

Manisha Sinha. *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xiii + 362 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-4884-5.



Reviewed by Kevin M. Gannon

Published on H-Pol (May, 2001)

Revisiting "The Problem of South Carolina"[1]

During the "secession winter" of 1860-61, newly-elected president Abraham Lincoln consistently overestimated pro-Union sentiment in the South, asserting that the crisis was "an artificial one." Lincoln believed that the secession of the deep South states had been provoked by a minority of rabid proslavery planters in a last-ditch effort to save their faltering political power in the face of a rising democratic impulse. Lincoln declared that the leaders of secession desired nothing more than "to play tyrant over all [their] own citizens, and deny the authority of everything greater than [themselves]," and he would repeat similar claims throughout the months before his inaugural and prior to the firing on Fort Sumter. Secessionists, he told Lyman Trumbull, "are now in hot haste to get out of the Union, precisely because they perceive that they can not, much longer, maintain apprehension among the Southern people that their homes,...and lives, are to be endangered;" therefore they faced the prospect of having their previously unquestioned political mastery challenged by a restive yeomanry. For

Lincoln, secession represented the ultimate expression of a fundamentally anti-democratic movement conspiratorially hatched by a minority of elite planters.[2]

In *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina*, Manisha Sinha offers a similar assessment of the secession movement in the bellwether state of disunionism. South Carolina's secession from the Union in December, 1860 was, according to Sinha, the product of the aristocratic "Carolinian slaveholding elite" (p. 243). Rather than a vindication of all southerners' rights, she argues, the secession movement in South Carolina was elite-led and possessed a profoundly "proslavery, antidemocratic nature" (p. 248). Taking issue with the so-called "republican synthesis," Sinha asserts that the ideology of South Carolina secessionists loathed rather than praised democratic principles, a trait that rose directly out of their immersion in a society that enslaved its African-American majority. In this light, Sinha asserts "[s]ecession represented the overthrow rather than the fulfillment of Jacksonian democracy and

the Second Party System in the Old South" (pp. 2-3). It was this essentially antidemocratic character of South Carolina's planter-dominated slave society that produced "a rigorous critique of democracy" within its movement toward secession from the Union.

Taking issue with historians such as Lacy Ford and Stephanie McCurry, Sinha denies that the yeomanry played any significant role in fomenting secessionist sentiment. "The nature of southern nationalism," she argues, "can be understood through the words and actions of those who initiated and defined the secession movement." Thus, to characterize secession as "a yeomen's movement," Sinha claims, "seems both analytically faulty and factually incorrect" (p. 5). Sinha also discounts the importance of localized issues, such as the economic dislocations of the late 1850s, in facilitating secessionist sentiment. These issues were, for Sinha, "nonstarters" that "had little to do with the politics of secession" (pp. 7-8). Instead, the economic issues of the period were subsumed under the broader rubric of the protection and perpetuation of slavery.[3]

Sinha therefore emphasizes what she sees as the four key incidences in the maturation of the sectional conflict: the nullification movement of the early 1830s, the first secession crisis that came on the heels of the Compromise of 1850, the movement by South Carolinians to reopen the African slave trade by the late 1850s, and the final victory of the secessionists after the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860. She justifies this exclusively national focus by arguing that "[i]t is perhaps proper to focus on the sectional crises to understand secession and the coming of the Civil War rather than the mundane local politics that had little to do with the growth of southern separatism" (pp. 2-3). The nullification movement, under the intellectual stewardship of John C. Calhoun, set the foundation for what would evolve into a powerful and virulent "discourse of southern nationalism" by establishing both the

