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Counter-Revision of Secession: Jacksonian Democracy on Trial


In this thoroughgoing study of radical ideology in South Carolina, Manisha Sinha shows clearly that planter-politicians linked nullification and secession inextricably to an unapologetic proslavery ideology, a fact most historians have little doubted in the last thirty years. Her larger point, however, is that South Carolina's radicals did so by deploying a counterrevolutionary political rhetoric, rejecting Jacksonian democracy and majority rule, and that these radicals dominated the political stage. Republican or democratic ideology, she argues, does not explain the southern radicalism that triumphed in secession. Republican or democratic ideology, she argues, does not explain the southern radicalism that triumphed in secession. She challenges what she calls a consensus "republican school of southern political historians" who argue that secession stems from Jacksonian notions of white men's democracy. Instead, she seeks to differentiate between the republican rhetoric employed routinely by almost all antebellum Americans and the conservative proslavery ideology that gave meaning and purpose to southern nationalism" (pp. 3, 4).

Organized chronologically, Sinha's book follows South Carolina radicals across the generation gap, highlighting advocates of nullification (1828-33), slaveholders' rights in former Mexican territories (1846-49), single-state secession versus southern nationalism (1850-52), the proposed reopening the Atlantic slave trade (1854-59), and finally, secession itself (1860). At each point, she lays before the reader the reactionaries' argument: that keeping African Americans in slavery was the best solution for the conflict between capital and labor, but that racial slavery did not necessarily mean white equality. Simple majority rule, especially in the country at large, potentially threatened slaveholders' property, so property must be represented in state government. Hence the importance of a firm states'-rights interpretation of the Constitution: having consolidated power within the state, planter politicians used states'
rights to protect their "minority rights" as slaveholders.

Sinha's book demonstrates ably the explicit bonds South Carolina radicals forged between antidemocratic theories of government, states' rights Constitutionalism, secession, and the protection of slavery. It will surely serve as a sharp corrective to Charles Adams's *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession.*[1] Sinha's book is replete with wonderful quotations from the protagonists themselves, and she lets them make her argument. Edwin C. Holland labeled slaves "anarchists" and "true Jacobins," an internal enemy to the ruling order (p. 15). John C. Calhoun asserted that, among white men, the "wealthy and intelligent" men spoke for the "poor and ignorant," and therefore planters spoke for the white South at large (p. 86). Peter Della Torre proclaimed that "hostility to slavery is hostility to the South. You cannot speak, you cannot think of the South, without slavery" (p. 102). The title of John Townsend's 1850 pamphlet was self-explanatory: "The South Alone Should Govern the South, And African Slavery Should be Controlled by Those Only Who are Friendly to it." It was republished in 1860 together with "The Doom of Slavery in the Union; Its Safety out of It" (p. 233).

Yet the radicals were not omnipresent or all-powerful, even in South Carolina and certainly not in the larger South. One of the strengths of the book is to show the long struggle radicals faced to bring unanimity to their cause. Unionists were hardly silent during the 1851 secession crisis. James Petigru, an old foe of nullification and now of secession, acknowledged a public toast "to the health of South Carolina" by countering, "With all my heart, and her return to her senses" (p. 107). Antidemocratic secessionists had the upper hand in South Carolina, but they knew they were the minority in the South at large and they rightly blamed the "direct vote" for unionism's victory in other states (p. 115).

This point exposes a tautology that Sinha's book is not able to escape within the scope of its evidence. She contends that "South Carolina was exceptional not because it was different from, but because it was ahead of, its sister states." The "disintegration of the party system, the ideological dominance of the politics of slavery, and the secession of a majority of the southern states," she writes, "represented the victory of Carolina-style politics. Secession represented the overthrow rather than the fulfillment of Jacksonian democracy and the Second Party System in the Old South" (p. 2). This might be true, but a book tightly focused on South Carolina's radical players, with a heavy emphasis on the national stage, cannot demonstrate this process for the South at large. It can only claim the apparent result as evidence for the assertion.

In fact, the Carolinization of southern politics depended on Jacksonian democracy as much as it was hampered by it. As historians have shown at state and local levels for places as different as Alabama, North Carolina, and particularly Virginia, slaveholders held inordinate political power, but broad white male suffrage provided at least some check on that power and helped shape the political rhetoric.[2] This was true to some degree for South Carolina, where after 1810, as Sinha recognizes, "most adult white males" could vote (p. 13). While planter-politicians may have been top-down in their theories of government and held onto power through the disproportionate representation of propertied men in government, they were still politicians and had to appeal to local voters' interests, including non-slaveholders'. Political masters might take the electorate by the wrist, but to do so, they had to keep their fingers on its pulse.

Ironically, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery* remains top-down in its method despite its political proclivity. It does not obviate the need for the work of Stephanie McCurry, Lacy Ford, and J. William Harris, who bring forth the nuances of
politics at the local and even domestic level. In these spheres, notions of patriarchy, white men's political liberty, and democratic patron-client relations were at play. These intersected and were bolstered by slavery and South Carolina's antidemocratic political structure, but they were not always conflated with slavery in political rhetoric. [3]

Rather than showing Jacksonian democracy to be inoperable in the South, Sinha's book highlights democracy's crucial importance, especially as Carolina secessionists carried their cause to other states. In fact, as Charles Dew's new book shows, lower-South secessionists lobbied upper-South representatives quite fiercely to convince them of Lincoln's threat to slavery. Only democratic processes could necessitate such actions, and the campaign worked, helping pave the way for the second wave of secession in 1861.[4]

Secession may have been led by men with an antidemocratic political philosophy, but it was achieved by men steeped in Jacksonian partisan politics. Some of them were the same men. We must recognize the white South's political and socio-economic diversity and the full stake it had in American representative democracy if we are to understand democracy's paradoxical role in this antidemocratic movement. Sinha's book fills an important niche by reminding us how radical the radical right could be, and how influential.

Notes
[1]. Daniel Justin Herman, "Secession Vindicated! Or, Taxes, Death, and the Civil War," book review of Charles Adams, When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Seccession, for H-CivWar@h-net.msu.edu, cross-posted to SLAVERY@listserv.uh.edu, 13 July 2000.


