

# Proslavery and Modernity in the Late Antebellum South

DANIEL IMMERWAHR

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It is no exaggeration to say that, apart perhaps from genocide, slaveholding is the past practice whose standings have fallen the lowest in modern times. Since the abolition of slavery on the Arabian Peninsula in 1962, human bondage has been formally prohibited in every nation on the globe, and despite its *de facto* persistence in places like Sudan and Mauritania it is internationally regarded as an unfortunate throwback to a less enlightened time. Nor is this branding of slavery as anathema to modernity particularly new. The great prophet of liberalism, Alexis de Tocqueville, warned that “slavery, amid the democratic liberty and enlightenment of our age, is not an institution that can last.”<sup>1</sup> And although his vision of human progress could hardly have differed more from Tocqueville’s, Karl Marx agreed heartily that slavery was by its very nature doomed, reading Southern slavery as the persistence of feudalism within a capitalist system.<sup>2</sup> Even for a thinker like John Crowe Ransom, perhaps the greatest twentieth-century nostalgist of the antebellum South, the slave system could be defended only for its “antique conservatism”—its stubborn opposition to industrial progress.<sup>3</sup> Heightened public concern for eradicating racism in the United States since the end of the Second World War has only added to our notion of slavery as a regressive, near-senseless institution.

Most antebellum defenses of slaveholding—centered around racial difference, the Bible, antiquity, social hierarchy, or necessity—do little to challenge our understanding of Southern slavery as a peculiarity within the landscape of modernity. And yet, by the 1850s, a new generation of apologists for slavery redescribed the age-old institution in terms that were undeniably modern, cosmopolitan, and—one might even say—progressive. George Fitzhugh, Henry Hughes, George Frederick Holmes, and J. D. B. De Bow, the principal theorists of this new interpretation of slavery, engaged critically with European socialist thought, led the adop-

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 13th ed., trans. George Lawrence (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 363.

<sup>2</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Everyman’s Library, 1930), chap. 8, esp. 236, 274-275, and 309.

<sup>3</sup> John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” in *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 3.

tion of the social sciences in the United States, and developed a nuanced account of economic imperialism. It was no accident that the first two books to use the word “sociology” in their title and the first U.S. sociology textbook were written by advocates of slavery.<sup>4</sup> Nor was it coincidence that many of the important features of the modern welfare state—including guaranteed employment, public health authorities, a centralized state bureaucracy, limited working hours, and guaranteed provision—were integral aspirations to the late proslavery movement. Although this vision of slaveholding modernity was aborted before it could confront its own inconsistencies and contradictions, the challenge remains to historians to account for it.

What follows is not a history of an intellectual movement but rather a rational reconstruction of it. For that reason, this analysis will pass freely among the four thinkers (and a few others), emphasizing the continuities in their thought and, for the most part, ignoring the differences. Fitzhugh will appear as the central figure, for the simple reason that he was exceptionally frank, wide-ranging in his thought, and willing to carry his ideas to their logical extremes—useful traits in a historian’s subject.<sup>5</sup> De Bow, whose influential *Review* provided an important forum for late proslavery, will appear less often because he agreed with the new interpretation of slavery only in part.<sup>6</sup> And yet, despite some divergences within the thought of this quartet of thinkers, there are good reasons for considering them as a single unit. First, they came from similar backgrounds: all were professionals who had experienced some measure of poverty.<sup>7</sup> While each man owned slaves at some point in his life, they

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<sup>4</sup> In 1854 George Fitzhugh published *Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society* and Henry Hughes published his *Treatise on Sociology*. It is not known which book appeared first. The word *sociologie* was coined in France by Auguste Comte, whose positive philosophy was of great importance to a number of white Southern thinkers. George Frederick Holmes was the author, in 1883, of *The Science of Society*.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene D. Genovese’s argument for the heuristic value of Fitzhugh’s thought is well-known among Southern intellectual historians. “Fitzhugh,” he wrote in 1969, “was neither typical nor representative; he was a ruthless and critical theorist who spelled out the logical outcome of the slaveholders’ philosophy and laid bare its essence.” While Genovese treats Fitzhugh as the spokesman for proslavery in general, however, I treat him only as a representative of one particular strain of thought. Similarly, while Genovese takes Fitzhugh’s thought as the logic of slaveholding stripped to its inconsistencies and temporizing, I examine the ways in which Fitzhugh and his contemporaries sought out *new* intellectual engagements instead of refining old arguments. If their thought captured the essence of anything, it was not slaveholding in general but slaveholding in the modern world. Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two essays in interpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> The core of the difference between De Bow and the others lay in his enthusiasm for the commerce. While Fitzhugh, Hughes, and Holmes took a socialist-inspired critique of the laissez-faire system as a fundamental element of their thought, De Bow—who made his fortunes as a land speculator—did not, and that made quite a lot of difference.

<sup>7</sup> Fitzhugh worked as a lawyer; Holmes as a lawyer, professor, and farmer; Hughes as a lawyer and politician; and De Bow as a lawyer, editor, land speculator, publisher, civil servant, and professor. For biographical details see Harvey Wish, *George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1943); Ottis Clark

were, as a group, on the periphery of the world that the slaveholders made.<sup>8</sup> With the exception of Fitzhugh, who could be accurately said to be the intellectual pioneer of the group as well as its oldest member, all were born in the 1820s and were as a consequence relatively young when they developed their reinterpretation of slavery in the mid-1850s. Intellectually, they were explicit in their affinities—the sketch of slaveholding modernity that Fitzhugh and Hughes offered in their books, Holmes elaborated in a series of reviews and De Bow endorsed and published in his *Review*. They wrote to one another, read each other's works, and published articles in *De Bow's Review*. Although the idiosyncratic and unsociable personalities of Fitzhugh, Holmes, and Hughes precluded a personal sense of unity among the four thinkers, they believed themselves to be united in their goal of vindicating the cause of slavery to the world.

The reading of late proslavery offered in this paper is not a complicated one. It involves little more than closely examining the words of certain slaveholders with openness to the possibility that they ought to be taken seriously in what they say. Yet, as even this simple task encounters substantial obstacles, it is worth noting some of them. The greatest difficulty facing intellectual historians of the white antebellum South is the temptation to dismiss proslavery, or at least the forms of it that insist on its modernity and progressive nature, with a sneer. Louis Hartz's masterpiece, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, illustrates this tendency well. In it, Hartz takes up the subject of Fitzhugh and his contemporaries only to dismiss them as “grossly imperfect Maistres,” “false Burkes,” and “brilliant men gone haywire.”<sup>9</sup> Hartz stands out from other historians in his willingness to engage critically with late slaveholding thought, but in doing so he discovered the deep opposition among men like Fitzhugh to the liberal tradition he so revered, and he damned them (praising their cleverness all the while) as being in a sort of intellectual bad faith. Continuing Hartz's line of thought, a large number of Southern historians have suggested that defenses of slavery were not considered opinions but rather the expressions of personal feelings of guilt and alienation taking

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Skipper, “J. D. B. De Bow, the Man,” *Journal of Southern History* 10 (1944); Ottis Clark Skipper, *J. D. B. De Bow: Magazinish of the old South* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1958); Neal C. Gillespie, *The Collapse of Orthodoxy: The intellectual ordeal of George Frederick Holmes* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1972; and Douglas Ambrose, *Henry Hughes and Proslavery Thought in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> In a short pamphlet in 1860, De Bow made the remarkable claim that, despite his financial success, he had only *just* become a slaveholder. See J. D. B. De Bow, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder* (Charleston: Presses of Evans & Cogswell, 1860), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An interpretation of American political thought since the revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), 148, 172, and 185.