supremacy of the slavery issue and the political leadership of the elite planter class in South Carolina. This discourse reached maturity by 1850, when "[t]he equation of slavery with regional identity" fostered a commitment to separatist ideals in the black-belt South, especially South Carolina (p. 95). This commitment was marked by its "undemocratic, top-heavy nature," as "[t]he average citizen had yet to be converted to the cause of southern nationhood and the democratic credentials of the 1850 movement were suspect" (p. 97). By the late 1850s, fears concerning slavery's future (and thus the future of South Carolina) in the Union gave rise to a vigorous effort to reopen the slave trade, according to Sinha. Once again, this movement was led by "aristocratic" figures, and it did not adopt the characteristics of democratic politics. What the slave trade movement accomplished, Sinha asserts, was to force an all-important "ideological re-evaluation" of slavery in South Carolina which served to establish slavery in the public mind as a positive good above any condemnation (p. 186). This intellectual and political hegemony of the interests of slavery described by Sinha was the driving force in the "overthrow of politics as usual" that occurred with the coming of secession in South Carolina in 1860 (p. 187). Sinha consciously invokes the writings of George Fitzhugh (p. 255), in arguing that "secession was an overturning of the Revolution of 1776 and the principles that underlay it"; the secessionist movement represented, ultimately, a repudiation of democratic politics and egalitarian sentiment in its desire to form a confederacy of slaveholders based upon the ownership of human servitude.

Sinha's work is provocative, but flawed in several significant respects, and ultimately falls short of the claims she makes in her introduction about its novelty and impact. One of the most endemic problems for Sinha is her consistent mischaracterization of the historians' arguments she seeks to refute. For example, she takes Lacy Ford and other "republican school" historians (her term) to task repeatedly for placing slavery in a

"rather benign place in the republican framework," where it served to merely emphasize white egalitarianism (p. 3). But this is only a thin caricature of the arguments of Ford, McCurry, Thornton, Cooper, et al. Slavery was far from a "benign" reassurance for Carolinians, according to Ford; it was, rather, the fundamental institution in a society where whites created a libertarian rhetoric (slave-labor republicanism) by virtue of their definition of slaves as "the other." Sinha's assertions that other historians have created an artificial separation between slavery and concepts like "liberty" and "honor" in South Carolina's political culture are inaccurate as well. Contrary to her descriptions, the historians she cites have repeatedly acknowledged the fundamental importance of slavery and race in the way southerners framed their understanding of these ideals. Slavery is far from disassociated from southern discourse in the works of these historians, and Sinha's characterizations repeatedly and consistently ignore essential parts of their arguments.[4]

Based upon a misreading of the historiography of antebellum South Carolina (and the deep South as a whole), Sinha thus exaggerates the ramifications of her argument. Her chapters on the movement to reopen the slave trade, for instance, argue that the scarcity of this episode in the historiography of the period belies its importance as "an integral phase of the sectional conflict over slavery expansion" (p. 125). Sinha's argument that the planter elite of South Carolina won an important victory in forcing a reconsideration of the slave trade is ultimately undermined by the fact that measures sponsoring its renewal were defeated resoundingly in the planter-dominated state legislature -- hardly a sign that the political leadership of the state was unified behind the movement. Sinha's claim to be writing a work "different from the traditional top-down approach" by emphasizing the "enslavement and political disfranchisement of African Americans" is also problematic (p. 6). Slavery appears in the book only in its relation to the planter elite. Slaves

themselves are not mentioned specifically until the last pages of her epilogue (pp. 257-258), a puzzling manner of "emphasis."

In the final analysis, Sinha does not convincingly refute the arguments of those historians against whom she contrasts her work. Several instances in her text contradict her flat declarations of the irrelevance of local interpretations of national economic matters, such as her assertion (p. 14) that "it was not just slavery itself but the tariff issue" that made the nullification crisis such a watershed event for Carolinians. It is, however, the main part of her argument concerning the yeomanry of the state that ultimately falls short. If the yeomanry were not active agents in the secession movement, if they meekly followed the planter elite, if they did not subscribe to the same ideological world view of the planters, then why (to cut to the essence of the matter) did so many of them fight for the Confederacy? Why did the racial ideals of slave society, white supremacy, and egalitarianism (at least rhetorically) resonate so deeply among all classes of white Carolinians? Pointing out the undemocratic features of Carolinian politics, as Sinha does, will not suffice to reduce the importance of this question. While South Carolina was unique in its inability to develop two-party politics, had far from equal representation in its legislature, and possessed a gentry that was vocally critical of "democracy," these factors did not place the state completely outside American political culture.

