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THE RETURN OF THE BEARDS

JASON PHILLIPS

Marc Egnal. *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. xiv + 416 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00.

After assessing the costs of the Civil War, Charles and Mary Beard quoted Virgil, "*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,*" or "happy is s/he who can understand the causes of things." Happy indeed! For generations Northerners blamed slavery for the conflict, while Southerners insisted they fought for states' rights. Neither explanation satisfied the Beards. For them, "the core of the vortex lay elsewhere," in statistics and laws "which show that the so-called civil war was in reality a Second American Revolution and in a strict sense, the First." The war precipitated the decline of Southern aristocracy and the rise of Northern capitalists and western farmers. By seceding to escape this fate, planters hastened their inevitable ruin, making it violent and "more complete" than the fall of French nobility during their Revolution. The price for this mistake was immeasurable, but for the Beards one fact was certain: "the monetary cost of the conflict far exceeded the value of the slaves."¹

The Beards' revisionism received acclaim during the 1920s and '30s and derision thereafter. Their two-volume *The Rise of American Civilization* struck a chord with readers disillusioned after World War I and cynical during the Depression. In those years warfare resolved nothing and economic forces reigned supreme. Then history turned against the Beards. After World War II military conflict seemed necessary and productive. Cold War consensus historians thought ideals were more than a veneer for base, economic motives. During the civil rights movement, scholars reasserted slavery as the cause of the war and censured earlier works tainted by racism. Because the Beards maintained that African Americans "made no striking development in intelligence" while

* *RAH* does not inform authors when their books are under review. These essays were written prior to the appearance of the June issue in which Marc Egnal reviewed Jason Phillips's book.

in bondage and preferred slavery to freedom, historians banished *The Rise of American Civilization*.² Recent scholarly emphasis on agency and contingency further marginalized the Beards for writing about impersonal forces and inevitability. It seemed the Beards were gone for good. Then history turned their way again. Americans are disillusioned by war, an economic crisis rivals the Depression, and the Beards have returned, sort of.

In *Clash of Extremes*, Marc Egnal argues that the Beards were more correct than their critics. According to Egnal, economic factors caused the Civil War, and scholars who focus on abolitionism and slavery promote an idealistic myth. The critical and popular success of James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* suggests that Americans want to believe their ancestors killed each other over different definitions of freedom.³ If Unionists defended the republican experiment, while Confederates fought for independence, and African Americans sought emancipation, descendants from every side share a portion of pride. This emphasis on slavery, however, fails to resolve three historical problems for Egnal. First, the slavery thesis does not explain the timing of the conflict because Americans disagreed about the institution for generations before secession. Second, the focus on slavery neglects substantial populations in both sections that opposed the radical extremes of secession and abolition. Third, by stressing antislavery, historians cannot reconcile the idealistic image of Republicans before the war with the corrupt, economic portrait of these same politicians during the Gilded Age. Egnal insists that economic history can resolve these inconsistencies. Like the Beards, he believes America's economy caused the war when it evolved into two sectional extremes during the antebellum period. Unlike the Beards, Egnal argues that factors beyond the economy, including ideologies about slavery, religion, local politics, and individual actions, also triggered the conflict. This admission permits a more thorough study of agency and causation. In *Rise of American Civilization*, people resemble *homo oeconomicus*. Egnal assures the reader that "few people chose sides in the sectional conflict simply to put dollars in their purses" (p. 16). With this approach in mind, Egnal provides an economic interpretation that addresses the three shortcomings he identifies in the slavery thesis, namely "the sequence of events leading up to the war, the divisions within the North and South, and the goals and evolution of the Republican Party" (p. 14).

