

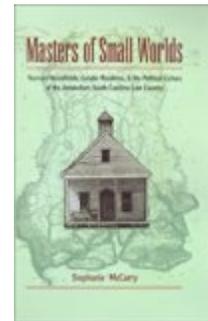
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lacy K. Ford. *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. xiii + 414 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-504422-5; \$48.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-506961-7.

Stephanie McCurry. *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 320 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507236-5.

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Review Essay: Varieties of Yeoman Independence in Antebellum South Carolina

One of the most vexing questions facing historians of the Antebellum South concerns the position in society of the group variously known as “plain folk,” “common whites,” or yeomen. In particular, historians wrestle with the exact nature of their relationship to the planter class. Generally, the fault line in schools of interpretation lies between those who cast Antebellum Southern society in terms of planter domination, and those who see it in terms of a more reciprocal relationship, often based on some common consciousness of race or citizenship. However, important debates rage about the economic tendencies of the planters—whether they were capitalist, seigneurial, or some mixture of the two—and about the nature of the yeoman economy—whether it was subsistence, market oriented, or some combination thereof. A corollary of this debate concerns the relationship of the yeomen to the institution of slavery, and therefore by implication, their relationship to secession. In 1860 and 1861 many Southern yeomen voted, and later gave their lives, to preserve an institution in which they collectively seem to have had only a small stake. Hindsight makes this all the more perplexing when we consider that yeoman discontent during the war was an important reason underpinning the collapse and defeat of the Confederacy.

All of these issues come into focus in two books which discuss yeomen in Antebellum South Carolina.

Lacy K. Ford, Jr.’s, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, and Stephanie McCurry’s, *Masters of Small Worlds* both seek to answer the question of why South Carolina’s yeomen were so eager to line up behind the secession movement and the Confederacy. However, both of these authors have much more to say about the position of yeomen within Southern society, and about their relationship to planters and to slavery. Ford and McCurry deal with different sections of South Carolina, and perhaps because of that, they come to conclusions which are at the same time generally similar and specifically different. They both argue that South Carolina’s yeomen supported secession and went to war because they perceived it to be in their best interests to do so. Both elevate the yeomen to the position of active participants in the political culture of the state. At that point, however they diverge, for where Ford sees a variant of “*herrenvolk* democracy” in which planters and plain folk were united and made equal by virtue of their common republican and racial heritage, McCurry argues for a shared politics of conditional equality based upon the common oppression of dependents, slave and free, but particularly female.

Logically, one might suppose that the starting point for any exploration of the Southern yeomanry ought to be a definition of terms: just exactly who were they? This is a problematic issue that students of the sub-

ject often neglect. Those that do not tend to settle upon individual definitions that sometimes make comparative analysis difficult. Ford and McCurry are a case in point here. In part this is a product of their different interpretive slants. McCurry wishes to de-emphasize the pervasive influence of slavery and thus defines her yeomen in terms of their land holdings. By contrast, the influence of slavery is central to Ford's analysis and therefore he defines his yeomen in terms of their slaveholdings. Both are equally valid foundations, but they do make comparison difficult. For example, Ford defines a yeoman as a farmer with less than six slaves, and one with between 6 and 19 slaves as a "middling slaveholder." This latter category overlaps with McCurry's definition of a yeoman as the owner of no more than 149 acres of improved land or nine slaves (Ford, p. 59; McCurry, p. 54). This difference may not significantly distort their findings, but it does highlight the quantitative difficulty inherent in comparative studies of the Southern yeomanry. To be fair to Ford and McCurry their categorization is sufficiently close that it might represent a regional difference as much as an interpretive one, although this is a topic in need of investigation. For comparative purposes, we will have to accept that knowing a yeoman when you see one is as close to a common definition as is possible.

