

OLMSTED, DE BOW, AND THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE ON THE AMERICAN SLAVE SOUTH

BY
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Scholarship on the American Slave South generally agrees that John Eliot Cairnes's The Slave Power provided a highly biased interpretation of the functioning and long-term viability of the southern slave economy. Published shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, its partisanship is partly attributed to its clearly stated goal to shift British support from the secession states to the states of the Union. Thus, it is generally agreed, Cairnes sifted his sources to obtain the desired outcome. A more balanced use of the sources at his possession would have provided a very different outcome. This paper will challenge this general assessment of Cairnes's book by examining in some detail two of Cairnes's most important sources: Frederic Law Olmsted's travelogues on the American Slave South and James D. B. De Bow's compilation of statistical data and essays in his Industrial Resources, etc., of the Southern and Western States (1852–53). By contrasting De Bow's use of statistical evidence with Olmsted's travelogues, my final purpose is to question the weight of evidence on the American Slave South. Cairnes aimed, I will argue, much more to balance the evidence than is generally acknowledged, but it is misleading to think that balancing a wide range of evidence washes out bias if this evidence itself is politically skewed, as is the rule rather than the exception.

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The eye of the world is on us, and the imagination has formed a picture upon this subject, even in our own country, which, when compared with truth, is as the midnight darkness in contrast with the light of noonday. Such is the hideous deformity of the picture, that we who are accustomed to the daily inspection of the original cannot recognise the picture from the original.

—John A. Calhoun of Alabama,¹ “Management of Slaves,” *De Bow’s Review* (1855)

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1967 the Dutch historian Arie Nicolaas Jan den Hollander critically examined the evidence John Eliot Cairnes had brought to his *The Slave Power* of 1862. Cairnes published his influential book shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War with the clear aim to shift public and political sympathies in Britain from the Confederates to the states of the Union. Taking issue with Cairnes’s use of facts for politics, Den Hollander argued that on the basis of the resources available to Cairnes, his account of the American Slave South could only be a figment of his imagination. He criticized Cairnes’s one-sided reliance on Frederic Law Olmsted’s travelogues, which he followed in their generalizations, while omitting facts and observations that did not fit in with his analysis. Den Hollander more specifically suggested that not having traveled through the American slave states himself, Cairnes reasoned from an armchair, lacking the “ordinary knowledge” that any local, “ordinary observer” would have had. Cairnes’s case caused Den Hollander to raise the “fundamental historiographical question” of how to arrive at a “definite image of a remote world based on transmitted information” (1967, p. 363).

Den Hollander was not the first, or the last, to criticize Cairnes’s use of evidence. Early in the twentieth century, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips gave a blistering account of the book, arguing as Den Hollander had that Cairnes lacked the immediate knowledge of a daily observer. Also, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, in their famous *Time on the Cross*, argued that “since Cairnes never visited the slave states,” he was dependent on others for evidence and had chosen to rely especially on Olmsted, even though they acknowledged Cairnes had used a variety of other sources as well, especially James D. B. De Bow’s *Industrial Resources* of 1852–53. They agreed with Den Hollander that Cairnes would have come to very different conclusions if he had strived for an unbiased weighing of his sources, especially if he would have considered the statistical evidence available.

But would he? Scholarship on the antebellum South is still divided between those who see an Old South in decline and others who see southern states that at some stage out-competed the northern states in economic growth rates (e.g., Sutton 1968; Guzman 2007; Dunn 2007; Shade 1996; Hummel 2014; Majewski 2007). Despite Ulrich Bonnell Phillips’s harsh words on Cairnes’s book, his own investigation of plantation statistics followed Cairnes in his description of an inefficient southern economy in decline. Casting their statistical web much wider than Phillips, Fogel and Engerman came by contrast to the conclusion that the antebellum plantation economy was far from declining, but was, in fact, profitable and efficient, and, especially

¹Not to be confused with John C. Calhoun, the ardent pro-slavery politician and vice-president under John Quincy Adams.

in the 1850s, showing higher growth rates than the North. Although economists such as Deirdre McCloskey claimed victory for their analysis, historians nowadays increasingly question the tenability of some of the assumptions on which Fogel and Engerman based their conclusions. Their identification of profitability with efficiency led them to overlook the dead-weight loss implied in the misallocation of labor in the southern slave economies. Neither did they discount the implied costs in the *Fugitive Slave Act* to keep the slave system in place. Their statistical analysis failed to deal with contradictory aspects of the economy of the Slave South such as the move to the north of more than 200,000 white southerners between 1840 and 1860; that is, in the period of the South's most rapid expansion. Apparently, the benefits of the slave system fell only to a few and the burdens on the many (Hummel 2014, ch. 2; Majewski 2009).