From 1820 to 1850, the economy unified the nation in five ways. First, trade on the Mississippi River and its tributaries strengthened the commercial bonds between the Northwest and Southwest. Second, the slave states bordering the North linked their fortunes to neighboring free states and resembled them over time. Third, the rise of cotton cultivation in the South and textile manufacturing in the North allied Southern planters to Northern capitalists. Fourth, the booming Southwest intensified Unionism because the federal government helped Southerners claim thousands of acres from dispossessed Native Americans and

Mexicans. Finally, the economy created similar divisions across the country, thereby encouraging national political parties. Egnal stresses how this final element—two national parties founded on economic philosophies—fostered compromises when sectional crises threatened the Union during the first half of the nineteenth century. As the standard of living rose dramatically after 1820, it separated entrepreneurs from workers who preferred the stability of an older economy. Prosperous men in both sections, including Southern planters and Northern capitalists, organized the Whig Party to enhance government support for transportation, education, and finance. They wanted a government large enough to grasp America's economic potential. Meanwhile, artisans and average farmers opposed big government because they believed it catered to the rich. These poorer groups rallied to the Democratic Party because it opposed high tariffs, internal improvements, and a national bank. Because these parties built national constituencies based on class lines, not sectional divisions, they safely steered the nation past sectional discord from the Missouri Crisis to the Compromise of 1850. Politicians with strong views about slavery, such as William Seward and Howell Cobb, consistently put party above section during this period. Egnal credits the parties for being "the cement of Union" and argues that economic changes, not a series of political events in the 1850s, cracked that cement (p. 72).

According to Egnal, the primary cause for change was the rising Great Lakes economy. By 1850 canals and improved harbors linked the Midwest to the Northeast. This east-west axis of trade replaced Mississippi Valley channels of commerce that had crossed sectional lines. As Egnal notes, "In 1835 the volume of freight forwarded from the Midwest to New York and other eastern destinations amounted to only 5 percent of the total sent to New Orleans. By 1840 that percentage rose to almost 40 percent, and by midcentury eastbound freight surpassed shipments south" (p. 106). Railroads increased this traffic immensely after 1855. The North's interregional economy fractured the political parties along sectional lines. Northern Democrats found it difficult to oppose internal improvements when those projects clearly benefited their voters. Southern Whigs found it difficult to support internal improvements when those projects clearly benefited the North at the expense of the South. The rise of the Lakes economy also changed the political demographics of the North. The booming upper Midwest attracted settlers from New England and western New York, the hotbeds of abolitionism. Over time these Northern sectors became as populous as districts in the Ohio Valley, where people had closer ties to the South.

The Republican Party seized political opportunities spawned by these economic changes. Its major issues—free soil in the territories, higher tariffs, free homesteads, internal improvements, and a transcontinental railroad—would strengthen and lengthen Northern trade and settlement along the east-west

axis. Northerners who preferred economic development to abolitionism embraced the party. Meanwhile, antislavery Democrats and Whigs joined the party because it refused to expand slavery. Egnal stresses that mainstream Republicans "acquiesced in the racism that defined Northern society" by refusing to condemn the fugitive slave act or abolish slavery in Washington D.C. (p. 10). Economic plans for the North, not ideological battles against the South, formed the party's core principles. The final two chapters of *Clash of Extremes* drive this point home by analyzing how Republicans built a formidable industrial state from the war years through Reconstruction. Unlike historians who focus on Republicans' wavering support of African Americans during this era, Egnal argues that Republicans' consistent economic policy defined the party from its origin to the Gilded Age.

