Towards a Bourgeois Revolution?
Explaining the American Civil War

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Abstract
This paper introduces arguments from Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic to suggest that the Civil War arose ultimately because of class-conflict between on the one hand, Southern slaves and their masters and, on the other, Northern workers and their employers. It does not, however, suggest that either in the North or the South these conflicts were on the point of erupting into revolution. On the contrary, they were relatively easily containable. However, harmony within each section (North and South) could be secured only at the cost of intersectional conflict, conflict which would finally erupt into civil war. The Civil War was a 'bourgeois revolution' not only because it destroyed slavery, an essentially precapitalist system of production, in the United States but also because it resulted in the enthronement of Northern values, with the normalisation of wage-labour at their core.

Keywords
Slavery, American Civil War, mode of production, ideology, bourgeois revolution

I

The American Civil War has attracted an enormous amount of attention from historians, the great majority of whom have, of course, written from outside the Marxist tradition. Nevertheless, some Marxist scholars have addressed the subject and have concluded that the War marked a revolution, indeed a bourgeois revolution. Out of four years of warfare, with an unprecedented amount of slaughter and bloodshed, came the emancipation of more than three million slaves, the consequent confiscation of more than three billion dollars of ‘property’ in those slaves, and a transformation in the politics of the country. The revolutionary nature of the struggle has been relatively easy to demonstrate; some scholars have insisted that the War paved the way, indeed

was indispensable in securing the necessary conditions, for the growth of capitalism in the United States. Hence the ‘bourgeois revolution’.2

In a two-volume work concerned essentially with the years from 1820 to the outbreak of war in 1861 I have tried to advance an explanation of the origins of the Civil War, an explanation of the destruction of slavery, and a re-interpretation of the War as a bourgeois revolution. This work was written within an explicitly Marxist framework, though it offered an interpretative schema different from that which Marx himself (who did of course live through, observe, and comment on these events) put forward, and different too from that which other Marxists have presented. The subject is of course an important one, for Marxists and non-Marxists alike, and it was perhaps inevitable that my interpretation would provoke dissent from different points on the political spectrum. The purpose of this essay is to restate that argument, to make it accessible, not merely to historians of the United States but also, more generally, to those working in other areas within the Marxist tradition, and to stimulate debate amongst other Marxists working in this area.3

II

Let us look first at the causes of the War. My argument stresses the resistance, actual or potential, of the subordinate classes in both the North and the South. Social historians, who have in the last few decades re-examined slavery minutely, have demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that the overwhelming majority of slaves did not wish to be slaves.4 They yearned for freedom and adopted various forms of resistance. These included shirking duties, sabotaging tools and machinery, treating livestock badly, and feigning illness. More dramatic was flight; some slaves ran away, in the most extreme cases in an attempt to reach the North and freedom. Most dramatic of all were acts of aggression and violence, ranging from arson to poisoning to servile rebellion. Some of these forms of resistance, such as insurrection, were rare in the United States. The fear of them, however, was extremely widespread and it drove the masters to take a whole series of actions, some of which marked important stages on the road to civil war. At these moments the slaveholders

2. On Marxist interpretations of the Civil War see, for example, Pressly 1962; Novack (ed.) 1976; Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983; Genovese 1967; Post 1982.
4. Strange though it may now seem, this ‘discovery’ was really only made by mainstream historians in the aftermath of World-War II. A landmark publication was Stampp 1956.
were responding to the potential for resistance as much as, or more than, to acts of resistance themselves.

It would, however, be quite mistaken to argue that the slaves were on the verge of revolution in 1861, when war broke out. On the contrary, the slaveholders were able to contain their slaves and neutralise their resistance. The crucial point, however, is that this could only be done at a huge price. The price would be their continued survival.