Using Upcountry South Carolina as a case study, Ford sets out to answer a simple question: "why the white majority of the Old South ultimately supported the secession movement?" (Ford, p. viii). Over 370 pages later he offers an answer: "a unified South Carolina could secede because the dominant ideal in her society was not the planter ideal or the slaveholding ideal, but the old 'country-republican' ideal of personal independence, given peculiar fortification by the use of black slaves as a mud-sill class. Yeoman rose with planter to defend this ideal because it was not merely the planter's ideal, but his as well" (p. 372). Between posing the question and answering it, however, Ford inserts himself into virtually all the major debates facing historians of the Antebellum South. He implicitly argues for the basic profitability of Southern agriculture (pp. 261, 275), and explicitly characterizes planters as rational economic investors who diversified their holdings into commerce and industry as well as slavery, thus directly challenging those who argue that planters were quasi-feudal seigneurs locked in a pre-modern economic system (pp. 65, 234, 267, 275). He denies the cultural hegemony of the planters over the plain folk (pp. 67, 359, 373), and he asserts the importance of republican notions of personal liberty and independence as being central to the political culture of the

South Carolina Upcountry.

What Ford means by "country-republicanism," and its corollary, "slave-labor republicanism," should by now be broadly familiar to most students of the period. For South Carolina's Upcountrymen, "personal independence formed the very foundation of liberty ... [and] men lacked true independence if their ability to control the affairs of their household, including its economic affairs, was denied or even circumscribed in any meaningful way" (p. 50). The best way to secure independence "was a system of political economy based on widespread ownership of productive property" (Ibid.). According to Ford, "the actual political economy of the Upcountry bore rather strong resemblance to the ideal political economy of 'country-republican' theory. The bulk of the population were freeholders who controlled widely varying amounts of wealth but who usually met at least the minimum economic standard for personal independence" (p. 51).

Crucially for Ford's analysis, "chattel slavery enhanced republican liberty" in three important ways. It permitted "the economy to expand beyond the subsistence level without the creation of a vast proletariat which was economically dependent but politically dangerous." Related to that point, "slavery dampened the conflict between labor and capital not only by rendering labor politically impotent but also by introducing a 'moral' dimension into capital's control of labor." Last of all, and yet for Ford most importantly, "slavery strengthened republican values by enhancing the 'independence' of whites and creating a pervasive sense of equality among all whites, since all whites could claim membership in a privileged class simply on the basis of race" (p. 353). Taken together, this meant that slavery insulated the Upcountry yeomen "from that which they feared most: the danger that they would one day be forced to become a laboring class dependent upon capitalists for their livelihood" (p. 354).

Ford's work is undoubtedly important, both for his analysis of the specific question he set out to answer, and for his forays into other, related matters of historical interest. Always bearing in mind that he discusses no more than one half of one state, it remains the case that his conclusions deserve serious attention, especially since he is not alone in identifying republicanism as an important component of the political culture of Southern yeomen in other states. However, *Origins of Southern Radicalism* is not without its flaws. As Drew Gilpin Faust argued in her *AHR* review (October 1990, pp. 1291-92), when Ford

states that, “no one in South Carolina argued that paternalism did or should serve as a model for relations among whites,” he may have exhibited an unwarranted degree of certitude (Ford, p. 359). However, the omission for which Ford has received most criticism is his lack of any discussion concerning gender and the Southern yeomen. It is this criticism of Ford and others that McCurry intended *Masters of Small Worlds* to correct.

In contrast to Ford, McCurry begins with far more ambitious goals, among them a desire to debunk the ‘herrenvolk democracy’ thesis. She sets out by asserting that the South Carolina Low Country was a region where, “the very presence of a yeomanry, although perfectly evident on the manuscript census, had long been overlooked and even denied and where the size of the black majority and the immense wealth and power of the planter class had long provided the central, if not exclusive, dynamic of historical interpretation” (McCurry, p. vii). McCurry unaccountably forces the reader to extract from scattered footnotes the identity of the historians whom she is challenging, but she provides a powerful corrective to the historical illusion of planter numerical superiority in the area.

She records that in St. Peter’s Parish, Beaufort District, located between the Savannah and Coosawhatchie Rivers in the southwest corner of the state, yeomen were a bare numerical majority (52.5%) in 1850 and still the largest single group among the whites (49.8%) in 1860 (Table 2.6, 55). The fact that in both of these years Beaufort District had the second largest black majority (over 80% in both cases) does tend to bear out McCurry’s assertion that “if St. Peter’s Parish had a white population with a yeoman majority, then there is little reason to doubt that the same was true of the other coastal parishes and of the interior low-country districts as well” (Table I, p. 306; 55). This yeoman majority was not necessarily economically backward either. In common with Ford, McCurry argues that the yeomen did participate in the market economy whenever practical, but that they practiced what Gavin Wright termed “safety-first” agriculture: “by combining a primary commitment to self sufficiency in basic foodstuffs with a modest investment in staple crops, [yeomen] attempted to meet most of the subsistence needs of the household from its own production” (McCurry, p. 63; also Ford, p. 73). They both argue, quite persuasively, that this was a perfectly sensible and rational economic strategy which in no way suggests hostility to the economics of the market (McCurry p. 69; Ford, p. 72). This is not all that McCurry and Ford share, as they both argue that yeoman farmers supported the

