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SOCIAL HISTORY AND STRATIFICATION IN THE ANTE-BELLUM SOUTH

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This is an essay in historical criticism. It concerns some sociological concepts as factors operating in historical inquiry in a specific body of historical writing, revisionist social history of the ante-bellum American South. The following discussion seeks to examine the problem of reinterpretation which faces the contemporary historian with respect to a narrowly defined subject matter, namely the social stratification of the ante-bellum South. It tries to isolate some of the existing conceptual difficulties and show how the lack of a consistently applied conceptual framework leads to descriptive confusion and questionable interpretations of data.

Myths, in MacIver's phrase, those "... value impregnated beliefs and notions that men hold, that they live by or live for" seem universal. Some myths are of slight importance, encompassing only a portion of a single isolated individual's conception of how things are, or should be, or were, while others become linked in vast networks, accepted as the dominant modes of thought for whole societies. Necessary in fact for their existence.

The American South has long been the subject of myths both popular and scholarly by which its way of life, social structure, and peculiar institutions have been sustained, explained, and justified. The network of myths surrounding the South have changed surprisingly little since their institutionalization in the context of the war between the states. In the popular imagination the earlier visions still persist and are mixed with present truths in the beliefs Northerners and Southerners still hold concerning one another.² Historians, too, have not broken free of the biases of the originators in spite of the fact that myths are subject to change. MacIver implies that the process of change is inevitable: "... it is important to observe that the myth sustaining a [social] relationship is often different from the myth that bore it. Once the track is pioneered many men follow it. The original myth may be forgotten, and if it endures it changes."³ Why then have the Southern myths persisted? It becomes more understandable when we consider that myths

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¹R. M. MacIver, *The Web of Government* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947), p. 4.

²Howard Zinn, "The Southern Mystique," *The American Scholar*, 33:49-56, Winter, 1963-64.

³MacIver, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

are not necessarily true or false. Falsity and fact are compounded in the alchemy of myth making and, while scientific objectivity as a characteristic of historical inquiry demands that the elements be refined out of the compound, it has not been easy to ask the necessary questions. Gradually, however, the focus of historical inquiry has been changing. Articulate Southerners of our generation have been questioning the older historical tradition in two ways—first, by examination of old concerns, and second by concern for new frames of reference within which subject-matter can be considered.* One such new frame of reference is the writing of social history.

Social historians plead that history is incomplete until the society of a region during a particular period is described. Such a description once begun, we would suggest, is incomplete until studies of social structure and social stratification are made.

Ante-bellum Southern society was an early subject for myth making by patriots both Northern and Southern. Their pronouncements make clear that the moral justifications for engagement in war and historical tasks are incompatible. The valuing process and the determination of historical facts and causality are even in the same mind clearly antithetical, but still historians are conditioned no less than are other men by the culture in which they live and are thereby predisposed to reconstruct the past in light of their learned perspectives. And so it was that an older generation of historians had a tendency to see the most striking and uniquely different aspects of Southern patterns of life. Their work came to be relied upon in such a manner that subsequent writings, according to Owsley, "further simplified the picture of Southern society,"⁵ so that until recent times no real understanding of the complexity of Southern life could be derived from existing historical works. The reasons for these distortions lie in the pressing needs of our historical forerunners—after all they had a war to explain. It was easy to be trapped by the pseudo-sociology of regional partisans who stressed social and cultural differences between the regions to the exclusion of difference within the regions themselves. In its extreme form the North became ". . . a conglomeration of greasy mechanics, filthy operatives, small-fisted farmers, and moon struck theorists . . ." while the South perpetuated the fondest of its self images, the well-bred Southern gentlemen.⁶

*See A. J. N. Den Hollander, "The Tradition of the Poor White" in W. T. Couch (ed.), *Culture in the South* (Chapel Hill, 1934), 403, 415, for a criticism of the traditional view of society in the ante-bellum South.

⁵Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), p. 3.

⁶Muscogee, Georgia, *Herald*, quoted in *New York Tribune* (September 10, 1856), cited by Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Causes of the Civil War* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 180.

