

The Ante-Bellum South as an Underdeveloped Society

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SLAVERY, by Eugene D. Genovese. New York: Pantheon Books, 1965. 304 pp. \$6.95.

In *The Political Economy of Slavery*, Eugene Genovese has made an original contribution to our understanding of ante-bellum Southern history. His contribution lies not so much in the discovery of new facts as in placing familiar materials in a fresh theoretical context. Genovese is the first to systematically apply to the pre-Civil War South the theory of economic backwardness developed by the particular Marxist school which the late Paul Baran dominated. Genovese's book, in short, is a critique of the socio-economic structure of the slave South, much in the same manner as a theorist of the Baran persuasion would analyze contemporary Honduras.

Much of the book is taken up with Genovese's largely successful efforts to prove that, in comparison with the American North and West in the nineteenth century, the slave South was economically and socially a backward region. Southern agriculture is subjected to a searching analysis revealing tremendous inferiority to the West in terms of crop diversification, use of fertilizers and/or mechanization, farm labor skills, and soil use. Genovese argues that Southern dependence on staple-producing plantation agriculture, manned by inefficient and exploited slave labor, condemned the region to a low level of effective internal demand for industrial goods, to a lack of urbanization, and to an overall industrial and commercial backwardness:

Plantation slavery so limited the purchasing power of the South that it could not sustain much industry. That industry which could be raised usually lacked a home market of sufficient scope to permit large-scale operation; the resultant cost of production became too high for success in competition with Northern firms drawing on much wider markets. Without sufficient industry to support urbanization, a general and extensive diversification of agriculture was unthinkable. Whatever other factors need to be considered in a complete analysis, the low level of demand in this plantation-based slave society was sufficient to retard the economic development of the South.

Although Southern cotton earned money in the world capitalist market place, these profits, in Genovese's estimation, did not find their way back to the Southern masses, black or white. That increment from the sale of Southern staples in the world market, which did not remain in the North to finance industrial and transportation ventures, returned to the South in the form of planter profits, to be used for non-productive luxury expenditures. Genovese portrays the planter elite as a pre-capitalist slave-owning class, possessed of aristocratic anti-capitalist values, and bitterly hostile to any efforts to modernize or industrialize the South. Nor, claims Genovese, did the planters' participation in the world market for their staples make them capitalists or the South bourgeois—any more than the existence of Amer-

ican banks in Managua which facilitates Nicaragua's sale of bananas in the world market, makes Nicaraguan society capitalistic. Genovese makes self-sustaining industrial growth the *sine qua non* for a society to be called bourgeois. By portraying the weakness and subservience of the Southern industrial bourgeoisie to the planters, prior to 1860, Genovese buttresses his thesis of the ante-bellum South as a pre-capitalist backward society dominated by an agrarian elite.

Finally, he argues that, unwilling to permit industrial-capitalist progress, and, driven to seek new soils for the expansion of their inherently wasteful agrarian system, this dominant planter class drove the South into a war for independence in 1860—to save its pre-bourgeois social order. This is Genovese's original thesis of the slave South as an underdeveloped society. His formulation both illuminates much of what has formerly been obscure in the causation of our Civil War and provides fresh insights into the socio-economic structure of the Old South. Ultimately, however, this thesis may raise almost as many problems as it solves.

The essence of the Baran-Genovese conception of underdevelopment is the notion of bourgeois failure. Baran put the issue brilliantly in an early article entitled "On the Political Economy of Backwardness":

While in advanced countries, such as France or Great Britain, the economically ascending middle-classes developed at an early stage a new rational world outlook, which they proudly opposed to the medieval obscurantism of the feudal age, the poor, fledgling bourgeoisie of the underdeveloped countries sought nothing but accommo-

modation to the prevailing order. Living in societies based on privilege, they strove for a share in the existing sinecures. They made political and economic deals with their domestic feudal overlords or with powerful foreign investors, and what industry and commerce developed in backward areas in the course of the last hundred year was rapidly moulded in the strait-jacket of monopoly—the plutocratic partner of the aristocratic rulers. What resulted was an economic and political amalgam combining the worst features of both worlds—feudalism and capitalism—and blocking effectively all possibilities of economic growth.

There are certain inherent theoretical difficulties in the uncritical application of this concept to the slave South, which Genovese cannot entirely surmount with statistics on Southern agricultural, urban, and industrial retardation.

To begin with, Genovese ignores the fact that, unlike any of the underdeveloped societies for which the Baran thesis was created as an explanatory model, the American slave South had a bourgeois rather than a feudal tradition. The Southern cultural ideal of the eighteenth century was primarily that of the liberal Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, the independent agrarian capitalist, and not the pre-capitalist ideal of landed reaction. Moreover, he also tends to underplay the existence of pervasive liberal democratic political institutions for all Southern *whites*, in his effort to make the ante-bellum South look like a contemporary pre-bourgeois backward society. Thus Genovese ultimately fails to consider the extreme artificiality and fragility of the effort of nineteenth century planters to impose pre-

capitalist values on a society whose underlying traditions were liberal.

Actually, Genovese gives us little or no evidence to support his constant assertions that the planter class exemplified the values of pre-bourgeois feudalism. There is no effort to reconcile the surface anti-bourgeois ideology of the nineteenth century planters with their generally bourgeois social origins. To be sure, Genovese shows the planters' opposition to certain forms of industrial capitalism in the slave South; but he fails to draw the conclusion that the very necessity for such opposition raises serious questions as to the real backwardness or pre-capitalist quality of the ante-bellum South. Certainly the agrarian elites of Baran's underdeveloped societies—societies which unlike the slave South lack a liberal tradition—have never feared subversion by indigenous industrial capitalism.

In Genovese's analytic universe no distinctions are really possible between the slave South and Brazil in the nineteenth century. Yet such distinctions are necessary, and they go to the heart of the difficulties inherent in Genovese's thesis. Nineteenth century Brazil *would* fit perfectly all of Genovese's notions of a backward slave society dominated by a reactionary landed elite. Brazil never experienced a liberal phase of development, and remains backward in Baran's terms to this day. *The point is, however, that European feudal values were transferred to Brazil but not to the American South.* In Brazil a plantation-slave economy, producing staples for

the world market, was created under the ideological and institutional influence of Iberian Catholic feudalism. In the American South, by contrast, a plantation-slave economy was grafted artificially onto a basically dynamic bourgeois foundation. In this sense, the slave South is really much closer to the relatively advanced liberal-racist societies created by European migrants in South Africa and Rhodesia than it is to the more feudal slave societies of Latin America. Although the agricultural and industrial indices showed the South backward vis à vis the American North and West—had Genovese compared the ante-bellum South to nineteenth century Brazil, he would probably have found that the American South was already far ahead of Brazil in economic development.

The ultimate issue is one of analytic perspective. The Baran thesis illumines much about the slave South; yet by applying it in an often parochial and/or procrustian manner, Genovese partly vitiates his analysis. Fully to understand the place of the slave South in world history, one would have to fuse Genovese's insights with those brilliantly pioneered recently by Louis Hartz and others in *The Founding of New Societies*. Hartz's study points the way beyond parochialism to the integration of American history with the larger comparative historical analysis of the manner in which European culture was transferred to new societies in North America, Latin America, Africa, and Australia.

N. GORDON LEVIN