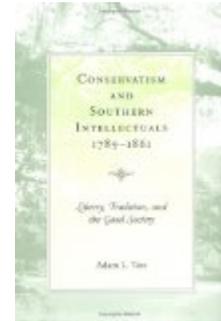


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adam L. Tate. *Conservatism and Southern Intellectuals, 1789-1861: Liberty, Tradition, and the Good Society*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2005. ix + 402 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1567-3.

Reviewed by James B. Jones (Department of History, University of South Carolina Aiken)
Published on H-South (May, 2006)



Change and Continuity, Variety and Consistency, in Southern Thought

Almost a generation ago Michael O'Brien pointed to the failure of historians to take seriously and explore objectively the writings and ideas of antebellum southerners. Since then, an impressive array of scholars has answered O'Brien's challenge, and southern thought, once considered an oxymoron, has become a healthy field of study producing rich fruits.[1] One result is that it is now more commonly recognized that the Old South, rather than being a stagnant monolith clinging to tradition while the North embraced progress, was itself varied and evolving. O'Brien again emphasizes this in his recent magnum opus on antebellum thought, saying the region "was a moving target, a thing in process, never what it had been ten years before." [2] Yet there were also continuities in southern thought. Core essentials remained, even as peripherals changed.

Adam Tate's contribution to the historiography of antebellum southern thought seems to take its cue from this understanding. First, he has chosen a time frame which allows him to compare and contrast three generations of thinkers, and to develop the theme of consistency versus the evolution of southern thought over half a century. Second, in his selection of thinkers, as his title indicates, he is looking at one of several possible strands of southern thought—conservatism—rather than at the whole of it. Yet Tate insists that the South "was not, as Louis Hartz wrote ... 'an alien child in a liberal family, tortured and confused, driven to a fantasy life.' Antebellum southern conservatives simply tried to preserve a measure of tradition within a liberal state" (p. 3).

Tate's method is to examine closely six thinkers, grouping them into three pairs, "Old Republicans," "antebellum proslavery intellectuals," and "Whig humorists," and comparing the two members of each group in their treatment of states rights, republicanism, slavery, religion, western expansion, and southern sectionalism/nationalism. This enables him to assert that each pair shared political ideas, but diverged in their ideas about the good society, a concept which he carries out with some, but not complete, success. Devoting three chapters to each pair, he first provides biographical sketches of them, then examines their similar political and economic views, and finally turns to their social views, where he argues for the diversity of their thought. Since these thinkers did not develop "a common southern social vision to accompany their states' rights political tradition," Tate maintains that "to comprehend antebellum southern conservatism, one must understand the different views of society southern conservatives espoused" (p. 7).

The earliest of his subjects, John Taylor of Caroline, was born in 1753, fought in the Revolution, and published his last work in 1823, a year before his death. Tate pairs him with fellow Virginian and Old Republican, John Randolph of Roanoke (1773-1833). His youngest subjects, southwestern Whig humorists Joseph Glover Baldwin and Johnson Jones Hooper, were born in 1815 and died in 1864 and 1862. Between these two pairs, Tate considers the writings of two antebellum proslavery intellectuals, Virginian Nathaniel Beverley Tucker (1784-1851) and South Carolinian William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870).

The reader may quibble with Tate's choice of thinkers, or even conclude that they are not a good sample on which to base his argument, but they do suit his purposes well enough.

Tate's first pair, Randolph and Taylor, were activated by their reading of the English "Country Ideology," their opposition to Alexander Hamilton's program, and their distress at Jefferson's seeming capitulation to it (pp. 38-39). They shared political principles and the view that the state and society should be considered separate entities. But in their visions of the good society, they diverged. Randolph clung to tradition, religion, patriarchy, and civility, and could not escape the sense that society was in decline. Taylor hated aristocracy, was less religious, more at ease with modernity, and had more confidence in the power of ideas to improve society. From these differences flowed their distinct views on religion, the West, slavery, and North/South sectionalism. These differences, concludes Tate, "weakened the potential impact of a unified Old Republican southern movement," although he also says few southerners discovered such differences in their writings (p. 135).

