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Jonathan Daniel Wells. *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xv + 321 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5553-9; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2882-3.

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Modernizers of the Old South

When did the "middle class" emerge in the United States? For most historians, the answer varies by region. In the urban northeast, the professional and commercial classes seem to have formed a single social category during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. They separated home from work, fashioned new gender roles and moral sensibilities, and voted for Whigs, Republicans, and other denizens of "progress." Conventional wisdom places the rise of a southern middle class several decades later, after the Civil War had destroyed the cultural hegemony of the planter elite. With insight and precision, Jonathan Daniel Wells offers a different chronology of class formation in the Old South. By the 1850s, he argues, a large and self-conscious middle class had cohered in the slave states. Made up of merchants, teachers, editors, doctors, and lawyers, this new class derived much of its power and ideology from its Yankee counterpart. Indeed, Wells argues that middle-class formation in the South preceded the "broad-scale economic conversion" that had spawned the northern middle class, with important consequences for sectional relations and the outbreak of the Civil War (p. 13).

Part 1 of *Origins* (chapters 1-2) reveals the extent and importance of North-South cultural exchange in the antebellum period. While northern farm families moved west to find or preserve their "independence," Yankee merchants and publishers often went south in search of business. Rather than shun northern influences and ideas, many southerners clearly welcomed what the *Richmond Enquirer* in 1845 called "an infusion of a little Yankee industry and capital" (p. 25). Wells uses both anecdotal and empirical evidence to show that northern books, newspapers, and periodicals circulated through small towns and large, inspiring well-educated southerners of moderate wealth with a new and dynamic vision of America's future.

In Part 2 (chapters 3-6), Wells argues that the "middling classes" of the South fused these imported ideas with evangelical Christianity to form a compelling logic of social and cultural reform. Put simply, evangelicalism gave middling southerners a moral alternative to the honor-based culture of the planter eliteâ?¢-and a moral sanction to attack the customs and priorities of that elite. Dueling, from this perspective, no longer seemed like a test of manly valor. Instead, as new Anti-Dueling associations made clear, affairs of honor were brutal and embarrassing relics of a "barbarous" and "backwards" past. While pressing for educational reform, as well, the middling peoples of the South continually compared their region to the industrializing North. Wells also devotes a chapter to professional women who paid lip service to "separate spheres" ideology, yet involved themselves in a range of public questions. As magazine editors and independent authors, such women lobbied for temperance, school reform, and other standbys of antebellum "improvement."

Throughout the book, Wells pays close heed to the language of social distinction. The term "middling classes," he notes, fits his subjects best in the period before 1850. But as Wells explains in his last three chapters, a full-blown and distinctive "middle class" matured in the Old South during the economic boom that preceded the Civil War. (Wells uses a content analysis of three southern periodicals to document the increasing use of the phrase.) For the first time, this new class saw itself in opposition to both wealthy planters and poorer whites. In a stellar analysis of industrial strikes during the late antebellum period, Wells shows how southern capitalists unabashedly used slave labor to undercut workers' demands for better wages. "In all other countries, and particularly manufacturing states, labor and capital are assuming an antagonistical position," one industrialist noted in 1851. But, in a slave society, "capital will be able to control labor, even in manufactures with whites, for blacks can always be resorted to in case of need" (p. 187). Village doctors or storekeepers might not have put

it so bluntly, but middle-class southerners were so eager to catch up with the North that they supported or excused the use of slave labor in factories. Disillusioned with large slave-owners who seemed decadent and reactionary, and impatient with workers who selfishly valued wages over factory output, middle-class southerners became a force of their own. In the process, however, they also frightened the very northerners who had long served as models to emulate. From the perspective of the new Republican Party, in particular, slavery posed a threat precisely because it seemed aggressive, expansive, and well suited to the industrial future. Northern leaders and citizens thus began to stiffen their opposition to slavery and to imbue their political decisions with what Eric Foner has labeled, "free labor ideology."[1] And, as sectional ties fell apart during the 1850s, middle-class southerners withdrew from politics altogether and ceded power to the planters. Thus they contributed to the sectional crisis in two ways: first, by pushing their Yankee counterparts into an anti-slavery position, and then by deferring to the rule of an increasingly militant plantation elite. Wells's final pages cast light on the confused aftermath of Lincoln's election. Surely, middle-class southerners told themselves, cooler heads would prevail, inter-sectional business would continue, and the nation would stay together. Only in 1861 did they close ranks with the planters and embrace southern independence.