Thus, even a substantial statistical enlargement of the evidential base—nowadays seen as the gold standard of objectivity—does not guarantee a balanced view of this historical episode, as, on second view, should not have been expected. Scholarship in the history of statistics has emphasized the “politics of quantified data,” robbing them of their allure of the objective and impartial (e.g., Desrosières 2002, 2008; Porter 1994, 1996). But the alternative to statistical evidence that is alluded to by Den Hollander, Phillips, Eugene D. Genovese, or Fogel and Engerman—direct personal experience—is equally problematic. As Richard Whately remarked a long time ago, a direct witness easily concentrates on “curiosities” and overlooks the obvious that may be the more important (Maas 2011, p. 211).²

Recently, Martin Öhman showed how American political economist Mathew Carey's turn to numerical statistics in the early nineteenth century failed to produce consensus, but enhanced sectional tensions in the early American republic (Öhman 2013; see also Cohen 1999). Öhman quotes an anonymous writer on statistics who explained that the purpose of *statika*, “to weigh,” was to “make society acquainted with its own *resources* and its own *wants*—and to render the whole conducive to its prosperity, its independence, and happiness” (Öhman 2013, p. 489). The questions thus are: what counts as evidence, and how does one weigh the sources? In what follows, I will single out two of Cairnes's resources, Olmsted's travelogues and De Bow's *Industrial Resources*, that equally enhanced conflict instead of consensus.

Starting from James D. B. De Bow's life history, I discuss three examples of how De Bow constructed and used evidence on the American Slave South. I then examine Frederick Olmsted's travelogues through the South and West, especially his *Journey through the Seaboard Slave States* published in 1856. Can we say something on the nature of the evidence these sources provide on the American Slave South? And how does this bear on Den Hollander's reproach to Cairnes that he merely arrived at a biased armchair judgment?³ I will then address Cairnes's own copy of *The Slave Power* to examine how Cairnes weighed the evidence, not with the

²A similar contrast between large data sets and haphazard evidence is played out in Piketty's recent bestseller *Le Capital au XXI^e Siècle*, in which he equally claims objective accuracy of direct witness accounts of Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austin on wealth distribution, but denies the accuracy of such observations to political economists from Smith to Marx and favors his large statistical data sets instead.

³On the economist as an armchair observer, see Maas (2011). On the history of observational practices in economics more generally, see Harro Maas and Mary S. Morgan (2012).

purpose to vindicate Cairnes in his proceedings, but to argue that evidence in the social realm can never simply be considered impartial, because it serves political purposes as well.

II. JAMES D. B. DE BOW—A CHARLESTON CONTROVERSIALIST

Robert Durden (1951, p. 442) referred to James D. B. De Bow as “the most nearly forgotten important man of the Old South,” and to De Bow’s *Review* as “the South’s semiofficial spokesman.” De Bow’s recent biographer John Kvach notes that De Bow is considered the “magazinish of the Old South” by some, while others perceive him as an “apostle of the New South” (Kvach 2008, p. 1). Following De Bow’s trajectory from Charleston, where he was born, to New Orleans, where he would unfold his major activities, Kvach shows how De Bow, from a very young age, became convinced that the plantation system of the South could not survive without an expansion of manufacture and trade in the Southwest itself. This conviction was partly rooted in his personal experiences in Charleston.

Born in 1820, James D. B. De Bow came from a middle-class merchant family in Charleston. Though initially successful, his father’s business did not survive the economic panic of 1819 that followed the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and the ensuing financial panic. Not only did his father’s business collapse, but Charleston as a whole also went into decline. The family had to sell off its three slaves, but slavery remained very much part of De Bow’s personal experiences in Charleston, with its mix of slaves, merchants, planters, and freed slaves, or when visiting plantations of relatives.

