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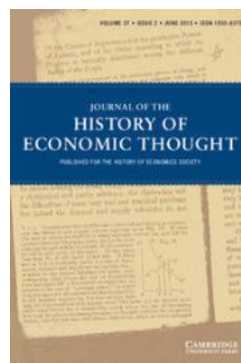
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THE AMERICAN SYSTEM AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BLACK COLONIZATION

BY
PHILLIP W. MAGNESS

From 1816 through to the end of the Civil War, the colonization of emancipated slaves in Africa and the American tropics occupied a prominent place in federal policy discussions. Although colonization has traditionally been interpreted as an aberration in anti-slavery thought on account of its dubious racial legacy and discounted for its impracticality, its political persistence remains a challenge for historians of the antebellum era. This article offers an explanation by identifying a distinctive economic strain of colonization in the moderate anti-slavery advocacy of Mathew Carey, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln. From the nullification crisis until the Civil War, adherents of this strain effectively integrated colonization into the American System of political economy. Their efforts were undertaken to both reconcile their respective anti-slavery views with a raw-material-dependent domestic industrialization program, and to adapt American System insights to an intended program of gradual, compensated emancipation.

I. THE AMERICAN SYSTEM AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BLACK COLONIZATION

The history of black colonization is almost exclusively understood through its troublesome racial legacy. From the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816 until the end of the Civil War, the United States government entertained and in some cases funded proposals to establish colonies for former slaves on the coast of Africa and in the American tropics. The policy was rooted in the prejudicial assertion

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that the United States could never survive as a multiracial society, and yet the colonization movement was also generally anti-slavery in nature. Its supporters viewed the separation of the black and white races as a means of ending slavery in exchange for relocation, and with it a panacea to racial violence in a post-slavery society. To the modern ear the very idea of colonization seems plagued by enormous expenses and the hopeless logistics of transporting millions of freed slaves to a foreign locale, let alone sustaining them. And yet it also occupied a recurring place on the national political landscape in some form or another for the better part of the nineteenth century.

It would constitute an historical disservice to fully separate colonization from its problematic racial motives.¹ Yet the question of its persistence and appeal has gone under-acknowledged on account of its distasteful legacy and impracticality. Largely missing from the discussion are the economic dimensions of colonization, and specifically the prominent position it attained in the prescriptive repertoire of the American System of economic thought. It is the contention of this article that, far from being an aberration from the historical development of anti-slavery politics, the colonizationist mainline from the 1830s until the Civil War was actually a means of integrating moderate anti-slavery principles into the Whig-Republican economic system. As such, colonization both typified the underlying economic nationalism of the American System and added its own functional extensions as (1) a mechanism to extricate slavery from the raw material-dependent domestic industrial base at the heart of Whig economic policy; (2) a means of expanding the national economic spheres of influence of the fledgling United States; and, in its matured iteration, (3) an application of the distance-centric vicinage principle to the transit of colonists to strategically chosen locales. When taken in cumulative, colonization claimed to provide a harmonizing work-around to the sectional discord of slavery while promising beneficial extensions of the American System abroad. While such context should not overshadow other sources of the colonization movement's scorned reputation, an inquiry into its neglected economic characteristics offers an explanation of this seemingly bizarre and impractical policy's lasting appeal to such leading American System adherents as Henry Clay, Mathew Carey, and Abraham Lincoln.

II. COLONIZATION AS AN ECONOMIC IDEA

"Why, sir, there is scarcely an interest, scarcely a vocation in society, which is not embraced by the beneficence of this system." So argued Henry Clay (1832a, p. 9) against the challenge to the Tariff of 1828, a core plank of his economic agenda. Clay's American System promised federal support to "almost every mechanic art," usually in the form of tariff barriers upon their foreign competitors. Yet it was no mere isolated subsidy, as Clay intended these specific policies to form a sweeping program of social coordination to the promised betterment of the nation. The tariff thus advantaged the "cotton planter himself and the tobacco planter" with a guaranteed domestic market, brought within reach by a vast network of roads, canals, and other "internal

¹The author of this article has explored colonization's troublesome racial legacy at length elsewhere. See Magness (2013), and Magness and Page (2011).

improvements” to aid in the transport of goods throughout the country’s interior. It pledged “beneficial effects, although they may vary in degree,” to “all parts of the Union.” “To none,” Clay continued, “has it been prejudicial.”

The sectionalizing tendencies of the nullification dispute, as Clay’s critics were apt to point out, belied this assertion. Yet Clay insisted this to be an aberration of comprehension, not a fault in political allocation—that his American System had been misconstrued, evidence of its alleged successes ignored, and above all its “unifying” principles imperiled by foreign interests seeking American subservience to a European power, echoing the neo-mercantilism of Alexander Hamilton a generation prior. By Clay’s time the aristocratic Hamiltonian system had undergone a popularization through the political discourse around the tariff. It also attained something of a theoretical grounding in the writings of Pennsylvania’s Mathew Carey (1822), a political publisher turned protectionist adversary of all things British.

