



## **Social-Property Relations, Class-Conflict and the Origins of the US Civil War: Towards a New Social Interpretation\***

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### **Abstract**

The origins of the US Civil War have long been a central topic of debate among historians, both Marxist and non-Marxist. John Ashworth's *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* is a major Marxian contribution to a social interpretation of the US Civil War. However, Ashworth's claim that the War was the result of sharpening *political and ideological* – but not *social and economic* – contradictions and conflicts between slavery and capitalism rests on problematic claims about the rôle of slave-resistance in the dynamics of plantation-slavery, the attitude of Northern manufacturers, artisans, professionals and farmers toward wage-labour, and economic restructuring in the 1840s and 1850s. An alternative social explanation of the US Civil War, rooted in an analysis of the specific path to capitalist social-property relations in the US, locates the War in the growing contradiction between the social requirements of the expanded reproduction of slavery and capitalism in the two decades before the War.

### **Keywords**

origins of capitalism, US Civil War, bourgeois revolutions, plantation-slavery, agrarian petty-commodity production, independent-household production, merchant-capital, industrial capital

The Civil War in the United States has been a major topic of historical debate for almost over 150 years. Three factors have fuelled scholarly fascination with the causes and consequences of the War. First, the Civil War 'cuts a bloody gash across the whole record' of 'the American . . . genius for compromise and conciliation'.<sup>1</sup> The four years of armed conflict undermine claims that US capitalist democracy has the capacity to resolve any and all social conflicts

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1. Moore 1966, p. 113.

peacefully. Second, the Civil War marked two major phases in US socioeconomic development. Whether described as ‘agrarian’ and ‘industrial’, or ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, there is little debate that production and exchange in the US was radically transformed after the Civil War. Finally, the abolition of slavery during the War altered the social and economic position of African-Americans – the origins, course and outcome of the War was intimately linked to the changing character of race and racism in the US.

The existing historical literature on the origins of the Civil War grapples, directly or indirectly, with one central question – why did the existence and expansion of plantation-slavery become the central and irreconcilable political question in the 1840s and 1850s? Put another way, why had political leaders and the social groups they represented been able to reach enduring compromises, create stable *national* parties which competed for support in both the slave-South and ‘free labour’-North, and marginalise debate on slavery and its expansion before the mid-1840s? Why did the question of slavery-expansion become irrepressible afterwards, creating regionally based parties, leading to Southern secession and war?

Charles and Mary Beard<sup>2</sup> produced the last systematic, synthetic *social explanation* of the US Civil War – an explanation that situates the political conflicts leading to secession and war in socioeconomic processes and forces. According to the Beards, the antebellum industrial revolution unleashed a process of economic diversification and growth in the commercial Northeast and agrarian Northwest, while reinforcing cotton-monoculture and economic stagnation in the plantation-South. The divergent paths of economic development led to conflicts between Northeastern ‘business’-groups who wanted federally funded transport-construction (‘internal improvements’), a national banking and monetary system, public-land policies that discouraged agrarian expansion, and protective tariffs for US manufacturers; and Southern planters who opposed all of these policies. Caught between Northern business and Southern agriculture were the independent family-farmers of the Northwest, who opposed a protective tariff and national banks, but wanted inexpensive land and federally financed transportation-construction.

Prior to the 1840s, the Democratic Party built an agrarian alliance of Southern planters and Northwestern farmers against Northeastern businessmen grouped in the National-Republican and Whig parties. After the annexation of Texas in 1844, the Democratic alliance collapsed as the Northwest’s diversified agriculture was integrated into Northeastern commerce and manufacture. The new economic alignment led the slaveholders to oppose the

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2. Beard and Beard 1927, Chapters XV–XVIII.

free distribution of public lands to small farmers (Homestead Act) and federal subsidies of road, canal and railroad-construction. The new Republican Party of the 1850s brought together Northeastern business and Northwestern agriculture on a platform of protective tariffs, free homesteads, a federally subsidised transcontinental railroad, and ‘free soil’ – a Congressional ban on slavery’s expansion into the territories in the West.<sup>3</sup> The Republicans’ victory in 1860 led to the Civil War and the triumph of Northeastern business over both the Southern planters and the Northwestern farmers.

Beginning in the 1940s, historians identified a number of empirical problems with the Beards’ social explanation of the Civil War. Some<sup>4</sup> challenged the Beards’ claim that Northeastern business was united in support of national banks, protective tariffs and ‘free soil’. Merchants and manufacturers were often on opposite sides of the debates on monetary policy, tariffs and the expansion of slavery in the 1840s and 1850s. Other historians<sup>5</sup> documented long standing tensions within the Democratic-agrarian alliance between Northern family-farmers and Southern-slaveholding planters, differences that predate and explain the farmers’ support for the Republicans in the late 1850s.

Since the 1950s, two non-social explanations of the US Civil War have dominated historical writings. Both the ‘revisionist’<sup>6</sup> and ‘new political’<sup>7</sup> historians reject any attempt to provide a materialist explanation of the US Civil War. For the revisionists, the political conflicts leading to the Civil War were *repressible*. Antislavery and proslavery agitators forced the question of slavery-expansion onto the national-political arena. No insolvable conflict – political, ideological or economic – existed between the North and South. The political crisis that culminated in war could have been avoided if moderate and clear-sighted political leaders had displaced the ‘blundering generation’ of demagogic politicians who appealed to ‘sectional fanaticism’ in the 1840s and 1850s. Such a political leadership could have allowed a peaceful resolution of the minor differences that divided the North and South, avoiding four years of senseless and purposeless carnage.

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3. In the United States, new areas annexed through conquest or purchases (or some combination of both) were initially organised as ‘territorial governments’. While settlers in these territories elected legislatures, the president appointed territorial governors who had veto-power over territorial laws, and the territories did not have representatives in Congress. After achieving a certain population, territories applied for ‘statehood’ from Congress, which conferred the right to elect their own governors and legislatures and have representatives in Congress.

4. Foner 1941; Sharkey 1958; Unger 1964.

5. Berwanger 1967; Foner 1969; Morrison 1967.

6. Randall and Donald 1961; Craven 1966.

7. Holt 1969; Holt 1978; Holt 1999.

The ‘new political’ historians agree that there was no social foundation for the sectional conflict over the expansion of slavery into the Western territories in the 1850s. However, they reject the idea that blundering political leaders aggravated the sectional tensions which culminated in the Civil War. Instead, these historians argue that the sharp increase in Irish-Catholic migration in the two decades before the War produced new, ethno-cultural conflicts. The increasing polarisation of politics in the 1850s over the right of Catholic immigrants to become citizens and hold public office, and restrictions on the production and sale of alcohol, destroyed the national Whig Party. While neither nativism nor temperance remained at the centre of political life after 1855, the collapse of the Whigs opened the way to the development of sectional parties – the Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans. These new parties deepened sectional divisions, and opened the way to Lincoln’s election, Southern secession and war.

In the past three decades, there have been some small steps toward the construction of a new social interpretation of the US Civil War. The work of Eugene Genovese<sup>8</sup> on the slave-South inspired new attempts to locate the origins of the Civil War in broad social and economic developments. Eric Foner<sup>9</sup> revealed that the Republican rejection of slavery was rooted in their idealisation of the dynamic Northern capitalist economy of the 1840s and 1850s. More recently, the work of Charles Sellers<sup>10</sup> on the ‘market-revolution’ of the 1820s and 1830s has inspired Bruce Levine’s<sup>11</sup> and Christopher Clark’s<sup>12</sup> efforts to revive a social interpretation of the Civil War.

John Ashworth’s two-volume *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*<sup>13</sup> marks a qualitative breakthrough in the renewal of a social explanation of the US Civil War. Ashworth makes the regional uneven development of class-relations – plantation-slavery in the South and capitalist manufacture and commercial family-farming in the North – central to his analysis of the political and ideological conflicts that culminate in the Civil War. From his vigorously materialist perspective on politics, he provides a convincing critique of both revisionist and ‘new political’ historians. Ashworth acknowledges that political leaders in the 1840s and 1850s misperceived the motives and goals of their political opponents. However, these errors of perception and the deepening sectional conflict were not random and

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8. Genovese 1967.

9. Foner 1970.

10. Sellers 1991.

11. Levine 1992.

12. Clark 2006.

13. Ashworth 1995; Ashworth 2007.

irrational, but flowed from the political leaders' socially determined world-views. Ashworth also brilliantly analyses the rise and decline of ethno-cultural conflicts in the mid-1850s, demonstrating that these divisions need not have caused the disruption of the national political parties. Instead, the conflict over slavery and its expansion was the root-cause of the realignment of political and social forces that led to the War.

Arguing that 'the origins of the Civil War are best understood in terms derived from Marxism, but [that] existing Marxist historical writing has not yet adequately considered the problem',<sup>14</sup> Ashworth provides a provocative *political-ideological* explanation of the US Civil War. However, the *absence of a theoretically rigorous and historically concrete analysis of the origins of capitalism in the US* ultimately limits Ashworth's magisterial study. In what follows, we present a critique Ashworth's complex analysis of the social origins of the US Civil War. We conclude with an outline of an alternative social explanation of the US Civil War, based upon our analysis of the origins of capitalism in the US.<sup>15</sup>

### ***A critique of Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic***

#### *Ashworth's thesis*

For Ashworth, the US Civil War was the inevitable result of a political and ideological polarisation rooted in the growing uneven development between the slave-South and capitalist North over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, the social relations of capitalism and slavery made possible very different *ideological accommodations* to the real or potential challenges of the direct producers (wage-workers and slaves), which produced a sharpening political and ideological conflict between slaveholders and capitalists in the last decades of the antebellum republic. Ashworth takes great pains to argue that there were no direct *economic* contradictions between the development of capitalism and plantation-slavery. However, the *political and ideological* conflicts that culminated in secession and war 'can only be understood in terms of the differences between capitalist and slave modes of production'.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Ashworth 1995, p. x.