secession cause of their own volition. Here McCurry, unlike Ford, argues for a gendered analysis: “as freemen in a world of dependents [yeomen and planters] shared ... in a definition of manhood rooted in the inviolability of the household, the command of dependents, and the public prerogatives manhood conferred. When they struck for independence in 1860 ... lowcountry yeoman farmers acted in defense of their own identity, as masters of small worlds” (McCurry, pp. 278, 304).

Gender is, of course, McCurry’s primary focus in *Masters of Small Worlds*. From the outset, she argues for the importance of a “gendered political history,” one that crosses “the threshold of the household and look[s] inside” (pp. ix, 37). In her analysis the physical dominance men held over their households, rather than any theoretical superiority over slaves they may not own, was the foundation of their claims to membership of the master class, and consequently the foundation of white unity in the South Carolina Low Country. In her words, “governance of a household and command of its dependent members were the coordinates of a freeman’s identity” (p. 19). However, this unity of mastery by no means indicated an equality in society or politics. McCurry is at pains to debunk the thesis of yeoman-planter reciprocity resting on a mud-sill of enslaved blacks (pp. 93, 240, 251). Not only does she widen the mud-sill to include all dependents—including slaves, servants, women, and children—but she also argues forcefully for an inequality of social power between yeomen and planters to go alongside the equality accorded all men by virtue of their status as masters. In her analysis, if the basis of masterhood and independence was “the rights of property and the command of dependents inside the enclosure, then the vastly greater wealth, property, and numbers of dependents that their planter neighbors commanded ensured that outside the household they met on unequal ground” (p. 95).

Like Ford and many other historians of the subject, McCurry bases her analysis of white political culture in the South upon a variant of republicanism. However, and unlike most of her peers, McCurry’s republicanism is explicitly Janus-faced. She agrees that Antebellum Southern republicanism, “gazed outward on the public sphere and countenanced a purportedly egalitarian community of enfranchised men.” Yet the foundation of this face of republicanism was “the command of dependents in their households,” and thus it had “another, more conservative face, one that gazed inward on the private sphere and countenanced inequality and relations of power between masters and their dependents: slaves, women, and chil-

dren" (pp. 235-36). In the author's estimation, this latter fact powerfully indicates, that "all over the slave South, and particularly the black-belt South, social inequality was not comfortably confined between black and white and limited to the private sphere, as those who define slave society in terms of race would argue" (p. 237).

McCurry's is an important work. She makes expansive claims for her interpretation: "to train our attention on [republican political culture] is to compel a quite different interpretation of republicanism in the antebellum South from the one that currently prevails. It might even compel another perspective on republicanism in all of its American variations. At the very least it suggests a broader and more interesting view of what constitutes the 'political' and thus political history" (p. 238). There is no doubt that in *Masters of Small Worlds* McCurry makes a number of very important contributions to her field. For example, turning the face of republicanism inward to look upon the household is an important corrective to those scholars who tend to concentrate upon its public face. Further, there is little doubt that the routine inclusion of the household in political history is past due. Her most important contribution to the scholarship on the Antebellum yeomen, however, is that, by basing her variant of republicanism upon mastery over all dependents, she is implicitly beginning to remove the debate out of the arena of race, and potentially bringing South Carolina's political culture more into line with an interpretation that could just as easily serve the rest of the nation. This implicitly suggests a reduction in the degree of Southern distinctiveness in the Antebellum period, and is truly "a quite different interpretation of republicanism in the antebellum South from the one that currently prevails" (ibid.). However, it is not necessarily one that is immediately convincing.

