How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?

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HOW DIFFERENT FROM EACH OTHER were the North and South before the Civil War? Recent work by historians of antebellum America throws interesting new light on this old question. Since some of these studies deal with individual communities, others with single themes of antebellum life, they are in a sense Pirandelloan pieces of evidence in search of an overarching synthesis that will relate them to one another and to earlier findings and interpretations. My modest hope is that the discussion that follows will be useful to historians in pursuit of such a synthesis.

The terms “North” and “South” are, of course, figures of speech that distort and oversimplify a complex reality, implying homogeneity in geographical sections that, in fact, were highly variegated. Each section embraced a variety of regions and communities that were dissimilar in climatic, topographical, demographic, and social characteristics. If, as Bennett H. Wall has written, “there never has been the ‘one’ South described by many historians,” neither has there been the one North. Historians who have compared the antebellum South and North without referring to the diversity of each have not necessarily been un-

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1 I first seriously thought of comparing the North and South after reading three papers by young historians on which I was asked to comment at the meeting of the Southern Historical Association held in Atlanta in November 1976. Whitman H. Ridgway’s “The Decline of the Post-Revolutionary Establishment: Maryland Community Elites in the First Party Era,” J. Mills Thornton III’s “The Growth of Elitism in Alabama Politics, 1840–1860,” and Donald De Bats’s “Political Elitism in Antebellum Georgia” revealed striking similarities between politics in these Southern communities and in the Northern communities that I had been examining.

aware of this diversity. Their premise, in speaking of the North and South, is that the Mason-Dixon line divided two distinctive civilizations, the basic similarities within each of which transcended its internal differences.

The modern discussion is a continuation of a scholarly controversy that has engaged some of the giants of the American historical profession. Charles A. Beard, Ulrich B. Phillips, Allan Nevins, David M. Potter, C. Vann Woodward, and other scholars of stature have been drawn to the theme because it is inextricably related to perhaps the most fascinating of all questions in American history: the causes of the Civil War. Many historians attribute that "irrepressible conflict" to the fundamental differences between the two civilizations that were parties to it. Even those scholars who have played down the role of sectional differences in bringing on the war have found themselves unable to avoid comparing the ways of life and thought of the two belligerents.

Unsurprisingly, the discussion has produced a variety of interpretations. Some scholars have emphasized the similarities of the North and South, a much greater number have stressed their dissimilarities, and others have judiciously alluded to their significant likenesses—"commonalities," in Potter's terminology—and unlikenesses. The greater popularity, among scholars and laymen alike, of


5 According to Allan Nevins, the sectional "schism in culture" created an atmosphere in which "emotions grew feverish, in which every episode became a crisis, every jar a shock"; *Ordeal of the Union*, 2: 554. In Eugene D. Genovese's version, the South's "special civilization built on the relationship of master to slave" was "at the root of the conflict with the North"; Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and the Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965). 35. Carl N. Degler has recently written that, "because of those differences" between the sections, "which clustered around the existence of slavery in the South, eleven states broke away to form the Confederate States of America"; Degler, *Over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (Baton Rouge, 1977). Also see Arthur C. Cole, *The Irrepressible Conflict*, 1850–1865 (New York, 1934); and Heywood Fleisch, *Slavery, the Supply of Agricultural Labor, and the Industrialization of the South*, *Journal of Economic History* [hereafter, *JEH*], 36 (1976): 392. For my own thoughts concerning the relationship between sectional differences and the outbreak of the war, see pages 1146–49, below.

6 For criticism of what David Potter described as the "school of historical thought" that "sees the [Civil War] as a clash of profoundly dissimilar cultures," whose people ostensibly "were at odds because they lived in different cultural worlds," see Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, 30–31, and *The South and Sectional Conflict*, 76–78; James G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 27 (1940): 3–28; and Francis B. Simkins, *The Everlasting South* (Baton Rouge, 1965), 38.

7 Carl N. Degler's work contains interpretations that emphasize both differences and similarities between North and South; Degler, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1974), and *Place over Time*. To the writings of Potter and Woodward, about which the same can be said, can be added James G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston, 1969); T. Harry Williams, *Romance and Realism in Southern Politics* (Athens, Ga., 1961); Charles G. Sellers, ed., *The Southerners at American* (Chapel Hill, 1960); and Grady McWhiney, *Southerners and Other Americans* (New York, 1973). A particularly strong, if not entirely persuasive, assertion of the essential similarity of the two sections over the entire course of American history is Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (New York, 1964), a work that is present-minded in the extreme. Thomas P. Gowan has answered his title question pithily and bitingly in the negative; Gowan, "Was the Old South Different?" *JSOH*, 21 (1955): 447–55. Works that emphasize sectional differences include Nevins, *Ordeal of
comparisons that emphasize differences is doubtless due, in part, to the fact that the war heightened our perceptions of those supposedly irreconcilable differences and, in part, to the fact that several dissimilarities were so striking, so unarguable, so obviously significant. While much of the scholarly controversy has concerned subtle sectional distinctions, whether in values, ideals, or other complex intangibles that might be read one way or the other, depending on the predilections of the interpreter, other disparities transcend subjectivity, based as they are on hard, quantifiable evidence.

Here were two sections containing roughly equal areas for human settlement. Yet on the eve of the Civil War the population of the North was more than 50 percent greater than that of the South. The most dramatic disparity concerned racial balance: roughly one-quarter of a million Northern blacks comprised slightly more than 1 percent of the Northern population; the more than four million blacks in the South constituted one-third of the Southern population. And almost 95 percent of Southern blacks were slaves. Although the value of agricultural products in the two sections was almost equal, Northern superiority in manufactures, railroad mileage, and commercial profits was overwhelming, far surpassing the Northern advantage in population. Similarly, Northern urban development outdistanced Southern, whether measured by the number of cities or by the size and proportions of the population within them. What did these and other, harder to measure, differences signify? To what extent were they balanced out by important sectional similarities? These are among the questions this essay will consider.

In comparing the great antebellum sections, it is useful to remember that all powerful, complex, and viable contemporaneous societies are likely to converge or be similar in some respects, dissimilar in others. It would be lovely were we able to estimate precisely the relative significance of the various criteria of comparison, the points at which similarities or differences become critical, and the nature of the balance between likenesses and unlikelinesses that would justify appraising two societies as "essentially" different or similar. Alas, we cannot. A society or civilization is a complex Gestalt. The subtle reciprocity binding together


8 These well-known facts are drawn from the U.S. census reports from 1830 to 1860. In a provocative recent essay Leonard P. Curry has argued for the rough equality of antebellum urban development in the North and South. Curry has demonstrated that a large proportion of the South's relatively small antebellum population increase occurred in Southern cities. But, in his ingenious manipulation of demographic data, he failed to consider that a large proportion of a small absolute figure is itself a small absolute figure. Curry's argument for the qualitative similarity of cities in all sections is more successful. Curry, "Urbanization and Urbanism in the Old South: A Comparative View," JSH, 40 (1974): 43–60.
its elements cannot be understood by mechanically attempting to weigh the significance of each of these elements and then adding up the total. The impossibility of contriving a simplistic calculus for measuring societies does not, of course, mean that a sensible comparison is impossible. It means only that such a comparison will inevitably be subjective and serve, at best, as a point of departure to those who evaluate the evidence differently.