Origins of the Southern Middle Class advances a number of interlocking contentions about the southern social order, its relationship with the North, and the coming of the Civil War. Above all, Wells illuminates the process of class formation–not only in the Old South but also in the modern age more generally. The foundations of class identity, he suggests, are not necessarily economic or material. In the southern case, a middle class carved a niche for itself by borrowing ideas and cultural aspirations from another region and then adapting those values to the unique circumstances of a rural, republican, and slave-owning society. By and large, Wells's analysis is both novel and convincing, one that will help illuminate social relations and class loyalties in other times and places.

If his treatment of class formation is new and exciting, however, Wells's analysis of its ramifications seems more conventional. Throughout, Wells refers to "economic and cultural modernization" as the underlying or transcendent goal of the emerging class. "The southern middle class," he summates, "formed in part in response to external stimuli, especially ideas about economic and cultural progress that came from the northern middle class" (p. 12). In part, the persistent use of the words "progress" and "modernization" in this book and many others owes something to rhetorical necessity; one cannot list all the reforms and measures advocated by the middle class without enlisting certain shorthands. "The term 'modernization' used here," Wells explains in an endnote, "will connote a desire on the part of middling southerners to experience the new trends in technology and culture that they admired in the North and parts of Europe" (p. 244). These trends included school reform, factory production, and the growth of cities. But what tied these trends and values together? Why did middling southerners or their ideological mentors consider these developments "modern" and others "backwards"? No single volume can answer these questions, of course. But by posing them, and by considering modernization as a porous, protean, and relational set of values, we might discover a process at least as interesting as that of class formation. And we might well find that southerners disagreed with northerners not only over the means of achieving modernization but also over the meaning of the goal itself.

This somewhat uncritical use of terms contributes to the only real weakness in Wells's book: the neglect of slavery as an integral component of social identity. As he makes clear, southern professionals and merchants often owned or tried to own slaves. Unquestionably, they also wanted to use slaves for factory work and scab labor. But it does not follow that middling southerners only or primarily saw slaves as another tool for "modernization," as Wells sometimes suggests. When secession came and the shooting began, he notes, middle-class southerners overwhelmingly backed the Confederate war effort. Why? Because "even though the war would undoubtedly disrupt trade with the North, the possibility of employing slaves in industries, the engine that would drive the South into the future, was at stake" (p. 225). Surely they had other reasons to fight for southern independenceâ?¢-and the chance to own slaves. As Walter Johnson memorably details in *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, whites of many social categories found cultural, sexual, and psychological satisfaction in the possession of slaves. Owning a slave worked a number of deeply personal transformations. It turned drudges into ladies, boys into men, nobodies into masters. It shaped the gender dynamics and social relations of middling as well as gentry households, tying the professional and mercantile classes to a set of laws and values that made emancipation unthinkable. Without an appreciation of slaves' presence in middling households, then, we are left with a somewhat wooden explanation

for middle-class attachments to the "peculiar institution" that built and then destroyed the Old South.[2]

All the same, this is a fresh and important book, rich in analysis and research. Using a wide range of manuscript and published sources, and drawing from a mountain of secondary literature, Wells has uncovered a side of the Old South that few have tried or cared to see. Anyone who studies the antebellum South will have to come to terms with his argument and findings, and everyone who is interested in the Civil War will benefit from the perspective he brings.

Notes

[1]. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[2]. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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