

## FAULKNER'S YOKNAPATAWPHA AND THE SOUTHERN HISTORY NARRATIVES

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### I

#### Faulkner's Fiction and Southern History

It may seem odd that a member of the historians' guild would choose as his subject for a conference on historiography a novelist and his fiction. It has long been our conceit that history is based on fact; that fiction, because it deliberately sacrifices accuracy and thoroughness to drama, is not to be trusted, no matter how vivid the historical setting. To our despair, we lament that much of popular history seeps into the minds of an unwitting public through fictional representations of history. Against a mountain of scholarly journals, books, conference papers, and courses on the history of the American South, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, has arguably done far more to shape popular understanding, or misunderstanding, of the South and its past. Perhaps the same might have been said, not long ago, of Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman*, and the movie version, *Birth of a Nation*.

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels and short stories, though required reading in colleges and high schools across America, may not have quite the same impact on popular historical imagination, but his work represents one of the richest troves of historically authentic fiction in American literature. The Yoknapatawpha stories span more than a century and a half of history, from c1800 to the 1950s, and they center on one particular place, Lafayette County, Mississippi; a place whose landscape, people, events, and history all bear strong resemblance to those of his imaginary place. What makes the Yoknapatawpha

saga *historical* is not just that each story is deliberately set in the past; Faulkner also took great care to develop a continuing cast of characters, families, landmarks, and folklore and to envelope all in a process of change over time. Without knowing anything about the actual history of the place the Yoknapatawpha stories parallel, readers of Faulkner cannot help but be impressed with the realism of his rendering. Nearly every page in some way documents the details of ordinary life, above all the speech, its idioms and dialects, but also the dress, the manners, work, leisure, food, and countless other folk customs. "The land, the people, and their history," Robert Penn Warren wrote, " - they come to us at a realistic level, at the level of recognition."<sup>1</sup>

Faulkner's authority as a guide to Southern history is by no means unimpeachable. He was careless with facts, blind to many issues, and wedded to several old shibboleths about the South, and blacks, in particular. But beyond using his fiction to document his observations of his people and their land, Faulkner was also at work probing the South's past and raising disturbing questions about it, at times challenging some of the fundamental premises on which Southern whites had built their society. He seemed intent on subverting much of the romanticism and self-serving justifications of Southern history as it had been formulated in popular narratives, novels, and film, and also as it had been embedded in school text books and scholarly journals since the Civil War. In many ways he anticipated and, in cases, inspired the revision of Southern history that was to be carried out by historians before and during the Civil Rights movement. C. Vann Woodward credits Faulkner, among other writers of the Southern renaissance, for leading the attack on the stubborn myths that enshrouded the region's past and, thereby, helping clear the way for historians, like himself, to take up the task of revising the traditional narratives that had dominated Southern history since Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

But this subversive reading of Southern history, which had inspired the young C. Vann Woodward, was not the one Faulkner's early admirers discovered and presented to the world. After World War II a group of literary

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner" in *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan East Lansing, 1973. p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History*, LSU Press, Baton Rouge, 1986. pp. 109, 145; C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, rev. ed., LSU Press, Baton Rouge, 1968. p. 38. I would argue further that Woodward's "plot" of Southern history, and much of his ironic tone, owes much to Faulkner's inspiration.

critics from quite diverse backgrounds coalesced to rehabilitate Faulkner's reputation and elevate him into the canon as one of the Great American Authors. In the process, they imposed on the complex and ambiguous world of Yoknapatawpha a framework for understanding its historical and sociological contours, one that continues to influence readings of Faulkner. Some, like Malcolm Cowley and Irving Howe, came to Faulkner from the political left, alienated by Stalinism and by ideological excesses of all kinds and eager to locate in Faulkner's exotic South something fundamentally American and original. It was Cowley who led the campaign to rescue Faulkner from literary oblivion by editing the *Portable Faulkner* (1946), a collection of excerpts and short stories designed to present a coherent overview of Yoknapatawpha and its people, packaged to show the historical and thematic unity of Faulkner's many works, and selected in ways that sanitized Yoknapatawpha, cleansing it of macabre violence, incest, miscegenation, and racism.<sup>3</sup>

Others gravitated to the Faulkner rehabilitation project of the Cold War era from the philosophical right, virulent anti-Communists, many of them with links to the Vanderbilt Agrarians, whose manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, of 1930 had defended the South as the last American bastion of traditional culture against the forces of "industrialism" and modernity. Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle, and others joined forces to elevate Faulkner's reputation and, with it, Southern literature and Southern culture. Cleanth Brooks, a second-generation Agrarian, would become, by the early 1960s, the leading critical authority on Faulkner as his fiction became entrenched in college courses across the country.<sup>4</sup>

As they worked to elevate Faulkner's reputation, they also advanced new ways of reading literature. The New Criticism eschewed emphasis on the historical context and biography of the author in favor of focusing on the internal aesthetics of literature as art. The effect was to disembodify Faulkner's fiction from its historical and social sources. Tate, Warren, Brooks and other Faulkner critics taught readers of Faulkner that underlying the gothic grotesque and violence of the Yoknapatawpha story was a moral tale of universal significance. This was not just about the South but about the human condition everywhere. Yoknapatawpha was not to be taken literally as sociology or

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern literary Criticism*, UT Press, Knoxville, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Schwartz, *op.cit.*

history, they admonished; it was a “legend” of the South set in a mythic place with characters whose stories represented universal human predicaments.