15. Post 1982; Post 1995; Post 2003; Post 2009.

16. Ashworth 1995, p. ix.

Ashworth argues that slavery was an inferior form of social labour to capitalism because of the slaves' continuous resistance to their unfree legal status. The masters' inability to accommodate this resistance led, not only to the South's economic underdevelopment, but the planters' profound political and ideological defensiveness in the face of an economically prosperous and ideologically self-confident North. Bi-sectional political parties were able to contain sectional conflicts over slavery and capitalism during the economic expansion of the 1820s and 1830s. The Democrats constructed a coalition of 'agriculturalists' that erased the difference between slave-holders and family-farmers; and the National Republicans/Whigs forged an alliance of merchants and large planters committed to political policies that could harmonise sectional and class-interests.

The economic expansion of the 1820s and 1830s unleashed a 'market-revolution' that radicalised Northern antislavery sentiment. Traditionally, republican politics in Britain and the US saw property-owners (merchants, manufacturers, planters, artisans, farmers) as capable of self-government, while the propertyless (slaves and wage-workers) were not. Early antislavery thought in the US defended 'free labour' – self-earned property – as morally and economically superior to both chattel and wage-'slavery'. According to Ashworth, abolitionists in the 1830s – and later the Free Soilers and Republicans in the 1840s and 1850s – embraced wage-labour as compatible with republican government and economic progress.

The new, militant antislavery politics of the abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s produced a defensive Southern radicalisation, leading to the suppression of free speech in the South and the struggle to secure new regions for slavery's expansion – the territories conquered from Mexico in the late 1840s, Kansas in the mid-1850s, and parts of Central America and the Caribbean in the late 1850s. The aggressive 'Slave Power' and its dominance of the federal government led, according to Ashworth, to a growing radicalisation of Northern public opinion where a majority embraced the call for 'free soil' – the ban on slavery's geographic expansion. New patterns of trade marginalised the forces of sectional compromise – the Northern Democrats and Conservative Whigs – opening the road to a political polarisation between antislavery Northern Republicans and proslavery Southern Democrats. The growing *political-ideological*, but not *economic-material* contradictions between slavery and capitalism culminated in the election of Lincoln in 1860, the slaveholders' bid for political independence and the Civil War – a bourgeois revolution that secured the dominance of liberal-bourgeois politics and ideology in the US.

John Ashworth's book represents a new benchmark for social historians of the US Civil War. His insistence that social and material factors rooted in the

different class-relations of slavery and capitalism led to the political crisis of the 1850s is a welcome alternative to claims that sectional fanaticism or ethno-religious conflicts allowed the slavery-controversy to dominate late-antebellum politics. Recognising that Northern and Southern political leaders seriously misperceived the goals and motivations of their sectional opponents at crucial junctures of the sectional crisis, Ashworth convincingly argues that these misperceptions were rooted in the growing divergences between capitalism and slavery. Similarly, he recognises the sharpening ethno-political conflict of the mid-1850s, but demonstrates that the slavery-expansion controversy – not the struggles over the naturalisation of immigrants and temperance – ultimately destroyed the bi-sectional Democratic and Whig parties.

However, key elements of his social interpretation of the origins of the Civil War are conceptually and historically flawed. Ashworth's claim that slavery was an inferior form of exploitation to capitalism because of the slaves' resistance to enslavement is theoretically and empirically questionable. Similarly, his argument that abolitionism and Republicanism embraced wage-labour, radicalising antislavery ideology and politics after the 1830s and *unleashing the sectional polarisation of the 1840s and 1850s*, is also open to challenge. Finally, his explanation of the marginalisation of the advocates of sectional compromise is inadequate.

#### *The roots of slavery's 'weaknesses'*

Central to Ashworth's social interpretation of the US Civil War is that slavery was 'a weaker form of exploitation than wage labour'<sup>17</sup> because of the slaves' resistance to their unfree legal status. First, 'the fact that so many slaves did not wish to be slaves, did not wish to see the fruits of their labour appropriated by another, and therefore attempted, in various ways to resist this exploitation'<sup>18</sup> led to Southern economic underdevelopment. The slaves' unwillingness to work and their masters' unease about trusting them with complex tools and machinery blocked technical innovation in plantation-agriculture and limited the use of slaves to simple, repetitive, unskilled tasks. Planters' fears about the lack of supervision of slaves in urban and industrial settings blocked the growth of cities and manufacturing. Second, Ashworth argues that slavery was much more vulnerable to class-conflict than capitalism. While the legal equality of capital and wage-labour masks exploitation and makes all labour appear as *paid* labour, the slaves' unfree legal status makes all labour appear to

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17. Ibid.

18. Ashworth 1995, p. 92.

be *unpaid* labour.<sup>19</sup> Not only do slaves not have the opportunities for individual social mobility available to wage-workers, there is no possibility of masters appealing to their slaves' shared world-view, a shared set of ideological values.

Ashworth's explanation of Southern economic development is a variant of what we have called the 'non-bourgeois civilisation model' of slavery.<sup>20</sup> Like Genovese and others, Ashworth places the slaves' lack of juridical freedom at the centre of his explanation of technical stagnation and economic underdevelopment in the antebellum South. Unfortunately, the notion that the slaves' unfreedom made them recalcitrant workers, incapable of developing skills, using complex tools or working in non-agricultural pursuits, is not historically accurate. Slaves in both classical antiquity and the plantation-regions of the Americas made up a large proportion and, in some areas, the majority of skilled urban and rural artisans. While sugar and tobacco-plantations, with their more extensive processing and storage-facilities, required more skilled workers than cotton-plantations, slaves could be found working on almost all New World plantations as skilled teamsters, blacksmiths, harness-makers, boatmen, stable and barrel-makers, sawyers and carpenters. On the Caribbean sugar-plantations, slave-artisans directed the complex process of boiling and curing sugar before the introduction of the vacuum-pan in the mid-nineteenth century. All of these crafts required extensive training, considerable technical knowledge and judgement, and often involved the slaves working under their own supervision.

Nor did the slaves' unfreedom prevent them from working effectively in non-agricultural pursuits. In ancient Greece and Rome, most slaves were employed in mining and urban handicrafts, where their labour could be utilised year round, rather than in agriculture, with its fluctuating seasonal labour-requirements. In the South, nearly one in twenty slaves worked in industrial settings (coal, lead and salt-mining, cotton-spinning and weaving, iron-smelting and forging, leather-tanning, tobacco, hemp and cloth and rope-making, lumbering). Not only did they work effectively with industrial machinery, there is little evidence that urban or industrial slaves were any more likely to flee their masters than slaves on rural plantations.

The notion that the slaves' unfree legal status made them recalcitrant, unmotivated and untrainable workers also tends to *idealise* the condition of legally free wage-workers under capitalism.<sup>21</sup> Unlike household-producers

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19. Marx 1974, pp. 42–3.

20. Most of what follows is drawn from Post 2003, pp. 303–10.

21. This is not surprising, given the origins of these arguments in the work of Adam Smith (Smith 1937, pp. 365–8), the founder of liberal economics, and John Cairnes (Cairnes 1968),

(peasants and artisans), neither slaves nor wage-labourers have control over or an interest in the outcome of the production-process. Both slaves and wage-workers confront a labour-process whose timing, pace and technical character have been organised by the non-producers. Thus, the problems of ‘labour-discipline’ and supervision – ensuring concerted work – exist under both slavery and capitalism. While the goals and forms of the slaves’ struggle differ from those of the wage-worker, many historians have noted the similarities between slaves’ and workers’ struggles in the production-process:

The conflict between master and slave took many forms, involving the organization of labour, the hours and pace of work, the sexual division of labour, and the composition of the labour force – all questions familiar to students of free workers. The weapons that workers employed in such conflicts – feigning ignorance, slowing the line, minimizing the stint, breaking tools, disappearing at critical moments, and, as a last resort, confronting their superiors directly and violently – suggest that in terms of workplace struggles, slaves and wage workers had much in common. Although the social relations of slave and wage labour differed fundamentally, much can be learned about slave life by examining how the work process informed the conflict between wage workers and their employers. For like reasons, the processes of production were as much a source of working class culture for slave workers as for free workers.<sup>22</sup>

Wage-workers’ lack of motivation, their indifference to the outcome of the production-process, has *not* been an obstacle to the introduction of new, complex, labour-saving machinery under capitalism. Rather than raising the level of skill and intelligence required of most workers, the division and simplification of tasks and the mechanisation of production have systematically lowered the general level of skill under capitalism over the past four centuries.<sup>23</sup> In sum, the slaves’ unfree legal status and her lack of motivation and commitment to the labour-process – features shared with wage-labourers under capitalism – cannot explain the absence of technical innovation in agriculture or the relative underdevelopment of urban industry in the antebellum South.

The claim that the absence of the possibility of individual social mobility under slavery made this form of social labour inferior to capitalism does not withstand historical interrogation. Few if any slaves in the plantation-South could hope to purchase their own freedom and become independent farmers

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an Irish liberal economist and opponent of British intervention on the Confederacy during the US Civil War.

22. Berlin 1998, p. 11.

23. Braverman 1974; Marx 1976, Chapter 15; Montgomery 1992; Thompson 1993.

or even slave-owners after 1700.<sup>24</sup> However, there were opportunities for individual slaves to ‘rise in the world’. While we need not accept their claim that such opportunities imbued a ‘Protestant work-ethic’ in Southern slaves, Fogel and Engerman<sup>25</sup> point out:

...slaves had the opportunity to rise within the social and economic hierarchy that existed under bondage. Field hands could become artisans or drivers. Artisans could be allowed to move from the plantation to town where they would hire themselves out. Drivers could move up to the position of head driver or overseer. Climbing the economic ladder brought not only social status, and sometimes more freedom; it also had significant payoffs in better housing, better clothing and cash bonuses.