shape in the form of arguments—in other words, more men, brilliant or not, gone haywire.<sup>10</sup>

Even without dismissing slavery's defenders out of hand, many historians have seen proslavery as a conspicuous weakness in white Southern thought. Just as Cold War-era intellectuals in the U.S. saw Communism as a blinding ideology, so too are we tempted to see the commitment to slavery as an impediment to accurate perception and free-ranging thought. Dan R. Frost's history of Southern academia, for instance, casts the unquestioned allegiance of the white antebellum Southerners to slaveholding as an intellectual disability, preventing them from considering any idea capable of imperiling their beloved institution.<sup>11</sup> While Frost is for the most part correct in seeing proslavery as a pre-rational commitment (at least among Southern slaveholders), one ought to be cautious about seeing a dedication to the slave system solely as a detriment. The history of human thought is full of examples of unquestioned commitments leading to moments of remarkable creativity or insight. One only has to think of Immanuel Kant's oft-quoted confession that, in writing his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he had to limit reason to make room for faith. And yet, Kant's pre-rational allegiance to the possibility of God led him to write not dogmatic propaganda but one of the most sophisticated and fruitful works of the entire Western philosophical tradition. It is better, therefore, to think of unquestioned intellectual loyalties as lenses—allowing for certain sorts of vision and preventing others—rather than blinders. An uncritical predisposition in favor of slavery on the part of Fitzhugh, Hughes, Holmes, and De Bow surely impaired their ability to think through certain problems but, as I hope to show, it *enabled* them to think through others. And their lack of criticism of what Fitzhugh called “the slavery principle” did not translate into an unthinking defense of the status quo in its entirety.<sup>12</sup> Their vision of slavery involved a massive expansion of state power, the extension of slavery to whites, and a number of other transformations of the slave system, many of which would have been hard for the average planter to swallow.

A third obstacle facing historians in the treatment of late proslavery is the tendency to treat Southern intellectual history in isolation from the intellectual history of the rest of the North Atlantic West. The four thinkers treated in this essay, for instance, were among the first to

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<sup>10</sup> For an assessment of such arguments, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Modernizing Southern Slavery: The proslavery argument reinterpreted,” in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in honor of C. Vann Woodward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 41 and Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The dilemma of the intellectual in the old South, 1840-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 112-113.

<sup>11</sup> Dan R. Frost, *Thinking Confederates: Academia and the idea of progress in the new South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> George Fitzhugh, “The Counter Current, Slavery Principles,” *De Bow's Review* 21 (July 1856): 93.

import the disciplines of sociology and statistics from Europe into the United States, but most histories of U.S. social science either begin after the Civil War or pass blithely over Fitzhugh, Hughes, De Bow, and Holmes as they jump from the founding fathers and Tocqueville to William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward.<sup>13</sup> Intellectual historians of the slaveholding South fall into this trap themselves. One of the foundational works of recent Southern intellectual history, Drew Gilpin Faust's *A Sacred Circle*, describes a network of Southern thinkers who were isolated and alienated from their own society as well as from the broader Atlantic world.<sup>14</sup> And although not every historian has followed Faust's line of interpretation, the treatment of late proslavery as a topic within the history of Southern thought or the history of slavery rather than as a topic within intellectual history more broadly discourages historians from seeing the slaveholding South as a legitimate participant in a transatlantic discourse about labor, social science, and imperialism.<sup>15</sup> With these provincial biases in place, the cosmopolitan aspects of Fitzhugh's generation of slavery advocates can escape notice.

If the obstacles to perceiving the intellectual engagement between late proslavery and the thought and conditions of modernity are substantial, so too is the work that has already been done toward breaking them down. Economic historians—both following in the tradition of Marxist Eric Williams and those following cliometricians Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman—have emphasized slavery's compatibility with capitalism and profit-oriented development.<sup>16</sup> Intellectual historians, for their part, have had considerable success in reviving Fitzhugh's generation—in

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey Alexander, Raymond Boudon, and Mohamed Cherkaoui, eds., *The Classical Tradition in Sociology: The American tradition*, vol. 1 (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the nineteenth-century crisis of authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); and Robert C. Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism: The American quest for objectivity, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Porter's book, it should be mentioned, is not strictly national in scope and thus has a greater excuse for overlooking Southern social science. One book that does treat the antebellum South is Dorothy Ross's *The Origins of American Social Science*, although Ross quickly leaves the topic, pointing out that "Southern social science, for all its ingenuity, went down to defeat with the Confederacy." Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Faust, *Sacred Circle*.

<sup>15</sup> Michael O'Brien's excellent *Conjectures of Order* is a partial exception. Particularly in his first volume, O'Brien stresses the connections between European and white Southern thought. Those connections, however, are largely one-way and, tellingly, only rarely involve slavery. Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual life and the American South, 1810-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> See Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The economics of American Negro slavery* (London: Wildwood House, 1974); James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A history of American slaveholders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); and Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, slavery, and freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The university of North Carolina Press, 1997).

some cases rescuing them from complete obscurity—and in taking what they have to say seriously.<sup>17</sup> Recently, some historians have even been sensitive to the progressive impulses in Southern thought, about slavery and other topics.<sup>18</sup> Now that we are fully prepared to recognize what is modern in slavery and the cultural and intellectual forms surrounding it, it is worth returning to the late proslavery generation, to understand the ways in which they engaged with the world of their time.

Historians often explain late proslavery as a reaction to the growing success of abolitionism after William Lloyd Garrison's founding of *The Liberator* in 1831.<sup>19</sup> According to this account, pressure from the North pushed Southerners to come up with stronger defenses of slavery, and the writings of Fitzhugh and his colleagues simply represent a more consistent and confident version of proslavery—the “logical outcome of the slaveholders' philosophy,” as Eugene D. Genovese put it.<sup>20</sup> While it is certainly true that defenders of the slave system perceived a palpable need to respond to Northern abolitionism, such an explanation misleadingly leaves out a crucial fount of intellectual inspiration for the Southern states: Europe. It is important to remember that, before the Civil War, the United States “was more a political than an intellectual comity,” as Michael O'Brien put it, and on the whole European thinkers mattered more to the South than did Northern ones.<sup>21</sup>

The Southern intellectual engagement with Europe took many forms. Like their Northern counterparts, Southern students completed the Grand Tour as the capstone to their university educations, drinking heady draughts of romanticism in Italy, observing medical techniques in Paris, and steeping themselves in German culture at Göttingen.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, numerous European visitors visited the Southern states, some of them—including Francis Lieber, Thomas Cooper, and George Frederick Holmes—staying on and taking an active role in shaping ideas and

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<sup>17</sup> Major participants in the revisionist project include Eugene D. Genovese, C. Vann Woodward, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Drew Gilpin Faust, and Michael O'Brien. See C. Vann Woodward, “A Southern War Against Capitalism,” in *American Counterpoint: Slavery and racism in the North-South dialogue* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), 107-139; Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*; Gillespie, *The Collapse of Orthodoxy*; Faust, *Sacred Circle*; Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery thought in the antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Wyatt-Brown, “Modernizing Southern Slavery”; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and progress in southern conservative thought, 1820-1860* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); Ambrose, *Henry Hughes*; and O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*.

<sup>18</sup> On this, see particularly Wyatt-Brown, “Modernizing Southern Slavery”; David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Genovese, *The Slaveholders' Dilemma*; Daniel Kilbride, “Slavery and Utilitarianism: Thomas Cooper and the mind of the old South,” *Journal of Southern History* 59 (1993): 469-486; and O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, 150.

