Nature of Southern Regionalism

O. Orland Maxfield

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas

Part of the Regional Sociology Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas/vol9/iss1/7

This article is available for use under the Creative Commons license: Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-ND 4.0). Users are able to read, download, copy, print, distribute, search, link to the full texts of these articles, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without asking prior permission from the publisher or the author.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu, ccmiddle@uark.edu.
THE NATURE OF SOUTHERN REGIONALISM

O. Orland Maxfield
University of Arkansas

The South was, and is, and will be! It is totally unnecessary to prove that there is a South, for the South is one of the older geographic regions of the United States, recognized from either the subjective or the objective viewpoint. The regionality of other areas, such as The West, The East, The North Woods, or New England, is no doubt equally apparent, but few of the national populace would be as opinionated on exact location and identity of those regions as they would be of The South.

This assumed authority on The South stems in no small part from The South's long suffering and prominence in the role of the nation's whipping boy. The layman has read, heard, and discussed The South's major problems for generations. These are presumed to be not only uniquely Southern, but also they have taken on the proportions of the major qualities of the Southern region. The Southerner has abetted the situation by being extremely conscious and sensitive of his area's regionality. He is inclined to be militantly regionalistic, even to the point of sectionalism if aggravated sufficiently. He lives a regionalism almost defiant to, rather than an ingredient of, the national unit, and his regional consciousness is no less real for his own lack of a general understanding of its historic background and present-day character. (2)

Southern regionalism has long been appraised by various groups chiefly the historians, followed closely by the sociologists. Geographers recognize the region in their coverage of the United States and many Southern colleges and universities offer it as a course, but geographers have done little to justify their delimitation of the region. Few people can
explain the presence of The South. Rather it is accepted as existing merely because it is said to exist.

Too much of the current thinking and interpretation is historical — an attempt to define and epitomize The South in terms of its Ante-Bellum identity. Definitive studies of analysis, such as Howard Odum's *Southern Regions*, (1) are largely out of date, although we continue to rely upon them for many of our basic concepts. We fail to appreciate that times and men do change; that new factors are introduced and old ones lose their dynamic nature. For in addition to the New South which arose from the embers of The War and Reconstruction, there is the still Newer South, a product of the last twenty-five years or so and of influences, such as government financing of manufacturing and a growing reevaluation of racial problems, of which the Old South had no experience. We are also inclined to overplay the role of a few cherished factors and entirely too prone to seek one single factor in explaining the existence of Southern regionalism. How many times has it been said that the subtropical climate, or cotton culture, the doctrine of white supremacy, or a Cavalier aristocracy, to name just a few, is each, singly, the basic underlying factor of Southernism and thus, by inference, its major quality.

It is past time for a better accounting of the basis and nature of Southern regionalism, with especial emphasis upon the present. Here is an excellent opportunity for geography to play that role which belongs to it alone, the combining and integrating of elements and factors in order to give a complete picture, be it of description or of analysis. For is not The South a complex? Is The South purely a historical region, or a sociological one, or an economic one? Rather, is it not more truly a geographic region, possessing elements and factors in a combination unique to it? Is it not true that as a geographic
region. The South would have no exact boundaries set by any one element, but rather would be possessed of a core area, identify it as you will, outward from which the qualities gradually would alter until they no longer would represent the combination essential for a Southern region? Here, then, is one possibility for the study and appreciation of Southern regionalism — to take all of the qualities and show how they intertwine and interact to make of southeastern United States the geographic region of The South.

Such a study of the complex nature of the qualities of Southern regionalism, followed to its logical conclusion, would result in a complete geographic study of the South. It still, however, would not necessarily answer the question of "Why is there a South?" unless care were taken to compare the area with the rest of the United States and to discuss relationships among the phenomena present. It could very easily result in mere tree-counting, cataloging, with no appreciation for the overall forest.

