

The Slave Power: Its Character, Career, and Probable Designs: Being an Attempt to Explain the Real Issues Involved in the American Contest

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Review

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Cairnes, John Elliot and Smith, Mark M. *The Slave Power: Its Character, Career, and Probable Designs: Being an Attempt to Explain the Real Issues Involved in the American Contest.* University of South Carolina Press, \$24.95 ISBN 1570035229

The dismal science and American slavery

19th century analysis of King Cotton

For decades, historians have used classical economist John Cairnes' **The Slave Power** as a vital source of analysis and information about the economy of slavery and the society it produced. Cairnes was a disciple of John Stuart Mill, who blessed the book upon its publication, and much of the power of the work comes from its analytical framework and the willingness of the author to go beyond the slavery's economic foundation to explore the psychology it fostered. However, the book has some strange failings. Most of the shortcomings may be related to the circumstance of its birth: Cairnes wrote this treatise to convince the people of England to sustain the Union cause because only by that route was slavery in North America to be ended. Even so, on the ground of classical economics, Cairnes produced some strange analyses.

Mark Smith has provided an able and informative introduction to the book. He lays out Cairnes' development as an economist, emphasizing the discipline's willingness to employ deductive reasoning, and then details the political situation of Great Britain that Cairnes confronted. A superior discussion of historians' use of Cairnes then follows, as Smith points out that most of Cairnes' economic analysis of slavery has been questioned and rejected. Yet Cairnes did not feel constrained to consider only economic details; he plunged into the politics and psychology of slaveholding. In this realm Smith believes Cairnes made his mark: Whatever Cairnes got wrong about the economics of Southern slavery, he was right about slaveholders' mind-set and their culture mainly because he remained true to the methodology and writing of classical political

economy. Smith exaggerates here, for Cairnes' depictions of slavery and slaveholders are more an act of imagination than of observation or keen reading. Regardless of his economic training, Cairnes was an abolitionist—he wrote like an abolitionist, he moralized like an abolitionist, and he generalized about the South like an abolitionist.

In many ways Cairnes' work is disappointing. To anyone familiar with the abolitionist economic critique of slavery, **The Slave Power** is oddly thin. The comparison between Virginia and Ohio (or New York or any other northern state) had been used by countless antislavery politicians since at least 1847. The idea that there existed a slave power eager to control the federal government and that aggressively sought new land had been a staple of abolitionist argument since 1840; his description of the slave power's actions over time is entirely derivative, and it unimaginatively duplicates hundreds of abolitionist/antislavery pamphlets. How slavery produced a backward society by deadening the instinct for improvement among laborers had been noted since the 1760s if not earlier. But this thinness should be expected: Cairnes based his book on a few American publications about slavery—most notably George Weston and especially Frederick Law Olmsted but surprisingly very little of Hinton Rowan Helper—and, somewhat oddly, a scattering of commentary from European periodicals. His information base was simply too small to write a truly incisive study of slavery in the American South.

Cairnes' one achievement in analysis that differed significantly from the Americans was his hypothesis that slavery was profitable only for a few staple crops where labor could be highly organized and closely observed, but the improvident habits taught by slavery led to ruination of the land. Therefore, the only means by which slavery as an economic institution could survive was by geographical expansion. Americans noticed the soil exhaustion caused by slavery and commented on it, but they probably believed southern expansionism was more for the purpose of bringing in additional slave states in order to fasten their domination over the nation and end northern republican liberty. Today the soil-depleting quality of slavery agriculture is receiving renewed attention after having been dismissed nearly fifty years ago (see Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slaves and the Louisiana Purchase* [New York: Oxford, 2003], and John D. Majewski, *A House Dividing: Economic Development in Pennsylvania and Virginia before the Civil War* [New York: Cambridge, 2000]). Moreover, Cairnes produced (at last!) a full explanation of why restricting slavery to fixed boundaries would lead to the institution's

ultimate extinction. Many scholars have commented that while contemporaries frequently believed that containment of slavery would produce an end to the system, contemporaries seldom explained their logic. Cairnes does: continuous population increase of slaves upon a soil constantly being exhausted by slave labor would result in a crop yield that would not cover labor costs, thereby making slavery too unprofitable to continue.

