

Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order

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Review

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Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth and Genovese, Eugene D.. *Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order.* Cambridge University Press, \$22.99 softcover ISBN 9780521721813

"Slavery in the Abstract"

Elite southerners argued in the antebellum era that hierarchy was natural to society and that enslavement was better for propertyless laborers than free agency as experienced by wage workers in the North and in Europe. Urban workers especially lived as impoverished victims of a rapidly emerging capitalist market economy. The argument taken to its logical conclusion by the South's leading clergymen, politicians, and other intellectuals in sermons, pamphlets, newspapers, Fourth of July speeches, and other forums maintained that enslavement should not be limited to black people but rather extended to include many white workers, a concept the authors refer to as "Slavery in the Abstract." Certain of the correctness of the slave system, proslavery ideologues predicted capitalism's imminent demise and claimed that enslaved blacks of the South fared better than the majority of the world's workers and peasants. Using the observations of socialists, labor leaders, and other critics of early industrialization to suit their own purpose, they argued that slavery was the more humane way to connect labor and capital.

For readers familiar with the previous scholarship of the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, the book's thesis will come as no surprise. As Genovese writes in the introduction, "Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and I long insisted that the presuppositions of the southern defense of slavery ended with Slavery in the Abstract" (1). What is new in this volume is the meticulous documentation of the doctrine's pervasiveness in speeches and writings of the southern elite. Left undocumented is the extent to which the message of Slavery in the Abstract penetrated the thinking of southerners other than the intellectuals who are at the center of this research. Although the authors contend that the

concept had wide circulation in the South, spread through “the influence of local leaders,” (51) they do not demonstrate that Slavery in the Abstract gained more currency than other ideas circulating in the same way and found in such civic texts as the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and George Washington’s Farewell Address. What non-elite southerners made of Slavery in the Abstract remains unknowable given the authors’ sources.

In what is perhaps the least satisfying part of the book, the last chapter (entitled “Perceptions and Realities”) examines the assumptions of proslavery ideologues to determine whether they were on or off the mark when it came to comparing the living and working condition of slaves to those of serfs, peasants, and wage workers in other parts of the world. This comparative approach results in some odd observations, such as this one: “except for the horrible threat of sale, slave children fared worse than peasant children elsewhere” (235). A pretty big exception, we might agree.

Some scholars will find the book provocative; others may find it troubling in what it reveals about past attitudes toward laboring people. Densely written, the work is probably not the best way to introduce newcomers to the scholarship of these important historians. Those already familiar with their work will be interested in the book because it represents a culmination of Fox-Genovese and Genovese’s thinking on an important topic.

Marie Jenkins Schwartz, Professor and Chair of the History Department at the University of Rhode Island, is the author of two books on slavery: Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South (2000) and Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South (2006), both published by Harvard University Press.