<sup>20</sup> Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, 1:4.

<sup>22</sup> See O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, vol. 1, chap. 3.

institutions in the South.<sup>23</sup> In the world of print, European influence was even greater, and more Anglo-centric. Southern readers' fevered enthusiasm for the romantic nationalism of Sir Walter Scott prompted Mark Twain to later remark that "Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war."<sup>24</sup> Alongside and following Scott, Lord Byron, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Thomas Carlyle captured white Southern hearts, with the latter holding special pride of place among slaveholders. "The spirit of Thomas Carlyle is abroad in the land," declared *The Southern Quarterly Review* in 1848, and not without warrant.<sup>25</sup> Carlyle's writings furnished the epigraph for *De Bow's Review* ("Commerce is King") and both the title and the subtitle of Fitzhugh's most influential work, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves without Masters*.<sup>26</sup>

The content of Carlyle's prose—his interminable condemnations of the free market and celebrations of social hierarchy—no doubt formed the basis of his appeal to slaveholding Southrons, but the form was important as well. For Carlyle came to the South not through bound volumes but through journals such as the *Edinburgh Review*, *Fraser's Magazine*, the *London Magazine*, and the *Foreign Review*. It is hard to understate the importance of British reviews for Southern social thought. Not only were they read in the South—one could get a subscription to *Blackwood's* and the U.S. imprints of four other British reviews for \$10 a year—but they served as the archetype for the South's own journals.<sup>27</sup> The founders of the *Southern Review*, the first major regional journal in the South, modeled their publication directly on the *Edinburgh Review* and in turn influenced the *Southern Literary Messenger* and *De Bow's Review*.<sup>28</sup> Reviews both Southern and European allowed Southerners quickly to digest a large body of thought without having to acquire or read large tomes. This was particularly important for Fitzhugh, who once confessed to Holmes that his entire store of knowledge was "all gathered from Reviews" and that, despite the great influence of French socialism upon him, he had "never read a Socialist author treating his subject philosophically in [his] life."<sup>29</sup>

The importance of Europe to the South was manifold, but by the 1850s one pivotal subject anchored white Southern regard for Europe:

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<sup>23</sup> For a full account of European visitors to the South, see O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, vol. 1, chap. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 26.

<sup>25</sup> "Carlyle's Works," *The Southern Quarterly Review* 14 (July 1848): 77.

<sup>26</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves without Masters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>27</sup> For some information about the pricing and availability of British reviews in the South, see George Fitzhugh, "The English Reviews," *De Bow's Review* 28 (October 1860), 392-405.

<sup>28</sup> O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, 1:531-539.

<sup>29</sup> George Fitzhugh, letter to George Frederick Holmes, 11 April 1855, quoted in Wish, *George Fitzhugh*, 20.

the labor question. “The *great question* in this day and generation,” as Archibald Roane called it in 1858, had been posed first in Western Europe, and particularly Britain and France, where the free labor system was on the brink of crisis.<sup>30</sup> Evidence of this impending crisis filled the pages of the British reviews that men like Fitzhugh took to with such enthusiasm. Through them, Thomas Carlyle, Robert du Var, Alton Locke, Joseph Kay, Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Louis Blanc, each in his own way, spoke to the South of brutal exploitation of labor under capitalism.

This message was so compelling in part because it seemed so foreign to many Southerners. “Society has been so quiet and contented in the South,” alleged Fitzhugh, “that its attention has not been awakened to the revolution, tumults, uproar, mendacity and crime of free society.”<sup>31</sup> But this state of blissful ignorance could only be temporary, for the rot was spreading, carrying with it the social maladies of irreligion, free love, utopianism, and labor strife. To see the disease in its advanced state, one only had to look to England, the country, according to Holmes, where one could find “the most perfect and matured type of the inherent tendencies of this mode of organizing labour.”<sup>32</sup> Unpopulated western lands had allowed the North to escape England’s fate for the most part, but the North was, as Fitzhugh’s put it, “an exceptional form of society” that could last only as long as the frontier did.<sup>33</sup> And even though slavery ostensibly protected the South from the economic failures of free society, the North’s impending social dissolution loomed ominously on the horizon. “We may be in no immediate danger ourselves,” Holmes reasoned, “but we cannot be indifferent when our neighbor Ucalegon’s house is in flames. The miasma of social corruption is infectious.”<sup>34</sup>

Advances in the state of European capitalism were accompanied by advances in European social thought. Not only did Europe serve as a harbinger of the fate of the United States, but it was also a source of words, theories, and concepts that men like Fitzhugh and Holmes found to be of great use. One example may help to illustrate this process. In a March 1855 review of Fitzhugh’s *Sociology for the South*, Holmes lamented that the English language had yet to produce a translation of the French term *prolétaire*. “It is an indispensable word in modern times,” he wrote, “and the impossibility of avoiding its use is a stronger proof of the failure of free societies, than the invention of the phrase Sociology, which Mr. Fitzhugh regards in this light. It ought to be unhesitatingly

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<sup>30</sup> Archibald Roane, “Ross on Slavery and Stiles’ Modern Reform,” *De Bow’s Review* 24 (April 1858): 304.

<sup>31</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), iii.

<sup>32</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “Slavery and Freedom,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 1 (April 1856): 86.

<sup>33</sup> Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “On the Importance of the Social Sciences in the Present Day,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15 (February 1849): 79.



introduced into the English language.”<sup>35</sup> Fitzhugh evidently concurred, for within two months he had dispatched a letter to the *National Era* complaining of the “Proletariat of France”—a usage that postdated the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first mention of the word by only a year and a half. Two years later, in *Cannibals All!*, he used the word “proletariat” five times and reprinted Holmes’s review in full.<sup>36</sup> Other new words and ideas, from sociology to wage slavery to the labor theory of value, entered Southern discourse, some with the same startling speed.

No European body of thought was more important to late proslavery thought than that developed by the French socialists. British reformers had offered the world reports and statistics on the advanced state of capitalism (and it is telling that Fitzhugh used many of the same sources that would later form the basis of the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*), but it was the socialists who offered a systematic critique of free labor.<sup>37</sup> Proudhon, who famously declared property to be theft, won undying respect from Fitzhugh and Holmes; the former crowned him “the greatest of all communists, if communist he be” and the latter claimed that his writing “diffuses its illumination through every part of the sphere which surrounds it.”<sup>38</sup> Hughes, for his part, was more struck with Fourier, whose two-volume *Passions of the Human Soul* he read at age twenty-three. “That book’s influence on me!” he wrote excitedly in his diary upon completing the first volume, “May God guide and govern it.”<sup>39</sup> These men quickly absorbed the deep bitterness of socialists toward the free market system. For Hughes, it was “a live murder-machine” that “kills its own children”; for Fitzhugh, “a mere slaughter-house, in which the poor, the improvident, and unfortunate, are continually sacrificed to feed and fatten parvenus.”<sup>40</sup>

Had the Southern appropriation of socialist thought ended there, however, the proslavery argument would have amounted to little more than a tuneless echo of Carlyle, who himself was already souring fast. The true gift of socialism to the South was not its analysis of capitalism, but its analysis of slavery. “Nothing written on the subject of slavery from the time of Aristotle is worth reading until the days of the modern

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<sup>35</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “Failure of Free Societies,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 11 (March 1855): 137.

<sup>36</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Trip to the North,” *National Era*, 24 May 1855, 81. For Fitzhugh’s later use of the word “proletariat” see *Cannibals All!*, 100, 109, 137, 159 and 248.

