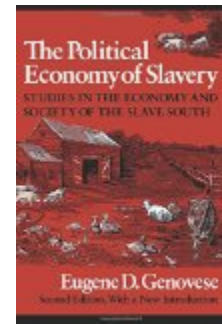


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eugene D. Genovese. *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989. xxxii + 335 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8195-6208-1.

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A Retrospective

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Part II—Introduction and Summary

I first encountered Eugene Genovese's *Political Economy of Slavery* as a graduate student in history in the late 1970s where the book was essential reading in courses on slavery and the Old South. I think I had to read the book in three separate classes, a testimony of how important scholars regarded it more than a decade after its publication. Some fifteen years have passed since I last picked up *Political Economy of Slavery* and I welcome the opportu-

nity provided by this H-Rural book review retrospective to revisit the book and to consider its place in the historiography of southern rural and agricultural studies, as well as the larger American historiography.

For those like me who have not returned to the book in some years, or for those graduate students on the list who have not yet compiled their reading lists for comprehensive exams, let me summarize the book's argument and then turn to how the book was received at the time of its publication, and a sketch of some of the work that the book has sparked since 1965.

The words "political economy" in the title were unusual for a work of history in the mid- 1960s, but not so much in the larger social sciences of the postwar period. A number of influential Marxist thinkers published theoretical studies about the transitions to capitalism from preceding systems. In the United States, their work was led by the economist Paul Baran and his associates at the *Monthly Review*. The central tenet of these Marxists was that capitalism was a system where labor itself was a commodity available for rent in the market, shorn from earlier systems of reciprocal rights and responsibilities. It is within this understanding of capitalism that Genovese defined the Old South as pre-capitalist and pre-bourgeois. By definition, the slave could not sell his or her labor in the market, and instead was at the mercy of an owner. As only sketched in *Political Economy of Slavery* (and fully elaborated in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*), the Old South was pre-capitalist because of the system of rights

and responsibilities that the slaveholders built. By “political economy,” Genovese also explained that he meant the “economic aspect of a society in crisis.” (p. 3) The interpretation set forth in *Political Economy of Slavery* was that a master class of planters constructed an economy of slave-based agriculture and, as practiced on the plantations of the South, the system precluded any improvement in productivity. The slave system could only maintain itself by extensive, not intensive growth, in other words, by expanding onto new lands, either in the West, or possibly into the Caribbean. The Slave South was thus a region that fell further behind the North and bourgeois Europe in terms of economic development; efforts to reform the system’s agricultural techniques failed, as did various efforts to diversity slave production into manufacturing. This systemic failure of the Old South led to the political crisis of secession and war familiar to every student of American history. Only on the “assumption that men may agree to commit suicide” (p. 267) could the master class of the Old South agree to compromise with the antislavery North.

The heart of the problem for the Slave South was the nature of slavery itself. The system kept its black workers ignorant, resentful, and unproductive. Reform was impossible under slavery and so the planters from the older areas like the Tidewater chose to sell what became surplus slave labor to the planters in the Cotton Belt. Genovese provides detailed chapters in *Political Economy* on this topic of inefficient slave labor dealing with “soil exhaustion,” the care or actual mishandling of livestock, and the overall failure of southern agricultural reformers. After several chapters on the failure of southern industry to grow, develop, and serve the home market, Genovese concluded the book by returning to the topic of Civil War causation with a stirring chapter on the crisis of the 1850s and how the South’s aggressive need to expand into the western territories brought on the Republican reaction and ultimately secession and war.