For all their economic inclination, Clay’s remarks on the tariff reflected an ongoing proxy fight over a different source of disunionist tension: slavery.² A border-state slaveholder who nonetheless saw an inherited injustice in the ‘peculiar institution,’ he occupied a precarious middle ground in a deteriorating debate. Slavery posed a distinct problem for the American System precisely because the latter promised economic advantages to all sections. The economics of Clay and Carey required a strategy of import substitution built around southern agriculture. Using external trade barriers and internal transportation improvements, they sought to redirect these raw materials to the industry of the Northeast, effectively cutting out Britain. Though its adherents intentionally eschewed an economic commitment to slavery, in practice such a system would bolster the slave economy by ensuring a buyer for plantation crops while also casting aspersions upon the professed anti-slavery abstractions of its supporters.³

Clay (1829) devised the so-called Whig formula in response to this conundrum—the pairing of compensated emancipation with colonization to facilitate a managed weaning of the plantation system from its slave labor force just as tariff-sustained import substitution took effect, boosting domestic prices and wage-labor replacements with them. Racial separation weighed heavily in this consideration, and questions of practicality impeded its execution, yet the operative mechanism of the formula was an extension of political economy. Slave economies, to quote Gordon Tullock (1967, p. 8), require “a very sizable expenditure on the ‘security’ of the slaves.” Increased policing, a national *Fugitive Slave Act*, the criminalization of inciting slaves or propagating abolition, and even policies to “prevent development of significant free populations of

²As John C. Calhoun wrote in 1830, “I consider the tariff act as the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things,” the true instigator being slavery. See Freehling (1966, pp. 255, 257).

³Andrew Shankman (2011) tends to discount the moderate anti-slavery commitments of both Carey and Clay, finding suspect motives through the American System’s productive dependence on and placation of the plantation economy. In contrast, Beverly Tomek (2011) finds a genuine if moderate anti-slavery motive infused in the American System by colonization. While acknowledging the complications highlighted by Shankman, it is a contention of this article that colonization reflects a serious political commitment by Clay and Carey to disengage the American System from plantation slavery after the nullification crisis, meaning Tomek’s argument is essentially correct. The adoption of the same colonizationist position by anti-slavery and economic Whig northerners such as Lincoln suggests a further weakness in the implied necessity of slavery to the American System’s raw materials strategy as well as a serious, if mistaken, belief in the political efficacy of black resettlement.

negroes,” which could harbor escapees, all functioned to reduce the enforcement liability of the slaveowner by transferring it onto “the non-slaveholding free population.”⁴ Despite its own high transport costs, colonization would mitigate the paradoxically increased enforcement expenses of maintaining slavery as it was gradually phased from existence by manumission and compensation to slaveowners.

Clay (1847) recognized as much in a prominent speech on the Mexican War, calling gradual emancipation the only means “that would ultimately eradicate this evil” of slavery, though it came about from a program that was “totally different from the immediate abolition [of slavery] for which the party of the Abolitionists of the present day contend.” Colonization in turn facilitated this peaceful retreat from slavery because it “obviated one of the greatest objections which was made to gradual emancipation,” that being the “continuance of the emancipated slaves among us.” As it was not always “safe, practical, or possible” to immediately repair “the infliction of a previous injustice,” a measured, coordinated implementation of Clay’s Whig formula might facilitate a practical alternative to the violent upheaval of abolition.

By implicit yet readily apparent extension, black resettlement would also obviate the political burdens of sustaining the rights of the freedmen in an openly hostile post-slavery society. It accordingly became its own solution to the uncertainties and expected costs of emancipation. The paternalistic undertones of this solution also carried a genuinely believed “civilizing” promise for blacks abroad, and one that synchronized with an ever-expanding American sphere of influence in the world as its “African children” established societies of their own with federal and philanthropic support. As a matter of political expression for Clay, who co-founded the ACS in 1816 and assumed its presidency upon the death of James Madison in 1836, colonization became as much a constant of his politics as tariffs, internal improvements, or any other feature of the American System during his lengthy presence on the national stage.⁵

Colonization had its doubters, and initially Mathew Carey ranked among them. He also professed a natural aversion to slavery, though one closely couched in its threat to the national identity his economic theories set out to foster. He demurred on the idea of colonization for most of the 1820s, believing it to be prohibitively expensive. Enlisting demographic data and rudimentary statistical attempts to model transportation capabilities, he made a surprisingly rapid about-face in 1828, quickly becoming one of the ACS’s major financial benefactors (Tomek 2011, pp. 84–86).

Carey’s conversion stems from the nullification crisis, and more specifically the course of his own counter-argument, developed in response to a pamphlet by South Carolinian Robert James Turnbull (1827). A States’ Rights radical, Turnbull built an influential early case for nullification in the Charleston *Mercury* by positing an emerging alliance between the tariff interests and colonization to subvert slavery:

⁴For an extended discussion of the political economy of slave enforcement, see Hummel (1996, pp. 47–56).