After the death of his father in 1826, the children were sent out to work, but, from a young age, De Bow developed greater, though largely undirected, ambitions. He managed to enter Charleston College to study law and passed the exam for the bar at Columbia, South Carolina. After returning to Charleston, he soon became involved in southern Democratic party politics and editorial work for the *Southern Quarterly Review*. A conflict over an article on the ‘Oregon question’ made him resign from the journal. The *Southern Patriot* offered him the opportunity to travel through South Carolina to write a biweekly column on his observations. On his travels, De Bow visited the cotton factory of William Gregg, an important southern industrialist and advocate of the development of the South through manufacture and industry. De Bow shared Gregg’s convictions (which Gregg later bundled in his *Essays on Domestic Industry*, published in 1845), but accused him harshly for not doing enough himself, an attack that forced the editors to publicly distance themselves from De Bow (Kvach 2009, p. 30). De Bow’s travel observations impressed on him the defects of the Old South and the promises of manufacture and trade that were not followed suit. His election as a local Charleston delegate to the Memphis Commercial Convention of 1845 would prove to be a life-changing event.

De Bow traveled to Memphis via New Orleans. On the boat to Memphis, he met John C. Calhoun, the former vice-president of the Republic, who would speak at the convention on the importance of economic development via the promotion of commerce, industry, and agricultural improvement. The convention movement had started in the 1830s from southern nationalistic motives. The general opinion in the

South was that northern trade and commerce were flourishing only at the expense of the South. Thus emerged a protectionist climate, where protectionism should not only be taken in an economic, but also in a cultural sense. The South had to regain economic independence from the North to be able to protect the southern way of life, including its slave system—the ‘peculiar system.’

The Southern Commercial Convention met for the first time in 1837, in Atlanta. Over the years, there were meetings throughout the South and West, the last in 1859 in Vicksburg, Mississippi. While the first conventions were devoted to the promotion of commercial independence of the Southwest by furthering commerce and industry, the last was dominated by overt commercial and cultural hostility to the North, and by the question of how to legally reopen the slave trade with Africa. The tariff, nullification, direct trade with England, railways connecting the East and South to the Pacific, slavery, the reopening of the African slave trade—all became, at one time or another, the subject of controversy between the northern and southern states, with the slavery issue unquestionably the pinnacle of controversies in the run-up to the Civil War. The central issue at stake was how to protect and promote the cultural and economic interests of the South.

III. DE BOW'S REVIEW

At the Memphis convention, De Bow successfully lobbied to establish a journal in support of the southern case. De Bow aimed at a southern counterpart of *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, a journal targeting an audience of east-coast manufacturers and traders. The first issue appeared January 1846. De Bow ran the journal from New Orleans, the main seaport in the Southwest and, in contrast to Charleston, a city on the rise. Indeed, De Bow's decision to run the journal from New Orleans can be seen as an indication that his aim was not only to defend the interests of the “Old South” and its obsessions with slave plantation agriculture, aristocracy, and privilege, but also to look ahead to learn from the newly added states and thus to rejuvenate the economies of the Old South.

De Bow's Review was to play an active role by serving as a platform for different opinions and plans for how this rejuvenation could be achieved, and what facts could be mobilized in support. Thus, the journal was devoted to a wide array of topics, ranging from “trade, commerce, commercial polity, agriculture, manufactures” to “internal improvements, and general literature.” The inclusion of general literature in its subjects indicates that De Bow conceived the *Review* not to serve only commercial interests, but also the interests of a culturally unified South; a South that included the newly entered western states as part of the same whole, sharing not just a unified economy but also a unique culture. This purpose followed directly from the Memphis (“Calhoun”) convention that proclaimed to “unite the Valley of the Mississippi with the Southern States, socially, economically, and politically, by railroads, canals, and common markets” (Wender 1930, p. 49).

Quoting Thomas Carlyle, De Bow chose “Commerce is King” as the motto for the journal. The frontispiece of *De Bow's Review* showed how industry and commerce would enhance agricultural sources of economic growth (see Figure 1). The emphasis on industry and commerce did not mean agricultural innovation was