Much of the fault to be found in these earlier studies lies in the fact that they were based on ". . . the idea of explaining the common [or universal] aspects of its society."⁷ Lewis E. Atherton describes the situation in this way:

Planters, slaves, plantations, staple crops, and factors characterized the South in this version and were pictured as dominating the section. Contemporary observers and historians might call attention to exceptions, but this conception became too deeply entrenched to be shaken. It was recognized, of course, that some southerners did not own slaves, that some areas did not produce the common staples, and that parts of the South did not fit a stereotyped pattern.⁸

The crux of the difficulty lies in the fact that the reappraisal of Southern history is a comparatively recent undertaking, which only now is revealing that vast quantities of data concerning the structure of society in the ante-bellum South were either nonexistent or had not been used in the kind of systematic appraisal necessary for an adequate description of the social structure.

Actually what the historian is faced with now, is the failure of the earlier students of Southern history, mainly untrained, to record the testimony of older generations of Southerners, who could have filled the gaps in our present materials.⁹

Because of this, in order to bring the specific nature of social structure into more realistic perspective, it has been necessary to abandon the sectional approach for a more specific analysis of regional areas. These studies depend on the existence, not of "private papers and business accounts," but rather, according to Owsley, on:

. . . church records, wills, administration of estates, county-court minutes, marriage licenses, inventory of estates, trial records, mortgage books, deed books, county tax books, and the manuscript returns of the Federal censuses

not to mention:

. . . county and town histories, biographies, autobiographies, and recollections of men and women of only local importance—preachers, lawyers, doctors, county newspaper editors, and the like . . .¹⁰

One course many of the newer studies take is to study the land tenure and economic stratification of the region under ex-

⁷Lewis E. Atherton, *The Southern Country Store, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), p. 2.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Owsley, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

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amination in an effort to bring into sharper relief the nature of the small planter and non-slaveholding, free, white farmer group.¹¹ Out of a population of some 6,000,000 Southerners in the 1850's, this segment of society numbered more than 5,750,000 and comprised by far the largest portion of the white population of the southern states.¹² This is not to say that this group had, by any means, the social, political, or economic significance warranted by its numerical strength, but rather illustrates that the simple two-fold division of the society previously relied upon gave far too much emphasis to the elites in a many-faceted, complex structure.¹³

Besides the very rich, owning 50 slaves and upwards, that populated the rich cotton and sugar lands of the "black belt," this area was interspersed with small planters and farmers who hardly ". . . had sufficient money to support the type of life which has sometimes been pictured as typical of the South."¹⁴ Shugg characterizes their status by saying:

Over half the slaveholders in the country probably lived in less comfort. They were the yeomen farmers who owned from one to nine Negroes, besides their land, and might well be called common people "on the make." With a family of five slaves . . . a yeoman was lucky to earn \$150 a year from the cotton he could raise.¹⁵

In the highlands and the piney woods region where the rich alluvial soils are widely scattered or non-existent, thus making the plantation system uneconomic, the population was almost entirely comprised of "corn 'n tater" farmers, cattlemen, and lumbermen.¹⁶ These people were partially geographically segregated and rarely had contact with their more prosperous kind located on the richer lands.¹⁷

Historians have in general tried to make a much greater distinction between the various members of the group previously known as "poor white trash," or just "poor whites." The really poor or "trashy" components of the society are said to

¹¹Jackson Turner Main, "The Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 41:241-58, September, 1954; James C. Bonner, "Profile of a Late Ante-Bellum Community," *American Historical Review*, 49:663-80, July, 1944; Herbert Weaver, *Mississippi Farmer, 1850-1860* (Nashville: The Vanderbilt University Press, 1945); Owsley, loc. cit.

¹²Atherton, loc. cit.

¹³Owsley, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁴Atherton, loc. cit.

¹⁵Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), p. 26.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 31.

have comprised at least in the agricultural region a relatively small number of the total population if not of the middle and lower economic group as well.¹⁸ This places the emphasis then on what some historians call the "yeoman farmer" as the stalwart of Southern agricultural society.