At the heart of their interpretation of Faulkner, however, was the Agrarian party line, a version of Southern history which goes something like this: Once upon a time, there was a South whose virtues rested on the closeness to the land and cultivation of the soil. Notwithstanding the injustices of slavery, the gentry of the Old South were families with a strong code of honor and paternalistic duty, a sense of tradition, family loyalty, and courage. The large majority of the Old South, and the heart of this Agrarian society, was the virtuous white yeoman class of farmers, the plain folk of the South, who, without great wealth in land or slaves, and without education, enjoyed a simple folk community of virtue, also bound by values of family honor.

This pristine, pastoral world was shattered, of course, by the Civil War and Reconstruction, and by the external enemies of Southern agrarianism: Yankee soldiers with guns, then carpetbaggers with ballots and laws, followed soon enough by Yankee robber barons whose railroads, banks, and corporations would place the South in colonial dependency and threaten what remained of its traditional agrarian culture. But the real enemies of the Agrarian South came from within, from the Southern proponents of the New South, a new breed of collaborators who brought Yankee materialism, greed, and a general disregard for nature and for the human community. In Faulknerian terms, the plot of Southern history could be summarized in the decline of the Sartoris and Compson families and the ascendance of the Snopeses.

## II

### **Faulkner’s History Reconsidered**

My own reading of Faulkner has been influenced by intensive research on the county where Faulkner lived and the history that nourished his fiction and shaped his view of the world. Many before me have traced the parallels between particular events, people, and places in his imaginary and historical worlds, and that evidence strongly confirms my opinion of Faulkner as a keen observer of his social environment. Faulkner’s understanding of history came through a

variety of sources, mostly oral tradition, passed on from elderly aunts, black servants, old men at the courthouse square, and scholars at the university. Whether Faulkner ever did anything one could describe as research or not (he claimed never), he was surrounded by people with a deep interest in history, and he absorbed his knowledge of the past as he did the very air he breathed.

Wherever he got his knowledge of the past, his interpretation of it came in part from reaction to the romanticism and defensiveness of the prevailing treatments of Southern history. Others of his time were at work embellishing the “moonlight and magnolias” popular imagery of the South or setting down in scholarship and school text books the southern version of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* was published the same year as Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, arguably his greatest novel. Faulkner had promised to “keep the plug hats and hoop skirts” out of his novel, but that was not a recipe for success. While *Gone With the Wind* was selling millions and becoming one of the most popular films of Hollywood history, *Absalom* went out of print.

While Faulkner was himself busy in Hollywood doing screenplays or writing magazine stories (hack work and prostitution he called it) he continued with his serious writing, always hoping for a larger audience, but writing in a style and on subject matter that was generally not aimed at pleasing the crowd. On the contrary, his fictional history of Yoknapatawpha was a disturbing exploration of some of the region’s more discomfiting features.

He went back before the settlement of northern Mississippi by Europeans, to the twilight of the Chickasaws and Choctaws before President Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830 dispossessed them of their tribal lands. Faulkner’s Indians are not innocent children of the forest; they are obese and slovenly, and they can be cruel and heartless. The Indians of Yoknapatawpha have been sadly corrupted by white culture; they covet the material things of the white world, clothing, ornamentation, even an abandoned steamboat, which is dragged through the forest to serve as a palace. They have accumulated African slaves; too many of them in fact, and they do not know what do with them. In one revealing scene the tribal elders gather to ponder the “Negro Question,” and wonder if they should eat the Indians or, instead, adopt the white man’s way, which was to acquire more slaves, to clear more land, to raise more cotton, to buy more slaves, and so on in a cycle of acquisitiveness to gain more money. “What will we do with this money?,” one of them asks, and the question meets with silence. The white men have that answer, of course, and when the Indians

finally accept the white notion of the land itself being a commodity to be bought and sold, they are dispossessed and forced to leave for Oklahoma.

White settlers, already having infiltrated the Chickasaw domain trading clothing, shoes, candy, and whiskey with the Indians, now swarm into Yoknapatawpha to swindle the Indians out of their land, buying up huge parcels and converting the former wilderness, full of game and forests, to plantations. The so-called Old South of legend is no aristocratic, genteel society in Faulkner's vision; it is instead a crude frontier where ambitious men of dubious social origin swindle Indians out of land, clear the forests, break the land, and quickly throw up plantations. There we see Thomas Sutpen, naked and bearded, working alongside his twenty wild black slaves, covered with mud to protect them from the mosquitoes, while they "tear violently" a plantation from the land, hacking lumber from the forests, fabricating brick from the mud, draining the swamps for fields and gardens, and erecting the shell of an imposing mansion that stands for years unpainted, unfurnished, without windows, until another burst of energy prior to his marriage fills the house with the imported trappings of the gentry. It is a South of material greed, ruthless exploitation of human labor and cruel disregard of human rights, and it is a South ravaged by reckless abuse of the land, which, once cleared of vegetation, quickly erodes, washed away or blown away in the dust that pervades the imagery of Yoknapatawpha.