⁵As Robert E. May (2013, p. 79) notes, “Clay genuinely believed that colonization offered Americans the most promising route to ending their country’s curse of human bondage.... To Clay, the most serious obstacle to accomplishing abolition was a worry by southern whites that emancipation would leave a high proportion of free African Americans in their states. He hoped, therefore, that the emigration abroad of free blacks would reduce those percentages” to the point that statewide emancipation programs could be enacted.

[T]heir whole policy seems to be, first, to entice from the Southern planter his slaves; secondly, to emancipate them after they are enticed, by means of their Societies or their laws; and, thirdly, to get rid of them, not at their own entire expense, but at the expense also of the South, by a system called the “American system,” and in the same manner as they would encourage their manufactures. (Turnbull 1827, Letter No. 27)

By 1832 Carey might have readily conceded the point. Nullification was no simple tariff battle. It also offered parallel strikes against internal improvements and the colonization society.⁶ In casting its lot with British-inspired free trade and politically entrenching itself for expansion, slavery had become a threat to the national unity on which Carey’s system depended. An emerging home industry, a defensive exclusion of European influence, and the building up of a homogenous American identity all contributed to this unity, and colonization was a natural extension to free it of its greatest disunionist threat. As Beverly Tomek (2011, pp. 66, 84) has noted, colonization was “the only solution that accorded well” with his personal distaste for slavery and his broader vision of a national economic identity. That identity held no particular ill will toward African-Americans, but neither did it credit them with anything more than a presence deemed irreconcilable with the white free-labor majority.

Carey (1828) saw only danger in the rapid “increase of the coloured population of the United States.” Colonization offered “efficient measures of prevention” to this trend insofar as it would simultaneously “provide a comfortable home” for the slaves and “civiliz[ing]” effects upon Africa, and deliver a “harvest of blessings to the United States,” freed of slavery’s distracting intrusions. Thus colonization, to Carey, took on a stature parallel to any “great undertaking,” a project he described approvingly alongside the Erie Canal and the “system of internal improvement.” He came to believe that these policies offered a corrective to an injustice caused by empowered but minority interests—the slaveholders of the South and the merchants of the British trade—who, by reason of the slave system’s presence, rebuffed the broader “national” interest of their better instincts, namely the American System. Treating colonization as the cure, Carey observed the ACS was “most violently opposed” by “those who would be most benefitted by it.” Thus in 1829, in an anonymous letter to the ACS’s *African Repository* printed under his familiar moniker “Hamilton,” he announced an intention to “obviate objections” to the colonization enterprise and “arouse the country” with a sustained assault on the economic viability of slavery. “While Southern produce commanded ready markets and high prices, slave labour, employed in agriculture, though not as productive as the labour of freemen, was still profitable. But at the present prices of flour, corn, tobacco &c. the labour of slaves is, in general, not more than equal to their maintenance” (Carey 1829).

Free labor, attained by colonizing the former slaves, would end not only “an extensive and inveterate evil,” but also unprofitable, inferior, and most of all dependent forms of agriculture. In this sense, the classical Smithian critique of slavery on efficiency grounds also found room in a Careyite system. That which dragged down the individual plantation also burdened the symbiotic place for agricultural raw materials in the nation’s industrial output.

⁶Note Carey’s (1832a) appropriation of Turnbull’s title “The Crisis” to frame his retort.

This economic turn is not to say that either Clay or Carey avoided all moral aspects of slavery. They simply sought to address them from a gradualist political ground between one irreconcilable extreme that regarded slavery as a “blessing” and another that advocated “immediate, unconditional, and indiscriminate emancipation.” An integrated national identity, economically self-sustaining, became their answer to this discord. Colonization contributed to this cause insofar as it “would tend to accelerate the duplication of the European race” in the place of those colonized and eventually, though Clay (1827) tread more carefully upon this implication, supplant the slave labor system. With colonization complete, the ethnically and culturally homogenous white remainder would form the basis of the free-labor economy of an internally self-sufficient and strategically expanding United States.⁷

As nullification made the tariff politically uncertain at the national level, from the early 1830s onward Clay refocused the legislative front of the American System onto a federal land distribution bill wherein western land-sale proceeds would be placed in state-level accounts for “education, internal improvements, and colonization, all great and beneficent objects, and all national in their nature.” These three policies were meant to operate simultaneously, and, with an anticipated revenue stream from federal land sales, “colonization would come in for its due share” (Clay 1832a, p. 83; Clay 1836).

