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THE CIVIL WAR AND
RECONSTRUCTION

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Introduction: A Civil War in the Age of Capital

LACY K. FORD

Even at a distance of seven score years, the Civil War era remains the most riveting epoch in all of American history for scholars and the general public alike. In his sweeping synthesis of the capitalist world during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875*, the gifted Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm noted with characteristic British understatement that the scholarly investigation of the “nature and origins of the American Civil War” had generated seemingly “endless dispute among historians” (Hobsbawm 1975: 154). Though the relative proportions have varied over time, the causes of the war, the contingencies of the war itself, and the long-term impact of the war on American society have all received abundant attention from scholars through the decades, turning the “battle of the books” over the Civil War era into the Hundred Years War of American intellectual life, a contest whose principal casualties have been pulp forests and red-eyed graduate students. Contributors to this volume accepted the daunting task of surveying this voluminous literature, or at least the most recent waves, and making sense of it for informed readers of the early twenty-first century. The volume is organized around the traditional tripartite themes of causation, war, and consequences, but its topics reflect the introduction of important new categories of analysis since the early 1960s.

Writing in the mid-1970s from his outsider perspective, Hobsbawm readily concluded that it could “scarcely be denied that slavery . . . was the major cause of the friction and rupture between the Northern and Southern states,” but he also pointed out that “the real question is why it [slavery] should have led to secession and civil war rather than to some sort of formula for coexistence.” After all, Hobsbawm suggested, “militant abolitionism alone was never strong enough to determine the Union’s policy” and “Northern capitalism” could easily have found it “convenient to come to terms with and exploit a slave South,” along the same lines as international businesses worked advantageously with a twentieth-century South Africa characterized by apartheid. Moreover, Hobsbawm noted, the Union victory that emerged from the conflict represented “the triumph of American capitalism and the modern United States,” but, while slavery was abolished, it hardly reflected the triumph “of the Negro, slave or free.” With the ultimate “failure” of Reconstruction, which Hobsbawm characterized as a program of forced democratization across racial lines,
Conservative white southerners regained control of the region and maintained a racist home rule for decades over occasional and usually feckless federal complaints and in spite of increasing resistance from the region’s African American population. Ironically, in a chapter entitled “Winners,” Hobsbawm concluded that the post-war South remained “poor, backward and resentful, the whites resenting the not-forgotten defeat, and the blacks the disfranchisement and ruthless subordination imposed by the whites” (Hobsbawm 1975: 153–7).

In many respects this volume in Blackwell’s *Companion* series might be better titled “The United States in the Age of Capital,” as the chapters focus largely on the years between the emergence of sectional crisis over the Wilmot Proviso in 1846 and the end of political Reconstruction in 1877. In broad brush, the contributions cover the historiography, much of it written since Hobsbawm’s magisterial 1975 account of capital’s triumph in the western world, offering 23 chapters covering three central themes of the era: how, why, and when slavery produced an American Civil War, the direction of the war itself and its immediate consequences for American society, and the process of Reconstruction, with its mixed and disappointing results.