At this juncture, perhaps it would be well to discuss the term "yeoman farmer" to see what contribution, if any, it makes to our clarification of the social stratification of the Old South. This term was introduced into the historical literature for the reason that, according to Shugg:

Any appellation like "poor whites," compounded of snobbish prejudice and used without discrimination, has little value to the presumably impartial historian. It explains nothing about the people it slanders, and even fails to classify them precisely.¹⁹

Granted that the term "poor white trash" should be replaced should it be superseded with a term to which no slander attaches but which does little in the way of contributing to a more precise classification of the subgroups which are subsumed under the term "yeoman farmer"? The real danger it would seem is not so much that it fails to classify adequately, but rather that its use tends to retard the development of more specific outlines and the descriptive terminology to accompany them for these subgroups within the larger category itself.

When we include the term "class" in our discussion of the yeoman farmer, we introduce more serious heuristic difficulties. The term "class" in one accepted sense is used to describe a group ". . . demarcated by economic factors: by income, economic function, or relation to a system of production."²⁰ This, however, is not the only sense in which the term "class" has meaning to the sociologist. The attitudinal principles of group consciousness, cohesion, and exclusiveness are of primary importance to the concept of "class" in the sociological sense and should not be overlooked as a contributing or ultimate criterion of stratification.²¹ This duality of content, that is, being both socio-economic and socio-psychological, makes "class" difficult for the historian to use, particularly when associated with an already obscuring term like "yeoman farmer." An illustration of this difficulty can be derived from Herbert Weaver's discussion of the yeoman farmers in his *Mississippi Farmers, 1850-1860*. He says:

¹⁸Weaver, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁹Shugg, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

²⁰Charles H. Page, "Social Class and American Sociology," *Class, Status, and Power*, Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, editors (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953), p. 47.

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Economically the yeomen might today be termed lower class, but socially and economically in the late ante-bellum period they were middle class or lower middle class. Many owned a small number of slaves, and the majority owned at least a small amount of land. They were not wealthy, but neither were they poverty-stricken. From this class had come some who by 1860 were wealthy planters. Others were acquiring property at a rate which indicated that they, too, eventually would move into a higher economic stratum.²²

Notice that here Weaver is discussing primarily the economic elements in his class distinction but introduces the term "socially" which seems to imply presence of attitudinal group factors. He goes on, saying:

In the older delta counties these people were fewer than in the more recently settled areas, and their social status was somewhat different. Overshadowed by a large number of planters, they were sometimes considered low caste. Even those who owned a few slaves moved in different social circles from the planters. Slaves of wealthy men looked down upon whites who owned no slaves, or who owned fewer than their own masters, frequently referring to them as "poor white trash." Some travelers apparently accepted this characterization uncritically, without attempting to ascertain what manner of men they actually [sic] were. Available records fail to bear out the implications of this characterization. Census figures show that production per acre of major crops among the small farmers compared favorably with that of the planter, a clear indication that they were not lazy and shiftless. The steady increase in property owned implies a thriftiness not generally ascribed to "trash."²³

Here Weaver abandons his economic definition of class, describing a segment of the group's "social status" as being low in the socio-psychological sense. The term "caste" is here misused and should be discarded. Then he returns to his economic definition of class which from his own perspective defines what the people "actually" were. The critic must suggest that Weaver is defending from his own point of view presuppositions he has already made about the nature of the yeomen farmers. Obviously the yeomen farmers, living in different geographical areas, were not socially stratified by the members of their own society in the same way.

If, then, the yeoman farmer was not socially stratified the same throughout the areas of the South under scrutiny, how was he stratified? Except in a few cases we are left with the problem of inferring the social stratification from our knowledge of the economic stratification. Using this economic base as a reference point, it should be possible to trace the outlines of the class

²²Weaver, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

structure in the sociological sense on a regional basis. Roger W. Shugg attempts this in his *Origins of the Class Struggle in Louisiana* and relies on what might be described as peripheral social activities to indicate the social layering of society in Louisiana. For an example of this we might point to his description of the political history of Louisiana in which the play of socio-economic factors comes through quite clearly.²⁴ What really is indicated in all this is that we should not rely exclusively on either economic or social stratification for our picture of society and, above all, should not confuse the two as being synonymous.