It bears note that in a movement of eclectic interests, colonization acquired a fluid reputation outside of Clay or Carey’s formulation. The national office of the ACS spent much of its early existence catering to divergent parties, even sacrificing its reputation in abolitionist circles by dodging the slavery question directly to avoid offending southern constituents (Tomek 2011, ch. 6). As the broader movement matured the colonizationists of the American System variety infused a distinctively economic character to their advocacy, also reflecting an era when mass migratory movements were seen as a conscious feature of economic development.⁸

Carey assumed the familiar role of pamphleteer, spending the last decade of his life steering public opinion toward colonization. He authored and financed two stand-alone publications on the subject and a number of shorter articles and letters (Carey 1832b and 1832c). The socio-economic effects of black population growth, and with it the anticipated rise in racial discord, dominated Carey’s colonization writings. He attributed the increasingly oppressive nature of the slave system to its changing demography, wherein black population growth now outpaced that of the white population in many southern states—a trend he cited with “the most serious alarm” and likened to a brewing storm before the bloody upheavals that preceded and secured Haiti’s independence (Carey 1832c, p. 4).

Colonization became the mechanism by which Carey countered the inflammatory albeit earnestly expressed fear of slave revolts. Yet in keeping with his philosophical commitment to interest group harmonization, he did not entirely neglect the stake that

⁷As Clay (1829, pp. 10, 21–22) argued, “The superior qualities which have been attributed to free labor will ensure for that the preference, wherever the alternative is presented of engaging free or slave labor, at an equal price.”

⁸Antebellum economic analysis frequently utilized migration demography as a primary metric of national economic performance. See, e.g., Blodget (1806, nA). For a recent study of the complex role of colonization in early American economic and state development, see Ericson (2011, app. B and C).

African-Americans would have in any such scheme. In leaving a country indisposed to permit their free exercise of even basic economic and political rights, African-Americans could search out abroad and attain “the luxury of freedom with all its attendant blessings.” Colonization thus “rescue[d] the free coloured people from the disqualifications, the degradation, the proscription to which they are exposed in the United States,” while also “avert[ing] the dangers of a dreadful collision at a future day of the two castes” in which African-Americans were likely to bear the brunt of the violence. Colonization was also “civilizing” to Carey (1832b, pp. 5–6)—a means of extending western industry, law, and culture to Africa by way of an American-born pioneering class, and with it an example of black self-government to emulate.

Though never quite attaining its desired level of support from the federal government, colonization remained a visible part of the political landscape until the Civil War, finding a home among the American System adherents in the new Republican Party. Mathew Carey’s more famous son Henry C. Carey—Philadelphia’s “Ajax of Protection”—perhaps expectedly included room for colonization in his own economics even as he did not match his father’s activism for the scheme.⁹ The younger Carey (1853, pp. 391–394) saw protectionism itself—a fosterer of “material, moral, and intellectual improvement”—as the ruin of the slave system. “Cheap food and slavery go together,” and, sustained by free trade, slavery artificially lowered the cost of feeding the massive labor forces required for the plantation system. The raw-material dependency that created internal discord within Mathew’s thought was therefore its own answer to Henry. Insulated by the tariff, a predicted corrective would occur as higher prices restored agriculture production to its “natural” level, free of British distortion.¹⁰

Henry echoed his father’s use of colonization as a means of introducing economic harmonization into a system disposed to division under slavery. As his argument went, “African colonization has been opposed by many who fail to see that when men remain at peace and permit wealth to grow, the great laws of nature invariably triumph over the weak and pitiful inventions of man.” Colonization thus offered an alternative to rashly enacted and immediatist abolition, “result how it may.” Though he avoided the particulars of its execution, he saw internal consistency in its design: “slavery came with poverty, and that freedom comes with growing wealth and population; that ... the latter are companions of peaceful and quiet action” to be attained by gradually separating the slaveholder from his human property. The interests to all parties, he concluded, echoing a familiar American System theme, would be brought “in perfect harmony with each other” (Carey 1848, p. 350).¹¹

Where the United States could peaceably shed slavery, Liberia would gain from a conscious and progressive colonization investment: to “raise the value of man in Africa,” to give him “machinery, to bring the artisan to his door, to build towns, to have schools, and to make roads” (Carey 1853, p. 299). By this design, the tariffs, canals, public education, and other “great works” of a national character included in the sweeping

⁹Henry Carey’s principal biographer identifies him as a latecomer to colonization—perhaps as late as 1848—and his published works allude to it only twice, though both approvingly. See Smith (1951, p. 30).

¹⁰For an evaluation of Carey’s arguments connecting tariffs and the abolition of slavery, see Meardon (2011, p. 313).

¹¹This argument broadly parallels Carey (1852).

reaches of the American System could quite literally be replicated abroad with similar promised results.

III. LINCOLN'S COLONIZATION AND THE AMERICAN SYSTEM LENS

In 1836 a young state legislator named Abraham Lincoln announced his re-election bid to the *Sangamo Journal*, declaring, "I go for distributing the proceeds of the sales of the public lands to the several states, to enable our state, in common with others, to dig canals and construct rail roads, without borrowing money and paying interest on it" (Basler et al. 1953 [hereinafter cited as *CW*], vol. 1, p. 48). Lincoln elaborated on this position at a debate a few weeks later, speaking on the "land bill" with such mastery that he dismantled the argument of an opponent "and left him to contend with the chilling waters and merciless waves" (*CW*, vol. 1, p. 50). While no copy of Lincoln's remarks survives, his platform was built around Clay's then-pending land distribution bill, the tripartite American System measure to finance education, internal improvements, and colonization.

