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 0521850657 - The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern
 Slaveholders' Worldview
 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese
 Excerpt
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Prologue

Wherever the main purpose of speech is flattery, there the word becomes corrupted and necessarily so. And instead of genuine communication, there will exist something for which domination is too benign a term; more appropriately we should speak of tyranny, of despotism.

—Josef Pieper¹

This book is about white Southerners, and it is not about their “whiteness” – whatever that term may mean. It explores the ways in which they reflected on the world they lived in and on the bearing of history and Christian faith on their lives as masters in a slaveholding society. We take the ground that the Lower South and large parts of the Upper constituted not merely a society that accepted slavery as part of its social order but a genuine slave society – that is, a society based upon slave labor. Accordingly, we strive to avoid two errors: the one that has these white Southerners with nothing much on their minds except slavery, the other that denies the pervasive influence of slavery on their widespread interests. We recognize that slaveholders, big and small, generally concentrated their thoughts on religion or politics or literature or mundane matters without fretting over the implications for their lives as slaveholders, and certainly without thinking that they had to defend their ownership of slaves at every turn. But we insist that, whether readily apparent or not, the master–slave relation permeated the lives and thought of all who lived in the society it dominated.

Most of those who figure most prominently in these pages owned slaves, some in large numbers; many more had a direct or indirect interest in slaveholding through family connections or professional and business arrangements. During the first half of the nineteenth century, as today, the richer the family, the better their children's chances of receiving a good education and enjoying the leisure to express thoughts, whether for publication or privately in letters, diaries, and journals. Since slaves produced the crops that afforded the primary source of wealth, the more slaves a family owned, the more highly educated its members were likely to be and the greater their leisure to read and think and write.

¹ Joseph Pieper, *Abuse of Language – Abuse of Power*, tr. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco, 1992 [1974]), 30.

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The southern states were rural and, by every significant measure, decisively more so than the northern states. They had fewer urban centers, and a much smaller proportion of their population lived in them. Yet more telling was that the number and size of urban centers were growing less rapidly in the South than in the North. While cities and towns were setting the tone and driving the development of northern society, the countryside continued to set the tone for southern towns and cities and to control their development. The South contained fewer miles of railroad in proportion to its size, and its railroads overwhelmingly connected areas of rich agricultural production with centers of export – rather than binding centers of industrial production and centers of population into an ever denser web. The North was also spawning vastly more industrial production than the South. Few historians have denied the rural nature of southern society: some have attributed the distinctive features of southern society exclusively to its persisting rural character, and some have insisted that southern rural society was essentially capitalist. At the margins, these arguments merge, primarily because they both seek to demonstrate that the South should not be viewed as a slave society different in quality, not just in level of economic development, from the North.²

Ruling classes enjoy disproportionate opportunities to shape the values and worldview of their societies, although none ever does so completely or unilaterally. Southern slaveholders prized the literate culture of Western Civilization, claiming it as their own. Many were, in fact, deeply conversant with it; others, through lack of interest or time, were less so. But even the most learned and broadly read straddled the worlds of literate and oral culture, remaining hostage in myriad ways to the sensibilities of those – slave and free – less fortunate than they. Our culture's categorical condemnation of slavery has made it easy for ideologues to demonize the slaveholders, even dismissing them, with breathtaking absurdity, as premature Nazis. Yet those who do so fail to recognize that such demonization of the slaveholders trivializes the slaves and nonslaveholding whites by reducing them to objects and implicitly denying their substantial contributions to southern culture.

Today, almost everyone views slavery as an enormity and abolition as a moral and political imperative. Yet as recently as two or three hundred years ago, the overwhelming majority of civilized, decent people would not have agreed: Indeed, they would have found such notions surprising. Before the eighteenth century, and especially before the dramatic revolutions with which it closed, most Europeans would have viewed the principle of free labor as surprising, if not alarming. Slavery, like other forms of unfree labor, had existed throughout history. Neither Judaism, nor Christianity, nor Islam, nor other religions condemned it at the time. The current recognition of the horror and intolerability of slavery represents a rare example of unambiguous moral progress, although whether what is now recognized as wrong

² For elaboration of our views on these matters see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), ch. 1; also, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1983).

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was always wrong – wrong in all circumstances and contexts – is a more complex issue than generally acknowledged.

Unsympathetic readers have been known to conclude that our respect for the southern slaveholders means that we agree with their defense of slavery. Other readers, including many who understand that respect for southern slaveholders does not depend upon approbation of slavery, may nonetheless think we view “traditional” societies, including southern slave society, as superior to modern capitalist societies. We do not, although the question transcends the necessity for and desirability of emancipation. The question is especially complex because the slaveholders embraced many features of modernity and progress. Their slaveholding society was enmeshed in the tentacles of the expanding capitalism from which it was born. Similarly, their slaveholding culture and intellectual life were inextricably tied to the most advanced intellectual and philosophical developments of the day. Southerners frequently argued against the more radical implications of modern ideas, but they never refused to engage them.

The tension between tradition and modernity in southern thought invites confusion. For example, many southern intellectuals did condemn capitalism for its wanton disregard of the networks of mutual responsibility that bind the sexes, social classes, members of families, and societies. In this respect, they effectively conflated capitalist social relations with the rise of an increasingly radical bourgeois individualism. But they also acknowledged their own adherence to and respect for many of the principles of individualism, notably its emphasis on individual conscience and moral responsibility. The problem, as they saw it, was to know when and how to call a halt to the seemingly self-revolutionizing momentum of fundamentally beneficial, but potentially destructive, developments. Their attitude toward the Middle Ages makes it impossible to claim that they saw previous epochs as superior to their own. But they did worry that the excesses of their own epoch might prove their undoing, and they did believe that slavery – with all of its wrongs, which many southern intellectuals sorrowfully acknowledged – could provide a hedge against capitalism’s most destructive forces, especially its erosion of binding human relations.

Throughout this book, we do our best to distinguish our attitudes from those of the people we are writing about. We never argue that capitalist societies are inferior to traditional societies, much less to southern slaveholding society. We have scant patience with the romanticization of what Karl Marx derisively called “rural idiocy.” We have tried to understand the mind-set of people who feared that the advantages of capitalism and individualism were threatening to extract too high a price. Unlike many of the Southerners we write about, we do not believe that capitalism and individualism have been worse than other systems and ideologies; but, like those Southerners, we do believe that they leave much more to be desired than generally admitted.

The ultimate horror of slavery lay not in the extent of its physical abuse but in the extent and depth of the enforced subordination. Some masters did brutally and irresponsibly overwork and abuse their slaves, although possibly nowhere near as many as contemporary detractors routinely claimed. Still, countless masters, often letting their tempers get the better of them, recklessly unleashed a power that could

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corrupt even those who sincerely strove to behave decently. Fits of temper and acts of cruelty should come as no surprise: What human being with comparable power might not do the same? "Aristotle," C. S. Lewis recalled, "said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters."³

The slaveholding South was born of the very revolutions that declared slavery the antithesis of freedom and an enormity; simultaneously, it was heir to a world that took unfree labor, including slavery, for granted. The transatlantic revolutionary movement of 1789–1848 proposed a new understanding of freedom as the freedom of the individual, but slaveholders, slaves, and nonslaveholding whites all descended from cultures that viewed family, clan, and community as more important than the individual. That is, they viewed the group as the main source of the individual's standing and sense of self. And they were originally rooted in oral cultures that typically rely heavily on the clichés and formulas that members of literate cultures self-consciously seek to avoid. Walter J. Ong, the distinguished literary scholar, noted that the formulas "are necessary for history" because they facilitate the preservation of knowledge, which is then available when needed. Oral cultures depend heavily upon recall and recognition and consequently favor verbosity, repetition, standardization of themes, and narrative, which wraps the knowledge to be preserved and transmitted in tales and songs easy to remember.⁴