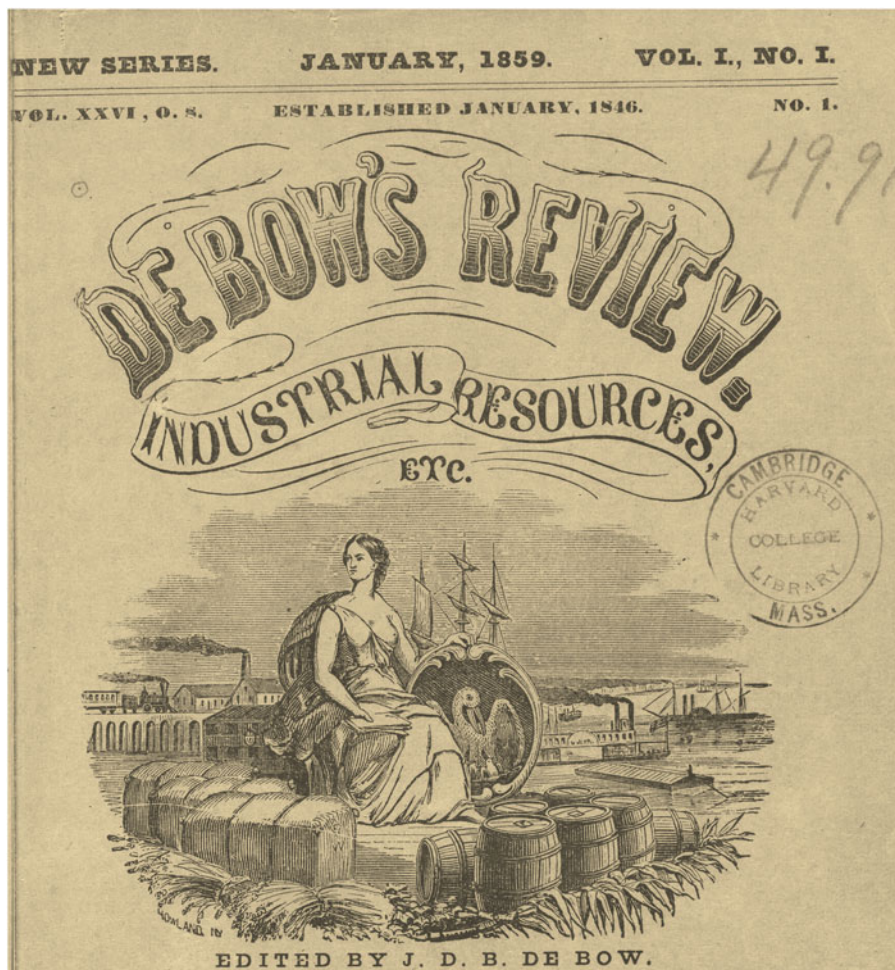


FIGURE 1. Frontispiece of *De Bow's Review* for April 1857. The engraving possibly shows Minerva as the goddess of wisdom, arts, and trades. She holds her left hand on the seal of Louisiana (the pelican) and her right hand on the source of wisdom, the *Review*, which provides the statistical resources to promote Louisiana's economic progress, symbolized by trade wares in front of her, a railroad, manufacture, and the harbor of New Orleans. With permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.⁴

unimportant, as can be witnessed from the many contributions on agricultural improvement De Bow included in the journal. However, to secure the future of the South and West, commerce and industry should be regained from the North. To underline this new agenda, the frontispiece showed the harbor of New Orleans, which was becoming increasingly competitive with that of New York, and the railroads, which were to connect the South and West to the Pacific.

⁴I would like to thank John Kvach and Federico D'Onofrio for their great help in tracking down the image.

Though there had been some, mostly short-lived, literary reviews in the South, no journal similar to the *Review* had been attempted before. De Bow advocated a policy of “active *neutrality*”; the *Review* was to serve as a platform giving equal voice to different opinions in matters of practical policy, and displayed statistics useful for this purpose. It would thus help to “advocate the true and best policy” for the southern and western states to “defend their rights and develop their resources” (*De Bow's Review* 1846, 1, p. 5). Thus, the information collected in the *Review* served its readers not just to know the country, but to transform it. That is, it provided knowledge to transform the Southwest into a coherent and economic prospering unity.⁵ An article on the state of Louisiana concluded (*De Bow's Review* 1846, p. 433):

The existence and preservation of our glorious confederacy depends more than all else upon a strong state feeling and pride, and love, which, prevailing in each of its parts, protects them from all danger of merging in and being lost in a mass; but keeps them like the beautiful orbs in heaven, revolving around their centre, distinct and individual; yet parts, and necessary parts, of one great wonderful system.

The *Review* consisted of a mixture of articles by De Bow; articles and essays reproduced from other journals or especially written for the *Review*; a section highlighting the economic conditions of a state in the Southwest; practical information on agricultural improvements; and statistical information from newspapers, governmental reports, and the census. The advertisements on the last pages paid for much of the costs of the journal but also indicate the support for the journal among southern merchants and manufacturers.

