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REFERENCES


1 *The Old South’s Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress*, is a volume of essays that aims to question traditional views of Southern history and culture. Positioning itself against popular stereotypes and a vast body of professional scholarship that promotes conceptualizations of the antebellum South as unprogressive, insular, and trapped in its own traditions, *The Old South’s Modern Worlds* rewards its reader with a broad-ranging examination of the South’s negotiation with the forces of modernization, both national and international, in the antebellum era. According to the editors, the view of the South as parochial is based on a reductionist opposition that pits a “backward-looking,” “essentialized” Old South against a “forward-looking,” “dynamic and diverse” North. To recast the Old South as a site of change and progress, this study undercuts simplistic as well as historically inaccurate articulations of the Old South as the “anti-North,” and attempts to offer a fresh perspective on Southern history and culture by emphasizing “the region’s diversity, modernity, and global interconnections.”

2 Much emphasis is placed on the diversity of antebellum Southern culture, and on the fact that “each of the many ‘Souths’ was inextricably shaped by modern experience.” To begin with, Southern history is examined in terms of its interfacing with US national history: rather than focusing on the unique traits that rendered the Old South distinct from the rest of the nation, this eclectic volume explores the many ways in which
Southern history was shaped by, as well as itself shaped, national history. Secondly, it proposes not just a broader national context, but also a global context for the study of the Old South. In line with postnationalist approaches to the study of America, it rejects the exceptionalist paradigm to investigate Southern life as part of the “larger narratives of the 19th century world.” In this sense, *The Old South’s Modern Worlds* dislodges the myth of the insular Old South and places the region within the broader arena of transnational exchange.

In line with the analytical framework defined by the editors, Part One of the volume (“The South in a World of Nations”) contains essays that undercut the notion of the Old South as the social, economic, and cultural antipodes of the North, and instead place the region within the broader contexts of national history and global affairs. In "Antebellum Southerners and the National Idea," Peter S. Onuf convincingly argues that secession politics was in fact an expression of American nationalism, as well as of a modern conception of the right of self-determination, which led Southerners to insist that "their fellow Americans honor the equality principle and their common nationality by recognizing the fundamental role of slavery in constituting Southern identity." Matthew Mason’s "A World Safe for Modernity: Antebellum Southern Proslavery Intellectuals Confront Great Britain" focuses on Southern intellectuals’ transatlantic engagement with the discourse of moral reform in their attempt to counter British criticisms of southern slave-holding. Finally, Brian Schoen's "The Burdens and Opportunities of Independence: The Political Economies of the Planter Class," discusses the response of the planter class to global market conditions (for instance, the emergence of competition from the Pacific Rim), and their adoption of modern market strategies and new technologies in setting up a multitude of regional political economies.

One of the aims of this volume, at which it succeeds very well, is to explore familiar topics (such as slavery and staple crop production) from new perspectives. In Part II ("Slavery in a Modernizing Society") we come upon treatments of slave trade as an economic activity that embraced several modernizing trends of the 19th century. "'A Disposition to Work': Rural Enslaved Laborers on the Eve of the Civil War" by Larry E. Hudson, Jr. argues against the notion that the South's slave labor system displayed a "premodern economic outlook" to present evidence that slaves were in fact an "increasingly flexible labor force eager to acquire new skills and opportunities" in a modernizing South. Steven Deyle's "Rethinking the Slave Trade: Slave Traders and the Market Revolution in the South" emphasizes the "crucial role that slave traders played in the economic development of the South" as they undertook business innovations and ventured into modern market practices, such as interregional trading, modern accounting techniques, and creative marketing tools. In "The Pregnant Economies of the Border South, 1840-1860," James L. Huston speculates on what the future of slavery would have been, had the Civil War never taken place; based on patterns of antebellum regional trades, Huston concludes that "the border South would have become a slave-based industrial economy," which would have rendered slave-holding only a more desirable and long-lasting mode of production.

It is this reconceptualization of slavery as a "more brutal but no less dynamic manifestation of the vast expansion of antebellum capitalism" that takes the reader of this book by surprise, as it suggests a connection between two ostensibly incompatible notions: slavery and modernization. In Part III of the volume ("Material Progress and its Discontents"), contributors consider urbanization and industrialization as particular manifestations of Southern modernization. Frank Towers' "The Southern Path to
Modern Cities: Urbanization in the Slave States" argues that the creation and development of Southern cities was influenced by slavery, but that Southern urban growth was also "caught up in the currents of modernity" and yielded a unique, alternative form of the metropolis, "rather than an immature version of the North and England"; as Towers points out, while Southern city-building took place within a slave-based economy, "Southern cities grew rapidly, combined industry and trade, built railroads and telegraphs, attracted a heterogeneous population, standardized public spaces, and allowed for social mobility and political openness." In "Swerve Me?: The South, Railroads, and the Rush to Modernity," William G. Thomas focuses on the South's railroad culture which he shows to be "consistent with the rest of the nation." The expansion of the Southern railroad system, according to Thomas, was the result of the region's adaptability to new technologies; at the same time, the fact that slave labor was instrumental in the creation of the region's railroad network appears to indicate that the modern technologies "might extend slavery rather than rendering it obsolete." Finally, "Industry and Its Laborers, Free and Slave in Late-Antebellum Virginia" by L. Diane Barnes, showcases Petersburg, Virginia as an example of industrial development in the antebellum South, to argue that "property rights in slaves formed an important element of the South's emerging modernity, representing a tangible and attainable investment for the emerging middle class of businessmen and industrialists." To Barnes, the Southern economy combined agriculture and slave labor with modern manufacturing.

