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Abstract

In a 1975 article on the place of yeomen farmers in a slave society, Eugene D. Genovese identified a critical question concerning the nature of the Old South. The issue, he wrote, is to explain "the degree of class collaboration and social unity" that existed among all whites, which to Genovese appeared "all the more impressive in the face of so many internal strains." Although some critics mistakenly charged that Genovese argued for non-slaveholder passivity in the face of planter hegemony, he was, in actuality, acknowledging that class relations were permeated with tension and discord, causing bitter resentments that occasionally flared into conflict among white folks. Yet Genovese never found evidence of a populist insurgency against slaveholder authority, a struggle in which the very basis of power was contested. He suggested— what scholars such as Steven Hahn, Lacy Ford, and Stephanie McCurry have more recently developed with amazing sophistication—that an intricate web of political, economic, and cultural relations bound whites together through shared material and ideological interests imbedded in human bondage. [*excerpt*]

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INTO THE MURKY WORLD OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Peter S. Carmichael

Jennifer R. Green. *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiii + 300 pp. Figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. $80.00.

David Williams. *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War*. New York: The New Press, 2008. 310 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $27.95.

In a 1975 article on the place of yeomen farmers in a slave society, Eugene D. Genovese identified a critical question concerning the nature of the Old South. The issue, he wrote, is to explain "the degree of class collaboration and social unity" that existed among all whites, which to Genovese appeared "all the more impressive in the face of so many internal strains."[1] Although some critics mistakenly charged that Genovese argued for non-slaveholder passivity in the face of planter hegemony, he was, in actuality, acknowledging that class relations were permeated with tension and discord, causing bitter resentments that occasionally flared into conflict among white folks. Yet Genovese never found evidence of a populist insurgency against slaveholder authority, a struggle in which the very basis of power was contested. He suggested—what scholars such as Steven Hahn, Lacy Ford, and Stephanie McCurry have more recently developed with amazing sophistication—that an intricate web of political, economic, and cultural relations bound whites together through shared material and ideological interests imbedded in human bondage.

Although Genovese's interpretive framework of the antebellum white South has stood the test of time, scholars remain somewhat uneasy as to whether slavery transcended the great economic and political divide between rich and poor. Some historians are especially troubled by the image of a planter class lording over society from a mansion on the hill, where their paternalistic gestures inspired lock-step allegiance from those below. Jennifer R. Green's *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South* and David Williams's *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* challenge the view of slaveholders as a uniformed and unified class who effectively instilled class discipline. While both authors compel us to think deeply about the nature of

class formation, identity, and political action, neither historian fully succeeds in reconfiguring the ways we conceive of Southern class relations before or during the Civil War. Williams's work is especially unsatisfying, for his discussion of class relations suffers from the most simplistic economic determinism. Members of the Confederate ruling class, in his eyes, were only capable of caring about their narrow self-interests—defending slavery, preserving wealth, and escaping military service—whereas poor white Southerners are seen as victims of class exploitation who derail Confederate military operations. Williams turns a complicated story of the Confederate home front into a twisted morality play that would only make sense if it were performed in a Roman coliseum where the powerful routinely give the thumbs down to the helpless before cheering enthusiastically as the poor victims, despite putting up a herculean fight, get devoured. Green, on the other hand, offers a far more sophisticated analysis of Southern class relations before the Civil War. She reveals new dimensions of the antebellum social order that complicate the traditional depiction of the two-tier class system of slaveholders and non-slaveholders. She finds a vibrant and influential middling order of young students at military colleges who stood on the periphery of slaveholder power in the 1850s. Unlike Williams, Green does not reach extreme conclusions when she encounters disagreements among Southern whites. Rather, she looks at these disputes as opportunities to explain how class differences forced all parties to negotiate power, even if compromise meant embracing new values that seemed incongruous with human bondage.

Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South overturns the dated notion that military schools were nurseries for perpetual adolescents who entered the adult world desperate to duel or to find a friendly game of eye-gouging. Green demonstrates that military schools in the 1850s attracted ambitious and highly driven young men who desired a curriculum that would facilitate the professional needs of a middling class. While many of the South's more established universities insisted upon a classical education for its pupils, places like the Virginia Military Institute appealed to a student constituency whose aspirations did not include becoming gentleman farmers. These young men needed vocational training to become engineers, teachers, and businessmen, and Green finds that military cadets praised their institutions for recognizing the importance of a practical education. The author proves that military schools attracted young men who did not have land and slaves waiting for them after graduation. But the debate over a practical education versus a classical curriculum was taking place at universities across the South, a point that Green misses. She does not, as a result, fully appreciate the broader economic and cultural forces that caused a curriculum reevaluation throughout the Southern academy. Changes in the political economy, especially in the upper South, as well as the growing influence of a transatlantic Victorianism,

were pushing people of all classes, not just the middling orders, to question whether a classical education was necessary.

Green is correct that young people discovered traditional avenues to male success—slaves and property—closed off to most in the 1850s, especially in areas where the soil had been scorched of its nutrients. Unfortunately, she interprets the professional trajectory away from the planter model as proof that a self-assertive middle class had arrived on the scene. In making this claim, she overlooks how the sons of prominent slaveholders also agreed with their middle-class peers that young people throughout the region must prepare themselves intellectually and culturally for a world governed by a spirit of progress. Green compounds this mistake by asserting that the endorsement of Northern middle-class values of intellectual discipline, moral restraint, and frugality demonstrates that the Southern middle class repudiated the planters for their luxurious and wasteful ways. They did, but a broader perspective on this matter would have revealed a sweeping critique of aristocratic values among slaveholders themselves. They denounced the anachronistic cavalier for making them look ridiculously out-of-step to the free-labor world.

Although my criticisms counter Green's claims that a Southern middle class self-consciously created a distinct set of values in opposition to the planter class, her findings cannot be dismissed entirely. Like no other scholar before, she succeeds in showing how ideas about Southern manliness and honor were modified in the decade before the Civil War. Unlike traditional universities, where reputation was based upon family prestige and wealth, military schools were more meritocratic. Having servants or wearing expensive clothes did not matter at a military academy where status came from wearing a uniform properly, following regulations obediently, adhering to schedules promptly, and listening to superiors attentively. Military schools were strikingly different from other Southern educational institutions in the ways they facilitated achievement and rewarded merit. Once a student received his diploma, the author discovered that a vast professional network advanced a graduate's career. To be sure, these young men were products of a slave society who accepted a world that prized individual mastery over perceived inferiors, but Green brilliantly shows how these young men reshaped and refined Southern manliness in ways that drew from cultural trends of a transatlantic Victorian culture. These cultural shifts are critical to her overall thesis that a Southern middle class stood apart from the planters. Yet, she refuses to go as far as Jonathan Daniel Wells, who argues in his path-breaking *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800–1860* (2004) that a middle class developed in antagonism to the planters. Green wisely concludes that class consciousness for the middle ranks of the South did not develop until after the Civil War.

In *Bitterly Divided*, David Williams finds class consciousness in every non-slaveholder breath. In the decade before Fort Sumter, the author somehow

detects a rise in antislavery sentiment among lower-class whites while slaves bordered on open rebellion. Williams insists that the Old South neared a revolutionary state by 1860, and that the Civil War unleashed seditious forces that engulfed the region into a two-front war: one against the North and the other against dissident Confederates. Members of the slaveholding class were responsible for this internal cataclysm, Williams argues, for they initiated a war that was immensely unpopular with non-slaveholders as soon as Jefferson Davis took the presidential oath. An unwavering determination to protect class interest caused the rich to reduce ordinary people to a state of angry desperation. Even a surge in military casualties and physical destruction from the North's hard war strategy could not awaken slaveholder sympathy to the immense suffering of their fellow whites. Williams condemns the rich for retiring to their plantations to grow cotton and tobacco while the poor were forced into military service, leaving their families virtually helpless and alone. Ignoring the poor and allowing them to sink into the muck of human misery found tangible expression in exploitive governmental policies such as conscription and impressment, which Williams sees as proof that the slaveholders managed to lose their political savvy but not their greedy ways during the Civil War. In the end, the malicious and myopic selfishness of the Confederate ruling class triggered a revolt of the common folks who fractured the Southern war effort through widespread desertion and vicious guerrilla tactics.