While interregional commerce and antislavery protest fostered a sectional party in the North, economic changes and states' rights agitation splintered Southern politics. By 1850 individuals committed to cotton and slavery in the Deep South worried that soil depletion and the restriction of slavery on the frontier could ruin them. These planters hoped states' rights theories crafted by John Calhoun would secure their interests within the Union. If compromises failed, however, they preferred secession over a decline caused by minority status in Washington, infertile land, and a concentration of unruly slaves. Another group located in the northern districts of the Lower South sought a diverse economy and reconciliation instead of militant sectionalism. Overland trade and family ties with the Upper South distinguished people in these areas from their southern neighbors. According to Egnal, the northern and southern sections of the Deep South "had different outlooks, distinct family histories, and different ways of building their homes and talking to their neighbors" (p. 152). The Upper South was even more connected to Northern economics and culture; however, large planters in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas agreed with Deep South militants about the dangers of soil depletion and abolitionism. In the Border States, slavery was losing its economic grip in the 1850s, though Kentucky and Missouri remained deeply divided between plantation life and a diversified economy. Because each Southern region (the Lower South, the Upper South, and the Border States) had distinct economic interests and internal divisions, the South did not form a sectional party to rival the Republicans. Instead, each subdivision of the South pursued its own course as the sectional crisis intensified. Proponents for compromise trumped secessionists until the Republicans won in 1860. Then, the boldness of the secessionists forced the rest of the South, and the nation, to respond to the actions of the Southern "extreme."

When Egnal handles secession, his taut economic interpretation unravels. Egnal admits that secessionists left the Union "to preserve slavery or, put more broadly, their social system" (p. 259). This acknowledgment supports the standard slavery thesis, not economic revisionism. The Beards claimed

"the South was fighting against the census returns," data that forecasted the triumph of Northern capital, industry, transportation, and farming.⁴ Egnal confesses that Deep South planters seceded because they feared a Republican threat to slavery, not because they opposed economic changes like Great Lakes commerce. Egnal's careful, concise explanation of how economic factors shaped the sectional crisis enhances our understanding of the origins of the Civil War. But those economic origins were *conditions* that heightened sectionalism, not *causes* that triggered secession and war. To separate a cause from underlying conditions, historians must identify what Marc Bloch called the "differentiating element in the compound of generative influences."⁵ During the secession crisis, that element was the Republican refusal to expand slavery. Compromisers urged the president-elect to abandon that single plank in the Chicago platform, because that position alone, not the party's economic promises, caused secession. Americans knew this was the sticking point. Debates about slavery on the frontier permeated public and private utterances from the Wilmot Proviso to secession. By insisting that economic conditions were the cause of the war, Egnal has to ignore this mountain of evidence about slavery out west. W. E. B. DuBois recognized the same fault in the Beards' economic interpretation. He marveled how "anyone who reads the *Congressional Globe* from 1850 to 1860, [or] . . . the discourses in the newspapers and accounts of meetings and speeches, [could] doubt that Negro slavery was the cause of the Civil War."⁶ Reading *Clash of Extremes* produces similar amazement.

Perhaps Egnal downplays the problem of slavery on the frontier because an interpretation that focuses on the West overcomes the three shortcomings he spots in the slavery thesis—the timing of the conflict, divisions within each section, and Republicans' wavering support of African Americans. First, the sectional crisis deepened in 1846 when David Wilmot demanded that western territory be reserved for freedom. This political stand, like Northern opposition to the gag rule, was driven by ideology not economics. In both cases, Northern Democrats ultimately abandoned the party line to side with their region. Secession and war occurred when the first major party devoted to Wilmot's principle won the presidency. Second, Northerners who opposed abolition supported the Republicans because they reserved the West for white farmers. Southerners who either favored a diverse economy or did not own slaves still resented the social stigma Republicans attached to Southern life and feared the party would concentrate blacks in the South. Third, Republicans who banned slavery on the frontier did not necessarily support abolition or racial equality. To assert that the party abandoned African Americans after Reconstruction assumes that they embraced them in the first place. Historians who favor the slavery thesis have been making these points for decades.