This effect was achieved by virtue of an increasing enmity with the North. Once again it is essential to look at the relations between the dominant and the dominated classes, this time in the free states. Here a decisive development was the growth of wage-labour, which by the 1850s probably accounted for a majority of the Northern workforce. It is vital to understand that the wage-worker had traditionally been viewed, in European thought, as akin to a slave, someone who was simply too dependent on the employer to be a fit citizen of a republic. The American tradition was itself heir to these views; its founders Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson had extolled not the wage-worker but instead the yeoman farmer, who owned his own land and was thus, it was claimed, ‘independent’. This tradition had ironically offered support to the slaveholder, not overtly in the form of an explicit celebration of slavery (though this was sometimes heard), but instead covertly, by a rhetorical and ideological assimilation of slavery to farming. The slaveholder was presented as another worthy and independent citizen of the agrarian republic. ‘Democracy’, which meant in these years the conferring of political rights on adult white males, rested on the agrarian interest, with the slaveholder viewed as a farmer, and the slave scarcely viewed at all. This was the ideology of the Democratic Party, generally in the vanguard of movements to widen the suffrage to include all adult white males.

The growth of wage-labour, however, brought major changes in its wake. Given that huge numbers of these labourers had the vote, it was necessary for Northerners to explain, both to others and to themselves, that these workers were not the threat to a democratic polity that had once been thought. It was necessary to explain why they could be trusted and, above all, perhaps, to state what the Northern economy, Northern society, and the Northern political system had to offer them.

Just as the slaveholders in the South were able to contain both the actual and potential resistance offered by their slaves, so Northern élites were able to

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6. The classic statement of this position is Jefferson 1964, p. 157. Many other examples from later decades can be found in Ashworth 1987.
contain both the actual and potential resistance offered by their wage-workers. In 1861 there was no revolutionary proletariat in the North. On the contrary, the Northern labour-system was more successful, and perhaps more stable, than it had ever been.

There was, however, a major, indeed insuperable, problem. Although the dominant classes in each section could contain the potential for opposition from below, as it were, they could do this only by subscribing to values and practices that aggravated opposition from across the Mason-Dixon line. In other words, intrasectinal conflict could be contained, but only by making intersectional conflict increasingly severe. Integration and stability within a region (section) of the nation made for disruption and instability within the nation as a whole. The Civil War marked the culmination of this process.

III

What were these values and practices? First, the economic practices: All scholars recognise that the antebellum South lagged far behind the North in the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. The task, however, is to explain this lag. I suggest that slave-resistance is the key constraint. Slaves in industry often treated machinery badly and this may have inhibited the tendency to invest in such machinery. Moreover, many industrial and urban settings gave the slave what was, from the masters’ standpoint, too much freedom; he might associate with unruly elements: free white workers, free blacks (a most undesirable class in the eyes of the slaveholder), even itinerant Northerners who might harbour antislavery sentiments. Flight was easier in urban settings. Although some slaves were indeed used in industry, influential Southerners were wont to complain that the slave who was ‘made a mechanic’ was immediately ‘more than half freed’.

If such fears did indeed constrain the development of Southern industry, they simultaneously deepened Northern opposition to Southern slavery. Northerners, especially in the final decades of the antebellum Republic, congratulated themselves on the progress of their economy and on its superiority (in terms of developmental momentum and potential) to that of the South. Here was a means of integrating Northern society. All Northerners, whether manufacturers, merchants, farmers or wage-workers, were invited to participate in these celebrations. Northern economic development was thus a force for integration within the North, just as its absence within the South played the same rôle there. The result was growing sectional conflict as

virtually every Northern enemy of slavery, from the most moderate to the most radical, in these years stressed its damaging effects on the Southern economy.9