The nature of Southern regionalism can be approached both objectively and subjectively. Each has its merits. The possibilities of each will be briefly indicated here. The objective method is carried out through an analysis of the individual qualities. The qualities can be systematically grouped or classified according to their nature; they have certain tangible aspects — they can be measured, taken apart, made the object of experimentation. One regrets somewhat the necessity of dissecting a region, of laying bare its bones, for individually the elements are rather gross and barren, whereas seen together they possess a certain vitality and warmth of meaning. Such a study is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end.

Qualities of Southern regionalism are not difficult to find in literature. Almost any study of The South will list an exhaustive number of them, which are usually termed characteristics, running the scale
from the role of religion to the recent emphasis upon manufacturing. Because of the varied nature of these items, the broadest term of identification, "qualities," is here applied to them, rather than the more restrictive designation of "property" or of "character." (5)

Care must be taken to distinguish the attributes of Southern regionalism from the true qualities. Attributes are those ascribed qualities which are inferred, or conjectured, largely the result of hand-me-down thinking and usually unfounded as far as definite knowledge of actual present-day conditions are concerned. Many of the concepts of The South today fall into this class when subjected to careful analysis.

What constitutes a true quality of The South? When we say that it identifies The South, or is a unifying element of Southern regionalism, what do we really mean? Can it identify The South and also be a part of some other region? How prevalent must the quality be in order to qualify as a mark of Southernism? Is there any standard for measuring this? Certainly, there must be few qualities, and it is difficult to think of any, which occur without exception throughout the entire South. And if we accept that The South is the result of a combination of elements rather than of any one, perhaps it is not even a worthy question. It is raised here only because it is a natural one, particularly likely to disturb the serious student who feels that everything must be measurable and properly pigeon-holed. Again, let it be emphasized that there is undoubtedly a core area to The South, where the maximum number of Southern qualities combine, and outward from that the number of combining qualities of the core decreases, and new elements are introduced until the combination is no longer suggestive of The South, but of some adjacent region.

One of the first tasks in analyzing the qualities of The South is to determine the period of time in
which one is interested. Certainly, few of the things which are commonest in men's minds today are true qualities of the contemporary South. Wilbur Zelinsky, writing "The Changing South," states: "The myth of the Old South dies hard. Ask the man in the street what the term American South means to him, and you are likely to be regaled with magnolias, mint juleps, banjos, bales of cotton, lynchings, and the K.K.K. Turn to a well-read citizen and the response may be 'The nation's economic problem number one.'" (6) But one need not quote from others. Step into the average classroom and ask the same question. The author recently spent considerable time discussing this with a class which identified the Southern drawl (only other areas had accents!) and plantation architecture (of "Gone With the Wind" variety) as unifying qualities of The South. Certainly any regional geography study, unless specifically of a historical nature, should refute the "popular legend" and "easy epithet" (6) and deal with such qualities as have reality in The South of today.

If a list of qualities is assumed for a certain period, and let it be that of the present for any examples used here, it is then possible to separate the qualities into categories. This produces a variety of possibilities, depending upon one's own interests and inclinations in classification. Classification should serve more than purely academic curiosity. A better understanding of individual qualities and of relationships should result.

One possibility which immediately suggests itself is the separation of qualities into those which are physical or natural and those which are cultural. This is the commonest division of geographic phenomena. Physical qualities are entirely the product of Nature and therefore exist without the presence of man. Such qualities as a Humid Subtropical climate and a basically Red and Yellow Podzolic soil would fit there. Cultural qualities include anything
relating to man's occupancy of an area -- the people themselves, their modifications of the landscape, their occupations. Therefore, while a specific soil group may be a natural quality, soil erosion, which is identified as a problem in The South, would be cultural. This type of grouping presents no real problems because of the ease with which a quality can be assigned. Its main value undoubtedly is to discover how much of the nature of Southern regionalism is due to the natural elements of the environment and how much is contributed by man. Relationships between the two groups can be studied easily.

