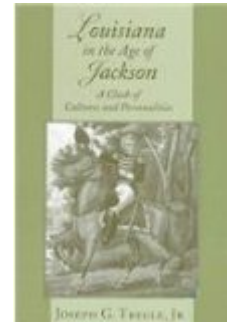


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph George Tregle. *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xii + 369 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2292-1.

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The organization, conception, and central concerns of this book represent the outlooks and emphases of the early 1950s when the dissertation upon which it is based was written, but Tregle's narrative is sufficiently grounded in the primary sources and nuanced in argument to transcend the book's origins. Although Tregle employs the older periodization of "the age of Jackson" stretching from 1824 to 1836—abruptly ending with the election of Martin Van Buren—and does not speak of a "second party system" (nor even refer to the work of his fellow Penn alumnus, Richard McCormick), nevertheless his book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the emergence of that system in the South. Tregle's thesis is given in the title and subtitle of the book: the politics of Louisiana in the age of Jackson was dominated by the diverse cultures of the state and the colorful personalities who lived there.

The first six chapters are devoted to various aspects of the geographic, social, economic, and institutional environment that Tregle believes shaped the political developments he traces in the second half of the book. Clearly the most important of these chapters is "The Ethnic Imperative" in which Tregle describes the main population groups in early Louisiana whose conflicts he believes created both a distinctive social order and political system. According to the author, "No other state seems to have been so seriously affected by ethnic cleavage as Louisiana" (p. ix), although it would be a mistake to lump Tregle with the so-called "ethno-cultural school." He goes to lengths to dispute what he calls the "creole myth"—a Louisiana populated by the genteel white descendants of the colonial French or Spanish families who did battle with the culturally barbarous Anglo-Saxon arrivistes. In fact, Tregle argues the term "creole"

was used to refer to all native-born Louisianans regardless of race, color, or status. He further adds that even the whites in this group were something less than cultural paragons: "Generally illiterate, almost always politically naive, genuinely uninterested in intellectual or artistic concerns, and not unduly fastidious in his theatrical taste, the typical creole could best be described as a simple man averse to change ... no more an aristocrat than he was an Ottoman Turk" (p. 30). Thus, Tregle tends to prefer the term *ancienne population* to identify the Latin Louisianans who made up the "largest single group in the community" (p. 23).

Often in the text Tregle combines the creole Latins with another distinctive element of the early Louisiana population, the foreign French who were generally fugitives from the French Revolution and its aftermath or the slave insurrection in St. Domingue. This group was far more sophisticated than the native Latins and provided political leadership to the Gallic element in their on-going struggle with the diverse horde of Americans who poured into the state intent on exploiting its resources and controlling its politics. He postulates a tripartite sectionalism of the Gallic sugar-growing region of the southwest, the American cotton-producing provinces along the Red River and in what had been West Florida, and the southeastern delta region dominated by New Orleans.

Other elements contributing to the distinctive population mix, which Tregle mentions but does not use in his analysis, included the migrants from Canada—the Acadians and their descendants, generally called Cajuns—and the Irish and German immigrants who entered the state settling in New Orleans in the last years of the period

dealt with here.

Of course, there were major groups outside the political system whose influence was indirect but of primary importance, namely the slaves and the free persons of color. The non-white population was a distinct majority, with slaves making up 51 percent of the state's population in 1830. More unusual was the place of the free blacks, a group Tregle discusses only briefly and in a strange fashion. Although he notes their special status in Louisiana—in some rural districts they were even allowed to vote in the 1840s—Tregle places greatest emphasis on the sexual activity of free women of color, especially their participation in the “quadroon balls” and the institution of *placage* which was embraced by the creole element of New Orleans. For example, he notes that the puritanical Americans “found particularly reprehensible the *menages de couleur* in which Gallic New Orleanians set up handsome quadroon women as mistresses of second households” (p. 86).

Although Tregle goes on to discuss the geographical distribution of these groups and to emphasize the split between New Orleans and the rural parishes, it is a shame that there are no maps to allow the uninitiated reader to locate the places named in the text. Similarly unfortunate is the absence of quantitative estimates of the size of the groups and the proportion of the population and voters each made up at various times since these crucial relationships undoubtedly changed. The state's white population grew from 34,311 in 1810 to 158,457 in 1840 and the relatively unstudied American element must have accounted for a good deal of that increase.

Tregle's emphasis on the “ethnic imperative” emerges most clearly in his challenge to the traditional view presented sixty years ago by Roger Shugg in *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*. Shugg had traced the conservative features of the state's constitution of 1812 (that remained in place until 1845) to the hegemony of the “black belt” plantation aristocracy over the yeomen farmer of the “white belt.” But Tregle argues forcefully that this legal “Skeleton of Iron” was welded together by the creole majority at the time of statehood to insure that their control could not be easily challenged by the swarm of grasping American locusts spreading into the state and filling up the cotton-growing areas.

Not only in this does Tregle's manuscript challenge older Progressive interpretations, but he also dismisses the view of today's neo-Progressives who emphasize the importance of the market revolution which took place during these years. Explicitly he argues

against the “wage-earner thesis” associated with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., but implicitly Tregle's chapter on the economic aspirations of the people of Louisiana rejects the idea that Louisiana had ever been anything other than capitalist in its orientation. There is no hint that anti-capitalist/communitarian leanings could be found among any significant group; some were simply more successful than others in the headlong rush for wealth.

