

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Larry J. Griffin, Don H. Doyle, eds. *The South as an American Problem*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995. ix + 310 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-1752-6; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1729-8.



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Published on H-Pol (July, 1997)

This book originated from a faculty seminar at Vanderbilt University in 1992 and 1993. The participants sought to discover the meanings of the South as an American problem, while allowing themselves to traverse disciplinary boundaries in doing so. The seminar included scholars from economics, English, history, law, political science, and sociology, as well as guests from outside the Vanderbilt faculty and from outside the academic community. The articles in this book represent, for the most part, the output of the effort many of these scholars put into the seminar.

Rather than merely list the contents of the book in a general overview, I would like to briefly describe the disparate arguments of each author before evaluating the book as a whole. The first essay, by co-editor Larry Griffin, asks the basic question begged by the title of the collection: "Why was the South a problem to America?" Griffin traces part of the answer to the simple reality that the South as a region has been treated as "something more than merely different from America ... it has also been celebrated and vilified with a fervor absent from meditations about other sections of the country" (p. 11). The reason for that derives from the relationship of the South as oppositional to the ideals and myths of the broader understanding of "Americanness."

Both literally and symbolically, the South has been

defined as being in opposition to America. From the realities of slavery and civil war, Reconstruction and Jim Crow to the myths and symbols of the Scopes trial and the current debates over the meaning of the Confederate flag, the South finds itself, or places itself, at odds with the understood meanings of America itself. Even as America selectively adopted aspects of southern culture that appealed to it, like Coca-Cola, it rejected other aspects that repulsed it.

But the South was more than just America's opposite: it was also essentially American at the same time. Griffin explores that seeming contradiction by proposing that the basic reality of the South's Americanness "created both the need for and the possibility of an oppositional South" (p. 23). Since the South and the rest of the nation shared so much, the "bad" had to be "externalized, expunged from the real America" (p. 23). To use an old cliché, if the South had not existed, it would have been necessary to create it, for it represents the dark side, the negative impulses, the opposite that enables Americans to define themselves by appealing to lofty ideals such as those embodied by the Declaration of Independence.

David Carlton follows Griffin's essay by posing a question that derives directly from Griffin's argument: exactly "how American was the American South?" Carlton's answer, like Griffin's, illustrates the same ambiva-

lence that many southerners themselves feel about their region. For Carlton, the South's opposition to American culture does not derive from the regional conflict over slavery. Instead, Carlton argues that the socio-economic transition of the nation in the years surrounding the Civil War served to isolate the South. The development of a vigorous entrepreneurial culture in the urban northeast, together with the east-west bias of the developing railroad system in the North, created a situation that kept the South from enjoying many of the benefits of "modernization," as migration patterns, business creation and expansion, and even ideology, benefited the northeast and west over the increasingly laggard South. Even now, as the South has recently benefited from changes in the transportation network to enable it to participate more fully in the national and international economies, the South depends on mature industries for its survival. The placement of automobile plants in states throughout the South is but one example.

Carlton addresses the question of southern culture as well. To Carlton, culture remains the area where the South is American. By examining some of the arguments that differentiate the South from the rest of America, such as those based on the early work of Eugene Genovese, Carlton concludes that America shares many of the values of the Southerners. Southern conservatism, industrial relations, even peonage, can all be compared to larger trends in the nation. Southern conservatism is not, as some have argued, an attempt by a privileged elite to maintain their social status. Rather, the rhetoric of the southern conservatives is the rhetoric of individualism—of *laissez faire*. In the area of industrial relations, Carlton sees the type of paternalism that characterized southern textile mill towns in New England, the Midwest, and Pullman, Illinois. Carlton also points out that peonage, once considered a peculiar institution of the South, is as much characteristic of the nation as a whole as of the South. It appears, argues Carlton, "wherever employers face problems of labor supply and readily bullied minority populations are available" (p. 41). The South contributed much to the ideals of the nation—its emphasis on individualism, its democratic credo—and only when the nation began to move toward a more modern, industrialized, entrepreneurial economy did the South become marginalized and differentiated from America.