Faulkner may be at his historical best in his treatment of the Civil War, particularly in *The Unvanquished*. Anticipating what only recently emerged as a major focus of Civil War studies, Faulkner saw the war through the eyes of the children, women, and slaves left behind on the home front. The Union soldiers who invade northern Mississippi following Shiloh are cast against type: chivalrous, sympathetic, a little stupid. The civilian morale is weak and at best most seem ambivalent toward the Confederate cause; the novel's protagonists are carrying on a profitable trade with the Yankees. Faulkner also dramatized the Southern bushwhackers, often Confederate deserters and other dissidents who formed gangs that preyed on the women and old people left defenseless on the home front. But more disturbing to prevailing images of the Old South was the rebellion of slaves against their masters and their massive exodus northward to freedom. On first reading, Faulkner seems to be describing a mindless flight of human lemmings who are somehow inspired by the "angel Sherman" who has promised something called freedom if they can get themselves across the

River Jordan. But Faulkner seems to have intended to document some elemental and instinctive human desire for freedom,

reasonless, following and seeking a delusion, a dream . . . one of those impulses inexplicable yet invincible which appear among races of people at intervals and drive them to pick up and leave all security and familiarity of earth and home and start out, they don't know where, emptyhanded, blind to everything but a hope and a doom....<sup>5</sup>

In language that was remarkably similar to Faulkner's scene of slave flight, John Eaton, the Army chaplain in charge of the slave refugee camps in Holly Springs and Grand Junction, Tennessee (the origin of the Freedmen's Bureau) described the exodus to freedom that winter:

Imagine, if you will, a slave population, springing from antecedent barbarism, rising up and leaving its ancient bondage, forsaking its local traditions and all the associations and attractions of the old plantation life, coming garbed in rags or in silks, with feet shod or bleeding, individually or in families and larger groups, - an army of slaves and fugitives, pushing its way irresistibly toward an army of fighting men... The arrival among us of these hordes was like the oncoming of cities. There was no plan in this exodus, no Moses to lead it. Unlettered reason or the mere inarticulate decision of instinct brought them to us."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Faulkner, *The Unvanquished*, reprinted Vintage Books, New York, 1966. p. 92

<sup>6</sup> John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War*, reprint Negro Universities Press, New York, 1969. p. 2.

Faulkner's treatment of Reconstruction (in *The Unvanquished* and *Light in August*), was, in contrast, limited and altogether consonant with the familiar images of the Black Legend: fanatical carpetbaggers taking up the "white man's burden" and imposing equality on people they themselves thought inferior, and the faceless masses of duped freedmen being herded to the polls, and then, of course, the gallant ex-Confederate officers rescuing the county for white rule through violence and terror. All that was missing was the virginal Southern belle fleeing from a rapacious black brute. Though he demonstrated his readiness to probe and subvert some of the most sensitive areas of the Southern myth, Faulkner remained unable or unwilling to attack or even question the main historical prop supporting the regime of white supremacy, which had been justified as an essential remedy to "black domination."

His disinterest in probing the conservative party line on Reconstruction did not prevent him from challenging the meaning of race in his own time. He began that odyssey with *Light in August* (1932), whose protagonist, Joe Christmas, becomes an object of violent racial hatred without anyone, including the reader, ever knowing whether he had any black ancestry, as some, including Joe Christmas himself, suspect. It is that same theme of interracial mixing that becomes the obsession of Ike McCaslin in *Go Down Moses*, as he delves into his family records to reveal the horrible secret that his grandfather had a daughter with a slave woman and then fathered another child with his daughter. Anyone familiar with Joel Williamson's recent examination of what he alleges were the family secrets of Faulkner's own paternal great grandfather (and his maternal grandfather) cannot help but think Faulkner may have been exploring the ambiguous inheritance of guilt and responsibility of a young man for his ancestors' actions and of a white man for what may be his black relatives.<sup>7</sup> Faulkner was also probing the meaning of race in a society that drew sharp social and legal distinctions between races and gave whites the power to transgress and blur those distinctions.

It was not until *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) that Faulkner dared come any closer to denouncing racial injustice. Set in contemporary Mississippi, the story centers on Lucas Beachamp, progeny and heir of old Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin. Beachamp is a proud, dignified, and righteous black man, who is framed for a murder he did not commit and is very nearly lynched by an angry

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.



mob of hill country poor whites. Lucas is rescued by the combined efforts of a young white boy, and his black friend, who uncover the mystery, while an old white woman sits in her rocker at the jailhouse door and by sheer moral righteousness stares down the mob.

