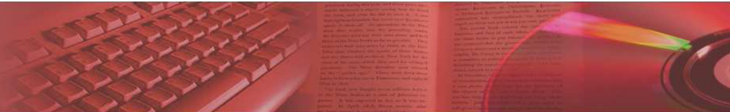
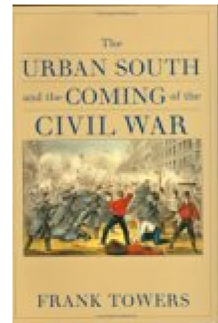


Frank Towers. *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2004. xi + 285 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2297-3.



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Cancers in a Planter's Paradise

Few modern Americans would consider Baltimore or St. Louis to be "Southern" cities. New Orleans, while geographically Southern, retains a unique character that separates it from the rest of the South. Before the Civil War, all three not only were considered part of the slave South but by 1860 were the region's largest metropolitan centers. Frank Towers, an associate professor of History at the University of Calgary, argues in *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* that these cities' sizes made their economies and politics more like those of Northern urban centers and sharply distinguished them from the society and politics of the rural South. The existence of large working classes and workers' influence in urban politics provided Southern nationalists with concrete examples of the dangers presented by the connection with the North. Contending that the cities were "somehow alien to their region" (p. 14), secessionists effectively read the big cities out of the South while pointing to them to show why disunion was necessary.

According to Towers, secession advocates claimed that the South's largest cities displayed the same characteristics that had "turned the North into slavery's enemy"; in fact, they were harbingers of changes that would "destabilize Southern society and thereby bring about the fall of slavery" (p. 16). Slavery provided the foundation for the South's patriarchal, hierarchical, and honor-bound society, in which white males enjoyed equal status and political power with no significant social divisions based upon class or interest. Mid-size cities complemented the rural South by providing trade outlets, but Baltimore, New Orleans, and St. Louis grew faster, much larger, and more economically diverse than their Southern counterparts. Large numbers of free blacks and immigrants transformed these cities into "glaring multicultural and industrial contrasts to the homogeneity of rural life" (p. 22). Each became home to a "rootless and propertyless" (p. 17) wage-earning class whose labor activism and political demands threatened social chaos. Such contentious and class-ridden urban democracies brought to the South free labor assumptions that threatened slavery and hierarchy, while workers' political action would "inevitably lead to tyranny by a majoritarian mob that would use the state to redress the inequalities of property and status" (pp. 17-18). The largest cities thus allowed secessionists to present their cause as "a referendum on American democracy, rather than as a referendum on slavery" (pp. 25-26). Disunion would protect the South and slavery from the "mobocracy of the North" (p. 35) and reduce the South's urban mobs to "a harmless, tiny minority in a polity dominated by country farmers who supported slavery" (p. 35).

The big cities appeared threatening because, as Towers demonstrates, they did differ from the South's idealized towns and foreshadowed changes that were coming to the region's smaller urban centers. By 1860, Baltimore, St. Louis, and New Orleans had crossed the "threshold" (p. 6) of 150,000 residents, a figure that far exceeded the population of other slave-state cities. Economic expansion brought several large-scale industries to Baltimore and St. Louis and made New Orleans one of the Union's largest commercial entrepots. Expansion also transformed the cities' occupational structure

and ethnic composition. Early in the nineteenth century, relations between employers and employees were characterized by *urban paternalism*, a hierarchical and household-based system in which skilled craftsmen enjoyed the status of independent businessmen while maintaining patriarchal authority over their workers, who were expected to repay their patrons with loyal service. By the 1850s, paternalist workshops had given way to large-scale mechanized factories that relied on unskilled wage workers, many of them immigrants and free blacks. Native-born skilled workers increasingly found themselves "the hirelings of wealthy industrialists" (p. 63), and the overall effect of the shift in labor relations was to bring to the slave states a type of class conflict usually associated with Northern and European industrial societies. For a while the Jacksonian party system contained this conflict. Democrats won workers' votes with a "common-man appeal" (p. 55) that combined national issues with resentment to local Whig elites. As business leaders continued to rely upon immigrant labor and invoke a one-sided paternalism, craftsmen increasingly recognized their junior-partner status in the party. With the outbreak of strikes and other collective actions in the 1850s, "the political goals of the Jacksonian labor movement lost their relevance for urban workers" (pp. 69-70).

