In this revisionist account of the ideology of the planter class in the American Deep South, Jeffrey Robert Young tackles a thorny topic that has both fascinated and divided scholars. Until recently, as people familiar with the historiography of this area will be all too aware, scholars have been divided into two rival camps over the issue of the world-view of the planter class. One school of thought, best characterized by the work of Eugene D. Genovese, has presented the South as a distinctive society underpinned by a pre-modern and non-capitalistic economy. Historians adhering to this belief have argued that this economy was presided over by a master class that was driven by paternalistic principles and was resentful of the unabashed pursuit of material gain.[1] The second group, of which James Oakes can be seen as having been the leading scholar, has argued that the South was closely integrated into world markets. These historians have characterized the slaveowners as hard-headed capitalists, who were interested principally in exploiting their slaves to make a profit.[2]

In the introduction to this book, Young recognizes that the lines of division between rival scholars have softened in recent years but then goes on to set out a case for "presenting a new paradigm for the historical analysis of slaveholder ideology." Young contends that a "historiographical inertia" has come to characterize scholarship of slaveholder ideology and argues that what scholars require is a vocabulary and an "interpretive approach that explicitly incorporates the valid evidence of both sides in this ongoing debate" (pp. 4 - 5).

In order to try to bridge this gap between historians, Young proposes that the ideology articulated by the slaveowners of the South be termed "corporate individualism" (p. 9). He argues that this philosophy was based on an organic view of society as a hierarchical system, in which individuals had and knew their places and fulfilled their roles according to the benefit of the greater good. In Young's opinion, paternalistic ideas of benevolent stewardship were clearly important in this vision of social relations, but so too was the notion, linked to modern conceptions of bourgeois indi-
individualism, that all members of society, including slaves, were individuals capable of moral and spiritual growth.

From this spirited introduction, Young tries to show how planters, in their search for profit, became closely engaged with a transatlantic system of capitalist exchange, which in turn exposed them to the changing religious and cultural developments of the wider world. Young argues that the master class of Georgia and South Carolina adopted a distinctive world-view of corporate individualism, based in a large part on organic and hierarchical principles, because, and not in spite of this engagement.

This book is a compelling study, outlining the development of a slaveholder ideology from the colonial period to the aftermath of the nullification crisis. It is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a different time period, and tells the story of the development of slaveholding ideology as the slaveowners made the transition from being colonial dissenters to becoming a shaping force in the new nation. Young then confronts the issue of how this ideology ensured that the Southern elite would come to see itself as an embattled and distinct section within the nation.

Young argues that, in the colonial period, masters of the Deep South jealously guarded their right to make a profit by exploiting women and men of West African descent. He shows how they resented missionaries who attempted to promote Christianity among the slaves and were, on the whole, suspicious of the British imperial authorities, fearing that interference from these quarters might threaten their precarious grip on their bondservants. Young contends that although some of the richest planters forged close links with Britain, most were afraid of being made ‘slaves’ to the imperial metropolis and that this helped to bring about the breach with Britain. He argues that, amidst this, all but a few planters saw Africans and their descendants as little more than beasts and were not inclined to see their relationship with their slaves as being at all reciprocal.

However, Young argues that in the aftermath of the Revolution, it became necessary for the master class of the Deep South to reconcile their position as slaveholders with the ideas of democracy, republicanism, and individualism that had also informed their break away from Britain. Furthermore, he contends that patterns of commerce meant that the master class of the Deep South were involved in an exchange of cultural trends and religious ideas with transatlantic and northern partners. As a result slaveholders were aware that, by the late eighteenth century, slavery was under attack from reformers on both sides of the Atlantic and felt the need to respond.

Young argues that the slaveholders’ response was informed by democratic and bourgeois notions of individualism as well as new ideas of reciprocal family relations that highlighted the importance of love, sentimentality, and mutual consent. However, according to him, the slaveholders took these ideas and applied them to their hierarchical and patriarchal society in a way that allowed them to maintain their mastery and the order that they longed for. The ideas of corporate individualism, which Young sees as having emerged from this development, therefore stressed the humanity of slaves and their capacity for moral and spiritual improvement. However, they also cast slaves as childlike dependants and masters as rational Christian stewards, and saw the master-slave relationship as reciprocal and mutually beneficial. Young argues that, by presenting slavery in a quasi-familial light slaveholders could justify the institution both to themselves and to the outside world. However, he also contends that the romanticization and domestication of slavery was rhetorical and a figment of the planters’ imagination, writing that “Only a fool would accept at face value the owners’ professions about the relatively easy and enviable lives of their slaves” (p. 174). By locating the beginnings of the development of this
mentality in the early nineteenth century, Young places the advent of a slaveowning culture containing paternalistic elements at an earlier point in time compared to other scholars.

