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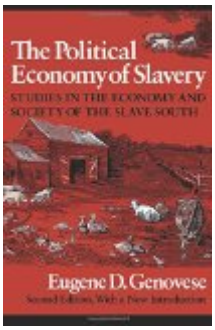
Eugene D. Genovese. *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South.* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989. xxxii + 335 pp. $14.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8195-6208-1.



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My acquaintance with the book, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, goes back to the day I bought a copy, which I still have, about 20 years ago. Looking for a book on the south and slavery, I came across a small paperback with the right price of $2.95, which seemed to fit the bill. Little did I know that I would be in for a frustrating experience. Here was a book which contrasted with my notions of the South, slavery, and the contours of southern society. It could not be as clear and consistent as Eugene D. Genovese argued; slavery could not have been like this, agricultural reform was a positive force, one which was clearly compatible with slavery, and white Southerners could not be as consistent in their commitment to the 'peculiar institution' as Genovese portrayed them. After all, slavery was an evil institution, with no redeeming characteristics, and the slaveowners were as greedy and rapacious as any American of the 19th century, concerned only with making a dollar (or several thousands of dollars),having no humane or fellow feeling for their bondsmen, who lived in abject poverty. Yet, here was a text which, maddeningly, one could not argue with, and which portrayed a different South. Every part seemed to be logically and consistently constructed, making any attempt to pick it apart a difficult task at best. It was only at this point that I began to recognize that I was dealing with an important work.

Since that time I have come to see *The Political Economy of Slavery* for the influential book that it is. It is a wide ranging study. Chapters dealing with the mundane issue of livestock in the southern slave economy, mix with broadly comparative chapters on soil exhaustion and the productivity of African labor, and politically sophisticated arguments for expansion and restrictions of southern industrial leaders. Agricultural reform, the decision on using free, white labor or slaves in southern factories, and the role of economics and economic theory in studies of the slave south are also topics discussed. Genovese also displays a firm command of the traditional historiography of slavery and the slave south. >From the Dunning school and U.B. Philips, to the Revisionist arguments about a 'blundering generation', through Stampp's work on the 'reality' of slave-ownership and slave life, Genovese navigates his way

through the maze of works on slavery, economics, development theory, economic history and southern history, as matters stood in the early 1960's. Many of the topics raised in this book have since been dealt with by other historians. To name one, there is now a wealth of information on labor, slavery and society in Africa. Recent books by Joseph C. Miller, Richard L. Roberts and Patrick Manning illustrate the new directions of research and thinking on the issues of labor and labor productivity touched on by Genovese in Chapter 3 of *Political Economy*.

Yet, all the chapters are window-dressing in light of the central essay and theme of the book. Chapter 1, "The Slave South: An Interpretation", stands alone in both depth of argument and importance. Genovese's interpretation of the slave south provides a holistic approach to the history of southern slave society. The crucial aspects of slave society are bared, in both their best and worst light, and the nature of southern society illuminated. Genovese accomplishes two tasks in this chapter, which still, whether one agrees with the conclusions or not, influence the way historians have seen southern history in the last 30 years. On one hand, Genovese takes the south seriously, as a thoughtful society filled with thoughtful men and women, concerned about the direction their social and political development is taking. Slavery, to them, is not something they can easily throw away, anymore than modern Americans can discard industrial capitalism at the drop of a hat. It was the society they were born into, the institution that shaped their lives, and, even when critical of it, unconsciously adapted their ideas and visions to its structure and rhythms. Slavery engendered certain cultural and social outlooks that worked to preserve the institution and sustain southern class structure. Hence, as historians, we would do equally as well to take them seriously.

On the other hand, Genovese presents us with an argument that links social, cultural, political and economic elements in a seamless web. The different parts of southern culture worked together, both to preserve slavery, and lead the south to its ultimate doom in 1861. The "uniqueness of the antebellum South" (pg 1) was manifested in its social beliefs, political ideology and public policy. The demands of slave society, or more precisely the slaveowners, limited the development of industry, retarded the growth of a home market, and undermined the drive for technological progress. Slavery made it impossible for the plantation to reform itself, or introduce new methods of restoring soil fertility, eroding the possibilities for economic advancement. The planters developed an "aristocratic, antibourgeois spirit with values and mores emphasizing family and status, a strong code of honor, and aspirations to luxury, ease, and accomplishment" that weakened the Northern work ethic and capitalist values of thrift and self-denial. At its core, southern society rested on the master-slave relationship, with all of its inconstancies, fears, and hidden meanings, a relationship that permeated southern life. In the long run, the southern system, with its peculiar set of values and ideals, and unique social relations and political ideology, could not stand the strain of coexistence in a state dominated by industrial capitalists, employing free labor ideology and the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence. The seamless web of southern society, in the end, turned into the hangman's noose.