De Bow was keenly aware of the importance of quantified statistical data. In several contributions to the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, he criticized the superintendent of the census of 1840, Joseph Kennedy, on his methods. This, the *Review's* reputation, and subtle maneuvering effectuated De Bow's appointment as superintendent of the census of 1850 from 1853 to 1857, when he moved from New Orleans to Washington, DC. De Bow's reliance on quantitative information became the “hallmark” of the *Review*, not just in the section listing statistics, but also in the use of quantified information in its articles and essays. Nationwide, the *Review* was well received and, indeed, considered on a par with *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, also in its number of subscriptions. Kvach's detailed analysis shows that most subscribers were large plantation holders, but its influence extended to a substantial number of upper- and middle-class urban readers.

His appointment as superintendent of the census made him decide to republish the more popular essays and articles from the *Review* in the three-volume *Industrial Resources* that became considered nationwide the most important statistical resource on the American South and West. During his stay in Washington, DC, and with tensions rising between the North and South, De Bow became more parochial over the issue of slavery, transforming from a southern progressive nationalist into a staunch fire-eater, who increasingly was considered to defend the interests of the Old South.

⁵For a detailed discussion of the transformative power of statistics, see D'Onofrio (2015).

IV. DE BOW'S USE OF EVIDENCE

Let me give three examples of how factual information combined with a progressive, southern patriotic, and pro-slavery agenda. The first example pertains to a general assessment of the economic relations of the northern states to the South; the second, to controversies about the proposed railway trajectories; and the third, to slavery and De Bow's work as superintendent of the census of 1850.

Economic Relation between North and South

In an editorial for July 1850, "The Cause of the South," De Bow reminded his readers of the primary purpose for which the *Review* had been established. He compared the relations between the South and North with that between the colonies and Britain. Taking up Benjamin Franklin's advice to his countrymen to "light up the torches of industry," he repeated the often-heard complaints that "*The North!*" was "conducting our commerce, builds for us ships, and navigates them on the high seas." "*The North!*" was spinning and weaving, supplying the materials for engineers and constructing "our railroads where we have any," and "*The North!*" was educating "our children." But it was not too late for hope. The purpose of the *Review* was to spur the South to "*action! ACTION!! ACTION!!!*" and to provide the means for it. Other contributions to the *Review* equally aggressively pitched the South against the North, as, for example, a lecture by Elwood Fisher, an attorney of Cincinnati, that was held before its Young Men's Mercantile Library Association, on January 16, 1849.

De Bow's own "Progress of American Commerce," republished in the first volume of *Industrial Resources*, sketched a history in which the North and the South became increasingly alienated. De Bow distinguished the history of American commerce before the Revolution, under the articles of the confederation, from the Constitution to the War of 1812, and from 1812 to the present day. Following that history, De Bow introduced a separation of the northern from the southern states that emerged in the short period between the Revolution and the Constitution, when different duties imposed in different harbors and clever policies of New York led to a rise of the 'empire' of New York, to the detriment of southern ports. The struggle of the South was to wrestle from this yoke. A central issue became the fight over the railroad trajectory that would connect the East to the Pacific.

Controversies over the Railroad Trajectories

When the Oregon territories were appended to the Union, this spurred plans to connect the east coast with the Pacific by train (Russel 1925). In his Memphis address, John C. Calhoun had identified the trajectory of the railroad as crucial for the promotion of commerce and industry in the South and West. This issue was closely linked to questions about urbanization and education in the South. The *Review* compared the growth of trade in New Orleans with that of Britain, considered the population growth in the hinterland, and concluded that the construction of a railroad from New Orleans to the Pacific could potentially elevate the already significant economic importance of New Orleans to being that of the world's main port. De Bow also considered other trajectories that could connect Charleston via Memphis

to the Pacific. Urban nodes could be established where railroads and waterways intersected, further enhancing industry and commerce.

The inclusion of population statistics, statistics on urbanization, and the geography of the Southern states in the *Review* supported De Bow's policy intentions. Comparing statistical data for the North and the South was, for De Bow, not a neutral matter, but a vehicle for propagating specific policies. The federal choice for the railway track from New York to the Pacific was considered a blockade for the development of the South; the low percentage of urbanization in the South was considered a hindrance to the development of industry and trade. These were issues on which De Bow asked his readership to take action. De Bow himself invested in the Tennessee-Pacific Railroad (that he never saw finished), of which he also became president.

Slavery and the Census

Tensions about the perceived imperialist relation of the North to the South and the preferred railway track between the East and the West converged on the issue of slavery. The specific track of the railroad would not only favor northern or southern ports, but would also be a 'pro-slavery' or 'anti-slavery' trajectory. In the short preface to the first volume of *Industrial Resources*, De Bow made separate mention of the collected essays on slavery as "entirely exhausting the subject."

