

Field Statement in Southern History Minor Field
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Field Statement in Southern History

The purpose of my study in Southern history is preparation to teach in the field; this field statement therefore focuses on topics relevant to teaching an undergraduate survey course in Southern History. Its primary periodic emphasis is on three eras: the Old South, defined as the South from about 1820-1860; the Civil War and Reconstruction-era South, from 1861-1877; and the New South, defined as the South from 1878 to about 1915; but the colonial, early national, and post-1915 South will not be ignored. Through a discussion of the themes that I consider the most important in the history of the South, I will examine the interpretive issues current in the historiography, identify the most important historiographic debates in the field, and point out the most important texts in the field of Southern History. At the end of this essay I will discuss the synthetic works that I believe address all these important themes in the study and teaching of Southern history. This final section will also be used to discuss important issues regarding slavery, the coming of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the New South not covered in the thematic discussions. Mastery of these issues, texts, and historiographic debates is critical to an effective teaching of the field.

Interpretive and Thematic Issues

Three themes have been most prominent in Southern history: Race, class, and religion. But these three themes have also been the most prominent in American history. It is the particular aspects of race, class, and religion that developed in the South that have made it a distinctive region. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the development and eventual domination of a wide-spread plantation economy worked by large numbers of African Americans in a system of racial slavery created a distinctive slave society in the provinces (and later, states) south of

Pennsylvania with its particular issues of race and class.¹ Moreover, as compared to the more balanced denominational mix in the North, the rise to dominance in the mid to late 1700s in these same states of the evangelical religions – Methodists and particularly Baptists – after the Great Awakening also helped to make the region distinctive from the mid to late 1700s on. States’ rights and honor, two other important themes in Southern history, were far more important in the South than in the North. These themes are critical to an understanding of Southern politics, society, and culture. Finally, any survey of Southern history must take into account the importance of the Civil War and Reconstruction as a dividing line between the Old South and the New South. The destruction of slavery and the growth of Southern industries (most notable railroads and textile mills) and towns in the New South that emerged from Reconstruction resulted in enormous changes in Southern politics, society, and culture. Scholars, however, debate the degree of continuity or change in racial ideology, class, and society, and therefore this essay will briefly examine some of the contours of this debate. But the impact of the changes wrought by the Civil War and Reconstruction is undeniable, and these events will therefore be used as a dividing line for discussing the major themes of Southern history.

Race and Slavery in the South

The impact of race is perhaps *the* fundamental theme of Southern history. Southern history simply cannot be understood without examining the racial ideologies that have affected its course. Race was both a social-cultural and an ideological construct. Southerners thought of race as a biological factor and considered their society a bi-racial one. That thinking affected many of their actions. But historians have recently pointed out that race was more a cultural conception and an

¹ Ira Berlin in *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) defines a slave society as one in which “slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations: husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, teacher and student.” Slave holders in such a society “were the ruling class” and “nearly everyone – free and slave- aspired to enter the slaveholding class...” (8). As Berlin explains, the transition to slave societies was gradual beginning in the Chesapeake and South Carolina in the early 1700s and the gradually proceeding to the southwestern states.

ideology than a fact of biology and they have demonstrated that understanding race in that way helps to explain much about Southern history.²

Before the Civil War, discussion of race cannot be detached from slavery. Edmund Morgan's thesis in *American Slavery, American Freedom* highlights its importance to American history as well as the crucial link between race and slavery.³ The marriage of a plantation economy with a system of racial slavery differentiated the South from the other British mainland provinces at least from 1700, if not before. Slavery in the American South was racial slavery and thus issues of race also implicate slavery: slave agency, slave life and culture; slave resistance; and the relationship between white and slave culture. But historians of the South have also examined issues of slavery apart from race: the different slavery regimes in the Chesapeake, Piedmont, and the Lowcountry, and whether the nature of the plantation slave economy was more capitalist or paternalist or some combination of both.

Race and slavery before the Civil War

Long absent from historical discussion of slavery was any examination of the lives of slaves and the communities in which they lived. Before 1960 these areas were simply ignored, except by black historians, and slaves' lives were viewed as totally shaped by masters, who received the bulk of historical attention. With the reevaluation of the black role in Reconstruction and the civil rights movement, Southern historians began to give sustained attention to slave life and slave communities, especially from the 1970s with studies such as John Blassingame's.⁴ As Thomas C. Holt recently noted in a review of African-American historiography, "Emerging from these studies is a consensus that despite the harshness of the system, slaves were able to create

² Barbara Fields makes this point in her article "Ideology and Race in American History" in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York, 1992).

³ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), see especially pages 295-387.

⁴ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

communities beyond their masters' total control."⁵ Moreover, historians agree that these communities were vital to shaping slave life. Additionally, these studies are in agreement that slaves possessed an agency in shaping the contours of their enslavement, though the extent and nature of that agency is debated among historians.

With a large measure of agreement on slave community and slave agency, historians have now begun to probe black culture and the interaction between white and black cultures in the colonial and antebellum South. The most comprehensive study to emerge in the last five years is Philip Morgan's comparative study of black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Low Country.⁶ Philip Morgan's focus is colonial slavery. In ways ranging from work patterns to social life, Morgan finds two different types of slavery/culture [slave cultures], and he reveals the variety of social and economic exchanges between whites and blacks. He reveals stark [distinct] differences between the working conditions, labor patterns, skills, economic life, and material life of slaves in the two regions. Whereas John Blassingame focused on a community of slaves that was separate from the planters' world (and he studied slave life in the nineteenth-century South), Morgan finds that "in both regions the social lives of blacks and whites were inextricably intertwined." Although the segregation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not exist in the eighteenth-century South, he finds that boundaries nonetheless existed, "and behind them whites and blacks developed distinctive social and cultural forms."⁷ Morgan studies eighteenth-century black culture in the last third of his study and finds two distinct regional cultures sharing an ethnic subculture shaped and supported by family and kin groups that were central to slave communities.⁸ Ira Berlin, in his history of African-American slaves, *Generations of Captivity*, extends this work into the nineteenth century with his chapter "Migration Generations" in which he focuses on the

⁵ Thomas C. Holt, "African-American History" in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 316.

⁶ Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁷ Morgan, 437.

⁸ Morgan, 558 and 672.

