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Natalie J. Ring. *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. xiv + 334 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2903-1; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-4260-3.

Reviewed by Susan W. Thomas (UNC-Greensboro)
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The Imperial South

Natalie J. Ring's *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930,* attempts to create a new framework for analyzing the history of the South during the fifty years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. As an expansion of her dissertation, her ambitious work contributes to the growing body of scholarship that places America's history in a global context. Ring builds her study upon a solid foundation of rich primary sources that includes the speeches, publications, and correspondence of familiar public figures and the records of a range of government and philanthropic agencies active in the South at the time. Ring deftly uses these sources to expand our view of the South beyond our comfort zone by integrating the familiar history of the impoverished war-ravaged region into a global narrative of imperialism and the growth of the national liberal state.

Students and scholars of southern history will recognize and identify with Ring's critique of the overworked emphasis on the analytical framework of continuity and change set in motion with C. Vann Woodward's 1951 classic *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1901.* Ring instead challenges her readers and fellow scholars to place the South of that period into the global arena of America's imperial experiment. She argues that by doing so, we can illuminate and better comprehend heretofore overlooked connections between the federal government's approach to "the problem South" and its agenda on the world stage.

Ring takes a discursive approach to her study, placing great emphasis on the rhetoric of the period, and focusing on the frequent inclusion of the South in public and private conversations regarding policies toward subject peoples in the Philippines and elsewhere. She draws on a wide range of published work dating from the 1880s to the 1920s to show how influential voices juxtaposed images of the South and its struggles with social and economic conditions to those seen in underdeveloped countries drawn into the web of imperialism. This language of empire that we recognize today as paternalistic and self-righteous proved a useful tool for addressing and attempting to overcome the trenchant problems facing the South.

Beginning the first chapter with Theodore Roosevelt's conviction that "The problem of any one part of our great common country should be held to be the problem of all of our country," Ring highlights the useful contemporary analogy of the nation-state and the human body (p. 18). When all is well, all parts of the body function together in harmony for the good of the whole; when one or more parts of the body are weak or diseased and unable to fulfill their role, the entire body suffers as a consequence. Within the body of America, the South stood out as the region least capable of fulfilling its role in supporting the health and well-being of the national body. The sickly South prevented full economic integration of the region and weakened the country's ability to reach its full potential. As Ring notes, "a diseased region would lead to economic decline for the nation as a whole" (p. 77). Bringing the South up to or near the national norm became imperative for the sake of the country's future.

Prominent figures such as Clarence Poe, editor of the successful *Progressive Farmer,* traveled to Asia and spoke with leaders of Japan and China and conferred with American and British imperial officials in the Philippines and India regarding the formation and implementation of innovative educational and agricultural programs.[1] The United States was not alone in its efforts to learn from others, as foreign visitors came to the American South for the same reason, to learn from the region's successes and failures. Looking at international collaboration among reform-minded peoples during this period is not a new idea. Daniel T. Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998) covered the ways in which

reformers on both sides of the Atlantic borrowed from each other as they sought to remedy social ills. Ring's contribution is showing how this exchange played out in the American South.

Ring details efforts to resolve the underlying causes of the South's health concerns such as widespread hookworm and malaria; she analyzes attempts to remedy economic problems such as the region's heavy reliance on cash crops; and she takes a close look at the push to garner public support for addressing educational ills such as high rates of illiteracy. She devotes the final chapter to America's "race problem" which revealed itself most clearly in the South, where racial tensions seemed to worsen as time passed. Ring asserts that imperialism revived the debate among both whites and blacks of the period over the meaning of race in the context of "global race problems" (p. 203). Ring explores how in each of these aspects of southern and national life, policymakers used the South as a laboratory for implementing new programs under the oversight of the expanding liberal state. She shows that much of the reform initiative we associate exclusively with the Progressives of the early years of the twentieth century had their genesis within the global milieu of imperialism.

Throughout the work, Ring consistently highlights the paradox of progress coexisting with poverty in the South. While reformers and policymakers wanted to emphasize progress, they continually focused on the problems plaguing the backward South. This emphasis on paradox with regard to the southern past is a familiar trope, which makes it seem out of place in a work that seeks to push the field into new directions. This is a minor fault, however, in a text that introduces readers to new approaches for continuing to study and learn from the South and its place in the nation.

The value of Ring's work lies not in revelation of new sources but in her use of sometimes familiar historical evidence, people, and events to reveal their international scope and significance. Her challenge to step back and see the South as a part of the nation's policy and rhetoric of empire deserves attention and further pursuit.

Note

[1]. Though Ring does not mention it, Poe also traveled to South Africa and brought home the idea of rural segregation for North Carolina, a notion that failed to gain support from the state's legislators. See Jeffrey J. Crow, "An Apartheid for the South: Clarence Poe's Crusade for Rural Segregation," in *Race, Class, and Politics in Southern History: Essays in Honor of Robert F. Durrden,* ed. Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Charles Flynn, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

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