Following these first two essays that effectively introduce the theme of the collection are nine essays that, organized roughly chronologically, explore some of the main themes of southern history and culture from within the framework of the book's intended focus. The first

of these, Joyce Chaplin's exploration of colonial attitudes toward climate, reminds readers that so much of the now-traditional approach to the South was or is constructed with an eye to creating differences where there are none, or where they are at least less pronounced. Chaplin begins by referring to much of southern historiography, works that introduced or furthered the idea that the southern climate—its heat and high humidity—created the atmosphere that led to most of the traditional southern problems, such as slavery. However, Chaplin's analysis of colonial references to climate reveals that, at least through the Revolutionary era, Southerners did not attribute as much to their climate as later generations of Southerners and southern historians would. During the colonial era, it was far more likely for Southerners to attribute lassitude to a personal failing than to the climate of the region. Indeed, she argues, if a settler in the South had heard such arguments, he would have scoffed, because to privilege the weather over human agency would have seemed unreasonable for settlers in the colonial South.

The next two articles, by James Oakes and co-editor Don Doyle, address the problem of slavery for the South and for the nation. Oakes concentrates solely on slavery, while Doyle broadens his approach to include secession and Reconstruction in the discussion. That is not the only difference between the two essays, however. Oakes' presentation engages the reader in his analytic framework that places slavery squarely in the midst of the American capitalist tradition. Drawing on his own previous work, as well as that of Orlando Patterson, Oakes takes his argument that slavery and liberal capitalism enjoyed a specific historical relationship to the early years of colonial Georgia. There, early settlers quickly tired of the trustees', and James Ogelthorpe's, rule, which rejected slavery and private property as antithetical to the patriarchal society they attempted to create in the colony. With the prosperous colony of South Carolina to the north, Georgians witnessed how their fellow colonists could thrive in a situation based on slavery. As immigration to Georgia fell off, the trustees began to liberalize their restrictions, and eventually gave up their grant a year early.

The case of Georgia reveals one of the essential paradoxes of American history: the simultaneous dedication of American colonists to free institutions for themselves, built on the foundation of slavery. But Oakes goes much further than reiterating Edmund Morgan's critique of American slavery and American freedom.[1] For Oakes, American slavery can be defined as social death (see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* [Cambridge,

Mass., 1982]) by analyzing the definitions of social life that American liberalism created in the years surrounding the American Revolution. Rights rhetoric, the importance of both private and public lives of citizens, and other aspects of social life that liberals envisioned, such as the value of education, religious toleration, or affectionate families, all help to define life in liberal society. When one looks at the definitions of social life, then it becomes comparatively simple to define American slavery as social death, and this is where slavery becomes an American problem. To quote Oakes, “if you want to know what it means to be an American, think about what it meant to be a slave” (p. 100).

Don Doyle’s essay on the nature of slavery, secession and Reconstruction as American problems examines how each was problematized in turn as its predecessor was seemingly solved. The idea that slavery was a problem for the entire country—an American problem—did not become widespread until the Mexican war added vast new territory to the United States, territory that could be used by the slave states to expand the influence of their insidious force. Abolitionists and other antislavery forces thus began to characterize slavery as a problem for the country, for only then could they save the West from the institution. And Doyle is careful to point out that it was the West, and not the slaves, that free-soilers were interested in saving.

As the problems of the 1850s gave way to secession after Lincoln’s election in 1860, abolitionists found themselves in the unlikely position of allies to the South. By seceding from the Union, the South had removed the problem of slavery, and many abolitionists were happy to see the problem gone. However, as war broke out, abolitionists then found it necessary to attempt to re-define the war itself. For them, the war became a war for emancipation rather than for re-unification, and the Emancipation Proclamation embodied that re-definition. At war’s end in 1865, though, these two American problems were resolved: slavery had ended, and the nation was re-unified. Now, however, there was another problem—reconstructing the union.

