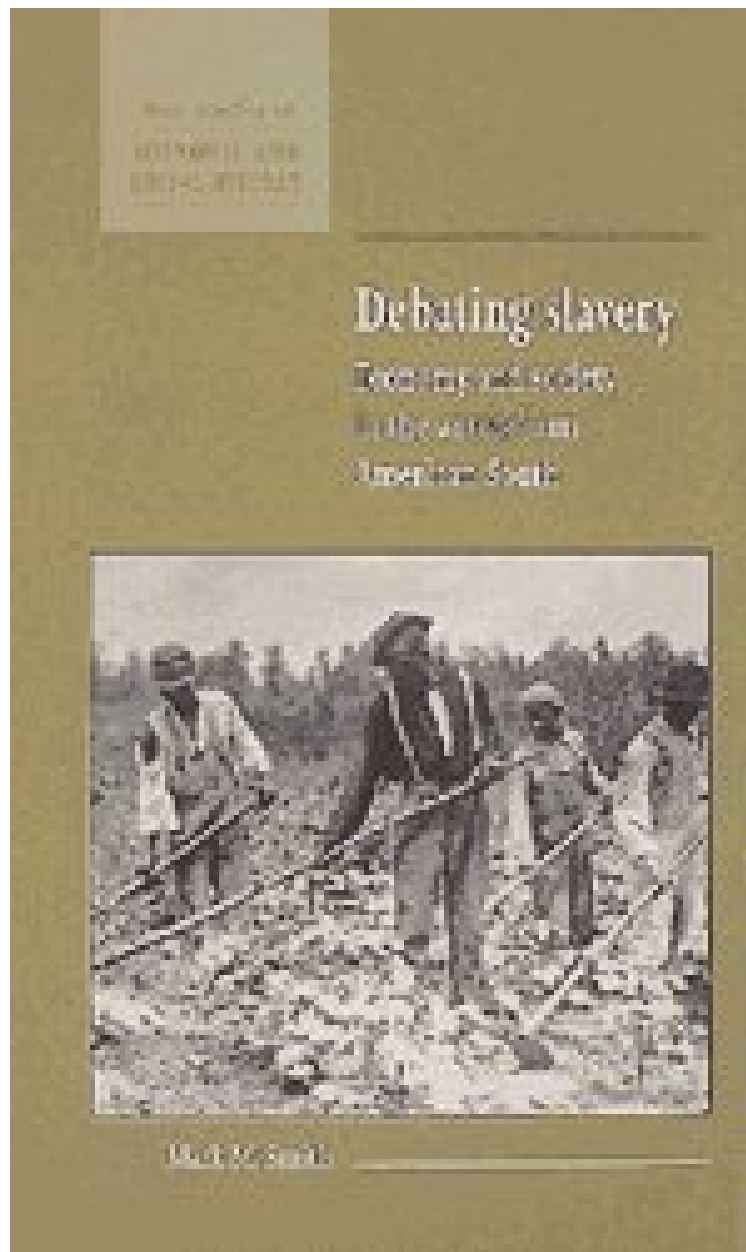



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## Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South (New Studies in Economic and Social History)

Mark M. Smith

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before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South* (New Studies in Economic and Social History):

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Dull Primer on the Historiography of Slavery  
By Omer Belsky  
In 'Debating Slavery', Mark M. Smith has made quite an achievement: he took two topics which I personally find fascinating - American Negro Slavery and Historiography - and managed to produce a sordid essay, that is almost entirely unenlightening and literally painful to read. Smith's book exposes the opinions of scholars of slavery on several key questions about the 'peculiar institution': Was slavery profitable? Were slave owners Capitalists? And to what extent did the owners control the life and culture of slaves? Smith's answer to all these questions seems to be a variation on 'to an extent'. Slaveholders were part Capitalist and part not Capitalists, and what is Capitalism anyway? The Slaves had their own culture but were very influenced by the masters, etc. I don't mind ambiguity and nuance in analysis, but Smith comes off not as complex but as indecisive. It doesn't help that Smith's narrative is little more than a list of scholars's opinions, along with citations and reference. There are some attempts to flash out the argument (often using graphs and charts), but those are halfhearted. Smith seems to think that reference is a substitute for an argument. In what is essentially an extended bibliographical essay, one would expect a useful list of works cited. Unfortunately, even that is not properly done. After a short list of 'general books', Smith goes on to put a separate bibliography for each chapter, without repeating titles. As a result, if you are trying to locate a reference to a book in chapter five, for instance, you may have to look through the bibliographies of all the preceding chapters, as the work you're looking for may be mentioned in any of them. All in all, *Debating Slavery* is a mercilessly bad book. The only good thing I can say about it is that it is short; but that just means it's overpriced :-)

1 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Useless marxist analysis  
By HaimGreat  
book if you want to explore the feebleness of marxist analysis. Author spends two of seven chapters trying to work out a definition of profit, and fails. Well, you will not get an analysis of profitability if you do not have a useful definition of profit. Besides, in 20th century America (when this book was written) there was no problem with the definition of profit, so what was his problem? His problem, of course, is he is a marxist, and a mighty big problem that turns out to be. If you want an economic analysis of Southern slavery, you will do better with "Time On The Cross", which is one of the earliest exercises in investigating antebellum slavery with modern economic tools.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Brilliant and Provocative Analysis  
By A Customer  
In his second book on slavery in two years, Professor Mark Smith of the University of South Carolina has established himself as one of this generation's more astute historians. Eschewing traditional "either-or" schools of historical interpretation, he provides a rational, yet passionate, examination of the institution of slavery. While older historians have gotten themselves all wrapped up in economic theories with all sorts of litmus tests, Smith takes a more reasoned approach. Was the South pre-modern? (In some ways, it was). Was the South modern? (In some ways, it was). This is not academic equivocation, for Smith makes a strong argument that the South was BOTH. His concluding paragraph says it all: "Instead of arguing for the modernity or premodernity of the Old South, we can begin to see how the region, while it retained slavery as the basis for its political identity and social and economic relations, was none the less modernizing its economic system even as it eschewed the democratic tendencies of nineteenth-century liberalism." Brilliantly argued in highly readable prose, this is a must-read for anyone who truly wants to understand the Old South.

Even while slavery existed, Americans debated slavery. Was it a profitable and healthy institution? If so, for whom? The abolition of slavery in 1865 did not end this debate, and it still remains among the most hotly disputed topics in American history. Smith outlines the main contours of this debate, summarizes the contending viewpoints, and weighs the relative importance, strengths and weaknesses of the various interpretations. This book introduces an important topic in American history in a manner that is accessible to students.

"Smith has provided an excellent historiographical guide that can be a start for new approaches to southern economic history. Indeed, his analysis here...suggests the great potential for asking new question to get new answers." *Journal of Economic History* "...Smith does present a well-written and thoughtful narrative...*Debating Slavery* can provide a valuable overview of some of the most salient historiographical questions about the nature of the slave-plantation South and, hopefully, will stimulate further historical inquiry into the important subjects it addresses." *H-Net s* "...given the enormity of the historiography and the controversy surrounding it, Smith's economical summary is nothing short of remarkable. He has produced a work that will find an eager audience of undergraduate, graduate, and professional readers." Jeffrey Robert Young, *The Journal of Southern History*