<sup>37</sup> On the evidentiary connections between Fitzhugh’s two books and Marx’s *Capital*, see Woodward, “Southern War Against Capitalism,” 125-126.

<sup>38</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 62; George Frederick Holmes, “Population and Capital—Property, Poor Laws, Power of Productions, and Means of Support,” *De Bow’s Review* 21 (September 1856): 219.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Hughes, *Diary*, 2 May 1852, quoted in Ambrose, *Henry Hughes*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical* (1854; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 145; George Fitzhugh, “Modern Civilization,” *De Bow’s Review* 29 (July 1860): 65.

Socialists,” wrote Fitzhugh.<sup>41</sup> At first, this might seem a curious claim; men like Blanc, Proudhon, and Fourier hardly shared late proslavery’s glowing appraisal of the slave system. Proudhon, for instance, believed that the truth of his dictum, “Property is theft,” should be as apparent to the reader as that of “Slavery is murder,” and asked nothing more of a society than “an end to privilege, the abolition of slavery, the equality of rights, and the rule of law.”<sup>42</sup> But slavery’s defenders heard other messages in socialist tracts. First, they heard that wage laborers were unfree, and perhaps even more so than slaves.<sup>43</sup> Second, they heard that the intentional organization of labor could solve the problems of capitalism. Putting these two lessons together, the slaveholding South learned from French socialism that slavery was *not* a peculiar institution. In its authoritarian aspects, it resembled the social relations of capitalism and in its social provision and planned organization of labor it resembled socialism. The correct response to slavery, therefore, could not be to simply castigate it, but rather to recognize it in all its forms and to choose the healthiest types of slavery for a given society.

Once slavery was a matter of social relation, not of legal definition, it could be found everywhere. Fitzhugh discovered that the “slavery principle,” as he called it, applied not just to those called slaves, but also to women, children, apprentices, soldiers, sailors, lunatics, and convicts.<sup>44</sup> “Wellington at Waterloo was a slave,” Fitzhugh contended. “He was bound to obey, or would, like admiral Bying [*sic*], have been shot for gross misconduct.” And yet, “the highest and most honorable position on earth was that of the slave Wellington, the lowest, that of the free man who cleaned his boots and fed his hounds.”<sup>45</sup> Unlike the socialists, who pointed out unfreedom outside of legal slavery in order to condemn it, Fitzhugh and his colleagues pointed it out in order to dignify legal slavery and suggest that there was nothing anomalous about it. “Some were born with saddles on their backs, and others booted and spurred to ride them,” wrote Fitzhugh, echoing the words of seventeenth-century Eng-

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<sup>41</sup> Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property? or, An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government*, ed. and trans. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Marcus Cunliffe and David R. Roediger have located important sources of the notion of “wage slavery” (or “white slavery”) among British Tories and Northern white wage laborers, respectively. And yet, for the late proslavery argument, it is European socialist sources that are most often quoted on the comparison of wage labor to slavery. Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context, 1830-1860* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1979) and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1999), chap. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 86; George Fitzhugh, “Counter Current, Slavery Principles,” *De Bow’s Review* 21 (July 1856): 94.

<sup>45</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 85. Fitzhugh’s reference is to Admiral John Byng, executed in 1757 by his own government for failing to prevent the French from taking Minorca.

lish rebel Richard Rumbold. “And the riding does them good,” he added.<sup>46</sup>

The difference between the North and the South in this analysis was not the presence of subjugation but the way in which it was organized. Holmes, Fitzhugh, and Hughes agreed that the great problem of free society was the conflict of labor and capital and that slavery offered a unique solution to the problem. Free labor’s greatest defect, they believed, was that it gave the capitalist no reason to care for the long-term welfare of the worker. The iron law of wages guaranteed that remuneration could climb no higher than what was required for subsistence, with no provision made for education, illness, injury, or old age. And within such a system, the “internecine feud between capital and labour,” as Holmes was fond of calling it, would wreck society.<sup>47</sup> Slavery, by contrast, was immune to the social tumult of free society. For Holmes, Fitzhugh, and Hughes, the distinguishing feature of the Southern system was that it identified the interests of capital and labor. Because laborers and employers were bonded to each other for life, slaveholders had an economic incentive to provide for the long-term care of their slaves—an incentive that only reinforced the familial bonds said to exist between master and slave. In the South, insisted Hughes, “laborers and capitalists are welded together,” a dictum that Fitzhugh put even more succinctly when he wrote that, “in such society, labor is capital.”<sup>48</sup>

The argument that slavery tied capital to labor was not an uncommon one among slaveholders, but it fell to Hughes, in his *Treatise*, to explore its full implications. Starting with the commonplace that the modern economy had of necessity divided itself into a propertied class and a class of laborers, he noted that each class was associated with a distinctive form of punishment for unproductive behavior. While capitalists who failed to use their resources productively would sacrifice some of their property and profits to others, the only forms of punishment applicable to laborers were starvation, loss of shelter, physical harm, or incarceration, some of which violated laborers’ human rights and all of which were wasteful, brutal, and, as Hughes laconically put it, “inexpedient.”<sup>49</sup> This asymmetry in punishments also gave capitalists an obvious advantage over laborers. “One class,” Hughes remarked, “has a greater ability to stand-out than the other. One cannot be starved; the other can.”<sup>50</sup>

An orderly society, Hughes believed, would favor economic disincentives over physical ones. Justice, morality, and productivity all demanded it. The problem was then to find a way to structure the economy

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<sup>46</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 179.

<sup>47</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “The History of the Working Classes,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 11 (April 1855), 199.

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Treatise*, 108; Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Hughes, *Treatise*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

so that as much of the burden of productivity would fall onto the shoulders of the capitalists as possible. And the solution, of course, was slavery. Under his idealized slave system, laborers would still be compelled by threat of physical punishment to work when able, but, unlike in the free system, the capitalist would assume every other responsibility. If productive uses of labor in one location dried up, capitalists would bear the financial burden of creating new opportunities, retraining laborers, or transporting them to a new location. “Warrantees [slaves, that is] may be out of work, but never out of wages,” he explained, in his peculiar language of warranteeism. “Loss of work, therefore, falls on the warrantor [master].”<sup>51</sup> The intemperance of the market would thus become the problem of the capitalists, who, unlike their laborers, would be in a position to do something about it. Rash investments and rapid mobility would become rare in a steadier, crisis-averse economy.<sup>52</sup>

It is a marker of how greatly the idealized version of the slave system differed from earlier descriptions of slavery in the U.S. (and from the actual practice of slaveholding) that its argument depended on an abridgment of the sanctity of property. Masters, according to Hughes, were not at liberty to treat their slaves in any manner they saw fit, but were compelled by law to provide for their needs. Fitzhugh made this implication clear. “You lose your right to your property,” he wrote, “so soon as you cease faithfully to execute your trust; you can’t make commons and forests of your lands and starve mankind.”<sup>53</sup> While Fitzhugh and Hughes would continue to defend the property of masters, they did so only on the grounds of social expediency—and only so long as the propertied class provided for laborers—not on the grounds of any divine or inviolable right to property. And what they saw as socially expedient often represented a serious challenge to slavery as practiced in the South. Fitzhugh called for the Southern plantation to operate as a sort of “social phalanstery, in which the master furnishes the capital and skill, and the slaves the labor, and divide the profits, not according to each one’s input, but according to each one’s wants and necessities.”<sup>54</sup>

Described in these terms, the idealized modern slave system bore less resemblance to ancient enslavement—in which the natural hierarchy

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<sup>51</sup> Hughes, *Treatise*, 155.

<sup>52</sup> Hughes’s idea that enslavement could act as a *check* on the most disruptive features of the mobility of capital and employment opportunities provides a remarkable contrast to older uses of enslavement. Historian David Brion Davis has argued that the earliest recorded forms of slavery made slaves out to be “the world’s first ‘modern’ people,” because each slave was “a replaceable and interchangeable outsider” and “the prototype for migratory labor.” That Hughes and his contemporaries could make the *opposite* argument—that enslavement would give more power to laborers by restraining the freedom of capitalists—indicates both significant developments in the North Atlantic economy and a sensitivity on the part of proslavery advocates to these changes. See Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 14-15.

<sup>53</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 234.

<sup>54</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 48. The word “phalanstery” is a reference to Charles Fourier’s utopian scheme for groups of associated laborers.

of humanity was given expression in social form—and greater resemblance to socialism. Indeed, it was a comparison that late proslavery welcomed. “Slavery is a form, and the very best form, of socialism,” Fitzhugh maintained, calling the plantation “the beau ideal of Communism” and declaring himself to be a socialist.<sup>55</sup> Although Hughes was more cautious in his comparisons, he, too, saw a connection between slavery and socialism and opined that the most promising future for the North would be the gradual evolution of trade unions into some form of regulated slavery.<sup>56</sup> A startling implication of the equation of slavery and socialism was that, as Holmes argued, the world contained “only two pure forms” of organizing labor: slavery/socialism and freedom. “All other arrangements to effect the co-operation of labour and capital,” he continued, “are only modifications or amalgamations of these two types, in different proportions.”<sup>57</sup> A number of historians have cited Fitzhugh’s formulation of the same principle as the source of Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech of 1858.<sup>58</sup> What is mentioned less frequently, however, is that while Lincoln referred to the presence of two competing and irreconcilable systems in the union, Fitzhugh’s reference was to the presence of two competing and irreconcilable systems in the world: “the one, the philosophy of free trade and universal liberty—the philosophy adapted to promote the interests of the strong, the wealthy and the wise” and “the other, that of socialism, intended to protect the weak, the poor and the ignorant.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, Fitzhugh’s two systems were not *slavery* and freedom, but *socialism* and freedom.

If Fitzhugh, Holmes, and Hughes had great sympathy for socialism in the abstract, they had little patience for socialists themselves. Socialists and slaveholders agreed that the laissez-faire system was a failure and that more governing control was necessary, but socialists could not be made to see slavery as a desirable form of socialism, or even a form of it at all. Damning them even further in the eyes of slaveholders, socialists advocated abolition, revolution, egalitarianism, utopianism, anti-racism, irreligion, and free love—all of which threatened to undermine the authoritarian, racist, and patriarchal system of labor in the South. Unwilling to accept socialist thought in full, white Southerners therefore remained open to other modern intellectual traditions that might temper its revolutionary nature. This they found in sociology, and in its frequent handmaiden, statistics.

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<sup>55</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 27-28, 245. Fitzhugh refers to himself as a socialist only twice, both times in uncharacteristically oblique language in the final pages of *Cannibals All!* The first reference: “We (for we are a Socialist) agree with Mr. Carlyle, that the action of free society must be reversed.” The second: “As we are a Brother Socialist, we have the right to prescribe for the patient.” Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, 254, 260-261.

<sup>56</sup> Hughes, *Treatise*, 187-190.

<sup>57</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “Slavery and Freedom,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 1 (April 1856): 72-73.

<sup>58</sup> For a review of this claim, see Wish, *George Fitzhugh*, 104-105.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 80.

Although recent historians have for the most part ignored it, sociology's legacy in the antebellum South was remarkable.<sup>60</sup> Auguste Comte coined the word *sociologie* in 1830 and it first appeared in English in *Blackwood's* in 1843, but Fitzhugh and Hughes were the first to use it in the title of a book.<sup>61</sup> Fitzhugh's *Sociology for the South* was not itself a proper treatise, but more of a prospectus. Holmes described it as "the first lineaments of such a science, and a collection of special contribution towards such a science."<sup>62</sup> By contrast, Hughes, who had studied with positivists and possibly with Comte himself in Paris, could justly be said to have written an actual work of sociology.<sup>63</sup> His *Treatise on Sociology* moves from a "theoretical sociology" to a systematic treatment of the social forces governing production and distribution in the North and South. And while Holmes did not offer his own treatise before the war, he served as an apologist for Fitzhugh's sociology as well as the principal interpreter for the Comte in the antebellum U.S. In all, Holmes wrote seven articles on Comte's positivism and engaged in a two-year, fourteen-letter correspondence with the French philosopher. The main subject of their correspondence was religion (Comte was an atheist), and Holmes's frustration that an otherwise satisfactory philosophy should so systematically denigrate religion is evident throughout.<sup>64</sup> Holmes eventually put out his own text, *The Science of Society*, in 1883—the same year that Lester Frank Ward published *Dynamic Sociology*.<sup>65</sup>

A similarly strong Southern legacy can be seen in the neighboring field of statistics. In 1845-46, the University of Virginia was the first

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<sup>60</sup> The relative lack of engagement on the part of historians with Southern sociology is surprising given how much work was done on the subject in the 1930s and 1940s. See H. G. Duncan and Winnie Leach Duncan, "The Development of Sociology in the Old South," *American Journal of Sociology* 39 (1934): 649-656; L. L. Bernard, "Henry Hughes, First American Sociologist," *Social Forces* 15 (1936): 154-174; L. L. Bernard, "The Historic Pattern of Sociology in the South," *Social Forces* 16 (1937): 1-12; Harvey Wish, "George Frederick Holmes and the Genesis of American Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 46 (1941): 698-707; Wish, *George Fitzhugh*; Skipper, "J. D. B. De Bow, the Man"; Jessie Bernard, "George Tucker: Liberal Southern Social Scientist," *Social Forces* 25 (1946): 131-145; and Skipper, *J. D. B. De Bow: Magazinst of the old South*.

<sup>61</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>62</sup> George Frederick Holmes, "Failure of Free Societies," *Southern Literary Messenger* 11 (March 1855): 131.

<sup>63</sup> For an examination of whether Hughes studied under Comte, see Stanford Lyman, "Henry Hughes and the Southern Foundations of American Sociology," in Stanford M. Lyman, ed., *Selected Writings of Henry Hughes: Antebellum Southerner, slavocrat, sociologist* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1985), 14-17.

<sup>64</sup> For an account of the interaction between Holmes and Comte, see Richmond Laurin Hawkins, *Auguste Comte in the United States, (1816-1853)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), 63-98. What remains of the Holmes-Comte correspondence is also reprinted in Hawkins's book.

<sup>65</sup> Wish, "George Frederick Holmes," 699. Sharon F. Mayes elaborates this point by arguing the Fitzhugh anticipated many of the conclusions of Emile Durkheim in "Sociological Thought in Emile Durkheim and George Fitzhugh," *British Journal of Sociology* 31 (1980): 78-94.

in the United States to offer a course in statistics, taught by William Holmes McGuffey, author of spelling books and a series of *Eclectic Readers*. The first *professor* of statistics, however, did not come until 1848—it was none other than J. D. B. De Bow, installed as “Chair of Commerce, Public Economy, and Statistics” at the University of Louisiana in 1848-49.<sup>66</sup> Although De Bow did not manage to attract students, his superlative statistical research won him an appointment as the Superintendent of the 1850 census, which was far superior to the previous six (a success due in no small part to De Bow’s insistence that the census be written and administered by trained specialists) and which served as the model for the 1860 and 1870 censuses.<sup>67</sup> Following De Bow’s attempt to teach statistics at universities, the University of the South included in its statutes the establishment of an entire *school* of “Political Science, Political Economy, Statistics, Laws of Nations, Spirits of Laws, General Principles of Government and Constitution of the United States.” By contrast, it would not be until 1873 that a Northern institution—Yale—offered its first course in statistics.<sup>68</sup> Statistics would always represent, for the antebellum South, a more commerce-friendly discipline than sociology (just as De Bow had much greater sympathies for the free market than did Holmes, Hughes, or Fitzhugh), but the two forms of inquiry dovetailed often within the proslavery body of thought.