A comprehensive comparison of the two sections would overlook nothing, not even the weather, which, according to Phillips, "has been the chief agency in making the South distinctive." In the space available here I shall focus on what our sociological friends might call three social indicators: (1) the economy, (2) the social structure, and (3) politics and power. In selecting these matters for examination, I do not mean to suggest that they are more important than values, ideals, the life of the mind, or any number of other features of antebellum life. Tangible phenomena may be easier to measure than intangible, but they offer no better clue to the essential character of a place and a people. I emphasize economic, social, and political themes because all of them are clearly important, the evidence on them is substantial, and each has recently been re-examined to interesting effect.

The economic practices of each section—one hesitates to call them economic "systems" in the face of the contradictory and largely planless if not improvisatory nature of these practices—were similarly complex. Northerners and Southerners alike made their living primarily in agriculture. Guided by the unique weather and the unequal length of the growing seasons in their sections, Northern and Southern farmers increasingly specialized, but in dissimilar crops. Tobacco and, above all, rice, sugar, and cotton were largely unknown to the North. Yet in the South, as in the North, farmers—whether large or small—sought and, for the most part achieved, self-sufficiency. They produced more grains and corn than anything else and in both sections raised and kept domestic animals roughly equal in quantity and, it has recently been claimed, comparable in quality. In view of the regularity with which Northern farmers brushed aside the lonely voices in their midst who urged subordination of profits to the "long-range needs of the soil," their money-mindedness in planting wheat (their own great dollar earner) year after year, and their unsentimental readiness to dispose of "family land" so long as the price was right, what Stanley L.

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9 Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South, 3. I hope to pursue this comprehensive investigation in the future.
Antebellum North and South

Engerman has said about Southern planters seems to apply equally well to
Northern agriculturalists: they were certainly not “non-calculating individuals
not concerned with money.”

The enduring popularity of Gone with the Wind suggests that the American
popular mind continues to believe that the Old South was a land of large planta-
tions populated by masters both honorable and courteously cruel and sinful, by
Southern belles “beautiful, graceful . . ., bewitching in coquetry, yet strangely
steadfast,” by loyal, lovable, comic, but sometimes surly Negroes, and by white
trash or ‘po’ buckra.” American historians have, however, known for a least half
a century that the plantation legend “is one of great inaccuracy”—false to the
character of Southern society, to the diversity of Southern whites, and to the re-
alities of black life. Great plantations centering on splendid mansions did exist
in the Old South but not in very great numbers.

The most distinctive feature of the antebellum Southern economy, as of
Southern life as a whole, was, of course, its “peculiar institution.” Slavery had
not been unknown in the North, flourishing through much of the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries and persisting in New Jersey until 1846. But it had in-
volved relatively few blacks and had had slight effect on Northern life and
thought. Northern public opinion, better represented by the authors of the
Federal Constitution in 1787 and the Missouri Compromise in 1820 than by the
abolitionists of the antebellum decades, accepted slavery, approved of doing
business with those who controlled it, abhorred its black victims, and loathed
Northern whites who agitated against it. Northern acquiescence in Southern
slavery does not erase this most crucial difference between the sections, but it
does argue for the complementarity and economic interdependence of North
and South.

The profitability and other economic implications of antebellum slavery have
become the subjects of intense recent debate, stimulating the development of

11 Engerman, “A Reconsideration of Southern Economic Growth, 1770-1860,” Agricultural History, 49
12 See Francis Pendleton Gaines, The Southern Planter: A Study in the Development and Accuracy of a Tradition
(New York, 1924). For some interesting work on the psychological role of the plantation myth or legend, see
William L. Andrews, Romanus and Reality in Southern Politics; Taylor, Civilian and Yankee, C. Hugh Holman,
“The Southerner as American Writer,” in Selten, The Southerner as American, 180–99; and Cash, The Mind of the
South.
13 Lee Slack, Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850–1870 (New Haven, 1975), 133, 142, and Fleisig,
“Slavery, the Supply of Agricultural Labor, and the Industrialization of the South,” 585–87.
14 Arthur Zilversmit, The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North (Chicago, 1967); Edgar J.
McManus, Black Bondage in the North (Syracuse, 1973); and Ira Berlin, “Time, Space, and the Evolution of
Afro-American Society in British Mainland North America,” AHR, 85 (1980): 44–78. For the argument that
Northern rejection of slavery had been dictated almost entirely by cost considerations, see Carville V. Earle,
15 Glover Moore, The Missouri Compromise, 1819–1821 (Lexington, Ky., 1953); Philip S. Foner, Business and
Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irresistible Conflict (Chapel Hill, 1941); Kinley J. Brauer, Cotton versus
Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion, 1843–1848 (Lexington, Ky., 1967); Leonard L.
Richards, “Gentleman of Property and Standing”: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America (New York, 1970); and
Brian J. Danforth, “The Influence of Socioeconomic Factors upon Political Behavior: A Quantitative Look at
New York City Merchants, 1828–1844” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1974). Danforth has per-
suasively argued that many Northern businessmen were ready to subordinate all other political considera-
tions to their lucrative cotton trade with the South.
climometrics or the new economic history. Since slavery was more than a labor system, historians have alsosearchingly investigated its noneconomic implications for both blacks and whites. A fair reading of the recent evidence and argument is that, while more slaves by far worked as field hands, slaves also performed with great efficiency a great variety of other jobs, many of them skilled, allowing for significant economic differentiation within the slave community. And, as exemplary workers and as costly and valuable properties, skilled slaves were ordinarily spared gratuitous maltreatment or deprivation. Despite the inevitable brutality of the system, slaves appear to have maintained the integrity of their personalities, customs, values, and family ties.

Several trade unionists in the antebellum North agreed with slavery’s apologists that not only the working and living conditions but in some respects the "liberty" enjoyed by Northern hirelings compared unfavorably with the situation of slaves. These were patently self-serving arguments, designed to put the lot of the Northern worker in the worst possible light. The fact remains that the economic gap between enslaved black and free white workers in antebellum South and North was narrower than historians once thought. Evidence bearing on the conditions of white Northern as well as black Southern labor demonstrates that during the middle decades of the nineteenth century the real wages of Northern workingmen declined and their living conditions remained bleak, their job security was reduced, their skills were increasingly devalued, and in many respects their lives became more insecure and precarious.


*19* In *Time on the Cross,* Fogel and Engerman have argued climetrically and, as their critics have pointed out, unpersuasively that slaves were rarely whipped and were comparatively well fed. For contrasting viewpoints on the quality of the slaves’ diet or, more precisely, on the quality of the pork eaten by Southerners, both white and black, see Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia A. Kiple, "Black Tongue and Black Men: Pellagra and Slavery in the Antebellum South," *JSH,* 43 (1977): 411–28; and Grady McWhiney, "The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Alabama Agriculture," *Alabama Review,* 31 (1978): 3–32.