Moving from treatments of competing traditional and modern features within antebellum Southern economy to cultural manifestations of modernity in the Old South, Part IV ("The Blurred Boundaries of Southern Culture") focuses on the region's complex response to national and global cultural trends. In "Zion in Black and White: African-American Evangelicals and Missionary Work in the Old South," Charles F. Irons discusses black Southerners' contribution to regional and international missions and reform initiatives. According to Irons, "Greater attention to African-Americans' cooperation with whites in reform activity "both adds weight to the emerging redefinition of antebellum Southern Protestantism as modern and reveals new lines of influence that blacks exerted on the development of Southern evangelicalism." In "The Return of the Native: Innovative Traditions in the Southeast," Andrew K. Frank revisits the history of Native American tribes of the Southeast who have been traditionally omitted from scholarly treatments of the South. Native Americans have generally been "oversimplified as romantically adhering to ancient traditions and stubbornly opposing changes that emanated from Anglo-American society." However, as Frank shows, despite their justifiable skepticism toward the modern concept of progress, many Native Americans embraced the modernizing influences of the marketplace: they "built elegant homes and lavish plantations; constructed toll roads, taverns, steamboats, and ferries; and adopted the clothing of their white neighbors." Continuing discussion on cultural constructions of identity and the blurring of lines of difference in the Old South, Graig Thompson Friend's "Sex, Self, and the Performance of Patriarchal Manhood in the Old South" addresses sexuality as the means through which white Southern men performed manliness as domination. As Friend shows us, in the antebellum era the forces of modernization affected the construction of Southern manhood: adopting the binary conceptualizations typical of the modern mindset, "over the course of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, white Southern men embraced oppositions that situated them as dominant racially (white/black), in gendered terms (male/female), and sexually (heterosexual/homosexual).
7 The greatest strength of this volume is its very premise: historical evidence suggests that the Old South did in fact respond to and utilize modern ideas and practices. However, modernity is not a readily definable term, nor did the modern manifest itself in the antebellum South as a specific and uniform set of political, cultural, and economic features. The editors as well as the contributors of the volume are in fact eager to emphasize, implicitly or explicitly, the elusive nature of the “modern” as well as the fact that the process of modernization in the Old South was affected by local conditions that yielded not one, but rather many “modern worlds.”

8 The question of what constitutes modernity and what forms the modern assumed in the antebellum South is variously treated throughout the collection. In Part V (“The Long View of the Old South”), the region’s relationship to nineteenth-century modernizing trends is debated from two opposed perspectives: Marc Egnal’s “Counterpoint: What if Genovese is Right?: The Premodern Outlook of Southern Planters” assumes a rather traditional scholarly stance, as it questions the postnational, global approaches to the study of the Old South. Aligning himself with Eugene Genovese’s view of the region as stubbornly pre-capitalist, Egnal argues that the “incipient forces for modernization made [Southern planters] more determined to defend their traditional view of society, even to the point of breaking up the union.” In contrast, Edward L. Ayers’s “The American Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction on the World Stage” proclaims the United States a “product of global history” and focuses on the ways in which the Civil War impacted an audience of people from different nations who “could see that the massive struggle in the United States embodied conflicts that had been appearing in different forms throughout the world.” The dialecticism that informs the volume’s overall treatment of the relationship of the Old South to change and progress as expressions of nineteenth-century modernization becomes more than clear in Michael O’Brien’s “Afterword” which, in a rather fanciful manner, underscores the slipperiness of the concept of modernity and points out the many historiographical challenges involved in the study of the Old South.

9 *The Old South’s Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress,* displays both broad scope and depth in its treatment of the antebellum South’s relationship with nineteenth-century modernity. What emerges from this volume is a view of the Old South as a pluralistic and complex region that, in the editors’ own words “did not fit comfortably within the dichotomies that have historically defined the literature of the antebellum South.” Acknowledging that “searching for a definitive answer to broad historical questions is itself illusory,” the editors offer a fresh perspective on the South’s adoption as well as appropriation of nineteenth-century modernity and simultaneously propose new possibilities for research. This volume is a great addition to historical scholarship about the Old South and should not be missing from any college library.
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