Many of Lincoln's earliest known political acts connected him to Clay. His first bid for office in 1832 was on an "internal improvements" platform and he soon adopted the protectionist tariff (*CW*, vol. 1, p. 5). He organized a Springfield Henry Clay Club in 1842 and served as an elector for Clay's failed presidential bid in 1844. As Lincoln recounted shortly before his own elevation to the presidency, "I was an old Henry Clay tariff whig. In old times I made more speeches on that subject, than on any other" (*CW*, vol. 3, p. 487).¹²

It is not known when Lincoln first incorporated colonization into his political repertoire. If the 1836 land bill suggests an early affinity, he was almost certainly a supporter by the mid-1840s. At some point Lincoln made a "pilgrimage" to Lexington, Kentucky "in order that he may hear the voice, grasp the hand, and look in the magnetic eyes of his adored leader" Henry Clay. Journalist Noah Brooks (1895, p. 100) dated this event to about 1846, though the story is sufficiently vague as to preclude greater precision. As Brooks continues, "Clay's speech was on the subject of colonizing Africa with emancipated American slaves." The encounter left a decidedly underwhelming mark on Lincoln, though not for its content but for Clay's delivery. The speech "was written out and was read in a cold manner, very unlike what Lincoln had expected of the fiery and impetuous Kentucky orator," and though the senator extended Lincoln an invitation to dine at his Ashland estate, Clay conducted himself in a "proud, distant, and haughty" manner, seeing his Illinois visitor as something of an adoring frontier "clodhopper."

In 1847 Lincoln traveled through Lexington again en route to Washington for his single term in Congress, placing him in the audience for Clay's aforementioned address on the Mexican War in which he articulated the underlying logic of the Whig formula. The encounter was decidedly more cordial, with Lincoln favorably referencing it many

¹²Though it is largely limited to the 1860 campaign, the primary historical work on Lincoln and the tariff is Luthin (1944).

years later. Clay (1847) focused upon the conflict's reanimation of the territorial question before concluding with a nod to the ACS for its "scheme of unmixed benevolence," now lamentably "without scarcely any aid from government." To this end, though without its intended results, the 30th Congress in which Lincoln sat gave renewed consideration to a flurry of colonization funding proposals.¹³

It was the occasion of Clay's death, however, at which Lincoln aligned himself most directly with colonization. On July 6, 1852, Lincoln delivered a lengthy eulogy in the Illinois statehouse, using the occasion to effusively commemorate Clay's colonization work, "one of the most cherished objects of his direct care and consideration; and the association of his name with it has probably been its very greatest collateral support." Here his enthusiasm for the scheme was unequivocal:

Every succeeding year has added strength to the hope of its realization. May it indeed be realized!... If as the friends of colonization hope, the present and coming generations of our countrymen shall by any means, succeed in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery; and, at the same time, in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land, with bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither races nor individuals shall have suffered by the change, it will indeed be a glorious consummation. (*CW*, vol. 2, p. 132)

This would be the first of many instances where Lincoln endorsed colonization on Clay's terms. Insofar as Clay functioned as a political disseminator of the like-minded Mathew Carey, Lincoln also picked up the pamphleteer's arguments, even as the extent of his direct familiarity with Carey's work is uncertain.¹⁴ The theme of national economic harmonization played prominently with all three men when espousing the scheme.

Given the thorough 1852 endorsement, it is something of a peculiarity of the Civil War literature that the sincerity of Lincoln's support for colonization, including whether he abandoned the scheme or even truly believed in it at all, is a heavily contested proposition. The question of what colonization actually meant to Lincoln has become a secondary consideration, and its intellectual underpinnings are rarely raised save to echo Clay, or an earlier connection to Thomas Jefferson (Gutzman 2007). To the contrary, a number of prominent historians have built something of a cottage industry in exculpating Lincoln from his attachment to a scheme with such heavy racial baggage, thereby rendering moot the need for a deeper scholarly probing of its connection to Lincolnian political economy.¹⁵ It is not the purpose of the present article to retread the particulars of this debate. Historians would nonetheless benefit from taking Lincoln at his word on colonization, as his speeches and actions on the subject over the

¹³Lincoln's single term is noted for its paucity of records, though it coincided with several colonization voice votes and a meeting of the ACS under Clay's direction in the House chamber. See "Thirty First Anniversary of the American Colonization Society," *National Intelligencer*, January 18, 1848.

¹⁴According to William Herndon, Lincoln "more or less peeped into ... Carey's political economy," though without specifying whether this meant the father Mathew or son Henry. See Bray (2007).

