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US Economic History: The Relationship of Capitalism to Slavery with examples from other "colonies of settlement"

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Karl Shepard · 4 hours ago

I. The Relationship of Agriculture to Transportation and the Industry of Agricultural Implements

Let me state up front that I completely agree with Genovese (The Political Economy of Slavery, 1965) and by extension with Dr. McCurry, that no plantation based economy has ever given rise to industrial capitalism. It is not controversial to argue that there was an articulation of agriculture to industry in the northern US that did not occur in the same way in the south. But let's turn our focus to two extant features of the northern agriculture that did not apply to the south, transportation development on the one hand and the development of agricultural implements on the other.

II. Transportation

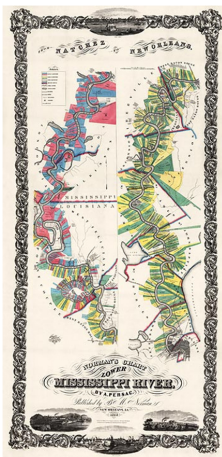
If you look at the following three maps it becomes evident that the North was invested in developing transport. This began with the National Road. It extends from the lands taken from Native Americans on the east coast to Vandalia Illinois. It attempted (only partially successful) to solve a problem the problem of bulky crops such as wheat and corn to the Atlantic seaboard via the Potomac River:



More successful was the Erie Canal. Opened in 1825, 32 feet wide, 8 feet deep and 232 miles long, the Erie Canal tied the entire region of the Great Lakes via Lake Erie to the eastern seaboard. The price of transport dropped precipitously by 95%. The bulky corn and wheat crops were drained from the interior opening the way to further free holder farming.



By contrast there were few transport developments in the south. Most plantations relied upon the rivers that flowed to the Mississippi River. Below is a map of a Norman's Cadastral survey of New Orleans and Natchez in 1858. Note the arrangement of plantations along the Mississippi River:



Source: http://www.rare-maps.com/REPROS_FRAME_THUMB/ASIR-151-MISSRIVER-1858.JPG

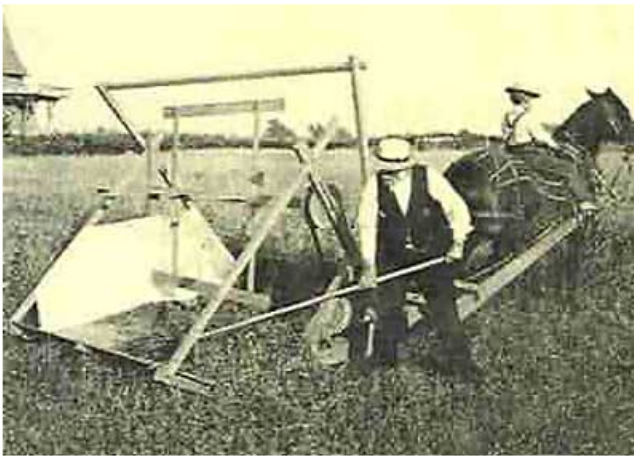
Providing further evidence of the lack of transport development in the south and its extension in the north, we turn to railroad lines:



It is clear that transportation, what we would call today public improvements were mostly located in the north and not the south. Perhaps we could argue geography as a cause. But there was more to it than that. Southern planters, stressed by the significant portion of their profits flowing to merchant capital in New York and London, simply refused to pay the taxes necessary for the improvements.

III. Agriculture and the Development of the Agricultural Implement Industry

In 1831, Cyrus McCormick invented the McCormick reaper. A horse drawn contraption, it allowed for the harvesting of crops with less labor. A picture of it appears below and a link to a video of the reaper appears below that:



Video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwELkLeUYJ0>

The most important thing to note is that while the original McCormick machine relied on some wooden sections, over time, increasingly significant amounts of iron and later steel would be incorporated into the reaper. It was a start of the articulation of agriculture to its industrial mechanization.

By contrast here's a picture of entire families including 10 year old children picking cotton:



The important point here is that while the north had three times the population of the south (24 million vs. 8 million, 4 million of which were slaves), the industrial mechanization of agriculture in the north was articulated to its agricultural output while southern agriculture relied on human labor. Factories would be built around northern agricultural machinery. In the south, the mechanization of agriculture did not occur until the late 1950's. See for example this video of a modern cotton harvest in Georgia 2009:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHE82R4i2Vo>

Now then, imagine the industrial development that accompanied northern agriculture in ways that it did not in the south.

And indeed, McCormick moved his manufacture of harvesting machinery to Chicago in the 1840's. No such development was ever forthcoming in the south.

