

## 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 West 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.