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IDEALISM AND MATERIALISM IN ANTEBELLUM
SOUTHERN POLITICAL HISTORY: A REVIEW ESSAY*

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* Paper presented at Organization of American
Historians Convention, April 2, 1981



HUMANITIES WORKING PAPER 60

April 1981

ABSTRACT

Although the mainstream "new political historians" have largely ignored the South, historians of the antebellum South have produced some of the most interesting recent works in political history. These scholars fall into two groups: one finds a white consensus, emphasizes ideology, and concentrates on evidence from "literary" sources; the other discovers evidence of conflict, stresses the material basis of political alignments, and combines quantitative with traditional evidence. In a brief review of books by Channing and Johnson, I point out that by concentrating on the immediate pre-war years, the authors cannot answer even the questions they themselves pose. Cooper's 1978 ideological interpretation finesses the question of the connection between opinions on slavery and Unionism and fails to explain why the southerners' responses to the crises of 1850 and 1860 were so different.

The central work of the last two decades, Thornton's, presents the bold and complex thesis that the South was born libertarian and avoids many of the problems of the other works reviewed. His treatment of politics as largely symbolic-expressive, rather than rational-instrumental, and his lack of statistical sophistication, however, invite criticism.

The most valuable facet of these works for American political history generally is that they restore politicians, policy, and political thought -- topics often shunted aside by the social history approach of the past generation -- to the study of politics.

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Over the past generation, the chief developments in American political history have been first, a broadening of the sources regularly subject to intensive analysis to include not only manuscripts, printed official documents, and newspapers, but also election returns, legislative roll calls, and quantifiable socioeconomic data; second, the adoption from other social sciences of the statistical techniques with which to analyze such information; and third, the formulation of two more or less consistent, fairly complete, and certainly vigorously argued notions -- the ethnocultural thesis and the so-called "theory" of critical elections. With a few significant exceptions -- notably Professors McCormick and Holt -- the historians who have fostered these profound and valuable changes in historical practice have ignored the South. Nonetheless, southern historians, particularly those who concentrate on the antebellum period, have produced some of the most exciting work on party politics written in the last two decades -- a fact too seldom recognized by scholars accustomed to chillier climes. Before the reconstruction of American political history can proceed much farther, however, the sectional split must be overcome, the nation, reunited. What have we learned about prewar southern politics recently?

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There is a long tradition of applying "social scientific" methods and hypotheses to the study of antebellum politics below Mason's and Dixon's line. Strongly influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's stress on the social underpinnings of politics and his practice of attempting to tease correlations from multicolored maps, and more generally by the progressive propensity for finding class conflict in politics, Ulrich B. Phillips and Arthur C. Cole early in the century launched the socioeconomic school of southern politics. Carefully tracing Whig and Democratic alignments from pre-Jacksonian personal factionalism through what he believed were the reversals of party positions in Georgia on states rights between the 1830s and the 1850s, Phillips saw a relatively consistent social thread -- planter Whigs fought small-farmer Democrats -- but found few systematic policy differences between the parties. Cole and later Charles Sellers added little more to Phillips's interpretation than greater geographical scope and urban allies for the Whig planters.¹

While the progressives' cartographic correlations represented the best methodological practice then current, neither Phillips nor Cole analyzed ideologies in depth and neither connected party politics directly with the Civil War or convincingly delineated the links between policy positions -- especially those on slavery and unionism -- and socioeconomic divisions within the electorate. Such deficiencies notwithstanding, they set a high standard for later works in the field, and their basic findings were not seriously challenged until the 1970s.

Recent students of antebellum southern politics fall rather neatly into two camps. Under the first flag are those who find pre-war political life characterized by a Caucasian consensus, emphasize ideology, and concentrate on impressionistic evidence. Under the second banner is a so far smaller host who, following Phillips and Cole, focus on conflict, stress the material or socioeconomic basis of partisan or other electoral contests, and blend into their books and articles heavy portions of quantified data. Although the two troops have long been called to muster, they have so far avoided direct conflict. Since I always like to watch a good fight, especially from the sidelines, one of my purposes today is to advertise the match and thereby to encourage each side to do battle openly.

There are, it seems to me, eight major empirical questions which any descriptive treatment of antebellum southern politics must address and which any general interpretation must account for:

1. How much continuity in electoral alignments was there between and within three periods -- 1820-36, 1836-52, and 1852-60?
2. What was the basis in ideas and material circumstances for the continuity and change that existed?
3. What were the policy correlates of those electoral alignments?
4. Was the South's political thought solid after 1830 or was the southern mind seriously divided?
5. To what degree were Southern governments in the period from 1820-60 of, by, and/or for the planters?