The gist of the essays was that slavery was in the nature of things, and, more in particular, that blacks, by their very nature, were better off in a system of slavery. To control the way the census registered color and slavery was, therefore, of prime importance for a defense of the southern way of life. De Bow, as many southerners, embraced the view of mankind's multiple descent (however difficult to square with the Bible). Blacks and whites were different by nature, and population statistics were used to show there was not one average man, but several, who scored differently on longevity, morbidity, crime, or poverty (Schor 2009).

Well known is the statistical mistake following from the census of 1840 that seemed to prove that the number of insane blacks in the North was significantly higher than in the South, thus proving the natural unfitness of blacks for freedom. When Edward Jarvis, a Boston physician, published on the mistake in the *Boston Medical Journal* (whites had been calculated as blacks), this did not induce southern commentators such as John C. Calhoun to alter their vision. In *Negroes—Black and Mulatto Population of the South*, De Bow accepted, however, that the 1840 census had been "notoriously faulty" in providing accurate information. But the census for 1850 would properly incorporate the distinction between blacks, whites, and mulattos, thus establishing once and for all the benefits of the slave system, not so much for the economic benefit of the slaveholders, but for the physical health of the blacks.⁶ Mulattos would be shown to suffer from the same degenerative defects as mules in fertility and life expectancy. Purity of the race became a measure of fitness (Schor 2009; see also Anderson 2003, and Schor 2003).

⁶And also to save the slaveholders from the embarrassment of which mulattos were the visible evidence; namely, that they were the product of systemic abuse and rape of slave women by their owners.

From these examples we learn that De Bow not only aimed to provide information, but also to raise southerners to action when their interests were at stake. Statistics were not neutral, but was in the service of a political agenda. De Bow's words in the preface to the first volume of *Industrial Resources*, that the "vast amount of valuable information" collected therein served the "practical and industrial interests of the country," were exactly right. The Old South had to see that its future was in the new West, and that the expansion of industry and commerce secured by infrastructural works and urbanization were vital for the survival of the southern way of life. This included the extension of the slave system to the newly acquired territories.

V. FREDERIC LAW OLMSTED

Let me now turn to Frederic Law Olmsted's *A Journey through the Seaboard Slave States* of 1856. Olmsted is nowadays best known as the garden architect who designed Central Park (his first commission) and Prospect Park in New York.⁷ Olmsted was raised in a well-established merchant family in Hartford, Connecticut. At the age of twenty-two, he decided to become a scientific farmer instead of an engineer. But, rather than staying at the (second) farm his father bought him at Staten Island, Olmsted repeatedly traveled abroad and published in detail on his observations (McLaughlin 1977, p. 9).

His first publication was *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (1852), the result of a tour through England with his brother John Hull Olmsted, who had studied at Yale. After the passing of the *Fugitive Slave Act*, Olmsted realized slavery was entering on his doorstep, and he made himself the promise to shelter any runaway slave and shoot everyone who would interfere. But Olmsted was not a full-fledged abolitionist. He considered slaves to be like children, and in need of guidance from the whites before they could live in freedom, an opinion not dissimilar from moderate southern views.

The *New-York Daily Times*, the predecessor of the *New York Times*, hired Frederic Olmsted to travel through the South to narrate to the readers about his experiences. He started on a four-month trip through the slave states on December 11, 1852. The editor, Henry J. Raymond, had explicitly asked Olmsted to "confine his letters to firsthand observation" (McLaughlin 1977, p. 13). Olmsted signed his letters as "a yeoman" and published them under his own name in 1856. In contrast with *De Bow's Review*, which covered a wide range of resources written by a network of southerners, these were the observations of a single person on the American Slave South. His letters on Virginia served as the general foil against which his subsequent letters should be read, when he was moving south, then southwest, to return via Memphis to Staten Island on April 6, 1853. Olmsted subsequently published on his travels through Texas.

VI. OLMSTED'S TRAVELOGUES

Olmsted's observations on Virginia are divided into three parts. In the first, he narrates his experiences as a traveler through the state of Virginia. The second treats of

⁷He designed many more parks, among others the arboretum of Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina.

the economy of Virginia. The third is devoted to its political system. The letters on Virginia crucially set the stage for his subsequent letters, which are about his travel experiences in the other states. The central message is Olmsted's rejection of a system of forced labor.