Like other Northerners, wage-earners were constantly told that they had a deep stake in the Northern economy. This was not simply because of its developmental potential, but also because of the unprecedented opportunities it offered for social mobility. Even if poor, the wage-worker, as Abraham Lincoln observed repeatedly, did not need to remain poor. Nor did he need to remain a wage-worker. Instead he might become first an independent craftsman or farmer, and then finally an employer of wage-earners in his turn. Here was an ideological claim of enormous power and importance. Yet once again, however much its integrative effects might promote Northern stability, this could only be done by creating still greater scorn for Southern slavery. The slave had little opportunity to become anything other than — a slave. Southerners became increasingly concerned, in the final years of the antebellum Republic, with the dangers posed by free blacks and they made it increasingly difficult for slaveholders to manumit their slaves. The vast majority of course did not even wish to do so. But if the denial of opportunities for freedom was necessary to maintain the stability of the slaveholders’ régime it once again made slavery seem retrograde and anachronistic and thus threatened the stability of the nation. The slave simply lacked the incentives for labour that so invigorated the free worker and, as a result, energised the entire Northern economy. Here was another cause of the conflict between North and South.

IV

Alongside these economic practices and values were a number of moral issues, whose impact can be understood in the same way. As we have seen, Southerners had to contend with the possibility that their slaves might flee. As a result they demanded, and received in 1850, a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law. This required all Northerners to aid in the rendition of fugitive slaves, and indeed presented this duty as a constitutional obligation. Here was a direct response to the problems posed by slave-resistance. But once again it challenged key Northern values. Many Northerners, having abandoned the notion that the ownership of property was the key to social stability and the prerequisite for political rights, had come to believe instead that the conscience was the all-but-infallible guide to human action. This too was an integrative force in the North, in the sense that all Northerners, whether they owned property or

not, whether they worked for wages or not, were invited to celebrate their right to follow the voice of the conscience within. But the new Fugitive Slave Law required Northerners to put their moral scruples aside when coming to the aid of the slaveholder who sought to recover his slave in the North. Although many were certainly prepared to do so, many were not, and they cited the absolute and unconditional need to follow the conscience as grounds for disobeying the new law. These men and women were among the most resolute enemies of Southern slavery.10

In much the same way, it was almost inevitable that a society in which increasing numbers of men and women took this view of their conscience should come to view slavery itself, and not merely the rendition of fugitive slaves, as grossly immoral, indeed ungodly. The essence of slavery, after all, was that the slave could not respond to the dictates of his conscience. Instead he was a mere instrument, someone who was required to obey the will of another. The Fugitive Slave Law was thus, as one radical antislavery senator observed, a 'Heaven-defying bill'. Although only a minority of Northerners were ever prepared to go so far, these abolitionists had a disproportionate influence in convincing Southerners of the impossibility of dealing with Northern 'fanaticism' and thus in inflaming sectional hostilities.11

Northerners of this persuasion revered, along with the conscience, the family. One of the effects of Northern economic development, and more specifically of the growth of wage-labour, was an increasing separation between the world of work and the world of the family. Some Northerners viewed the family and the home as a refuge, a 'haven in a heartless world'. It was a vital source of order and harmony for the wider society. But where did this leave slavery? The slave lacked a family; under slavery, marriage had no legal status, partly because the master wanted to use the threat of its break-up to discipline his slaves. Thus the family might be broken up; parents had no right to keep their children. According to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the greatest work of antislavery propaganda of the nineteenth century, 'the worst abuse of the system of slavery is its outrage upon the family'.12 Once again, these values had an integrative effect within the North just as their denial to the slaves helped maintain discipline and stability in the South. Once again, they could only result in a deepening of the sectional divide. It was possible to invite the Northern wage-worker to enjoy and celebrate the right to follow his conscience and his right to 'a family non-marketable'. But if this

invitation were accepted, the result was likely to be an increasing revulsion from chattel-slavery.¹³