Egnal tries to rehabilitate the economic interpretation by arguing that disunion was not a paranoid reaction to antislavery ideology but "a rational act by a group that clearly perceived its long-term self-interest" (p. 263). In

Clash of Extremes, fire-eaters are driven by accurate economic forecasts, not by delusions of grandeur or nightmares of Haiti. According to Egnal, Southern extremists defended their right to prosperity and presented a “reasoned brief” to the Upper South and Border States (p. 284). This interpretation is selective and reductive. Egnal quotes one secession commissioner to support the notion that fire-eaters’ “contentions rested not on fuzzy emotional appeals but on hard, rational analysis” (p. 285). Charles Dew’s close study of all fifty-two commissioners persuasively concludes that secessionists preyed on Southern fears of racial equality, interracial sex, and slave revolts to foment disunion.⁷ In other words, when extremists spoke to their fellow Southerners they did not champion states’ rights or economic self-interest, they screamed about white supremacy. Egnal simplifies secessionist ideas and motives because his definition of ideology is reductive. When he states that “ideology serves as the link between interest and action,” Egnal makes two sweeping assumptions—that people usually choose a worldview that serves their economic interests, and that people clearly know what those interests are (p. 16). Ideology is not the handmaiden of self-interest. Southern historians know how often people adopt ideas rooted in morals, traditions, or prejudices that hinder their economic welfare. Secessionists are Exhibit A. If they had a clear plan for promoting their long-term interests, Egnal does not share it. Certainly Republican victory was a real threat to Southern planters. But for disunion to be reasonable, it must provide the best course of action to check that threat. By seceding and leaving the rest to chance, the Southern extreme was reactionary and imprudent, not sober and prescient.

Nonetheless, because it raises important questions about causation, *Clash of Extremes* makes a major contribution to American history. The return of revisionism forces historians to reconsider how economics exacerbated the nation’s greatest crisis. To enhance our understanding of the Civil War, however, that reassessment must expand upon, not reduce, the differences between conditions and causes, between self-interest and self-knowledge. When the Beards were still popular, Marc Bloch was fighting Nazis and wondering how historians could simplify humanity to objective, economic concerns. Exasperated, he asked, “Does anyone consider that the oppressive moral atmosphere in which we are currently plunged comes only from the rational part of our minds?” Bloch warned us, “We should seriously misrepresent the problem of causes in history if we always and everywhere reduced them to a problem of motive.”⁸

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1. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* 2 (1930): 99 (first, second, third, and fifth quotations), 54 (fourth quotation).
2. *Ibid.*, 116.
3. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988).
4. Beard and Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* 2:54.
5. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (1953), 192.
6. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folks Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935), 714.
7. Charles B. Dew, *Apostle of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (2001).
8. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 195.

Exchange

MARC EGNAL RESPONDS

Edwin Perkins and Jason Phillips find much to praise in *Clash of Extremes*. Perkins calls this explanation of the Civil War “perhaps the most comprehensive argument to date for the role of economic forces,” while Phillips declares the first two-thirds of the book a “taut economic interpretation.” Nonetheless, Perkins leaves the book with the same assumptions he brought to the assignment: grave doubts about the validity of any economic explanation. And Phillips concludes that economic factors were “conditions that heightened sectionalism,” not fundamental causes of the war. Still the questioners can be questioned. Much of Perkins’s critique reflects a narrow, deterministic view of economic causation, while Phillips puts forth an idealistic analysis that lacks explanatory power.

It is little wonder that Perkins began this book doubting the role of economic concerns: his approach emphasizes short-run calculations, not the broader ideological interpretation that underpins *Clash of Extremes*. For example, in discussing secession, he notes “the Southern slave economy in the 1850s was thriving” and concludes that “most Southerners were optimistic about the future of their businesses.” I’d agree with the first part of his statement: short-run prosperity. But the second part—optimistic planters and merchants—is simply not the case. The leaders of the secessionist movement held a dark vision of the future and were certain that the Republican ascendancy threatened their survival. Favorable returns for a few years were beside the point.