“Second Middle Passage,” the massive forced migration of slaves from the upper to the lower Southern states, as “the central event in the lives of African-American people between the American Revolution and slavery’s final demise in December 1865.” The Second Middle passage affected all aspects of black life. It forced new labor regimens, broke up families and forced the reconstruction of others, and changed the relationship between masters and slaves. The “plantation revolutions” that it enabled in the Lower South and Mississippi Valley “created new, powerful slave societies” in these states while eroding slave societies in the Upper South.⁹

In addition to slave community and black culture, the nature of the relationship between slaves and master (this includes issues of accommodation and resistance) and the associated issue of the economic nature of the slave plantation have received much attention in recent decades from Southern historians. These issues are far from settled and still remain points of historiographic debate. Eugene Genovese’s thesis in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* remains at the center of this scholarly debate.¹⁰ According to Genovese planters were politically hostile to democracy; paternalism, characterized by personal relations with slaves and reciprocity of duties and rights, was the mode of planter-slave interaction and planters were in the market but not of it. James Oakes and, most recently, William DusiBerre have sought to counter Genovese’s thesis. James Oakes in *The Ruling Race* finds major divisions in a diverse slaveholding class. For Oakes, paternalism exists only among old elites who were of an earlier era. The tendency he finds is away from paternalism and toward liberal democracy with planters embracing free market capitalism. Oakes finds “paternalism giving way to liberalism throughout colonial, revolutionary, and pre-Civil War America” (xviii). DusiBerre in *Them Dark Days* examines slavery on the Georgia and South Carolina rice plantations and finds none of Genovese’s paternalism there. Instead, he reveals a

⁹ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 161-163.

¹⁰ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974).

harsh, callous, and extremely exploitative (read capitalistic) slavery with few and fleeting personal relations between masters and slaves.¹¹

Slavery also influenced Southern politics and political ideology, but historians have debated the degree of influence – where and how race and slavery intersected with Southern politics. Edmund Morgan, in *American Slavery, American Freedom*, was one of the first to address this issue and his thesis remains influential. Writing on colonial Virginia: He argues that “[r]acism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation.” Racial slavery as it came to exist in Virginia by the middle of the eighteenth century allowed the Virginia gentry to embrace concepts of equality because their laboring lower class was enslaved and politically powerless.¹² The relationship between slavery and politics remains another important issue in Southern history. William Cooper argues that defense of slavery, not economics or finance, was the central issue in antebellum Southern politics. The “politics of slavery” – the interaction of slavery, the political system, and white social values – dominated the South, he claims.¹³ William Freehling in his study of the Nullification crisis, though he reveals the economic dimension of the crisis, also argues for the primacy of slavery in politics. He argues that nullification “was to a crucial extent a revealing expression of South Carolina’s morbid sensitivity to the beginnings of the antislavery campaign.”¹⁴

Issues of race after the Civil War

The destruction of slavery by the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment ended the association of slavery and race in the South. But racial issues continued to dominate Southern society and politics. Although some historians have argued that white racial ideologies were

¹¹ James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); William Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

¹² Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 363-386. Quote on 386.

¹³ William Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ William Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), x. Freehling significantly revises this argument in his later book *Road to Disunion*, which I will discuss in detail below.

discontinuous with the racial ideologies after emancipation, others have asserted persuasively that, although its structure and content may have changed, there was a continuity of racial ideology between the two eras: the continued attempt to keep blacks politically and socially subordinate.¹⁵ Racial ideology did not diminish in its impact on the course of Southern history after emancipation. The maintenance of white dominance under the newly devised and powerful rhetorical banner of “white supremacy” became an almost overriding concern for white Southerners and the effects of this campaign one of the most critical concerns for black Southerners.¹⁶ Race had an impact on almost every facet of Southern life in the post-war era: from Reconstruction with its early Black Codes, its racial politics, its violent white supremacy campaigns, and its racially motivated “redemption” through the New South era’s racial divisions in work and labor, its early moves towards segregation and separate of black and white cultures; and its Jim Crow laws to Southern Populism’s struggle with race relations and the Southern Progressives’ attempts to deal with race.

Two influential books capture many of the issues of race in the South in the critical period between 1865 and 1915. These are Joel Williamson’s *The Crucible of Race* and Howard Rabinowitz’s *Race Relations in the Urban South*.¹⁷ Among much other analysis of racial ideas in the South, Williamson defines a periodicity for dominant white conceptions of racism. He views the 1880s, after Redemption, as the “Conservative Restoration” from the Liberalism of Reconstruction. Conservative racism sought to restore race relations, as far possible, to a semblance of race relations before the Civil War by the disfranchisement of black men and the separation of the races in public places.¹⁸ After about 1895 Radical racism became dominant.¹⁹ Although it shared goals with its predecessor, according to Williamson it had the special motive of

¹⁵ Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History”

¹⁶ Fields in “Ideology and Race in American History” explains why white supremacy should be considered by historians as a rhetorical slogan.

¹⁷ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South 1865-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

¹⁸ Williamson, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

depressing the expectations of black men by demonstrating the “surety of white supremacy and the futility of black resistance.”²⁰ In another important argument that differs from the interpretation of some other historians of the South, Williams asserts that “it was not the myriad and ingenious legal stratagems of Southern white leadership that disfranchised and depoliticized Negroes in the South after Reconstruction.” It was instead the combination of social, economic, physical, and psychological prohibitions imposed by whites that drove blacks out of Southern politics. “In the end,” says Williamson, “it was white power and white solidarity in the desire to exclude the great mass of Negroes from political life that effected the political reduction of black people.”²¹ Additionally, Williamson point out the important effects that occurred as a result of the growing separation of black and white cultures in the post-war South that resulted by the twentieth century in the South of two cultural worlds – one white and one black.²² The shattering of this two-world South would later be a critical factor in the civil rights movement.²³ Also, in an effort to explain the sudden increase of lynching and race riots that occurred in the 1895 to 1915 period, Williamson makes a lengthy argument that in the Radical racist, turn-of-the-century South blacks became scapegoats for whites “having difficulty coping with a burgeoning industrial-commercial-political

²⁰ Ibid., 224-225. Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) deals with an interesting aspect of this Radical takeover from Conservative racism: Ben Tillman himself, who started his political career with the conservative Redeemers in South Carolina, but who as governor had to deal with Radical racism; he was, Kantrowitz argues, caught in a bind between his goal of the rule of law, the new mob actions of Radical white supremacists, and his own past use of political violence in the name of white supremacy. See Kantrowitz, 156-197, especially 166.

²¹ Ibid., 247. J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) finds that the various disfranchisement stratagems of the Southern Democratic state governments were the key factor in the elimination of black political participation. (He finds reduced participation by whites too but is less certain the new laws were meant to disfranchise them.) Kousser’s research also leads him to believe that partisanship and Progressive rationalization were possible additional motivations for disfranchisement. See Kousser, 244-265.

²² Williamson, 256-257, 323.