IV. Agricultural Machinery, Specialized Plows, and Free Holder Agriculture: Canada and Australia

Canada

The Erie Canal not only provided an outlet for US farms around and on the Great Lakes it also provided an outlet for Canadian wheat, red winter wheat, adapted from the colder climates of Northern Europe. Accordingly, Massey (now Massey-Fergusson) starting in 1847 first imported the components of agricultural machinery from the US and later improved and manufactured its own mechanized machinery for free holder agriculture. The company is based in Ontario. Massey provides us with another example of free hold farmers and the relationship to industrialization via agricultural machinery.

Australia

Australia provides perhaps one the most interesting contrasts and exhibits similar characteristics to the bifurcation of US agriculture. Queensland in the north grew sugar with imported, indentured, Pacific Islander labor.

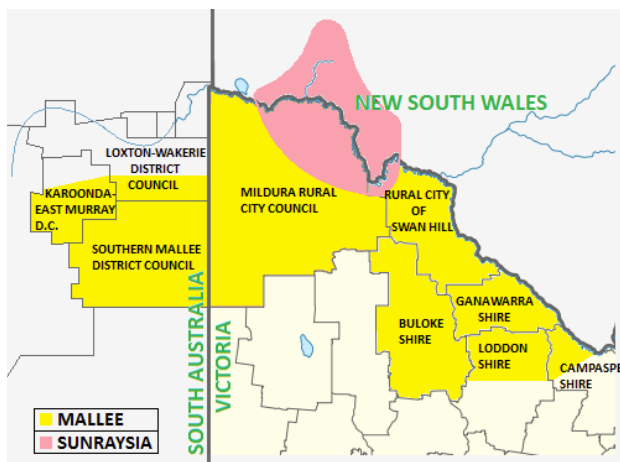
(Let it be noted here that I appreciate the reference in the early lectures to former black slaves being shipped to Australia. And indeed, after the closing of the US to indentured servants, Australia was a huge recipient of indentures down to the mid 1800's. After the US fell, Australia was the British safety valve that prevented revolution.)

The rest of the country was founded on sheep and cattle stations, an agricultural commodity that could walk itself to market. The original land grants in Australia were quite large.

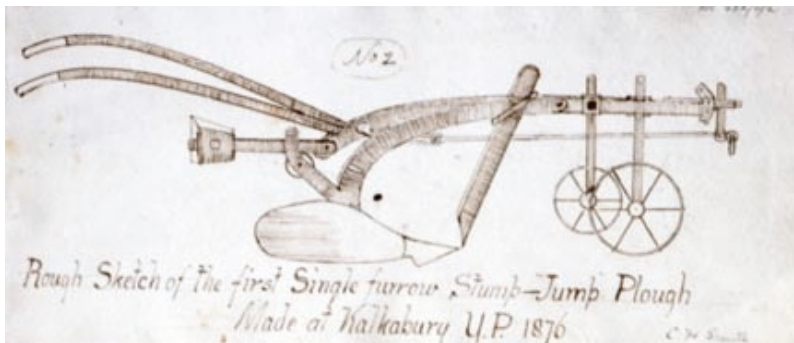
In the 1860's, under the pressure from the descendants of those indentured servants in Australia, Victoria opened up mallee eucalyptus lands to small farmers. The trees were cut but the stumps were difficult to remove. First I provide a map of Australia and then a map of those lands:



The mallee eucalyptus lands:



The point is to note the mechanization of agriculture. With the opening of these lands to free hold agriculture there were new advances in agricultural mechanization: the stump-jump plow and Riddley's stripper were early examples and were later combined and transformed into the McKay combine. McKay's combine was an 1880 Victoria invention. Below I provide a picture of the original design of the stump-jump plow and below that the McKay reaper:



By contrast, Queensland sugar (see the map above) continued to be harvested under the crudest of labor intensive regimes. Here is a video of the sugar cane harvest in Nicaragua, the same methods used in the antebellum US south around New Orleans and much of the third world today: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOB_VfYC-nM

After 1901 and the independence of the Commonwealth of Australia, the new nation-state adopted a white's only immigration policy similar to that adopted in the United States. Both countries feared a "yellow invasion". A side impact was the mechanization of the sugar harvest seen in this Australian video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPPlxh4MyZI>

V. Conclusion

Insofar as we can argue that free hold agriculture meant a particular articulation of industry to agriculture in the north that was lacking in the south, it is clear that once repressive labor regimes were removed in the US and Australia, a path was opened for far greater agricultural productivity.

To be sure, the contrast goes much deeper than transport and the mechanization of agriculture. There is also the demand for nails, glass windows, saws, hinges, tack, harnesses, boots, buttons, and many other goods that accompanied the expansion of free hold agriculture. That in turn set in motion the British and US industrial revolution in ways that southern plantation slavery never could. With the basest of housing, one pair of winter shoes, and two sets of clothes per year, the aggregate demand in the south for slave produced cotton, rice, and tobacco was never enough to make an industrial revolution.

Karl Shepard

3/19/14

(This has been updated and revised a bit since I originally wrote it.)

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