



**Thomas N. Ingersoll.** *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South 1718-1819.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999. 490 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57233-024-5; \$60.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-57233-023-8.



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## **Mammon and Manon: Order and Disorder**

Using symbolism in his title to reflect the central thesis of his book, Thomas Ingersoll counterpoises Mammon and Manon in his history of early New Orleans. He uses Mammon, a false god in the New Testament, to personify riches, avarice, and worldly goods. He takes Manon from Abbe Prevost's popular French melodrama, *Manon Lescaut*, in which Chevalier Des Grieux and his lover, after whom the play is named, flee from France to Louisiana and then into the desert where the degenerate Manon dies. Manon, in the French mind, came to symbolize "deprivation, vice, and tyranny," which, to the French, came to represent the city. Yet, even the temptations of Manon were not a good enough reason to entice the French to move to the colonial city (10). Using the two figures to represent differing phases in New Orleans' history, Ingersoll likens the earliest years of New Orleans, or those years between 1718 and 1731, to Manon, the "sultry temptress." Manon suits his thesis well as she represented a disorderly place where women of every color "gave themselves up to illicit sex with men, whenever the latter were not indulging in other vices and crimes" (xvii). Manon then, represents both a "sultry temptress" that inspired disorder in New Orleans and New Orleans

itself. That changed after 1731, however, when Mammon, symbolizing a powerful planter class united in their search for wealth, triumphed over Manon and Mammon established order and respectability. Ingersoll states that Manon should not be modified but rather should be retired, his point being that she ruled in the earliest years, was defeated, and then tried again to rise from the rubble of orderliness at the end of the eighteenth century in the form of Jezebel "whose charms, it was believed 'would inevitably result in the disappearance of the 'pure' Caucasian'" (xvii). This time, however, Manon was defeated by white women who sought to defend their own status.

The interpretation underlying this symbolism challenges the prevailing scholarship which argues for a more open social system of slavery in colonial Louisiana allowing a large, racially mixed population of free people of color to evolve as a fundamental segment of society. Unfortunately, his revisionist efforts revive old stereotypes. Ingersoll's choice of the sexualized and racialized "Manon," or the "sultry temptress," misrepresents New Orleans' early years when the town's inhabitants discovered that their survival depended upon interracial coop-

eration. His allusion to Manon as the cause of the disorder at both the beginning and end of the period covered by his book plays upon the worst of the city's myths and indeed repeats the language that was used to blame the common practice of racial mixing, defined as disorder, on women.

Ingersoll's central thesis is that a powerful and successful planter class formed in colonial New Orleans and established a plantation society that resembled those of the Anglo-American colonies in North America. This is indeed a novel interpretation; and he readily acknowledges that his view of New Orleans' first century as overwhelmingly orderly is contrary to other scholarly interpretations that describe it as disorderly. In his departure from other scholarly interpretations, Ingersoll claims that New Orleans was as orderly as were Charleston and Savannah. In Ingersoll's words, New Orleans was "remarkably similar to other slave societies found in continental North America" (xvii).

Ingersoll claims to write "the story of a community built by slaveholders and slaves and how it grew during its first century" (xv). He posits that it is his task to "describe the social and political continuity and change in a large urban-rural community over a long period" (xv). Ingersoll restricts his study to the city and the vicinity of New Orleans because, as he says, it was the only significant settlement in early Louisiana and represented the labor and social relations associated with both a rural and urban slave community. By focusing upon New Orleans with its urban and rural components, Ingersoll pretends to do what other scholars of the South have failed to do. He claims that his work transcends that of Peter Wood's *Black Majority*, because it looks at whites as well as blacks.[1] Further he claims that it surpasses Kulikoff's *Tobacco and Slaves*, which treats masters and slaves but in topical fashion.[2] Ingersoll points out that it is his purpose to explore social relations of power in a small region that included both plantations and urban actors, black and white, slave and free. His intent is to tell the story of the individuals who struggled to "create order despite the basic moral lawlessness of slavery" (xvi).