This book, and the popular Hollywood movie that followed, helped move Faulkner into what proved a mostly uncomfortable position as a critic of Southern segregation. Now elevated to the role of great American author, and sent on tours of Europe and Asia by the U.S. State Department as part of the cultural Cold War, Faulkner found himself speaking out against racial injustice at home. He was a moderate and a paternalist; he urged Southern whites to do the right thing, to reform their own society before the federal government imposed a second Reconstruction. Faulkner wanted to “speak now against the day” when white Southerners would resist desegregation, and make the inevitable changes more painful.<sup>8</sup>

But his own convictions about race were confused and inconsistent. His difficulty in confronting a concrete social problem and discussing practical solutions were symptomatic not only of his obscure line of thinking about social matters, but also of a deeper ambivalence about race, about the South, and about human capacity for progress. Faulkner saw history as tragedy and he usually cast humans as a sorry mix of pathetic vices and occasional nobility. “Man stinks the same stink no matter where in time,” he once wrote to Malcolm Cowley, trying to puncture his editors romantic enthusiasm for the “Southern legend.” It was his sense of tragedy and the weakness of human nature that made Faulkner such a confused social critic and such a poor spokesman for social reformers. Reformers must believe in social progress, in redemption, in the capacity of humans to do good and to effect improvement in the world. Faulkner instead saw man’s greatest virtue simply as the capacity to endure, to suffer and live on. It was this sense of history as tragedy that ultimately made Faulkner at once a penetrating critic of the South and a captive of its culture.

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<sup>8</sup> John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 1994.

## THE CAREER OF THE MYTH OF SOUTHERN BACKWARDNESS

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During the first half of the 1970s, when the *Sunbelt South* recorded an unprecedented development, the media and public opinion of an industrially declining North engaged in a polemic that a national magazine defined as "The Second War Between the States."<sup>1</sup>

While one would have expected general satisfaction for the brilliant achievements of a region long considered the nation's "economic problem number one," this negative reaction betrayed the existence of a long-dormant psychological attitude toward the South that only its recent, phenomenal growth could explode. Although economic prosperity in the North had happily coexisted for well over a century with the idea of a laggard and stagnant South, it looked like the reverse was unbearable to Northerners. Perhaps unconsciously, the title of that article captured the essence of a historical experience mostly made of opposition, rather than conciliation, between North and South. It also revealed the largely ideological dimension of what at first sight appeared to be a purely economic conflict.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of backwardness pervades a considerable part of Southern history, and has affected historiographic interpretation in such a fashion as to reveal much more than simple desire to ascertain facts of an economic character. From the early decades of the nineteenth century, Northern opinions on the Southern economy became more and more closely intertwined with the issue of black slavery, concurring to shape the image of a peculiarly Southern culture which was seen as increasingly growing apart from the national mainstream. However, the first articulate statements of a "natural" economic superiority of the North with respect to the South can be traced back to the attack on slavery mounted by the abolitionists during the 1830s. Drawing upon their strong evangelical outlook, the latter had

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<sup>1</sup> "The Second War Between the States", *Business Week*, May 17, 1976, pp. 113-14. See also "The War Between the States" and "A Counterattack in the War Between the States", *Business Week*, June 21, 1967, p. 72-75.

<sup>2</sup> The definition *Sunbelt South* was coined in 1969 by Kevin Phillips. Among the historians who participated in the debate about the idea of prosperity it enshrined, George B. Tindall, in his essay included in W.B. Moore, Jr., et al., *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, New York, 1988, argued that the concept of *Sunbelt* had been created by Northern culture, pp. 326-35. The new left historian Kirkpatrick Sale, in *The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenge to the Eastern Establishment*, New York, 1975, hinted at the political/ideological nature of the idea of a Sunbelt South, remarking that its northern boundary was made to coincide with the Missouri Compromise line of old memory.

“socialized” the idea of sin, making slavery a national rather than an exclusively regional or individual problem. Although it was seldom emphasized to the exclusion of others, an economic argument against slavery was usually present in abolitionist literature. For instance, in his *Despotism in America*, Richard Hildreth argued that slavery was detrimental to American economic growth.<sup>3</sup>

Southerners were deemed responsible for the continuation of the peculiar institution, and it seemed quite natural that the evil economic effects of slavery should manifest themselves most unequivocally in the South. On the other hand, this general argument needed further specification, for it was plain that the plantation system based on slave labor generated an enormous amount of wealth from which the whole country benefited greatly. A firmer basis for an economic critique of the slave regime was thus provided by the close association which, during the 1830s, came to be established between the idea of economic development and the relatively new phenomenon of industrialization. The North could provide a reference model to this effect. Accordingly, abolitionists, and other Northerners as well, defined Southern backwardness as the region’s incapacity to industrialize, independently of how wealthy the South really was or the extent to which it actually contributed to national growth and prosperity. Southern economy – so the argument ran – was backward because slavery prevented the creation of a wide free labor market as well as the formation of a consumers class large enough to sustain industrial growth.<sup>4</sup>

In an attempt to defend their region from Northern attacks, Southern polemicists and pamphleteers developed a number of arguments which, paradoxically, often reinforced rather than weakened the image of a backward South. In their efforts to expose the variety of ways in which the North extracted wealth from the South, they set forth a virtual “dependency theory”. For instance, South Carolinian George McDuffie denounced the domination of Southern foreign trade by Northern merchants and estimated an “annual loss of the exporting states by the indirect intercourse of their foreign trade” of over ten million dollars. Robert Hayne and James H. Hammond, two other prominent South Carolinians, joined McDuffie in encouraging planters to diversify their investments and advocated manufacturing as a necessary component of a modern regional economy – thus conveying the impression that they were urging the adoption of a totally new economic course.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anne C. Loveland, “Evangelicalism and Immediate Emancipation”, in *Journal of Social History*, 38, 1966, pp. 172-88; Donald G. Mathews, “The Abolitionists on Slavery: The Critique Behind the Social Movement”, in *Journal of Southern History*, 33, 1967, p. 164, 180-81; William H. and Jane H. Pease (eds.), *The Antislavery Argument*, Indianapolis, 1965; Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse, 1830-1844*, New York, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Mathews, “The Abolitionists on Slavery”, pp. 180-81.