6. To what extent did nonslaveholding whites favor or oppose secession?

7. How much continuity was there between previous party politics and the struggle over secession? This question suggests two subsidiary ones: A. Was secession manipulated by a small elite, playing on temporary fears? Or, B. Was it a logical outgrowth of previous politics?

8. Did political parties hasten or hold back the crisis which led to Civil War?

Only one historian, so far as I know, has yet hazarded answers to all these questions, and even he (Mills Thornton) has so far confined his work to one state.² Others, fascinated, as many historians have always been, with the trauma of civil war, have focused on the events immediately preceding secession. Although the desire to slice off a short, manageable period and study it in detail is understandable, such a concentration in this case seems to me inevitably to beg even the limited questions about the breakup of the Union which scholars seek to answer. Let me illustrate the point.

In his 1970 book, Crisis of Fear, Steven A. Channing asserted that paranoia was a necessary and perhaps sufficient condition for secession in South Carolina.³ Presumably, this heightened tension was requisite because South Carolina whites would not otherwise have been unified in their willingness to leave the Union and to risk civil war in order to protect slavery. The consensus was, in other words, recent and temporary, and Palmetto State politicians, whom Channing describes as having a "benevolent authoritarian attitude toward the

masses of citizens," were apprehensive that non-slaveholders and northern-connected businessmen might defect if not stirred up.⁴

Yet by concentrating only on the events of 1859 to 1861 and by not specifying a clear counterfactual, Channing renders his case unprovable. Unity is always relative: how united were white Carolinians in 1860, compared to earlier times? Do events before or after 1860 cast light on the question of whether the politicians were right to fear poor white or capitalist defection? How important to the creation of unity was it that South Carolina had the least vigorous structured political competition of any state throughout the antebellum period -- that Calhoun's duchy did not emerge from his antiparty shadow even in the 1850s? Do earlier, later, or contemporary instances, in South Carolina or elsewhere, of paranoia without secession or secession without exaggerated fears shed any light on the adequacy or correctness of Channing's explanation?

Or consider Michael P. Johnson's thesis that secession in Georgia was in part a struggle over which whites would rule the state, a preemptive revolution by upper-class slaveholders who feared that if he were president of an unbroken union, Lincoln would succeed in employing federal patronage to build up an antislavery party in the South. Potentially disloyal nonslaveholders instinctively opposed secession, even though most had previously been loyal Democrats because of what Johnson describes as their "ignorance and inertia." By contrast, Bell and Douglas voters in black belt counties often defected to the secessionists, not out of paranoia, for these privileged individuals were less subject to unreasoning passions than

the lower-classes were, but because they recognized that the reactionary revolution was in their interest.⁵ The secession election, in other words, strikingly reduced false consciousness and stripped away habitual behavior: The real became rational, and vice versa.

But Johnson's materialist hypothesis, no less than Channing's social psychological one, cannot be corroborated by looking only at the events of 1859 to 1861. How firm had nonslaveholder loyalty to slavery been in Georgia earlier, or, looking past the Civil War, how successful were Reconstruction Republicans in building up a white following by the judicious use of patronage?⁶ Does the longer-term counterfactual indicate that the slaveholder secessionists' alleged fears were well-grounded, or that they were unreasonable? Why had mountain and pine barren poorer whites traditionally voted for the Democrats? Did the confusion of parties in the state from 1850 on contribute to the fluidity of allegiances during the secession crisis? In general, was the well-known partial reshuffling of alignments between the 1860 presidential and the 1861 secession elections in the state the result of a profound, if recent "internal crisis" or of a more longstanding conflict? In either case, how serious was the social contradiction, and why didn't stronger evidence of it appear at other times?

As the adjective "antebellum" implies, even historians who have not homed in on the years around 1860 have tended to view the first six decades of the nineteenth century as a well-made play with secession as the predetermined climax. The most outstanding example

of this "Waiting for Yancey" plot line is William J. Cooper, Jr.'s The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856, the first thorough research monograph to carry the political history of the whole South from the 1830s through the mid-1850s.⁷ Relying entirely on newspapers and manuscripts, Cooper argues that the slavery issue dominated every presidential campaign in the South from 1828 to 1860, and that economic issues were important only in state elections, and then only during what he terms the years of the "great aberration" from the panic of 1837 to Tyler's Texas annexation scheme in 1843-44. Either because the independent, antiparty, rabidly proslavery Calhounites forced Whigs and Democrats to take extreme positions to gain their votes or because the southern political public was so proslavery and put so much weight on the issue -- Cooper offers both explanations⁸ -- major party elites were virtually forced to charge each other in every campaign with being soft on abolition or insufficiently protective of slaveholder interests. Since the parties were driven to appear "more southern than thou," party competition fed the continuing and ever deepening crisis.