Louisiana shrugged off examination of her failings with impatience, eager to get on with the pursuit which essentially defined the society as a whole—the business of acquiring wealth. So thoroughly did this theme dominate the life of the community that it made of Louisiana a frontier settlement ... The same ruthlessness, unrestrained individualism, and hidden desperation which had so often been part of the pioneer push into the American West moved with relentless determination through the ranks of those who saw in Louisiana's fields or counting houses the promise of a golden avalanche ... No other frontier demanded more alertness or guile, more insensitivity to evil, or more resistance to considerations of justice and mercy ... Nothing better characterizes this Louisiana scene of the 1820s and 1830s than the inelegant phrase “on the make” (pp. 42-43).

Tregle emphasizes how this rampant individualism generated a highly personal politics dominated by what Tregle calls the “transcendent ego”:

This grasping for wealth almost brutalized the people, cutting great inroads into personal and public honesty, draining the society of those energies and visions which might have contributed to the fashioning of a life better suited to moral and rational beings, and twisting its leadership into ambitious seekers-after-power, impatiently vying for the right to rule rather than to serve (p. 43).

In their origins these politicians were a cosmopolitan lot and, in a general way, they reflected the interests of their ethnic groups. But personal allegiances and rivalries meant that there were often intra-group conflicts and struggles for personal fame and power. The net result was that “no national party emerged in Louisiana based on one ethnic or geographic faction as against a second organization based on the other; no Jackson army of Americans poised against a Whiggery completely French” (p. 80). Tregle does assert a tendency for the “original rivalries” to persist in the new era, but offers no adequate statistical basis for its demonstration.

In the last half of the book Tregle traces the emer-

gence of the Democratic and Whig parties through the victory of Van Buren in 1836. Politics in the 1820s was highly personal and both Jackson and Clay had many close connections of kin and friends in the state. The 1828 election was the first in which the presidential electors were popularly chosen, and Jackson (who had many enemies among the Gallic population although he gained three of the state's five electors in 1824) won a narrow victory over Adams (who had won the other two electoral votes in 1824.)

Although Tregle does note the commitment of Jackson's supporters to the principles of '98, he sees this as a rhetorical gambit rather than adherence to a consistent ideological position.

In none of their attacks upon protectionism, internal improvements, or eventually the Bank of the United States did Louisiana Jacksonians display any indication of hostility to the business complex as a class or endorse the concept that the relatively dispossessed members of the community found themselves in that status because of economic exploitation by bankers or commercial barons. Their arguments reflected instead a sharp response to conflicting sectional interests dividing East and West or aligning wealthy slaveholding planters against manufacturers in distant northern centers. They opposed the tariff not because it made some people rich but because it favored one section over another, and internal improvements because they had relatively less importance for an agrarian region than for an industrial one (pp. 193-94).

In order to further develop this argument, Tregle notes that Martin Gordon—one of the state's Jacksonian leaders and a favorite of the Old Hero when it came to distributing the loaves and fishes—was also one of Louisiana's richest men and president of the "most notorious monopoly in the state," the Orleans Navigation Company. The "loudest critics of the Bank ... stood at the forefront of banking activity in the state; despite Jacksonian assaults on 'monopoly' and 'privilege,' Democrats ... controlled public services like the New Orleans gaslight and waterworks utilities; and few Whig merchants, factors, and financiers could rival the wealth and commercial clout of [several leading] Jacksonians." In the 1836 election, which featured the discussion of slavery and an outburst of nativism stirred up by the Jacksonians, Tregle concludes that the real issue was whether Jackson could appoint his own successor.

Tregle's political narrative revolves around the machinations of various leaders who seem more interested in spoils than anything else and includes numer-

ous vivid characterizations. He describes the best known Louisiana politician of the time, Edward Livingston, as "a legal scholar who had no rival, a lawyer who had no superior, and a man who had no apparent concern for personal integrity" (p. 117). Tregle could find few stable patterns of ideological or socio-economic conflict:

Louisiana possessed little of the stability or maturity which might have allowed for a more theoretical approach to economic and political problems. Its society responded primarily to immediate personal attachments, for individual advantage and advancement dominated the concerns of the great mass of its people (p. 334).

In these last chapters Tregle also discusses state politics and elections. From this he draws his major conclusion that the "unusual ethnic struggles in Louisiana produced within it a political pattern unlike anything elsewhere in the United States—a dualistic system for local and national political action." Local politics during these years came down basically to a conflict between the Gallic and the American elements, but this had little relationship to the national contests even when gubernatorial and presidential elections were in the same year.

Unfortunately, Tregle prefers to sketch the character and eccentricities of Louisiana's political leaders and summarize debates over issues taken from newspapers rather than systematically analyze the behavior of voters and legislators. His key conclusions are simply asserted. There is nothing on the development of institutional structures. The reader is told that Louisianans had a "fanatical dedication to the fortunes of their competing champions," and yet in 1832 when Clay opposed Jackson only 22 percent of the white adult males went to the polls—a significant decline from 1828—and they gave Jackson an overwhelming 62 percent of the vote. Turnout went down even further in 1836, but then jumped up to nearly half of the white adult males (47 percent) by 1844—before the constitution was changed to expand the suffrage. Clearly a great deal was happening in the state's political system that Tregle has chosen not to consider or which has eluded him entirely. While in many ways Louisiana was distinctive, personal politics such as that depicted by Tregle characterized the first phase of the second party system in all of the states and dual systems of local and national politics could be found elsewhere.

All in all, *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson* is both fascinating and frustrating. It is generally well written, grounded in extensive use of primary sources, contains a few excellent chapters and is often convincing or at least

reasonable in its speculations. But it fails to either develop the author's main arguments or address the most significant questions that have interested political historians of this era since the 1960s when Lee Benson and Richard McCormick shattered the Progressive paradigm.

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