What was it in sociology and statistics that the slaveholders found so attractive? First, sociology offered not just a new methodology and set of intellectual ancestors, but a new object of analysis: society. This matched Southern intuitions that the best way to understand humans was not as an atomic individuals, but as participants in a social web. The fallacy of most liberal thinkers, Fitzhugh argued, was to accept the conceit of Hobbes and Locke that humans are self-interested brutes who band together only to further their individual interests. “Men are naturally associative,” he insisted, adding that the antagonism and hostility of free society was the only effect of a social system that had denied the social nature of humanity.<sup>69</sup> It was not Robinson Crusoe, the central figure of liberal mythology, but the patriarchal head of a family who stood for human nature in the South. Dissenting movements in the North and in Europe—Shakerism, socialism, Fourierism, Mormonism, and the rest—were only taken as further evidence of the natural desire on the part of humans to face the world as members of society, not alone. Thus sociology, with its emphasis on groups and preference for social organization, offered much to the South that the other social science—economics—could not.

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<sup>66</sup> Paul J. FitzPatrick, “The Early Teaching of Statistics in American Colleges and Universities,” *The American Statistician* 9 (1955): 12-13.

<sup>67</sup> See Paul J. FitzPatrick, “Leading American Statisticians of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 52 (1957): 306-308.

<sup>68</sup> FitzPatrick, “Teaching of Statistics,” 13.

<sup>69</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 32.

Social science could also serve as a useful corrective to revolutionary socialism. For unlike their adopted socialist brethren, slaveholders had nothing to gain from revolution. Abolitionist literature pouring daily from Northern presses and the specter of slave revolt made it painfully clear to slaveholders that, if there were to be a revolution of any sort, they would not be the beneficiaries. “However secure we may think ourselves,” warned Holmes, “we are slumbering upon the ashes of a volcano, which may at any time break forth again and overwhelm us.”<sup>70</sup> The virtue of social science, however, was its ability to prevent such revolutions. Comte himself promised that the basic aim of social science was “to avoid the violent revolutions which spring from obstacles opposed to the progress of civilisation; and to reduce these to a simple moral movement.”<sup>71</sup>

The way in which white Southerners saw social science as contributing to this anti-revolutionary program can be best seen in Fitzhugh’s “Antinomic Pathology,” a short article, published anonymously and during the war, that Fitzhugh believed to contain the key to his theories.<sup>72</sup> The word “antinomic” Fitzhugh meant not as a reference to the antinomian crisis of such importance to the religious history of the United States, but rather to the concept of antinomy as it appears in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*—the clash between one law of reason and another. But while Kant believed that perceived antinomies could be in the end explained, Fitzhugh took them as evidence of the simple inadequacy of human reason. No general law, he believed, could ever serve as a guide to action, and yet “the besetting sin of mankind is to try to simplify all things, and reduce them to a few general rules.”<sup>73</sup> For Fitzhugh, the most salient example of the failure of general rules was the conflict in theories of human nature and political economy. Some believed humans to be selfish as a rule and supported a laissez-faire economy on that basis. Others believed humans to be naturally altruistic, and constructed elaborate utopian schemes. But the truth, according to Fitzhugh, lay in neither extreme, but in an Aristotelian middle. Humans are both social *and* selfish, and any so-called law of human nature will fail to grasp this complexity.

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<sup>70</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “On the Importance of the Social Sciences in the Present Day,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15 (February 1849): 80.

<sup>71</sup> Auguste Comte, “Plan for the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society,” *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The early essays of Auguste Comte*, ed. Ronald Fletcher (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1974), 149.

<sup>72</sup> [George Fitzhugh], “Antinomic Pathology,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 37 (July 1863): 415-419. For Fitzhugh’s own discussion of the importance of “Antinomic Pathology,” see George Fitzhugh, “Moral Philosophies,” *De Bow’s Review* 3 (April-May 1867): 410. To my knowledge, it is the only article of his own that he ever cited in any of his published writings.

<sup>73</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Modern Agriculture,” *De Bow’s Review* 27 (December 1859): 662-663.



The inevitable failures of human reason did not mean that progress or thought were impossible, but rather that social science would have to take the form of pathology—the study of disease—rather than philosophy. In Fitzhugh’s view, the distinguishing feature of medical knowledge was its deep humility with regard to the human intellect and its preference for cautious experiment over wild speculation. For him, pathology was little more than “common sense and every day practise erected into a system. Not a system of universal, unbending rules—not a system of speculative *a priori* philosophy, but just the reverse of that; a tentative system, that feels its way through life.”<sup>74</sup> And just as pathology treated medical diseases, so social sciences would treat social diseases—with caution and an abhorrence of abstract concepts. Such an approach could still evaluate social systems in terms of their respect for morality or justice, but any such assessments would be made on the basis of economics or demography, not philosophy or legal theory. The similarity between social science and medicine sprang from a shared commitment, one that had never been a part of socialist thought. For unlike revolutionary socialists, social scientists agreed with physicians on the first priority of all action: not to kill the patient.

In addition to its social, counter-revolutionary, and anti-metaphysical aspects, one further feature of social science recommended it to slaveholders. Social science would allow white Southerners to begin a chore that had long been neglected, but which the increasing attacks on slavery had made necessary: to tell the world about the South. The importance of this seemingly basic task should not be underestimated. Almost unanimously, Southern slaveholders felt that the North and Europe had simply failed to understand slavery as practiced in the South, and that more information about the Southern system, presented by slaveholders themselves, would quiet the abolitionists. “The great question of African slavery is not understood in the outside world,” complained one writer in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, calling on Southern slaveholders to explain “the *facts* of slavery” to the rest of the world.<sup>75</sup> Holmes agreed. It was absurd, he thought, that the theorists of the labor question had never “soberly investigated” the Southern solution; only “the careful collection and diligent criticism of facts” could rectify this incomprehensible oversight.<sup>76</sup> De Bow founded his *Review*, so important to the late proslavery cause, with the express purpose of meeting this challenge; in the first issue he expressed its intention “to collect, com-

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<sup>74</sup> Fitzhugh, “Antinomic Pathology,” 415.

<sup>75</sup> W. R. A., “The Duty of Southern Authors,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 23 (October 1856): 242, 245.

<sup>76</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “Slavery and Freedom,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 1 (April 1856): 68, 69.

bine, and digest in permanent form” statistics about the South and West—a promise that no one could accuse him of breaking.<sup>77</sup>

Slaveholders’ worries that the world remained ignorant of Southern conditions tied into a much larger set of concerns, concerns that led proslavery advocates to consider their condition through a third lens of modernity: imperialism. As Fitzhugh, Hughes, Holmes, and De Bow reinterpreted slavery in light of European socialism and social science, they identified not only a sharp contrast between the slave system and the free system, but also a clear power imbalance that subordinated the South to the North both intellectually and economically. It was on this topic that Southern thinkers distinguished themselves most clearly from their European compeers. For while French and British intellectuals took an occasional interest in empire, late proslavery advocates felt themselves to be a colonized people, for whom imperialism was not merely an interesting subject, but an inescapable frame of thinking.