Ashworth’s claim that slavery was an inferior form of exploitation because masters and slaves did not share common ideological values is also open to challenge. In his brilliant study of slave-life and culture, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*,<sup>26</sup> Eugene Genovese persuasively argues that *paternalism* provided a common set of ideological values for both masters and slaves. The planters were able to appeal to their slaves as members of an extended ‘family’, in which all members of the family had reciprocal, although different, responsibilities.<sup>27</sup> Just as capitalist appeals to shared ideological references – equality, freedom, democracy, individual opportunity – do not eliminate working-class resistance and struggle, nor did planters’ appeals to their ‘black family’ eradicate slave-resistance and struggle. Like all *hegemonic* world-views, planter-paternalism attempts to harmonise conflicting classes, but rarely succeeds in eliminating materially based conflict.

The roots of slavery’s weaknesses – technical stagnation in agriculture and underdevelopment of urban industry – are found, not in the resistance of the slaves, but in the structure of the master-slave social-property relation.<sup>28</sup> In both slavery and capitalism, the propertyless direct producers have no control over or stake in the outcome of production, making possible and necessary a centralised labour-process under the control of the non-labourers or their

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24. Breen and Innis 1980 describe one of the last examples of such a transformation before the consolidation of plantation-slavery.

25. Fogel and Engerman 1995, p. 149.

26. Genovese 1972, Book 1.

27. Ashworth 1995, p. 115, in fact discusses the social foundation for such a world-view in his analysis of the similarities between plantation-slavery and independent-household production: ‘The home tends to remain the center of production, with the characteristics of the family farm, or plantation’.

28. This section is drawn from Post 2003, pp. 310–18. The concept of social-property relations is drawn from Brenner 1985a and 1985b.

agents. The key difference between capitalism and slavery is that capitalists purchase the workers' *labour-power*, their ability to labour for a set period of time; while masters purchase the *labourer*, giving them an unlimited claim on the slaves' ability to work. Thus, slaves are 'means of production in human form', a *constant* element of the production-process.

The 'capitalisation of labour' has two crucial implications for the labour-process under slavery. First, the slave must be maintained whether or not they labour in order to preserve their value as a form of constant capital. Thus, the threat of unemployment, the main means by which capitalists discipline wage-labourers, is not available to the masters. Instead, they must rely on physical coercion to ensure that slaves labour. Even more importantly, the master-slave social-property relation makes technical innovation – in particular the replacement of human labour with new and more complex tools and machinery – an episodic process at best. Laying-off 'redundant workers' and expanding the size of the reserve-army of labour allows capitalists to easily adjust the size of their labour-force in order to adopt labour-saving tools and machinery. By contrast, masters could not easily 'expel labour from production' – they would need to find buyers for any surplus-slaves – and adopt labour-saving technology. Put simply, it was the fixed and inflexible costs of reproducing the slave-labour force – not the slaves' reluctance to labour – that prevented relatively continuous technical innovation under slavery. Generally, the introduction of new crops or expansion to new regions provided masters with the only opportunity to introduce labour-saving technology, fundamentally altering the relatively fixed relationship between labour, land and tools.

The structure of the master-slave social-property relation, rather than slave-resistance to bondage, also explains the underdevelopment of Southern cities and manufacturing. The absence of continuous technical innovation in plantation-slavery severely limited the market for manufactured tools and machinery in the South. The masters' need to ensure that their slaves were constantly working, even in the 'slack seasons' between cotton-crop cycles, encouraged plantation self-sufficiency in food and other consumer-goods. The resulting absence of a 'home-market' for industrial production, not the masters' fears of an urban environment, prescribed the growth of industry and cities in the South.

The distinctive structure of the master-slave social-property relation shaped 'rules of reproduction'<sup>29</sup> of this form of social labour that led, inexorably, to *geographic expansion*. Unable to reduce the amount of necessary labour that

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29. Brenner 1989.

the slave performed through mechanisation, the planters had few options to increase the volume of production or reduce costs in the face of world-market competition. On the one hand, the planters could attempt to increase the intensity and pace of work by increasing the acreage each slave or slave-gang tilled in a given period of time. On the other, the planters could add more slaves and more land (preferably more fertile lands) in order to increase output and reduce costs. In sum, geographic expansion was the *necessary form of the expanded reproduction of the master-slave relation of production*.

Ashworth points out that the planters articulated their struggle to secure the political and legal conditions for slavery's geographic expansion in very different terms. While the planters correctly equated the geographic containment of slavery with its eventual destruction, they argued this on ground of political representation – 'the political need for additional slave-states' and profitability: '... the slave population was increasing at a rate which, in some parts of the South at any rate, was highly alarming.... They had serious doubts whether the anticipated number of slaves, if confined to the present boundaries of the South, could be profitably used by their masters.'<sup>30</sup> Ashworth, however, doubts whether the geographic expansion of slavery was either *necessary* or *possible* in the late-antebellum period. Geographic expansion was unnecessary because 'vast supplies of land were available in the South in 1860'.<sup>31</sup> Ashworth also questions the *possibility* of slavery-expansion because of natural conditions: 'Only where large-scale agriculture was possible, in highly favorable climatic conditions and where there was massive overseas demand for the staple crops produced, did the institution thrive and expand. Thus it proved unable to compete across much of the West even where white opinion was utterly indifferent to the welfare of the African-American population.'<sup>32</sup> The 'vast supplies of land available in the South' were primarily in the 'upcountry' (hill and mountain) and pine-barrens. The inferior soil-fertility and rough terrain made large-scale plantation-agriculture difficult, leading the planters to leave these areas to non-slaveholding white farmers who engaged in subsistence-production before the Civil War.<sup>33</sup> Nor were there any 'natural limits' of climate and soil to slavery. Slavery, in both classical antiquity and the Americas, had been utilised successfully in a wide variety of crops, including grains, in the grazing of livestock, and mining. While the Western territories may not have been suitable for cotton, tobacco or hemp, there were ample

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30. Ashworth 2007, p. 49.

31. Ashworth 2007, p. 148.

32. Ashworth 2007, p. 634.

33. Hahn 1983, Part I.

opportunities for masters to use slaves in ranching and mining.<sup>34</sup> In sum, the geographic expansion of slavery into the Western territories – and beyond to Cuba and Central America – was both *possible and necessary* for the future of slavery as a distinct form of social labour.

### *Abolitionism, Republicanism and wage-labour*

For Ashworth, the abolitionist and Republican embrace of wage-labour as compatible with republican institutions produced a more aggressive and radical Northern antislavery sentiment and politics, *which sparked the growing polarisation over the geographic expansion of slavery in the two decades before the Civil War*. For Ashworth, ‘the growth of capitalism in the North generated the economic critique of southern slavery’<sup>35</sup> that brought a radical ideological and political shift – away from viewing wage-labour as ‘wage-slavery’, a social form incompatible with the stability of republican institutions.

Ashworth’s case concerning the abolitionists rests on a rather thin foundation. He cites only one abolitionist – Lydia Maria Child – who explicitly speaks about ‘labourers’ who work for wages as distinct from self-employed artisans and farmers.<sup>36</sup> His case for the Republicans rests on stronger evidence. Most Republicans, like Lincoln, viewed wage-labour as superior to slave-labour because free workers could rise into the ranks of the self-employed. However, Ashworth cites other Republicans who argued that, whether or not workers remained wage-labourers their entire life, wage-labour was superior to slavery and a sound foundation for republican institutions.<sup>37</sup>

Ashworth understands that the Republican vision of wage-labour did not embrace large-scale, mechanised production with armies of unskilled workers. Instead: ‘When Republicans extolled their society as one in harmony with human nature, it was the small shop, the village artisan and the small-scale manufacturing enterprise with an average of perhaps ten employees, they had in mind. This was the wage labour system as Republicans understood it on the eve of the Civil War.’<sup>38</sup> However, the Republican vision of a ‘free labour’-society not only envisioned *small-scale* production, but *manufacturing*, where skilled workers still organised and controlled the labour-process. In his study of debates in antebellum political economy, Allen Kaufman<sup>39</sup> argued that ‘the

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34. Genovese 1967, pp. 251–64, presents the classic critique of the ‘natural limits’-thesis.

35. Ashworth 1995, p. 115.

36. Ashworth 1995, pp. 165–8.

37. Ashworth 2007, pp. 267–97.

38. Ashworth 2007, p. 298.

39. Kaufman 1982, pp. 43–4, emphasis added.

economists of the American school’ – Daniel Raymond, Matthew Carey and Henry Carey who helped to shape the Northern Whig and Republican world-view – did not equate the promotion of *manufacture* with what we understand as *industrialisation*:

Both processes conjure in our imagination the emergence of the factory system, the formation of an industrial working class... But the crucial distinction between the American school’s concept of that process and our own (which consequently differentiates their notion of promoting manufacturing from our notion of industrialization) is that for the American school the *labourer was not separated from the direct control of the production process*. Certainly, these theorists accepted the accumulation of land and capital as a natural consequence of increasing wealth and in so doing underwrote the formation of the working class. However, they hoped to prevent the development of an impoverished working class by restricting and ensuring its skill composition. The American school could thus assume that, over time, independent labour would fundamentally structure the economy. In this theory capital neither organised production for its own profit nor acquired any productive characteristics...

Put another way, it was not the small scale of production that Republicans idealised, but the skilled workers’ control over the labour-process – their *independence* from capital in the organisation of production. The degradation of slavery was not simply the slaves’ unfreedom or their inability to experience individual upward social mobility, but that they were subject to the will of their masters in the plantation-labour process.

The Republican vision of skilled wage-labour as a form of *independent labour* was an accurate ‘mental road map of lived experience’<sup>40</sup> of capitalist manufacture – with its *formal subsumption of labour to capital*<sup>41</sup> – in the antebellum US. With the exception of the cotton-textile industry, skilled workers organised and directed almost all of antebellum Northern capitalist manufacturing.<sup>42</sup> Even more importantly, the vast majority of antebellum manufacturing capitalists had emerged from the ranks of the artisanal petty-producers.<sup>43</sup> Even after the Civil War, skilled workers often controlled the labour-process and hired and supervised apprentices and helpers in the production of iron, steel and machinery.<sup>44</sup>

For the Republicans, the containment of slavery, a Homestead Act and a protective tariff would promote the growth of manufacturing – ensuring the

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40. Fields 1990, p. 110.

