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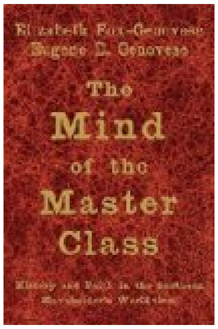
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese
Eugene D. Genovese
The Mind of the Master Class
History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview

Reviewed by Paul Harvey (University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.)
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Walk the Line: Southern Conservative Thought in a Revolutionary Age

'Tis the season for blockbuster books on nineteenth-century American history, including the present text, Michael O'Brien's weighty two-volume *Conjectures of Order* (2004), and Sean Wilentz's celebration of *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005). While I have made my way through some of O'Brien and Wilentz, I have not yet had time to get through them completely, primarily because my own attention has been preoccupied with *The Mind of the Master Class.* This is itself a densely detailed work, but positively svelte compared to the two door-stopping tomes just mentioned, weighing in at a mere 718 pages of text.

Besides the formidable phalanx of text and elaborate footnotes nicely placed at the bottom of the page (thank you, Cambridge!), Genovese and Fox-Genovese also provide Southern historians with a true gift: over eighty pages (in tiny font) of a bibliographical glossary, divided up alphabetically by topic, which scholars will consult for decades to come. Aside from extensive references to readings on the obvious topics (slavery, abolitionism, the Bible, and so on), the bibliographic glossary provides a huge array of readings, both primary and secondary, on Southern thought about everything. Need some quick references on antebellum Southern thought about the Crimean War, or Schleiermacher, or Roman writers from Cicero to Varro? On the historian Macaulay, or on the singing of the "Marseilles"? On Southerners' writings about Hume, or Iberian Literature? Here is your place to start, and happy trails. Bibliographic geeks, including the present reviewer, will relish the treasure-hunting enjoyments of perusing the bibliographic glossary.

In terms of reviewing the text itself, I am conflicted. On the one hand, who will argue the value of having such a massively researched, mature, and imposingly erudite work as this one? Everyone reading this review on H-South will be familiar with the incomparable contributions of Genovese and Fox-Genovese to the history of slavery and the South, so much so that recounting their pathbreaking contributions to the historiography seems superfluous. Moreover, the endorsements plastering the back cover (from historians whose collective eminence makes me feel rather pipsqueakish by comparison), certainly give the authors an all-star posse.

And yet, my inner Grinch cannot help but express some disappointment and frustration with *Mind of the Master Class*–precisely because this is the mature work from two scholars who have, it would appear, read virtually every extant primary source relating to their subject, and probably all of the secondary ones as well, and precisely because one hopes and expects the two authors to produce a memorable work that will define scholarship for a generation or more to come. I rather feel about it as I did listening to Bruce Springsteen's *Devils and Dust*–the critics praised it, eminent music-listening friends loved it, and I admired it in parts, but I could not help feeling that the talents of the artist were constrained by the form, that something was being held back, and that I was denied the impassioned masterpiece that I wanted to hear/read. Yes, this is an aesthetic rather than an intellectual critique, but there you have it. Oh, for the days of *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*–Springsteen's flawed, sprawling, but ultimately grand equivalent, I believe, to Eugene Genovese's problematic but still matchlessly interesting work *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974). By contrast, *Mind of the Master Class* requires considerable heavy lifting on the part of the reader, and somehow lacks the majestic narrative that carried forward the earlier classic.

Or maybe it's just me being a Grinch. Thus, I will try first to give some brief but fair summary to this lengthy and complex book, endeavoring to give the authors their masters' due for what is, by any reasonable standard, a meritorious achievement.

The authors ultimately seek to provide a comprehensive study of the "worldview" of the Southern slaveholders. To do so, they engage their subjects with great moral and intellectual seriousness. We have a huge canvass full of scenes from the intellectual lives of the hegemonic slaveholding class. This class set the rules of the game for everyone else, and more than anyone else ministers and religious thinkers defined elite Southern thought. Ultimately, as slaveholding whites in the antebellum South (here, as in the book, abbreviated simply as "Southerners") well understood, the world that created them–the dynamic dual revolutions in politics and economics from the Enlightenment to the Civil War–might very well also undo them, thus spurring a conservative counterrevolution led by Southern conservative divines and secular thinkers. The fundamental tension of corporatism and individualist modernity drove their intellectual efforts; the authors use this tension to frame their analysis.

