest that the numerous non-slaveholders "who were only marginally involved in cotton" did not experience economic growth (p. 85). Ransom's argument implies a major shift in the distribution of southern income in the period 1840 to 1860; this is an interesting possibility, but currently there is not much evidence for it. Also, Smith makes a common mistake when he says (p. 85) that world cotton demand "dropped after 1860." It was the "growth rate of cotton demand" that dropped (according to Wright). More generally, the chapters on the economics of slavery would have been better if they had included some international comparisons, and some attention to the economic consequences of emancipation.

The last chapter offers a sort of synthesis, identifying points of potential consensus, and suggesting "New directions" for future research. It offers perhaps the most contentious claim in the book; Smith states "an important but rarely articulated truth: the need and the way to

reconcile the apparently competing schools of thought is probably best achieved not through more empirical research but through greater theoretical consideration" (p. 89). Coupled with the claim (at the start of the chapter) that "we know an awful lot about virtually every aspect of slave culture, the southern economy, and planters' ideology" (p. 87), a reader might accuse Smith of calling for a retreat from the archives. More generally, the last chapter may be a problem for many students. It finds some common ground among competing perspectives, focussing mostly on Genovese and Oakes. However it draws heavily on Marx and on Marxian theories which may not be comprehensible to most students.

The bibliography is wide-ranging and interesting to peruse, but referring to it while reading was inconvenient, because the entries are grouped according to chapter. Generally, it is a well-crafted work, even if computer spell-checking is evident at times (e.g. "none the less" (p. 11), Barrington "Hoore" Jr. (p. 112)). An index also is provided, which will help students to zero in on authors of interest. As is often the case, perusing the index can be interesting. For example, I was reminded of both the competence of Smith's coverage and the inevitability of omissions when I noticed that the index (and bibliography) includes Cashin, but not Cash.

In closing, I speculate that writing such a book is an unenviable task; it just invites criticism. First, there are people like me who think it will just reduce the number of students who actually read and get engaged in southern history. Second, every other historian of the South will have her/his own take on most of the many works that are covered, and most will dispute or dismiss some aspect of the book. On the other hand, most historians don't get to write books for Cambridge University Press. And, I suspect the author enjoyed feasting at the banquet of scholarship that he drew on for *Debating Slavery*.

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Citation: James R. Irwin. Review of Smith, Mark M., *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

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