²³ David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990) points out how the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960 at the beginning of the civil rights movement punched through this barrier and the importance it had for helping to end the Jim Crow regime: “But the sit-in demonstrators, with their books, polished manners and shoes, and business attire, presented an unaccustomed picture. They presented the white southerner with another anomaly: the preconceived notion of what blacks ought to look and behave like, and the reality of the demonstrators. In addition, the sit-ins blasted the notion that blacks were content with the system of segregation. ... In other words, the sit-ins initiated the process of lifting the veil of anonymity from blacks.” Goldfield, 122.

order as it impacted upon a social-psychological-sexual order” of an earlier period. Whites used violence against blacks to convince themselves, Williamson argues, that they were “managing their lives in important ways.”²⁴ Finally, and most importantly, Williamson makes a powerful argument that “race is, in fact, not a real problem, that any person of any race is not barred by any physical difference from belonging to any culture. Race, in brief, is a problem of the mind and not of the body.”²⁵

Rabinowitz significantly modifies Woodward’s argument in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* on the nature and timing of segregation in the South.²⁶ Woodward argued for the 1890s as the decade where earlier alternatives to segregation were closed off with the passage of the so-called Jim Crow laws. Focusing on five large urban areas, Rabinowitz reexamines the Woodward thesis and makes an important argument that the *de facto* segregation in public accommodations that appeared in these areas between 1865 and 1890 was viewed by white Republicans, Redeemers, and even many blacks as a progressive improvement over the former policy of exclusion. These blacks, Rabinowitz explains, “believed, or at least hoped, that separate facilities could be equal.”²⁷ Rabinowitz also disagrees with Woodward’s contention that segregation and disfranchisement were closely-linked, post-1890 developments. Rabinowitz instead argues that the withdrawal of Northern opposition to *de jure* segregation and growing black resistance to the existing *de facto* segregation explain the timing of the passage of the Jim Crow laws in the mid 1890s.²⁸ Historians thus recognize race as one of the most vital factors in understanding Southern history, but class is also an important theme for a complete knowledge of Southern history.

²⁴ Williamson, 318.

²⁵ Williamson, 318.

²⁶ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (3rd rev. ed.; New York, 1974).

²⁷ Rabinowitz, 196. Rabinowitz’s findings also concur with Williamson’s argument that separate black and white worlds had emerged by 1890 as a result of segregation. See Rabinowitz, 197.

²⁸ Rabinowitz, 332-339. Woodward included erosion of Northern opposition in his arguments for the timing of the Jim Crow laws but linked it with other causes that Rabinowitz does not find persuasive.

Class in the South

Class is especially important in the study of the New South but is also a significant factor in understanding antebellum Southern society. The end of a deferential society dominated by the gentry is probably the central topic of class in Southern revolution-era society. The central issue of class in the antebellum South concerns the relationship of slave-owning planters and non-slave-owning yeoman farmers. Yet another aspect of class in the Old South is the lives of poor whites: how did they fit into antebellum Southern society? In the Reconstruction period the central issues in this theme are the emergence of a post-war class structure in the South and the degree that it represented a change from the antebellum class structure. In the New South with the growth of mills, towns and a Southern middle class, one of the most important class issues was the relations between this new middle class and the new mill proletariat. Another important aspect of class has been the relationship between the town middle class and the country people/farmers. Both of these relationships involved the effort of the middle class to reform both the mill workers and the rural farmers. The cultural and political divisions between the middle class and the rural farmers and the mill workers is one of the key themes in this area, especially in the progressive-era South as the urban middle-class sought to reform the mill villages and rural counties. Also important in the study of class are the generational changes among mill workers and the implications for politics and Southern society. Finally, the rise of an African-American middle class is also an important issue in the study/teaching of the New South. Involved in this aspect of class are the relationships and growing distance between the white and black middle classes, the cultural gap/lack of understanding by whites of black culture, and white supremacists' suppression of black achievement/black middle class.

Class in the Old South

An important issue in the study and teaching of class in the colonial and early national South is the rise of individualism and the associated decline of the old gentry-dominated society. Rhys Isaac, in *The Transformation of Virginia*, writing about colonial and Revolutionary Virginia

discusses the rise of individual autonomy and popular republicanism and the decline of gentry-dominated, rank-ordered community, both of which were crucial parts of the Revolution.²⁹

In the study of the antebellum South class relations in white society is one of the most important issues and there is debate among scholars about its nature. The most important question scholars ask is: Was there a class division in white antebellum society? There are generally four schools among scholars about the importance of class in the white community. The first finds evidence of several white classes and indicates tensions among them: planters, small slaveholders, and non-slaveholding yeoman landowners. The other three argue that other factors overcame class tensions. The second finds whites united by racism. The third school of scholars emphasizes evidence that points to a common agrarian economy uniting whites. The fourth school finds a culture of honor uniting whites.³⁰ J. William Harris argues that there was change over time in these class relations. Examining the Augusta hinterlands in Georgia and South Carolina, Harris asserts that in a republican society, slave owners needed the support of all white men and largely succeeded in getting white men to see themselves as part of one white community; but the growing inability of non-slaveowners to move into the ranks of slave owners threatened to create a class division in white society. And the strains of the Civil War revealed class divisions in white society between planters and poor yeomen farmers that broke up white unity.³¹ In recent years the nature of life and work among poor, non-landowning whites in the Old South has received more attention from scholars. Bolton and Culclasure's *The Confessions of Edward Isham* is one of the best works on this subject. The authors examine the lives of poor whites through the life of Edward Isham, exploring poor white labor; poor women's lives; and interracial contacts between poor whites and slaves/free blacks, among other issues.

²⁹ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

³⁰ J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 1-4.

³¹ Harris, *passim*.

Class in the New South

In the New South, the rapid development of mills brought issues of class to the forefront in culture and politics, and historians have provided many outstanding studies of this aspect of the New South. Four of the best and most influential of these works are David L. Carlton's study of the interactions of mill workers and townspeople in South Carolina; Bryant Simon's examination of mill worker politics in the first decades of the twentieth century; William A. Link's volume on progressive reform efforts in the rural South; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and her co-authors' oral history of Carolina mill-worker life in the 1920s and 1930s.³² In the study and teaching of the New South the cultural divisions between mill village and towns and middle-class progressive reform are two of the most important issues. Carlton examines the relationship between upcountry South Carolina mill hands and townspeople, taking as his primary theme the cultural and class divisions between "town people" and "mill people." These divisions are apparent in the mill workers' defense of their individualism against the reform efforts of the middle-class townsmen. The class and cultural divide between turn-of-the-century town and mill people was also apparent in "Bleasism," the politics of Cole L. Blease that promised mill hands relief from middle-class reform. Simon makes mill worker politics his central focus but he too discusses the cultural divisions between mill and town people. He argues that by the 1930s mill-worker class politics in opposition to middle-class reform politics had displaced race politics and home rule issues. Important to this change were the language of "New Deal Americanism" displacing the language of "besieged white South Carolinians" and the generational differences among mill workers.

³² Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

Middle-class reform in the Progressive-era South is also the subject of Link's book. He studies Southern middle-class urban reform efforts in the rural South's race relations, health care, education, moral reform, and temperance campaigns. Both Carlton and Link find resistance to middle-class reform and clashing views of community in the New South but they differ on the nature of middle-class progressive reform. Link argues that it was motivated primarily by a true desire for reform but Carleton argues that it was motivated primarily by a desire for social control.

Hall and her coauthors are more concerned with life inside the mills and mill villages than with politics and town-mill interactions. The nature of mill "paternalism" and "welfare capitalism" are much debated by Southern scholars and the authors focus their study on these aspects of life in the mills, but perhaps the most important contribution of their book is in revealing the degree of agency exercised by the Carolina mill workers, often overlooked by earlier histories of the Southern mills.