Young also claims that an "emerging gender dynamic paralleled the development of the new model for racial interaction" (p. 152). Women and slaves were both seen as subordinates, but as individuals in an organic, reciprocal, and moral society both groups had a defined role to play. According to Young, white Southern women were increasingly seen as having a duty to serve their families and communities but were also expected to uphold strict standards of so-called womanly conduct.

Young contends that by the 1820s the slaveholders of the Deep South had "begun to perceive themselves as an embattled minority within the Union that they had fought to establish" (p. 161). He argues that planters had great faith in their society, saw themselves as progressive, and compared their society favorably with the free states of the North. He argues that by the 1830s, a sectional identity existed among the planters of the South and that the language of sectionalism was being used in conjunction with a mass media to try to bring political unity to the white South. The reader is left with a vision of the master class of the Deep South as the self-assured leaders of a society which they saw as unique, morally sound, favored by God, and superior to that of the northern states.

This book considers a large topic over a broad time frame, but is never short on detail. The author’s bold thesis is always supported by careful research and is as refreshing as it is persuasive. In short, it is a pleasure to read and goes a long way towards reconciling some of the hackneyed debates that have come to characterize the historiography of the Old South. Work like this can only serve to help scholars to be more innovative and creative in their studies of the region in the antebellum period. Furthermore, this book can be read alongside Charles Joyner’s Down by the Riverside and more recent works such as William Dusinberre’s Them Dark Days, Robert Olwell’s Masters Slaves and Subjects, and Stephanie McCurry’s Masters of Small Worlds to help give students a valuable introduction to the study of the slaveholding Georgia and South Carolina low-country. [3]

However, in reaching his conclusions, Young might have considered the impact of the white urban poor of the antebellum South upon the worldview of the region’s elite. By the 1830s laboring immigrants, many of them Irish, were a major feature of Southern cities. This new feature of the urban population did not empathize with the white elite of the region, nor were they committed to the support of slavery. Immigrant wage laborers were never won over by the master class’s attempts to convert the lower classes of the South to a sectional ideology and continued to be seen by the elite as an “enemy within” up to and during the Civil War. Furthermore, as a rapidly expanding group of propertyless yet enfranchised free wage laborers, they served to undermine the low-country elite’s romanticized view of Southern society, as harmonious, organic and very different from the society of the northern states. It is therefore possible that what Young describes as the sanctuary of “a well managed plantation household” (p. 211) and the promotion of a rural slave-owning ideal might be seen, in part, as a psychological retreat on the part of the lowcountry elite from the threat posed by the arrival of belligerent free wage laborers on what this elite had come to see as the civilized and secure island of the American South. Therefore, a consideration of the connection between pro-slavery ideology, sectional identity, and the issues of immigration, class, and ethnicity might provide a basis from which scholars of the antebellum South could use the ideas put forward by Young to explore other aspects of Southern history.
It might also be added that the ideology of corporate individualism, as presented by Young, helped to inform an incipient "scientific" racism, which by the 1830s was being developed with the assistance of Southern doctors. These racist beliefs held that blacks were innately foolish and irresponsible and yet had racial immunities to disease and were naturally suited to a life of heavy labor. Masters could use such ideas in support of a vision of a hierarchical and organic society made up of individuals with reciprocal obligations. They could justify their stewardship over individuals that they saw as vulnerable and incapable of self government, whilst demanding that slaves show gratitude by fulfilling their naturally ordained role as physical workers by laboring hard for their masters in the rice and cotton fields.

This suggests just some of the ways that Young's work might be built upon and how it might be of use to scholars of the antebellum South. It is evidence that this book is not only fascinating in its own right, but that it is challenging and highly thought-provoking. Domesticating Slavery poses important questions and, I am sure, will be read and used by scholars and students of slavery and the antebellum period for years to come.

Notes


Copyright (c) 2000 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-shear/


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4380

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