

George M. Fredrickson

## THE CONSERVATIVE MIND

THE SOUTHERN TRADITION: THE ACHIEVEMENT AND LIMITATIONS OF AN AMERICAN CONSERVATISM, by Eugene D. Genovese. Harvard University Press, 1994. 138 pp. \$22.50.

**I**n the 1960s and 1970s, Eugene Genovese revolutionized historical writing about the Old South. Using a supple form of Marxian analysis, he ended the reign of the “consensus” historians, who had viewed white southerners as guilt-ridden liberals driven by their economic interests to defend an institution that contradicted the democratic values that they shared with other Americans. Seeking to rescue the slaveholders from the enormous condescension of liberal historians, he took them seriously and on their own terms, finding in the proslavery argument an authentic American variant of the reactionary anti-capitalism or anti-modernism that had arisen in Europe among defenders of *anciens régimes* against the bourgeois utopianism of the French Revolution.

At the time that he published books like *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1965), *The World the Slaveholders Made* (1969), and *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), Genovese was in the forefront of a new leftist historiography that was affirming the existence of class conflict and ideological polarization in the same American past that earlier historians, convinced of “American exceptionalism,” had divested of such “Old World” characteristics. But there was a peculiarity in Genovese’s way of doing this. Whereas most New Left historians concentrated on finding social radicalism and proto-Marxism among the underprivileged, Genovese sought opposition to liberal capitalism on the

far right. The conventional Marxist view of the slaveholding South, originated by Marx himself, was that it represented capitalism in an extremely savage form. Genovese not only denied this interpretation but wrote about the slaveholders’ resistance to bourgeois hegemony with respect and even with a qualified kind of admiration. (Whatever else they might have been, he seemed to be saying, at least they were not capitalists.)

Genovese’s earlier work had made it seem that the worldview of the slaveholders had died with the institution that sustained it. As a historical materialist, he could hardly make a claim for the survival of the slaveholders’ ideology once slavery itself had been abolished. But the Genovese of the 1990s is profoundly antagonistic to the left as it now exists. Besides repudiating much of the socialist tradition, he has become a fierce critic of multiculturalism, radical feminism, and any other ideology that posits as its ideal the liberation of the individual from traditional forms of hierarchy and authority. Consequently, he is prepared to seek allies, or at least inspiration, from the cultural right. Still the anticapitalist, he looks once again to a southern tradition that he believes offers an alternative, not only to liberal capitalism but to the cultural left as well. Rather than having gone to its grave with “the peculiar institution,” the southern tradition, it now appears, has survived in the thought of a few twentieth-century southern intellectuals—the Nashville Agrarians of the 1930s and their conservative academic descendants, men like Richard Weaver of the University of Chicago, who died in 1969, and Melvin E. Bradford of the University of Texas at Dallas, who achieved brief notoriety when Ronald Reagan attempted unsuccessfully to

make him head of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

*The Southern Tradition*, based on a series of lectures that Genovese gave at Harvard in 1993, is both intellectual history and social philosophy. It seeks to establish the centrality in southern conservative thought of what might best be described as an antimodernist traditionalism and then attempts to use its insights to expose the dangerously utopian—and incipiently totalitarian—tendencies of the contemporary left. Such an enterprise is likely to impress most readers of this journal as perverse. It would seem undeniable that two salient features of southern conservatism have been its presumption of white supremacy and its commitment to laissez-faire economic policies, especially on the part of the federal government. Genovese is fully aware of these problems and attempts to deal with them. Racism, he asserts here as he has done in his other works, is an incidental or secondary rather than an essential or primary part of the southern tradition. (We will examine this claim in some detail below.) Reluctance to interfere with the market economy, on the other hand, represents a failure of southern conservatives to appreciate what it will take to enforce their own basic values. Genovese notes:

True, private ownership and the exercise of firm authority in management are essential for economic efficiency as well as the preservation of freedom. But then, the alternative to present arrangements may well reside in the extension of republican political traditions to the economy—to a constitutional arrangement that protects private interests, including the right to inherit property, while it respects the ultimate power of the people, acting collectively, to establish proper limits on individual action. At issue here is the challenge to devise property relations that can sustain a “social bond individualism” [Richard Weaver’s term for the South’s alternative to the anarchic individualism of the antebellum North] strong enough to repress both license and totalitarian tendencies.

Some of this sounds remarkably like an endorsement of the social democracy that Genovese elsewhere disparages. In some respects, clearly, his attack on contemporary left liberalism is congruent with the communitarian chal-

lenge to an exclusive emphasis on individual rights and personal liberation that has provoked some healthy soul-searching within the left itself. But when he repudiates rationalism and egalitarianism and bases his conception of community on a respect for myth, “prejudice,” and social hierarchy, he has clearly deserted the Enlightenment tradition that has sustained the left since the eighteenth century and made common cause with its enemies. Edmund Burke, rather than Marx or even Thomas Jefferson, would seem to be his current ideological hero, just as he “has long been a hero to southern conservatives.”