Not surprisingly, the Southern intelligentsia felt the domination of the North most palpably with regard to education. The observation that the North was quickly outpacing the South in learning was not an uncommon one below the Mason-Dixon line. The South is a place, one complainant put it in 1842, “where the sun ripens fruit, but not scholars,” and, indeed, many young Southerners went North for their university years.<sup>78</sup> But by the late antebellum period, proslavery advocates had become aware of an important implication of this asymmetry. Northern learning, Fitzhugh believed, was “tainted with abolition,” and thus unfit for Southern students.<sup>79</sup> The problem was not just Horace Greeley and William Lloyd Garrison, but the entire liberal tradition—from John Locke to Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson—which privileged the individual pursuit of liberty over the social pursuit of security and progress.<sup>80</sup> To truly comprehend even its own social system, one reviewer observed, the South would have “to throw off the weight of the accumulated prejudices of ages” and “the authority of the most eminent and illustrious names in history.”<sup>81</sup> And while attention to Europe could help break Southern subservience to the North, proslavery thinkers also campaigned, often successfully, for the foundation and support of Southern universities and journals. The creation of Southern schools of thought, in

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<sup>77</sup> J. D. B. De Bow, “The Commercial Review,” *De Bow’s Review* 1 (January 1846): 5. See also De Bow’s paean to statistics in J. D. B. De Bow, “The Science of Statistics,” *De Bow’s Review* 3 (March 1847): 270.

<sup>78</sup> George S. Hillard, Letter to Francis Lieber, 7 December 1842, quoted in O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, 1:88. For perceptions of the intellectual barrenness of the antebellum South, see also Faust, *Sacred Circle*, chap. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!*, 58.

<sup>80</sup> The proslavery assault on the liberal tradition can be found, among other places, in Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, chap. 19 and in George Frederick Holmes, “Failure of Free Societies,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 11 (March 1855): 129-141.

<sup>81</sup> Review of *Cannibals All!*, *Richmond Enquirer*, 23 January 1857, is reprinted in “The Pro-Slavery Press of the South,” *National Era*, 26 February 1857, 36.

turn, promised not only a more confident proslavery but also essential contributions to European and Northern thought. “Social science will never take a step in advance,” he warned, “till some Southern slaveholder, competent for the task, devotes a life-time to its study and elucidation.”<sup>82</sup>

For late proslavery ideologues, the North’s intellectual domination of the South accompanied an even more worrisome economic domination. In 1851 De Bow estimated that the South exported \$80 million annually to the North in the course of ordinary commercial transactions. “How much more does the North annually receive from us in support of her schools and colleges, her editors and authors—her Saratogas and Newports?” he asked, noting that money spent by Southrons in the North was not reciprocated by Northern spending in the South.<sup>83</sup> The drain of resources from one region to another had a familiar ring to the ears of the South, and more than a few suggested that the North might be recreating, economically at least, the same sort of empire that Britain had until eighty years before enjoyed in North America. Speaking of the North, one writer for the *Southern Literary Messenger* suggested that, “in a COMMERCIAL point of view, the South may be considered as her province, with the relationship similar to that borne by the colonies of Great Britain to the mother state.”<sup>84</sup> Fitzhugh agreed, comparing a number of colonial relationships with that between North and South and finding no real difference. “Free trade, when the American gives a bottle of whiskey to the Indian for valuable furs, or the Englishman exchanges with African blue-beads for diamonds, gold and slaves, is a fair specimen of all free trade when unequals meet,” he wrote. “Thus is Ireland robbed of her very life’s blood, and thus do our Northern States rob the Southern.”<sup>85</sup>

But for Fitzhugh, economic imperialism was more than just one country profiting unduly from the resources of another. It was one of the great strengths of his vision to recognize the *developmental* consequences of international economic exploitation. According to his own account, he merely extended socialist critiques of the free labor market to the larger topic of economic intercourse between races and nations.<sup>86</sup> Just as the socialists had shown that the division of labor under the free market was creating a growing division between “head-work” and “hand-work,” so too, Fitzhugh argued, did international trade effect a large-scale division of labor between entire economic regions. The North and Europe, for example, paid the South to carry out “the very lowest and coarsest hand-work,” while undertaking more specialized, ennobling tasks for themselves.<sup>87</sup> While the South might reap short-term benefits

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<sup>82</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 81.

<sup>83</sup> O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, 1:45-46.

<sup>84</sup> W. C. B., “The Country in 1950, or the Conservatism of Slavery,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 22 (June 1856), 427.

<sup>85</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173.

from this trade, in the longer term it would prevent the South from developing its own manufacturing, presses, and universities. “Trade never did civilize a people” and “never failed to degrade them,” Fitzhugh believed, “unless they supplied the manufactured articles.”<sup>88</sup>

Fitzhugh’s discussion of economic imperialism may seem to take him far afield from his original topic, slavery, but it is important to remember that, for him, the source of the disease was the free labor system. Northern wealth was amassed not by high productivity but “by pauperizing the people at large,” and thus capitalists there were pushed constantly to seek out new outlets for trade.<sup>89</sup> This “fugitive and fictitious” wealth of the North compared unfavorably to the “permanent and real” wealth of the South, which, if left unmolested by the North, would profit by the steady, controlled improvement of its own resources.<sup>90</sup> Holmes, Hughes, De Bow, and Fitzhugh all agreed that the internal development “with moderation and discretion” was the appropriate avenue for the South.<sup>91</sup> This vision would include cities, universal education for whites, and improvements such as railroads and roads, but only at a slow enough pace to ensure that the benefits of development would be fairly distributed. And it would be slavery, which Fitzhugh believed to be “protection against excess of competition,” that would provide the necessary check to prevent Southern development from becoming Northern rapacity.<sup>92</sup>

In their redescription of slavery through the languages of socialism, social science, and imperialism, theorists of late proslavery developed a vision of slaveholding modernity that, on the face of it, bore little resemblance to Southern realities. The most conspicuous difference between the slavery imagined by men like Fitzhugh and the slavery of the South was the importance of race. Although Fitzhugh, Hughes, Holmes, and De Bow were all racists of one stripe or another, racial difference played a minor role in their collective redescription of slavery. In fact, both Hughes and Fitzhugh hoped to extend the slave system to white laborers as well as black ones, and Fitzhugh raised a few hackles when he wrote in *De Bow’s Review* that “the white race is the true and best slave race.”<sup>93</sup> When race mattered to late proslavery, it only mattered in that it made the separation of society into a propertied class and a class of laborers slightly more convenient. One should not see the jettisoning of race as a central term of analysis as a propagandistic effort to make slavery more palatable to the North—white Northerners had no lack of ani-

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<sup>88</sup> Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, 123.

<sup>89</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Wealth of the North and the South,” *De Bow’s Review* 23 (December 1857): 591.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 592.

<sup>91</sup> George Frederick Holmes, “Failure of Free Societies,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 11 (March 1855): 133.

<sup>92</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Modern Civilization,” *De Bow’s Review* 29 (July 1860): 63.

<sup>93</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Origin of Civilization—What is Property?—Which is the Best Slave Race,” *De Bow’s Review* 25 (December 1858): 654.

mosity toward blacks and late proslavery ideologues saw no need to conceal their own racism—but one noteworthy consequence of the discarding of race from proslavery was that slavery emerged more clearly as a system of *labor* rather than of racial oppression, thus making it more easily comparable to Northern and European systems.