V

Finally, there was a series of political confrontations between North and South which revealed a similar pattern or set of processes. When antislavery emerged, or rather re-emerged in the early 1830s, it posed a challenge to Southerners. As they acknowledged, they did not want their slaves to be contaminated by abolitionist doctrines. Hence they took steps to ensure that this did not happen. At the same time, and responding to the fears of slave-insurrection that would periodically grip the Old South, they took steps to ensure that rebellions did not occur. For example, and especially in the Deep South, they curtailed freedom of speech. In Congress, they tried to suppress debate on the antislavery petitions that in the mid-1830s began to flood the nation’s legislature. When in the early 1840s there were signs of British antislavery activity in Texas, they moved to annex Texas. And fearful of Northern voting power in Congress, they made a series of attempts to acquire additional states, most notoriously in Kansas in the mid-1850s.¹⁴

Some of these attempts were successful, others were not. But the key fact is that they all incurred an enormous degree of hostility and resentment in the North. These Southern responses had one thing in common: each challenged the liberties not merely of the slave but also of the free Northerner. Restrictions on free speech, on the right to petition, and on the power of the majority threatened white Northerners, who were themselves being taught that their democratic rights were a precious heritage of freedom. Did not demands for additional territory for slavery (which seemed to many Northerners merely a minority interest in a minority section of the Union) confirm that the nation was, in reality, being governed by an aristocratic ‘Slave Power’ bent on subduing the liberties of white Americans as well as slaves? Here was yet another challenge to the Northern ideals which were so important to the integrative process there, a challenge that was mounted in order to maintain the stability of slavery in the South.¹⁵

¹⁴. These themes are treated in most of the standard surveys of the antebellum years, but nowhere more perceptively than in the works of William W. Freehling. See, especially, Freehling 2007.
VI

Historians used to believe that the sectional controversy could be understood with little or no reference to the slaves themselves, whose aspirations for freedom they either did not recognise or could not relate to the politics of the era. Similarly, such class-conflict as there was in the North has seemed to many scholars to have been largely unrelated to the sectional conflict and to the subsequent eradication of Southern slavery, achieved as it was by the triumphant Northern armies.

It is also fair to say that even some Marxist scholars have operated within a framework that has obscured these forms of class-conflict. In the schema I have proposed, class-conflict is potential as well as actual. Actions taken by elites to prevent such conflict, either with Northern wage-earners or with Southern slaves, are as important and as consequential as the conflict itself. Moreover, for class-conflict to occur there is no need for either slaves or wage-workers to feel class-consciousness. Indeed there is little evidence that the slaves in the South had such consciousness while in the North the antislavery thrust came from groups who believed that the glory of the North was its very classlessness. Concerted collective action on the part of groups who are conscious of a shared class-position and determined to struggle to improve that position is one way that class can make itself felt in history, but it is only one, and almost certainly not the commonest one. Assuredly the American Civil War cannot be explained in these terms. A brief narrative of the events of the sectional controversy may, however, serve to suggest that it can instead be explained in terms of the processes I have described above and with the understanding of class and class-conflict that I have proposed.¹⁶

VII

Slavery had provoked controversy since, indeed before, the founding of the Republic. But this conflict had been muted because in the era of the American Revolution most Southern leaders had believed, with Thomas Jefferson, that slavery would, and should, die out gradually and peacefully. This was in fact the course it took in the decades after independence in the Northern states, where it had existed but where it had not been critical for the regional economy. But in the South the process was radically different. A conjuncture of developments took place which, by 1820 at the latest, confirmed to all careful

¹⁶. This understanding of class is not, of course, original; it does, however, depart from the views of distinguished Marxist scholars such as E.P. Thompson. See Thompson 1968.
observers that slavery was not merely stable in the South but that it was expanding. Technical innovations, such as the invention of a new cotton gin in the 1790s, combined with a new availability of land on which cotton and other crops could profitably be grown and with a growing demand for those crops from Europe. The result was a huge opportunity for Southern planters, one that they would eagerly grasp.