¹⁵The main exculpatory arguments fall into two camps. The first asserts that Lincoln offered the policy as only a "lullaby" to ease the process of emancipation before a racially unenlightened public. The second supposes that Lincoln "evolved" beyond colonization and ultimately shed the policy during the war. For a historiographical survey and critique of these views, see Magness (forthcoming).

decade after the 1852 eulogy evince both a strong intellectual debt to Clay and—with a few consistent adjustments—a continuation of his distinct brand of colonization, infused with and complementary to his adoption of American System economics.

In July 1853 Rev. James Mitchell, the northwestern regional agent of the ACS, traveled to Springfield to set up an auxiliary colonization society in Illinois. Mitchell made an acquaintance with Lincoln, already known as a colonizationist. The future president attended a meeting of the nascent state organization on July 7, later becoming one of its managers and at least twice addressing the organization. He also officially joined the ACS in 1856, submitting a subscription through Rev. James Finley during another recruiting visit to Springfield.¹⁶

Of these many potentially revealing interactions, only one—a speech to the Illinois Colonization Society on January 4, 1855—left more than passing documentation. The outline suggests he spoke about the founding of the ACS, emphasizing “[i]ts colateral objects—Suppression of Slave trade—commerce—civilization and religion” (CW, vol. 2, p. 299). A reporter indicated that Lincoln and another speaker “expressed themselves favorable” to the larger colonization project. Other accounts were political in nature and connected the speech to Lincoln’s then-pending candidacy for United States senator, due to come before the legislature in a few days’ time. By one account he “labored very ingeniously against occupying a position obnoxious to the favor of anybody,” perhaps reflecting colonization’s politically moderate reputation. A Democratic paper denounced him as “lost in the mazes of fusion.”¹⁷

A closer look at the Illinois legislature provides another largely unnoticed context. Lincoln’s speech came up contemporaneously with a pending bill to fund a state colonization agency. Stephen T. Logan, Lincoln’s old law partner and Senate campaign manager, was among the legislators simultaneously guiding the bill and made the motion to reserve the House chamber for Lincoln’s remarks.¹⁸ Mitchell attests as much in a written account: “[H]e boldly placed himself on the record at the request of a number of gentlemen in Illinois and Indiana, who wished to secure the legislative action of his state on this subject. At our request he addressed the Legislature and became the bold exponent of our views, though censured for it by some of his political friends” (Mitchell 1865). Mitchell (1865) also placed Lincoln at a Colonization Society meeting a few months prior where the bill was drafted. As one of the papers reported, the speech likely cost him some immediatist abolitionist support for the Senate. He narrowly missed a majority on an early ballot before releasing his backers to Lyman Trumbull in order to block the Democrats (Pinkser 1993).

¹⁶Though infrequently covered in the biographical literature, newspaper and archival attestations of Lincoln’s early colonization activities may be found in: “Colonization,” *Daily Illinois State Register*, July 8, 1853; James Mitchell, “To the Friends of Colonization” (handbill), July 7, 1853; James Mitchell (interview), “Lincoln and the Negro,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, August 26, 1894; “Colonization,” *Springfield Daily Register*, August 30, 1853; “Colonization,” *Daily Illinois State Register*, January 12, 1854; “State Colonization Society,” *Springfield Journal*, January 28, 1857; James Finley to Ralph R. Gurley, August 14, 1856, Letters Received, American Colonization Society Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷Coverage of Lincoln’s 1855 colonization speech appears in “Letter from the Capitol,” *Alton Telegraph*, January 8, 1855; *Chicago Press*, January 8, 1855; *Springfield Daily Register*, January 10, 1855.

¹⁸See *Illinois Journal* (1855, pp. 8, 20–21, 24) and *Illinois Reports* (1855, pp. 297–326); “Illinois Legislature Debate” and “Proceedings of the Illinois Legislature,” *Alton Weekly Courier*, January 11, 1855.

Lincoln espoused colonization again in his famous Peoria speech on October 16, 1854. “My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia,—to their own native land,” he remarked, though he also cautioned against its “sudden execution” on practical grounds. “If they were all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days; and there are not surplus shipping and surplus money enough in the world to carry them there in many times ten days” (*CW*, vol. 2, p. 255). Given the exculpatory thrust of the Lincoln literature, this apparent moment of wavering has fostered multiple searches for a deeper esoteric meaning in his choice of words—a hint that Lincoln did not really believe what he asserted as his “first impulse,” that he saw its impracticality, or perhaps he even intended to “instruct” his audience in reasoning through the problem of slavery by way of deconstructing its proposed solutions.¹⁹

A more likely explanation is that Lincoln was grappling with a challenge to the ACS of distinctly economic character. By the mid-nineteenth century, the American System’s theory of trade in goods was almost singularly obsessed with the costs of transportation. This took the form of so-called “vicinage” theory: the use of tariffs to divert trade to closer locales, all serviced by canals and railroads to eliminate distance and expedite delivery.²⁰ As lengthy transport distances constituted “waste,” while also depriving urban industrial locales of the vicinity-induced benefits of a shared geography with their suppliers, vicinage became a primary American System critique of free trade.²¹