**T**he issues of social and political philosophy raised by Genovese’s neo-Burkean conservatism could be endlessly debated. But what about the purely historical foundations of the work? Has he fully and accurately described and analyzed “the southern tradition,” or has he invented a tradition to suit his own polemical purposes? In my opinion, he has here—and throughout his work—misconceived the South and what it represents. He has done this by focusing on some aspects of southern thought and experience at the expense of others that are at least as important. Because of his strong ideological commitments—first on the left and now the cultural right—he has tended to find what he was looking for in the southern past rather than pursuing an open-ended inquiry into how, on the basis of the available historical evidence, we can best answer the questions that we have chosen to ask. Historians who seek to go beyond antiquarianism and engage contemporary issues will inevitably allow their personal concerns to affect how they pose their questions, frame their hypotheses, and decide what is important and needs to be emphasized. But Genovese does more than this: he begins his inquiries with a set of basic theoretical or philosophical assumptions that he seeks to explicate, assumptions that do not seem subject to falsification or revision on the basis of the evidence.

Is it really true that “the southern tradition” has been essentially anticapitalist or antimodernist, while only incidentally or secondarily racist, as Genovese claims? In recent years a

number of competent historians (such as James Oakes, Shearer Davis Bowman, Michael Tadmán, and Norrece Jones) have raised serious doubts about Genovese's conception of the ideological character and legacy of the Old South. For the most part, Genovese has cavalierly ignored his critics and failed to answer their objections to his interpretations.

It has always seemed to me, as I have written on a number of occasions in the past twenty-five years, that an insistence on racial difference and inequality was a central rather than a secondary feature of southern slaveholding ideology. A few slaveholding theorists did indeed argue in principle that slavery need not be restricted to blacks, but they never actually proposed enslaving poor white southerners or even denying them equal citizenship, and most of them conceded that white people could not be safely made into slaves, because it would be in their nature to fight to the death against servitude. As desirable as slavery might be to ensure the safety and stability of any society, only biracial societies like the South, which was fortunate enough to have at its disposal a race of "natural" slaves, could avoid for long the intellectual heresies and social disorders produced by democracy and the free labor system. Besides being an apparently archaic system of unfree labor, therefore, slavery as practiced and justified in the South was also a manifestation of white supremacy, and it was defended most insistently and effectively on those grounds. Genovese is simply wrong when he says in *The Southern Tradition* that the Old South "rejected scientific racism." It is true that one version of it—the biblically unorthodox view of multiple creations—aroused some controversy, but the equally racist contention that blacks, although originally the progeny of Adam and Eve, had evolved into a distinct and permanently inferior *variety* of the human species enjoyed wide acceptance in religious circles. Many of the Old South's political leaders, including Jefferson Davis, actually embraced the more radical version, as is evident in their references to blacks as "pre-Adamites."

Much of the criticism of Genovese's interpretation of the Old South has been directed at

his contention that the region's political economy and governing social philosophy were "pre-capitalist." Genovese assumes on the basis of an abstract Marxism that contradicts some of Marx's own historical and political writings that capitalism and "free labor" are synonymous. *Ipsa facto*, an economy and society based on slaveholding must be noncapitalist. But does it really make sense to deny that capitalism can coexist with a system of unfree labor? South Africa at the height of apartheid relied heavily on the short-term servitude of black contract laborers, but no one has suggested that South Africa in the 1950s was a precapitalist society. If a combination of private property, private control over capital, and the use of capital to produce commodities for profit in a market economy are taken to be the essential features of capitalism—as most economists would maintain—then the Old South was a thoroughly capitalistic society. From this perspective, the internal slave trade, which was a central and ubiquitous aspect of southern economic life, represents the logical outcome of a radical commodification of labor rather than simply an embarrassing anomaly in an otherwise "paternalistic" system.

**T**o claim that the South was capitalistic is not the same as saying that it was liberal or democratic. Liberal democracy is not an essential feature of capitalism any more than free labor is. (One has only to look around the world to become aware of this fact.) The conservative ideologues of the Old South, as well as some of their successors, had no real objection to capitalism as an economic system. What they opposed was the ideal of human equality that had arisen out of eighteenth-century revolutionary struggles against inherited privilege and that nineteenth-century abolitionists made a core principle of their attack on the enslavement of African Americans.