At mid-century industrial workers in the South as in the North worked primarily in small shops and households rather than in factories. Trade unionists in Baltimore, Louisville, St. Louis, and New Orleans were with few exceptions skilled and semi-skilled white artisans, precisely as they were in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Pittsburgh. In Southern as in Northern towns and cities, the least skilled and prestigious jobs were those done preponderantly by Catholic immigrants rather than by older Protestant, ethnic groups.22 Significantly, the South attracted far fewer of the antebellum era’s “new immigrants”—that is, Germans and Irish—than did the North. For all of their smaller numbers in the South, European immigrants played an economic and social role there that was not dissimilar to what it was in the North. Diverse measurable evidence indicates that the pattern of immigrant life in the United States was national, rather than distinctly regional, in character. A similar point can be made about Southern urbanism and manufacturing—namely, quantitative distinctiveness (or deficiency), qualitative similarity to the North. Although the value of Southern manufactured products was usually less than one-fifth of the national total during the antebellum decades, the South was hardly a region devoid of industrial production. Articulate Southerners “crusaded” to bring the cotton mills to the cotton fields, and, whether due to their exhortations or to the play of market forces, the amount of capital the slave states invested in cotton manufacturing doubled between 1840 and 1860, surpassing their rate of population growth.23 Because the South nevertheless lagged far behind the Northeast in manufacturing, one influential school of historians has described the antebellum economy—and, for that matter, Southern society as a whole—as noncapitalist, prebourgeois, or “seigneurial.”24

Some historians have criticized Southern deficiencies in commerce, finance, transportation, and manufacturing as manifestations of economic wrongheadedness and irrationality and have attributed to these deficiencies the South’s defeat in the Civil War. A number of modern economic historians, cliometrists for the most part, have interpreted the evidence somewhat differently. Invoking the old argument of “comparative advantage,” they have noted that heavy investment in cotton, the nation’s great dollar earner in international trade, was hardly irrational, since it enabled the South to equal the national rate of profit during the era. Southerners who did invest in Southern factories

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22 This point is the thesis of a paper on antebellum Southern free labor by Herbert G. Gutman and Ira Berlin that Gutman presented to the Columbia University Seminar on the City in the spring of 1976. For the North, see Theodore Heselberg et al., “Occupation and Ethnicity in Five Nineteenth-Century Cities: A Collaborative Inquiry,” Historical Methods Newsletter, 7 (1974): 174–216, and Kathleen Neils Cozenz, Immigrant Mil


got a return that compared favorably with industrial profits elsewhere. (Why, ask the critics, didn’t they invest more of their capital that way?) If Southern manufacturing was outdistanced by that in the Northeast, it compared favorably with industrial production in the Northwest and, for that matter, in Continental Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. If the South suffered inordinately in the wake of the financial panics of 1837 and 1839, it was, as Reginald C. McGrane noted long ago, precisely because the South had speculated excessively in transportation projects and land acquisition as well as other investments. The South’s “unusually favorable system of navigable streams and rivers” has been cited to explain its lag in railroads. Yet in the 1840s Southern railroads “equalled or exceeded the national average capitalization per mile.” The views of many scholars are expressed in Gavin Wright’s recent observation that “before the War the South was wealthy, prosperous, expanding geographically, and gaining economically at rates that compared favorably to those of the rest of the country.”

Antebellum Northern investors, like their counterparts in the South and in Europe, put their money into American products, industrial and agricultural, solid and flimsy, drawn almost entirely by the profit margin likely to result from their investment. Investors in all latitudes appear to have been indifferent to possible long-range consequences of their financial transactions, acting rather on the principle that the “rational” investment was the one likely to pay off. That the railroads, the diversified industry, and the commercial superiority of the North turned out to have important military implications in the 1860s could hardly have been anticipated by earlier profit-seekers. When the commercial magnates known as the Boston Associates invested heavily in factories built in the new suburbs of Boston, they hardly had in mind outfitting Union troops a generation later; they were much more concerned about maintaining close ties with Southern cotton magnates on whose raw materials they were so heavily dependent. There is something bizarre in historians, more than a century after the event, scrutinizing the economic behavior of antebellum capitalists and subjecting that behavior to unrealistic tests of rationality and farsightedness that these men themselves would have found farfetched.

To argue, however, as several historians have, that a substantial Southern

lag—whether in railroad mileage or urban growth—is not as great when it is measured in per capita rather than absolute terms.²⁶ Explain away rather than explain these fundamental sectional differences. For it can reasonably be maintained that the antebellum South’s comparatively small white population (which accounted for its high per capita rates) was not due to historical accident but to significant features, if not failings, in Southern civilization. That all differences between two communities indubitably have a historical explanation—be it the smaller population, the hotter climate, or the prevalence of enslaved blacks—in no sense detracts from the significance of those differences. The burden of my argument is not that antebellum economic developments in the states south of the Potomac were almost exactly like, let alone a mirror image of, those in the states north of the river but rather that the economies were similar in significant ways that are often taken for granted, as, for example, in the similar operation of the profit motive or the similarity of the laws of inheritance in the two sections. And even where, as in industrial production and labor systems, the South and North differed most glaringly, modern evidence has reduced and placed in a somewhat different perspective the gulf between them. As for the recent suggestion that the South was not capitalistic, I shall defer comment until I have first dealt with social and political matters, since capitalism concerns more than economic arrangements alone.

**Historians have long known** that a society’s social structure offers an important clue to its character. The kind of social classes that exist, the gulf between them, their roles in society, the ease or difficulty of access to higher from lower rungs on the social ladder, and the relationships between the classes tell us as much about a civilization as do any other phenomena.²⁷ What distinguishes modern from earlier historians in their treatment of social class is the extent to which they have borrowed from social scientists both in theorizing about class and in the methodology used for measurement. Employing these new approaches, historians have drastically modified earlier notions of antebellum society.

The ancient belief that the white antebellum South consisted of two classes, wealthy planters at the top and a great mass of poor whites below, may continue to command some popular acceptance. That belief has been so long dead among historians, however, that as early as 1946 Fabian Linden could remark that “the debunking of the ‘two class’ fallacy” had “become the tedious cliché.”²⁸ For, beginning in 1940 and continuing steadily thereafter, Frank L. Ow-

ley and a group of scholars influenced by his work utilized hitherto neglected primary sources to reveal that the most typical white Southerners by far were small farmers working the modest acreage they owned with few, if any, slaves.29

The too neat portrait that the Owsley school drew of the white Southern social structure was quite similar to the picture of Northern society accepted by historians less than a generation ago.30 The white population was ostensibly composed primarily of the great "middling orders," hard-working, proud, and not unprosperous farmers for the most part, whose chance to rise even higher so-