Lincoln subscribed wholeheartedly to the vicinage doctrine and elaborated upon it in one of his few surviving early tariff speeches. Excess transportation costs, including “all carrying, & incidents of carrying” goods, fell into the category of “useless labour.” To illustrate his point Lincoln described a scenario in which a Pennsylvania iron-maker faces English competition for the business of a neighboring Pennsylvania flour mill. If the trade goes to England, the flour maker must haul his product to port. “[T]hen a merchant there takes a little more for storage and forwarding commission, and another takes a little more for insurance; and then the ship-owner carries it across the water, and takes a little more of it for his trouble; still before it reaches [England] it is tolled two or three times more....” This labor, Lincoln concluded, was “utterly useless,” its “ruinous effects ... all little less than self evident” (*CW*, vol. 1, pp. 409–410).

Could Lincoln’s aversion to transportation costs have similarly extended to colonization in Liberia? He repeated the transport critique during his famous 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas. In an 1859 speech at Leavenworth, Kansas, he similarly remarked, “All the rest of your property would not pay for sending [the freed slaves] to Liberia,” suggesting cost-consciousness loomed large in his evaluation (*CW*, vol. 3, pp. 15, 499). Yet Lincoln had not turned against colonization on this account. In 1857 he answered *Dred Scott* with a renewed call for voluntary resettlement, lamenting how “no political party, as such, is now doing anything directly for colonization.

¹⁹For examples, see Burt (2013, p. 353), and Morel (2011, pp. 188–190).

²⁰Classic versions of the vicinage principle appear in Carey (1858, ch. X; 1852, pp. 92, 202–203, 206–207).

²¹For a more thorough discussion of the perceived benefits offered by the American System’s theories of agricultural geography, see Ariel Ron’s contribution in the present issue.

Party operations at present only favor or retard colonization incidentally.” Deeming the enterprise “a difficult one,” he repeated the maxim “when there is a will there is a way” before concluding “what colonization needs most is a hearty will.” Lincoln next echoed the old American System theme of aligning “natural” interests through the mechanisms of colonization: “Will springs from the two elements of moral sense and self-interest. Let us be brought to believe it is morally right, and, at the same time, favorable to, or, at least, not against, our interest, to transfer the African to his native clime, and we shall find a way to do it, however great the task may be” (CW, vol. 2, p. 409). Here and on at least three other occasions he again enlisted Clay to support the scheme (CW, vol. 2, p. 544; CW, vol. 3, pp. 93, 233–234).

Lincoln offered a solution to the transport problem during his presidency, echoing a similar turn among colonizationists in Congress. Colonization “may involve the acquiring of territory,” he noted in December 1861, presumably beyond Africa alone (CW, vol. 4, p. 48). Liberia, he pointed out in 1862, was a success “in a certain sense” but no longer the thrust of his colonization plans. In its stead Lincoln envisioned a closer locale with greater economic significance: “The place I am thinking about having for a colony is in Central America. It is nearer to us than Liberia—not much more than one-fourth as far as Liberia, and within seven days’ run by steamers. Unlike Liberia it is on a great line of travel—it is a highway” (CW, vol. 5, p. 373).²² Though Lincoln did not abandon Liberia or the ACS entirely, the thrust of his energy was in the Americas for each of the schemes he subsequently pursued: the Chiriqui region of Panama, British Honduras, Guiana, Dutch Suriname, and Haiti.²³

The occasion of Lincoln’s remarks bears mention, as they appeared in a rather notorious address to a delegation of free African-Americans on August 14, 1862. Lincoln arranged the event through the auspices of his old colonization associate James Mitchell, now brought to Washington to oversee the administration’s efforts. It took the form of a highly patronizing lecture in which Lincoln urged colonization upon the delegates as a means of remedying the Civil War itself. This charged message has unsurprisingly attained an exceedingly poor reputation. James Oakes (2007, p. 194) calls it a “low point in his presidency,” and Mark Neely (2009, p. 54) describes it as a case of “political ineptitude.” Others excuse its significance, as with James M. McPherson’s (2009, p. 128) deeming it a prime example of the hypothesized “lullaby” to warm racist white voters to emancipation, despite the speech’s black audience.²⁴ The August 1862 remarks accordingly remain something of an outlier in Lincoln’s corpus, dismissed and derided but seldom taken as a serious representation of his colonizationist beliefs, let alone his broader economic vision.

But why not take them seriously? The speech contains perhaps the fullest surviving example of Lincoln’s own brand of colonization at near-maturity. With transportation resolved in a closer geography, Lincoln set out to cast the venture as one of distinctively harmonized, if separate, interests. “We have been mistaken all our lives if we do not know whites as well as blacks look to their self-interest,” he insisted. To this end

²²An Interior Department report similarly stressed “the expense of colonizing at Liberia would be greater than at any point named.” See Senate Executive Document No. 55, Ser. 1238, 39th Cong., 1st session, 7.