41. Marx 1976, Chapter 14, Appendix.

42. Taylor 1951, pp. 207–20; Clark 1929, pp. 367–76.

43. Beckert 1993, Chapter 2; Livesay and Porter 1971; Wilentz 1984, Chapter 3.

44. Clawson 1980; Montgomery 1992.

continued independence of the skilled worker in command of the labour-process, and short-circuit the emergence of a permanent, potentially politically-radical proletariat in the US. According to Beckert,<sup>45</sup> most manufacturers in New York and the rest of the North embraced this vision in the 1850s, and

believed in the mutual interest of capital and labour, a belief that came naturally to a group of employers in close contact with their workers. They expected that for skilled, temperate, and native-born workers, wage labour was to be merely a way station en route to economic independence. If jobs were lacking, agricultural expansion in the West would provide a new route to realise their independence. As long as there was opportunity, there would be no permanent proletariat, and, correspondingly, no permanent poverty. Opportunity, as industrialists saw it, was a right of the citizens of the republic.

The emergence of specifically capitalist social-property relations in the North did not create a radically new critique of slavery. Most of the abolitionist and Republican political, economic and moral arguments against slavery were present in the debates over the admission of Missouri in 1819–21. However, the development of capitalism in the North – the result of the transformation of Northern rural-household production – made *the demand for the geographic containment of slavery* the ‘common sense’ of the majority of Northern farmers, manufacturers, artisans and skilled workers in the 1840s and 1850s. These new social relations of production also created an irreconcilable political conflict over the future class-relations of the geographic expansion of commodity-production.

#### *Economic transformation and political crisis*

Ashworth argues that, while the economic expansion of the 1820s and 1830s allowed ‘sectional peace’ and the marginalisation of debate on slavery’s existence and expansion on a national level, the growth of the 1840s and 1850s thrust this debate to the centre of the political stage and marginalised all political forces seeking ‘sectional’ compromise. The growth of commerce, the ‘market-revolution’ of the 1820s and 1830s, ‘inevitably’<sup>46</sup> brought the growth of capitalism in the North, while reinforcing the dominance of slavery in the South. By the 1840s and 1850s, the growing economic gap between the North and South fuelled both pro- and antislavery political agitation. By that point, the patterns of interregional trade had also shifted as a result of canal and railroad-construction, strengthening ties between Eastern industry and

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45. Beckert 1993, p. 73.

46. Ashworth 1995, p. 79.

Western agriculture. Because ‘the economic ties between North and South had traditionally operated as a counter-tendency’ to a polarisation over slavery, with the weakening of these economic ties ‘a barrier to the further growth of anti-slavery in the North was removed’.<sup>47</sup> The social groups enmeshed in these economic ties – primarily Conservative Whigs and Northern Democrats – were weakened politically.

Ashworth’s argument that the growth of markets inevitably led to the development of capitalism in the North essentially reverses the historical and theoretical sequence of causation – *it was the growth of capitalism that generated the growth of markets, not vice-versa*. Although he never explicitly discusses the mechanism by which commercial development leads to capitalism, Ashworth’s descriptions of how expanding markets lead to wage-labour is compatible with what Brenner<sup>48</sup> and Meiksins-Wood<sup>49</sup> have called the ‘neo-Smithian’ or ‘commercialisation’-model of the origins of capitalism. In this model, the growth of trade provides new opportunities for independent producers – land-owning farmers unencumbered by legal restrictions on their freedom (serfdom) – to specialise output, introduce labour-saving technology and accumulate land, animals and tools in order to maximise income and reduce costs. As these profit-maximising farmers specialise output, they cease to produce much of their own subsistence (other than food), creating markets for manufacturers of consumer-goods. The farmers’ continuous search for labour-saving tools and machinery also creates markets for specialised producers of capital-goods. Competition leads to deepening social inequality in the countryside, with successful farmers accumulating land and capital, and unsuccessful farmers losing land and becoming wage-labourers in agriculture and industry.

The historical record of ‘peasant-agriculture’ in pre-industrial Europe (and most of the world prior to the late-twentieth century) and the colonial and antebellum US directly contradicts the causal predictions of the ‘neo-Smithian’ or ‘commercialisation’-model.<sup>50</sup> As long as the independent farmers are able to obtain, maintain and expand landed property outside of market-competition, they are under no compulsion to specialise output, introduce new techniques or accumulate land and capital. When prices are rising, independent-household producers increase the production of physical surpluses to sell in order to purchase the items of consumption which they or their neighbours cannot

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47. Ashworth 2007, pp. 623–4.

48. Brenner 1977.

49. Meiksins-Wood 1999.

50. For pre-industrial Europe, see Brenner 1985b. For the colonial and antebellum US, see Post 1995 and Post 2009, pp. 458–62, 471–4.

produce. When prices fall, such producers simply cut back the production of surpluses and restrict their consumption. They are, however, under no threat of losing their possession of landed property if they fail to specialise output, introduce cost (and labour-)saving tools and machinery, and accumulate land and capital. Only when the conditions under which household-producers obtain, maintain and expand landholdings are transformed – when producers are compelled to ‘sell to survive’ – do household-producers specialise, innovate and accumulate. Such ‘pre-capitalist commodity-production’ – independent-household production – was the dominant form of rural production in much of the rural North before the 1840s. As we will see, the transformation of this form of social labour into petty-commodity production – where household-producers were subject to ‘market-coercion’ – was not the ‘inevitable’ consequence of the growth of commerce, but of class-conflicts over conditions of landownership that began in the 1780s and culminated in the 1830s.

Ashworth’s analysis of shifts in interregional trade in the 1840s and 1850s, which explains the growing irrelevance of the Northern Democrats and Conservative Whigs, is also open to historical challenge. Ashworth essentially reprises Douglass North’s<sup>51</sup> thesis that Southern export of cotton fuelled economic growth in the US in the 1820s and 1830s:

... a major consequence of the expansive period of the 1830’s was the creation of conditions that made possible industrialization in the Northeast. Transport facilities developed to connect the East and West more efficiently; a new market for western staples developed in the rapidly industrializing East and, sporadically, in Europe. The dependence of both the Northeast and the West on the South waned.

Albert Fishlow’s<sup>52</sup> research challenged North’s claim that the completion of canals and railroads in the late 1830s shifted the main axes of interregional trade from West to South (food-cash) and South to East (cotton-shipping) to West to East (food-manufactured goods). Fishlow firstly discovered that the bulk of Western foodstuffs marketed during the 1820s and 1830s were destined for Eastern urban markets. The Southern plantations were already self-sufficient in foodstuffs. Food shipped down the Mississippi River was re-exported from the port of New Orleans to New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Even more important, investments in railroads and other transportation-facilities tended to follow, rather than lead to increased

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51. North 1961, pp. 69–70.

52. Fishlow 1965a, Chapters III–IV; Fishlow 1965b, pp. 187–200. Ashworth 2007, p. 621, n. 294, cites this work.

commodity-production in agriculture. Put another way, the building of railroads and canals did not *cause* the growth of markets and commodity-production, instead they were its *consequence*.

In sum, Ashworth's analysis of the social roots of the growing political and ideological polarisation over slavery-expansion is highly problematic. Slavery's economic weaknesses were not rooted in the resistance of the slaves, but in the structure of the master-slave social-property relation – whose 'rules of reproduction' made *geographic expansion* the necessary form of the expanded reproduction of this form of social labour. Nor did the abolitionists and Republicans substantially radicalise antislavery arguments with an embrace of wage-labour, sparking the sectional polarisation of the 1840s and 1850s. The Republicans preserved the traditional republican hostility toward a propertyless, impoverished class of wage-labourers subject to the will of others in their work-lives. Their innovation, following the American-school economists, was to envision a society where manufacturing – in which skilled labourers organised and controlled the labour-process – prospered under the protection of tariffs and a Homestead Act. The development of Northern capitalism was not the 'inevitable' result of the growth of trade, nor did patterns of interregional trade change in the way Ashworth asserts in his account of the marginalisation of the forces of compromise. Ultimately, all of these problems flow from the absence of a *theoretically rigorous and empirically rooted analysis of the origins of capitalism in the US*. Lacking such an analysis, Ashworth's important insights into the political and ideological dimensions of the conflicts leading to the Civil War remain unexplained.

### **Toward a new social interpretation of the US Civil War**

#### *The transformation of Northern agriculture*<sup>53</sup>

The roots of the catastrophic class-polarisation over the social character of the expansion of commodity-production in the US during the 1840s and 1850s are found in the transformation of Northern rural-household production between 1800 and the late 1830s. As Meiksins-Wood<sup>54</sup> points out, the British expansion into the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the first example of a specifically capitalist imperialism – where the reproduction of capitalist social-property relations governed the process of

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53. This section is based on Post 1995, pp. 415–36; and Post 2009, pp. 464–6, 471–80.

54. Meiksins-Wood 2003, Chapters 4–5.

geographic expansion. However, the first experiment in capitalist imperialism *was unable to recreate capitalist social-property relations in British North America*. Although the British state granted legal title to wide swaths of land in the North-American colonies to private individuals and corporations, the undeveloped colonial state-institutions, in particular the military, made it impossible for land-owners to enforce effectively their claims to landed property. As a result, the majority of rural households in the North (and the majority of non-slaveholding households in the South) were ‘squatters’ – occupying land without legal title or payment. Even when landholders were able to force squatters to purchase land, the relative strength of the farmers rather than market-forces set the price of land. As a result, most rural households were able to obtain, maintain and expand land-holdings without successfully competing in the market. In sum, while large-scale commodity-production on the basis of plantation-slavery was established in the British Caribbean and Southern-mainland colonies by 1700, the British were *unable to reproduce capitalist social-property relations in the Northern colonial countryside*.

