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The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South

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Abstract

This article reviews *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South* (2013) by Bruce Levine.

Keywords

social, revolution, South, Confederacy, Civil War, Dixie

Book Review: *The Fall of the House of Dixie*, by Bruce Levine

Brexton O'Donnel

Bruce Levine's *The Fall of the House of Dixie* (2013) opens with a stirring reminder of the size and wealth of the antebellum Southern states, and the fact that much of that wealth was in human capital. Levine extensively details the immense wealth tied up in slavery, and the luxurious lifestyle of the Southern slave-holding elite. The book's goal is to stress the importance of slavery as an economic and social institution for white Southerners, and a central fact of life for them. Levine argues that the Civil War transformed from a conventional military conflict into a revolutionary struggle that transformed American society and politics. His core thesis is that the Civil War brought about a great social and political revolution in the American South especially. Most of the book consists of Levine seeking to demonstrate how the structures of wealth and power in the South, founded on the cornerstone of slavery, were radically altered by the Civil War in an event he calls "the second American revolution."¹⁴⁹

Levine begins the book by laying out the background of "The House of Dixie" and continues chronologically recounting its fall through the war and into Reconstruction. He devotes successive chapters to the early phases of the war, the evolution of Federal war policy towards slaves and slaveholders, and the progressive collapse of Southern society. Levine takes a dual approach in making his argument. Calling on an

¹⁴⁹ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South*, (New York: Random House, 2013), 285.

impressive array of sources, Levine spends much of the book examining the relationship of slavery to the society and economy of the Confederacy. Dissent in the Confederacy, which resulted in the creation of West Virginia and guerrilla warfare in Unionist East Tennessee, comes in for close scrutiny.

Some of these poor whites took up arms against the Confederacy out of resentment at their wealthier neighbors leading them into war. However, Levine also notes that even many poor whites continued to support the Confederacy.

Still, conflict between poor whites and the Confederacy demonstrated the weakening of the socio-economic foundations that the House of Dixie stood on. Throughout the book, particular attention is paid to the amount of slaves that abandoned the Confederacy in the wake of the Federal armies' advance.

The military successes of the Federal armies continuously weakened the institution of slavery in the Confederacy, and as the fortunes of slavery waned, so did the enthusiasm of Confederates for the war. Levine does not forget to look at the situation through the eyes of the slaves either. Where the collapse of the South brought ruin to slaveholders, it uplifted the newly freed black population of the South and greatly altered their position in Southern society, as they could no longer be sold or forcibly separated from their families.

A recurring theme throughout Levine's chapters in the latter half of the book is the increasing Confederate fear of what the impending end of slavery will mean, and their failed efforts to control their slaves. Levine's rigorous examination of the increasing amount of cracks in the social cohesion of the Confederacy throughout the book is its greatest strength.

Levine also examines the political relationship of slavery to the war, particularly in the context of Federal war aims. Levine demonstrates how the aims of Lincoln and the Republican Party in regards to slavery changed over the course of the war. Levine rightly emphasizes that the Republican Party was not a revolutionary party. While the Republican Party was committed to undermining slavery, they preferred gradual change. In the early days of the war, only the most radical Republicans foresaw the end of slavery in the near future. Originally, the party embraced a limited war for the Union. The logic of events forced the Republicans to embrace a more radical policy, targeting slavery to win the war.¹⁵⁰

Levine successfully crafts a provocative social history of the American Civil War that neatly describes the origins of the Southern rebellion and the social changes that ultimately transformed the South and brought about the end of the House of Dixie. The dual nature of the book serves it well, as Levine illustrates the social changes and tensions that unraveled the Confederacy's socio-economic structure, while providing a clear political backdrop that contextualizes the transformation of the South with Northern war aims. Much of the book's political content is not groundbreaking, and in the hands of another author, might come off as tedious. But Levine successfully crafts a compelling narrative that skillfully incorporates a wide range of sources.

Levine also addresses the aftermath of the Civil War, pointing out that as the blood-toll of the Civil War mounted, Southerners were reluctantly reconciled to rejoining the Union. They did so while maintaining hopes of being able to restore some form of their social system,

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 142-170.

and in this, they eventually succeeded.¹⁵¹ A thorny issue for a scholar arguing that the Civil War represented a social revolution that transformed the South is that the post-Reconstruction South managed to recreate many elements of the antebellum Southern society and retain political power. Yet Levine argues persuasively that the setbacks do not detract from what the “second American revolution” did accomplish, which was to end slavery forever and advance the greater cause of liberty. Bruce Levine has penned a superb work that will stand as one of the premier social histories of the American Civil War.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 284-299.