A new era for slavery quickly ushered in an equally new era for antislavery. Abandoning his previous faith in colonisation (the voluntary repatriation of slaves, or freed blacks to Africa), William Lloyd Garrison was the first and most conspicuous of those Northerners who in the early 1830s demanded the immediate abolition of slavery. Abolitionists expounded many of the views we have already considered. They condemned the Southern economy for its backwardness, which they attributed unhesitatingly to slavery; they condemned the political power of the slaveholders (the ‘Slave Power’) for the threat it posed to freedom in the South and throughout the nation. Above all, however, they focused on the immorality of slavery, the violence it did, not so much physically to the slave, but morally, by depriving him of home, family and the right to follow his conscience.17

The next twist in the story came with the Southern response to abolitionism. But it is important to note that the abolitionist enterprise could not have been even remotely viable if the slaves had not wanted their freedom; the antislavery cause was difficult enough as it was. And the same thirst for liberty, the same desire to resist enslavement, resulted in a highly conspicuous attempt at servile insurrection in Virginia, led by Nat Turner in 1831. Abolitionism and the Turner revolt served to convince some Southerners – and their numbers would steadily rise over the coming years – that they could not afford to stand by and watch the antislavery phalanx augment its power in the North, and the North augment its power in the nation. There then followed a series of actions which, whilst attempting to shore up the power of slavery, in fact deepened antislavery sentiment in the North, by linking the cause of antislavery with that of white freedom. Southerners experimented in the early 1830s (unsuccessfully) with the idea of nullifying federal laws, tried in the late 1830s and early 1840s (successfully for a time) to negate the right of petition to Congress, and curtailed (for the entire lifetime of slavery) freedom of speech and opinion in the South, and especially the Deep South. They even closed the mails to abolitionist pamphlets.18

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Into this maelstrom came the question of territorial expansion. Here the rôle of the Democratic Party was critical. Some Southerners made it clear that they wanted additional territory for slavery, fearing, probably mistakenly, that on purely economic grounds the institution must either expand or perish. Others made the same demand, but out of an essentially political fear that if the North were able to acquire additional free states the time would eventually come when Northerners would not merely control the federal government but would have sufficient voting power to alter the constitution and abolish slavery everywhere within the nation. The Democratic Party proved a hospitable home for these Southerners and proved for a time a potent instrument through which to press for the extension of slavery. The big gain came when Texas was annexed to the Union in 1845, under Democratic auspices.

This gain was not secured, however, on explicitly proslavery grounds. Instead mainstream Democrats claimed that the agrarian republic could and should be perpetuated by territorial acquisitions. This ideology, which had a genuine appeal to many who had little interest in protecting slavery, served to legitimate territorial expansion into the Southwest, where slavery could either be protected or introduced, as well as into the Northwest, in much of which it was prohibited. Here the ideology of ‘Democracy’, with its assimilation of the planter to the slaveless yeoman farmer, came once again to the aid of the slaveholder.

An increasing number of Northerners, however, argued instead that the North must itself expand and that Northern capitalism was profoundly threatened by the prospect of plantation-slavery in the West. Some of these Northerners sometimes also expressed a concern for the welfare of the slave, but others confessed their indifference to the moral dimension of slavery and acknowledged that they were solely motivated by their concern for the economic opportunities and political rights of whites. By 1850 there were signs that the two groups would be able to coalesce and, within a relatively short time, perhaps, control the North and the nation.19

The following decade saw a political transformation. When Southerners tried yet again to open the way to the expansion of slavery, this time into Kansas, and some Northern Democrats, led by Stephen A. Douglas, showed themselves prepared to acquiesce, the result was the collapse of one party, the Whigs, and the creation of another, the Republicans. With the Democratic Party reduced to increasing impotence in the North (though stronger than ever in its political heartland, the South), the way was clear for the triumph of

the Republican Party in 1860. The Republican presidential candidate of that year, Abraham Lincoln, was committed to the ultimate abolition of slavery, though he had no blueprint as to how it was to be achieved and acknowledged that it might take many decades. This, however, was enough for the states of the Deep South, which then left the Union. With the Lincoln administration refusing to accept secession, and the newly formed Confederacy insisting on the right to control the forts formerly owned by the Washington government but existing within its boundaries, the confrontation at Fort Sumter, with the Confederates firing the first shot, was the signal for the outbreak of civil war.20

