



The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese , Eugene D. Genovese

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Presenting many slaveholders as intelligent, honorable and pious men and women, this study asks how people who were admirable in so many ways could have presided over a social system that inflicted gross abuse on slaves. The South had formidable proslavery intellectuals who participated fully in transatlantic debates and boldly challenged an ascendant capitalist ("free-labor") society. Blending classical and Christian traditions, they forged a moral and political philosophy designed to sustain conservative principles in history, political economy, social theory, and theology, while translating them into political action.

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Ryan says

This book is astonishingly complete. Dr. Genovese has so many well-researched quotations, and he backs up statements about Southern opinions and thoughts with solid sources. Though it is not my place to give a complete review of the book, I will say that the southern ideals of independence and righteousness certainly might help today's society get back on track (if there was a track in the first place). As my dad wrote in his review, chapters 4, 15, and 16 are excellent because 15 and 16 actually lay out the biblical arguments for slavery as the southern slaveholders saw it. Without a doubt, this is one of the most thorough, informative, and enlightening books I have ever read.

Mike says

I started reading this over 2 years ago. I finally finished. It is an amazing book, well-researched and really takes you into the world of the southern slaveowner, as well as to northern rivals. It is a dense book with many quotes. Four chapters in particular were outstanding: Chapter 4, 15, 16, and 20. Provided tremendous insights into what seems to be the heart of the war for Southern Independence: namely the battle over the Bible. While slavery was the issue, the cultural differences between the North and South were vast and differences over of the authority of the Scriptures were sources of the these differences. In many ways, the Civil War was a religious war.

Nick says

The Genoveses were an interesting academic couple. He became famous early not for his scholarship but for declaring himself a Marxist and publicly favoring the victory of the Viet Cong in 1965; he was working at the time for a state university and his comments became fodder for the gubernatorial race that year--won by the side favoring academic freedom. His "Roll, Jordan, Roll" was a landmark analysis of slavery from a Marxist perspective, but both he and his wife, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, whose earlier work on women in the Old South, also came from a Marxist perspective. But then they both became religious and conservative Catholics; this work does not reflect that shift overtly but it does come across as deeply sympathetic to the intellectual life of ante-bellum and Civil War white society, particularly ministers. It is a move from a concern with the life and culture of those largely left out of the South's vision of its pre-war self to a fascination with the variety of thought that existed at the time, including the occasional Jew or abolitionist. I approached the book out of a life-long fascination with the way in which people passionately defend ways of life by using material that so patently contradicts their argument--in a nutshell, how slaveholders and their defenders could see themselves as deeply Christian. The book answers that question and many more that I had not thought to ask. The defenders of slavery pointed out that Jesus never condemned it (at least in the materials that have come down to us) and that the Old Testament is full of the ownership of fellow human beings--therefore, despite the experience of the Hebrews in Egypt and their flight from it, the Bible, in the mind of the slaveholders, sanctioned the institution. They were particularly critical of the North's capitalism; the grim side of Dickens' novels were evidence to the Southerners that paternalistic slavery was actually more concerned about labor than industrialists. There are other intellectual debates here--how the Southerners expressed themselves on and debated such issues as the French Revolution, classical

civilization, the Bible, and history. And the debate was substantial--at least some Southerners sympathized with the French Revolution; after all, it overthrew tyranny. There was a substantial debate over Oliver Cromwell, and while most Southerners saw themselves as intellectual descendants of the Cavaliers, there was at least some sympathy for the Roundheads. At least some of the material may presuppose more knowledge about the theological intricacies of the era than at least I possess--the breakaway of Southern Methodists, Baptists and other denominations from northern churches in the 1840's is discussed as though it were widely understood. Also, this tome--and it is a tome--is rather too inclusive. Clearly, the ruling class of the South was literate and even articulate, as ruling classes tend to be; not every diary entry, sermon or broadside must be quoted and the structure can at times seem like an endless series of "on the other hand's". The intent seems to be an effort to prove beyond the tiniest doubt that even aside from the early Virginians like Jefferson and Madison, with their complicated attitudes toward slavery, there were eloquent and educated Southerners. I am not sure that anyone doubted that--certainly no one who has read Rutledge or Calhoun or recalls that John Wilkes Booth shouted in Latin after murdering Lincoln. Still, it is a useful reminder that intelligent people in the past offered passionate arguments full of eloquent phrasing and copious evidence without realizing how strangely contradictory it would all seem a century and a half later. And perhaps a gentle reminder to ourselves that our own arguments may seem very strange and contradictory to the discerning eyes of the future.

E.LB says

boring....long..... like a text book.....didn't finish it.

Craig says

If interested in the intellectual history of the Old South, this work by the Genoveses complements Michael O'Brien's work nicely. I may even prefer this to O'Brien's double-volume epic. Don't be put-off by the fact that the Genoveses moved away from their Marxist origins to embrace Catholicism. This is intellectual historiography of the highest order.

John Beeler says

Controversial because it is misread as sympathetic to slaveholders. I think it's a little more complicated than that, much like the relationship between slave and master.

Marsha says

Slave owning elites were heavily influenced not only by religion, but by their study of history, particularly their love of Gibbon. Ironic, considering what would happen to the Confederacy.

Sean Chick says

Dense, perhaps too sympathetic to the master class, but useful if read in tandem with Conjectures of Order and Richard Taylor's memoirs. That could be too much for most people. Regardless, I like the attention to the intelligence of the masters, particularly their knowledge of history. It is something the current master class in the South has lost.