30 In David Potter's phrase, the Owsley School had "delineated the structure of antebellum society in terms in which large slaveholders and plain farmers were practically indistinguishable"; The South and Sectional Conflict, 14. For a devastating critique of the Owsley approach, see Linden, "Economic Democracy in the Slave South," 140-49. For an equally critical recent statement, see Wright, "Economic Democracy" and the Concentration of Agricultural Wealth in the Cotton South, 1850-1860," Agricultural History, 44 (1970): 63-94. Also see Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization, 154-60; and Campbell and Lowe, Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas. For a rare—rare, that is, in this scholarly era—opposing viewpoint, see Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeoman Farmers in the Slaveholders' Democracy," Agricultural History, 49 (1975): 341.
cially matched the opportunities an increasingly democratic society gave them
to exert political influence and power. Small groups of rich men—great planters
in the one clime and merchants and industrialists in the other—occupied the
highest social plateau; professionals who served the rich were slightly above the
middle, which was occupied by small business people and independent farmers,
skilled artisans, and clerks; and below them stood industrial and landless agricul-
tural laborers. Since class is determined not by bread alone, blacks—whether
slave or free and regardless of how much individuals among them had managed
to accumulate—were universally relegated to the lowest levels of the social
structure, scorned even by white vagrants and frequently unemployed workers,
urban and rural, who constituted America’s equivalent of a propertyless prole-
tariat. 31

The achievement of recent research is its transformation of what was a rather
blurred image of social groups, whose membership and possessions were both

31 For the Southern class structure, see Frank Huffman, Jr., “Town and Country in the South, 1850–1880:
A Comparison of Urban and Rural Social Structures,” South Atlantic Quarterly, 76 (1977): 566–81; Owsley, Plane
Folk of the Old South; Craven, The Coming of the Civil War, 27–31; James C. Bonner, “Profile of a Late Ante-
Herdsman”; and Roger W. Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana (University, La., 1939). For a devas-
tating critical analysis of Shugg’s research, see Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., “Another Look at Shugg’s Louisiana,”
Louisiana History, 17 (1976): 245–81. And, for a modest, lovely book about merchants and their place in the
Southern community, see Atherton, The Southern Country Store, 1900–1980.
unclear, into a more sharply focused picture. By digging deeper, particularly in nineteenth-century data on wealth and property, historians have come close to knowing the numbers of families belonging to different wealth strata and the amount of wealth these families owned. The beauty of the new evidence on who and how many owned what and how much is that in the antebellum era wealth appears to have been the surest sign of social, as well as of economic, position. Antebellum wealth was almost invariably made in socially acceptable ways. Modern scholars have found that “the social divisions of antebellum America were essentially wealth-holding categories.” The upper class did not comprise so much the families who “controlled the means of production” as it did the families who “controlled the vast wealth created largely through the exchange of goods produced.” Degree of wealth was the surest sign of the quality of housing, furnishings, and household goods a family could afford, of its style of living and uses of leisure, and of the social circle within which it moved and its individual members married. Gathering from the manuscript census schedules, probate inventories, and tax assessors’ reports statistically valid samples or, in some cases, evidence on every family in the community under study, modern scholars have been able to arrange the antebellum Southern and Northern populations on a wealth-holding scale. While it is close to a statistical inevitability that the distribution of wealth in the South and North would not be precisely the same, the most striking feature of the evidence is how similarly wealth was distributed—or maldistributed—in the two sections.

On the eve of the Civil War one-half of the free adult males in both the South and the North held less than 1 percent of the real and personal property. In contrast, the richest 1 percent owned 27 percent of the wealth. Turning from the remarkable similarity in sectional patterns of wealthholding at the bottom and the very top, the richest 5 to 10 percent of propertyowners controlled a somewhat greater share of the South’s wealth, while what might be called the upper middle deciles (those below the top tenth) held a slightly smaller share in the North. The South also came close to monopolizing wealthy counties, the per capita wealth of which was $4,000 or more and, despite its smaller population, the South, according to the 1860 census, contained almost two-thirds of those persons in the nation whose worth was at least $110,000. According to Lee Soltow, the leading student of this evidence, these sectional disparities “could be attributed almost entirely to slave values. . . . If one could eliminate slave market value from the distribution of wealth in 1860 . . . , the inequality levels in the North and South were similar.”

In view of the centrality of slavery to the antebellum South, it is idle to speak of “eliminating the market value” of slaves from the sectional comparison. Northern free labor, rural and industrial, also represented a form of “sectional wealth,” if a much overlooked form. Although as individual human beings they

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did not add to their own private wealth or to the wealth of the employers they served, their labor created wealth for themselves and for these same capitalists at rates of productivity that, I believe, even Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman would concede compared favorably with the rates of the most efficient slaves. In other words, the North had access to a form of wealth, free labor, that was roughly as valuable per capita as was slave wealth, however absent this Northern wealth was from the reports prepared by census takers and assessors. Given the known habits of these officials to overlook small property holdings—precisely the kind of holdings that would have been owned by Northern working people—and to accept as true the lies people swore to as to their worth, it is likely that the fairly substantial cumulative wealth owned by small farmers and modest wage earners was almost entirely omitted from the wealth equation. Such groups were far more numerous in the North than in the South. Had slaves been treated as part of the potential property-owning Southern population to which they actually belonged, instead of being treated as property pure and simple, the total wealth of the antebellum South would have been diminished by several billion dollars: the product of multiplying the number of slaves by the average market price of almost $1,000 per slave. The addition of nearly four million very poor black people to the number of potential property owners in the South would have increased its rate of inequality (and the Gini coefficient of concentration that measures it), although not everywhere to the same extent.

Wealth in both sections was distributed more equally—perhaps the more apt phrase is less unequally—in the countryside than in towns and cities. While the rural North has been less intensively investigated than its Southern counterpart, enough research has been completed to disclose that the North was hardly a haven of egalitarian distribution of property. Rural Wisconsin (which had a Gini coefficient of inequality as high as that of antebellum Texas), the Michigan frontier, and northwestern New York State were centers of inequality and pov-


35 Randolph B. Campbell and Richard G. Lowe’s stimulating and excellent “counterfactual exercise” in assessing the effect on the antebellum South’s distribution of wealth of “freeing the slaves” has the one omission that I can detect of failing to restore—and with interest—the capital that Southerners had invested in slave purchases; Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas, 55, 135, 146–53. The same theme has also engaged Gavin Wright, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, Lee Soltow, and Robert Gallman. Also see Engerman, “Some Considerations Relating to Property Rights in Man,” JEH, 33 (1973): 43–65.