Social relations in New Orleans, Ingersoll claims, were molded by two factors. The first was color; the second class. Color, in his opinion, was premier because "in a slave society, all relations are determined by a legally defined 'race' of slaves" (xv). But class too defined social relations, though in an odd statement for someone who bases much of his argument on class relations, he claims that there was only one true class, that of the

planters. The working class (indentured servants transported during the Law years) shrank quickly and dramatically, dying off in the unhealthy climate. New Orleans' people of African origin and descent, whether slave or free, were simply too splintered to become a group. Indeed, by defining the problem within the framework of class relations and then denying there was any but one "real" class – that of the planter elite – Ingersoll sets up the central point of his book. New Orleans' planter class was so powerful that it defined the development of the community; hence, his argument that slave society there was so controlled and orderly that it resembled Anglo-American slave societies in North America.

Ingersoll drives his point home in three sections of his book. Part I details the establishment of New Orleans and its surrounds by the French in 1718, arguing that the early city, laid out in grid form, was impressive, only on paper. By 1731, at the end of the first period of settlement, there were 1,629 Europeans in the colony and 4,112 Africans. Of those, as he points out, more than half of the Europeans and nine-tenths of the Africans lived in or around New Orleans. During this early period, New Orleans was not only unimpressive geographically, economically, and demographically, but it was dangerous and inhospitable.

After this first period, culminating in the Natchez revolt of 1729 in which slaves and Native Americans rebelled against whites, the planter class became especially conscious of class and common interest. The town and the plantations around it had domestic stability solidified by a hard core of American-born Creoles from New France, Catholicism, rootedness, commitment to a plantation economy, French law and governance, and paternalism. The system worked and the planter class was knit even closer together, he seems to imply, because women had an inordinate amount of power over their own property and conditions were favorable for the advancement of their children. Ingersoll describes New Orleans people of African descent as potentially threatening yet so deeply divided by ethnicity, social distinctions (skilled and unskilled, slave and free, which were conditions imposed from above by their masters) that they never developed a common identity. The author does not deprive blacks of all their humanity. He acknowledges that they built their own coherent community parallel to that of the master class. Yet, as he notes, the black community and its social relations changed by the end of the 1740's when the majority of inhabitants, both black and white, had become Creoles (people born in the colony). Creolization was a potential threat, as native-born slaves negotiated a degree of independence. Yet, even then New

Orleans' slaves did not acquire any real power, nor did they in any way threaten the master class. Their independence and community developed under such unequal circumstances and was so manipulated by the master class, which included religious and secular officials, that they were rendered powerless.

In this, his first section of the book, Ingersoll sets out to prove that New Orleans was more similar to the Anglo colonies of North America than to the French colonies in the Caribbean. New Orleans as a disorderly society in the eighteenth century, he claims, is nothing but a myth perpetuated by historians. Ingersoll turns his attention in Part II of his book to the Spanish colonial period, asking if the transition in governance inspired change in social relations. The Spanish period lasted for approximately forty years after Louisiana, west of the Mississippi River, was ceded to Spain in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The Spanish took effective control of the fledgling colony six years later and only relinquished it to France in 1803.

The question Ingersoll asks in this section of the book is the one that has been traditionally asked by scholars: whether the application of Spanish law, custom, and tradition fundamentally antagonized French planters or changed planter-slave relations. After dismissing the Rebellion of 1768 as an isolated incident that was quickly dispelled, he concludes that able Spanish administrators only succeeded in placing a thin veneer of hispanicization onto the social system of slavery and that Spanish policies of economic expansion drew the French planter elite into at least a semblance of cooperation. Within this schema of Spanish economic expansionism, which included the reestablishment of the African slave trade, the change to sugar production, and the transition of the town into a city, slavery remained harsh, perhaps even harsher than the French period. The improvement of economic conditions signaled dilation of the creolized slave community, reduction of the ability of slaves to create and sustain families, and little progress for the small but growing community of free people of color. In Ingersoll's opinion, people of African descent, separated into groups divided by origin or ethnicity, skill, and status, were more deeply divided than ever. In short, the presence of the Spanish in New Orleans "did not alter the basic fabric of slave society." (239).

