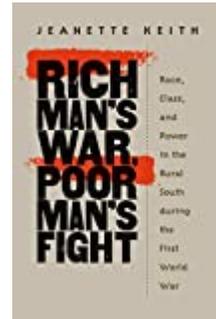




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Why are We Fighting? The Opposition to Conscription in the Rural South and the Meaning of National Service

Jeanette Keith's *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* is an excellent study of opposition to the war in the region through the period of 1915 to 1918 and offers a rich analysis of the themes of race, class, and nationalism in the United States. In a chronological manner, Keith uses seven chapters to detail the depths of dissent to the war in the rural South and moves her analysis from the political arena of the Congress, through the local politics of draft boards, and down to the grass-roots of opposition in places such as DeKalb County in Georgia and Johnson City in Tennessee, where otherwise anonymous Southerners resisted conscription. As Keith notes, at this time of intense class antagonism, the First World War was, "depending on your politics," either the height or nadir of draft dodging in the United States (p. 58). The number of draft dodgers in WWI dwarfed that of the Vietnam War (in excess of 3,000,000 as compared to 571,000 in the Vietnam era), yet, the later conflict is perhaps the more prominent historical example of popular opposition to war. During WWI, the South accounted for over ninety-five thousand desertions and some states,

such as Florida, had desertion rates as high as 20.4 percent among eligible conscripts. While most states in the South had comparable desertion rates to those of California, Massachusetts, and New York (roughly 11-13 percent), Keith's work, at the very least, challenges the myth of the martial South—a region traditionally seen to be particularly attuned to national service. Keith's work therefore ponders a central question: why did so many Southerners resist the draft?

Jeanette Keith's thesis contains two main threads: first, that Southern dissent was rooted in the politics of class, and, second, that this dissent exposed the difficulty that the nation-state had in bureaucratizing the rural South effectively. On the first point, in chapters 1 and 2, Keith demonstrates that dissent reflected developed opinions about the role of class in America. The rural South had a tradition of dissent, ascribed too often to ignorance, and Southern politicians tapped into popular concerns when they argued that the Preparedness movement of 1915 and 1916 was an attempt to force individuals into a European conflict so that American in-

dustrialists could prosper. The cost, they argued, would be felt greatest by the Southern poor, far removed from the benefits of the manufacturing interests apparently at threat. Alabama senator John Burnett, for example, chastised fellow senator Tom Heflin for his enthusiasm for war: “when the tocsin of real war was sounded ... these men who had made those declarations were never the ones that smelled gunpowder” (p. 35). Similarly, when the Preparedness movement gave way to the political debate on conscription, this consciousness of class continued. “We need not fool ourselves about who will do the fighting and dying in this war,” commented Georgia Representative, James W. Wise, “the helpless will be compelled to go” (p. 49).

In discussing the roots of southern opposition to the war, Jeanette Keith seeks answers not only in the speeches of Southern politicians, but also in the letters written by rural Southerners to those politicians and to the draft boards that they helped to establish. When the war began and the debate about the draft and service intensified, these letters reveal the class-based analysis that rural Southerners brought to the conflict. Consequently, the stuttering and uncertain prose of individuals is a constant presence in this text. They opposed the national policy of conscription because of its suppression of voluntarism and its disproportionate impact on the poorest regions. And much is gleaned from the letters: “It is inconceivable to think that the people are again to fight in foreign contry for and idile or principel that their own government falls far short of given them,” wrote one anonymous correspondent from North Carolina to U.S. Senator Edwin Yates Webb in May 1917 (pp.55-56). In that quotation, as with many others, Keith reveals the political consciousness of the region’s inhabitants and their intent to resist the call to service for a nation-state that did not protect that for which it asked them to fight.

Jeanette Keith’s discussion of the class roots of anti-conscription sentiment in the rural South are given further emphasis in chapter 3, when she outlines the specific way in which the national policy of the draft engendered opposition. Southerners reacted to the very selectiveness of the Selective Service Act and Keith’s analysis draws out the contrast between the national definition of service and that held in rural areas. The Exemptions policy made this clear. To the Provost Marshal General, Enoch Crowder, the conscripted force would ideally target young unmarried men, but this did not excuse married men from service. In fact, their claims for exemption related to a simple economic equation: if an individual could earn thirty dollars a month in the army and that

amount was greater than the amount they would earn by staying at home, then they could not be granted an exemption from the draft based on economic dependence. But work meant more than income in the rural South, Keith reminds the reader, and the life of the rural farmer with its attendant chores of wood-chopping, hog killing, and harvesting was not factored into the rubric of the Selective Service’s exemption policy. Such arguments, however, could not penetrate the narrowed perceptions of “work” and “dependency” that local draft boards were obliged to adopt. This is an apt reminder of the economic vision that nation-state builders adhered to at this time: an urban image of orderly workers separated from the daily rhythms of farm life that persisted in the rural South. When the realities of the draft intersected with long-standing class-based suspicions about the motivations for war and opposition to a conflict that took men away from essential work at home, rural Southerners had a cogent argument against conscription.

Of course, being able to exercise that opposition was the crux of the issue at this time and *Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight* offers a relevant analysis of the consequences of criminalizing dissent. Chapter 6 concentrates on the surveillance state that descended over the United States during the First World War and, in her discussion, Keith inverts the traditional cause and effect analysis of repressive laws and dissent. Instead of the suppression of civil liberties resulting in dissent, Keith argues that the strength of dissent caused those liberties to be eroded. “The national government reacted seriously to a rational fear that dissent, if allowed to continue, would grow until it impeded the war effort,” concludes Keith (p. 136). The Espionage Act and Sedition Acts were thus designed to stifle opposition that was readily apparent to government policy. Such dissent was wider than the Socialist movement (even if it bore the brunt of the Espionage Act) and reflected the consequences of the government’s actions. As Keith argues effectively, it was when the state choked the free expression of ideas, that its population was forced to take other means—often more violent—to demonstrate their disapproval. If the modern American state was indeed born in this era of conformity, as historians often contend, then Keith’s study reminds us that the American population has never accepted such restraints on their free expression of ideas without complaint.