²³For a discussion of Lincoln’s shift away from Liberia, see Magness (2012).

²⁴For one notable diverging appraisal, see Masur (2010). For the context of the speech and its related Panama scheme, see Page (2011).

Lincoln promised new economic opportunity around a strategically located isthmian coaling station. He even hinted that the colony would be the starting point for an eventual Panama Canal—"a great highway from the Atlantic or Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean"—and with its shipping link to California, arguably the largest internal improvement project ever attempted (*CW*, vol. 5, pp. 370–375).

Like Clay and Carey, Lincoln also saw great discord in a racially divided nation due to a prevailing "unwillingness on the part of our people, harsh as it may be, for you free colored people to remain with us." He continues in admittedly grating terms: "But for your race among us there could not be war, although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other. Nevertheless, I repeat, without the institution of Slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence" (*CW*, vol. 5, p. 372). Thus the speech's most notorious passage nonetheless echoes Clay, labeling the war a manifestation of the disharmonizing effects of slavery that colonization purported to correct.

When Lincoln returned to colonization in his annual message to Congress on December 1, 1862, he similarly tackled its labor implications in terms that directly reflect an American System influence. "Emancipation, even without deportation, would probably enhance the wages of white labor, and very surely would not reduce them" as it did nothing to disrupt a numerical status quo. Any colonization beyond that would function to the advantage of the white laborer at home and presumably the black laborer abroad, freed from political discrimination. The mathematics, he contented in a passage that might easily find a home in one of the Carey's labor tracts, were directly disposed to increased wages:

With deportation, even to a limited extent, enhanced wages to white labor is mathematically certain. Labor is like any other commodity in the market—increase the demand for it and you increase the price of it. Reduce the supply of black labor by colonizing the black laborer out of the country, and by precisely so much you increase the demand for and wages of white labor. (*CW*, vol. 5, p. 535)

In advancing colonization, it seems, Lincoln was distinctly aware of its economic resonance.

Lincoln's motives may merit criticism for their short-sightedness, their racial pessimism, and the unavoidable tinge of paternalism that lurks around even the most benign expressions of concern for the future of African-Americans. The voluntary nature of colonization ironically affirmed black agency in the decision to leave while effectively denying the same in considering its propriety. Yet as an economic idea and system of social relation—since to Clay, Carey, and Lincoln they operated in the same realm—colonization found a peculiar if certain place in the American System. It was a specific component of a comprehensive and almost formulaic strategy to rectify the problem of slavery, purporting if not always living up to the claim of mutual benefit for those involved.

Resituated as an economic idea, it becomes easier to follow the interconnected transmission of colonization as an idea and why Lincoln's secretary of the navy, Gideon Welles (1877, p. 439), recounted that colonization and emancipation "were, in his mind, indispensably and indissolubly connected." Lincoln's colonization ventures exhibited a direct intellectual continuity from Clay even as his presidency yielded only emancipation, its forays into black resettlement—both certain and sincerely offered—having all foundered in execution.

Yet it is the persistence of the colonizationist idea in Lincoln's thought even amidst adversity—he personally resurrected it from political hostility in his own administration and party on numerous occasions—that finds explanation in its American System underpinnings. From the founding of the ACS to the Civil War, the policy of colonization was invariably complex, tied to massive allocations of public resources, and contingent upon a near-meticulous coordination of political actors and private parties alike. Like so much of the American System's domestic policies, its execution was predicated upon a specific, structured, and national design. It laid out a clear prescriptive formula for peaceably expunging slavery and thereby "harmonizing" the national economy in the absence of its discord.

Colonization also hearkened back to the original hemispheric projections of Clay's economic vision, with Lincoln effectively promulgating vicinage-induced American footprints in the Caribbean even as Clay's own prior investment in Liberia had constrained his scheme to impractical distances. Perhaps the colonizationist "path not taken" was never to be, given its own internal limitations. But the economic worldview that adopted and sustained it exerted more than a passing influence upon the national struggle over slavery, and the particulars of its colonizationist forays represent a certain, if flawed, moral extension beyond the American System's traditional and limited conceptualization as a mechanism for projecting national economic clout.

The American System's particulars of tariffs, transportation improvements, and free labor have long been acknowledged as features of Lincoln's political economy, though they often appear with limited discernible interaction with his more prominent emancipation legacy. Much as it had for Carey and Clay, the moderate and flawed gradualist policy of colonization linked Lincoln's political economy to his broader moral engagement with slavery. Still, attesting to the neglected and distorted state heretofore existing around this subject, the primary scholarly assessment of Lincoln's economic thought to date permits little room for this connection. Its author, Gabor Boritt (1978, p. 258), declares that "colonization ran contrary to major elements of his economic persuasion." Quite the contrary, colonization was a central tenet of the very same.

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