Another aspect of mill life that Southern history scholars still debate is the reason for the failure of unions to take hold in the Southern textile industry. Hall and her coauthors show that more than a cultural tendency to individualism, the failure may have resulted from lack of faith in the unions to protect the mill hands from owner retaliation. For mill hands eagerly embraced the textile unions in 1933 under the NRA, but lost interest in organizing after they felt betrayed by union deals with management after the great 1934 strike.³³

Class and race intersect in historians' discussion of some aspects of the post-Civil War Southern economy. An important historiographic debate in this area concerns the origins of sharecropping and its associated credit-debt system. Also, important in this area is the nature of land ownership and economic activity in the New South. Leon Litwack, in his *Trouble in Mind*, touches on these issues but J. William Harris in *Deep Souths* makes them the central focus of his book. His comparison of rural societies in the Georgia Sea Islands, Piedmont Georgia, and the Mississippi Delta finds significantly different patterns of labor and land ownership in each area

³³ Hall, et al., *Like a Family*, 289-357.

related to the nature of the regional economy, including the extent of plantation continuance/development, the quality of the land, and the extent of regional capital development. These differences had an impact on the course of politics and social development in each region.³⁴

One of the most vibrant, long-lasting, and most critical debates among scholars of the post-Civil War South concerns the Populist movement. Scholars have been most interested in the origins of Southern Populism, the nature of the Populist movement in the South, and the meaning of Populism's success and eventual failure in the region. A full study of Southern Populism is lacking in the historiography. The general studies of Richard Hofstadter, Lawrence Goodwyn, and Robert McMath focus only partly on Southern Populism.³⁵ Steven Hahn focuses on the origins of Southern Populism.³⁶ C. Vann Woodward and Edward Ayers make the Southern Populists part of their studies of the New South.³⁷ All these works offer differing interpretations of Populism and the Populists. Focusing more on Western than on Southern Populists, Hofstadter viewed Populists as disoriented farmers outside the mainstream of society with unrealistic political goals. Woodward believed the Southern Populists were poorer farmers seeking an alternative to the oppressive conservatism and self-interest of Redeemer Democrats. Goodwyn focuses on the movement culture of Populism that grew out of the Farmers' Alliance and the promise Populism offered for democratic reform of capitalism. Hahn argues that Southern Populism originated among landed upcountry farmers drawn into the New South's cotton economy.³⁸ Ayers challenges Goodwyn's,

³⁴ J. William Harris, *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont, and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

³⁵ Hofstadter, Richard, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Random House, 1955); Goodwyn, Lawrence, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); McMath, Robert C., Jr., *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

³⁶ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983)

³⁷ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁸ Ayers, 524n71.

and to an extent Woodward's, view of Populism as a new democratic culture. McMath, in a more even handed account, explains the Populists without Goodwyn's overemphasis on the Alliance's "movement culture." By placing the Populists in the context of partisan competition that Goodwyn often ignores, McMath reveals the challenges they faced in a winner-take-all political system. I will deal with Ayers' and Woodward's interpretations of Southern Populism in more detail below.

A final issue of class in the New South that overlaps with race is the rise of the black middle class and its suppression by Southern white supremacists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Williamson engages this issue in his *Crucible of Race* as does Litwack in *Trouble in Mind*. But Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore in *Gender and Jim Crow*, writing about New South/progressive era in North Carolina makes it the central focus of her book.³⁹ She addresses several themes important to this issue, among them the failure of most whites to recognize class differences among blacks; black middle-class women's political activity; their use of progressive reforms to reshape black life and race relations; and their role as diplomats to the white community.

Religion in the South

Just as important as class to the shaping of Southern history is religion. In the pre-Civil War South a major development was the impact of Evangelicalism in bringing about the decline of the hierarchial society of the eighteenth century and its subsequent expansion across the South in the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. The predominance of Evangelicalism in the South from the beginning of the nineteenth century contributed to its distinctiveness as a separate region. In addition to the social and cultural impact of Evangelicalism, the accommodation of the evangelical religions with wealth and slaveholding has been much studied by historians. The growth of Black Christianity is another important antebellum development with numerous implications for the South's slave labor regime and the region's culture, and the antebellum split of

³⁹ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1996).

the evangelical churches over slavery also had lasting effects on Southern religion and society. Religion arguably became even more important for Southerners during Reconstruction and the era of the New South. In the New South era, as historian Edward Ayers points out, “Religious faith and language appeared everywhere in the New South.”⁴⁰ Evangelical religion also had a major influence on Southern progressivism as seen in reform crusades, concepts of Christian uplift, temperance campaigns, and moral reform campaigns.

Religion in the Old South

Because of its undoubted impact on Southern society, the rise to dominance in Southern religion of the evangelical churches is probably the most studied aspect of antebellum religion in the South. One of Isaac’s major themes is the revolution in community and status that resulted from the rise of popular evangelicalism in the late eighteenth century and the associated decline of the parish church and its Anglican establishment that had previously been the strongholds of gentry culture. The growth of African-American evangelicalism was an important aspect of Southern culture in the antebellum years and has only started to receive attention from historians in recent decades. Donald G. Mathews, in his study *Religion in the Old South*, was one of the first historians to give equal weight to black evangelicalism.⁴¹ Mathews explains that Evangelicals’ early assault on slavery first made Christianity attractive to the slaves – blacks discovered “that the freedom promised by the gospel was real and that Christianity was not solely the white man’s possession.”⁴² Evangelical Christianity also met several social and psychological needs for Southern blacks. According to Mathews, it provided “a sense of ultimate justice,” established “a claim upon the oppressor for recognition of the slaves’ dignity as human beings,” enhanced their self-esteem, helped them “order their daily lives in an ultimately meaningful way, and create a special

⁴⁰ Ayers, 160.

⁴¹ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). His chapter on African-America religion in the Old South is on pages 185-236.

⁴² Mathews, 195.

identification with the Supreme Being and His Mediator.”⁴³ Mathews points out that African and Christian traditions were combined in the slaves’ religion: “Black religion in the Old South was a churning suspension of ideas and behavior patterns fed by African and Christian traditions.”⁴⁴ Finally, he also explains the importance of black preachers to black Christianity. “Black congregations... could be aroused only by black preachers....”⁴⁵ But it is the intersection of black religion and white society that has spurred much of the historiographic debate. Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* suggests that Christianization served to accommodate slaves to the slave regime, essentially shoring up the planters’ paternalist hegemony but not all historians agree with his interpretation.