Oral cultures establish clear heroes and villains, avoiding difficult cases of moral ambiguity. In these ways and others, they contrast markedly with the literate culture of recent centuries. Modern literate cultures have enthusiastically promoted habits of analysis and irony over those of participation and mimesis, and modern narratives have turned inward, favoring subjectivity over the shared values of the group. The modern narrative tends to present the writer as at odds "with society's presuppositions and values" rather than as united to them. The point is to highlight the antagonism between the goals of the society and those of the individual, who exposes the falsity and hypocrisy of society's codes and values. Postmodern culture has extended this attitude toward the individual's conflict with society to emphasize the individual's conflict with authority – both natural and divine – and especially with history, viewed as a reservoir of oppression and a fetter upon the individual's infinite possibilities for self-invention.⁵ North and South shared a commitment to freedom, but the years between the Missouri crisis of 1819–20 and the beginning of the War for Southern Independence resounded with bitter quarrels over its meaning. Few Southerners credited an idea of freedom that included slave emancipation, and even fewer had any use for the emerging campaign for the rights of women. The defense of slavery doubtless propelled Southerners' interest in history, but it neither

³ "Equality," in C. S. Lewis, *Present Concerns* (New York, 1986).

⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1977), 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

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began nor exhausted it. From the beginnings of settlement, they had demonstrated sensitivity to the historical dimension of their experience and to the balance between the old and new.

Throughout this book, we use “Southerners” to refer to the white people of the South, our primary subject here. We see no point in cluttering sentence after sentence with an unnecessary adjective. Millions of blacks were no less “Southerners” than those whites were. We trust our readers to know as much and to know that we know. Having written elsewhere about the lives and culture of the slaves of the South, we are acutely aware of the deep antagonisms that set them against their masters and their enslavement. Other antagonisms divided slaveholders from non-slaveholders and nonslaveholders from slaves. The South was riddled with tensions and conflicts of interest that set social groups against one another, and always at the forefront were the intersecting lines of slave versus free and black versus white. Although the importance of the antagonisms ought not to be minimized, a narrow focus on them obscures the many cultural assumptions shared by white Southerners of different classes and, within narrower limits, by blacks as well. Members of a rural society, all Southerners preserved inherited traditions derived from their respective societies of origin, and they were more likely than not to agree on general principles that emphasized family, tradition, and inherited concepts of authority, honor, courage, and duty.

Permit us to anticipate two criticisms. First, we do not disguise – and never have disguised – our respect for the slaveholders who constituted the hegemonic master class of the Old South. Nor do we disguise our admiration for much in their character and achievements. We see no point in arguing with those who maintain that any expression of respect and admiration for slaveholders prettifies slavery, slighting its cruelties and abominations, and absolves white slaveholders from collective and personal responsibility for their crimes against black people. The late I. F. Stone was once asked how he, a prominent spokesman for the radical Left with unimpeachable credentials as a lifelong warrior against racism and social injustice, could admire a slaveholder like Thomas Jefferson. If we recall correctly, he replied, “Because history is tragedy, not melodrama.”

Second, readers may quarrel with our broad use of “Southerners.” Since only a small minority of Southerners owned slaves and since nonslaveholders, to say nothing of slaves, could think for themselves, do we not conflate the master class with the whole of the white southern population? No. Only a nitwit would argue that nonslaveholders let slaveholders – and elite planters at that – do their thinking for them. We speak of the master class as “hegemonic,” a term that implies deep social chasms and acute social struggles but also a measure of agreement. Ruling classes, especially in democratic societies in which most white men had ready access to firearms, cannot unilaterally impose their will on others. Even under conditions of a pronounced uneven balance of forces, a ruling class – in order to survive – must to some degree respond to the mores and expectations of those it dominates.