Similarly, Perkins’s focus is too narrow when he examines the motivation of Northerners. “Squandering millions of dollars in an effort to suppress a large-scale Southern rebellion,” he notes, “was not a rational use of financial resources.” Here too he provides a mechanistic view of causation and ignores the evidence and arguments in *Clash of Extremes*. Beginning in the late 1840s, as the book details, individuals living near the Great Lakes, along with many New Englanders, developed an ideology of “nationalism.” This outlook guided

their actions as the sections came to blows. This ideology, to be sure, was self-serving and had strong roots in self-interest. But like the worldview of the secessionists, it transcended short-term profit-and-loss statements.

Perkins is also wide of the mark when he critiques the book by emphasizing that the Northern and Southern economies “were complementary.” “The implication, if not the intent of the author,” he asserts, “was to portray . . . two systems in diametric opposition.” But such economic determinism was neither my intent nor the implication of my argument. In fact, the book emphasizes how economic ties brought the two sections together before mid-century. Even after 1850, when the rise of the Lakes’ economy and concerns about soil exhaustion deepened the sectional divide, trade strengthened the ties between the North, on the one hand, and the Border States and much of the Upper South, on the other. *Clash of Extremes* explores the economic roots of the conflict. But “North” and “South” are never the units of analysis in a work that provides a more fine-grained approach.

Jason Phillips’s critique is equally questionable. He emphasizes the role of ideas not firmly rooted in any set of interests, and at times he sets forth the same narrow view of economic motivation that Perkins does. Thus Phillips’s argument does not explain the timing or participants in the secessionist movement. Phillips praises Charles Dew’s work on the secessionist commissioners and contends that those leaders “preyed on Southern fears of racial equality, interracial sex, and slave revolts.” But Phillips and Dew fail to show why only *certain* Southerners responded to the commissioners’ pleas. Border State leaders rejected these arguments, while in the Upper South, only a small group backed independence before the outbreak of fighting. Even in the Deep South, planters and small farmers clashed over the wisdom of separating.

An emphasis on economic self-interest does a far better job of explaining those splits. It suggests why the Border States, with their growing trade links to the North, remained loyal, and why the Deep South divided as it did. Within the cotton states, the northern tier of counties, with their more diversified economies and their growing overland trade with the states to the north, spurned the arguments of the fire-eaters.

Like Perkins, Phillips overlooks broader ideological concerns and focuses on immediate outcomes in his discussion of secession. Separation, he asserts, was “reactionary and imprudent, not sober and prescient.” But in 1860 the secessionists did not know what we know. Many reassured each other that the Northerners would let them go in peace. Others felt the South would achieve a quick victory. All knew that even if secession was a gamble, it was a chance well worth taking when the alternative was the death of their class.

Phillips also ignores the material interests underlying the campaign for free soil—a demand, he claims, that was “driven by ideology not economics.” For most Northerners, as *Clash of Extremes* argues, the resolve to keep slavery out

of the territories was an economic issue. The policy offered Northern farmers a chance to gain new lands without competition from Southern planters. Indeed, many advocates wanted the territories closed to *all* African Americans, slave or free. Only for a small group of Radicals was this proposal first and foremost an antislavery measure, one designed to improve the fate of African Americans. Significantly, the Republican Party, which waved the banner of free soil, rejected all other moderate antislavery demands, including the repeal of the fugitive slave law and abolition in the District of Columbia.

In sum, any approach that takes a narrow view of economic motivation or emphasizes ideas detached from material interests cannot explain the Civil War. Finally, I want to thank Thomas Slaughter for making possible this innovative forum as well as Edwin Perkins and Jason Phillips for their lively critiques. During the dozen years I worked on *Clash of Extremes*, I benefitted greatly from spirited exchanges with my many readers, and I am delighted to see this dialogue continue. Those interested in further discussions of this work are invited to visit the book's website: www.clashofextremes.com.