Part III of the book covers New Orleans during the early national period of United States history. Ingersoll calls the years from 1803 to 1819 the Republican period. However, he takes much of his evidence from documentation that more accurately reflects conditions

later in the antebellum period. He argues that the transition of New Orleans from its European colonial status to that of an American city went smoothly, that laws remained the same or were tightened to more closely circumscribe the region's slaves, and that there was little if any cultural conflict between the incoming Americans and the Creoles and other French-speaking elements of the population. In his view, the basic institutions remained the same. New Orleans claimed its place beside its sister cities in the American South without incident. French planters were all too eager to join their American brethren in further suppressing the slaves and especially free blacks in the city. In the final pages of his book, Ingersoll struggles to demonstrate that New Orleans had no more a tripartite social system with free blacks occupying a central and important center ground than did any other southern city. Rejecting the importance of New Orleans' Creoles of color, he restates that the only difference between New Orleans and Charleston or Savannah for that matter was that New Orleans was a rapidly growing commercial city. Thus if there were differences they were a product of urbanization, not colonial origins or culture. To Ingersoll, New Orleans should not be mistaken as different. Indeed, "everywhere in the world 'the hard core of slavery was much the same' and free blacks constituted an annoying contradiction" (347).[3]

For the sake of demonstrating class unity, with the rise of a powerful planter class, Ingersoll's work contradicts most of what has been written about New Orleans in the approximately 275 years that have passed since its founding. In the past decade, a number of able colonial scholars, writing from different points of view, have come to conclusions from which Ingersoll veers radically. Daniel Usner, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Paul Lachance, and Kimberly Hanger, to name only four, found planter power in colonial New Orleans weakened by harsh conditions, high mortality, and a fledgling economy.[4] In general, each discovered that, with few resources, planters were not able to establish the kind of control over their slaves that would have been necessary to establish a cohesive plantation society and that slaves and free people of color had more maneuverability than did their counterparts in the Anglo-American colonies. With diminished control and without economic viability, planters in and around New Orleans were forced to allow their slaves to forage and barter for food. As a consequence, the inhabitants of lower Louisiana, including New Orleans, formed face to face networks that mitigated a harsh plantation regime. And indeed, it was just those face to face relations that fostered the unusually

open racial relations that existed in the region.

As a result of those loosened social codes, interracial liaisons were not only frequent, they were openly tolerated. Focusing upon the Spanish period with its more ameliorative attitudes towards manumission, Kimberly Hanger demonstrates the growth and importance of the free black population. By the early national period, approximately one-third of New Orleans free people were racially mixed, and many of them owned property, especially women. Other scholars have found significant divisiveness in New Orleans between the Creoles, slave and free, and the Anglo-Americans. It was common throughout the region and signified nothing less than an unusual cohesiveness between the differing racial groups of Creoles in the city. Joseph Tregle best details the cultural struggle between the Anglo-Americans and the Creoles.[5] And finally, while it is true that by the 1840's conditions had deteriorated so dramatically in New Orleans for free people of color that many began to leave the city, they did elsewhere in the region as well. A telling event occurred in Pensacola where, in response to laws that increasingly threatened their positions, a shipload of free Creoles of color left, even as the white Creoles in the city pleaded in the local newspaper for them to stay.[6] Such a response, over two decades after Ingersoll ends his study, points to a Creole population, in New Orleans and all along the Gulf Coast, black and white, slave and free, who represented a long legal, economic, and cultural tradition that did not resemble any part of the population in the South's other southern cities.

Notes:

[1]. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colo-*

*rial South Carolina from 1670* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

[2]. Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

[3]. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[4]. Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi River Valley before 1803* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Paul Lachance, "The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in antebellum New Orleans," *Social Science History* 18 (1994): 211-31; Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives; Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997).

[5]. Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Creoles and Americans" in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 131-185.

[6]. *Pensacola Gazette*, April 4, 1857.

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