While this is a text about dissent, the author’s discussion, in chapter 7, of the many acts of resistance to the draft that occurred in 1917 and 1918 is perhaps the most disappointing section of the book, if only for the fact that the sheer weight of examples threatens to overwhelm an

in-depth investigation of each case. It is fair to accept though, that given that the widespread nature of this dissent, a detailed study of all the recorded acts of violence would be overwhelming. Moreover, given that the official explanation for absent draftees or missing servicemen was often ascribed to the ignorance of Southerners (both white and black), Keith's sustained point remains clear: Southerners' dissent was grounded in the politics of class and the politics of localism, and even disjointed examples of violent clashes between resisters and law officers reinforce the very real and sustained nature of dissent in the rural South at this time.

Keith is conscious of the regional bias of her study and focuses her conclusions without recourse to generalizations. The text is effective in staying within the bounds of the rural South and not stretching its analysis beyond that region or even beyond the lives of the rural Southerners whose dissent it charts. Yet, it is a study that has shown the way for future investigations of dissent in other settings of rural America, particularly when it engages with the second thread of Keith's analysis—the problematic extension of a national bureaucracy into the rural South. Many Southerners avoided the draft simply because of their isolation; and this study reinforces the peripheral place of the South in a centralized national economy and bureaucracy in the early twentieth century. As Keith argues, the bureaucracy of the American nation may have expanded during World War I, but its reach too often stopped “at the end of paved roads” in the South. The intent to conscript individuals between twenty-one and thirty (extended to eighteen to forty-five in 1918) had to be reconciled with the reality that, in the rural South, there were “no requirements for birth registration; no driver's license; no uniform compulsory education laws, so no really usable school records; and no death certificates” (p. 158). How does a nation rule that which it cannot see, wonders Keith, and her analysis of resistance to conscription is an excellent lens through which to understand the stuttering development of the nation-state in the United States at this time. How did other local communities view the fight and to what extent can the disproportionate rates of dissent across American states (4.4 percent in Iowa, 12.7 percent in California, to a high of 20.4 percent in Florida) be explained with respect to the same logic about the reach of the nation-state? While unanswered, Keith's text provides much to recommend other historians seeking to understand the extension of the nation into other regions of the United States at this time.

As well as offering conclusions about the nation-state

that propel interest for historians of other regions of the United States, Keith's work also resonates for scholars interested in the intersection between class, region, and race. To many black Americans, the war offered a chance to prove loyalty to the nation and disprove racist ideologies that held blacks unsuitable for service. Yet, the white supremacist ideals held generally by draft board members created a dilemma: if African American men were unsuitable for a fighting force, then to draft Southern white men in their place was not only to endanger the white race abroad (through conflict), but also in the South (by leaving the region to blacks who might attack Southern women). As a Kentucky Representative put it, “People in Kentucky are not liking it very well, that the negroes are permitted to stay at home and hang around the towns and steal, while the white boys are taken from the farms and sent into the army” (p. 123). While these sentiments may have contributed to the rising levels of lynchings in the South between 1918 and 1919, the dilemma over what we could perhaps call the “service of race” played out differently in regions of the South as draft boards acted in the best interests of “their” blacks. “In many parts of the South,” Keith states, “blacks got exemptions or did not get exemptions according to their value, or lack thereof to influential whites” (p. 131). And, with the government withholding the induction of black troops until the spring of 1918, the burden of fighting in World War I fell “disproportionately on the backs of poor whites” (p. 133). Not only did this further embolden their opposition to the draft, it also exposed the fact that “white supremacy did not—could not—serve the interests of all whites simultaneously and at all times, since those interests varied widely by class” (p. 118). The period after WWI then, remains a critical juncture in re-establishing racialized tenets that could block class consciousness in those areas of the South that had expressed it so forcefully.

Finally, for readers schooled in the history of World War I from other national perspectives, the history of anti-conscription agitation in the rural South is a fascinating and relevant comparative angle to how war intersects with popular associations with the state. For example, Australia voted down conscription (twice) and part of the opposition lay in the transfer of forces from Australian soil. There was a parallel in the case of opposition in the American South, with acceptance of preparedness for American defense but a reluctance to extend such service to foreign soils. Although no longer part of the British Empire, Australia's debate over conscription, nevertheless, was contained within the vestiges of colonial rule (Australia's independence was only secured in 1901)

so the strains of empire remained. Yet, the logic of peripheries and centers that underscores the development of an empire is equally applicable to the American example. The South was far removed from the center of the nation-state and the militarism of the region was associated with the protection of home first. Clearly, many Southerners had not extended the parameters of home to the nascent nation-state in 1917 in the same manner that Australians debated the merits of protecting “home” in Europe. It is even more surprising, given how far removed from the center of national commerce rural Southerners were and how distant the fighting of WWI was from their regional valleys, that many would have vol-

unteered to fight at all. In any case, Keith’s study can remind us that the vision of the American nation offered by the Wilson government (as one dedicated to securing democracy abroad) was refracted regionally by Americans, and multiple interpretations of loyalty and patriotism emerged as a consequence. World War I may have helped to create the bureaucracy of the American nation-state but this did not immediately translate into one vision of what that nation meant. To that end, Keith’s study could be taken up as a suitable model by others keen to test what the parameters of nationalism were at the local level across the United States.

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