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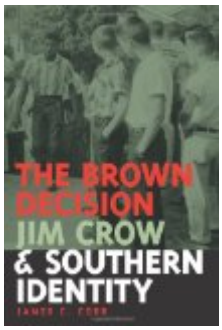
James C. Cobb. *The "Brown" Decision, Jim Crow, and Southern Identity.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2005. x + 93 pp. $22.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-2498-2.



Reviewed by Stephen Lowe

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James C. Cobb's 2004 Lamar memorial lectures at Mercer University are a useful tonic for those who have grown tired of the "down on *Brown*" crowd of historians and other academics whose chorus of despair amounts to a din of negativity. Cobb, particularly in the second chapter of this book in which he directly addresses that group of negative academics, responds to the criticism over *Brown* with insight, cleverness, and powerful historical argument. The three chapters cover the sweep of the Jim Crow South, from its origins and "Strange Career," through the battle over *Brown* and its contested meaning and significance, and finally to a South that today is the direction for much black migration and the rediscovered foundation for African-American identity.

In chapter 1, Cobb explores the origins of Jim Crow and its development from the late nineteenth century up to the early 1950s. The Jim Crow South, he argues, was a model for the coexistence of oppression and economic development. While some writers believed in the 1950s and into the 1960s that capitalism and segregation could not survive together, Cobb demonstrates that in the South of the 1890s and beyond, the two institutions not only survived but thrived in mutual codependence. Segregation allowed for depressed wages for both whites and blacks, as there were more than enough white workers in the early days of southern industrialization both to pay them very little and to exclude black workers at the same time. Following Woodward, Cobb argues that the rise of Jim Crow was a product of Progressivism, of a "search for order." Only by disfranchising blacks and encoding customary segregation in law could the South maintain the peace and order that would be needed to advance into the new industrial age.[1]

Chapter 2 takes on the naysayers. Recent scholarship, particularly Michael Klarman's *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights* (2004), argues that *Brown* was either wrong, untimely, or unfortunate. Cobb punctures much of the historical arguments set out by the critics, and takes on the legal and moral arguments against *Brown* for good measure. Too much, argues Cobb, of the foundation of anti-*Brown* scholarship depends on counterfactual argument, a contention with which this reviewer

could not agree more. The white backlash thesis that forms the core of much of Klarman's work depends on the idea that *Brown* led to white resistance. Cobb points out that the white reaction to *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944 belies much of Klarman's thesis, for the reaction to *Smith* prefigured the reaction to *Brown* right up to the threats of violence. When a local legislator in Schley County, Georgia, advised black voters to stay away from the polls in 1946, he backed up his advice by standing in front of the polling place with a shotgun (p. 36). States that threatened, or proceeded, to close their schools after *Brown* could not easily shut down all voting, but the measures taken by many states to change election laws after *Smith* certainly should give historians a clue that the "backlash" did not emerge fully formed only after *Brown*.

"Power yields nothing without a demand," said Frederick Douglass, and the struggle that led to *Brown* certainly reveals that. While critics like Klarman argue, counterfactually, that the South was inexorably heading toward some sort of racial accommodation, Cobb responds that the white community in the South, led by racists and with a weak liberal contingent, was certainly not heading down that road with any speed, deliberate or otherwise.

Cobb's final chapter brings his brief but effective set of lectures to a close by looking at the importance of the South in African-American identity. *Brown v. Board of Education* was after all, about belonging. After *Brown*, black people belonged. More than that, *Brown* and the Civil Rights Movement gave African Americans a sense of belonging to the South. By the turn of this century, more blacks in the South identified as Southerners than whites in the South.

The irony--one of many, assuredly--of the end of Jim Crow is that it brought a sense of loss to blacks. The sense of self and community that developed within the confines of the segregated system was undermined by a growing class awareness in the black community. As opportunities arose to move to suburbs, many middle-class blacks in the South flew away, leaving poor blacks to cope on their own. While the Civil Rights Movement, at least in some ways, had led to a consensus agenda among black Southerners, the shifting nature of the post-Civil Rights South has led to conflicting agendas within the black community. For example, Cobb closes this chapter with a look at recent conflicts over the symbols of the white South that many middle-class blacks have seen fit to challenge, particularly the use of the Confederate flag. Many poor blacks see this as a waste of time. Cobb sees this "squabbling over the icons of [the] past" as an impediment to doing something to fashion "not just a new southern identity but a new southern reality" (p. 75).

For anyone interested in southern historiography, this book offers a look at the thoughts of a leading practitioner and his take on the major themes of southern history. More importantly, this book is a good brief look at the issue of southern identity, where it came from and where it is headed. Some of these themes echo Cobb's contemporaneous *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (2005) or his earlier *Redefining Southern Culture* (1999). For those seeking a quick start on the subject, Cobb's Mercer lectures are highly recommended, and will certainly leave the reader wanting to explore the subject even more.

Note

[1]. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968). Cobb quotes the Wiebe title on p. 22.