With large exceptions, especially in the Upper South, planters, middling and small slaveholders, and nonslaveholders shared a broadly conservative worldview,

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however widely they diverged on political and religious specifics. Agreement on some essentials grew the more easily because virtually all members of southern society shared a fundamental attachment to independent rural households anchored in absolute private property. That slaves could not hope to realize the dream goes without saying, but they, too, continued to nourish it; with emancipation, the majority of freedmen chose it over any alternative, even if potentially more lucrative. Thus, when we write of "Southerners," we seek to capture a discernibly wide majority view on the issues under discussion.

The social and intellectual elite of the master class did shape the culture to a considerable degree, and we endeavor to show not the presumed ways in which they forced themselves on the classes below them but rather the extent to which they brought their vision and aspirations into harmony with those they sought to lead. If we draw heavily on the ideas and work of ministers, let it be remembered that they carried principal responsibility for the education of the boys and girls of all classes. Hence, a good many of the books by clergymen as well as laymen that we cite frequently were, in fact, polished versions of college lectures given over many years; they were part of the education of the thousands of young people, not all of them from the elite, who shaped southern politics and ideology: Thomas Roderick Dew on history and political economy; Thomas Cooper and George Tucker on political economy; Nathaniel Beverley Tucker on political theory; Jasper Adams, R. H. Rivers, and William A. Smith on moral philosophy; John Leadley Dagg, Robert Lewis Dabney, and James Henley Thornwell on theology and social questions.

Here, we explore the views of an educated elite, supplemented by those of "ordinary" slaveholding readers. We pay little attention to the ways in which the views of the elite intersected with and were informed by the traditions of others; we assume that influence ran in various directions, reinforcing the ways in which literate Southerners read historical texts. To take but one example, the Roman comedies, beloved of the slaveholding elite, were infused with elements of oral culture, as were the *Iliad* and Shakespeare's plays, among many of their favorites. Were there world enough and time – although there never is – it would be possible to suggest, if not demonstrate, distinct resonances between the oral cultures and traditions that informed the Southerners' favorite works of literature and those that informed the oral culture of African-American slaves and nonslaveholders. Any such exploration would have to begin with the Bible, which emerged from the dawn of literacy and continued to provide a living bridge between oral and literate cultures in the South. But there was more. Gifted novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston underscored the common elements of white and black southern culture, calling the South as a whole "the purest English section of the United States":

What is actually the truth is, that the South, up until the 1930s was a relic of England.... and you find the retention of old English beliefs and customs, songs and ballads and Elizabethan figures of speech. They go for the simile and especially the metaphor. As in the bloom of Elizabethan literature, they love speech for the sake of speech. This is common to white and black. The invective is practiced as a folk art from earliest childhood. You have observed that when a southern Senator or Representative gets the floor, no Yankee can stand up to him so far as compelling language goes They did not get it from the Negroes. The Africans

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coming to America got it from them. If it were African, then why is it not in evidence among all Negroes in the western world? No, the agrarian system stabilized in the South by slavery slowed down change ... and so the tendency to colorful language that characterized Shakespeare and his contemporaries and made possible the beautiful and poetic language of the King James Bible got left over to an extent in the rural South.⁶

Hurston's genius with words captures the centrality of history to Southerners' worldview as well as to their attempts to understand immediate problems and the ultimate prospects for their society. A lot of the past did get "left over" among all elements of southern society, and the abiding presence of the past in the regional culture reinforced and informed Southerners' reading of history. Neither naïve nor uncritical in their admiration for aspects of previous civilizations, they searched the past for a template for what it meant to be human: nobility, honor, courage, piety, loyalty, faithfulness, generosity, and a capacity to survive both victory and defeat with grace whether in public matters or private. And they took for granted that these qualities were compatible with power over others. Thus, as the young wife of a Methodist minister, Fanny Webb Bumpas prayed, "Lord help me to govern my family and my servants aright."