The rôle of the economy here needs to be elucidated. It was not that there was a direct conflict between Southern slavery and Northern capitalism, since each could prosper together. Indeed each did prosper in these decades; the Northern and Southern economies were, to a significant degree, interdependent. However, economic growth deepened the commitment of each section to its labour-system. The processes of commercial development strengthened the attachment of the South to its agrarian economy, while at the same time furthering the development of capitalism (understood as entailing a widespread employment of wage-labour) in the North.

There were other economic processes at work, too. Some scholars working within or outside the Marxist tradition have noted the changing patterns of trade in the 1850s. Links between the Northeast and the Northwest grew stronger, with the development of a sophisticated railroad-network, for example, binding the regions as never before. The growing maturity and increasing integration of the Northern economy has seemed to many scholars to be linked to the region’s growing political integration, as demonstrated in the rise to dominance in virtually the entire North of the Republican Party. The question is, however, how the economic changes related to the political.

It is in the realm of party-politics that the answer is to be found. Within the North, the groups with the closest economic links to the South were probably the conservative Whigs, often revealingly referred to as ‘Cotton’ Whigs because of their attachment to, and dependence upon, the South. But as the importance of these economic ties diminished (at least in relative terms) so a brake upon the growth of antislavery sentiment in the North was removed. The result was to facilitate the Republican rise to power and to deepen Northern hostility to slavery.

The conflict between North and South, however, although rooted in economic practices, was essentially over values, or world-views. The values

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20. An account of these events can be found in many works. One of the best is in McPherson 1988, pp. 3–307.
that supported the free-labour (increasingly dominated by wage-work) society of the North came into collision with the values and practices needed to sustain slavery in the South. We have noted these values; they centred on the home, the family, the conscience, the potential for social mobility and economic development, the right to freedom of speech, the right of the majority to rule. Each either threatened or was threatened by the South. Sectional conflict and ultimately civil war would be the result.

VIII

The War witnessed the destruction of slavery and the freeing of more than three million slaves. This had not been a priority of the Lincoln administration at the outset. Lincoln, although insisting on the ultimate eradication of slavery, had had no clear understanding of the way in which this might be achieved. But in the War, the weaknesses of slavery, rooted in the reluctance of the slaves to be slaves, came decisively into play. The long-term constraint imposed by slavery on Southern economic development proved catastrophic for the Confederacy, which simply could not match the economic power of the North. Moreover, the opposition of the slaves to the régime resulted, in the final years of the War, in the disintegration of the Southern social system, as the slaves took advantage of unprecedented opportunities for flight. In their tens of thousands they escaped and joined the advancing Union armies. At this point the slaves were finally able to play a direct, rather than an indirect, rôle in the destruction of chattel-slavery in the United States.21

The result was in a real sense a bourgeois revolution. It was not that the Northern economy had had in plantation-slavery a major obstacle to its future development, whose removal had been necessitated by war. It was not even the case that the postbellum South would fall into line with the rest of the nation; instead, the South would be for three generations a backwater outside the national mainstream and, in stark contrast with the antebellum years, able to exert relatively little influence on the nation’s development. But the exclusion of the South from that mainstream provides the key to the rôle of the Civil War and the struggle over slavery. The demise of the Confederacy meant not merely the end of slavery but the triumph of Northern values, their incorporation into the very fabric of the nation. After the War the values of the Republican Party, which stressed the compatibility, indeed the inseparability, of democracy and capitalism, became the values of the nation. They achieved national hegemony.

This was not an economic gain in the sense of a readily measurable addition to wealth. But it was a legitimation of the economic system of the North and indeed the nation as a whole, from which the dominant groups in the nation would derive an incalculable benefit, economic, political and ideological. It would indeed complete the creation of a bourgeois republic in the United States.

References

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