Cooper's is a politics of ideological consensus and nearly unbroken rhetorical continuity in which class divisions are implicitly dismissed; party splits are seen as superficial, and issues, as largely symbolic; and electoral politics is generally divorced from state and national policy, except on slavery-related issues. Since he stops in 1856, and since he abjures or disdains the systematic analysis of electoral returns, Cooper avoids confronting alternative descriptions and explanations, but even in his own terms, he finesses

two crucial questions: First, what was the connection in southern political minds between unionism and slavery? Admitting that white southerners backed slavery, were there significant divisions across time or socioeconomic groups on the question of whether they were willing to give up the union to guarantee the right of bondage? If such divisions did exist, as most fireaters certainly appear to have believed, then the consensus may have been more apparent than real.⁹ Second, if competition for the extreme position on slavery was always the dominant strategy, why did the Whigs adopt a unionist stance from 1850 to 1852, why did the Democratic response of painting their opponents as insufficiently proslavery fail in this case, and why did most Democratic politicians so quickly and successfully move from an extreme states' rights stance toward the moderate position of support for the 1850 Compromise?¹⁰

Cooper argues that white manhood suffrage, high turnout, the fact that politicians continually oiled their machines and campaigned extensively among the masses, and travelers' impressions that white southerners of all classes continually discussed politics prove that the prewar southern polity was small-d democratic. Conversely, in The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860, a book which suffers from many of the same difficulties of other works which focus on the years immediately before the War, William L. Barney views southern democracy as mostly rhetoric, pointing to regressive taxation in Mississippi and other policies in both states which favored rich slaveholders at the expense of less privileged citizens.¹¹ But no other work has so boldly and pervasively confronted the problem of

democracy in the antebellum South as Mills Thornton's Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860. Since Thornton's is, to my mind at least, the most profound, subtle, and challenging work ever written on prewar southern politics, and since one of my chief purposes today is to stimulate critical research to test, refine, and perhaps refute some of his contentions and findings, it is necessary to pursue Thornton's reasoning in some detail.

The white South, Thornton claims (from Toqueville, out of Bailyn) was born doubly free -- that is, not enslaved, and libertarian. The white southerner of all classes, but especially the self-sufficient, parochial, non-market-oriented hill country yeoman, was deathly afraid of dependence on fellow white men or of other relationships which, by challenging his independence, reminded him of slavery, and deeply wary of concentrations of either private or governmental power. Since wise governors were those who symbolically slayed private privilege, Andrew Jackson's war against the monster bank both exemplified and reinforced this notion of proper governmental action for the post-revolutionary generations. The Jacksonian political style, prefigured in Alabama by the assaults on the "aristocratic" Broad River cousinry in the 1820s, thus linked voters who responded to emotional and symbolic, not rational and instrumental appeals with political entrepreneurs who often cynically manipulated what Thornton refers to as the "myths and prejudices" of the white masses.¹²

Note the radical differences between fellow consensualists Cooper and Thornton: For Cooper, the ideological consensus was on the

protection of black slavery, which had, for current and prospective slaveholders at least, a possible underlying material basis, but which cannot account for divisions over such economic issues as banks, tariffs, or internal improvements. In Thornton's more purely ideological theory, on the other hand, the basic issue was not protection of black slavery, but avoidance of white "slavery," or, to put it another way, preservation of white independence and formal equality. Since this was a thread which clever politicians could and did find running through all sorts of governmental policies, Thornton's thesis applies to economic as well as slave-related issues. Therefore, while Cooper's "great aberration" suggestion and his whole analysis would be cast into serious doubt by quantitative evidence of substantial voter continuity in state and national contests running through and beyond the 1837-43 period,¹³ since such continuity would tend to show that voters perceived no aberration, Thornton's more flexible thesis could easily accommodate such a finding.¹⁴

After brilliant chapters on the composition, structure, and mores of both the legislature and the political parties and a closely reasoned analysis of the members' general incompetence and the often self-defeating policies they adopted, Thornton turns to the question of why Alabama responded differently to the sectional crises of 1850 and 1860. Although he differs from most recent historians when he asserts that the Compromise of 1850 represented southern "appeasement" (p. 187), Thornton believes that in 1850 white Alabamians were not yet psychologically receptive to a crusade, that they were then unconvinced of the reality of the northern threat, that most still

accepted the major parties' dogma that partisan political action was the best protection for southern rights, and that the Whig-Unionist line that the compromise would end sectional agitation proved attractive to white southerners who deeply desired to be let alone. Alabamians' views changed partly because of the familiar national events of the 1850s -- Kansas-Nebraska, John Brown, and all that¹⁵ -- but much more because of the desparate thrashings of Alabama Whiggery in its prolonged death throes, the combination of the boring-from-within tactics of what he calls the "right fireater" Yanceytes and the independence of the antiparty "left fireaters," and (a notion I find logically but not convincingly developed) what Thornton alleges was a socioeconomic and political crisis which racked the state and particularly its poorer sections in the 1850s.