The second twosome, Tucker and Simms, dealt with the same concerns about liberty and tradition, and faced the same public issues. Tucker's thought revealed the influence of his half brother John Randolph. After 1833 he was professor of law at William and Mary, but he also wrote didactic novels, which led to his partnership with Simms, the Old South's first man of letters. Tucker and Simms held political views that showed their debt to the Old Republicans, and both became secessionists early on. Tucker had more use for political parties than did Simms and became a Whig out of fear of Andrew Jackson's power. In their faith in progress, within a carefully balanced state, both resembled Taylor more than Randolph. Yet both blasted the Bank of the United States and the protective tariff. Their hierarchal social thought was shaped by Burkean respect for tradition and the proslavery ideology. Both respected religion, though Tucker was more devout. Both knew the West well, appreciated its potential, regretted its crudeness, and saw the Old South as the key to civilizing it. Tate finds little difference in their views on slavery, concluding that for both it was the virtual panacea for modern society's ills. Both also embraced southern nationalism as an expression of interest and ideology. Here Tate's argument for differing social views is less than convincing.

Baldwin and Hooper provide Tate the opportunity to explore the dilemma of balancing freedom with tradition

in the context of the old Southwest. These writers used humor and satire to advocate a Whig concept of order that they saw as crucial to the development of southern frontier society. Tate's close reading of their thought reveals some differences, but he is confusing when he asserts that southern Whig conservatism "differed greatly from the early southern conservatism of the Old Republicans," and then adds that rather than abandoning the doctrines of the Old Republicans, Baldwin and Hooper "gave them a modern flavor" (p. 254).

Baldwin, a Virginia lawyer, struck out for the southwest in 1836, went into politics and wrote humorous sketches of frontier life that were published as *Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi* in 1853. By then he had moved to California, and thus took himself out of the cauldron of southern self-consciousness. North Carolinian Johnson Jones Hooper's life followed a similar path, except for the last part, and led to his writing a series of stories featuring the frontier rascal Captain Simon Suggs. He edited a Whig paper in Alabama, endorsed Clay's program, and became a "Know-Nothing" after the Whigs' demise.

Tate finds Baldwin's and Hooper's political views similar to those of the Old Republicans except for their support for Whig economic policy. Their social views, however, differed considerably from their elders', in large part because of their southwestern perspective. Thus Baldwin "inverted Burke." That is, while appreciating the importance of tradition, he understood that "the new institutions of the West were not organic," and therefore "had to be voluntary in nature" (p. 308). He concluded that only Whig policies could impose economic order and build a basis for republican institutions in the anti-traditional West. Hooper shared this view. His Simon Suggs is not deterred even by the fear of eternal damnation, and cheats his own father in a game of cards, showing "the inability of coercion and religion to order modern freedom" (p. 321). Baldwin made the Yankee character who believes the worst stereotypes about southerners a target of ridicule, thus offering another basis for southern cohesiveness. He did not become a southern nationalist, but Hooper did, and he championed racial prejudice and hatred of northern fanaticism as bonds for southern whites. In the 1850s, unlike Baldwin, he became increasingly shrill in his calls for southern unity.

Tate makes good use of the writings of his six subjects, and includes a fifteen-page appendix, placing his argument in its historiographical context. Here he demonstrates his command of the literature on the southern

mind as he surveys larger trends in the scholarship and then comments on earlier studies of each of his six subjects. His study provides a valuable combination of horizontal and vertical analysis of the intriguing mind of the Old South. Well grounded upper-level undergraduates could benefit from it, and it would be a good choice for a graduate course in antebellum southern thought.

Notes

[1]. Michael O'Brien, ed., *All Clever Men, Who Make Their Way: Critical Discourse in the Old South* (Fayet-

teville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982). The list of works is long, but most recently it has been greatly enriched by two monumental studies: Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life in the American South, 1810-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Neither of these works was available to Tate.

[2]. O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, p. 5.

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Citation: James B. Jones. Review of Tate, Adam L., *Conservatism and Southern Intellectuals, 1789-1861: Liberty, Tradition, and the Good Society*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

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