The key letter is his account of a journey on horseback that he fails to complete in one day. Olmsted rents a horse to visit a plantation and receives seemingly straightforward instructions to get there—he should just follow a road that leads, according to the instructions, “straight” down to the plantation. But soon Olmsted finds himself lost in the woods. Wandering around, he encounters slaves living in a decent house, or impoverished whites, who all very kindly provide him with new directions that he does not manage to follow through, either. When darkness sets in, a white, petty farmer is willing, for payment, to lodge him for the night. The next day Olmsted sets off from a small township in a direction that soon proves wrong, but, knowingly, he rides on to finally find the right direction, after once again asking at a slave hut.

Olmsted subsequently turns this slightly unsettling episode into an analysis of the slave economy of Virginia by historically situating and explaining his personal experiences. His observations confirm the cultural and economic decline of the state. On his wanderings through the woods, he sees formerly well-maintained tracks now fallen into disuse. Large parts of the woods are secondary forests, sprung up after the soil of former plantations had been exhausted and planters had left to try their luck elsewhere. Poor whites found themselves on petty pieces of land that were hardly sufficient to support even one family.

Going through the history of Virginia, Olmsted searched for causes to explain these personal observations and readily found them in the character of the planters, who mimicked the life of English landed nobility and, in doing so, had become rapidly dependent on a system of slavery that had come to undermine all aspects of economy and morals. The influence of slave labor demoralized poor whites to perform “negro work.” And insofar as the whites were willing to work, their productivity and the quality of their work were negatively affected by the resistance of slaves to work. Runaway slaves were a recurring problem.⁸

In short, Olmsted pictured an image of Virginia as a state in decline because of its complete reliance on a system of forced labor that infected all aspects of its social, economic, and political life. Ports were small, and Virginians complained about New Yorkers who stole their commerce. Railroads were constructed, but by northerners, as free Virginians were either unwilling to do the job or were delivering poor quality. Urbanization and infrastructural works were retarded because planters stuck to the fiction they could live a life of conspicuous consumption on the countryside. Olmsted perceived glimpses of hope only where slaves were paid for their work, as in the “Dismal Swamps” on the Carolina border, where slaves could earn considerable sums of money in timber extraction.

This then became the main theme of his subsequent letters. Moving through the Carolinas, Georgia, to Louisiana, and then up to Memphis, Olmsted played out the

⁸In a contribution that De Bow approvingly reprinted in *Industrial Resources* (1852, vol. II, pp. 315–329, 322) the New Orleans physician Dr. Cartwright diagnosed the tendency of slaves to run away as a specific disease, “drapetomania,” which literally means the madness of a slave to run away.

opposition between forced and paid labor, tracing the degeneracy of the “Old South” to its reliance on slavery and seeing improvements where free labor was given space. Olmsted’s personal experiences served to confirm the history of the Old South as a history of decline.

VII. JOHN ELLIOTT CAIRNES AND THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE

My account so far shows that the evidence brought to De Bow’s *Industrial Resources* was complementary to Olmsted’s travelogues, but written from a different perspective. De Bow ignored the economic aspects of the slave system and concentrated on its moral and natural virtues for the whole of the South and humanity. The *Resources* contained extensive information, in many cases in the form of numerical statistics, on agricultural improvements, urbanization, infrastructural works such as railroads and improvements of ports, and on comparisons of the North with the Southwest. But, as Theodore Porter (2011) reminds us, numbers never stand on their own, and this was certainly true in the period from Jackson to the Civil War. De Bow’s adherence to the cause of the Commercial Conventions made the tone of the articles and the numbers presented serve as a call for action to his readership. Emphasizing time and again the need for an expansion of a commercial and industrial sector of its own, De Bow envisioned a Southwest that could free itself from its dependence on the northern states so as to preserve the southern way of life by westward expansion. It was easy to read this message as a confirmation of the backward state of the Old South. This message was confirmed by Olmsted’s travelogues through the Old South, and enhanced by his journey through Texas that confirmed De Bow’s appeals to expand to the West. Olmsted not only vividly sketched the Old South’s backward state from personal observation, but also historically traced its causes to the reliance of the South on slavery—a system of forced labor that incorporated expansionist traits for its survival.