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EDWIN PERKINS RESPONDS

Marc Egnal continues to distort: I did not claim that economic issues were unimportant; I merely stated that he had failed to convince me that they superseded antislavery as a causation factor. I regret the pessimistic nature of this message, but I must point out that the tone of Egnal's response is typical of what has been happening in the history profession over the last two decades. Fields like economic and business history are rapidly falling into irrelevancy. They are joining diplomatic, intellectual, and a fair amount of mainstream political history in the dustbin of, well, you guessed it—history. I was not replaced upon retirement at my former university, and the institution from which I received my doctoral degree in the early 1970s under the leadership of Alfred Chandler and Lou Galambos reportedly will soon let the field of business history lapse into oblivion.

The current generation of social and cultural historians is unabashedly arrogant. They believe that they essentially know almost everything about anything worth knowing. A few outliers are prone to offer economic analyses of past events after paying only cursory attention to the secondary literature produced by scholars trained specifically in the fields of economic and business history. Professor Egnal is not alone. Professor Woody Holton has been following much the same path with respect to events in the Confederation

and Early National periods of U.S. history. Just a year or so ago, the *Journal of American History* published an article focusing on twentieth-century financial history, and nowhere was there any reference to the publications of the late Robert Sobel, who ranks as the most prominent historian of twentieth-century securities markets. It's like writing about communism without mentioning Marx. Sadly, the beat goes on. Will any reasonable degree of balance ever be restored to our discipline?

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JASON PHILLIPS RESPONDS

Though Marc Egnal claims a fondness for intellectual dialogue, he does not participate in one. Dialogue is stalled until Professor Egnal answers questions and faces challenges. My review gave Egnal credit; but it found much to criticize, not praise, in *Clash of Extremes*. From the moment he writes, "Still the questioners can be questioned," Egnal attacks our critiques instead of addressing our concerns. By discarding dialogue in favor of interrogation, he produces a "spirited exchange" but not a constructive one. Because Egnal talks past me (or at me), I prefer to talk to you, the reader.

I have three problems with this book. First, when Egnal admits that secessionists left the Union to preserve slavery as a social system, he contradicts his thesis that economics and not slavery caused the war. Edwin Perkins assumes Egnal doggedly defends his thesis to provoke scholarly attention. I believe Egnal does so because he confuses historical conditions for causes. Second, the book posits three shortcomings in the slavery thesis that do not exist. Historians who argue that slavery on the frontier caused the Civil War have already explained the timing of secession, divisions within each section, and Republicans' inconstant support for African Americans better than Egnal does. Third, the book reduces historical causation to economic motivation. This reductionism is most evident when Egnal unconvincingly portrays secessionists as calm and prescient. Instead of addressing my point that evidence from one secession commissioner fails to challenge Charles Dew's analysis of all fifty-two men, Egnal discusses the reception of secessionist rhetoric (a completely separate issue) and vaguely compares the explanatory power of his thesis to others.

How does history acquire explanatory power? Egnal claims history gains such power by linking ideology and action to economic issues. He brands history that lacks such material foundations as "idealistic," implying that such works are disconnected from reality. But reality is more than material. Reality is our perceptions, however flawed, of a material world. Whatever people

believe to be true is real to them, as real as dollar bills. This is why events as complex as the Civil War require more than an economic explanation. Unfortunately, instead of balancing material and immaterial factors, Egnal roots intangible things like pride and prejudice in economics. By simplifying human interests and motives to material concerns, he reduces reality and history to an economic story that lacks explanatory power. In Egnal's story, a war saturated with morality, fear, and hatred is really a clash of financial systems. Though he criticizes economic reductionism, Egnal practices it. Whether he intends to or not, he promotes a theory of causation that presupposes economic origins for any historical event.

Of course history needs more than a broad theoretic foundation to gain explanatory power. A short list of additional necessities would include sound methodology, mastery of evidence and scholarship, a deep understanding of humanity, plausible causation, contextual analysis, convincing portrayals, evocative prose, and resonance beyond the author's field. *Clash of Extremes* satisfies some of these requirements, falls short in many, and excels in none of them.

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