Two traditions preeminently influenced southern thinking on these questions: classical culture and Christianity. From the Greeks and Romans, Southerners, like countless others, drew a profound sense of cyclical time: That which has been will recur; the archetypal forms of human character, the havoc wreaked by human passions, and the configuration of events would all reappear with regularity. Empires rise, decay internally, and fall to superior eternal foes. From Christianity, Southerners drew a vision of time's linearity – of progress toward a better world. Christianity held out the possibility that their society might break the cycle, avoiding decadence and destruction. Living through what struck all concerned as an age of momentous change, Southerners turned to history for instruction in the great affairs of individuals and nations: what changes and what remains the same? In an age of rapid change, how much could people rely on constants of human nature? Is moral progress possible or is humanity bound by the same temptations and character flaws that have permeated all past and present societies? And most pressing, how could the children of revolution, which they knew themselves to be, defend slavery as an omnipresent and justified feature of history? If the dethroning and execution of monarchs, which Southerners overwhelmingly applauded, should be welcomed in the name of "the rights of man and the citizen," then how could the historical precedents for slavery remain immune?

In the end, Southerners were asking, "What is history about? What is it for?" In what measure are human beings the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who have gone before and in what measure denizens of a "brave new

⁶ Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, Oct. 2, 1947, Charles Scribner's Sons Archives, Author's File 3, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries, quoted by Hazel V. Carby, "Foreword," in Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (New York, 1991), vii–xvi.

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world”? The accelerating technological changes of the nineteenth century seemed to push all history into a uniform penumbra, but Southerners refused to accept the argument that those changes irrevocably changed the reigning principles of Western culture. They fought, as best they could, to control material progress rather than to become its plaything. However unpalatable the solutions they proposed, the questions they asked remain as compelling now as they were then.

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PART ONE

CRADLED IN THE STORMS OF REVOLUTION

Indeed, it may be said, without fear of contradiction, that the leading ideas connected
with the progress of the human race have been cradled in the storms of revolutions.
—Bishop R. H. Wilmer of Alabama*

* R. H. Wilmer, *Future Good – The Explanation of Present Reverses: A Sermon Preached at Mobile and Sundry Other Points in the State of Alabama during the Spring of 1864* (Charlotte, NC, 1864) – a spirited defense of secession aimed at fellow Episcopalians.

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I

“That Terrible Tragedy”

“... that terrible tragedy, the French Revolution . . .”

—James Henry Hammond

On February 1, 1836, James Henry Hammond—freshman congressman from South Carolina—intervened in a rancorous debate in the House of Representatives over antislavery petitions to condemn abolitionism as evidence of an ascendant radicalism that threatened the foundations of social order. The destructive principles initiated by “that terrible tragedy, the French Revolution” were now spreading across Europe and the northern states of the American Union. Slavery, he proclaimed, provided the last bulwark against catastrophe: “Sir, I do firmly believe that domestic slavery regulated as ours is produces the highest toned, the purest, best organization of society that has ever existed on the face of the earth.” Radicalism, spreading westward from New England, was undermining the constitutional and political framework of the Republic. Waxing philosophical while mincing no words, Hammond credited southern slavery with ensuring the fragile republican compromise between society and the individual.¹

For Hammond, a large planter who had edited a pro-nullification newspaper, and for his proslavery countrymen and countrywomen, slavery guaranteed the protection of property rights necessary for the preservation of an ordered and civilized society. In a frequently repeated southern theory, slavery unified capital and labor and thus forestalled class struggle, considered the most dangerous and corrosive of sociopolitical antagonisms. The theory had wide appeal, but it mired slavery’s proponents in tension between commitment to social hierarchy and commitment to

¹ “Speech on the Justice of Receiving Petitions for the Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” in [Clyde N. Wilson], ed., *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of James H. Hammond* (Spartanburg, SC, 1978), 15–50. Some of the broad themes are sensitively explored in Thomas Horne, “Bourgeois Virtue: Property and Moral Philosophy in America, 1750–1800,” *History of Political Thought*, 4 (1983), 317–40.