One important category in our sociological description of the Old South, namely, the social mobility of the inhabitants, has largely been neglected. This is due in part to our failure, discussed above, to make the necessary delineation of the class levels within the small planter-free white farmer group. The degree of vertical mobility seems to have been in some areas at least very high, making the development of a clearly defined set of influences contributing to this mobility difficult. The picture is further broken up by the fact that fluctuating, economic influences resulted in similar fluctuations in the degree of mobility exhibited by the regional social units.²⁵

Some disagreement over the degree to which an open class system with its accompanying relative mobility existed in the ante-bellum South is apparent in the writings of at least four historians. Owsley claims that the yeomen farmers were not class conscious and did not regard the elites as socially oppressive, and that upward social mobility except in the older states of Virginia and the Carolinas was considered a common occurrence.²⁶ Shugg holds, however, that as time went on and the "... ranks of the yeomen and middle classes thinned out, the proportion of common people enlarged; and the aristocracy ... became more select and more class conscious," the degree of mobility and openness of class lines became a public issue.²⁷ Weaver, holds that, in general, the farmers were fully as prosperous as the planters, that upward social mobility was common, and that social hierarchy was little recognized.²⁸ By contrast Bonner maintains that a superficial view does not tell the real story of the farmers in the lower economic group, which comprised almost 35 per cent of the total white community and whose economic position became progressively worse as the 1850's wore on. He further holds that the means to increase

²⁴Shugg, *op. cit.*, pp. 121 ff.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶Owsley, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-34.

²⁷Shugg, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

²⁸Weaver, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-25.

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ones social status became harder to come by and that as time went on, the class cleavages became more apparent and realized by the populace.²⁹

One is forced to the conclusion that few generalizations about the nature of mobility and the relative openness or closure of class in the South as a whole can be made from existing interpretations.

A far more serious fault of the historical studies so far discussed is their exclusion of the underlying Negro society, both free and slave, from their study of ante-bellum social structure. What kind of skewed picture of society results from paying attention only to the white segment of a much larger society? It is perhaps not too far amiss to suggest that in the attempt to "correct" a traditional over-emphasis on the aristocratic slave-holding tone of ante-bellum Southern society, these historians have shied away from an inclusion of Negro slave society in their description of Southern social structure.

This avoidance, even if justified in terms of a division of labor, leaves the historian open to charges of making deliberate distortions and perhaps what is more significant, affects his own analysis adversely. This adverse affect may be enough to offset any gains made towards the reinterpretation which is desired.

Why should this be so? It is clear that social stratification depends in large part on the existence of value symbols which are interpreted in the social situation as validation of social statuses. In the case of the ante-bellum South, we know that the percentage of Negroes in the total population varied widely from place to place and that the percentage of slave-holders varied as well.³⁰ And further, we are aware that the existence of a slave caste with its own internal class distinction as well as a thin strata of free men of color are value symbols that collectively, vitally affect the relative class distinctions which are made within the upper caste white society. Is it, therefore, not more cogently reasoned that by inclusion of both Negro and white castes and their classes in our description of social structure we will do more justice to those areas where slaves and slave-holders do not predominate? By stressing the diversity of types and degrees of stratification, we additionally strengthen rather than weaken the brief that the earlier over-simplified myths are perpetuating a distorted picture of Southern society. At the same time we will not be laying grounds for new myths.

The successful writing of social history depends in large

²⁹Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp. 666 ff.

³⁰Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Knopf, 1956), pp. 30-32.

part on the availability of historical materials that have sufficient breadth and depth to enable us to describe the social stratification of a given society both in time and in geographically distinct areas. So far, the historical materials relating to the social stratification of the ante-bellum South have not been collected in any kind of systematic whole to enable us to make an adequate judgment about the feasibility of such studies. Evidence on a regional basis suggests that it will be possible to write adequate descriptions of social stratification only by the dint of much hard labor expended in a thorough examination of existing sources. It also seems indicated that the South, at least in the stratification sense of the term, is a fiction, which if true will make studies using this concept useless for any serious socio-historical consideration. If this proves upon further examination to be true, the idea of a "South" should be discarded in favor of one which will do justice to the regions involved, as well as the historians who are engaged in writing histories of them.

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