The absence of race in the late proslavery analysis was its most conspicuous difference from slavery as practiced, but not its most important one. More fundamental to the thought of Fitzhugh, Hughes, Holmes, and De Bow was their desire for a far more powerful state. “The South must . . . originate a new political science,” Fitzhugh declared, “whose leading and distinctive principle will be, ‘The world is too little governed.’”<sup>94</sup> Although Fitzhugh imagined that government might, like slavery, exert a restraining influence on the economy, he believed that the main business of government, and in fact the entire object of social organization, was to protect the weak.<sup>95</sup> De Bow did not share Fitzhugh’s vision of a welfare state, but nevertheless supported a technocratic government with a strong professional civil service, capable of organizing and controlling progress on a scientific basis.<sup>96</sup> Hughes, the most explicit of the quartet in his plans for the future, called for a state body to regulate commerce and production, a hygienic authority, public schools, working hours laws, censuses, the regulation of public entertainment, public parks and museums, and, to support it all, high taxation.<sup>97</sup> “Men,” he wrote, “must be orderly, the whole power of society, must be orderly. If not, existence and progress fail; realization is imperfect, and starvation, insecurity, ignorance, disease, misery, immorality, and irreligion are unshunnable.”<sup>98</sup> In Walter Lippmann’s famous formulation, mastery, not drift, was to be the rule of Southern industrial development.

No proslavery tract exhibited the tension between these progressive visions and slavery as practiced in the South better than Hughes’s *Treatise*. To begin, he refused even to call his system slavery. Slavery, he argued, “is want, oppression, hatred, outrage, cruelty, and injustice. . . . It is odious. It is amoral evil. It is abhorred by God and man.”<sup>99</sup> The root evil of slavery, he continued, was that it deprived the slave of all rights. Instead of slavery, Hughes advocated “warranteeism,” a name that emphasized the mutual obligations of slaveholder and slave (or, “warrantor and warrantee”), as well as the security of the rights of the slave. Although Hughes insisted repeatedly that slavery as practiced in the South *was* warranteeism (albeit “with the ethnical qualification”), Southern slavery clearly lacked the cornerstone of Hughes’s system: a strong state

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<sup>94</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Southern Thought Again,” *De Bow’s Review* 23 (November 1857): 453.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>96</sup> Otis Clark Skipper, “J. D. B. De Bow, the Man,” *Journal of Southern History* 10 (1944): 404-423.

<sup>97</sup> Hughes, *Treatise*, 65-69.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

willing to recognize and enforce the legal rights of slaves to food, shelter, furniture, home maintenance, medical care, education, transportation, and legal fees.<sup>100</sup> In Hughes's system, slaveholders would have some power over their slaves as magistrates, but this power would be strictly defined and limited by the state, and many forms of punishment and treatment that were common practice in the U.S. South (though Hughes denied it) would be illegal under warranteeism.<sup>101</sup>

Another demonstration of how far theorizations of slavery could take slaveholders from unthinking allegiance to the status quo can be seen in the few contributions to social thought that Fitzhugh made after the war. Suitably convinced that slavery was a lost cause, he dropped it and cast about for other alternatives.<sup>102</sup> The virtue of slavery to Fitzhugh had been its authoritarian, paternalistic protection and organization of labor, so he seized upon the social force that seemed the closest to being able to fulfill that role in the absence of legal slavery: monopoly capitalism. "My sole object," he explained in 1869, "is to teach men that land monopoly—or, to speak more accurately, the monopoly of property, or capital, by the few, and the consequent subjection of the many to the dominion, taxation and exploitation of these few—is not an evil, as generally esteemed, but the greatest of human blessings."<sup>103</sup> It was land monopoly that forced an otherwise dissolute society into social organization and it was with land monopoly that he would cast his fortunes. Pauperism and crime, he still believed, would be the inevitable results of the free market system, but these at least could be ameliorated. "Let us all try to do justice to the poor," he proposed, "and—whilst relieving their wants—not insult them by calling such relief charity. They produce everything, and have a right to a decent support; yet, like Africans and Indians, they would produce nothing but for land monopoly, which compels them to work or starve."<sup>104</sup> Oddly enough, race—an unimportant term of analysis in late proslavery—now took center stage. For only the natural affection of the strong for the weak, and particularly of a master race for a subservient race, could guarantee that laborers would receive adequate compensation. Only when racial segregation matched class stratification could capitalists be induced to feel warmly about their so-

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 207, 170.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 221-222.

<sup>102</sup> Remarkably, Fitzhugh's repudiation of his antebellum views was so swift that by October of 1865 he had found work as an associate judge for the newly-created Freedmen's Bureau, where he worked for over a year alongside a freedman. See Wish, *Fitzhugh*, 312-314.

<sup>103</sup> George Fitzhugh, "Land Monopoly," *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education* 4 (Sept 1869): 290. See also George Fitzhugh, "Land Monopoly, Savage Nature," *De Bow's Review* 4 (November 1867): 437-441 and George Fitzhugh, "The Freedman and His Future II," *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education* 5 (February 1870): 191-198.

<sup>104</sup> George Fitzhugh, "Land Monopoly," *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education* 4 (Sept 1869): 289.

cial inferiors.<sup>105</sup> Although Fitzhugh had no illusions that his hybrid of monopoly capitalism and welfare statism would be a panacea, it was at least the closest thing to slavery that he could openly advocate.

In this reconstruction of one strain of proslavery thought, I have attempted to show its grounding in the concepts and experiences of a world that extended beyond the boundaries of the slaveholding South. By re-examining slavery in the light of contemporary social thought, Fitzhugh, Holmes, Hughes, and to some extent De Bow sought not only to vindicate their own beliefs, but also to enter the great Atlantic debates about market, empire, and social science. For them, slavery was not the last vestige of feudalism in the modern world, nor even a peculiar institution; it was a modern mode of social organization that could be analyzed and defended with the same language used to treat socialism and capitalism. The only peculiar feature of the slave system in their eyes was its late entry into the worldwide discussion of the questions of the modern age, but even this spoke to its merits. It was, they believed, precisely the *success* of the slave system in solving the problems of the modern economy that had relieved slaveholders of the very need to pose the questions that so tormented intellectuals in the North and in Europe.<sup>106</sup>

And yet, despite the enthusiasm on the part of men like Fitzhugh for their entry onto the world's stage, war and the emancipation of Southern slaves ensured that their intellectual legacy would be an aborted one. Hughes died in the war and De Bow shortly after, while Holmes and Fitzhugh lived into their seventies, continuing to theorize but robbed of their principal point of reference. It is not hard to see the late proslavery movement as a sort of intellectual cul-de-sac, of mild interest but of little influence. Despite its short duration, however, late proslavery has much to tell the historian. For not only does late proslavery demand a sophisticated approach to the relationship between slaveholding and modernity, but it also encourages us to see thought about slavery as not simply part of the peculiar history of slaveholding, but as part of a larger, cosmopolitan story of the modern age and visions of what it could be.

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<sup>105</sup> Fitzhugh, "Land Monopoly," 288.

<sup>106</sup> Although this argument can be found in a number of locations, Fitzhugh made it best in the preface to his *Sociology for the South*. Explaining his use of the word "sociology," he explained that that "it grates harshly, as yet, on Southern ears, because to us it is new and superfluous—the disease of which it treats being unknown among us." Fitzhugh, *Sociology*, v-vi.