Free from ‘market-coercion’, rural households in the Northern British mainland-colonies organised production the way peasants – independent-household producers – had for millennia. Northern farmers engaged in ‘safety-first’ agriculture, raising a wide variety of crops and animals for the consumption of themselves and for non-market exchange with their neighbours, marketing only physical surpluses. Technological change was highly episodic, with North-American farmers using tools and methods that contemporary capitalist farmers in Britain had already abandoned. Land-holdings tended to become fragmented over time as land was divided among adult sons who formed their own households. Only the relatively continuous expropriation of Native Americans, which provided new lands for European colonial settlement, prevented the sorts of demographic collapses that resulted from fragmented landholdings in continental Europe in the seventeenth century. In sum, the Northern farmers’ ability to obtain, maintain and expand landholdings without successful commodity-production freed them from any compulsion to specialise output, introduce labour-saving tools and methods, and accumulate land.

Colonial merchants and land-speculators constantly sought to increase the Northern farmers’ volume of commodity-production and enforce legal claims to lands on the frontier – to augment mercantile profits from buying and selling agricultural goods and land – before the American Revolution. However, as long as the colonial militia remained small and staffed mostly by small farmers, independent-household producers were able to obtain and

keep land at no, or minimal, cost. Thus, they were able to continue marketing only the physical surpluses they and their neighbours did not consume.

The American Revolution and its immediate aftermath radically changed the relationship of forces between the Northern farmers and the merchants and speculators. State-government requisitions of food, cloth and other supplies usually produced and consumed in Northern rural households disrupted their non-market reproduction during the War. More and more Northern farmers fell into debt to local merchants to purchase goods that they had previously produced themselves. These debts became particularly burdensome after the War, as newly independent Northern state-government raised land-taxes to fund the enormous public debt accrued to finance the Revolutionary War. The combined growth of debts and taxes forced Northern households to market larger-and-larger portions of both their subsistence and surplus-output in order to maintain their landed property in the 1780s.

The threat of the loss of possession of landed property as the result of debts and taxes produced a wave of rural unrest in the 1780s and 1790s. Beginning with Massachusetts' Shay's Rebellion in 1787, Northern farmers physically confronted local and federal courts, tax-collectors and land-speculators in defence of their self-earned – non-market-appropriated – landed property. The new federal state, the product of the merchant and planters' 'Constitutional Settlement', was able to create a national army capable of defeating the Northern independent-household producers and *enforcing legal claims to landed property*. By closing off access to cheap or inexpensive land on the frontier, the merchants' newly established political hegemony ensured that the farmers marketed both the 'surplus' and portions of their 'subsistence'-output. Put simply, farmers in the Northeastern US became dependent upon successful market-competition for their economic survival – they became agrarian petty-commodity producers in the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

The class-struggles of the 1780s and 1790s effectively ended independent-household production in the original area of colonial settlement, but did not spell the end of this form of social labour in the US. The dominance of plantation-slavery in the South allowed the reproduction of independent-household production among non-slaveholders in the region. In the Ohio Valley and Great Plains, independent production developed as Native Americans were 'removed' and white settlers occupied land at little or no cost. Even when the federal public-land system gave legal title to land-companies, 'squatters' were able to organise 'claims-clubs' to force landowners to sell the land to the settlers at well below market-prices. As a result, most farmers in the Northwest prior to the 1830s were able to market only physical surpluses and produce most of their own food, clothing and simple tools.

However, the outcome of the class-conflicts of the 1780s and 1790s sharply limited the reproduction of independent-household production in the Northwest. In particular, the development of the federal public-land system transformed the conditions under which household-producers obtained, maintained and expanded landed property in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. As Native Americans were expelled, the federal public-land office surveyed and auctioned land in the trans-Allegheny West. While minimum prices and acreage were progressively reduced during the antebellum period, no maximum price or acreage-limits were ever imposed. Federal land-auctions promoted successive waves of land-speculation during the antebellum period, as land-companies, railroad and canal-companies and wealthy individuals bought up large tracts of land for profitable resale to actual settlers. Particularly in the 1830s, settlers found themselves either having to obtain mortgages to purchase land (older farmers with some capital), or become temporary tenants in order to accumulate enough cash for a down-payment (younger farmers with no capital).

The commercial depression of 1837–42 not only left most farmers in the Northwest with crushing debts accrued to obtain land, but led to a sharp increase in state-taxation. Most Northern state-governments had subsidised canal and railroad-construction with public funds. As railroad and canal-companies failed, state-governments were forced to raise taxes – in particular, taxes on landed property – and expand the numbers of tax-collectors and assessors in order to fund their public debts in the 1840s.

Increased land-prices, the burden of mortgages and rising taxes completed the transformation of Northern rural-household production in the two decades before the War. Payment of debts and taxes became the conditions for obtaining, maintaining and expanding landed property in the Ohio Valley and Great Plains 1840s and 1850s. To obtain sufficient cash to meet obligations, farmers were compelled to specialise output, introduce new and labour-saving tools and methods, and accumulate landholdings. Put another way, Northwestern rural households in the two decades before the Civil War found themselves in the same position as Northeastern farmers after 1800 – they had to engage in successful market-competition in order to survive as property-owning agrarian producers. The result was the ‘agricultural revolution’ of the 1840s and 1850s – the growth in the size and proportion of output produced as commodities, increasing specialisation in cash-crops, rising labour-productivity with the introduction of new seeds, fertilisers and improved implements and machinery, and growing social inequality among farm-households.

The completion of the transformation of Northern farmers from independent-household to petty-commodity producers was the main cause of

the sharpened pace of capitalist-manufacturing growth in the two decades before the Civil War. As Northern farmers were compelled to ‘sell to survive’, they became a growing home-market for capitalist-produced consumer and capital-goods. Family-farmers specialising in cash-crops found themselves purchasing a wide variety of consumer goods (cloth, shoes and boots, etc.) which they and their neighbours had previously produced. In their struggle to reduce production-costs through technical innovation, farmers began to purchase the most advanced tools and machinery, rather than producing these implements themselves or procuring them from local blacksmiths. The importance of the rural home-market on capitalist industrialisation is evident in the development of the US ‘agro-industrial complex’.<sup>55</sup> Unlike Britain, cotton-textile and shoe and boot-production were not central to the US industrial revolution. Instead, industries producing farm-machinery, tools and supplies, and processing agricultural raw materials (meat-packing, leather-tanning, canning, flour-milling, baking, etc.) were the axis of US industrialisation in the mid-nineteenth century.

*From merchant to industrial capital*

The transformation of Northern agriculture – the subordination of rural-household production to the discipline of competitive markets – and the subsequent formation of a home-market for industrial capital also brought about a radical alteration in the structure of the US economy as a whole. Before the crisis of 1837–42, the dominance of noncapitalist forms of social production in all regions of the US – plantation-slavery in the South, independent-household production in the North – made the activities of merchant-capital the main stimulus to commodity-production and circulation. Northern and Southern merchants and bankers financed slave-based cotton-cultivation and organised the sale of raw cotton to textile-manufacturers in New England and Great Britain.<sup>56</sup> Small and medium-sized merchants across the Northwest gathered up agricultural surpluses for shipment through New Orleans to the Eastern urban centers.<sup>57</sup> Land-speculators purchased land from the federal government at public auction and resold to family-farmers in the North and planters in the South.<sup>58</sup>

The dominance of merchant-capital in the US prior to the 1840s was rooted in the noncapitalist character of commodity-production and the resulting

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55. Headlee 1991, pp. 28–38; Post 1982, pp. 121–6; Pudup 1983.

56. Foner 1941, Chapters 1–2; Woodman 1968, pp. 30–50.

57. Clark 1966, Chapters I–II; Fishlow 1965b.

58. Opie 1991, Chapters 4–5.

shallow social division of labour.<sup>59</sup> The dominance of merchant-capital required no specific social-property relations, only the production and circulation of commodities. As a result, the geographic expansion of plantation-slavery was a *spur* to the growth of commodity-circulation in the US before the mid-1840s.<sup>60</sup> Growing exports of slave-produced cotton to Britain allowed Northern merchants to accumulate capital directly from the cotton-trade, and to import British capital. The accumulated merchant-capital fuelled the continued geographic expansion of commodity-production in the US through the 1830s, as merchants financed the purchase of land and slaves in the South and provided capital for land and transport-infrastructure speculation in the North.<sup>61</sup>

The fruit of land-speculation in the Northwest was the completion of the subordination of rural-household producers to ‘market-discipline’ in the 1840s and 1850s. The dominance of agrarian petty-commodity production in the North created a home-market for industrial capital, *qualitatively transforming* the US economy as a whole. Put another way, the *unintended consequence* of the merchants’ pursuit of their own, *noncapitalist* strategy for reproduction – buying land cheap and selling it dear – created the condition for the development of industrial capitalism in the US. After c. 1837–42, the activities of manufacturers and commercial family-farmers became the main stimulus of commodity-production and circulation. The geographic expansion of agrarian petty-commodity production encouraged the growth of capitalist manufacturing of capital and consumer-goods, while the growth of manufacturing and cities induced further rural specialisation, innovation and accumulation. These new social-property relations not only stimulated increased investment in railroads, but transformed the rôle of Northern rural merchants. Large, specialised grain and livestock-merchants located in the growing rail, river and lake-cities of the Ohio Valley and Great Plains displaced local merchant shop-keepers who had gathered up marketable surpluses and often prepared them for shipping (milling, meat-packing). Most Western grain and livestock-merchants became agents of manufacturing capitalists in flour-milling and meat-packing during the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>62</sup>

The transformation of Northern social-property relations deepened the social division of labour and led to the subordination of merchant to industrial capital. After the crisis of 1837–42, Northern merchants increasingly became agents of manufacturing capitalists, and manufacturers became financially

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59. Marx 1981, Chapter 20.

60. Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983, pp. 3–25.