If equality and not capitalism was really the issue, and if the inequality that was being defended was primarily or inescapably based on race, then the southern conservatism for which Genovese seeks to gain a hearing is not likely to arouse much sympathy from anyone

who is not on the extreme right. Impelled by Genovese's accolades, I sat down to read Richard Weaver, the foremost exemplar in the mid-twentieth century of the kind of southern traditionalism that Genovese believes could teach us something of value. I am prepared to grant that Weaver is an interesting and provocative exponent of anti-modernism from a southern perspective. But if we are careful to notice what it is that inspires Weaver's most passionate diatribes against the modern world, we find that it is the allegedly hypocritical efforts of Yankee reformers to interfere with the South's racial hierarchy. In his posthumously published books *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (1968) and *Southern Essays* (1986), Weaver excoriates the abolitionists, the Radical Republicans of the Reconstruction era, and the antisegregationists of the 1950s, including the U.S. Supreme Court for its mandating of "forced integration." Is it possible to disentangle Weaver's critique of commercialization and industrialization from his stalwart defense of legalized racial inequality? Perhaps. But it is difficult to know in the case of Weaver, as in the case of Genovese's favorite antebellum conservative, George Fitzhugh, which came first—the wholesale rejection of the modern world for its excesses of individualism and materialism or the impulse to defend one or another of the South's peculiar racial institutions against a serious challenge. The humanistic culture of a Fitzhugh or a Weaver made them realize that a defense of the South based on racism was intellectually primitive or threadbare if it was not accompanied by categorical rejection of the ideal of equality. But in both cases the racism was never repudiated and may have remained close to the root of their concerns, even as it became subsumed under a more comprehensive "conservatism." For a majority of conservative southerners in both the 1850s and the 1950s simple racism was probably sufficient, and modernity did not have to be rejected in all its aspects. Embraced with few qualms were modern economic practices and institutions that served the interests of men with property and capital, including property and capital in a human form.

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**G**enovese's effort to deemphasize the role of white supremacism in the southern tradition does not mean that he condones or ignores the racism of his subjects. Although he denies its centrality in their thinking, he takes note of it and forthrightly condemns it as a deeply regrettable aspect of their thought. What he finds fundamental and valuable in their thinking is

opposition to finance capitalism and, more broadly, to the effort to substitute the market for society itself; opposition to the radical individualism that is sweeping America today; support for broad property ownership and a market economy subject to socially determined moral constraints; adherence to a Christian individualism that condemns personal license and demands submission to a moral consensus rooted in elementary piety; and an insistence that every people must

develop its own genius based on its special history, and must reject siren calls to an internationalism—or rather a cosmopolitanism—that would eradicate local and national cultures and standards of personal conduct by reducing morals and all else to commodities.

This kind of an attack against contemporary liberalism and radicalism, whatever its pedigree and however compromised its southern manifestation may have been, deserves to be taken seriously. People on the left might accept the validity of its critique of a market-driven society without conceding that a traditional hierarchical society is the only alternative. But it remains to be seen, in the wake of the discrediting of state socialism, just what kind of egalitarian communalism is possible. Genovese has therefore issued an important and valuable challenge to thoughtful people on the left. It is regrettable, however, that he has chosen to find the substance for this challenge in an intellectual tradition that could not distinguish between conservative conceptions of social order and the domination of one race by another and was woefully inconsistent or ineffectual in its opposition to market capitalism.

But the exercise may be instructive in a way that he never intended. He has illustrated the kind of uses—or misuses—to which some of the conservative ideas that he admires can easily be put. It is one thing to advocate “social hierarchy” and respect for “legitimate authority” in general terms as an antidote to the normlessness and anomie of modern life. It is something else entirely to defend specific inequalities and assertions of authority. Such defenses usually turn out to be based on status anxiety, greed, racism, or sexism rather than on a commitment to the common good. Conservative ideology often serves as a rationale for injustice. Prescriptions for an organic community that repudiate equality as a social goal can readily sanction a defense of the prevailing distribution of power and privilege. The left may be in deep trouble and in need of new ideas, but an ideology that so easily lends itself to the self-serving defense of things as they are provides no answer. □

**Christine Stansell**

**AN OPINIONATED WOMAN**

REASONABLE CREATURES, by Katha Pollitt. Knopf, 1994. 186 pp. \$22.00.

**H**olding opinions in a treacherous business for a woman. Shrii! Silly! Imprecations and accusations lurk at the edges of life and female psychology, fueling prejudices and women’s own self-censorship. Feminist writer Naomi Wolf recently called attention to how little women’s opinions figure in our op-ed pages, journals, public affairs shows, and columns, all “strikingly immune to the general agitation for female access.” Gender socialization, suggests Wolf—both what men expect of women and what women expect of themselves—undermines the boldness and self-assertion necessary to a strong public voice.

Opinionated women, it is true, too often still register as in over their heads, presumptuous in proportion to how far they venture outside their proven expertise in matters of personal life.

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