Civil War Revision Notes

The Sectionalisation of Politics, 1845-1860

All serious historians credit slavery as the underlying root of the Civil War, with most debate centring on how and why slavery precipitated secession and war. Some view secession as rational behaviour by people determined to preserve their non-bourgeois way of life or their republican values; others argue that it resulted from the irrationality of extremists who used racial fears to whip citizens into a senseless terror. All agree that the south left the Union to preserve slavery.

Historians of the twentieth century are divided between those who saw war as unavoidable and irrepressible and those who thought that the war was blundered into and with better leadership in the 1850s, it could have been avoided. By the election of 1860, sectional tensions were more important and plunged the US into Civil War. This phenomenon explained by:

- **Structural factors**: deep in the social, political or economic system, beyond the control of politicians (inevitable interpretation)
- **Anti-structural and accidental factors**: unrelated/incidental to the sectional controversy, derived from personal weaknesses of politicians (repressible interpretation)

What caused the Civil War?

**Economic Factors**

The Marxist historians Genovese and Foner, and the Progressive Beard, saw the civil war as an inevitable conflict between two different economic systems, that of the northern capitalists and that of the southern agrarian slaveholders. However, the war should not be attributed to economic concerns (the divergent nature of the two economies is complementary) but to other factors.

Charles A. Beard: structural and fundamental clash between North and South based on economic interests that was not amenable to compromise. Slavery was a symbol of divergence between agrarians of the south and financiers and industrialists of the north. This argument reduced deals and ideology to economic interests, denying moral commitment to African Americans; exaggerated the Republicans’ commitment to economic policies in 1860 and underestimated their commitment to anti-slavery; failed to recognise dissimilar economic interests might actually promise unity.

Genovese in *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1965) argued that war was irrepressible and that secession was a rational act for class self-preservation initiated by southern slaveholders. Slavery made an aristocracy of slaveholders in southern society, which were an anti-bourgeois class who clung to backwardness. The inefficiency of their approach meant planters needed western land, which was made impossible by the election of Lincoln. The Civil War was thus the conflict of two social orders and two sectional classes that led to an inescapable march to secession.

**Ethnocultural Issues**

Some historians have noted the effect of immigration and nativist hostility to immigrants and of the temperance movement in bringing about the collapse of the second party system between Democrats and Whigs in the mid-1850s. This collapse altered the political agenda and facilitated the triumph of sectionalism. This wave of immigration and the temperance movement had little to do with any sectional hostility between north and south. The political upheaval of the mid-1850s was not simply the product of the controversy unleashed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This also owed to the Know Noting movement and the prevalence of fears of immigrants among the native-born in these years, following the upsurge in immigration around mid-century. The temporal power of the Catholic Church was a genuine concern for many Protestants and the economic dislocations caused by immigration (and economic growth) gave this increased impetus. In many states, nativism and temperance attracted more voters...