Genovese ended the book with a “Note on the Place of Economics in the Political Economy of Slavery.” This addendum was a careful look at the work of Alfred Conrad and John Meyer and their 1958 article “The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South” that sought to use capital accounting theory to estimate the profitability of slavery. Their work may very well be considered the beginning of the “new economic history” or “cliometrics.” Aside from a few quarrels with their underlying assumptions (the best of which was Genovese’s dry observation that Conrad & Meyer somehow thought that mules were “self-reproducing.”), the central point of the postscript

was to challenge the connection between strict profitability and the crisis of the Union. Genovese insisted that “Great social transformations do not come about as a result of popular income accounting. An accurate knowledge of profit or loss will not tell us much about the origins of the secession crisis.” (p.282)

Part III—How the book was initially received

By the time I encountered the book, Genovese had already published much of what he promised in what must have seemed at the time in 1965, an audacious introduction. Let me quote the introduction in which Genovese gave his publishing plans with my inserts in brackets [] of the resulting titles and publication dates:

“The generalizations presented in this first study require considerable elaboration and defense, which the following studies only begin to offer. I do, however, plan to submit several volumes after this one. In my study of George Fitzhugh, “The Logical Outcome of the Slaveholders’ Philosophy” [*The World the Slaveholders Made*, 1969] which is almost finished, I shall develop the ideological side of the argument. Also well under way is a study of rebelliousness and docility in the Negro slave, “Sambo & Nat” [*Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1974], which will treat an important part of the story that had to be neglected here. Finally, I expect to submit, in what form I am not yet sure, extensive studies of the planters and the middle- and lower-class whites” [“Yeoman Farmers in a Slaveholders’ Democracy,” in *Agricultural History*, 1975].

This audacity was not lost on reviewers at the time. Let me discuss a few of the many reviews of *Political Economy of Slavery*, almost all of whom realized immediately that they had a major interpretative work before them that challenged much of the professions’s orthodoxy about the nature of slavery and the South. The *Journal of American History* asked Joe G. Taylor of McNeese State to review the book and he found it “disappointing” and filled with assertions with which “almost all historians will quarrel.” In sum, Genovese had written a book such that “its few virtues are far outweighed by its many faults.” Although Taylor engaged in some not so-subtle red-baiting of the author, it is interesting that the main feature of the book that angered him was the assertion that the planters were a master class who ruled both slaves and non-slaveholding whites alike. This was an assault on the scholarship of Frank Owsley and reviewer Taylor fairly sputtered at Genovese’s citation of an obscure article in the *Journal of Negro History* as a sufficient refutation of Owsley’s “yeoman thesis” that the non-slaveholding whites tolerated neither political nor

economic domination by the planters. In the *American Historical Review*, Carl Degler (then of Vassar College) offered a more subtle review, but one that still focused on the planters as a self-conscious ruling class who preferred economic backwardness to Yankee rule. And while Degler seemed persuaded that slavery did retard the South's economic development, he, too, could not overcome his skepticism about the ability of the planters to rule as a class. While not such a defender of the non-slaveholding whites as Owsley and Taylor, Degler pointed out that a racial solidarity of all whites explains more of the history of the Old South perhaps than the class rule of the planters.

Other reviewers focused less on the question of whether the planters were the leaders of a class or a race. Melvin Drimmer of Spelman College, reviewing the book in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, was unpersuaded by Genovese's contention that slavery was unprofitable and in the Tidewater region, and thus maintained only by the domestic slave trade to the southwest. Drimmer was also unpersuaded by Genovese's dissent from the work of economists Conrad and Meyer and challenged the notion that the Old South faced an economic crisis due to a lack of capital accumulation. If Conrad and Meyer were correct in their argument that slavery was an economically rational system, no matter how inhuman, then there could not have been a crisis of the political economy in 1860. The most friendly review that I encountered was provided by L.S. Curtis of Washington University, who reviewed the book for the *Journal of Negro History*. He did support Genovese's argument that the southern planters ruled as a self-conscious class as much as leaders of the white race. Moreover, Curtis agreed with Genovese that the question of the profitability of slavery had been cast too narrowly by economists and that the slave system would not rise or fall on the rate of return on invested capital in land and slaves.

