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**Martin Öhman. "A Convergence of Crises: The Expansion of Slavery, Geopolitical Realignment, and Economic Depression in the Post-Napoleonic World." *Diplomatic History* 37:3 (June 2013): 419-445. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht018>**

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Reviewed by **Tim Roberts**, Western Illinois University

Martin Öhman offers a reinterpretation of the political crisis in the United States over the entry of the state of Missouri into the Union in 1820. From the Founding in 1787, Americans had carried or inherited slavery from Virginia to Louisiana without a national confrontation. But the question of Missouri statehood sparked a controversy that former president Thomas Jefferson called "the knell of the Union" for its provocation of political conflict between southern and northern states, rather than, as had been customary, the eastern seaboard and the trans-Appalachian West.<sup>1</sup> Öhman argues that the Missouri crisis should be understood as the Americans' response to dangers posed by Europe. On one hand, he asserts, continuing British interference with American trade in the Atlantic and Caribbean, along with British and Russian interest in the Pacific Northwest, threatened American maritime commerce. On the other hand, the end of continental war promised by the Congress of Vienna threatened to reduce Europeans' demand for American agricultural produce. Both of these developments prompted interest in ensuring that national expansion would create opportunities for free-labor manufacturing, not slavery, rendering the United States less involved in the hazards of a global commerce still subject to Old-World navies and consumers.

Actually, Öhman agrees with Jefferson that the Missouri crisis signaled an unprecedented threat. But he emphasizes that the threat perceived was not sectional rivalry but the uncertainty of foreign markets. He asserts, "To rightly understand the rationale behind the push for restriction [of slavery] at this particular moment...it is necessary to move beyond the domestic political scene" (428). He concludes the article with reference to Kentucky Senator Henry Clay, the leader of the 'Missouri Compromise' by which slavery was allowed

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 22 April 1820, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York, 1984), 1433-1435.

in Missouri but not north of its southern boundary. In 1820 Clay declared a “new epoch,” behooving Americans “to deliberately contemplate...the relations that are likely to exist between us and the other parts of the world” (445). Namely, Clay wished to encourage development of American manufacturing and domestic markets. Öhman rightly asks us to reconsider whether and how American statesmen and political economists regarded the relationship between the expansion of slavery and America’s place in the world, not only the moral paradox of slavery in a republic professing universal liberty, but slavery’s economic impact.

The article has three problems, however, one technical and two substantive. First, it seems poorly edited, containing several run-on sentences, misspelled words (including in the first sentence), and missing parentheses. Second, while Clay, Mathew Carey, and other American nationalists did advocate for American economic diversification, they had little reservation about slavery’s continuing expansion. The prospect of unfettered expansion in the post-Napoleonic era, coupled with state-organized internal development, ensured slaveowners’ property interests, protected against excessive manufacturing, and maintained white Americans’ independence and prosperity. Slavery’s expansion was hardly deterred by the “great political uncertainties following the end of the Napoleonic Wars” (419).

Third, Öhman’s argument is not persuasive in showing that Americans’ anxiety concerning their place in the world provided the rationale for the showdown over Missouri. Scholars have found that although the War of 1812 was controversial, Americans’ confidence swelled after the Treaty of Ghent.<sup>2</sup> The country suffered no loss of territory; in fact the war ensured westerners’ national loyalty and ended the chance for a mid-continent European empire. British negotiators quickly dropped their demand for an Indian reservation in the Northwest Territory and stopped the practice, if not the official policy, of impressment. The war unlocked westward settlement and fostered market and transportation revolutions. Öhman emphasizes that Americans had “concern” about Britain and that their “relations with Spain remained strained” (430). But these attitudes reflected national assertiveness, not doubt. In the short-term the administration of President James Monroe brushed aside Spanish and British opposition to annexation of Florida and proclaimed United States, not Anglo-American, unilateral hegemony in the western hemisphere. Öhman cites the worry of the political economist Hezekiah Niles about the prospect of “ubiquitous” popular rebellions in southern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, which led him to advocate for national self-sufficiency through restriction of slavery (434). But this was an age when many Americans interested in international trade benefited from war, not peace, in Europe (a point the article actually makes at its outset).

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, 2001); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America 1815-1848* (New York, 2009); George Rogers Taylor, *Transportation Revolution 1815-1860* [1951] (Armonk, 1977); Steven Watts, *Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, 1987).

In sum, this article amplifies recent scholarship that seeks to understand how Atlantic forces shaped questions of territorial expansion and slavery in the early American republic.<sup>3</sup> It ably shows that American leaders involved in the Missouri controversy were aware of the challenges posed by post-Napoleonic conditions in Europe. But those conditions presented opportunities as well as risks, and do not seem to have demonstrably altered the path of American development at the time.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bender, *Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York, 2006); Brian Schoen, *Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore, 2009); and essays in John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason, eds., *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Freedom and Bondage in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville, 2012), especially John Craig Hammond, "Uncontrollable Necessity': The Local Politics, Geo-Politics, and Sectional Politics of Slavery Expansion," 138-60; and Andrew Shankman, "Neither Infinite Wretchedness nor Positive Good: Mathew Carey and Henry Clay on Political Economy and Slavery During the 1820s," 247-66.