Williams advances his arguments regarding Confederate class warfare by operating in a parallel historiographical universe in which no other scholarship matters except his own. Of the 567 endnotes in *Bitterly Divided*, he cites his own monographs or coauthored work 181 times. Relying on his own publications raises obvious methodological problems that appear when he engages the existing literature. In his introduction, Williams asserts that "generations of historians have too often neglected—that during its brief existence, the Confederacy fought a two-front war" (p. 1). Internal dissension is hardly a new idea. The notion that the South imploded from within dates as far back as 1937, when Charles Ramsdell, in the inaugural Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History, suggested that class friction, exacerbated by short-sighted governmental policies and ruling-class arrogance, led to social disintegration, a collapse of morale on the home front, and the demise of Confederate armies. Ramsdell's lectures were later published posthumously in 1944 as *Behind the Lines in the Southern Confederacy*. His social explanation of Southern defeat lay dormant until a new wave of scholarship in the 1970s revitalized internal explanations of Confederate collapse. Throughout the 1980s this dominant interpretation followed the broad contours of Ramsdell's pioneering study. Surprisingly, the leading names of the internal school of defeat such as Paul Escott, Wayne Durrill, and Drew Faust are cited by Williams, but he either mangles their sophisticated interpretations or surgically

extracts evidence from these important books to fit his rigid thesis of internal dissent. How Williams (as well as the scholars who wrote the blurbs on the dust jacket) can claim that *Bitterly Divided* tells an untold story that demolishes the Lost Cause myth of a united Confederacy is downright baffling.

Williams is certainly entitled to his opinion that internal hostility was responsible for the Confederacy's demise. But the current historiographical debate is not centered on whether lower-class dissent derailed the South's military effort. Historians generally agree that a host of complicated problems of poverty and internal violence blunted the military effectiveness of Confederate armies. Even Gary W. Gallagher's *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (1997), a book that many consider the knock-out blow to the internal school of defeat, acknowledges that privations and political discord disrupted Southern armies. Scholars are currently more interested in the varied meanings and contradictory intentions of dissent, a line of inquiry that Williams does not ignore. But *Bitterly Divided* unfortunately classifies every anti-Confederate expression as a class-based condemnation of the war. Desertion, for instance, was a form of social protest that reflected a range of conflicting motivations and purposes. Leaving the ranks without permission did not always mean a renunciation of the Confederacy. Although Williams references William A. Blair's influential *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861–1865* (1998) in regards to desertion, he misunderstands Blair's central point that absenteeism became an accepted practice in the army, in which *officers*, the very men Williams condemns as uncaring thugs, violated military policy by allowing individuals to go home without official permission. Most soldiers, in fact, returned to the ranks after a short visit. The lenient and informal policy of allowing members of the rank-and-file to assist distressed loved-ones, Blair argues, actually diffused hostility against the government for its failure to end shortages and control greedy extortionists. Not until late 1864 did absenteeism unmistakably represent defeatism and possibly a desire for Northern victory. Williams never acknowledges the contradictory impulses behind desertion—or other forms of Confederate dissent, for that matter—even though he is correct in asserting that the 1862 Conscription Act antagonized the lower classes. But those who resisted the implementation of the draft, as Aaron Sheehan-Dean points out in *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (2007), often entertained a different definition of duty and service from the military planners in Richmond. Countless soldiers were angered by the preferential treatment afforded slaveholders, but others objected to the idea of state coercion and believed that military service should remain a voluntary act. Their opposition to this policy, in other words, cannot be seen as a declaration of war on the Confederacy that originated in a feeling of class injustice. There was lower-class unrest as Williams describes, but Confederate officials revised

conscription regulations throughout the war to make it more equitable on all classes, an essential point that Williams basically ignores.