A number of ambiguities spring to mind, which need investigation before we accept McCurry's interpretation. If you believe, as McCurry and Ford both do, that the household was the foundation of social and economic organization in the Antebellum period, then you raise a question about the nature of independence. If you argue that what is important is the independence of the *household*, rather than simply the independence of the household *head*, you cast a very different light over republicanism as an interpretive tool. Individual independence is a relatively modern construct, one that originated in the rise of bourgeois society, and what might be more important in the Antebellum period would be communal independence, or more concretely, the independence of the household. If this were the case, then we could ar-

gue that the free adult members of the household were dependent on their *freely given* labor, and upon the unfree labor of any slaves they may own. One presumably unintended effect of McCurry's study is to present Low Country yeoman women as virtually powerless and passive, to remove from them in most cases any power to shape their own lives and the lives of those around them. If these women gave their labor willingly in order to secure a better, and more independent, future for their families, then can historians characterize them as abject "dependents" in exactly the way McCurry does?

Furthermore, in attempting to debunk theories of "herrenvolk democracy" McCurry may be tilting at windmills when she defines "democracy," and she may be going too far in removing race from the center of the debate. She suggests that "if white men's democracy implies a rough equality of political influence, access, and power between yeomen and planters, then, it is safe to say, the political culture of the Low Country was of a different character" (p. 246). If we define democracy in those terms then she is undoubtedly correct, but to do so would be to deny the existence of democracy almost anywhere in the United States at that time. Everywhere in the nation "common folk" suffered customary exclusion from certain levels of the political process because they lacked the material resources to participate. Undoubtedly South Carolina, the last state in the Union to withhold the right to vote for presidential electors from her citizenry, was an extreme example of this inequality, but South Carolina was also the first state in the Union to institute universal white manhood suffrage.

This latter fact assumes some significance, as McCurry spends the better part of her effort to undermine "herrenvolk democracy" asserting that "equality" in the South was a myth, except in so far as all men were masters. Ford, by comparison, asserts quite strongly the essential equality of all white men. This difference becomes abundantly clear when the two authors deal with the same passage from Mary Chesnut's Civil War diary—although for McCurry, using Chesnut to support an interpretation based upon the interior of the yeoman household may be stretching a point. The episode in question comes from October 1861 and concerns a well-digger named Squire MacDonald, a man with "'mud from the well ... sticking up through his toes'" ([McCurry, p. 128; Ford, p. 373]—Oddly, both Ford and McCurry misquote Chesnut in referring to the squire in their text as *McDonald*. The original spelling, which Ford uses when he quotes directly from the diary, is *MacDonald*.) Chesnut's husband and uncle, both important politicians and

planters in the state, were entertaining this man on the porch of the latter's plantation house. MacDonald was a yeoman notable, and descendant of a Revolutionary War hero. When Mrs. Chesnut's female cousin remarked upon the fact that Mr. Chesnut was "solemnly polite and attentive" to the yeoman, she replied: "Oh! that is his way. The raggeder and more squalid the creature, the more polite and softer Mr. Chesnut grows" (Ford, p. 373). The difference in interpretation applied to this vignette is stark and revealing.

Ford takes this to suggest that, "two of South Carolina's wealthiest men spent a warm fall evening on the porch of a big plantation house currying the favor of a well-digger ... Neither ... provided the controlling influence on the Boykin piazza. Instead, the man at the center of attention ... was the common white. Even though the sophisticated Mary Chesnut found him ragged and uncouth, her husband, a politician, knew McDonald's (sic) importance ... The rich and supposedly powerful were mesmerized by his presence and respectful of his heritage. They were supplicants for his favor, almost captive to his will" (Ibid.). In sharp contrast, McCurry argues that, "Mary Chesnut made no effort to conceal her disgust ... The fawning attention her husband and uncle heaped upon the man appalled and angered her. 'The raggeder and more squalid the creature, the more polite and softer Mr. Chesnut grows,' she noted derisively. Her uncle and her husband may have been willing to overlook McDonald's (sic) plain style and modest means. Mary Boykin Chesnut was not ... McDonald was an influential man in the neighborhood ... [but] such distinctions among the broad ranks of the common folk were irrelevant to Mrs. Chesnut" (McCurry, p. 129). Where Ford argued that this episode illustrates the equality of white men in Antebellum South Carolina, McCurry suggests that "by such gender and class distinctions and complexities was the delicate balance of independence and inequality maintained among the small free community of yeomen and planters in the South Carolina Low Country" (Ibid.).