The same "anti-democratic" professions of planters that Sinha uses as evidence of "counter-revolution" in South Carolina could have been, and indeed often were, uttered in other regions of the country. The Massachusetts elite, a decidedly non-slaveowning group, was itself hardly a model of political openness and tolerance toward the "lower orders." Any letter written by Daniel Webster, Harrison Gray Otis, or a myriad of other northern political leaders would give ample evidence of a widely-held suspicion of "democracy"

among the elite classes not only in New England, but throughout the country.[5] Therefore, one might ask, how atypical were South Carolina planters in their resistance to the democratic features that were making themselves felt in the American polity? Although Sinha decries the unwillingness of other historians to recognize the agency of subordinate groups (like slaves), her argument is predicated upon a similar unwillingness: she refuses to recognize the agency or significance of any group other than the tiny planter elite in the course of South Carolina's march to secession. Thus the reader is asked to believe that the whole of South Carolina's white citizenry swallowed any and all ideological and political claims articulated by the planters and submitted to their leadership in a sort of blind, faithful deference. By arguing that South Carolina's political culture was shaped exclusively by this tiny elite, and that the state far outstripped the rest of the Union in its resistance to democracy, Sinha paints an exceedingly superficial portrait of her subject.

A word about stylistic concerns is also necessary. Sinha's eagerness to assert her conclusions' purported originality leads to a distracting habit of sarcastic and often snide references to those historians with whom she disagrees. On many occasions, Sinha refers disparagingly to the work of others in the field, and then fails to provide citations in her endnotes to direct the reader to these supposedly incorrect interpretations (see, for example, p. 102). This type of side commentary would be better left out of the text. The overall writing style of the work would also have benefited from more editorial attention. Many passages throughout are confusingly written and repetitive, while the reader's attention is also diverted by often tortured prose and unwieldy syntax. Also distracting is the idiosyncratic use of short titles in the footnotes; Sinha uses only the first two words of a title in subsequent notations, leaving the reader to wonder to which source she is referring to when simply citing *The Writings* or *The Works*. These editorial issues would be small matters in-

dividually, but in their aggregate represent significant problems for the book's audience.

While Sinha boldly sets out to refute recent historiography and establish a new paradigm with which to understand the role of South Carolina in the southern secession movement, the end result falls short of these expectations. Little new ground is broken in her argument; rather than offer a model different from the traditional, "top-down" approach, the book moves over the familiar territory of the growing sectional conflict through an exploration of national issues, and posits an exaggerated thesis that ultimately does not answer the important questions it initially addresses. Just as the Civil War would disprove Lincoln's assumptions about the nature of the secession crisis, the willing and often eager participation of the entire class spectrum of white southern society in that conflict creates significant concerns about Sinha's assessment of South Carolina's political culture.

Notes

[1]. The title for this review refers to James Banner's important essay, "The Problem of South Carolina," in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

[2]. Abraham Lincoln, Speech in Indianapolis, Feb. 11, 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), IV: 194-196, quoted at 196; Lincoln, Speech at Pittsburgh, February 15, 1861, *ibid.*, IV: 210-215, quoted at 211; Lincoln to Trumbull, Nov. 20, 1860, quoted in David Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 141. See also pp. 134-146 for a treatment of Lincoln's perceptions towards unionism and secessionist sentiment in the South during the crisis.

[3]. Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeo-*

man Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Arguments similar to Ford's and McCurry's, that is, arguments that explore the primacy of the yeomanry and an ideology of "country-republicanism" [Ford's term] in the coming of secession, are also found in J. Mills Thornton, III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) and William J. Cooper, Jr., *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), among others.

[4]. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, esp. 350-363. On this point, see also Ford, "Making the 'White Man's Country' White: Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian South," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Winter, 1999), 713- 737. For arguments concerning the integrated relationship between concepts such as "liberty" and "honor" and the institution of slavery, see, among others, Cooper, *Liberty and Slavery*, and Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[5]. Harlow W. Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservative Leaders and the Transformation of America, 1815-1836* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), provides excellent evidence of these sentiments in New England, while Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics*, Rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) and Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) discuss the resistance of elites to an evolving democratic political culture in more general terms.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit

educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Kevin M. Gannon. Review of Sinha, Manisha. *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5117>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.