

***Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War.* By Marc Egnal. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. Pp. xiii, 416. Cloth, \$30.00.)**

Marc Egnal's forcefully argued and engaging *Clash of Extremes* seeks to discover the origins and implications of the Civil War in "the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies" (347). Though few specialists are likely to be fully persuaded, Egnal's materialist approach cuts a fresh furrow in a well-worked field. Before the 1850s, he writes, economic interests worked to sustain union, with the Mississippi River system forging north-south links in the heartland. Expanding markets in turn generated conflicts that were articulated in the emerging second party system: "In almost every state Whigs and Democrats glowered at each other from opposite sides of a divide defined by approaches to the economy" (65). Following Michael Holt, Egnal suggests that the diminishing salience of these issues in the 1850s subverted the national parties and so imperilled the union. Meanwhile, the Mississippi's union-sustaining hegemony was subverted by flourishing east-west trade ties made possible by the transportation revolution.

With the center's hold failing, Egnal's "extremes" stood in increasingly sharp, polarized juxtaposition. The slave-dependent Deep South, fearful of soil exhaustion, sought fresh lands for the expansion of plantation agriculture, while the industrializing Great Lakes region turned to the federal government for internal improvements, tariff protection, and other developmental measures. Divergent regional interests fostered escalating grievances and suspicions: southern slaveowners feared that a federal state that had served their interests so well through the 1840s would be deployed against them--and their peculiar institution--by sectional enemies; meanwhile, northerners' mounting frustrations with unresponsive and corrupt Democratic administrations conjured up dire images of a "slave power" conspiracy against their vital interests and fundamental rights.

Egnal's interpretative challenge is to explain how the extremes--and their "extremist" spokesmen--could come to dominate the debate despite the interests and loyalties of the great majority of Americans north and south and in between. His materialist solution to this conundrum--that disunion did not reflect the rational, interested calculations of most Americans--is to set into motion interest-based conflicts *within* each section. Extremists had to win intra-regional struggles for domination, whether through party political mobilization in the North or through successive secession crises in the South. Under these deteriorating conditions, with northerners and southerners alike acknowledging increasingly intractable sectional differences, the rational calculations of extremists could compel majority assent--though sometimes barely, and not at all in contested border regions.

Because Deep South planters had good reasons to fear for the future of slavery under a Republican regime, Egnal can explain their plunge into the abyss of disunion and war as a "reasoned response to economic change" (286). So, too, Republicans who provoked that plunge had sound economic reasons for seeking to capture the federal government. To secure power, however, they first had to forge an alliance with the small minority of northerners who were committed opponents of slavery, a minority that was locally dominant in the same Great Lakes districts where Republican economic appeals were most resonant. For Egnal, the opportunistic admixture of antislavery "idealism" reinforces the case for the primacy of material interests, for Republican victory in 1860 depended finally on muting ideological appeals and foregrounding economic planks in their platform that could win critical votes in the more southerly regions of the North, where antislavery had much less appeal: "The economic agenda was more important in securing a broad base of support and in setting the future course of the party" (227).

Egnal's materialism makes some sense for some people some of the time. But the critical premise of his interpretation--that his key actors had a "reasonable" sense of what their interests were and proceeded to act on them, heedless of the consequences--seems highly dubious. Americans understood that disunion would unleash "the dogs of war," as the founding fathers had warned, and that war would waste lives and treasure while jeopardizing their cherished liberties. Ideologically driven "extremists" sought to construct compelling visions of the nation's or their section's future that transcended concrete, immediate, particular interests, ultimately justifying their sacrifice. Slaveowners had to persuade themselves as well as non-slaveowners that the perpetuation of the institution was critical to their shared southern way of life, or "civilization." For their part, northern "nationalists" (pseudo-idealists dismissively defined by quotation marks throughout the text) had to convince themselves and others that the union--whatever that might mean in the wake of secession--was worth fighting for.

In the classic materialist mode, Egnal sees through the professions and pretensions of his subjects: he knows what really moves them. But the irrationality of war and the incalculable risks belligerents--from vanguard ideologues to ordinary soldiers--all too willingly undertook suggest that other modes of explanation are required. Egnal may think he has uncovered the "materialist roots of secessionist ideology," but the "root" metaphor mystifies the critical steps from putative interest to action (264). By his own account, regional loyalties trumped class interests in the 1850s, ultimately overcoming counsels of prudence for reluctant combatants who faced radical choices about what or who to die for. Egnal sets the stage for the dramatic

denouement of the sectional crisis, but he finally leaves his actors without scripts, with dim memories of the interests that had once prompted (some of) them to political action and that had once sustained bonds of union across the sectional divide.

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