

A REVIEW ESSAY:
FOGEL AND ENGERMAN ON SLAVERY

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Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross, 2 Vols.
Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974. Volume I, The
Economics of American Negro Slavery.

Students of the antebellum and Civil War periods will want to give careful attention to the volumes of Fogel and Engerman, easily the most important new work on slavery and one that should become definitive. It is strong language, indeed, to refer to any new work on slavery as "definitive," since the topic has received no less than the best of scholarly attention. Phillips, Ramsdell, Stamp, Gray, Conrad and Meyer, Elkins, and Genovese form only a partial list of important scholars who have studied every aspect of American Slavery, apparently, and have reached every rational conclusion, so it would seem. What else is there to be said? A great deal, as these volumes tell us.

Happily, Fogel and Engerman are not modest or tentative. They assert that their examination of slavery "is part of a more ambitious effort to reconstruct the entire history of American economic development on a sound quantitative basis," a claim which is the key to their prominence and the chief reason any serious student of slavery must consider their findings in detail. They demonstrate once more that the systematic application of mathematical and statistical methods to research problems can lead to substantive advances in our understanding. Since quantitative methods in history are gaining an ever widening acceptance it hardly seems necessary to point out that any method has limitations. Yet, tired and unimaginative criticism continues to emphasize that point, as though it deserved attention. In contrast, serious students know that quantitative methods do not always provide unambiguous answers to all questions. Not all questions have unambiguous answers, obviously, and many other questions which might be answered unambiguously with quantitative data must remain ambiguous because these data cannot be or have not been retrieved. Fortunately, most of the issues long debated by historians of the antebellum period are subject to clarification by quantitative data

and the authors do not hesitate to use their data to correct previous assertions about America's "peculiar institution."

When the authors begin with data that describe American slavery the reader knows at once that he is in for a special treat. Gone are the boring travel accounts and tracts which have fashioned our conventional view of slavery. Likewise banished are the foggy narrative "analyses" of Liberal historians who equate research with the reading of old newspapers. Quantitative data presented here are clear and are interpreted for any lay reader to follow, with appendices and discussions of methodology reserved for Volume II. The purpose of their description is to give us a revised economic picture of slavery. For example, historians have assumed that slavery remained profitable only because of the interregional slave trade; that planters in the Old South were profitable because they engaged in breeding for export. Hard evidence contradicts this assertion and should lay it to rest forever.

Still, it is the historiographic battle joined that forms the core of their work. The authors do not hesitate to begin with U.B. Phillips and the crucial question of whether or not slavery was profitable. Like many other critics, they point out that Phillips' evidence was nonrepresentative, yet that problem did not deter Phillips from concluding that slavery was unprofitable. The thesis suggests that the slave system was dying due to internal economic contradictions. Although Phillips himself did not draw this conclusion it was developed by many in the "Phillips school," chiefly Charles W. Ramsdell. Ramsdell asserted that slavery was dying because the planters tended to overproduce cotton, because slavery would follow cotton only to its "natural limits," or central Texas, and because slavery was incompatible with the on-rushing urban society. The Fogel and Engerman material refutes each of these points. For example, they point out that Ramsdell's conclusions were based upon the rise in cotton production and the decline in cotton prices during the 1850's. Ramsdell concluded that the price of cotton was bound to decline to the point that slavery would become unprofitable. In contrast, the authors show that there was nothing unusual about the slight decline in cotton prices between 1857 and 1860, a decline that was not out of line with the general downward trend of raw cotton prices that began in 1802. They present additional data to show that cotton production was

extremely profitable in the 1850's, far too profitable to sumize that slavery was dying.

The authors' treatment of Eugene Genovese will be of particular interest to students who have been heavily influenced by Genovese' work, The Political Economy of Slavery. Genovese argued persuasively that historians have been preoccupied with the profitability issue and thus blinded to the overriding concerns of the planter class, a class which was "precapitalist," meaning that it subordinated its drive for profit to its interest in maintaining its social and political leadership. Therefore, Genovese argued, it is absurd to believe that the planter class would have abandoned slavery simply because of declining profits. Rather, in the face of declining profits, slaveholders would seek a political solution, war, to preserve their precapitalist system.

Fogel and Engerman are not the first to attack the validity of Genovese' position. Lee Benson suggested severe methodological problems with the Genovese data in his work, Toward a Scientific Study of History. Fogel and Engerman present comprehensive data, computer processed, to show that slaveholders earned high rates of return, comparable to rates of any other investment within the capitalist system of the 1850's. Their material further bolsters the case offered by Conrad and Meyer to the effect that slavery was a highly profitable capitalist investment and they show that if anything, Conrad and Meyer underestimated the average rate of return from slavery. They concede Genovese' point that the slaveholders valued their life-style and power but challenged his contention that these commitments conflicted with the pursuit of profit.

The authors do not hesitate to attack myths held by the most sympathetic exponents of a legitimate black history, and as they do so the central purpose of their work emerges. Their data show that slaves were efficient and adaptable; that slaves were more efficient than their white counterparts; that they adapted easily to an urban, industrial setting, gaining skills and (N.B. ?) earning wages comparable to free white workers in the North.

The authors conclude flatly that the economic argument against slavery is without foundation. Therefore, they undercut any version of the argument that Civil War causality can be established

by showing a sick and dying southern economy faced off against a healthy, expanding northern economy. But their central purpose is not to discuss Civil War causality. Rather, it is to provide systematic and comprehensive evidence "to correct the perversion of the history of Blacks -- in order to strike down the view that black Americans were without culture, without achievement, and without development for their first two hundred and fifty years on American soil." If slavery was profitable and slaves could and did reach a reasonable level of achievement, was slavery so desirable? Of course not! Rather, the authors show that the old economic argument against slavery was and continues to be based upon the false premise that blacks were inferior and in any case were working and living within a system that made achievement impossible. In contrast, they show that most blacks achieved as much or more than their white counterparts despite the arbitrary restrictions of the system.

Some readers will regret that the issue of Civil War causality was not settled in this work. Other issues central in the minds of political historians were dealt with peripherally. Fogel and Engerman have a different purpose: to counter historians of any persuasion who have given us a false picture of slavery and to insist that any historical argument, no matter how persuasive or well intended, must square with all available quantitative data. It's a warning that no competent historian can afford to ignore.