61. North 1956; North 1961, Chapter VII.

62. Clark 1966, Chapters III–VII, X–XIII.

independent of the merchants, with banks becoming the main source of credit for both manufacturers and farmers.<sup>63</sup> While the merchant-capital's condition of existence was the exchange of commodities independently of social-property relations, the dominance of industrial capital required *capitalist* or *petty-commodity* social-property relations. Thus, as industrial capital became the dominant form of capital in the 1840s and 1850s, the geographic expansion of plantation-slavery became an *obstacle* to the development of capitalism in the US.

*The social origins of the sectional crisis*

The roots of the catastrophic political crisis that culminated in the US Civil War are found in the conflict between the social and political conditions of the continued development of capitalist manufacturing and plantation-slavery after 1840. The development of capitalism in the US rested on *the continuous expansion of agrarian petty-commodity production* – household-production subject to ‘market-coercion’ that compelled producers to specialise, innovate and accumulate, providing a mass home-market for industrial-capitalist production. The expansion of plantation-slavery – *the necessary form of the expanded reproduction of this form of social labour* – was incompatible with the development of petty-commodity and capitalist production in the regions where it was dominant. In sum, the social and economic contradictions between the development of capitalism and slavery after 1840 produced the growing radicalisation of Northern and Southern public opinion, the marginalisation of the advocates of sectional compromise and the collapse of the nationally organised Whig and Democratic parties.<sup>64</sup>

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63. Livesay and Porter 1971.

64. While Ashworth characterises plantation-slavery as a ‘mode of production’, we follow Ellen Meiksins-Wood (Meiksins-Wood 1988, Chapter I) in viewing slavery as a form of social labour whose ‘logic of process’ differs depending on the social forms in which it was embedded. While we are agnostic on the historical debate between Meiksins-Wood (Meiksins-Wood 1988, Chapter II) and de Ste. Croix (de Ste. Croix 1981, Chapters III and IV) over whether slavery was the dominant form of social labour in the Ancient-Greek city-states, it is clear that the historical dynamics of ancient and modern slavery were different. One could argue that slave-owning planters in the Caribbean and Southern colonies responded more directly to market-imperatives emanating from capitalist Britain than the independent-household producers in the Northern British colonies. Clearly, the slave-plantation economies responded to these market-imperatives in a noncapitalist manner. However, their subordination to a capitalist world-market clearly marked these societies. In sum, we identify a specific historical contradiction between the social conditions of the expanded reproduction of plantation-slavery and capitalism in the US in the mid-nineteenth century, rather than a timeless, structural antagonism between slave and capitalist modes of production. We thank Ellen Meiksins-Wood, whose comments on an earlier draft of this essay brought this issue to our attention.

As we have seen, the structure of the master-slave social-property relation was inimical to the growth of industry in the South. On the one hand, the slaves' status as 'means of production in human form' made it difficult for masters to expel labour in order to introduce labour-saving tools and machinery, limiting the market for industrially produced capital-goods. On the other, the masters' need to continuously employ their slaves encouraged plantation self-sufficiency in food and clothing, limiting the market for industrially produced consumer-goods. Nor was the dominance of plantation-slavery compatible with the development of commercial family-farming – agrarian petty-commodity production. The planters were able to use their superior financial resources to appropriate the most fertile and best located lands, leaving only the hill-regions and pine-barrens available at no or low cost to non-slaveowning white family-farmers. As land-owners, the planters sought to maintain low land-taxes in the South. As a result, Southern family-farmers were under no compulsion to specialise output, technically innovate or accumulate. Put simply, the geographic expansion of plantation-slavery would have prevented the development of agrarian petty-commodity production in the Western territories, retarding the development of capitalism in the United States.

To be clear, this argument does not imply either 'that northern capitalism had... come to a grinding halt in 1860, immobilised by the existence of Southern slavery'<sup>65</sup> or that the continued existence of plantation-slavery *where it existed* in 1861 would have led to a crisis of Northern capitalism.<sup>66</sup> Our thesis, rather, is that capitalism and slavery in their *continued* development after 1840 were incompatible. On the one hand, the continued development of slavery *required* geographic expansion into new territories – a geographic expansion that knew no 'natural limits'. On the other, US capitalism's expanded reproduction *required* the geographic expansion of petty-commodity social-property relations in agriculture. Put directly, the social-property relations of plantation-slavery and agrarian petty-commodity production *could not coexist*. One or the other set of social-property relations had to dominate the geographic expansion of agricultural production in the US after 1840, making the question of the social character of geographic expansion an explosive and irresolvable issue on the political terrain in the 1840s and 1850s.

#### *Mercantile hegemony and the second party system, c. 1828–44*

If we view the economy as a matrix of social relations – between people and between people and nature – then:

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65. Ashworth 2007, p. 647.

66. Ashworth 2007, p. 647, n. 36, mistakenly attributes these arguments to us in Post 1982.

The historical development of the relations of production and exchange formed a field of constraint and possibility within which political interests and action took shape. It permitted a wide range of perception, motive, and choice and a sphere of action that is properly political. Political action and ideology were neither simply contingent nor the expression of idealised 'material interests' but resulted from the active response of historical actors to these complex and evolving processes.<sup>67</sup>

Before the 1840s, merchant-capital's dominance in the US social formation made possible the specific alliances of class-forces organised in the Democratic and National-Republican/Whig parties and the marginalisation of national debate on slavery-expansion. The resulting political hegemony of the merchant-class permitted them to impose their structural *indifference* to the social relations of commodity-production upon national politics, suppressing any debate on the potentially disruptive question of slavery's existence and expansion for the twenty-five years after the Missouri crisis.

The Jacksonian Democrats included within their alliance, not only the Northern independent-household producers and Southern small and medium planters, but also Northern land-speculators.<sup>68</sup> The speculators' disinterest in whether family-farmers or slave-owning planters purchased land and produced commodities melded well with the Jacksonian world-view, which erased the class-distinctions among 'agrarians'. Politically, states' rights, the abolition of the Bank of the United States,<sup>69</sup> low land-prices (but not the abolition of the sale of public lands) and opposition to protective tariffs united the Democratic alliance. The Democrats' opposition to federal-government regulation (banks and corporations, state-rights) and embrace of geographic expansion made 'freedom' the continual duplication of a 'timeless present' without 'customary restraints' across space. Such a world-view captured the lived experience of *extensive growth* of the various noncapitalist social groups – land-speculators, middling planters and subsistence-farmers – that made up the Democratic coalition.<sup>70</sup>

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67. Tomich 1990, p. 286.

68. Pessen 1978, Chapter 11; Hammond 1957, Chapter 12.

69. Land-speculators and subsistence-farmers had very different goals in their struggle to abolish central banking in the US in the 1820s and 1830s. Like the Democratic planters, the subsistence-farmers believed that the destruction of the Bank of the United States would be a first step towards the end of all banks, paper money and the scourge of land and commodity-speculation. The land-speculators, however, wanted to end central banking restrictions on state-banks in order to increase the money-supply and promote inflation of the land and commodity-prices.

70. Wilson 1977, p. 201.

The National-Republican and Whig parties brought together a political alliance of manufacturers, urban artisans, commercial farmers, and large cotton, tobacco and hemp-planters under the leadership of Northern and Southern merchants and bankers. The Whig notion that slavery, although inferior morally and economically to free labour, was one of a number of diverse interests that needed to be harmonised was quite compatible with the merchants' *indifference* to the social relations of commodity-production in the antebellum US. The 'American System', which called for an interventionist state to establish a new central bank, levy protective tariffs and raise land-prices to ensure that only rural households with capital engaged in agriculture, spoke to the demands of the diverse social groups most enmeshed in commodity-production.<sup>71</sup> The Whigs' world-view envisioned the encouragement and deepening of freedom over time, in which the 'federal government... was a corporate instrument for realizing a larger positive good. Qualitative change through time rather than quantitative growth across space marked the true destiny of a nation of freemen'.<sup>72</sup> Just as the Democratic vision of a spatial expansion of timeless freedom captured the planters', subsistence-farmers' and speculators' experience of *extensive growth*, the Whig vision of a qualitative deepening of freedom over time corresponded to the merchants', manufacturers' and commercial farmers' experience of *intensive growth*.

*The first schisms in the second party system: the pre-emption debate of 1841*

The stability of the Whig and Democratic parties depended on the economic and political hegemony of merchant-capital in the US. The indifference of *all* merchants to the social relations of commodity-production allowed different groups of merchant-capitalists to cement alliances with different segments of the slave-owning class in each party, preventing any debate over the existence and expansion of slavery in the federal government. The changed field of constraint and possibility that emerged with the dominance of industrial capital after 1840 undermined the ability of merchants in the Democratic and Whig parties to impose lasting compromises concerning the social character of the geographic expansion of commodity-production on their respective social allies. Instead, *the incompatibility of the expansion of slavery and petty-commodity and capitalist production* radicalised the political demands of Northern manufacturers and farmers, and induced the planters to make increasingly militant demands in defence of the existence and expansion of their form of social labour.

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71. Van Duesen 1969 and 1973; Sellers 1969.