Yet another aspect of Evangelicalism in the antebellum South about which historians disagree is its relation to the family. Mathews and Christine Leigh Heyrman interpret this relationship differently. Whereas both note the resistance, even hostility, of Southern patriarchs to the Evangelicals in the last decades of the eighteenth and first decades of the nineteenth centuries, they differ about the significance of the Evangelicals’ shift to the family as the prime enforcer of Evangelical discipline and morality in place of the church conference or class meeting.⁴⁶ Mathews recognizes that the shift was important, but he argues that the Evangelicals’ emphasis on “family religion” grew over the decades and that the Evangelicals had always appealed to husbands as head of families. He sees a far more important development in the emergence of the ideal “evangelical woman,” who by the middle decades of the century became “the person primarily responsible for family religion because it was she who came to have the primary responsibility for religious nurture.”⁴⁷ Hyerman, on the other hand, argues that Evangelicals’ early appeal to women and insistence on church discipline of family life had resulted in hostility from patriarchs. She finds a

⁴³ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁶ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ Mathews, 101.

shift to the evangelical churches surrendering family discipline to patriarchs (including relations with slaves) and concentration on disciplining male social relations as the fundamental development that allowed evangelical church membership to expand among Southern males. “The willingness of the churches to relax their monitoring of the brethren’s private behavior sent the message that evangelical men might rule their households pretty much as they saw fit, running little risk of interference or censure.”⁴⁸

Religion in the Reconstruction-era and the New South

Religion may have been even more important in Southern life after the Civil War. Southerners turned to their churches to help them cope with the social pressures of emancipation, Reconstruction, and the building of the New South. And the rapid emergence of the separate African-American churches after emancipation was a vital component of the development of African-American communities. Reconstruction in particular was a critical time for Southern Evangelicals as they sought to interpret the defeat of the South and black churches sought independence from the white churches. Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion*, makes these issues the focus of his book.⁴⁹ Focusing on the three most important churches in the South during Reconstruction – the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Presbyterians – he examines religious reconstruction of the South through the study of three groups: southern white Christians, northern white Christians, and black Christians of both regions that each had a different conception of the war’s meaning. He finds that Southern whites, though they thought the war represented God’s chastening, were unrepentant over slavery and secession, believing both to have been righteous, and viewed the Northern churches as politicized and radical, justifying continued separation.⁵⁰ For black Southerners “the real meaning of the war lay in the deliverance of four million people from

⁴⁸ Heyrman, 250.

⁴⁹ Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁰ Stowell, 44 and 180.

bondage.”⁵¹ They sought personal freedom and religious independence in the formation of their own churches under their own preachers.

There is little doubt among historians of the centrality of these churches to African-American communities both in Reconstruction and the Jim Crow Regime of the New South. Leon Litwack, in his *Trouble in Mind*, among many other aspects, details the importance of the church and their preachers under the Jim Crow regime of the New South.⁵² A final issue regarding religion in the study and teaching of the history of the New South is the relation between evangelicalism and progressive reform. This relationship is one of the major themes of William Link’s *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism* where he discusses the relationship of evangelicalism with moral reform, prohibition movements, and temperance campaigns. He also shows how evangelicalism provided the revival model for reform campaigns and how reformers adopted a “crusade style” of reform.⁵³ And Gaines M. Foster’s *Moral Reconstruction* demonstrates how changing attitudes in the Southern political leadership in accommodating a larger role for the federal government in legislating morality helped to enable the success of the Christian and prohibitionist lobby in the early twentieth century.⁵⁴

Southern evangelicalism was also of immense importance to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to the important fact that many of the movement’s early leaders were evangelical ministers, black appeals to white Southern evangelicals’ morality was of critical importance to the success of the movement.⁵⁵ Race, class, and religion are, then, the three major themes of Southern history, but states’ rights, honor, and the extent of continuity between the Old

⁵¹ Stowell, 181.

⁵² Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁵³ William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁵⁴ Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁵⁵ Goldfield, 105 and 121. “White southerners ... must either reconcile their deep religious faith to a new social order or live with and explain away the increasingly glaring contradiction between faith and reality” (121). Goldfield, 169-171, also argues that the civil rights movement had a restorative effect on Southern whites’ evangelicalism.

South and the New South are also important themes for a complete understanding of Southern history and therefore they must be addressed in any survey or overview.

States' Rights, Honor, and Continuity between the Old South and the New South

States' rights was not important only in the politics of the antebellum era of Southern history, but also played a role in the politics of Reconstruction, the New South and the twentieth-century South as well. Honor was an important and integral aspect of antebellum Southern society. Its influence was present in politics, gender relations, the slave system, and social relations. Continuity and change between the New South and the Old South, though largely a historiographic issue, does involve the ways that New South boosters used the image of the Old South. It shows as well the cultural manifestations of the Old South in New South ideologies. And it involves the issues of generational and economic separation: the push of the New South boosters to break away from the Old South while at the same time using it to validate themselves and their policies.

States' Rights

In the antebellum era, one of the primary areas of focus for states' rights scholarship has been the South Carolina Nullification crisis of 1832-1833. It offers the best opportunity to explore the states' rights theme in Southern history and in a Southern history survey. All works on antebellum Southern politics explore the topic of states' rights to one degree or another in regards to its impact on the causes of the Civil War. William Freehling, in his important *Prelude to Civil War*, examines the Nullification Crisis from the perspective of South Carolina politics and society, and Richard Ellis in *Union at Risk* examines not only the Nullification crisis but also the divisions in antebellum states' rights thought that impacted the crisis and subsequent developments in Southern politics.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina 1816-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Richard E. Ellis, *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

During Reconstruction and “Redemption” the association of white supremacy and states’ rights continued from antebellum years but changed from an emphasis on the defense of slavery to opposition to Northern interference in Southern race relations and the legitimacy of the Radical Republican governments of Reconstruction. Dan T. Carter, in his book *When the War Was Over*, examines the failure of the South’s “self-Reconstruction” of 1865-66 and states’ rights. His major theme is the conservative Southern politicians’ failure to accept the implications of emancipation and greater civil rights for blacks that brought on Radical Reconstruction. And he sees this as the best the South had to offer in terms of politicians.⁵⁷ Ted Tunnell and Richard Zuczek with their state studies of Reconstruction in Louisiana and South Carolina, respectively, deal with the contest over states’ rights and legitimacy in the Reconstruction South and the white reactionary campaigns of political violence to overthrow the Radical governments that increasingly resulted in force as the arbiter of legitimacy.⁵⁸

Though states’ rights was a lesser force in Southern history after the turn-of-the-century accommodations on racial politics between North and South, it still made an impact on Southern politics in various ways, from opposition to moral legislation and later the New Deal to the “Dixiecrats” and the civil rights struggle. Gaines M. Foster in his book *Moral Reconstruction* shows how changing attitudes in regards to states’ rights among Southern political leaders helped to pass moral legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Roger Biles in *The South and the New Deal*, among many other topics, explains how lingering states’ rights ideologies shaped Southern conservatives’ opposition to New Deal policies.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Dan T. Carter, *When the War was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South 1865-1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

⁵⁸ Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996). Zuczek explains how the Redeemers’ effort to overthrow the Radical South Carolina government essentially became a military campaign.

⁵⁹ Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

Honor

Concepts of male honor were an integral part of antebellum Southern culture, impacting politics, slavery, and class relations. Moreover, in both the antebellum South and the postwar South protection of female honor was part of the maintenance of male honor. And honor continued to be an important aspect of Southern society in the New South era, influencing such areas as politics, race relations, and Confederate celebration.