<sup>5</sup> George McDuffie, in *De Bow’s Review*, 4, 1847, pp. 208-25; James H. Hammond, “Progress of Southern Industry”, *ibid.*, 8, 1850, p. 503.

While in the last two decades before the Civil War arguments in favor of economic diversification and manufacturing became the battle cry of a considerable part of the Southern élites, other Southerners, more sensitive to the message of evangelical protestantism, saw slavery as a major obstacle to their own salvation and, like Daniel Goodloe and Hinton Rowan Helper, thought of making their arguments against slavery more convincing by borrowing from northern rhetoric on Southern economic lag. In so doing, they anticipated a major Republican theme according to which, without slavery, the South would enjoy a prosperity similar to that of the North.<sup>6</sup> Helper's work was fundamental in shaping Northern opinion about the state of Southern economy, and was even included in the Republican literature of the 1860 electoral campaign.

The escalation of the North/South debate came, almost of necessity, to entail the definition of the South not only as backward but also as fundamentally adverse to any transformation – in the way of industrialization – that would make it resemble a preexisting Northern model. However, the virulence of attacks like that carried out by abolitionist Theodore Parker, who maintained that the South “is the foe to Northern industry – to our mines, our manufactures, and our commerce ... She is the foe to our institutions,” could only elicit such negative reactions on the part of Southerners as the one penned by George Fitzhugh.<sup>7</sup>

Statements like “manufactories scarcely exist at the South; mechanical industry, distinct from agriculture, has hardly any existence” were almost the order of the day in the Northern press.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the wide popularity enjoyed by Helper's and Fitzhugh's polemical writings as confirmations, penned by Southerners themselves, of the correctness of the abolitionist/Republican interpretation, works showing a different picture of the South were not lacking. Among these, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, published in 1860 by Thomas Kettell, editor of the *Democratic Review* of New York, in which the author endeavored to show that, despite contentions to the contrary, the South was neither poor nor lacking in industrial enterprise. Written in an attempt to avert the outbreak of a fratricidal war, Kettell's book disclosed some important facts about Southern economy, in itself and in comparison to those of the Northeast and the West, that were not likely to please the abolitionists. Basing his analysis on the returns of the 1850 census, Kettell set himself to demonstrate not only that the South had overwhelmingly contributed to Northern – and Western –

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Goodloe, *Inquiry into the Causes that Have Retarded the Accumulation of Wealth and Increase of Population in the Southern States*, New York, 1841; Hinton R. Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*, George Fredrickson (ed.), Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 25, 112, 355-56; Lawrence Shore, *Southern Capitalists: The Ideological Leadership of an Elite, 1832-1885*, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986, chap. 2.

<sup>7</sup> John L. Thomas (ed.), *Slavery Attacked: The Abolitionist Crusade*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965; Susanna Delfino, *George Fitzhugh and the 'New Sociology for the South': A Reappraisal*, in *Annali della Facoltà di Scienze Politiche di Milano*, Milano, 1981, pp. 147-60.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Tribune*, February 13, 1860.

growth, but also that what appeared to him as an excessive “self-glorification of Northern industry” was grounded in merely political motives. An attentive and fair examination of the census figures showed, in fact, that the South was not “so destitute of manufactures as the popular mind has been led to believe.”<sup>9</sup>

Drawing attention to what he described as the “provincial position” of both the South and the West as compared to Northeast of the country, Kettell fashioned his argument rather around comparison between Southern and Western manufacturing. The method of his analysis directly hit the core of the major issue under debate, i.e., the relative performance in manufacturing between a free labor society and one making ample use of slaves. Along this line, Kettell showed that both the per capita product of Southern manufactures and the number of hands employed were similar to those recorded by the Western states and that, during the 1840s, manufacturing had grown faster in the South than in the West. Kettell’s conclusion was that “there is no evidence that the existence of slavery is in any degree opposed to the development of white industry.”<sup>10</sup>

Although Kettell’s findings would not have been so sweeping had he decided to include the data of the 1860 census in his analysis, the larger implications of his investigation would not have been much different. How, then, can we reconcile Kettell’s findings with the gloomy picture of the Southern economy provided by its critics? Even supposing that Kettell’s conclusions were exaggerated, and that the region’s industrial performance was actually poorer than he maintained, even the most skillful manipulation of census figures could not have produced opposite results.