This effort required reformulating the problem. Now, the problem became how to reform southern society. The Radical Republicans wanted to recreate the South in the image of the North, to radically alter the southern social structure and economy. Against the efforts of white Democrats in the South, the Radicals attempted over the years of Reconstruction to bring this program to fruition. However, years of obstinate refusal by south-

ern Democrats to cooperate, together with legal and illegal maneuvers to control the electoral process and the social/economic system, led ultimately to the end of Reconstruction and the exhaustion of the northern populace with the problem. In the end, the American problems of slavery, secession and Reconstruction, were resolved by returning the problem to the South, by redefining it as the “Negro Question,” and allowing the era of Jim Crow to begin with northern complicity.

James Ely’s article explores the relationship of the Supreme Court in the history of southern race relations from 1890 to 1965. By connecting changes in public attitudes toward race relations to changes in Court opinions, Ely successfully develops the theme of the book to his chosen problem. Specifically, Ely argues that, in keeping with public opinion about the nature of race relations in the era of Jim Crow, the Supreme Court decided cases in favor of racial separation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American people simply did not regard race relations as a national problem. Thus, when *Plessy v. Ferguson* was decided in 1896, the case did not receive much national attention or notoriety.

It was only after the second World War that matters of race really began to have national meaning again. Together with the centralizing effects of the New Deal, changes wrought by the War, especially the increasing role of the United States in world affairs, made changes in American race policy necessary. Therefore, even in the face of southern intransigence and massive resistance, the Supreme Court at first, then later the political branches of the federal government, began to emphasize equalizing race relations in the country, specifically the South, which began to be regarded as a problematic region for the first time since the Civil War. In short, changes in American attitudes brought on by the New Deal and World War II created the atmosphere in which the government could successfully attempt to bring about real change in American race relations.

The loose chronological approach to the book’s theme ends with an essay by Hugh Davis Graham, who follows the story of the South’s problematic nature from 1965 to the present. He does so by critiquing the arguments of those scholars he calls the continuistarians—those who argue that American history is little more than the history of racism. His critique focuses on the “watershed” year of 1965, which brought about drastic changes in the southern way of life. Federal legislation, Graham argues, effected real change in the South. The legislative results of the Civil Rights Movement were not, as some scholars

have argued, easy and inconsequential.[2]

Graham offers four areas in which the South witnessed distinct breaks with its own past, discontinuities that strengthen the argument that the government's response to the Civil Rights Movement mattered. These discontinuities are: the collapse of segregation in the aftermath of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; the relative lack of major violence in the South between 1964 and 1968; the detoxification of southern politics; and school desegregation. A couple of these may need more explanation. Given the South's past, even its recent past up to 1964, many people expected the Civil Rights Act to be met with as much resistance as *Brown v. Board of Education*, but such was not the case as southern businesses began to integrate right away, with exceptions being tried in courts of law rather than fought out in the street. By "detoxification of southern politics," Graham means that once it was no longer possible or desirable for southern politicians to resort to crass race-baiting, the South became more truly democratic than it had ever been, with many of those same politicians openly courting black votes.

Ultimately, Graham argues, despite continued debate over racial preferences (the one area in which whites and blacks in the South are likely to differ politically) the South has ceased to be a problem for America. Since 1965, the South has undergone such significant change that many young white southerners are incapable of conceiving of the system of apartheid that their parents or grandparents lived in. That, for Graham, is convincing evidence of tremendous discontinuity.

The last five articles in the book deal thematically with a variety of topics. The first, by economic historian Robert Margo, addresses the question of the South's economic backwardness. More precisely, I should say, the essay dispels several myths about the region's economic backwardness over the entire span of southern history. First, Margo deals with the controversial issue of slavery's relative profitability. Margo follows a number of scholars, not the least of whom are Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, in arguing that slavery was not only profitable, but viable (meaning essentially that it could be and was profitable over the long term). However, it is Margo's stated concern to avoid taking sides in the broader historiographical debates over Fogel and Engerman's conclusions. Rather, Margo merely wishes to point out that the South was not, as a result of slavery, economically backward before the Civil War, at least when one looks at the benchmarks of regions of the country other than the Northeast, or indeed if one looks at other coun-

tries.