The various chapters that follow "The Slave South: An Interpretation" illustrate certain facets of Genovese's general argument, demonstrating in more detail the linkage of society, economy and ideology. For example, the discussion of soil exhaustion, reform, and plantation agriculture is closely related to the overall discussion of southern society. Genovese places soil exhaustion into a larger, comparative framework, drawing on work dealing with ancient Rome and Medieval Britain, as well as the American south. For Genovese "The main problem" with soil exhaustion "lies in the reaction of social institutions", and the reaction of

southerners to soil exhaustion was, inevitably, shaped by the existence of slavery. (Pg. 88) He was not the first to argue this, as Genovese himself notes. But Genovese places the responsibility for soil exhaustion at the feet of the master-slave relationship. A sound agricultural system would have recognized the dangers to prosperity and social structure, and adjusted accordingly . Indeed, many in the south sounded the warning. John Taylor of Caroline, Edmund Ruffin, J.D.B. DeBow and others promoted agricultural reform as a means of restoring fertility to the soil and renewing the advance of prosperity for the future. But, all their efforts at rousing the south proved fruitless.

The reason was that "Slavery and the plantation system led to agricultural methods that depleted the soil". (Pg 99) The plantation was a legacy of the frontier, an effective means, with slavery, of mobilizing the large amounts of labor necessary for commercial crop production in colonial America. In the North, farmers adjusted their methods of agriculture to compensate for soil exhaustion, in response to the growing market for cereals and meat in an industrializing region. But slavery "forced the South into continued dependence on exploitative methods after the frontier had passed". The precocious commercial production of Southern planters had, in the end, caught up with them. The commitment to single-crop, staple agriculture- the mode of production most compatible with slavery- limited Southerners ability to change crops, alter their style of farming or introduce new methods and organization, that would counteract the effects of soil exhaustion.

For reform to be successful, slavery would have to be curtailed or ended. The capital locked up in slaves would have to be freed for machinery and fertilizers. For their effectiveness, reform efforts needed a smaller labor force and a new form of farm organization. Reform could succeed in the Upper South, only because the Lower South absorbed the excess slave population. But, the cost was a decline in the importance of slavery in Virginia, and virtually conversion to free labor in parts of Maryland and the whole of Delaware. The option available to Virginia and Maryland would, without territorial expansion, be closed to the Lower South, who then faced a future of bleak prospects and increased concentration of landholding, as planters scratched to make ends meet on exhausted soils. As Genovese puts it "The South faced a dilemma of which the problem of soil exhaustion formed only a part. On the one hand, it needed to develop its economy to keep pace with that of the free states, or the proud slaveholding class could no longer expect to retain its hegemony. On the other hand, successful reform meant the end of slavery and of the basis for the very power the planters were trying to preserve". (Pg 99) Soil exhaustion may have been only part of the Southern dilemma, but Genovese's use of the problem exposed the tensions that lay at the heart of the planters social ideology and culture. Without slavery they would not exist. With slavery, they are doomed to economic backwardness and eventual irrelevancy in the union.

With the spotlight provided in "The Slave South: An Interpretation", Genovese proceeds to illuminate a number of other aspects of Southern society and economy. The lack of a home market, the dependence of industry on the planters, the low productivity of labor led to economic stagnation. The slaveowners pretensions and pride blinded them to the real problem, that of slavery and slave society. They willingly adopted political panaceas for economic and social problems, because it was the last bastion of their power and authority. If their social structure was slowly, if irreversibly, crumbling under the weight of soil exhaustion, low productivity and lack of economic diversification, they could always use their political power to reverse the trends. Hence, the weight placed on access to the territories and further expansion in Mexico and the Caribbean. Finally, in 1860, it was clear that the planters were going to be unable to pursue their plans within the struc-

ture of the union. Independence, as slave-holding republic, seemed to be the only route to safety. Even this step, Genovese implies, would have disappointed the planter elite. The problems of their society were structural. Political intervention might have slowed the pace of decline and decay, but only for a time.

