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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. 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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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.2 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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2 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
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.³ 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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