Setting the stage for the rest of the volume, Douglas R. Egerton’s chapter, “Slavery and the Union, 1789–1833,” explores the literature on slavery in the world of the founders. Egerton contends that critical regional differences defined the young nation’s approach to slavery and slavery-related issues from the time the founders drafted the constitution onward. In New England and most of the northern states, where the proportion of slaves as a part of the total population was small and where local economies depended only marginally on slave labor, post-revolutionary idealism quickly put slavery on the road to a gradual end. But, as Joanne Pope Melish (1998) has pointed out, as the gradual emancipation process unfolded, these states also began to purge the long-time presence of slavery from their civic memory. Moreover, even as gradual emancipation removed slaves from the social landscape in these free-labor states, public policy continued to reflect high, and perhaps even intensified, levels of white supremacist thought and severely circumscribed social, political, and economic opportunity for free blacks in the region, recasting both former slaves and blacks free from birth as second-class citizens. In the Chesapeake region, with its long history of slave-based tobacco production, slavery remained entrenched even as the region’s aging tobacco economy experienced cyclical decline. The rhetoric of leading Chesapeake state politicians endorsed gradual emancipation; but the actions of these same upper South politicians failed to match their rhetoric and did little to hasten emancipation. Ultimately, in both the upper South and the lower North, a fragile and awkward consensus emerged around colonization as the best method of gradually ending slavery while preventing the creation of a large free black population. To complicate matters further, black agency in the Caribbean, primarily in the form of the Haitian Revolution, played a key role in forging white attitudes, both in frightening southern slaveholders into concern for their future safety and in prompting President Jefferson to acquire Louisiana to facilitate the “diffusion” of slaves out of the Chesapeake and South Atlantic regions, where concentrations of slaves on a Haitian scale existed in a few locales. Jefferson and other upper South defenders of the approach praised diffusion as a beneficent means of weakening slavery and preparing the way for eventual emancipation. In the booming cotton regions of the lower South, however, little sympathy for colonization emerged
other than as a means for removing potentially troublesome free blacks from an expanding slave society. In the South Carolina lowcountry, where spectacular rice fortunes emerged from the work of the region’s preponderant slave population, Charleston authorities investigating the aborted Denmark Vesey insurrection scare advocated a tighter regimen of slave management that would reduce the limited autonomy slave resistance had carved out for slaves and their families while also launching a full-throated rhetorical attack on slavery’s critics in the early 1820s.

But as white southerners grappled with how to wind slavery down or expand it westward, depending on their preferred policy, the world the founders knew gradually disappeared into the vortex of the market revolution. During the years following the war of 1812, a series of transportation improvements and related technological innovations prompted a dramatic expansion and quickening of the young republic’s market economy. Market relations penetrated regions previously isolated from their reach and thickened in areas where they already flourished. To be sure, the market revolution emerged at different times and proceeded at different paces in different parts of the country, but it was everywhere an evolution of the capitalist economy. In many parts of the North, and in scattered enclaves elsewhere, the market revolution brought with it industrialization, understood as a process of capital-intensive factory production, and the rise of a class of largely propertyless wage laborers. In other areas, the market revolution meant simply the expansion and intensification of commercial agriculture and trade, and in the lower South, the market revolution represented the westward expansion of plantation agriculture and the extension of staple agriculture into upland regions previously dominated by subsistence production.

Moreover, as the chapters herein by John Larson and Michael Morrison explain, the American public often interpreted the market revolution through the lens of political ideology. As Larson notes, “by the time of the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828, the market revolution had become both an engine of social change and a self-conscious topic of public debate.” Defenders of the market revolution saw it as a rising tide that lifted all boats. From this standpoint, one eventually championed by the Whig party, the growth and development of the American economy allowed more and more Americans to move from subsistence to competence, from competence to comfort, and even from comfort to prosperity. Over time, Henry Clay’s Whig party, which both inherited and enhanced the Federalist vision of a robust national government active in promoting economic stability and progress, wanted federal policies which would foster the market revolution by providing a stable and abundant currency, financing internal improvements, enacting tariffs to protect emerging American industry from potentially ruinous British competition, and slowing the pace of westward expansion to encourage intensive development in established areas. On the other hand, many Jacksonian Democrats tended to view the market revolution as a threat to the independence of petty producers, the yeoman farmers and artisans (whom Jefferson had praised as the yeomanry of the cities), and threatened to plunge these unsuspecting avatars of personal independence into the dangerous if exciting vortex of the market. Other Democrats had less quarrel with the market revolution than with the notion of using the government to endow already powerful interests with special favors to the disadvantage of rising entrepreneurs. But both groups of Democrats saw the function of government in the age of market revolution as one of protecting individual producers from powerful corporations and an