Perhaps, a key to understanding how both Northern and Southern rhetoric could as easily range between the gloomiest and the rosier descriptions of Southern manufacturing can be offered by a consideration of the variety of ways in which Americans perceived industrialization itself in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Although the idea that an industrial economy should be deemed superior to any other was making more and more adepts from the 1830s, it was by no means a dogma in any part of the Western world. Not certainly in the United States where, as Anthony Wallace has convincingly illustrated, the debate about how to use the machines of the industrial revolution was extremely lively during the 1830s and 1840s, giving rise to alternative proposals such as those expressed by utopian communitarianism. In those decades, most Americans still believed in the preferability of a balanced agricultural/industrial economy, and many agrarian reformers like Horace Greely continued to consider industrialization as a dangerous phenomenon, the negative effects of which could only be counterbalanced, in a land-rich country like the United States, by the existence of a healthy and thriving agricultural sector.<sup>11</sup> On the other

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas P. Kettell, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, New York, 1860, pp. 53, 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution*, New York, 1972.

hand, the South recognized the importance of industrializing and, in the last few decades before the Civil War, actually gave a notable impulse to manufacturing.

In recent years, a study of the comparative growth of Southern and Midwestern manufacturing firms during the 1850s has not only confirmed the correctness of the comparative approach adopted by Thomas Kettell, but even improved his conclusions. According to economic historian Vicken Tchakerian, during the 1850s Southern manufacturing recorded a faster growth than its Western counterpart. Labor productivity levels in the South were especially high for cotton and woolen textiles and for iron manufacturing. These branches, together with the machinery and tobacco industries, also made for a dramatic increase in capital invested in manufacturing.<sup>12</sup>

Challenging the still prevailing opinion that, whatever beginnings the South may have experienced during the 1840s in the way of industrialization, waned during the cotton boom of the 1850s, these findings would support the view that the Southern nonagricultural sector was a dynamic and important contributor to regional growth on the eve of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> But the war came, and the civil conflict bequeathed to successive generations the abolitionist/Republican image of an economically backward Old South, as summarized by William H. Seward's description of the effects produced on it by slavery: "an exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly neglected roads...an absence of enterprise and improvement."<sup>14</sup>

During Reconstruction, the Republican rhetoric was reinforced by the emergence of a literary genre in the North that eulogized the Southern plantation as the embodiment of the national ideal of a stable and prosperous agrarian society, thus accelerating the elaboration of myths of the Old South.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, however, the issue of antebellum Southern prosperity and economic development lost momentum as Republicans became increasingly frustrated about their own failure to carry out the promised transformation in the South. As a matter of fact, a whole array of factors contributed to plunge the region into a state of poverty and depression that would take almost a century to overcome. The massive destruction of industrial plants and infrastructures attendant on the war; the discontinuation of traditional credit lines available to entrepreneurs; the panic of 1873 and the onset of six years of economic depression; and, last but not the least, the unthinkability of federal economic intervention for the "reconstruction" of the

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<sup>12</sup> Vicken Tchakerian, "Productivity, Extent of Markets, and Manufacturing in the Antebellum South", in *Journal of Economic History*, 54, 1994, pp. 497-525.

<sup>13</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War*, New York, 1986; Howard N. Rabinowitz, *The First New South, 1865-1920*, Arlington Heights, Ill., 1992, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, New York, 1970, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, "The Northern Origin of Southern Mythology", in *Journal of Southern History*, 43, pp. 567-82; Howard R. Floan, *The South in Northern Eyes, 1831-1861*, Austin, Tex., 1958

South, all played a role.<sup>16</sup> Redeemers and New South prophets, too, found in the theme of antebellum backwardness a convenient argument to account for post-war regional economic failures, as is testified by Henry Grady's contention that "the Old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth."<sup>17</sup>

In the early twentieth century, myths about Southern backwardness were formalized by Ulrich B. Phillips in three main assumptions: 1) slavery was unprofitable; 2) the institution was moribund on the eve of the Civil War; 3) slavery prevented Southern economic development. Although serious objections to the validity of these propositions were raised from the 1930s, Phillip's conclusions have long been taken for granted by a vast majority of historians.<sup>18</sup>

The most significant effect of the interpretation advanced by Phillips was to raise a wall between the study of the antebellum and post-bellum Southern economies, whereby the former was confined to the analysis of plantation society as seen from the viewpoint of the planters' class. In fact, within this interpretational framework, manufacturing was deemed to have been non-existent in an economically stagnant Old South. To this approach, the Vann Woodward thesis of the loss of power by the traditional planter élites across the war contributed greatly, as it surmised the lack of a manufacturing culture among the ruling classes of the antebellum South and, at the same time, promoted the idea of the "colonial" nature of Southern post-war economy.<sup>19</sup>

The flurry of studies that have been carried out by economic historians ever since the publication of the path-breaking work by Alfred Conrad and John Meyer in the late 1950s have long dispelled - for those who cared to read them - the image of a poor and stagnant Southern economy during the antebellum period. These scholars have shown that the plantation making use of slave labor was a profitable enterprise and that the economic

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<sup>16</sup> Supporter of the thesis that Southern backwardness appears to be essentially attributable to the Civil War is Stanley L. Engerman, "The Economic Impact of the Civil War", in *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, 3, 1966, pp. 176-99. Some more recent research would confirm the hypothesis of the dramatic disruption generated by the war. See Howard Bodenhorn, "Capital Mobility and Financial Integration in Antebellum America", *Journal of Economic History*, 52, 1992; Sumner J. La Croix and Christopher Grandy, "Financial Integration in Antebellum America: Strengthening Bodenhorn's Results", *ibid.*, 53, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Joel C. Harris (ed.), *Life of Henry Grady, Including His Writings and Speeches*, New York, 1972, p. 90. Lawrence Shore, *Southern Capitalists*, pp. 124-168.