72. Wilson 1969, p. 165.

The first fissures in the second party system emerged during a debate on public-land policy, rather than slavery-expansion. The Democrats had traditionally advocated the rapid geographic expansion of both plantation-slavery and independent-household production through lower minimum prices for public land. The Whigs, as advocates of the ‘planned colonisation’ of the West by ‘improving farmers’, generally advocated higher minimum prices for Western lands. By the early 1830s, Western farmers began to demand a general and permanent ‘pre-emption’ – the right of those settlers who had occupied public land to buy their land at federal minimum prices outside of the public-auction system. Democrats had generally been favourable to limited pre-emption laws, but opposed a permanent law which would have effectively abolished the auction-system which nurtured land-speculation. The Whigs tended to oppose the sale of land to ‘squatters’ below market-prices before the crisis of 1837, and instead advocated the distribution of public-land sale-revenues to the state-governments to finance transport-infrastructure projects.<sup>73</sup>

The crisis and depression of the late 1830s and early 1840s fed renewed agitation among Western farmers, now subject to ‘market-coercion’, for a general and permanent pre-emption law.<sup>74</sup> The Whigs’ victory in the presidential election of 1840 and their capture of a majority of Northwestern House and Senate seats set the stage for the Congressional debate on land-policy in the summer of 1841.<sup>75</sup> The Northern Whigs reversed their opposition to pre-emption, introducing a bill that combined pre-emption and distribution. In the debate, Northern Whigs no longer argued against ‘anarchic’ and ‘unplanned’ settlement in the West, but praised the geographic expansion of commercial household-production for stimulating both agriculture and industry.<sup>76</sup> They met opposition, not only from Southern Democrats and a minority of Northern Democrats who opposed distribution, but also from a number of prominent Southern Whigs. While most of the opposition to distribution centred on concerns that Congress would have to increase tariffs to compensate for distribution, a number of prominent Southern Whigs and Democrats attacked distribution as a violation of states’ rights, an

73. Hibbard 1924, pp. 56–115; Robbins 1976, pp. 3–50.

74. US Congress, Senate, Number of Letters on the Public Lands in Illinois, S. doc. 248, 25th Cong., 2d Sess., 1837; US Congress, House of Representatives, Memorial of Inhabitants of Miami County, Indiana, H. doc. 178, 25th Cong., 2d Sess., 1837.

75. Robbins 1976, pp. 80–91; Stephenson 1917, pp. 44–65. US Congress, Congressional Globe: Proceedings 27th Cong., 1st Sess., 10:1–2 for a listing of the party-affiliations of various House and Senate delegations.

76. See, for example, US Congress, Senate, Congressional Globe: Appendix, 27th Cong., 1st Sess., July 6, 1841, 10:443.

‘unconstitutional’ centralisation of power and a danger to the region’s ‘peculiar institution’.<sup>77</sup>

The House vote of 6 July 1841 on the combined pre-emption and distribution bill clearly indicates a sharp *sectional* division on public-land policy.<sup>78</sup> All of the Northern Whigs, whether from the manufacturing East or agricultural West, voted in favour of the bill. By contrast, the majority of Southern representatives, Whig and Democratic, opposed the legislation. Only nine of sixteen Upper-South Whigs supported the bill, while 14 of 16 Lower-South Whigs voted against. In sum, the alignment around the Pre-emption Act of 1841 *prefigures* the *sectional polarisation* of the later 1840s and 1850s. The political spokespersons of manufacturers and farmers stood together to promote the spread of capitalist and petty-commodity production. Opposed to them were the relatively unified representatives of the planters who perceived a threat to the master-slave social-property relation from the use of federal funds to build transport-infrastructure. Similar divisions, focusing on the Southern Democrats’ continued opposition to federally financed transport-infrastructure projects sought by Northern farmers, increased tensions within the Democratic Party in the early 1840s.<sup>79</sup> The root of these tensions was the same – the completion of the transformation of Northern farmers into petty-commodity producers, which altered the attitude of many Eastern Whigs toward the expansion of family-farming; and the growing incompatibility of the expansion of slavery and capitalism, which fuelled planters’ fears of a centralised federal government.

*Class-conflict over the social character of the geographic expansion of commodity-production, c. 1844–61*<sup>80</sup>

The sharpening political conflicts and ideological polarisation of the 1840s and 1850s, so well-described by Ashworth, were rooted in the incompatibility of the expansion of social-property relations of plantation-slavery on the one

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77. See, for example, US Congress, Senate, *Congressional Globe: Appendix*, 27th Cong., 1st Sess., June 30, 1841, 10:104 and July 3, 1841, 10:400.

78. US Congress, House, *Congressional Globe: Appendix*, 27th Cong., 1st Sess., July 6, 1841, 10:156.

House votes generally give a better indication of the alignment of different social groups on key policy-issues because representation in the lower chamber was based on population. This was especially true in this case because the Senate bill contained an amendment ending distribution of land-revenues to the states if the tariff had to be raised – a provision making it more palatable to Southern Democrats. US Congress, Senate, *Congressional Globe: Proceedings* 27th Cong., 1st Sess., August 21, 1841, 10:364–370.

79. Foner 1969.

80. The following is a summary of the argument in Post 1983, Part III.

hand, and agrarian petty-commodity production and capitalist manufacture on the other. The growing radicalisation of Northern public opinion in the late 1840s and 1850s, manifested in the defections of Whig and Democratic farmers, manufacturers, artisans and urban professionals to the Free Soil and Republican Parties,<sup>81</sup> was not simply a product of their idealisation of the Northern free-labour society, or a response to the perceived threat of the Slave Power. While the threat of the Slave Power and free-labour ideology canalised Northern opposition to slavery-expansion, the increasingly militant refusal of the Republican majority of Northern society to countenance any further expansion of plantation-slavery *corresponded to the social position* of manufacturers and commercial farmers in the North. Beckert<sup>82</sup> argues that manufacturers in New York and other parts of the North understood that ‘the westward expansion of slavery was a threat both to their own well being and to the Republic’:

American industry had experienced rapid growth, and railroads, together with increased immigration, had helped settle the West, resulting in an expansion of prairie agriculture based on free labour. The advent of new economic structures facilitated the emergence of new segments of the economic elite, who based their businesses not on the export of agricultural commodities produced by slave labour but instead on domestic industrialization, import substitution, and the export of agricultural commodities (especially wheat) grown by free farmers. . . . Free labour needed free soil, a political program that brought these businessmen into increasing conflict with an expansionist South and into coalition with other social groups in the North.

Put simply, the continued development of the manufacturers’ form of social labour after c. 1837–42 *required* the containment of slavery to the areas where it was already dominant. Any further expansion of slavery would have undermined the spread of agrarian petty-commodity production, and with it, capitalist manufacture. The reproduction of the class-position of the manufacturers and farmers made Republicans’ commitment to ‘free soil’ *necessary*. Whatever illusions the Republicans had about the strength of Southern Unionism during the secession-crisis of 1860–1, their refusal to countenance any expansion of plantation-slavery into the Western territories was a *rational* expression of their social position.

Similarly, the increasing radicalism of the planters<sup>83</sup> organised in the Democratic Party was not simply a defensive reaction to the slaves’ resistance

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81. Beckert 1993, pp. 89–97; Blue 1973; Foner 1970.

82. Beckert 1993, pp. 89–90.

83. Barney 1972.

to bondage, the planters' inability to ideologically defend their form of social labour, or concerns about the political loyalty of non-slaveowning white farmers. Instead, the radical planters' refusal to countenance any restriction on the expansion of slavery, their advocacy of US expansion into the Caribbean and Central America, and their championing of the demand for a Congressional slave-code for the Western territories flowed from the *social requirements* of the reproduction of their form of social labour. Geographic expansion – the addition of more slaves and more fertile land – was the *most rational and efficient* way to increase output and raise productivity under plantation-slavery.

Small and medium planters had little uncultivated land in reserve and were often the first to seek new and more fertile lands for their operations. Thus, it is not surprising that the 'middling and lesser' slaveholders were in the vanguard of Southern radicalism.<sup>84</sup> However, even larger planters, with large 'private frontiers', would not accept any limits on the spatial extension of their form of social labour.<sup>85</sup> Just as the future development of capitalism in the North required reserving the Western territories for petty-commodity and capitalist producers, the future of plantation-slavery depended upon securing, either within the US state or in an independent state of their own, the legal-political conditions for the spread of slavery to new territories. According to Schoen:<sup>86</sup>

Some voices in the Lower South, particularly in South Carolina and former Whig circles, believed slavery's expansion a chimera perpetuated by opportunistic Democrats. Diverse reasons led many more to the conclusion that southern society and regional interest actually depended on... more land suitable for slavery. Simple political arithmetic suggested a contained Slave South might not survive an expanding free soil American empire. Amateur demographers, especially in the black belt, argued that without a vent for rapidly reproducing slave populations the region would soon be on the brink of racial warfare. Proud men, and not a few women, believed on principle that taking their property anywhere in federal territories remained a natural right, the relinquishing of which would make them second-class citizens. Others just wanted to prop up their proslavery belief that race-based slavery could adapt to all climates and businesses. To this traditional list must be added slaveholders' desire, largely economic in origin, to ensure that their progeny would have the cheap land,

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84. Gates 1960, pp. 142–4; Genovese 1967, Chapter 4.

85. Contrary to Ashworth's claim (Ashworth 1995, p. 491) that the large planters' commitment to Whig ideology militated against their embracing Southern radicalism, it was their large reserves of uncultivated land that made them relatively inured to the need for geographic expansion in the short-term.

86. Schoen 2009, pp. 212–13.

labour supply, and access to commercial opportunities necessary to fulfill the Lower South's version of the American dream.

The changing matrix of social relations of production and exchange, the subordination of merchant to industrial capital, also doomed the forces of sectional compromise – the Democratic land-speculators and the Whig merchants and large planters – to irrelevance in the political crisis of the 1840s and 1850s. The Northern Democrats' world-view, which collapsed family-farming and plantation-slavery into an undifferentiated 'agrarian' interest, and their embrace of 'states' rights' and white male democracy were not the main reasons they embraced 'popular sovereignty' and reduced the choice of class-relations in new territories to a matter of soil and climate-determined relative profitability. Nor was the conservative Whigs' (and later Americans and Constitutional Unionists') belief that the rôle of statesmen was to balance the diverse interests in society the main reason they strenuously argued that slavery was not a concern of the Federal government. These political and ideological stances were the 'road map of the lived experience' of merchant-capital's *structural indifference* to the social relations of commodity-production. The inability of either the Northern Democrats or the Conservative Whigs to impose enduring compromises on the question of slavery-expansion after 1850<sup>87</sup> was the unavoidable consequence of the subordination of merchant to industrial capital in the US economy, which made the expansion of slavery and capitalism irreconcilable.