Since the publication of the book, critics of Genovese's argument have often appeared. Criticism tends to fall into two main categories. Economic historians, using econometrics and theory have worked on the structure of slavery as an economic system. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, in *Time on the Cross*, argue that slavery was an adaptable system, with high enough levels of labor productivity and adequate profit rates, to preserve the institution, even within the structure of the union. From an economic viewpoint there was no inevitability to slavery's collapse. Other historians have criticized Genovese's argument from the perspective of social history. James Oakes, in *The Ruling Race*, takes exception with Genovese's focus on the planter elite as a hegemonic elite. (Although Oakes, in his latest book *Slavery and Freedom*, seems to modify his earlier stance) In reality, the great planters tended to be a small, isolated group, particularly concentrated in the southeast, who were unrepresentative of the mass of slaveowners. Laurence Shore and Frederick Siegel argue that Genovese underestimates the independence and effect of industrial capitalism on southern society. Both economic and social historians stress the 'bourgeois' nature of southern slaveowners. The planters, particularly the nouveau riche of the old southwest, were motivated by the emerging norms of antebellum American society; individualism, pursuit of self-interest, and wealth-seeking. Slavery was merely the means of realizing their ambitions. The Civil War was an in-house conflict between different interests, not a struggle between world-views and incompatible social structures. David Potter contended that the argument based on essential cultural differences "exaggerates the points of diversity between the North and South, minimizes the similarities, and leaves out of the account all the commonalties and shared values of the two sections". (Potter, *Impending Crisis*, pg 32) Thus the South represents one regional variant of a general American commitment to capitalism and capitalist values. What the critics fail to take into account is the unusual nature of capitalism in a slave economy. The crucial question is this: Can a slave be treated in the same manner as a wage-worker? Can they be fired or laid-off in an economic downturn? Does a capitalism based on the ownership of labor, rather than the hiring of labor power, present a challenge to the values of self-interest, individualism and wealth-seeking? Genovese, focusing on the master-slave relationship, feels that the values inherent in a slave system are fundamentally different from, and incompatible with, the values of an industrial capitalist society. Only when the critics can answer the above questions, can their case be proven.

This brings me to a second, more personal, criticism of The Political Economy of Slavery. An interest in agricultural reform in the South originally led me to the book. It is possible that slave society was more flexible than Genovese argues. John Taylor of Caroline felt that expansion, not slavery, was the barrier to the adoption of better, more efficient farming methods. While recognizing that free land was an essential resource for an agrarian society, Taylor also noted that free land, by encouraging emigration and dispersed settlement, dissolved the fundamental tie binding farmers to the land and community. With the easy availability of land "the best informed agriculturalists are driven... or seduced by the temptations of wealth...to sell their lands, which require labour, for the purchase of a better profit". (Arator, pg 29) The effect was to short-circuit the necessity of adopting better modes of agriculture. Only where planters were forced by necessity to improve their farming, would agricultural reform and proper agricultural practices take root. There was no doubt that the frontier mentality was the

evil Taylor and other reformers fought. But, it was rooted in habits of behavior that could be changed, given proper information and constraints on migration and expansionism.

Taylor's program of agricultural reform was, in his view, compatible with slavery. Genovese makes a distinction between the 'Virginia' and the 'Southwest' solution to the problem of inefficient slave agriculture. In Virginia, a process of diffusion was underway by the early 1800's. Slaveholding was becoming both widespread among the farming population, and evolving into smaller units. Taylor, far from advocating the end of slavery, was, in reality, violently opposed to overseers and other managers on a plantation who came between the master and slave, and introduced inefficiencies into the plantations organization. The owner, in order to make the plantation run properly and to further agricultural reform, had to take a hand in the day-to-day operations of the estate. Closer supervision by the master could make the entire plantation run more efficiently, raise labor productivity, promote diversification and raise the quality of livestock, all problems that Genovese ascribes to the slave system. In the old Southwest, the solution to the problem of soil exhaustion and decline was consolidation of estates in to larger units, capable of effectively overcoming the burdens of soil infertility and low productivity. I am not entirely sure whether the Virginia solution depended on a market for surplus slaves in the Southwest. Inheritance, for example, helped distribute slaves among the farming population. Certain counties in eastern Virginia approached slave ownership rates of 90% or more in the antebellum period. Increasingly, for antebellum Virginians, the real competition was between slavery and machines, and it is possible that slaves were a more flexible instrument for agricultural reform and increased production, on smaller units, than a machine or capital input would be. In any case, I would argue that these are two distinct solutions to the problem of soil exhaustion and reform. The question is which would have been more advantageous for the long-term preservation of slavery?

Even my criticism cannot really 'refute' Genovese's conception of southern society. Taylor, as a member of Southern society had to assume that there were real possibilities for reform inherent in the slave society of early national Virginia. The real achievement of The Political Economy of Slavery is in the realm of paradigms. Eugene Genovese has given us a fully-functioning, logically constructed model of southern slavery and society that historians are still arguing with, attempting to refute or explain in greater detail. Like Bentham's system of utilitarian morality, when an historian tries to refute Genovese's model, "it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself... Is it possible for a man to move the earth? Yes: but he must first find out another earth to stand on". The Political Economy of Slavery has done what all great history books do; asked the questions, and raised the issues, that alter and shape our understanding of the past and the research we undertake in the future.

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