<sup>18</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Economic Cost of Slave-Holding in the Cotton Belt", in *Political Science Quarterly*, 20, 1905, pp. 257-75; Id., *American Negro Slavery*, New York, 1918. Among early critics of Phillips, Robert R. Russell, "The General Effect of Slavery upon Southern Economic Progress", *Journal of Southern History*, 4, 1938; Fabian Linden, "Ripercussions of Manufacturing in the Antebellum South", in *North Carolina Historical Review*, 16, 1940; Thomas P. Govan, "Was Plantation Slavery Profitable?", *ibid.*, 8, 1942; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*, New York, 1956.

<sup>19</sup> Comer Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, Baton Rouge, La., 1971 (first ed., 1951), pp. 107-74, 291-320.

system based on slavery was still viable at the time of the Civil War. Moreover, far from being a poor region, in 1860 the South showed both a per capita income and a rate of growth either equal to or higher than the national average (depending on whether the black population is considered in the count or not).<sup>20</sup>

The widespread conviction that economic models and statistical elaborations alone cannot fully represent the complexity of social and economic realities and transformations – something the *new economic historians* never claimed – strongly indicated the need to reappraise the whole issue of Southern cultural distinctiveness, especially as far as the economic mentality and behavior of both entrepreneurs and workers were concerned. However, historiographic debate often took on the dramatic tones of a moral crusade that recalled the antebellum days, and seemed to be largely dominated by ideology rather than by a sincere desire to discover a more truthful picture of the antebellum South.

Several years after the publication of the famous essay by Conrad and Meyer, Eugene Genovese contended that “any notion that slaveholders as a class could or would...transform themselves into ordinary capitalists, rests on a *vulgar economic determinist outlook*, contradicts the *actual historical experience*, and ignores the essential qualities of slave based Southern life.” He also remarked that “statistics can never disprove what we have reason to know from *simpler and more direct methods*.”<sup>21</sup> This and other polemics revealed that most of the critical opposition to the new findings about the Southern antebellum economy originated in the assumption that slavery must have created a peculiar culture and frame of mind in the Old South that prevented its economic development.<sup>22</sup> If, according to historian Douglas Dowd, “it was the consequence of slave society, in all its ramifications, that explains that stagnation,” Genovese saw in the “aristocratic”, antibourgeois spirit of the Southern ruling classes a natural hindrance to regional modernization and capitalist development.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, “The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South”, in *Journal of Political Economy*, 66, 1958. For figures concerning per capita income, wealth, and growth see Richard A. Easterlin, *Regional Income Trends, 1840-1860*, in Seymour Harris (ed.), *American Economic History*, New York, 1961; Robert E. Gallman, “Gross National Product in the United States, 1834-1909”, in *Output, Employment and Productivity in the United States after 1800*, New York, 1966; Stanley L. Engerman, “The Effects of Slavery on the Southern Economy”, in *Explorations in Economic History*, 4, 1967; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, Boston, 1974.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Alfred H. Conrad et al., “Slavery as an Obstacle to Economic Growth in the United States: A Panel Discussion”, in *Journal of Economic History*, 27, 1967, p. 525. The italics are mine.

<sup>22</sup> I am here essentially referring to the polemic engaged by Herbert Gutman upon the publication of Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, as reported in Ira Berlin (ed.), *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class by Herbert G. Gutman*, New York, 1987, pp. 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> Conrad et al., “Slavery as an Obstacle”, p. 35, 43; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, New York, 1965, pp. 7-8. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D.



Disagreements among historians seemed to stem – as Robert Fogel remarked – from the belief that bad, undesirable social and moral systems were not capable of sustaining vigorously growing economies. More specifically, if slavery was bad, although profitable, it could not have been compatible with general social and economic well being. In other words, the abolitionist economic indictment of slavery was still well and alive.<sup>24</sup>

Little by little, the vast majority of historians have come to accept the idea that the plantation economy was both profitable and viable, and that the antebellum South was a wealthy and thriving region. The entrepreneurial, business-oriented character of the planters' culture has also received growing consensus. However, more serious problems have arisen from what can be described as the last bulwark in the traditional interpretation of the antebellum economy, i. e., the assumption that, however developed, the slave South could never have industrialized in the proper meaning of the word. Acceptance of this possibility, of course, would have implied an even more drastic revision of the traits of Southern culture. Among them, paramount, was the belief that manual labor was not considered honorable in the slave society, and that whites shunned it the most they could. Moreover, until the 1960s, many scholars subscribed to the idea that slavery and factory work were incompatible. Indeed, the innovative study by Robert Starobin on industrial slavery appeared only at the beginning of the following decade.<sup>25</sup> Generally speaking, the belief that manufacturing, if existing at all, was a minor economic activity, totally subservient to agriculture, helped lessen the historian's interest in the subject, and largely confined studies on manufacturing locations and individual industrial branches to the category of sheer curiosities. Rather than eliciting extensive original research, historical syntheses of aspects of the antebellum Southern economy other than agriculture continued to rely largely on secondary sources and established authorities. As a result, if on the one hand new insights and information are constantly being added to our knowledge of Southern antebellum economic life, even at present debate seems to be stuck in the quandary of an old approach that, again, betrays the resilience of a powerful mythical component.<sup>26</sup>

This *impasse* is essentially revealed by the dichotomous nature of the frame of reference within which arguments concerning Southern industry continue to be fashioned. Despite the many indications that, in the United

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Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*, New York, 1983, chaps. 1-3, 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> Conrad et al., "Slavery as an Obstacle", p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Conrad et al., "Slavery as an Obstacle", p. 50; Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, New York, 1970.