One may consider Cairnes from a number of viewpoints, but the most obvious one to take is his use of classical economics, and it is here that his inconsistencies, paradoxes, and actual evasions are truly remarkable. Strange as it may seem, the word wage does not appear once in this book—at least from my reading—yet the book is about labor conditions and written by an economist. Rather, labor is given all sorts of mystical, emotional qualities—honorable, dignified, motivated, educable—but never given a wage. And here we may see Cairnes' dissembling. Free labor, he wrote, might be a better source of labor for cotton production than slaves; but the conditions he placed on free labor should raise eyebrows: Free labour, which was then scarce and costly, has now in many of the large towns become superabundant; and it is quite possible that, even with external conditions so favourable to slavery as the southern half of North American undoubtedly presents, free labour would now, on a fair trial, be found more than a match for its antagonist.

Translating this into the language which he knew but did not write, Cairnes said that free labor is cheaper than slave labor because the wage for free labor is lower than the cost of upkeep for the slave. It was probably this passage that Karl Marx fastened upon because it was an admittance by a political economist that free laborers suffered worse material conditions than slaves. Why Cairnes does not draw out the obvious is left to the reader's fertile imagination. But then Cairnes compounds the error: The tendency of things, therefore, in slave countries is to a very unequal distribution of wealth. Yet he has just admitted that slaves earned more than free laborers, so how could the distribution of wealth in a slave society be worse than in a free labor society?

Two other essential elements of classical political economy make their presence in Cairnes' work—population and rent—but neither operated as they normally did in classical political economy. First, Cairnes used population density to explain the economic problems of the South: slavery's tendency to cultivate soil-depleting staple crops stopped population from accumulating in cities. Slavery dispersed people over a territory instead of congregating them into

towns and cities where real progress was obtained—presumably manufacturing and the industrial arts. Second, by dispersing people southerners never kicked the mechanism of rent into high gear, because rent only occurred when soils of less fertility were resorted to. The incongruity of the analysis is that population density and the emergence of rent are precisely the reasons the classical political economists formulated a horrible skew in the distribution of wealth: population pressure drove wages to subsistence while rent enabled landlords to earn monopoly profits and starve manufacturers of capital needed for expansion. Cairnes had in truth described why the South had escaped the dungeon of the dismal science—and in point of fact a lot of southerners knew it. Instead of a damnation of slavery, Cairnes, in the light of *classical* political economy, actually wrote a justification of it!

Other aspects of the book deserve some attention. Cairnes' terms beg for explication. He constantly refers to northern peasant proprietors: these are evidently the yeomen farmers of Jeffersonian tradition—but why are they called peasants? And largely the peasant proprietors of the North are Cairnes' reference point for free labour. Then again, he uses the word *proletaire* not to describe workers but to describe the mean whites of the South who, in Cairnes' depiction, are rootless, hunting, scavenging vagabonds who disdain labor. And at the end of the book, Cairnes warns that upon emancipation the freedpeople need to become hired workers and not peasant farmers. If peasant proprietors worked so well for the North, why would they not work as well for the freedmen?

As with any book of this length, many other subjects are worthy of mention and consideration, but only one more will here be mentioned. It is the question of methodology. Classical economics prized deductive reasoning: establish a few obvious truths and then deduce results. This procedure produced some bizarre results. The nonslaveholding population of the South, for one example, was reduced to the lowest level of aggressive animal life possible—primarily by deduction from general principles, aided by a few choice passages from Olmsted. Cairnes shot off one generalization after another based on ethics, political ethics, justice, the principles of morality, eternal truths, and the like. As he wrote, a political economist, by reasoning on the economic character of slavery and its peculiar connexion with the soil, [may] deduce its leading social and political attributes, and almost construct, by way of *a priori* argument, the entire system of the society of which it forms the foundation. No wonder the methodology came into disrepute. After watching Cairnes' inability to control his drive to generalize, I appreciate more and more the aphorism of Thomas Huxley,

who acidly commented that Herbert Spencer's undoubted definition of tragedy was a deduction killed by a fact.

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