A second means of grouping might recognize generic and intrinsic qualities. Generic qualities are those which are found not only in The South, but in the nation as a whole. This list could be surprisingly long, because many qualities which might be called problems are found in other parts of the country. To say merely that The South has a racial problem is scarcely setting it apart from most of the larger urbanized areas of The North; nor is a high proportion of forest land distinctive of The South alone. Intrinsic qualities, on the other hand, are those which are found only in The South. The economy peculiar to the Cotton Belt as a result of a long economic evolution is an intrinsic quality since it is not the same as that found in the other cotton areas of the country.

A third possibility is to classify qualities as inherent or acquired. Inherent qualities are resident in the very nature of the area. Acquired qualities are those which are developed in addition to those which are inherent and are the product of a later time. This grouping, at first glance, may appear to be a duplication of the natural and cultural categories. We might assume, however, that inherent qualities are both of a natural and a cultural nature. At whatever time a regional consciousness emerged in The South, (was it by the time of the American Revolution?), we can assume that those qualities which
created the distinction between The South and the rest of the nation are the inherent ones. Those which are the product of a later time, whether generic or intrinsic, or acquired.

Perhaps after such cold, rational scrutiny as objective analysis affords — the investigation of the merits of a quality to see if its inclusion is warranted and then its classification — it may appear to some that there are few things which are truly Southern, or at least widespread enough to impart a regional flavor to The South. By analyzing the elements individually, and thus taking them out of context, so to speak, they may fail to signify a South for they would not exist in sufficient number to create a combination markedly different from an adjacent area.

There is, then, another very real possibility in the nature of Southern regionalism which should not be overlooked. Southern regionalism may exist subjectively, rather than objectively, the product of very tangible elements and factors of the past rather than of the present. James G. Randall, the historian, expressed a subjective view of Southern regionalism when he wrote: "Poets have done better in expressing this oneness of The South than historians in explaining it. Just as the name 'Dixie' loses something of its haunting melody when subjected to etymological analysis; so the quality called 'Southern' and recognizable on the instant, seems to dissolve into thin air when wiseheads fall to explaining it in terms of historical origins and conditioning factors."

Francis Butler Simkins adds weight to this argument by stating: "All observers admit that Southerners is a reality too elusive to be explained in objective terms. It is something like a song or an emotion, more easily felt than recorded."

The South is no less real if it is revealed to exist subjectively rather than objectively. And it
should not be too surprising to find that the present-day South, whatever its objective origins may have been, exists mainly as a regional consciousness, a totally irrational concept in view of The South's contemporary structure. Particularly, as The South becomes more like the rest of the nation, leveling out inequalities of its cultural aspects, the objective qualities that do exist will diminish in importance. But this is no indication that The South will become any less a region. For many, the concept of The South set apart on a subjective basis is the more appealing. Certainly the possibility of dealing with it in this manner should be given full consideration. It would not result in any list of qualities to be classified and analyzed, but it might suggest a unity that would not be apparent otherwise.

There is one major danger in this subjective approach and the conclusions drawn from it. Southernism thus is shown to be apart from the actual fact and Southernism becomes a world separated from the issues of the day by a gulf of time. Unless it is clearly realized that subjective Southernism is no true measure of the qualities of the contemporary South, only misconceptions can arise.

This paper does not attempt to arrive at any definite conclusions concerning Southern regionalism. It is exploratory from the standpoint of investigating ways in which the nature of Southern regionalism can be approached. Southern regionalism scarcely belongs to any one field of study, but any discipline concerned with the regional character of The South can investigate the issue legitimately. Geography, with its ability to integrate and to probe more fully into regional analysis than most fields, is especially interested in it, whether it be geography as a science and thus using the objective approach, or geography as a humanity, using the subjective method.
THE NATURE OF SOUTHERN REGIONALISM

LITERATURE CITED


(5) Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms, G. and C. Merriam, Springfield, Mass., 1942, has been referred to in choosing among the various shades of synonyms.