

## **Race, Profit and Property: Southern U.S. Political Economy and the Legitimation of Slavery in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

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My post-doctoral project focuses on the legitimation of slavery elaborated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by political economists in the U.S. South through a rejection, adaptation and revisitation of the Enlightenment legacy and of British economic thought. If until then, U.S. economic and political thinkers had largely followed Thomas Jefferson and Adam Smith in treating slavery as an inefficient and backward form of employment (which still needed to be maintained until its extinction), in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Southern U.S. economists started elaborating new interpretations in response to a rapidly changing context marked by the cotton boom, the expansion of slave plantations and the rise of abolitionism and slave revolts. Economists like Thomas Cooper (1759-1839), George Tucker (1775-1861), Jacob Newton Cardozo (1786-1873) and Thomas Roderick Dew (1802-1846) on the one hand rejected Thomas Jefferson's vision of natural rights, while maintaining his ideas on racial hierarchy, and on the other hand criticized Adam Smith's vision of free labor, while retaining elements of his economic science, like *laissez-faire*, free trade, the division of labor and private property. In doing so, the paper argues that U.S. Southern economists tried to justify slavery as the necessary institution to employ black workers, as a profitable form of labor and as a legitimate form of property, shaping a new legitimation that sought to show its fundamental modernity and compatibility with a capitalist market society.

In recent decades, historiography has highlighted the relationship between slavery and capitalism in the United States, showing that Southern slavery was a driving force in U.S. economic development (Schermerhorn, 2015; Beckert, Rockman, 2016; Rockman, 2024). At the same time, research has demonstrated how, after the late-eighteenth-century cotton boom, U.S. slave plantations became increasingly rationalized, modern, profitable, and market-oriented capitalist institutions (Blackburn, 2011; Baptist, 2013; Beckert, 2014; Johnson, 2014). However, the intellectual history of the relationship between slavery and capitalism remains largely unexplored.

Existing historiography on early-19<sup>th</sup> century economists in the U.S. South is particularly limited. Histories of U.S. economic thought have mainly considered their free-trade doctrines, rather than their pro-slavery arguments (Dorfman, 1946; Conkin, 1980; Persky, 1992; Calvo, 2020). Histories of U.S. pro-slavery thought have mostly focused on political, rather than economic arguments and on later figures like Calhoun and Fitzhugh (McKittrick, 1963; Faust, 1981; Tise, 1987; Young, 2006). Those historians who devoted studies to early Southern economists have tended either to downplay the role of slavery in their theory (Leiman, 1966; Kiker-Carlsson, 1969; MacLeod, 1980) or to treat them as reactionary thinkers

(Harrison, 1949; Hite, 1972). Others argued that an inescapable contradiction existed between the defense of slavery and the elaboration of economic science (Genovese–Fox-Genovese, 1984). A few historians, however, provided important insights into the modern character of the Southern economists' pro-slavery arguments, showing how they deployed modern intellectual tools like republicanism, liberalism and utilitarianism in support of slavery (Kaufmann, 1982; Kilbride, 1993; Carlander - Brownlee, 2006; Davis, 2006). This project seeks to fill these historiographical gaps by showing how nineteenth-century Southern economists help illuminate the relationship between slavery and capitalism from a new perspective. In doing so, this research offers a first contribution towards an intellectual history of slavery within nineteenth-century U.S. political economy

The HES Early-Career Scholars Research Fund would be crucial in allowing me to carry on this research, particularly in helping me afford the cost of a one-month research period between Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina to consult the Southern economists' papers. In particular, I would need to access: Dew's papers at the College of William & Mary; Cooper's and Tucker's papers at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill; Cardozo's papers at Charleston College (detailed reference below). I plan to use the grant to cover travel and accommodation costs: around 500\$ for a two-way flight ticket from Italy to the United States (likely Washington D.C. or Richmond, depending on ticket costs); around 200\$ for public transportation between Richmond, Chapel Hill and Charleston and around 800\$ for accommodation. I have not applied for any other funding for this research.

### **Archival Collections**

«Cardozo, Jacob N.», in «Robert Rosen Papers» (Mss. 1064), Special Collections, College of Charleston.

«Thomas Cooper Papers, 1819-1837» (collection 01786-z), Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.

«Thomas Roderick Dew Papers» in «Dew Family Papers» (Mss. 65 D51), Special Collections Research Center, College of William & Mary.

«George Tucker Papers» in «Tucker Family Papers, 1790-1932» (collection 02605), Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina.