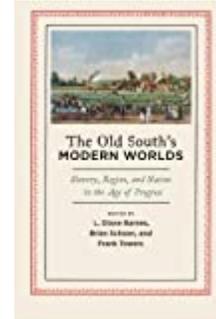


L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, Frank Towers, eds. *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xv + 331 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538401-7; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-538402-4.



Reviewed by Michael Gagnon (Georgia Gwinnett College)

Published on H-Southern-Industry (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Tom Downey (Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University)

Out with the Old, and in with the ... Modern?

The Old South's Modern Worlds, edited by L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, is a welcome addition to the historiography of the antebellum South that will prove useful in upper division and graduate classes, as well as a must read for doctoral students studying for comps, for the next decade. Since the early 1990s, the consensus of most southern historians has been to reject Eugene Genovese's conception of the Old South as a precapitalist society, as a society that was in but not of the market. Replacing Genovese's capitalist/precapitalist dichotomy with a modern/premodern one, these essays locate a multitude of modern ideas and practices among antebellum southerners within a comparative context that reaches beyond simply explaining why the South was not the North. At the center of every essay is how slavery proved compatible with modernity, rather than becoming a means to reject it.

The authors of this collection focus on how antebellum southerners utilized modern ideas and practices on their own terms, demonstrating that the South was distinctive in its approaches to adopting modernizing

trends. Uneven acceptance of modernity, across both time and space, is a hallmark of the strength of this new dichotomy. Like economic development, it did not happen everywhere all at once, but proved a process instead. These processes unfolded differently across the South because the long-term outcomes were moderated by pre-existing attitudes and culture, and shaped by local human decisions. Rather than explaining the Old South as an aberration in a meta-historical process of human progress (i.e., "backward"), this volume allows for the contingency of human decisions to demonstrate how the Old South played a role in a world increasingly embracing modernity.

The fifteen essays of the book are divided into five sections: "The South in a World of Nations," "Slavery in a Modernizing Society," "Material Progress and Its Discontents," "The Blurred Boundaries of Southern Culture," and "The Long View of the Old South." In addition, there is a lengthy introduction, as well as an afterword and a conclusion. Michael O'Brien's afterword is by far the most entertaining portion of the book with a hilarious

version of a dialogue between the ancients (1850s southerners) and the moderns (2010 historians) that informs as much as it entertains. Likewise, other essays have their entertaining moments, such as Craig Thompson Friend starting his essay on paternalism and masculinity with the statement, "James Henry Hammond was a despicable man" (p. 246).

As in most scholarly works, reading the introduction allows the reader to understand what they are getting themselves into. In this section, the editors explain that "modern" is as slippery a concept as "capitalism" was under Genovese's paradigm. Rather than insisting on a rigorous explanation of the term, they explain that modernity includes both "cultural outlook and material achievement." It gives "priority to the present," and its practitioners aspire to keep "up with the times" (p. 10). As a result of this approach, readers will come away with an understanding that "modern" is not necessarily "better" or "ethical" or "amoral."

This loose description of the organizing principle allows the essayists to look at a variety of issues and to suggest, repeatedly, that more research needs to be done to explore how the South accepted modernity. Without summarizing each essay, which is actually done very well in the book's introduction, I think this work has much to offer everyone. Since I tend to give priority to economic issues, I preferred those essays over the others. For instance, Steven Deyle's paper convinced me that the slave trade, or at least its leading merchants, could be seen as modern in the technologies and approaches they used in conducting their business. James L. Huston's essay on the possibility of slavery's expansion in the border states, had the Civil War not intervened, does service in explaining the anxiety the North had with southern slavery. Towers's contribution on the importance of antebellum southern urbanization demonstrates how a broader context can more accurately describe a process, in sug-

gesting that Cuba and the South shared a similar form of urbanization, one that was different rather than backward from the North. William G. Thomas suggests that the expansion of the southern rail system, particularly from 1855 to 1860, created a southern internal market that could have matured, had the Civil War not intervened. These are only a few of the essays I found useful.

Many of the other contributions explore intellectual history and/or cultural history, which I am sure others will find as useful as I found the ones I briefly described. My one really big concern is the multitude of ways the essayists describe "modernity." It seems much like Supreme Court justices defining "pornography," only knowing it when they see it. Notwithstanding this caveat, *The Old South's Modern Worlds* is a great collection and its editors are to be congratulated on their work.

The weakest portion of the book is the counterpoint provided by Marc Egnal in defense of Genovese. While Egnal does the partnership of Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese good service in summarizing their ideas about why the South's leadership rejected modernity, he fails to convince in light of the essays of this collection to which he was countering. Had Egnal directly addressed the issues proffered by the other contributors, his own piece would not appear a straw man to increase the irrelevance of planter hegemony as the central organizing principle for understanding the Old South. Although the editors state that they included it to generate debate, one wonders if the collection would not have generated sufficient debate without it.

The conclusion points out fruitful areas of research yet to be tackled. This seems to me to be one way the book could be useful as a teaching device, particularly since most of the essays average about fifteen pages in length. I, for one, plan to use it in my classes in the future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-southern-industry>

Citation: Michael Gagnon. Review of Barnes, L. Diane; Schoen, Brian; Towers, Frank, eds., *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*. H-Southern-Industry, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34684>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.