Thornton's crisis is virtually the mirror image of Johnson's. According to Thornton, the rapid expansion of railroads, the increased penetration of market activity into areas previously devoted to subsistence farming, and the explosion of governmental funding to assist corporations, schools, libraries, and eleemosynary institutions threatened to upset the parochial lives of Alabama small farmers and the negative control they had always enjoyed over Alabama politics. Secession was thus for them a preemptive, symbolic revolt against the modern world -- a world represented by market-oriented planters and home-grown capitalists as well as by abolitionists and free soilers. Johnson's and Thornton's crises pit the same groups against each other, but with the couper and coupee reversed: the one is a conservative revolution against the small farmers, the other, a

liberal last stand by parochial supporters of least government against upper-class governmental expansionists at home and the spectre of both Whiggery and abolition abroad. Directly contrary to Johnson and much more convincingly, Thornton shows that Alabama's secession constitution of 1861 was strongly anti-corporation and laissez-faire. It was therefore the fulfillment of the small-farmer agrarian libertarianism which Thornton contends was a recurrent and often dominant theme of Alabama politics from the attacks on the Crawfordites in the 1820s to the Populist crusade of the 1890s.

What seems to me most valuable about all these works, and Thornton's in particular, for American political history in general is that they restore politicians, policy, and political thought to the study of politics, from which they have so often been shunted aside in the social history approach to politics which has become dominant in the last twenty years. Votes are more than imperfect public opinion polls and politics is more than an unbiased mechanism for translating into policy inherently non-political philosophies attributed to social groups in the electorate.

Yet I cannot end without noting two objectionable facets of the books which I have discussed: First, the authors nearly always employ simplistic statistical techniques or misuse sophisticated ones.¹⁶ It is certainly not a striking testimonial to the idea of progress that Barney and Thornton continue to rely heavily on the same technique of cartographic correlation which graced Phillips's 1901 Ph.D. dissertation. Second, I disagree fundamentally with the view of politics, which all but Johnson share with such ethnoculturalists

as Formisano, as primarily a symbolic, irrational battle largely divorced for the voters, if not the politicians, from material self-interest. Just as I would not turn political history into a mere branch of social history, neither would I totally segregate the two.¹⁷ At the very least, those who consider political choice as usually based on rational self-interested calculation should not abandon the battle quickly, even against such a formidable opponent as Mills Thornton. In Alabama in the 1850s, for instance, it was perfectly consistent with either a self-interest or a libertarian-irrational model for North Alabama poor farmers to oppose government subsidies to railroads which would primarily enrich townspeople, planters, budding exploiters of the state's mineral wealth, and, of course, the railroad builders. But while the Thornton thesis would predict that the same farmers would vigorously oppose what was for the hill country the much more pervasive intrusion of public schools into their lives, the rational calculus would predict that small farmers would favor, or, since the tax system forced others to bear a large share of the costs, at least be indifferent to schools. I therefore count the fact that, as Thornton shows, public funding for schools grew by 360% in the 1850s in the state (p. 294) as a triumph of Yeoman rationality, and, I hope, a token of more such victories over irrationalism in political history to come.

Footnotes

1. Ulrich B. Phillips, Georgia and State Rights, in American Historical Association, Annual Report (1901), II, 5-224; Arthur C. Cole, The Whig Party in The South (Washington, D.C.: The American Historical Association, 1913); Charles G. Sellers, Jr., "Who Were the Southern Whigs?," American Historical Review, 59 (1954), 335-46. In view of its quality and, for Phillips, unbiasedness, it seems surprising that Georgia and State Rights was largely neglected in the Phillips revival of the 1960s.
2. J. Mills Thornton III, Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge and London: LSU Press, 1978).
3. Steven A. Channing, Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1970), 282. "The secession of South Carolina was an affair of passion. The revolution could not have succeeded, and it certainly would not have instilled the astounding degree of unanimity in all classes and all sections that it did, were this not so."
4. Ibid., 157, 255-61.
5. Michael P. Johnson, Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia (Baton Rouge and London: LSU Press, 1977), 66, 81.
6. The second half of this question is meant to suggest more generally that strict adherence to conventional periodization may hamper explanation. Solutions to problems in antebellum politics may

require one to look at the postwar scene, and vice versa. For example, a full assessment of the possibility of success of a renewal of Whiggery after the War cannot be made unless one considers the actual record of intersectional Whiggery before secession.