*The US Civil War: a bourgeois revolution?*

While the changing structure of the social relations of production and exchange created the class-conflicts that ultimately led to the disruption of the unity of the US state and the Civil War, neither the outcome of the military conflict nor the social relations that would emerge after the War were predetermined. Instead, they were determined by the *unpredictable* and *historically contingent* outcome of class-conflict. For Ashworth, slavery's weaknesses – 'the comparative lack of manufacturing and the heavy reliance on a single crop, the weak financial infrastructure, and the inferior transport network together inflicted immense damage upon the Confederate war effort and played a key role in bringing about Union victory'.<sup>88</sup> He clearly recognises that the North's economic superiority did not *guarantee* military victory. Of equal importance was the sharpening of class-conflict *within* the South during the War – between

87. Beckert 1993, pp. 78–93, Chapter 3; Foner 1941; Nichols 1948.

88. Ashworth 2007, pp. 632–3.

planters and non-slaveowning farmers who bore the financial and military brunt of the War, and, most importantly, between masters and slaves. The growing refusal of slaveless whites to continue fighting in the Confederate army gravely weakened the Southern war-effort. The mass-flight of slaves from the plantations as the Union army advanced dealt a death-blow to the Confederacy after 1863.

Ashworth concludes that the US Civil War was a bourgeois revolution because it made ‘the ideology of the victorious North, with its reconciliation of democracy and capitalism . . . the ideology of Americanism’.<sup>89</sup> His privileging of the removal of ideological obstacles to the dominance of capitalism is based on a rejection of our thesis that the continued geographic expansion of slavery was an impediment to the continued development of capitalism in the US. From our point of view,<sup>90</sup> the US Civil War removed the single most important hindrance to the expansion of capitalism – the territorial extension of plantation-slavery to the Western territories. Although the class-struggles during the Reconstruction period did not result in the emergence of either capitalist plantation-agriculture or a class of African-American petty-commodity producers, the noncapitalist form that replaced slavery – share-cropping – did not share slavery’s spatially imperialist tendencies. While share-cropping condemned the South to continued economic underdevelopment,<sup>91</sup> it did not pose an obstacle to capitalist expansion in the rest of the US.

What, then, is the theoretical and historical status of the notion of the bourgeois revolution? As both Meiksins-Wood and Brenner<sup>92</sup> have argued, the notion of the bourgeois revolution is rooted in the early Marx’s vision of the transition to capitalism. Marx’s original analysis (which he abandoned in his mature writings of the 1850s and 1860s), drew on Adam Smith’s vision of the development of ‘commercial society’. In *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx argued that capitalism began in the medieval cities with the activities of merchants and artisans. The growing cities provided both a haven for peasants escaping serfdom and a market for agricultural goods. The growth of markets encouraged peasants to specialise output, innovate technologically and accumulate land and tools. Precapitalist propertied classes’ hold on political power maintained old and created new impediments (legal coercion of direct producers, state-taxation and monopolies, etc.) to the deepening of markets. The bourgeoisie, the ascending class in

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89. Ashworth 2007, p. 647.

90. Post 1982, pp. 49–51.

91. Ransom and Sutch 1977.

92. Brenner 1989; Meiksins-Wood 1995, Chapter 4.

production, leads its revolution and destroys these precapitalist remnants, allowing the free development of their new mode of production.

We have already presented the theoretical and historical criticism of this ‘Smithian’ vision of the transition to capitalism – that the growth of market-‘opportunities’ are not sufficient to disrupt the ‘rules of reproduction’ of noncapitalist social-property relations. Instead, the *unintended consequences* of noncapitalist social classes pursuing the reproduction of their forms of social labour in very specific conditions of crisis and sharpened class-conflict open the *possibility* of the emergence of capitalist social-property relations.<sup>93</sup> As Brenner<sup>94</sup> points out, the notion of the ‘bourgeois revolution’ rooted in the commercialisation-model actually ‘renders revolution unnecessary in a double sense’: ‘First, there really is no *transition* to accomplish: since the model starts with bourgeois society in the towns, foresees its evolution as taking place via bourgeois mechanisms, and has feudalism transcend itself in consequence of its exposure to trade, the problem of how one society is transformed into another is simply assumed away and never posed. Second, since bourgeois society self-develops and dissolves feudalism, the bourgeois revolution can hardly claim a necessary role.’

The critique of the ‘neo-Smithian’ theory of the analysis of capitalism has led to a re-evaluation of the notion of the bourgeois revolution. Brenner<sup>95</sup> has developed a new social interpretation of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. English agriculture was capitalist a full century before the revolution of the 1640s and 1650s. The class-conflict between English landlords and peasants took a very different trajectory than the conflict in Western Europe. Like the peasants in Western Europe, English peasants were able to gain their legal freedom in the fifteenth century. However, the English landlords, alone in Europe, were able to impose commercial leases on their tenants in the sixteenth century, making the latter’s continued possession of landed property dependent upon successful market-competition. The revolution of the seventeenth century did not pit capitalist landlords and farmers against precapitalist aristocrats, but a new merchant-class enmeshed in the English capitalist economy leading an already-capitalist landlord and farmer-class against the monarchy and merchants who depend upon royal monopolies.<sup>96</sup>

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93. Brenner 2007.

94. Brenner 1989, p. 280.

95. Brenner 1993.

96. Comninel’s 1987 analysis of the French Revolution of the eighteenth century concludes that the ‘bourgeoisie’ that led this revolution was in no sense a capitalist class. French agriculture

Ashworth's analysis of the US Civil War as a 'bourgeois revolution' suffers from the same theoretical problems as the classical schema. Ashworth denies any material, economic contradiction between the expansion of slavery and capitalism in the mid-nineteenth-century US. The Civil War was the product of sharpening political and ideological conflicts – no material obstacles existed to capital's triumph. No arguments are offered to demonstrate how the politics and ideology of slavery was a substantial impediment to the development of capitalism. The Civil War – like other 'bourgeois revolutions' – was unnecessary to the triumph of an already-extant and robust capitalist mode of production.

By contrast, our analysis of the social origins of the US Civil War indicates that it, almost alone among the 'bourgeois revolutions' identified by the historical-materialist tradition, actually fits the classical schema. The geographic spread of a noncapitalist form of social labour, plantation-slavery, constituted an obstacle to the future expansion of a vibrant capitalism. Capitalist manufacturers and commercial family-farmers, organised in the Republican Party, take the lead in organising the political and military struggle to remove the impediment posed by slavery and its expansion. The classical schema, however, remains highly problematic. The origins of capitalist social-property relations in the US – the subordination of Northern rural-household producers to 'market-coercion' in the late-eighteenth century – was the *unintended consequence* of the class-conflicts that followed the American Revolution of 1776–83.<sup>97</sup>

The first American Revolution, at best, fits a *minimal definition*<sup>98</sup> of the bourgeois revolution – a revolution that creates state-institutions capable of promoting the dominance of capitalist social-property relations. This definition requires no prior development of capitalist social-property relations, no precapitalist obstacles to capitalist development, nor a class-conscious capitalist class in the lead of the revolution. A revolution is *bourgeois* only to the extent that it, *intentionally or unintentionally*, advances capitalist development in a given society.

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remained thoroughly noncapitalist, and most of the urban merchants and professionals remained dependent on the French absolutist state (see Conninell 1987).

97. Post 2009, pp. 474–80.

98. Mooers 1991, pp. 1–4, 33–40. Mooers effectively uses this 'minimal' definition to argue that the English Revolution of the seventeenth century and German unification in the nineteenth century were 'bourgeois revolutions' – revolutions that created states which advanced capitalist development. However, his analysis of the outcomes of the French Revolution of 1789–94, the Napoleonic Empire and the Revolution of 1848 indicates the preservation of precapitalist state-structures, in particular, tax-farming. In our opinion, it was the Second Empire (1850–71) that established a viable capitalist state in France.

The colonial economy was *noncapitalist*, based in independent-household production in the North and plantation-slavery in the South. The activities of a class of colonial merchants bound together various noncapitalist forms of social labour. As these merchants organised the growing export of Northern surpluses of grain and meat to the South and the Caribbean, and of Southern tobacco, rice and indigo to Europe, they laid the basis for an independent noncapitalist economy and a bid for political independence in the 1770s and 1780s. Put simply, the American Revolution was not the struggle of a capitalist class to free themselves and their form of social labour from precapitalist restrictions. Rather, it marked the success of precapitalist merchants and agricultural classes to establish an independent state for their increasingly autonomous precapitalist economy.

Nor did the merchants and land-speculators in the post-revolutionary period seek to free capitalist production from noncapitalist fetters. Instead, they sought to *promote their position as land and commodity-traders*. In the 1780s and 1790s, the merchants, with the support of the planters after Shays' Rebellion, constructed state-institutions and a standing army that was capable of enforcing their legal claims to landed property – not in order to establish capitalist production, but to allow themselves to reproduce themselves as buyers and sellers of land. The *unintended consequence* of the speculators' successful struggle to enforce legal titles on land – the creation of the social monopoly of land – was to fundamentally alter the conditions under which Northern households obtained, maintained and expanded landholdings. The result was the disruption of the rules of reproduction of independent-household production and the consolidation of the rules of reproduction of agrarian petty-commodity production and capitalist manufacture. As we have argued, the subordination of Northern farmers to 'market-coercion' through the actions of speculative merchant-capitalists in the first four decades of the nineteenth century established the conditions for the subordination of merchant to industrial capital and made the further expansion of slavery and capitalism incompatible.

The American Revolution and Civil War can, at best, be viewed as bourgeois revolutions because they established and consolidated state-institutions that helped to secure the political and juridical conditions for the development of capitalism in the US. Only the *unintended outcomes* of a revolution led by a noncapitalist merchant-class – the development of petty-commodity production and capitalist manufacturing in the North and the preservation of plantation-slavery in the South, allowed the US Civil War to assume the form of a 'classic' bourgeois revolution led by a self-conscious class of capitalist manufacturers and commercial farmers struggling to remove the obstacle posed by the geographic expansion of plantation-slavery.

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