Logically, one might suppose that both of these interpretations cannot be right. However, given a certain point of view they are reconcilable. Ford interprets the episode from the point of view of James Chesnut and Alexander Boykin, because for them Squire MacDonald was a temporarily important man whose command of votes entitled him to respect. McCurry interprets the episode from the perspective of Mary Chesnut, who could not vote, owed MacDonald no respect, and wanted to get this offensive "creature" out of her

sight as soon as possible. Ford's political interpretation bestows honor upon the yeoman, whereas McCurry's gendered social class interpretation bestows contempt. However, MacDonald was there, he was equal to Chesnut and Boykin, however temporarily, and he was equal because he was a white man, and therefore a citizen and a voter. Mary Chesnut recognized this fact in a comment neither Ford nor McCurry used. Just before her description of the Squire MacDonald episode, Chesnut recounts an exchange between another two prominent South Carolinians that bears repeating.

"Why do you hate republics? "

"Because the mob rules republics."

"And the mob always prefers Barrabas to Jesus Christ.

And yet people do so love to be popular and to have the votes of the mob." One begins to understand the power which the ability to vote gives the meanest citizen (Woodward, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Diary* [1981], p. 204).

The Squire MacDonald episode is an *example* of this sort of phenomenon. Mary Chesnut may very well, as McCurry asserts, abhor the existence of MacDonald, but, as Ford notes, she was not so politically naive as to be unable to recognize why he was there. He had the vote, and ultimately that was because of the color of his skin, not because of his social graces.

Although McCurry's gendered analysis casts vital new light on the subject, it is difficult to get past the issue of race in understanding Antebellum Southern political culture. McCurry's focus on inequality depends precisely on the grossly disproportionate distribution of wealth between planter and plain folk, which itself rested upon the profitability and high incidence of large-scale plantation agriculture in the Low Country. This, of course, rested on slavery and therefore upon race. In 1850 the Low Country was almost 70% black, and the top 10% of planters controlled just over 70% of the real wealth (McCurry, Table I, p. 306; Table 2.5, p. 54). In the Upcountry in the same year the population was almost 50% black and the top 10% of the population controlled less than 55% of the real wealth (Ford, Table 2.1, p. 45; Table 2.6, p. 50).. The relatively less unequal distribution of wealth in the latter case does suggest the possibility of a more reciprocal relationship between planter and yeoman. Furthermore, the fact that there were fewer blacks (who of course counted for the purposes of legislative apportionment as three-fifths of a white person) in the Upcountry, increased the

political power of the yeomen. Taken all together the peculiarities of South Carolina on either side of the fall line make it easy to see how Ford and McCurry could have come to different conclusions. The greater poverty and lesser political importance of the Low Country yeomen suggests an interpretation leaning toward planter dominance, and the lesser poverty and greater political importance of the Upcountry yeomen suggests an interpretation leaning toward some form of reciprocal democracy. In context, both interpretations seem to have merit and serve to underscore the dangers inherent in generalizing local conditions over the whole of the South. Yet McCurry does seriously undervalue the importance of race and slavery to the social and political culture of her region.

Still, she is correct to point out the varieties of independence in the context of South Carolina. To be independent as a yeoman, wherever you lived, was not even close to being independent as a planter. Boykin and MacDonald came from very different worlds, but what united those worlds, at least in the case of Antebellum South Carolina, were republicanism and race. What McCurry refers to as “republican democracy,” a situation in which the historian confronts “the most apparently ‘aris-

tocratic’ political culture in the nation ... [and] a political culture as authentically ‘democratic’ as any other” (McCurry, pp. 240, 239), could just as easily be described as “herrenvolk republicanism,” a term David Roediger suggested to characterize the racial ideology of the Northern working class. In his words, it “had the advantage of reassuring whites in a society in which downward social mobility was a constant fear—one might lose everything but not whiteness” (Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* [1991], p. 60). It is possible to contain varieties of independence within the broader rubric of racial republicanism, and McCurry, although she strenuously denies this fact throughout *Masters of Small Worlds*, does seem to suggest a redefinition of the concept of “herrenvolk democracy” in a new and innovative way, one that has especial relevance for the Antebellum Southern situation. For that reason, if for no other, her work deserves as serious consideration as does that of Ford.

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