36 This is, at least, the conclusion of Campbell and Lowe, who have found that “freeing” slaves and thus diminishing the wealth of rich property owners is balanced out by the substantial enlargement of potential property owners in the persons of very poor blacks. In antebellum Charleston, by contrast, transforming slaves from property into (potentially property-owning) people would have had a marked effect on wealth distribution, increasing the proportion of the propertyless by almost a third and substantially expanding the percentage of wealth owned by the richest 1 percent and 10 percent. The explanation of this maldistribution is the very large proportion of blacks in Charleston, where they comprised more than 50 percent of the population. See Michael P. Johnson, “Wealth and Class in Charleston in 1800,” paper presented at the Citadel Conference on the South, held in Charleston, April 19–21, 1978, p. 5.
At mid-century, the proportion of white men who owned land in any amount was substantially lower in the Northwest than in the South. The percentage of free males owning land in the North as a whole was slightly smaller than in the South. Owing to the absence of slaves and to the relative paucity of very large farms, wealth was somewhat less unequally distributed in the rural North than in the South.\(^{37}\)

In investigating the distribution of wealth in the antebellum rural South, scholars have probed data on different states, counties, and regions. The patterns throughout are remarkably similar, whether for wealth in general, land and real estate, or personal and slave property. Accentuating the maldistribution of landed wealth—whether in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, the “cotton South,” or the agricultural South as a whole—was a fact of life that the Owsley school neglected: the dollar value per acre of large farms owned by slave-owning planters was substantially greater than the value per acre of the small farm. And yet, regardless of the nature of the soil or the proportion of large farms in a given region, the rates of wealth concentration were remarkably similar as well as constant during the decades before the war. Paralleling the recent finding that in antebellum Texas, no matter what the differences were “in climate, soil, and extent of settlement, the most striking fact is . . . the high degree of concentration in wealthholding across all the regions,” another recent study reports no great differences in “the degree of inequality” between the cotton South and the other “major agricultural regions” of grain, tobacco, sugar, and rice production in 1860.\(^{38}\)

The distribution of slave wealth closely followed the pattern of other forms of Southern wealth.\(^{39}\) During the decade before the war, slaveownership was confined to between 20 and 25 percent of white families, and maldistribution of this form of property was the rule within the slave-owning population. Half of all slaveowners owned five or fewer slaves, with only one-tenth owning the twenty or more slaves that by Ulrich B. Phillips’s definition made them “planters.” Less than one-half of 1 percent owned one hundred or more slaves. As with other forms of wealth, the concentration of slave wealth increased slightly between 1850 and 1860.\(^{40}\)


\(^{39}\) According to Albert Niemi, “inequality in slave holdings is a good proxy for inequality in total wealth” throughout the antebellum South; “Inequality in the Distribution of Slave Wealth.”

\(^{40}\) Campbell and Lowe, Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas, 43–44. Also see Wright, The Political Economy of the Cotton South, 34–35; Linden, “Economic Democracy in the Slave South,” 150–52, 166; and Soltow, Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850–1870, 134, 142.
While the South had long lagged behind the North in urban development, recent scholarship has unearthed evidence that Southern cities grew at a remarkable rate during the antebellum decades. If the Southern rate of urban expansion still did not match the Northern quantitatively, Southern cities, old and new, were qualitatively not unlike their Northern counterparts. Antebellum cities in all latitudes were amazingly similar in the roles they played in the political, administrative, financial, economic, artistic, and intellectual affairs of their regions. Antebellum cities were also alike in the types of men who ran them, in the underlying social philosophies guiding those men, and in their "social configurations." Not the least of the similarities of cities in both great sections was in their distribution of wealth.

Three things can be said about the distribution of wealth in the towns and cities of the Old South. Property ownership was even more concentrated there than in rural areas. Riches became more unequally distributed with the passage of time, with the proportion of the propertyless increasing sharply between 1850 and 1860. There was an increase too in the proportion of urban wealth owned by the largest wealthholders—at least for the dozen communities measured to date. And the patterns of wealth distribution in Southern cities were very much like those that obtained in the North.

The pattern of wealth distribution in Providence and Newport (Rhode Island), Pelham and Ware (Massachusetts), Newark, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Mil-

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42 Curry has offered an ingenious but unpersuasive argument designed to show that the urban proportion of the antebellum South's total population growth compared favorably with the Northern figure. For my critique, see note 8, above. The fact remains, however, that, from a starting point at the beginning of the century that was well behind the North, the South, by a number of significant measures, did come close to matching Northern urban growth during the antebellum decades.


wauk ee, the great cities on the Northeastern seaboard, and a dozen other Northern urban centers was impressively consistent and glaringly unequal. The sharp maldistribution of the 1820s and 1830s became more widely skewed with the passage of time (the Gini coefficients of inequality for 1860 matched those prevalent in the South). On the eve of the Civil War, the wealth of most cities, while greatly augmented, was "less widely dispersed than it had been earlier"; the propertyless groups in Stonington (Connecticut) and Chicago, for example, comprised between two-thirds and three-fourths of all households by the outbreak of the war.  

Nor do sectional rates of vertical mobility appear to have been much different. In 1856 Cassius M. Clay told an Ohio audience that "the northern laboring man could, and frequently did, rise above the condition [into] which he was born to the first rank of society and wealth," but he "never knew such an instance in the South." Recently unearthed evidence on the social origins of the men in the "first rank" does not sustain Clay’s surmise, so popular with contemporary yeasayers. In the South, "increasing barriers to slaveownership resulting from higher slave prices and the growing concentration of wealth" left "lesser planters," not to mention laboring men, with their "aspiration thwarted." And in the North—whether in Wayne County (Michigan), Newport, Stonington, small towns in Massachusetts, Chicago, and Brooklyn, or the great cities of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—eminent and rich men of humble birth were a rarity. Evidence on the more likely movement from a lower social position to an adjacent one, rather than to the very top, remains in pitifully short supply. In antebellum Philadelphia, small New England counties, and rural Georgia, even the modest movement from one plebian level to another appears to have seldom occurred.  


Antebellum North and South

Throwing important, if indirect, light on the relatively slight opportunities for upward social and economic movement antebellum America offered to poor or economically marginal men is the era’s high rate of physical or geographical mobility. In rural as well as urban communities, in large cities and small, and on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, armies of footloose Americans were on the move, following trails never dreamed of in the Turner thesis. One-half of the residents, primarily the poorer and propertyless, left those communities from one decade to another in their search for a more acceptable living. I have no doubt that future research will yet disclose that, during what was a period of economic expansion in both sections, significant numbers of Americans improved their lot, even if modestly. To date, however, the data reveal equally slight rates of social mobility and high rates of geographical mobility on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

Carl Degler has recently observed that Southern society “differed from northern in that the social hierarchy culminated in the planter, not the industrialist.” At mid-century, great Northern fortunes, in fact, owed more to commerce and finance than to manufacturing. What is perhaps more important is that a sharply differentiated social hierarchy obtained in both sections. In Degler’s phrase, planter status was “the ideal to which other white southerners aspired.” A good case can be made for the equally magnetic attraction that exalted merchant status had for Northerners. If the fragmentary evidence on Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas, which Jane H. Pease has so effectively exploited, is any indication, then great planters lived less sybaritically and consumed less conspicuously than historians have previously thought. If Philip Hone’s marvelous diary—two dozen full-to-the-brim volumes of life among the swells during the antebellum decades—has broader implication, then the Northeastern social and economic elite commanded a lifestyle of an elegance and costliness that, among other things, proved irresistibly attractive to the aristocratic Southerners who graced Hone’s table, pursued diversion with other members of Hone’s set, and married into its families—the Gardiners, Coolidges, Coldens, Bayards, Gouverneurs, and Kortrights.