The demise of urban paternalism coincided with the collapse of the national party system. The Democratic Party came to dominate the South, but opposition parties gained control of the municipal governments of the three largest cities. In Baltimore and New Orleans, politicians used an "antiparty," anticorruption appeal to unite white skilled laborers in a tenuous alliance with businessmen and evangelical Protestants in the nativist "Know-Nothing" party. Antiforeignism proved a liability in St. Louis, the city with the largest number of enfranchised immigrants, so worker discontent there carried the Republican Party into power. Leaders of the new parties again expected to be able to contain worker discontent, but by the mid-1850s laborers had flexed their muscle. Working-class gangs used violence, intimidation, and election riots to solidify Know-Nothing and Republican control of the cities in "nascent political machines" (p. 24): in return for the gangs' influence at the polls and support on non-labor issues, municipal governments provided native-born whites with jobs in public works projects, tacit support in strikes, and assistance pushing African Americans and immigrants out of desired occupations. Democratic appeals to "law and order" kept the party a competitive minority, but worker influence in the cities distressed rural-based Southern leaders. Even though Baltimore and New Orleans Know-Nothings upheld slavery while St. Louis Republicans defended white supremacy, the cities' independence threatened Southern unity because workers "challenged planter domination of the South by advancing their own power ... in state and regional politics" (p. 14). Gang violence and bloated municipal budgets meanwhile made Southern elites "receptive to the fire-eaters' case that secession would save republican government from a democracy that had run amok" (p. 148).

By the late 1850s, Southern nationalists had rejected the claims of "these pockets of political heterodoxy" (p. 184) to be "Southern." Secessionists charged that the cities' "combative politics" proved that "the ills of Northern mob rule were infecting the South" (p. 152) and called for disunion partly to pre-empt a potential alliance between urban workers and Northern Republicans. Within the cities, antiparty rhetoric "increased each side's mistrust of each other" (p. 151) as the urban parties grafted the sectional conflict onto their existing party division. The conflation of local enemies into "agents of tyranny" (p. 182) allied with sectional foes elevated an already bitter party division to a particularly mean-spirited level that eventually produced riots. Baltimore, St. Louis, and New Orleans became neither "bastions of the Union nor strongholds of secession," but each "served as organizing bases for both camps" (p. 207). The persistence of pre-War divisions again distinguished the largest cities from smaller Southern towns, where the demise of party competition in the 1850s gave local elites the opportunity after secession to unite communities behind the Confederate or, in the border South, Union cause. The urban parties, though, "set comparatively rational and orderly boundaries for the internecine conflict" (p. 184). In the Southern mountains, secession became intertwined with the class-based rift between rural traditionalists and commercially oriented modernists to produce a brutal guerrilla. In the cities, "social identity and party affiliation had converged" (p. 151), and "each side used party identity to bridge social divisions within their coalitions" (p. 212).

The brief summary in this review cannot do justice to the nuance and depth of Towers's work. The author has extensively researched his topic and presents a sophisticated argument that should stand as a significant contribution to the literature on secession. He presents a persuasive case demonstrating that a politically active working class of the kind usually associated with Northern cities had also developed in the South's largest urban centers. He also shows that this "Southern brand of free-

labor politics" (p. 3) shaped both the cities' experience in the sectional conflict and their identity as Southerners. The text does focus heavily on Baltimore, with notably less space devoted to St. Louis and New Orleans, but Towers justifies this emphasis by observing that Baltimore was "both the biggest problem for slaveholders and the most visible example of the trends that were underway in other urban centers" (p. 8). Still, the author keeps his focus on the larger implications of the cities' story. In addition to his comparisons of Baltimore, St. Louis, and New Orleans with smaller towns and with the mountain South, Towers provides insightful comments on his findings' historiographical significance. The linking of urban politics with the sectional conflict, he notes, helps to explain the strength of secessionist support in the upper South, where "racial-stake" (p. 27) white supremacist appeals had less direct relevance to slavery. Similarly, Towers remarks that Southern urban Know-Nothing efforts to balance a defense of slavery with their opposition to pro-slavery Democrats "offers a counterpoint to scholarship showing that northern Know-Nothings switched to the Republican Party after 1856" (p. 101).

