

A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth Century South in Comparative Perspectives

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Review

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Kolchin, Peter *A Sphinx on the American Land: The Nineteenth Century South in Comparative Perspective*. Louisiana State University Press, \$22.95 ISBN 080712866X

Many souths

Slim volume asserts broad comparative methodology in study of region

Social anthropology has but one method; it is the comparative method; it is impossible pronounced Evans-Pritchard, the Oxford anthropologist. His point is that perfect comparisons are impossible, yet without comparison there is no analysis. Peter Kolchin would doubtless agree; certainly **A Sphinx on the American Land** illuminates the U.S. South û and other souths in the world û in a way that is both distinctive and essential.

Originating in the Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures at LSU, this short and well-crafted volume is organized in three chapters: The South and the Un-South, Many Souths, and Other Souths, followed by an Afterword. The first chapter usefully surveys changes in perception of the southern region, how its distinctiveness emerged and evolved, and to some degree remains as an identity in the minds of both southerners and non-southerners in the United States, and how scholars characterize that identity. While Kolchin's comments, on pages 30 to 31, regarding contemporary southern identity are sensible if not surprising, his tracing of historical changes during Reconstruction, within a footnote on page 33, will be informative to lay readers.

Many Souths usefully illustrates a point that should always be made û the existence of a variety of southerners and souths û and concludes with a brief comment on how one traces identity to heritage.

Other Souths offers a comparison of the American South, especially nineteenth century plantation society, and what Kolchin identifies as other

souths. How did slavery in the South compare to serfdom in Russia? How extreme was death and destruction in the United States Civil War compared with other wars? What was typical and atypical about Confederate nationalism? What were key differences and similarities between reconstruction in the South and in post-serfdom Russia? These analyses are powerfully stimulating and prove Kolchin's assertion of the unique strength of comparison.

Readers should be aware that Kolchin confines himself primarily to the works of historians. The comparative method, applied to the South or elsewhere, is also practiced in anthropological, sociological, theological, and literary studies. A brief example of such comparative study would be my article *The South in a Global World* published by *Virginia Quarterly Review* in Autumn 2002, which distills ideas from a Rockefeller-funded seminar on the South in comparative and global perspective. A remarkable recent book, published by LSU Press this year, is Miles Richardson's *Being-in-Christ and Putting Death in its Place*, which compares Latin American Catholicism and Southern Baptist Protestantism. Works like these emphasize the cultural dimension, whereas Kolchin focuses more on political economy.

In any case, this short but well documented volume is essential and suggestive reading for anyone interested in the American South as part of our world history.

James L. Peacock is Kenan Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is currently working on a study of relations between religious and cultural groups in Singapore, as a Fulbright New Century Scholar, and during the 2003-04 academic year will be a Fellow at the National Humanities Center in Cary, North Carolina, where he will continue comparative study of the global U.S. South.