How, then, are we to judge Cairnes’s weighing of the evidence? Was Cairnes ignoring evidence when picturing the American Slave South in a state of decline, as Den Hollander admonished Cairnes? If we read Cairnes’s interventions in the British periodical press, it seems he was quite unwilling to face serious criticism of his analysis in *The Slave Power*. When criticized in the conservative *Saturday Review* on his use of statistical evidence regarding slave-breeding and slave-consuming states, Cairnes (2003, vol. 6, p. 133) angrily replied that

there is something ludicrous in the attempt to prove the existence of a slave trade in the South by inferences from a census. We might as well ... prove the existence of Napoleon Bonaparte by an appeal to the bills of mortality. The thing is notorious. Slave breeding and Virginia—‘the two ideas,’ ... ‘are as indissolubly associated as cotton spinning with Manchester, or as cutlery with Sheffield.’⁹

⁹Cairnes implicitly refers to Richard Whately’s pamphlet *Proof of the Existence of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1819), which questioned Hume on miracles. For solid evidence (against Phillips or Fogel and Engerman) that slave breeding was not a myth, see, for example, Thelma Jennings (1990), also Sutch (1975) and Hummel (2014).

But, if we examine his efforts to incorporate such criticism in the second edition of *The Slave Power*, we reach a different conclusion. In the first edition of *The Slave Power*, Cairnes analyzes what follows from the economic principles he sees at work in the American Slave South. One of these consequences was sparseness of population, for which he found evidence in De Bow's *Industrial Resources*, using an article on the agriculture of South Carolina that had been recommended by De Bow himself as an "able and valuable essay" (Cairnes 2003, p. 151n). This evidence supported his claim about the difficulties sparseness of population posed to "civilized progress." At issue was the difficulty of organizing education for the scattered-dwelling whites: "The mass of the people must remain entirely uninstructed."

Cairnes's analysis was largely in agreement with Olmsted's travelogues. However, because Cairnes then was seriously criticized, he tried to strengthen his case by adding evidence. On page 130 of his own copy of *The Slave Power*, he contrasted Robert Russell's *North America, Its Agriculture and Climate* of 1842 with James Williams's *The South Vindicated* of 1862. Williams and Russell were by no means pro-northern sources. Cairnes further added a reference to the census of 1840 of the second volume of *Industrial Resources* that showed substantially higher levels of literacy for Massachusetts against Virginia and other southern states (De Bow 1852, vol. II, pp. 109–110). An additional reference to *Industrial Resources* concerned fragments of an article that De Bow approvingly cites on the same issue and on Virginia's stagnant commerce and trade (1852, vol. III, p. 460).¹⁰

Thus, Cairnes is balancing his exposition, making references to opposite views, on different sides of the political spectrum in a manner he regularly used and that can be found, for example, on his contributions to *The Economist* on the state of Ireland halfway the 1860s, which he equally densely littered with annotations and newspaper clippings as his personal copy of *The Slave Power*.¹¹ In these annotations Cairnes is weighing the evidence, constructing an image of the American Slave South from his armchair that, in its general outlines, is confirmed by recent historical scholarship, and he could do so *because* the biases in the evidence pinpointed the issues at stake.

However, my intention is not to vindicate Cairnes against his critics. The more important conclusion is that the evidence Cairnes brought to *The Slave Power* would never become neutral by becoming balanced. De Bow's statistical materials were intended to promote the interests of the South and West towards further expansion of manufacture and trade, and thus to protect the slave system as an inherent part of the southern way of life. Olmsted used his observations to confirm the northern view that the Old South was an economy in decline because of its peculiar system. The statistics in De Bow's *Review or Industrial Resources* were neither neutral nor unbiased but followed a pronounced agenda, which confirmed Olmsted's experiences as a traveler. Bias can reveal truth.

¹⁰Literally, we can read: "This is controverted by Williams (South Vindicated p. xxxii) but compare Weston's Poor Whites p. 3" [i.e., George M. Weston, 1856, *The Poor Whites of the South*, Washington DC: Buell and Blanchard, HM]. An annotation in the left margin reads: "Confirmed by Russell p. 156 & p. 301–2." John Elliott Cairnes's personal copy of the first edition of *The Slave Power* (1862). James Hardiman Library, NUI, Galway. Special Collections Cairnes Collection (306.3620973 CAI)

¹¹Cairnes Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 8982.

This doesn't mean one should not weigh the evidence. But the reproach of a biased reading of evidence, at least for social and historical research, is as problematic as any claim for an objective, neutral, evidential high ground. Even though this conclusion may follow almost trivially when the use of data is historicized, it should make us as cautious when judging contemporary studies on the American Slave South as when passing judgment on previous authors. The question is never solely about balancing the evidence; it is also about the political end it serves.

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