That the social structures of the antebellum South and North were in some important respects similar does not, of course, make them carbon copies of one another. In this as in other respects the chief difference between the sections was that one of them harbored a huge class of enslaved blacks. John C. Calhoun,

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51 Degler, Place over Time, 56.

James H. Hammond, George Fitzhugh, and other influential Southern champions of white supremacy never ceased reminding their antebellum audiences, therefore, that in the South “the two great divisions of society [were] not the rich and the poor, but white and black, and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper classes.” Several historians have recently agreed that great planters and small white farmers in the South shared common interests, for all the disparity in their condition. The interests of the different social classes will be considered in the discussion of influence and power that follows. Whatever these interests may have been, Southern whites, rural and urban, lived as did Northerners—in a stratified society marked by great inequalities in status, material condition, and opportunity.

Influence, power, and, above all, politics in antebellum America have been the subjects of massive recent research. Most discussions of antebellum politics have stressed differences between the major parties. The literature takes on new meaning peculiarly germane to this discussion when it is recast and its focus shifted to a comparison of politics in the North and South. Politics, as Samuel Johnson once observed, often touches human beings but lightly. A recent study of antebellum North Carolina reports that its political system, which was indifferent to pressing problems, was only saved from “violent explosions” by “its own practical insignificance.” That people may be indifferent to the politics of their time, perhaps sensibly so, does not render politics insignificant to the historian. In retreating from history as past politics, some of us appear to have taken up a history of nonpolitics. This is silly. For how the political system works, whether for good or for ill, is as important a clue to the character of a civilization as any other.

By mid-century the American political system was everywhere formally democratic. Notorious exceptions to and limitations on democracy persisted, but they persisted in both North and South and for largely the same reasons. If blacks could not vote in the Old South, with rare exceptions neither could they vote in the Old North, where they were barred by statute, subterfuge, custom, and intimidation. The South initiated the movement to limit the powers and terms of office of the judiciary and substitute popular elections for the appointment of judges. When Fletcher M. Green reminded us a generation ago that antebellum Southern states created new, and modified old, constitutions that were

53 Calhoun, Speech before the U.S. Senate, as quoted in Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, 1: 419.
56 The best comprehensive overview of the political and other deprivations suffered by Northern free blacks is Leon Litwack, North of Slavery (Chicago, 1971). Invaluable on Northern racial attitudes is George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914 (New York, 1971). As is still true in the twentieth century, apportionment discriminated in favor of rural over urban areas; see Michael P. Johnson, Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia (Baton Rouge, 1977), 87–88.
fully as democratic as those in Northern states, he concluded that by this "progressive expansion in the application of the doctrine of political equality . . . the aristocratic planter class had been shorn of its political power." Power, he claimed, had now been transferred to "the great mass of whites." As Green's critics were quick to point out, popular suffrage and theoretical rights to hold office are not synonymous with popular power. Yet these are not empty or hollow rights. That they have often been made so testifies not to their insignificance but rather to the importance of the larger context in which democratic political gains are registered. It remains neither a small matter nor a small similarity that on the constitutional level the antebellum North and South were similarly democratic and republican.

At least as important as a society's system for selecting political officeholders is the kind of men who are regularly selected and their characteristic performance in office. In collecting evidence on political figures, scholars have sought to measure the measurable—above all, the social and economic characteristics of officeholders and party leaders. I think it safe to assume that historians performing these chores have the wit to know that an individual of whatever background is perfectly capable of transcending it. Their unspoken working assumption is one that has been known since before Aristotle: the material and social circumstances of men in power may throw some light on their motives and behavior, taking on added significance when these circumstances are uniform or close to uniform. That Charles A. Beard's mechanistic overemphasis of these points may have given them a bad name does not detract from their usefulness.

Abundant data have been accumulated on the occupations, wealth and property ownership, church affiliations, education, and other social indicators not only of antebellum officeholders in several dozen cities equally divided between South and North and in counties in every Southern state but also of state officials in all of the Southern and most of the Northern states and of Congressmen from most of the states in the Union. The resultant picture inevitably is not uniform. Humble county and town officials, for example, were less likely to be drawn from the highest levels of wealth and from the most prestigious occupations than were men who occupied more exalted state and federal positions. Aldermen and councilmen usually did not match the mayor either in wealth or in family prestige. But the relatively slight social and economic differences found between men at different levels of government or between men nominated by the parties that dominated American politics from the 1830s to the


58 In Clement Eaton's phrase, "the existence of a democratic political machinery is . . . no guarantee that democracy will prevail in the functioning of government.", The Civilization of the Old South, 298-99. Also see Campbell and Lowe, Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas, 3, 109.

59 For an interesting argument that stresses the importance of the political ideology of republicanism to the antebellum South, see Michael Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s (New York, 1978).

60 See particularly the two definitive studies by Ralph A. Woonker: The People in Power: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Lower South, 1850-1860 (Knoxville, 1969), and Politicians, Planters, and Plain Folk: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Upper South, 1850-1860 (Knoxville, 1973).
1850s were not differences between the North and South. In the South as in the North, men similar in their dissimilarity to their constituencies held office and exercised behind-the-scenes influence. In contrast to the small farmers, indigents, laborers, artisans, clerks, and shopkeepers—the men of little or no property who constituted the great majority of the antebellum population—the men who held office and controlled the affairs of the major parties were everywhere lawyers, merchants, businessmen, and relatively large property owners. In the South they were inordinate men who owned slaves and owned them in unusually large numbers. It may well be that a society that is stratified economically and socially will confer leadership on those who have what Robert A. Dahl has called substantial material “advantages.” It is not clear that this is an iron law. What is clear is that the Old South and the North awarded leadership to precisely such men.

More important than the social and economic backgrounds of political leaders are their public behavior and the ideologies or “world views” underlying this behavior. Not that the thinking or action of powerful men is totally unaffected by their material circumstances. But, in view of the complexity of any individual.

63 For a recent comparison of Whig and Democratic candidates and party leaders, see my Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics (rev. ed., Homewood, Ill., 1978), 235-41.


ual's ideology and of the diverse elements that help shape it, the effect of these circumstances cannot be assumed and is likely to vary from one individual to another. Although the political philosophies of men do not lend themselves to quantitative or precise measurement, the burden of recent scholarship is that most Southern and Northern political activists were similarly ambitious for worldly success, opportunistic, materialistic, and disinclined to disturb their society's social arrangements. Men with values such as these were ideally suited to lead the great pragmatic parties that dominated antebellum politics.65

Many parties flashed across the American political horizon during the antebellum decades. That the Antimasonic Party, the Liberty Party, and the Free Soil Party almost entirely bypassed the South is an important difference between the sections. The South was not hospitable to organized political dissent, particularly dissent hostile to the expansion of slavery. These parties were small and ephemeral organizations whose leverage stemmed not so much from any great voting support they were able to command as from the nearly equal strength in both sections of the great major parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. Whoever would evaluate the actions of those who held executive or legislative office in antebellum America must, almost invariably, evaluate Whigs or Democrats—at least until the mid-1850s, when a new party emerged during the great controversy over the extension of slavery in the territories.