The authors' admiration for the intellectual achievement of the "master class" is clear, as is their understanding of the intellectual contradictions which ultimately undermined the world which they lost: hence the epigraph of the book, from George Santayana: "The necessity of rejecting and destroying some things that are beautiful is the deepest curse of existence." Partially in counterpoint here, I thought of a recent piece by Adam Gopnik in the *New Yorker*, which portrayed wars as "good for destroying things which must be destroyed," even if "useless for doing anything more."[1] Ironically, it was precisely the intellectual resourcefulness of Southerners in defending their own culture and in buttressing slaveholding with a formidable apparatus of expertly crafted biblical argumentation which, in part, contributed to the growing sectional divide and sense that Southerners and Northerners were truly a different people–such that, by the time of the Civil War, a number of otherwise gifted Southern thinkers actually trotted out the nonsense of tracing the Mason-Dixon cultural divide to the Roundheads and Cavaliers in the English Civil War. I do not have the same elegiac feeling for the Old South as the authors sometimes appear to have, but I take their point about the importance of the intellectual dilemmas with which Southerners grappled.

Southerners were revolutionaries, and many of them admired European nationalists, but political disorders in Europe increasingly unsettled them as they saw the apparently inevitable course of democracies towards leveling the social distinctions necessary for order. Likewise, Southerners were (famously) Protestants, even as the most intellectually acute among them understood that the Protestant Reformation steamed forward an intellectual train that was headed quickly off the track of orthodoxy. Capitalism, liberalism, individualism, and Protestantism collectively put in place a permanent revolution that could, and would, destroy the world the slaveholders made.

[Here, the authors, who dedicate their book to Richard Lopez, Msgr. of the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, allow themselves a bit of a chuckle as they recount how the Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney after the war despaired of democratic Protestantism and found only in "popery" a remnant of fidelity to God's fundamental truths of "obedience, order, and permanent authority." The authors conclude: "Dabney feared ... that a modern, rationalistic Protestantism was accepting everything and standing for nothing. Catholics might be forgiven for replying: 'Thou sayest it' " (p. 635).]

Moreover, Southerners understood that capitalism and economic expansion fueled the rise of the South as a staple-crop empire, even as they acknowledged that the increasingly powerful theories of free labor would eventually undermine the slave system necessary for Southern social order and economic prosperity. Southerners, then, were products of the world of liberalism and capitalist individualism, even as, with increasing desperation, they clung to the foundation of corporate structures (especially the patriarchal family) and rural independence. The authors explain: "The history of the last three centuries posed for nineteenth-century slaveholders, as for other Christian traditionalists and political conservatives, the daunting question of how to tame what was beginning to look like a permanent revolution" (p. 650).

In some of their most insightful passages, the authors trace how Southerners understood the lessons of History.

Here, most interestingly, the authors devote one chapter to the "slaveholders' quest for a history of the common people." Southerners did not wait around for the "new social history"; they were eager for it in their time, for they believed that "a proper understanding of social history ... would strengthen a conservative slaveholding worldview." After all, did not history prove the constant presence of slavery in human history, and the miserable degradation of the European laboring classes after their "emancipation" from feudalism and their introduction to free labor? Because social history "recorded the travail of the lower orders of society," it also "conveyed the strength and rationality of the slaveholders' worldview." The fascination of Southerners with medieval history and philosophy led in similar directions. Medieval history "comforted them, too, with reassurances about the ubiquity of slavery, dependency, and hierarchy, while simultaneously reminding them of their own allegiance to modernity.... They knew that the medieval world was not–never could be–theirs. But they determined to preserve its most admirable features as they fought to build a bulwark against the morally corrosive features of the modernity that was breaking upon them" (p. 328).

In terms of their philosophy of history, Southerners borrowed from both ancient and Christian understandings. On the one hand, as admirers of the ancients, they could not help but see that "glory, decadence, downfall" was the inevitable fate of human societies. These cycles of history were inevitable. On the other hand, as Christian believers, they held to a linear view of sin, redemption, and progress in piety. The classical and the Christian warred with each other in the white Southern soul. Neither won out completely, but both provided warnings about possible imminent destruction ahead; and after 1865, Southerners turned to both to understand the "consuming fire" they had experienced from 1861 to 1865. As always, they were "torn between antagonistic tendencies: their fondness for individual freedom, descended from the Greeks and transformed by Christian doctrine; and their approval of a socially cohesive medieval corporatism designed to minimize class antagonisms" (p. 668).

The authors also provide a very extended tour of Southern religious life, both in terms of discussing the spread of evangelical denominations, and more importantly the rise of Southern casts of theologizing. Here, the authors make a point that I have made to students for years, usually eliciting shock and horror but not much in the way of rational response: "To speak bluntly, the abolitionists did not make their case for slavery as sin–that is, as condemned in Scripture. The proslavery protagonists proved so strong in their appeal to Scripture as to make comprehensible the readiness with which southern whites satisfied themselves that God sanctioned slavery.... To this day, the southern theologians' scriptural defense of slavery as a system of social relations–not black slavery, but slavery per se–has gone unanswered" (p. 526). From there, the authors powerfully contrast the abolitionists' appeal to "the Spirit" with the Southerners' stress on "the Word," and conclude that "the war over the Good Book revealed a larger, more extensive war over the very meaning of Christianity–specifically, over the relation of the revealed Word of God to the Holy Spirit and the demands of individual conscience" (p. 527). The authors also provide a carefully nuanced discussion of the strange career of the "son of Ham" defense of slavery. Few elite theologians accepted the story from Genesis 9:18-27 as having much if anything to do with contemporary slavery, but the idea nonetheless spread widely through the United States and became such a part of "everyday theology" that people could make brief references to it without explanation, knowing that their readers or hearers would understand the full story. The irony here was that "this scripturally and intellectually weakest point in the biblical defense of slavery emerged as the politically strongest. It gripped public opinion more firmly than any other" (p. 526). The consequences, as the authors also conclude, were enormously tragic.

