**Howell Keiser**

PhD Candidate

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**Biography:**

Howell Keiser is a PhD candidate at Louisiana State University. He has served as the John L. Nau III Library Fellow at the University of Virginia, the T. Harry Williams Fellow at LSU, the William Gilmore Simms Research Fellow at the University of South Carolina, and the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture. He has published reviews for the *Civil War Book Review* and *The Alabama Review*, and contributed to the *Emerging Civil War* series. His current dissertation—tentatively titled, “The Dismal Science of Union: Pro-slavery Malthusianism and the Coming Civil War”—explores the ways proslavery intellectuals selectively utilized Malthusian theory to defend slavery and ultimately foment rebellion.

**Dissertation Abstract:**

It has been said that slaveholding Southerners consumed Malthusian and Ricardian economics in a “fit of ideological inebriation and applied it everywhere.” But how did the consumption of these dismal political economic theories shape proslavery thought and the coming Civil War? This dissertation project answers this question by charting an intellectual history of Civil War causation; it emphasizes the theoretical dimensions of proslavery political economy and the ways in which the South’s slaveholding and intellectual elite selectively utilized the theories of Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo to defend slavery and foment rebellion. Malthusianism had a long-standing intellectual tradition in the United States by the antebellum period. A preventative check to Malthus’s population dilemma became the safety valve of the West. Slaveholders, however, modified this premise, adding slavery to the list of preventative checks. Southern expansion, the perpetuation of slavery, and the various socio-political benefits slaveholders associated with this schema became the foundation of proslavery Malthusianism. At odds with the economic, demographic, and political developments taking place in Northern society and the United States writ large, slaveholders pursued an alternative vision of statehood premised on the logic of population control. For the proslavery elite, the laws of economics and population were immutable, and compromise thus proved impossible.