The Democrats and Whigs were national parties drawing their leaders and followers from both sections. They could usually count on intersectional support for the national tickets they presented quadrennially to the nation at large. Interestingly, the presidency—whether occupied by Southerners Jackson, Tyler, Polk, and Taylor and the Southern-born Harrison or Northerners Van Buren, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan—was in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s in the hands of Whigs and Democrats who displayed great sensitivity toward the political and economic interests of the slave-owning South. In the 1840s Congressmen voted not by region as Northerners or Southerners but primarily as Whigs and Democrats. Party rather than sectional interest prevailed in the roll calls on most issues reaching the national political agenda. In the 1850s, as Thomas B. Alexander has reported, "forces greater than party discipline . . . were evidently at work . . . forcing party to yield to section on a definable number of issues."

64 Pessen, Jacksonian America, 172-74. Political leaders are no less idiosyncratic than are other men; they have, of course, been interpreted differently elsewhere. Yet the version I have given of their operative values and the prevalence of these values among leaders in all latitudes follows the evaluations in older studies of antebellum politics and such recent biographies as Irving H. Bartlett, Daniel Webster (New York, 1978); Chase C. Mowery, William H. Crawford (Lexington, Ky., 1974); John A. Monroe, Louis McLane: Federalist and Jacksonian (New Brunswick, N.J., 1973); Herman J. Viola, Thomas L. McKenny: Architect of America's Early Indian Policy (Chicago, 1974); James C. Curtis, Andrew Jackson and the Search for Vindication (Boston, 1978); and Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821 (New York, 1977).
65 By pragmatic parties I mean, as do most historians and political scientists who have used the term, parties largely but not solely concerned with electoral success, parties not devoid of principles so much as parties of flexible or shifting principles.
66 The great political influence of these interests raises questions about the recent interpretation linking the place of the South within the antebellum United States to that of weak and underdeveloped nations in the modern world order.
Yet, even in the 1850s, "both major parties maintained a high level of cohesion and intersectional comity" with regard to the range of issues not bearing on slavery and its right to expansion.67

The great national issues of antebellum politics, culminating as they did in Sumter and the ensuing war, were of transcendent importance to Americans. A good case can nonetheless be made that local and state politics touched the lives of people more often and more directly than did national politics, particularly during an era when the men in the nation's capital were inclined to treat laissez faire as an article of faith.68 State governments in North and South, by contrast, engaged in vigorous regulation of a wide range of economic activities.69 Local governments taxed citizens and, if with limited effectiveness, sought to provide for their safety, regulate their markets and many of their business activities, look after the poor, maintain public health, improve local thoroughfares, dispose of waste, pump in water, light up the dark, and furnish some minimal cultural amenities through the exercise of powers that characteristically had been granted by state government. States chartered banks, transportation companies, and other forms of business enterprise, determined the scope of such charters, themselves engaged in business, disposed of land, and regulated local communities. The great question is how did the actual operations of local and state governments in the North and South compare during the antebellum decades.

Antebellum state government was almost invariably controlled by either Whigs or Democrats. The major parties were essentially state parties, bound together in the most loosely organized national confederations. Citizens divided not by geographical section but by party preference within each state. The parties were in all latitudes characteristically controlled by tight groups of insiders that sometimes monopolized power, sometimes shared it with rival factions, in the one case as in the other controlling nominations and conventions, hammering out policy, disseminating and publicizing the party line, organizing the faithful to support it, enforcing strict discipline, and punishing those who dared challenge either the policies or the tactics pursued by the leadership. While party policies could conceivably have been infused with the noble principles proclaimed in party rhetoric, such infusion rarely appears to have been the case. The "Albany Regency," the "Richmond Junto," the "Bourbon Dynasty" of Arkansas, and similar cliques in control elsewhere have been described as realists rather than idealists.

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68 For an interesting argument on the relatively slight impact of national government, see Philip S. Paukdan, "The American Civil War Considered as a Crisis in Law and Order," AHR, 77 (1972): 1013–34. For the argument that state legislatures were "the centers of political power," at least in the Upper South, see Wooster, Politicians, Planters, and Planter, 27.

To call attention to the gulf between the pronouncements and the actions of antebellum state political leaders is not to indulge in cynicism but simply to report the facts as historians have recorded and interpreted them. J. Mills Thornton's recent description of antebellum Alabama's political leaders as demagogues who felt a "secret contempt for the voters" they publicly extolled and whose "primary function was to gain as many offices as possible for the party faithful" is not unlike historians' characterizations of other leaders in other states, both in the North and in the South.\(^70\) In New York as in Alabama, in Michigan as in Georgia, in Pennsylvania as in Mississippi, in Illinois as in Missouri, the "compelling aim" of the major parties and the groups that ran them appears to have been "to get control of the existing machinery of government" and to dispense to party loyalists the jobs that attended electoral success. While seemingly preoccupied with patronage and gerrymandering or with keeping from the agenda of state governments issues that posed a "threat to property and the social order or which threatened ... stability,"\(^71\) the major parties did not sidestep altogether economic, social, and cultural issues of some moment. The most germane feature of roll call evidence on such issues is how little there is to choose between legislative voting patterns in the South and the North.\(^72\)

In towns and cities, unlike the states, party counted for little. Candidates for the mayor's office and the local council or board of aldermen did not fail to remind voters of the moral superiority of their own parties. But, as students of antebellum urban politics have noted, it mattered little whether this major party or that won the election or whether the town was located north or south of the Mason-Dixon line. True, the problems faced by cities in Texas, where "Indian fighting was probably the most important municipal activity," were unknown in the Northeast (and, for that matter, the Southeast). The amazing thing is how similar were both the problems taken up by local government everywhere and the measures enacted for coping with them.

Perhaps in no other milieu was governmental policy so permeated with class bias. Whether it was Natchez or Springfield, Charleston or Brooklyn, New Orleans or Boston, the lawyers, merchants, and large property owners who occupied city hall ran things in the interests of the "wealthier inhabitants." Tax rates were everywhere minuscule and property flagrantly underassessed, at the insistence of large taxpayers. Valuable lots were leased to rich men at ridiculously low rates, if not sold to them for a song. Funds provided by the niggardly bud-

\(^{70}\) Thornton, Politics and Power in a Slave Society, 43, 95, 115, 140, 150, 246.


\(^{72}\) Herbert Enskowitz and William G. Shade have examined roll calls in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, Virginia, and Missouri between 1833 and 1843; see their "Consensus or Conflict? Political Behavior in the State Legislatures during the Jacksonian Era," JAH, 58 (1971): 591-621. For an informed criticism of this essay and an effective argument that "partisan voting behavior on selected roll calls" does not indicate the existence of "contracting belief systems," see Levine, The Behavior of State Legislatures in the Jacksonian Era, 16, 201, 206, 232.
gets typical of the time were spent most freely to improve or widen streets used by businessmen rather than to clean streets in the neighborhoods of the poor. Improved public facilities for disposing of waste or carrying fresh water into the city were usually introduced first in upper-class residential districts. The "indisputable connection between the policies of the city council and the interests of the wealthier inhabitants" that Richard Wade discerned in Cincinnati early in the era could be found in most other cities.