The period between the end of the Civil War and World War II, on the other hand, was a time of economic hardship for the South. Because of collapsing agricultural productivity, as well as other factors, the South's economy simply was not able to recover rapidly from the deprivation wrought by the war. Educational factors are not far from the center of Margo's argument, as he illustrates that substandard educational systems throughout the South disadvantaged southern workers, even relative to European immigrants coming to the Northeast to work in the growing industrial economy of the late nineteenth century.

Margo's evidence seems to indicate that if one compares the South to regions of the country, or the world, other than the industrial Northeast, the South compares favorably, especially after 1940. Because of the military economy, agricultural mechanization, and improved educational systems, the South since World War II has rapidly improved itself economically, to the point that in 1990, southern per capita income was 90% of the nation's average. Thus, again, as we approach the twenty-first century, the South ceases to be a problem for the nation.

The second of three non-Vanderbilt contributions to the volume is Eric Sundquist's long analysis of the many-layered relationships among Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Scottsboro cases, and the modern Civil Rights Movement. In a complex examination that underscores the centrality of Lee's novel in many white Southerners' perceptions of themselves and their region (with ill affects, Sundquist implies) Sundquist offers a study of the popular novel that explores the nature of representation and the related silencing of the black voice. Atticus Finch, the protagonist of Lee's novel, simultaneously serves as voice of the downtrodden black man, Tom Robinson, unjustly accused of raping a white woman, and as the voice of the liberal white South. What results is at best a muted voice for the African-Americans who must suffer through the system of Jim Crow (of the time period of the novel: 1935) and the desegregation movement (of the time period of its publication: 1961). Sundquist's essay move effortlessly through time to make insightful connections of the book with its dual time frame, while at the same time reminding its readers that the novel can serve a purpose in history, if subjected to the kind of analysis offered here.

The only essay in the collection that has been published before is Jimmie Lewis Franklin's, which started out as his 1993 presidential address before the Southern

Historical Association. In the essay, Franklin looks at the ways in which African-Americans define themselves in relation to the South. Specifically, by examining the sense of place in the writings of black Southerners, we are able to develop a clearer picture of how southern culture is something that blacks and whites share in spite of the great distances that still separate them. Scholars, like Molefi Kete Asante, who assert that African-Americans have only Africa to thank for their cultural traditions, and that the white South learned nothing from the Africans it imported, are somehow missing the larger point: that American society, especially the South, is a syncretic culture.

The South as a place carries a great deal of the cultural memory of African-Americans. Franklin argues that attachment to the South by blacks not only caused many of them to stay in the South when opportunities existed in the North, but also led many Southern blacks into the protest movements of the 1950s and 60s, and even earlier. It was love for the South, in addition to hatred of its (white supremacist) values, that inspired many southern blacks to fight for their rights as citizens.

Franklin's essay is followed by Michael Kreyling's complex analysis of the career of literary historian Louis D. Rubin, Jr. Kreyling begins with a critique of southern literary history, especially that created and defended by the Agrarians who wrote *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930. For them, the issue of race was absent, or at least divorced, from literature. Black voices were to be silenced in this interpretation of the southern literary tradition because it was "too full of experiences" (p. 235). Rubin's place in the tradition of southern literary history is ambivalent at best. While thoroughly modernist in his leanings, Rubin remains intellectually indebted to the Agrarian tradition. Kreyling criticizes Rubin's "sanguine, nostalgic revision of the Agrarian movement" as well as his "nostalgic detoxification of the southern image" (p. 254).

The final essay in the work, by John Egerton, recapitulates many of the themes in the other essays. In "The End of the South as an American Problem," Egerton offers a brief survey of the southern problem, which most of the authors in the collection would agree is race, from the early national period to the present. He includes a list of Southerners from the generation before the Civil Rights Movement—about which he has recently written.^[3] His ultimate point: the American South has experienced firsthand, and to its detriment, many of the racial problems that confront the nation as a whole today. Perhaps it is the South—one assumes he means its

progressive constituency—that can now point the way for the nation to achieve the fulfillment of its ideals.

