A Long, In-Depth View of Race and Racism in the South

David Brown and Clive Webb tackle a massive task in writing *Race in the American South*. More than just a history of race, it tells the story of both race and racism in the region from the colonial era to today. They argue that over time those two forces became the most important factors in shaping the South—a somewhat predictable but well-documented thesis. In accord with such an ambitious undertaking, *Race in the American South* is a long, dense tome that requires some perseverance to wade through. A brief glance at the index indicates the vast scope of this work. Brown and Webb even admit up front that it is necessarily "a book of synthesis" (p. v) and not a comprehensive examination of the topics and periods covered. In this sense, their work reads much like a textbook and would be a suitable addition to an upper-level undergraduate syllabus. Rich in historiography and armed with an in-depth guide to further reading, it would also be an excellent roadmap for any graduate student preparing for comprehensive examinations or for a faculty member looking to engage the most recent scholarship in an assortment of fields concerning race and the South. For those uninitiated in historiography, it would be a daunting read, but, with some familiarity, the academic debates flow readily along with the narrative.

Brown and Webb stake out their theoretical ground in the introduction and establish themselves firmly in the realm of social history. As is increasingly common, the introduction is primarily used to define key terms and ideas to head off potential historiographical criticism for intellectual laziness. They do a good job of getting all of their ducks in a row here. Promising to incorporate gender and class throughout their analysis, they also spend significant time defining and distinguishing between race and racism. In lockstep with most historians today, they see race as a construct that changes depending on time and place, but for them, racism is less abstract and has a more tangible impact upon the history of the South, especially in terms of power. Ultimately, they acknowledge that race and racism, in spite of their constructed natures, continue to play real roles in the lives of southerners.

Rejecting the notion that the South was a biracial place, Brown and Webb also bring into their story people who did not fit squarely into the white-black dichotomy but who nonetheless were key players at assorted times in southern history, including Jews, Native Americans, and many others. Throughout the book, they emphasize that an understanding of race in the American South must include a broad interrogation of all people who lived there over time. Additionally, they discuss the meaning of the "South" and recognize that there is no adequate definition for it in geographic or ideological terms. Instead, they view it as both a state of mind and a place but do not attempt a more precise description.

Although it incorporates popular analytical tools like race, class, gender, and agency, at times, *Race in the American South* reads like a traditional history book. It even begins with European contact; the first date on the timeline, for example, in the back is 1492. While they attempt to break out of the mold of looking at south-
ern history in specifically demarcated and narrowly related periods, like the antebellum South, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the civil rights movement. Brown and Webb form each chapter around one of these eras. A large part of this organization is due to the fact that the primary actors in the story are people of Native American, African, and European descent. To bring them all into the picture, Brown and Webb have to use a somewhat conventional timeframe. With that said, they do take the time to connect those periods and show that they are not independent of each other. For instance, they repeatedly hammer at the point that the civil rights movement did not appear out of thin air in 1954 and just as easily disappear in 1968. They focus on the long scope of the movement and its emergence out of forces that shaped the Jim Crow system. Still, there is a lot of basic history that undergrads this book. There is also a lot of historiography. Without taking many sides, Brown and Webb do a nice job of mixing historiographical debates into the fabric of the book, and they lean heavily on other historians for their conclusions. The debate over the status of blacks in the British colonies includes a long examination of Winthrop Jordan’s classic, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (1968). Although they accept Jordan’s argument that some vestiges of racism existed before slavery, they argue that southern racism fully “developed after slavery” (p. 24). When it comes to the evolution of slavery in the South, they rely heavily on Ira Berlin and the categories he uses to describe the development of slave societies from societies with slaves in his Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (1998). In fact, the major historians in every area they address surface at some point in their book. Peter Wood’s interpretations are a part of the story of plantation societies. Philip Morgan’s description of the shift from white patriarchy to paternalism in the antebellum South is also here, as are George Fredrickson’s theories about Herrenvolk Democracy. A discussion of slave agency includes Peter Parish, Eugene Genovese, Robert William Fogel, James Oakes, William Dusinberre, and others. In terms of whiteness studies and the civil rights movement, they make one of their few analytical stands to reject Michael Klarman’s backlash thesis because it gives too much credit to white moderates, but they still accept Charles Eagles’ call for more studies of the white South. [1]

The final chapter is the only one that comes up a bit short in their overall mission. In less than fifteen pages, Brown and Webb attempt to show how the national civil rights coalition of the late 1960s collapsed into the tumult of the 1970s that included the more radical Black Power movement, Vietnam War, student movement, and white conservative backlash. All of these factors are loosely tied together to explain why race and racism continue to define the South today. It is a forty year sweep in a chapter that ends somewhat clumsily: “Time, it is said, heals all wounds. The deeper the wounds, the more time that is needed. In the American South, those wounds run very deep” (p. 333).

Redemption comes in an excellent conclusion, where Brown and Webb lay out their argument: “The history of race is inextricably intertwined with the historical development of the American South” (p. 336). Although the reader will not be surprised, they prove that the history of race and racism in the South was part of a process that dated back to the colonial era when both were relatively undefined. Thanks to the institution of slavery and its rise to prominence in the South, blackness became related to servitude but not necessarily to inferiority in colonial America. That shift came with the closing of the international slave trade and Indian removal, both of which turned latent notions of white supremacy into an expressed ideology. It was only after abolition that the white South needed to codify its supremacy, and, with the eventual consent of the federal government, Jim Crow came into being. Yet, a culture of black resistance developed in this atmosphere that fueled the modern civil rights movement and brought an end to de jure racism in the South. In a conclusion that sounds somewhat like Berlin’s thesis on slave societies and societies with slaves, Brown and Webb argue that the South is no longer a racist society, but it is a society with persistent racism.

Overall, Brown and Webb do a remarkable job with this giant undertaking. Race in the American South is a deep synthesis of many disparate fields and serves as a strong historiographical reference guide. It may be difficult to read cover to cover, but its best use may not be for that purpose. Instead, it is a reference for all who are engaged in these topics and an in-depth introduction for those who aspire to be more engaged in them. [1].


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