7. Baton Rouge and London: LSU Press, 1978.

8. See, e.g., Politics of Slavery, 69, 97, 116-7, 235, 244, 373.

9. In an unpublished, highly quantitative analysis of the secession referenda in eight states, Paul D. Escott argues that the percentage of whites who were slaveholders explains a considerable amount of the county-to-county variance in those elections, even after the percentage for Breckinridge has been controlled for. While there were few who openly expressed unconditional support for the union, particularly in the Deep South, in those turbulent days, and, consequently, it would be a mistake to read the cooperationist vote as a perfect indicator of unionism, it would still seem that immediatists were usually less hampered in their desire to protect slavery by any lingering attachment to the nation than those who voted for conditional secession or abstained. I want to thank Professor Escott for sending me a copy of his fine article, which is entitled "Secession and the Irrepressible Conflict Within the South."

10. Cf. Thornton's suggestion, Politics and Power, Chapter IV, that the Whig cry that first, Taylor's election and later, more successfully, the compromise of 1850, had ended the sectional crisis and allowed Alabamians to be left alone explains the response to the Unionist party in the early 1850s. The Unionist victory was so

overwhelming as to remove the issue on which the party was based from politics, and therefore rob the party of any reason for being. When the Whigs lost, they lost; but when they won big, they also lost.

Moreover, whereas Cooper tends to equate Whig and Democratic defenses of slavery, Thornton distinguishes between the Whig appeal from 1848 to 1857 to end sectional agitation and the Democratic line of demanding positive governmental action to protect slavery. It was not until Alabama Whigs became a hopeless minority that the party's remnant desperately reversed field and began courting the extreme states' righters. This fact, along with the stress Thornton puts on the role of the antiparty fireaters means that normal party competition did not, in Thornton's view, feed the sectional crisis, although the erratic behavior of the former Whigs after 1855 and the savage factional battles within the Democracy did. See Politics and Power, 361-64, 418-24.

11. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974, 26-27, 32, 44, 50, 91, 311.

12. Thornton, Politics and Power, XV-20.

13. Peyton McCrary et al., "Class and Party in the Secession Crisis: Voting Behavior in the Deep South, 1856-1861," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 8 (1978), 429-57, discovered considerable instability between alignments in presidential elections during both the 1840s and 1850s in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana on the basis of regression analysis of county-level data. But since the proper test for Cooper's thesis would relate state to national elections, not presidential elections to each other, and would compare

stability in each of the decades from 1830 to 1860, there is no available study which I know of which provides the relevant information.

14. Note that Thornton, p. 166, directly denies that southern rights issues played an important role in the presidential canvasses of 1836 and 1840. Like the ethnoculturalists in the north, he generally emphasizes the primacy of local over national issues, but unlike them, he views the late 1840s and 1850s as a time when national issues succeeded in penetrating and then dominating the state's politics. Ibid., 348-49.

15. Although Thornton's discussion of the differences between southern rights factions sometimes seems arcane and verging on antiquarian, his decision not to weight down his book with another tertiary rehash of national events should be commended -- and should set an example for others!

16. In his Secessionist Impulse, for instance, Barney never runs statistical significance tests on his tables. Although I have not yet run full log-linear models on his seven cross-classification tables in chapter two, I did test for the significance, using a Chi-square test and the standard 0.05 significance level, for the marginal relationships between age and political choice in 1860 and wealth and political choice. The results were as follows: both age and wealth were significantly related to political choice in one table out of seven, but in the one significant wealth case, the Breckinridge supporters were significantly poorer than the other partisans, contrary to Barney's argument. Barney's central table on the

electorate's behavior, pp. 136-37, I found utterly confusing, inconclusive, and greatly in need of multiple regression analysis. Thornton's decision to present only the median percent of slaveholding and wealth in Appendix 2, pp. 466-73 of Politics and Power makes it impossible for any reader to judge the statistical validity of his findings, probably masks insignificant relationships, and needlessly excludes data on the non-median legislators in each voting category. Johnson's procedures I have discussed in a previous review. Channing ignores and Cooper, Politics of Slavery, XIV-XV, 96, 147, 211, 218, 267, 341, 365, peppers his book with quantitative statements based on overly simplistic assumptions and no real statistical analysis.