There is little to criticize about this study. The book is professionally done and presents an original argument on an important but overlooked topic. In the spirit of dialog encouraged by H-Net Reviews, I offer the following comments mainly to give the author an opportunity to respond. First, I would like to have seen Towers comment more directly on an apparent contradiction between Southern nationalist fears of the urban centers' free labor politics and some secessionists' advocacy of industrialization. As Towers observes, in the 1850s several Southern states–particularly Virginia–experienced rapid urbanization. The author stresses most cities' roles providing "market services for plantation agriculture" (p. 19). Smaller scale manufacturing ventures in these towns are mentioned mainly to show how they would eventually follow patterns advanced in the larger metropolises. Granted, most of these industries involved processing agricultural products, and, according to David R. Goldfield, "manufacturing was not necessarily synonymous with urbanization."[1] Still, at least some Southerners promoted industrialization as a way to secure the South's economic self-sufficiency and political independence. This was the goal for industrialists like William Gregg, who is not mentioned in the book, and–for a time at least–of J. D. B. DeBow, whom Towers presents as an advocate of cities mainly as commercial supplements for agriculture. No doubt these Southerners believed they could reconcile industry with a submissive labor force that included slaves and free blacks as a way to avoid class conflict. But the impression comes across in this book that there was virtually no Southern interest in manufacturing outside of the three major cities. More discussion of attempts to reconcile the contrast between cities, industrial advocacy, and manufacturing in the smaller towns would have enhanced Towers's argument.

Likewise, I wonder whether Towers overemphasizes the influence of urban politics in the popular case for secession. The idea that secession involved a rejection of a socialist "red republicanism" associated with European radicalism is a theme that has received relatively little attention from scholars. Towers's argument that the cities stood as threats to region's idealization of rural life provides an important understanding into the motives for disunion. It is, however, an idea that better fits the conservative, antidemocratic views held by at least some secessionists–a view highlighted in some important recent studies[2]–than with the more populist presentation of secession as a democratic action that would protect white liberty and equality.[3] Whether or not speakers or hearers truly believed it, the rhetoric of secession overwhelmingly stressed "racial stake," *herrenvolk* ideals, and one suspects that politicians would hesitate to rely upon an implicitly elitist appeal suggesting that a white workingman's democracy could produce dangerous excesses. Most of the evidence Towers provides on secessionists' motives comes from private letters. Aside from an analysis of James H. Hammond's well-known "mudsill" speech, there are few of the usual quotations from newspapers, public speeches, and documents that readers usually find in works on antebellum Southern politics. I am not saying that Towers should have provided quotations for quotations' sake. Rather, more discussion of the use of the attack on the cities in secessionists' public declamations would provide a better sense of whether it is better understood as part of the appeal to non-slaveholding farmers or as an antidemocratic fear present among Southern elites.

Again, I raise these issues primarily to give the author an opportunity to address them, and I look forward to his response. *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* is a quality work that should become a standard source for Southern, urban, and labor historians.

Notes

[1]. David R. Goldfield, "Pursuing the American Urban Dream: Cities in the Old South," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*,

eds. Blaine A Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington: Kennicat Press, 1977), p. 57.

[2]. See especially Manisha Sinha, *The Counter-Revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Wallace Hettle, *The Peculiar Democracy: Southern Democrats in Peace and Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

[3]. Among the most important studies that emphasize secession as an expression of Jacksonian democracy aimed at protecting white liberty are Anthony G. Carey, *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Lacy K. Ford Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); William J. Cooper, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); and J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

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