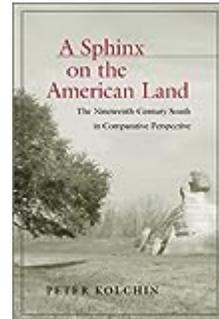




Peter Kolchin. *A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth-Century South in Comparative Perspective.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. Index. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2866-4.



Reviewed by Gordon E. Harvey (The University of Louisiana at Monroe)

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Comparativists All

“Properly conceived, southern history can—and to some extent already does—lie at the forefront of efforts to make sense of human relations around the world. Bubba truly has arrived” (p. 3). So writes Peter Kolchin in *A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth-Century South in Comparative Perspective*, the published expanded version of his outstanding Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures given at Louisiana State University in the spring of 2000. Kolchin’s aim with the lectures, and now with the book, is to explore the nature of southern history through a comparative lens and in doing so, explore the instrument itself—which he asserts is used more often than not by all historians, especially those who study the South. By his own admission, Kolchin uses the term “comparative” loosely and as a tool to “cover a variety of approaches and methodologies designed to accentuate context” (p. 3). Taking a “soft” approach to comparative history frees Kolchin from the more rigid “compare and contrast” format that requires equal time and devotion to both sides of a comparative study. In just a handful of chapters, Kolchin follows the format of his three Fleming lectures: comparing the South to the “unsouth” (the North), pondering the many Souths in the South,

and exploring similarities between the South and other Souths outside the nation’s borders. The book runs a mere 124 pages, but one should not be deceived by a low page count. Kolchin’s is a rich study that wastes as little space as possible while exploring some grand and seminal themes of southern history.

Kolchin’s first chapter considers the comparison between the South and the North, or more accurately what Kolchin calls the “unsouth.” Statements about either region, writes Kolchin, are fraught with implicit generalizations and stereotypes. To say that in comparison to the unsouth, Southerners are hospitable or lazy is to imply that non-southerners are mean or industrious. Such comparisons began in the latter decades of the eighteenth century as visitors from the North and residents of the South began to make observations about the nature of the South for the uninitiated. One of the first chroniclers was Philip Vickers Fithian who, after a year in Virginia, wrote a friend in the North that of the South and the North “you will be making ten thousand comparisons” (p. 7). Thomas Jefferson’s famous observations followed not long after Fithian’s correspondence and both Yankee and

southerner alike have taken the opportunity to generalize about the South and posit what most modern southerners will recognize as the traditional southern stereotypes: lazy, unsteady, fiery, indolent, violent, passionate. The post-civil rights South saw such stereotypes used in a less incriminating manner. Depending on the period their use of such characteristics stood as evidence that the South remained a backward region or that the region was an oasis of serenity in a world gone mad.

Kolchin's book is as historiographical as it is comparative, and he judges that most historical studies that have attempted to make sense of the South have been stronger at describing the region than defining it. And he argues that finding the answer rests in the formulation of the question. "In making sense of the controversy over southern distinctiveness, the key question must be a comparative one: what important experiences have most southerners shared with each other that most northerners have not shared (or at least have shared in doses small enough to constitute qualitatively different experiences)" (p. 15)? There are only two outstanding experiences that southerners could have shared in such measure that no other region of the nation has: slavery and Confederate rebellion, two issues with no small connection to one another.

In chapter 2, Kolchin writes that the task of defining and describing the South involves not only comparing it to other regions but also comparing it to itself: "historians seeking to come to grips with the nature and distinctiveness of the South must also consider whether one can differentiate degrees of southernness" (p. 43). Three elements comprise Kolchin's exploration of "many Souths": divergence within the region, change over time, and variations among groups of southerners. Kolchin argues that one cannot see a monolithic region in the nineteenth century even in its most fundamental economic function, that of slavery. Slavery in Louisiana was far different from slavery in Virginia, or Delaware for that matter. Southern historians have long grappled with the issue of change over time, or in the historical debate, change versus continuity, as seen in the debates between Woodward, Rabinowitz, Weiner, and Billings and others. Third, Kolchin concludes that the "prototypical southern does not exist" (p. 48). It would be virtually impossible to find across the south the "classic" southerner. Regions, sub regional varieties, cultures, and linguistics prevent any such generalization from being made.

One should also focus on other nations as well when comparing the South to "other Souths," writes Kolchin. Of course, the largest body of transnational compara-

tive work on the American South concerns slavery and its comparison with the institution as it existed in Latin America and elsewhere. One of the first to explore the topic transnationally was Stanley Elkins who in 1959 focused on the severity of slavery in Latin America and the United States, concluding that American slavery was less severe than its counterpart in Latin America. It may have been, writes Kolchin, but the American South exhibited a far more rigid racial structure than Latin America. Economic backwardness, civil war, and politics have also been foci of transnational comparatives, especially Weiner and Billings, and others who argue that the South followed a "Prussian road" to economic and political recovery following the Civil War. The American Civil War is not the only civil war in world history, writes Kolchin, but few people have dared compare the American version with England's or even the continuing one in the Congo. Emancipation of slavery has invited comparison to the serfs in Russia, and has produced one glaring difference: the Russian nobility freed their own serfs; they were not forced to do so by defeat or occupation. Save for Haiti and Cuba, all other forms of slavery in the modern Western world ended peacefully, writes Kolchin. America did not. In terms of politics, Kolchin invites comparison of political behavior, citing the American South's support of conservatism with that of the English South and the Italian South.

Kolchin's is at once a survey of comparative history as applied to the American South and a primer on the use and misuse of the comparative model for southern studies. Kolchin also tries to free the readers and writers of southern history from having to use a strict model of compare and contrast, which, he concludes, must be the result of too many such exams in college classrooms. Comparative history does not always require equal devotion to both sides of the issue. Kolchin also asserts that all historians depend on comparative history in their work. To judge, conclude, and contextualize one must make some form of comparison: "Historical judgments are usually based, however, on implicit, unarticulated comparisons; indeed, almost every historical statement of significance is implicitly comparative" (p. 116). To Kolchin, it would appear that the key to unlocking the mysteries of the American South rests in the proper use of the comparative model. In other words, one can only know what is southern by knowing what is not. And, argues Kolchin, to know what is southern, and what is it to be southern, one can approach an answer to the seminal questions of our existence—change versus continuity, national identity, race and its many manifestations, and the essence of freedom itself.

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