And what did the review in our own *Agricultural History* say, the journal in which some of the arguments of *Political Economy* first appeared? Lary Gara wrote the review and for the most part ignored what the book had to say about agriculture in the South and the limits of agricultural reform. Instead, Gara concentrated on the arguments about Civil War causation.

I found it interesting in revisiting *Political Economy of Slavery* and the reviews of the book, how often Genovese used his book to attempt to rehabilitate the work of Ulrich B. Phillips, and how nearly every book reviewer at the time chose to overlook this line of thought. *Politi-*

cal Economy has an inscription quoting Phillips' line that slavery "was less a business than a life; it made fewer fortunes than it made men." Genovese was for some time a one-person committee trying to convince historians of the rightful place of Phillips in American historiography, but the effort has largely been a failure. Phillips is hardly read at all today, and when students do encounter him, it is largely with a shudder at his books "dedicated to the master race."

Part IV—How the book has fared

Political Economy of Slavery was written at a time when the history of slavery was largely co-terminous with the late antebellum period. One of the significant movements in the historiography of American slavery has been the development of a stronger sense of chronology, in short, the awareness that the slave system grew and developed over nearly two centuries. One of the strengths of Genovese's work is that he did project a sense of change over time, or to be more accurate, a sense of how the Old South was frozen in a pre-modern system within a larger dynamic and changing capitalist world. *Political Economy* described a ruling class that was afraid to change, and incapable of change. Any sort of change in the master-slave relationship would have undermined the dominance social position of the planters. Indeed, Genovese's word "hegemony" indicates what was at stake for the planters.

It is my reading of the literature published over the last thirty years that the history of slavery in the South now takes into account a much keener sense of how the system changed over time, and how greatly it differed by region and type of commodity produced. Still, so much of the literature has been concerned with the big issues that Genovese raised and defined in 1965: class leadership vs. white supremacy; economic backwardness vs. rational allocation of resources; and the labor struggle on the plantations. It is in this sense that *Political Economy of Slavery* remains essential reading because of the questions that it raised for other historians (and its author) to pursue.

The most famous challenge to Genovese's view of the planters as a self-conscious ruling class was James Oakes' 1982 *The Ruling Race*. This review is not the best place to review the scholarly differences between the arguments in *Political Economy* and those in *Ruling Race*. In Oakes' view, reform and change were possible and the history of the Old South was one in the nineteenth century of evolution toward a liberal polity, but one where racial dominance (rather than class dominance) was the defin-

ing feature. In a similar vein, it is worth briefly noting that Genovese's final chapter on the political crisis of the 1850s has been followed by an enormous amount of scholarship, mainly about the emergence of a Republican antislavery opposition, but also on the development of southern consciousness. The work of William Freehling and others has shown that the roots of secession ran very deep in the South, and long preceded any sort of general economic crisis of the South in the few years before the Civil War.

Some of the most interesting work on the economic history of the plantations has been written by labor historians who have taken seriously the notion of class struggle and have tried to interpret the plantation as an arena of labor conflict. That scholarship is readily accessible in the 1993 anthology *Cultivation and Culture*, edited by Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan. The labor historians writing on the nature of work on the plantation very much build on Genovese's work by insisting in a careful examination of the crop production process and also on how production changed over time. Their work has made us aware that the South, never mind the plantation complex in the Atlantic economy, was very diverse. The labor requirements differed greatly from sugar to rice to cotton, and to tobacco and food crops. The analysis of the struggle over work rules and routines is reminiscent of the best in the new labor history writing about struggle on the "shop floor." Again, the contributors in *Cultivation and Culture* remind readers that the slave regime changed over the course of the nineteenth century as regions matured. Most remarkable is what some of the authors acknowledge as the emergence of a "peasant" economy throughout the Americas on the plantations that the slaves ran for their own benefit, with the grudging acceptance by the owners.