It is Williams's failure to account for the evolution in Confederate legislation that prevents him from seeing the ways that local, state, and national officials simultaneously softened and toughened policies against its poorer citizens. The Southern ruling class faced a formidable if not impossible task of waging war against a well-supplied and populous enemy while trying to feed and care for suffering civilians. Fully appreciating the practical challenges facing Confederate officials in fielding armies, managing an economy, and providing social services would have injected some much-needed moderation in Williams's hyperbolic writing. He states, for instance, that "if common folk were being 'eaten up' by officeholders, speculators, and other well-to-do southerners, the upper crust themselves ate well, despite food shortages" (p. 75). Of course there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of individual callousness, but knitting together a series of examples to support an extreme generalization fails to address the ways that governmental policies changed or the degree to which they succeeded or failed. Paul Escott, Emory Thomas, William Blair, and Sheehan-Dean counter Williams's depiction of brutish Richmond bureaucrats keeping a tight grip on food and clothing resources. These authors, among many others, found that governments at all levels took unparalleled steps to supply food, control prices, and care for the indigent. After the famous Bread Riot of 1863, Richmond's leaders opened a free store where the poor could exchange tickets for provisions. In Lynchburg, city officials established public stores that sold basic necessities at cost to the poor. Evidence of upper-class benevolence cannot be found in *Bitterly Divided*. If Williams had incorporated primary research that was incongruous with his predetermined thesis, he still could have furthered his theory of lower-class unrest as a cause of Confederate decline. Escott accomplishes just that in *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (1978). Members of the yeomen class, Escott discovered, sometimes rejected benevolent measures, not out of clear-cut class animosity, but because they considered charity a form of dependence. He, moreover, finds that Confederate leaders were always adjusting policy in response to lower-class demands, but the war consumed their nation's resources and people so quickly that they could not keep pace with a crisis that rapidly spiraled out of control. Their measures, he argues, proved insufficient in solving the material and moral catastrophe that eventually enveloped the Confederate home front. Escott's work endures, even though recent scholarship has an uncomfortable relationship with the internal explanation of Southern defeat that *After Secession* best represents, because he incorporates oppositional evidence to his argument. In this way Escott shows how ruling classes, like all people, act in contradictory ways that are both enlightened and exploitive. Williams does not allow, in *Bitterly Divided,* for complications that would bring ambiguity to his historical black-and-white world.

Both Williams and Green deserve credit for their imaginative inquiries into the murky world of Southern power relations. They also should be commended for refusing to rely on race as the universal explanation of white solidarity. Green is especially clever in showing how military cadets possessed what Antonio Gramsci calls a "contradictory consciousness."[2] This helps explains how these young men could be part of a historical bloc that in some instances allowed them to move comfortably among prominent slaveholders, while at other times they felt apart from the planter class, believing they were at odds with the very world into which they were born. Those moments when consensus collapsed are opportunities to penetrate historical consciousness of class, which E. P. Thompson encouraged us to explore so long ago. Green and Williams respond to this challenge by emphasizing how occupation, wealth, and status shape class formation and identity, but the authors are not as successful in locating the intellectual dispositions of their subjects—the very ways that people feel, comprehend, and represent the world around them. While Williams and Green are at their strongest in describing the dynamic relationship between human behavior and its relationship to the material environment, their materialist explanation of causation deprives us of seeing how ideas functioned on their own terms, apart from social conditions. *Bitterly Divid*ed and *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South* typify the scholarly approach to class identity. We are thus in need of fresh ways of accessing consciousness that move beyond the linkages between material surroundings and class ideology.

The concept of Sensibility, as Daniel Wickberg brilliantly demonstrates, offers us new possibilities of exploring class consciousness.[3] Sensibility gets us below the substance of culture and ideology so that we can see how people, regardless of the issue or the object, mentally, morally, and emotionally engage life. Sensibility, when located, consists of filters that predispose an individual to committing a specific action or expressing a certain idea. If Green and Williams had explored the perceptual orientations of their subjects, not just in terms of a materialism-grounded belief system, but in the actual ways that military cadets and poor Southerners saw and felt the world, we would have gained rich insights into the ways that white Southerners experienced their lives. Instead, we encounter their historical experience through a framework of traditional scholarly questions—questions that people at the time rarely asked of themselves to order their chaotic and confusing lives.

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1. Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeoman Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," in *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*, ed. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese (1983), 251–52.

2. T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985), 569.

3. Daniel Wickberg, "What Is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New," *The American Historical Review* 112 (June 2007), 661–84.