With such importance to Southern culture and politics, honor has not escaped the attention of Southern historians. Many have made it the prime focus of their studies. Bertram Wyatt-Brown in his extensive and influential study *Southern Honor* explains the full range of honor's impact on Southern antebellum culture.⁶⁰ Joanne Freeman in *Affairs of Honor* asserts that the culture of honor was an essential part of national public life in the early republic, and she argues that it "formed the very infrastructure of national politics."⁶¹ William Cooper in *The South and the Politics of Slavery* discusses the close relationship in antebellum Southern politics between honor and the politics of slavery.⁶² Though honor is not the central focus of their studies, other historians such as Foster, in *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, Litwack, and Williamson reveal its impact on many aspects of Southern culture, both white and black. Foster shows that honor was particularly important to Confederate veterans' celebrations, and Williamson explains how it was intertwined in racial politics.⁶³

Continuity and change between the New South and the Old South

The Civil War was a watershed in Southern history. Emancipation altered the basis of the Southern economy and society. Nevertheless, numerous schools of thought among historians have

⁶⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁶¹ Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xviii.

⁶² The close relationship between the defense of slavery and the defense of Southern honor is central to Cooper's thesis. See Cooper, 73-74.

⁶³ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 24-29 and 33-35.

developed over time regarding the degree of continuity versus change between the Old South and the Reconstruction era in both the plantation economy and the structure of society. How much of a break was the Civil War and Reconstruction with the pre-war economy and society? As Eric Foner explains in the preface to his definitive work *Reconstruction*, historians have had varying interpretations over the decade from the 1950s revisionists' claims for a complete radical break from antebellum society to the 1960s/1970s "postrevisionist" scholars' arguments for a "superficial" Reconstruction and conservative Republican ideology. Foner, like the revisionists, finds Reconstruction radical but not as successful as they found it. One of the central historical debates in this area has been over just how new the "New South" really was. Because answering this question involves so many areas of Southern life it has primarily been addressed in the synthetic works that I will review below.

Another important area where issues of continuity and change are raised is the life of women in the New South. Jane Censer, updating the work of earlier historians like Anne Firor Scott, in *The Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood* addresses continuity and change in roles and attitudes of elite white women in areas such as the redefinition of women's sphere, courtship, marriage, female education, and property ownership.⁶⁴ The nature of the Redeemers in the New South has also been debated by historians: were the new economic leaders planter's sons or a new middle class? Many historians now argue for the latter but some argue that planters continued to provide economic leadership. In Redeemer politics examples can be found of both planters and new men. Historians remain divided about which group provided the primary political leadership - the old planter class or the emerging town-centered middle class, but recent studies such as that of Jane Censer and Edward Ayers have tended to see a movement among planters away from residence on the plantations to a primary residence in towns, making life in the New South more town centered. Also, the study of the Lost Cause has raised issues of continuity and change,

⁶⁴ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1970).

primarily in the use of the “lost cause” by New South leaders to discipline and unify its population, an issue discussed by Gaines Foster, in his *Ghosts of the Confederacy*.⁶⁵

Synthetic Works

Because Southern history should be taught using the books with the best examination of the key thematic issues and historiographic debates, several synthetic works must be included in a review of the historiography of the field: William Freehling’s *Road to Disunion*; Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*; and Edward Ayer’s *Promise of the New South*. The interpretations presented by these historians in these important books must inform any Southern history survey.⁶⁶ These authors combine many of the themes discussed above in their books and they also provide illumination of important issues in the areas of slavery, the coming of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the New South not covered in the foregoing discussion. This brief review will explain the major arguments of these influential works will be discussed and summarize their most important themes. The abridged works of Foner and Ayers would also be useful to assign for student reading. These books together engage almost all of the historiographic debates listed above and their views on these debates will be discussed.

William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*

At the beginning of his magisterial, in-depth survey of the politics of the antebellum South (which I make no attempt to summarize here) Freehling shows that the historical concept of *the* South is erroneous; there were, he makes clear, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century,

⁶⁵ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 139-144. Foster also ties the ritual of the “lost cause” to the defeat of Southern Populism: “The acting out in its rituals of social solidarity, respect for loyal followers, and deference to leaders helped foster the cultural patterns that made political revolt or racial reform so difficult. The celebration thereby not only contributed to the failures of the Populists’ challenge to the established order, it helped imbue the New South with values and attitudes that rendered it a particularly conservative society” (195).

⁶⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Ayers cited previously.

many Souths – the Deep or Lower South, the Middle South, and the Border South – each with distinctive characteristics and, most importantly, different slavery regimes and numbers of slaves (and attitudes towards slavery). Freehling also modifies his argument regarding nullification as South Carolinians’ early response to antislavery and a manifestation of guilt over slaveholding and of fear of slave insurrection.⁶⁷ His modified thesis results from his emphasis in *The Road to Disunion* of the Lower South fearing the consequences of possible emancipation in the Border South states. “In the wider perspective of continual colonization proposals in national and Upper South state politics in the 1830s,” he explains, “a perspective too much lacking in my narrowly focused localistic study of South Carolina, Carolinians had reason to worry that all the southern world might not be South Carolina.” They also feared the consequences of their depressed economy in relation to the more prosperous states of the newly opened southwest and the decline of their old republican political ideology in the face of Andrew Jackson’s democratic politics. In short, he writes, he now believes South Carolina nullifiers were not over-reactors to antislavery but simply desperate “that their little cockpit of a state might be too divided and debilitated to say no to the (from their perspective) disastrous trends of American and southern history.”⁶⁸ Finally, Freehling disputes William Cooper’s thesis in *The South and the Politics of Slavery* that slavery was the dominant issue in antebellum Southern political contests from 1840. Though he agrees with Cooper on the dilemma slavery potentially (and ultimately did) present for the Southern Whigs,⁶⁹ he points out that Cooper gave too little attention to the politics in the Border South states. Also, he believes Cooper ignored local political contests that took place between the slavery-

⁶⁷ See above.

⁶⁸ Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 597-598n16.

⁶⁹ Freehling puts the dilemma this way: “But if slavery ever became the primary issue and if their party needed to present a united front, Southern Whigs would face an unrelenting double bind.” If they ignored or opposed the Democrats’ campaigns to strengthen slavery, they would be allying with “anti-Slavepower Yankees” and appear soft on slavery. On the other hand, if they employed “their gag rule gambit of out-Slavepowering the Democracy,” they would defend slavery for the South but put at risk their national alliance with antislavery Northern Whigs they needed to defeat Democrats nationally. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 334.

rhetoric heavy presidential contests.⁷⁰ “The thesis finally cannot account for the enormous amount – often the greater amount – of rhetoric devoted to other themes even in presidential years, rhetoric, for example, which makes Southern Whigs’ fears on economic nationalism in the mid-1840s hardly the aberration Cooper thinks it.”⁷¹ Freehling’s survey thus revises previous interpretations of the interrelationship of slavery and politics in the Old South (including his own) and reveals the complexity of antebellum Southern politics.

Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*

As his title indicates, Foner’s focus is on Reconstruction. He examines both the Reconstruction-era North and South; four themes dominate his study of the Reconstruction-era South: the centrality of the black experience and black agency in the making of Reconstruction; the remodeling of Southern society; the interconnection of race and class with the evolution of racial attitudes and patterns of race relations, and the revolutionary nature of Reconstruction.⁷² Foner notes the revolutionary nature of Reconstruction: “An entire social order had been swept away, and on its ruins a new one had to be constructed.”⁷³ Additionally, he points out that the involvement of the freedmen in the political process was revolutionary: “Black participation in Southern public life after 1867 was the most radical development of the Reconstruction tears, a massive experiment in interracial democracy without precedent in the history of this or any other country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century.”⁷⁴ And despite its limitations and failures, Foner asserts that

⁷⁰ A point also made by Michael Holt in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58 and 76. Also see his comments on his agreement with Freehling on the inadequacy of Cooper’s thesis, 994 note 59.

⁷¹ Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 599-600n19. Minisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), though she only focuses on South Carolina, takes Cooper’s argument even further, arguing that the politics of slavery as it developed in South Carolina actually resulted in a “distinct, separatist ideology based on the values of slavery and a rigorous critique of democracy” that led to a questioning of the ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy and the overthrow of Jacksonian democracy in secession. Sinha, 2-5.

⁷² Foner, introduction.

⁷³ Foner, 128.

⁷⁴ Foner, xxv.

“Congressional Reconstruction was indeed a radical departure, a stunning and unprecedented experiment in interracial democracy.”⁷⁵

The black experience and black agency were central in the making of Reconstruction. “Upon emancipation blacks evidenced,” says Foner, “a desire for independence from white control, for autonomy both as individuals and as members of a community itself being transformed as a result of emancipation.” After emancipation, the institutions that free blacks had created – churches, schools, and mutual benefit societies – and the semiautonomous slave culture focused on family and church “were consolidated, expanded, and liberated from white supervision, and new ones – particularly political organizations – joined them as focal points of black life.” With these actions, Foner points out, “blacks during Reconstruction laid the foundation for the modern black community....”⁷⁶ And the Republican Party was a key part of the black experience of Reconstruction. “In Union Leagues, Republican gatherings, and impromptu local meetings, ordinary blacks in 1867 and 1868 staked their claim to equal citizenship in the American republic.”⁷⁷ The Republican Party, Foner notes, “became an institution as central to the black community as the church and school.” And Foner goes on to explain that after the collapse of the Southern Republican governments and black disfranchisement “blacks would recall the act of voting as a defiance of inherited norms of white superiority, and regard ‘the loss of suffrage as being the loss of freedom.’”⁷⁸

Presidential Reconstruction was in part an attempt to resist any further remodeling of Southern society after emancipation; but such a remaking was later attempted, and partly achieved, during Radical Reconstruction. Foner discusses the key political and social aspects of

⁷⁵ Foner, 278.

⁷⁶ Foner, 78.

⁷⁷ Foner, 288. Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1989) highlights the important link between political mobilization of blacks in Reconstruction, labor conflict, and the Radical Union Leagues. “The League was as much an economic and protest movement as a partisan one.... The leagues expressed wider social concerns and encouraged labor insurgency” (189).

⁷⁸ Foner, 291.

both governments. For the presidential Reconstruction regimes these were: massive disfranchisement of former Confederates necessitated by the reluctance of white leaders to enfranchise the freedmen, President Johnson's refusal to break planter hegemony, and Southern post-war leaders' refusal to accept blacks as anything but plantation laborers. These policies "envisioned less a New South," notes Foner, "than an improved version of the Old" and revealed, says Foner, "how profoundly attitudes toward the emancipated slaves and their place in the new social order affected efforts to reshape the Southern polity and economy."⁷⁹ The record of the Radical Republican governments was mixed. Foner points out the accomplishments of the Radical Southern governments: functioning biracial democratic government, rebuilt and expanded public facilities, public school systems, and modernized tax codes. Additionally, they had prevented the attempt to substitute a legal system of labor discipline for slavery; furthermore Radical Reconstruction "transformed [freedmen's] lives and aspirations in ways un-measurable by statistics and in realms far beyond the reach of law."⁸⁰ But Foner points out that the Radical governments were not successful in other respects: "Blacks still suffered from dire poverty, and the old ruling class remained largely intact, implacably hostile to the new order of things."⁸¹ Regarding the interconnection of race and class with the evolution of racial attitudes and patterns of race relations, Foner discusses the economic issue that dominated Reconstruction: the planters' belief that "the South's prosperity and their own survival as a class depended ... upon ... the ability of the planter to command labor." "And the conflict between former masters attempting to recreate a disciplined

⁷⁹ Foner, 215. Carter makes the period of presidential Reconstruction the central focus of his book. Carter, though he does not dispute that Southern leaders sought to re-impose social and labor discipline on the freedmen in the infamous black codes of 1865, notes that the leaders were by and large veterans of the old Whig party and that historians have tended to ignore "the extent to which this postwar leadership turned grudgingly but surely from a slave to a free society." He also argues that "a substantial number" of postwar Southerners, including some planters, were willing to "accept the replacement of the plantation economy with a farmer dominated agricultural society." Carter, 3-4.

⁸⁰ Foner, 410.

⁸¹ Foner, 410-411.

labor force and blacks seeking to infuse meaning into their freedom by carving out autonomy in every aspect of their lives, profoundly affected the course of Reconstruction.”⁸²

Finally, Foner states his summary assessments of Reconstruction. “The freedmen’s political and civil equality proved transitory, but the autonomous black family and a network of religious and social institutions survived the end of Reconstruction. Nor could the seeds of educational progress planted then be entirely uprooted.” And he points out that the foundation for future progress was laid: “[T]he institutions created or consolidated after the Civil War – the black family, school, and church – provided the base from which the modern civil rights revolution sprang.” And although blacks were unable to achieve the economic independence that they had hoped for, “Reconstruction closed off even more oppressive alternatives than the Redeemers’ New South.” The “small but growing number of black landowners, businessmen, and professionals” in the New South revealed that “the doors of economic opportunity that had opened could never be completely closed.” Moreover, Foner notes that Reconstruction established “a framework of legal rights enshrined in the Constitution that, while flagrantly violated after 1877, created a vehicle for future federal intervention in Southern affairs.” Despite these achievements, though, Foner believes that, overall, “Reconstruction can only be judged a failure.” It failed to achieve far-reaching economic change or establish the freedmen’s political and civil equality. “Perhaps the remarkable thing about Reconstruction was not that it failed, but that it was attempted at all and survived as long as it did.” For blacks, the failure of Reconstruction “was a disaster whose magnitude cannot be obscured by the genuine accomplishments that did endure.” He points out that “Reconstruction’s demise and the emergence of blacks as a disfranchised class of dependent laborers greatly facilitated racism’s further spread” so that by the beginning of the twentieth century racism “had become more deeply embedded in the nation’s culture and politics” than it ever had been.⁸³

⁸² Foner, 129.

⁸³ Foner, 602-612.

Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South*

Promise of the New South is now the definitive study of the New South. Its central focus is the conflict between the legacies of the Old South and the new forces of modernity in the New South.⁸⁴ It has displaced C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South* in that role (though at least one reviewer disagrees with me).⁸⁵ I believe this is the case for several reasons. First, Ayers offers a very rich description of everyday life and social conditions in the New South. In his chapter "In Town" Ayers provides an overview of life in the towns and villages of the New South; in "Dry Goods" he explains the impact of stores and the consumer goods they stocked on Southerners, as well as the role of merchants in the changing commercial culture of the New South; in "In Black and White" he explores race relations; in "Faith" Ayers examines changes in Southerner's spiritual lives; and in "Books" and "Voices" Ayers describes Southern literature and music, respectively. Second, Ayers' three chapter study of the Populists is superior to Woodward's. Ayers complicates a story that Woodward presented too much as one of the Populists versus the Redeemers. Woodward characterizes the Populist revolt as "symptomatic of popular discontent with the New Order of the Redeemers" and a challenge to "the New South romanticism."⁸⁶ But Ayers provides a more complicated picture of Populist motivations: "No single idea or policy drove the Populist movement, only a general insistence that the government pursue actions more equitable for the majority of citizens, become more open in its actions, and be willing to go beyond shibboleths."⁸⁷ And though both Woodward and Ayers agree that the Populist farmer was less likely to reside in counties with heavy black majorities, Woodward presents a class-based profile, while Ayers reveals that other factors were at work. According to Woodward, "rank and file

⁸⁴ Ayers specifically states this as his thesis in "Narrating the New South," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Aug., 1995), 555-566.

⁸⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). Howard N. Rabinowitz in his review of *Promise of the New South* in *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Aug., 1993), 505-515, asks, "Is it now the standard work on the subject? It could have been, but, as it stands, the answer is no." Ayers defends his book in "Narrating the New South" cited above.

⁸⁶ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 231 and 249.

⁸⁷ Ayers, 266.

members of the party sprang from lower economic and social classes.”⁸⁸ Ayers finds that Populist farmers owned the land they farmed and tended to live in counties where railroads and dry goods stores of the Southern “new order” had arrived. And although their rhetoric did proclaim a disdain for capitalist and political monopolies, Ayers points out that in terms of policies the Populists demanded only that the Southern “new order be brought into alignment with the ideals of American democracy and fair capitalism.”⁸⁹ Moreover, Ayers presents a more complicated picture of the Populists’ efforts to gain the support of black farmers. Where Woodward over simply states that the “bolder” Populists “challenged the cult of racism with the doctrine of common action among farmers and workers of both races,” Ayers shows that there were limits to the Populists’ alliance with blacks; except in North Carolina, the Populists were unwilling to risk local black rule.⁹⁰ Georgia Populist leader Tom Watson “wanted blacks to support Populist economic policies but not to expect anything besides economic unity.”⁹¹ But Southern blacks “could not perceive their ‘self-interest’ in the single mindedly economic terms that Tom Watson preached.”⁹²

Ayers also has a much more convincing explanation of the origins of Jim Crow than Woodward’s class-based explanation. Woodward ties the origins of Jim Crow laws to the rise of “insurgent white democracy” against the reactionary Redeemers and to lower-class whites’ demand to bolster white supremacy in the face of their need to work in competition with black wage earners in the cotton fields, mines, and wharves of the New South.⁹³ Ayers takes a different view. Building on earlier work done by Howard Rabinowitz and others, Ayers argues that the first segregation laws were not based on white class demands, but instead resulted from white reaction to “the growing ambition, attainments, and assertiveness of blacks.” It was “the product of no particular

⁸⁸ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 246.

⁸⁹ Ayers, 281.

⁹⁰ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 249. In North Carolina Populist leader Marion Butler formed a fusion alliance with the Republican Party, including black Republicans in the eastern part of the state, that captured the legislature in 1894 and controlled the state government until defeated by a violent white supremacist Democratic campaign in 1898. See Ayers, 280 and 290-293, 298-301.

⁹¹ Ayers, 273.

⁹² Ayers, 274. Ayers discusses the complicated relationship of Southern blacks with Populism 269-275.

⁹³ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 211.

class” and “grew out of concrete situations, out of technological, demographic, economic, and political changes that had unforeseen and often unintended social consequences.” Far from being a tool of the lower class, segregation to whites became “a badge of sophisticated, modern, managed race relations.”⁹⁴

Additionally, Ayers updates Woodward’s examination of Southern voting patterns in the 1880s. Woodward views the 1880s as a “period of political torpor” in which the average Southerner, faced by a lack of political competition to the Redeemers’ Democratic Party, retreated into “political nihilism.”⁹⁵ Ayers, seconding the work of Kousser, modifies this view: there was competition, Republicans (and blacks) still managed to vote and some state parties remained strong. According to Ayers, “Redemption failed to eliminate the opponents the Democrats had faced under Reconstruction. The Republicans carried considerable strength into and throughout the 1880s.” The party even gained ground, Ayers points out, in Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.⁹⁶ For instance, in North Carolina the Republican Party remained strong and attracted both black and white votes.

Moreover, Woodward’s work on the Southern economy is updated by Ayers. In addition to his chapters on the growth of stores, mills, and extractive industries in the New South that show the central importance of the railroad in these developments, Ayers significantly revises Woodward’s picture of a colonial Southern economy. Woodward contended that the Southern textile industry was colonial and dependent on Northern capital.⁹⁷ Ayers (and others) have convincingly demonstrated that most Southern textile mills were owned by Southerners. “Perhaps most important for the South’s perception of itself, the textile mills were built with local capital and

⁹⁴ Ayers, 145 and 491n34. See also Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South*.

⁹⁵ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 105-106.

⁹⁶ Ayers, 37. Also see Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁹⁷ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 308. Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) also argues for the central importance of the railroads in building the New South but finds Northern financial interests much more involved in the Southern railroads and associated extractive industries than Ayers finds in the textile industry. In particular see Nelson, 168-169.

employed local people.”⁹⁸ *Promise of the New South*, then, not only complicates and revises Woodward’s account of important aspects of the New South but also adds much to our knowledge of Southern life during this period. Together, these three important synthetic works provide an excellent survey of the many issues of Southern politics and culture from the antebellum years to the eve of the First World War.

Conclusion

Race, religion, and class thus took on particular aspects in the Southern states that along with states’ rights and honor combined to make the region a distinctive area and a region of the United States of which scholars in American history must be knowledgeable, for United States history cannot be understood without taking into account the South. Moreover, the historiographic debates summarized in this essay must be a part of any survey of Southern history because students should understand the issues that are being debated by historians in the field, as well as the important interpretations current in the field. No doubt historians will continue to debate issues of race, class, and religion in the South but, as I hope this essay has demonstrated, these debates will serve to enrich our understanding of this vitally important region’s history.

⁹⁸ Ayers, 112. Ayers’ study of the Southern economy appears in his chapters “Dry Goods” and “Mill and Mine,” 81-131.

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