The work of Robert Fogel, his colleague Stanley Engerman, and a host of other economists since the publication of *Political Economy of Slavery* has far extended the initial theoretical understanding of the economics of slavery that Conrad and Meyer began in 1958. Starting with the controversial *Time on the Cross* (1974), and continuing more fully in the multi-volume project *Without Consent or Contract* (1987-93), Fogel and his associates have done much to dispute Genovese's argument that the Old South was in any sort of economic crisis in the antebellum period. The question of the profitability of slavery is certainly settled (even if it is irrelevant as Genovese maintained), but more important, the cliometricians have shown that the slave system was quite flexible and responsive to changing prices. Perhaps this is most evident

in the ability of the overall slave system to allocate slave labor to different enterprises depending on commodity prices. At times of low agricultural prices, more slave labor was rented out to non-farm enterprises, and when higher prices returned (especially after the low cotton prices of the early 1840s), slaves went back to the fields where their labor would earn the highest return.

Fogel and Engerman have spent much of the past two decades developing the concept of a high labor productivity by slaves on the plantation, quite to the contrary of the argument that Genovese put forth in *Political Economy*. Again, contrary to the ideas advanced in *Political Economy*, the economic historians find evidence of a considerable division of labor on the plantations, especially the gang system. Fogel finds that the irony of slavery is that the system's genuine evil was linked to its efficiency. The crisis of political economy, as I read Fogel, was in the North, which collectively decided in the 1850s that continued submission to southern political demands was intolerable.

In thinking about this review, I returned to my old (and yes, yellowed) notes about *Political Economy of Slavery*. One cryptic note I wrote to myself read "Genovese—restatement of Olmsted." (Truth in reporting time: I took that note in a 1977 class at the University of Rochester class co-taught by Genovese and Stanley Engerman). My reference to "Olmsted" is to the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect, who was also for a brief time the agricultural correspondent of the *New York Times* with the assignment to visit the South on and report for a northern audience about the workings of the plantations. *Political Economy of Slavery*, I was surprised to learn on my current reading of the book, has almost no references to Olmsted. Genovese cites with qualifications the views of the English economist (actually, political economist) John Cairnes, who wrote disapprovingly about American slavery during the Civil War. Cairnes provided a pithy summary of the economics of slavery with his phrase that slave labor was "wanting because it is given reluctantly." In turn, Cairnes wrote his economic analysis of slavery while sitting in London reading the works of Frederick Law Olmsted, particularly, the latter's *Journey to the Seaboard States*, so I think I understand why I connected Genovese to Olmsted. Thanks to the work of the editors at the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, we now know more about Olmsted's travels in the 1850s than did writers before 1981, when the editors published the correspondence that undergirded *Seaboard Slave States*. This is literally a case of "more is less" since the amazing thing about Olmsted is that he spent al-

most no time on plantations, visiting only three during his lengthy travels, and then seeing them during slack times. I still think it is fair to say that Genovese reformulated and updated the Seward-Cairnes-Olmsted abolitionist economic critique, and that it is also fair to think of the continuing exchange between Genovese and Fogel as a long-running commentary on the nature of both bourgeois society and slave society.

Part V—Conclusion: the legacy of *Political Economy of Slavery*

This is a book that does deserve to be read by today's graduate students. It represents an interpretation that combines extensive research and learning with a compelling explanation for what is always a main challenge for American historians, why the Civil War broke out when it did. The issues that Genovese raised or engaged in 1965, class over race, the economic viability of the

planters, and the nature of work on the plantations have remained central concerns for writers on the Old South ever since. A check of *Social Science Citation Index* shows that the book is still extensively cited by scholars writing in different fields. What better testament to the lasting power of the book than to continue to be read, cited, and extended?

Historians today may not accept Genovese's argument that the political economy of the Old South was in crisis in 1860, but they are far more likely than they were in 1964 to accept his notion that the conflict that erupted into warfare in 1861 was one between rival social systems, and not just the result of the bumbling generation. It is also representative of a very creative time in the writing of American history, a time when one of the central moral questions of the day—the civil rights question—also fully engaged the work of American historians.

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