<sup>26</sup> Acknowledging the South's potentials for industrial development as well as its not negligible achievements in that area, many scholars have wondered why, then, the region did not more fully industrialize during the latter part of the pre-Civil War era, and have ascribed such slowness to the existence of a peculiarly Southern culture which was, after all, resistant to massive involvement in manufacturing. See, for instance, Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss, *A Deplorable Scarcity: The Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Society*, New York, 1981.

States, there were as many Northeast and Wests as there were Souths, such arguments are still based on a generic opposition between North and South: the first embodying the idea of “development”, the second that of “backwardness.” However, what the first term of comparison actually means is “the Northeast,” which is taken as a standard against which to gauge the economic performance of the South. According to economic historian Thomas Cochran, an ingrained belief in the uniqueness and superiority of their society combined with religious faith to lead Americans to emphasize the rate of economic growth of their own country as an extraordinary event. Because industrialization was originally a regional phenomenon, in the United States as elsewhere, the Northeast came to be perceived, by extension, as the most rapidly growing region of the Western world. This perception was incorporated into national mythology as the counterpart to Southern backwardness.<sup>27</sup>

But even the second term of comparison - the South - is an ideal type that hardly ever includes the border - and slave - states of Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri, thus failing to answer a major question: just what was the relationship between industrialization and slavery? Yet, as Stanley Engerman suggested several decades ago, the most reliable approach toward an understanding of the nature of industry in the slave South lies in a rigorous investigation of and comparison with contemporary Northern realities. Following Thomas Kettell's example, scholars have recently undertaken comparative studies between the South and the West, but much more needs to be done. Ultimately, a thorough reassessment of the antebellum Southern economy bears strong implications as far as the definition of the meaning of Southern cultural distinctiveness is concerned.

The contraposition between North and South appears to be the product of a process of definition of the traits of an American identity which, due to historical circumstances and accidents, was increasingly made to coincide with the Northeast. As historian James McPherson has suggested, the victory of the North in the Civil War facilitated the final transferral of the “burden of exceptionalism” from North to South, whereas there are reasons to believe that, by that time, the Northeast itself was the real exception within the country.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the very idea of a close and unparalleled association between poverty and the South has helped conceal the fact that pockets of destitution have existed and continue to exist in other parts of the country as well.

The uniqueness of the theme of “colonial dependency” as applied to the Southern historical experience has been challenged by recent historiography on the American West, that has indicated important elements

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<sup>27</sup> Tomas Cochran, “The Paradox of American Economic Growth”, in *Journal of American History*, 61, 1975, pp. 925-41. This author shows that the rate of growth of the United States in the antebellum period was by no means exceptional as compared with other countries of the Western world.

<sup>28</sup> James M. McPherson, “Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question”, in *Civil War History*, 29, 1983, pp. 230-44.

of analogy with the South. On the one side, it has shown how the respective mythologies of these two regions bore opposite implications as regards their economic prospects, whereby the West was represented as the land of economic ascendancy and individual opportunity, and the South as that of economic stagnation. On the other hand, this new historiography has pointed out the increasing similarity of the two regions' economies during the twentieth century, reinforcing the idea of their both being "plundered provinces," colonial appendages to the national centers of power and wealth located in the Northeast. In this light, both the rise of the "Sunbelt" South and the reactions which were vented in the 1970s to its portentous economic growth offer good reason for meditation. Apart from the not-so-often-remembered fact that large sections of the South have also historically been part of the West, several questions need to be asked about the economy of two regions, together making up for the largest part of the national territory, where big business and corporate enterprise continue to coexist with poverty and lack of opportunities.<sup>29</sup>

The recent experience of the *New Western Historians*, whose revisionist efforts have been made extremely difficult by the persistence of a stereotyped representation of the West largely influenced by the still vast popularity of the Turnerian interpretive paradigm, has taught the scholarly community many lessons. Among them, most important, that challenging myths is feasible and dismantling them is a long, painful chore, but not an impossible one. Certainly, the improvement of our understanding of the antebellum Southern economy, society, and culture is central to that rewriting of American history that has already been successfully undertaken in other areas of research.

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<sup>29</sup> William Robbins, "The 'Plundered Province' Thesis and the Recent Historiography of the American West", *Pacific Historical Review*, 55, 1986, pp. 577-89; David M. Emmons, "Constructed Province: History of a True Making of the American West", *Western Historical Quarterly*, Winter 1994, pp. 437-58.