The preceding paragraphs, I hope, give some flavor for the kinds of topics discussed in this huge book, and the high intellectual stakes of the issues dealt with in specific sections. There is, of course, much more than can be even briefly summarized here; suffice to say that the authors provide a searching and comprehensive portrayal of the meanings of history and faith in the intellectual life of the pre-Civil War South, and much more besides. No one, I dare say, will find fault with the authors' research, deeply humane thought, and erudition. This is certainly intellectual history of the highest order.

Perhaps because of my high expectations, however, the book frustrated and, at times, exasperated me (and here, rant-wary readers of reviews may stop). First, and most importantly, the authors too often make it exceedingly difficult to follow the larger thrust of their arguments; and within those larger arguments, it is too often equally tedious to follow the sub-points. Many individual paragraphs lack topic sentences; many chapters lack introductions and conclusions to give at least a brief notion of what the chapter is about, and why readers should care about the specific topics under discussion. In other words, the "so what" question is too often left unanswered, and readers are left to insert their own signposts through huge sections of the text which examine the trees in clinical detail and neglect the forest.

Beyond that, quotations frequently pile on each other like major league baseball players celebrating a pennant-winning victory, and too often there is no real sense given of why so many quoted examples of the same point are really necessary. Then, when there is a "here's the majority view, but on the other hand there was also another view" kind of paragraph, the authors provide a brief transitional phrase such as "A counterpoint: ... "; these read as if the authors could not really be bothered to pick and choose among the quotations, focus on making their own point in their own words as clearly as possible, and thus use the quotations judiciously to provide some context and flavor for the reader. As a reader, I could understand the points when a lengthy discussion with numerous quotes were acceptable or even essential, such as with the complicated discussion of the "son-of-Ham" allegory and its relationship to black slavery in America. In other cases, the need for all this is not quite so clear. How many pages, for example, are necessary to establish that Southerners were ambivalent and eventually turned against the Hungarian nationalist Louis Kossuth; or that Southerners "respected Camillo Benso di Cavour but not Giuseppe Mazzini" (p. 51); or that there was considerable difference of opinion between Mary Chestnut and her crowd and someone named William Joshua Grant and his family over whether Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* was or was not risqué. And so on and on. My point here is simply that the crucial level of extensive detail needed for really critical personalities and issues–on, for example, Jefferson's tortured relationship with slavery and with Christianity–is not always distinguished here from a level of burdensome detail on lesser points that can exhaust even interested readers, particularly when, for very long stretches of this lengthy book, the authors make little or no effort to show us, or remind us, of the significance of the original point of discussion.

For my part, it was really only sitting down to write this review that made me piece together all the various strands of the points presented into a coherent whole. In the work, the authors rarely do that satisfactorily, even though, when they do, the results are masterful. But through long stretches of this book, one searches for those occasional paragraphs with a growing level of desperation, akin to my own forlorn search in intramural basketball skirmishes for my jump shot; it's a wonderful thing when it appears, but that is with frustrating infrequency.

Once the argument is pieced together, my admiration for the authors' achievement grew commensurately. But the fact that I *had* to do so–that is, that as a reader I had to expend an inordinate amount of effort to thrash through the work and eventually emerge rather exhausted but with a harvest of profound insight–is a problem, and I fear that it will prevent the book from getting the readership it deserves.

One other bit of testiness–the author's use of the phrase "War for Southern Independence" for the more conventional term "Civil War" (p. ix, passim). This strikes me as an unnecessary and, frankly, rather poor choice that will engender all sorts of arguments over semantics that detract from discussion of the more profoundly important topics of the book. The authors leave no room for doubt that "Southern independence" was based precisely on Southern slavery, and that Southerners were aware and increasingly proud of that fact. By this reasoning, the "War for Southern Slavery" is just as apt a choice. But, what is wrong with "Civil War"? That is what it was, ultimately, and the other choices mentioned here are partisan labels rather than historical descriptors.

Finally, though, let me reiterate that this is a towering work that I hope will foster discussion and debate for years to come. I would like to put in a sincere plea to the authors for an abridged version of this work that would allow for classroom use and for a larger readership to grapple with these complex but hugely significant ideas.

Note

[1]. Adam Gopnik, "The Big One," *New Yorker* (August 23, 2004). Also available at `http://www.newyorker.com/critics/atlarge/articles/040823crat_atlarge`

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