As a whole, this collection of essays works pretty well. It is well-organized. Each essay, save Egerton's, is extensively endnoted, and a comprehensive twenty-two-page bibliography follows the biographies of the contributors. There are a few minor problems that need to be addressed, however, and these really are problems with the book as a whole rather than with particular essays. First, though, I would like to elaborate a bit on one of the issues that comes through upon reflection on the overall work itself. That is, exactly *when* does the South become a problem? While the authors make valid points with their individual essays, the reader is left to draw his own conclusions, because there is no consensus here. Most of the writers would agree that the South was first problematized in the early 1800s, as the North began increasingly to abandon slavery. As the abolition movement, and other anti-slavery forces, began to gain strength in the 1830s and 40s, their strategy, as Don Doyle points out, was to demonize the South as un-American. James Oakes, on the other hand, argues that slavery was, at least insofar as the institution complemented the country's developing capitalism, always an American problem. Robert Margo goes even farther, arguing that the southern economy cannot be viewed accurately as a problem until at least after the Civil War, despite attempts by historians to locate the origins of southern economic backwardness in slavery. I believe that the disparate views on the exact nature and chronology of the "southern problem" expressed in the work would serve as a good jumping-off point for discussion, not only of the historiographical elements of the essays, but of the southern problem itself. If, as Doyle argues, the South had to be successively problematized as specific problems were "solved," we can debate whether it can happen again, or indeed, if it is happening now. Northerners who, for example, argue that the South is "taking" northern rust-belt jobs, or who still cite the South as the center of the American race problem, might question the extent to which their arguments are valid or just part of a long tradition of finding in the South the scapegoat for what are really American problems.

Now to the problems, which are minor. The first problem is that, while the quality of the essays is uniformly good, the audience that would get something out of them varies considerably. By this I don't mean that historians' eyes will glaze over as they read the contributions of Michael Kreyling or Eric Sundquist. Rather, what I mean is that some of these essays are appropri-

ate articles for an undergraduate class on southern history. Doyle's, Ely's, and Margo's fit this mold. Others, like those of Oakes and Franklin, would work quite well in a graduate seminar populated by students with some familiarity with the major works of southern history. Still others might work with advanced literature majors (Kreyling and Sundquist). As a result, I would recommend that anyone thinking of using this book take a close look before assigning the whole thing. While the collection as a whole works for a reader who specializes in southern history, it may not work for an audience of differently-prepared undergraduates or graduate students.

The second problem, also a minor one, has to do with the question raised by the title of the collection. While every essay addresses key issues of the southern problem in American history of culture, not enough of them address the extent to which so much of that problematic nature is externally constructed. Larry Griffin hints at the problem in his introductory essay, and Robert Margo follows through with his essay on the southern economy, as does Joyce Chaplin with her exploration of the climate question. However, other authors treat the South as an American problem that has been, if not solved, at least recast—usually by Americanizing the South: by nationalizing its problems (to borrow from Egerton's *The Americanization of Dixie, the Southernization of America*). This is not a criticism of the authors, since I tend to agree with this assessment of the state of affairs today. I merely offer it as an observation of the irony in the book's title: the South is not an American problem, at least not any longer—America is the problem, and primarily because of

its relative lack of success in dealing with the problems of race, poverty, and oppression. The frightening prospect is this: if the South is the most progressive region of the country in race relations, as several of the authors have implied with figures of school integration and economic growth, where does that leave us? This collection of essays, as good as it is, cannot answer that question, nor would I expect it to.

Notes:

[1]. Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975).

[2]. For example, Graham cites Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York, 1982); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (first edition, New York, 1981); William Chafe, "One Struggle Ends, Another Begins," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson, Miss., 1986); and Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York, 1989) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (New York, 1992).

[3]. John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. (New York, 1994).

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Citation: Stephen Lowe. Review of Griffin, Larry J.; Doyle, Don H., eds., *The South as an American Problem*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

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