A contemporary New Yorker attributed to corruption the not atypical favoritism the city showed its property-owners, observing that "nearly every alderman has in some degree owed his success to the personal efforts and influence of 'backers,' who must be recompensed for their services." In the absence of evidence that local officeholders were so motivated, it is more reasonable to assume that they acted out of an honest conviction that the prosperity of the larger community depended in the first instance on the prosperity of its wealthiest inhabitants. That such beliefs were colored by the material advantages of those who possessed them, as by the conservative social values typically absorbed by men of their standing, seems equally reasonable. In any case, the pattern of uncommonly prosperous propertyowners controlling localities in the interests of men and families similarly situated was not confined to one geographical section.

Power is not, of course, confined to control of government. Control over banks, credit, capital, communications, and voluntary associations, which in an era of laissez faire often exercised more influence than did public authorities over education and culture, crime and punishment, social welfare and poverty, gave to those who had it a power that was barely matched by those who held the reins of government. The burden of recent research is that small social and economic elites exercised a degree of control over the most important institutions in the ante-bellum North that bears close resemblance to the great power attributed to the great planter-slaveowners by William E. Dodd a half century ago and by Eugene D. Genovese more recently. Influential voluntary associa-

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74 Full documentation of this point would present a catalogue of almost all of the studies of ante-bellum localities that I have already cited. For these two paragraphs I have primarily drawn up Wheeler, To Wear a City's Crown; draft transcript of Pease and Pease's comparative study of ante-bellum Charleston and Boston (which I have used with the kind permission of the author), James, Antebellum Marketing; Fish, Turn into City; David R. Goldfield, "The Business of Health Planning: Disease Prevention in the Old South," JSH, 42 (1976): 557-70; Wade, The Urban Frontier, 209; and Hurst, "The Elite Class of Newport," 92-94.
tions and financial institutions appear to have been run by similarly atypical sorts on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.\textsuperscript{76}

Shortly after secession, Governor Joseph E. Brown told the Georgia legislature that in the South the "whole social system is one of perfect homogeneity of interest, where every class is interested in sustaining the interest of every other class." Numerous Southerners agreed with him, and many scholars concur. In their failure to challenge planter supremacy, small farmers—slaveowners and nonslaveowners alike—ostensibly demonstrated the unique identity of interest that was said to bind all whites together in the antebellum South.\textsuperscript{77} The interest of a group is a normative term, known only to God (and perhaps to Rousseau in his capacity as authority on the General Will), in contrast to its perceived interests, as stated in its words and implicit in its actions. There are, therefore, as many interpretations of the "true interests" of Southern—or, for that matter, of Northern—small farmers as there are historians writing on the subject. The South's large enslaved black population doubtless affected the perceptions of all Southern whites, if in complex and unmeasurable ways. Recent research indicates that poorer and nonslave-owning Southern whites were, nevertheless, sensitive enough to their own social and economic deprivation to oppose their social superiors on secession and other important matters.\textsuperscript{78} Whether the acquiescence of the mass of antebellum Northerners in their inferior social and economic condition was in their own interest will be decided differently by conservative, reformist, and radical historians. Our admittedly insubstantial evidence on the issue suggests that the degree of social harmony coexisting with subtle underlying social tensions was, racial matters apart, not much different in the North and the South.


\textsuperscript{77} Brown, as quoted in Johnson, Toward a Patriarchal Republic, 42. Also see Owsley, Plain Folk of the Old South, 134; Craven, The Coming of the Civil War, 52; Olen, "Historians and the Extent of Slaveownership in the Southern United States," 101-16; Genovese, "Yeoman Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," 332, 338; and Barney, The Road to Secession, xiii-xiv, and The Secessionist Impulse, 3, 187. Although he has rejected Genovese's argument of planter hegemony, Degler has accepted Olen's thesis that small and large Southern farmers had interests that were "at least parallel, not antagonistic"; Place over Time, 77, 80.

LIMITATIONS OF SPACE PERMIT no more than a swift allusion to a number of other matters that are fascinating either because, like religiosity and values, they are intangible or, like crime and violence, they resist precise measurement.79 Scholars of a revisionist bent can have a field day with these themes, for the growing literature on them yields tantalizing evidence that appears to overturn the traditional view of a distinctive antebellum South. Legal briefs can thus be written attesting the near similarity of the South and North in their achievements in science, medicine, public health, and other aspects of intellectual and cultural life, in their ideals of womanhood, in their racial attitudes, in their violence and attitudes toward violence, in their materialism as in other values, in aspects of humanitarian reform, and in religion, particularly in the roles played by evangelicalism and the Benevolent Empire in the Protestant denominations that were predominant in both sections.80 Much of this literature implicitly pro-


motes the concept of sectional convergence either by upgrading Southern or by downgrading Northern achievements. But, since historians—unlike embattled attorneys—cannot content themselves with evidence that is both insubstantial and contradicted by evidence pointing in an opposite direction, they are best advised to reserve judgment. Wisdom consists in re-examining and re-evaluating the earlier literature on these themes, weighing carefully the merits of the recent contributions, and, above all, in probing for additional evidence.

HAVING EXAMINED economic developments, social structure, and politics and power in the antebellum sections, let me now return to the question of capitalism in the Old South. Several historians have recently argued that Southern planters constituted a "seigneurial" class presiding over a "pseudocapitalistic"

munity in the Changing City, 1840-1870," Maryland Historical Magazine, 71 (1976): 367-80. In addition, Bell Irwin Wiley has adduced substantial evidence on the similarity of the values of young Southerners and Northerners in uniform; see his The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy (Indianapolis, 1945) and The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union (Indianapolis, 1952).

society, a class whose "world view" ostensibly set them "apart from the mainstream of capitalist civilization." By this analysis, the Old South, though influenced by modern capitalism, belonged (as do early modern India and Saudi Arabia, among others) to the category of "premodern" societies that have been the economic and political dependencies of the dynamic industrial world that exploits them. The antebellum South's banking, commercial, and credit institutions did not in this view manifest the section's own capitalistic development so much as they served to facilitate the South's exploitation by the "capitalistic world market." This argument can be accepted uncritically only by accepting Eugene D. Genovese, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Raimondi Luraghi as the arbiters and interpreters of what represents "every normal feature of capitalism." 82

Capitalism is not a rigid system governed by uniform economic practices, let alone inflexible definitions. The economy of the antebellum United States, like capitalistic economies in Victorian England and other nations, was composed of diverse elements, each playing a part in a geographical and functional division of labor within the larger society. As Lewis C. Gray and Thomas P. Govan long ago and other scholars more recently have observed, Southern planters had the attitudes and goals and were guided by the classic practices of capitalistic businessmen. 83 The antiurbanism and antimaternalism that Genovese has attributed to the great planters is unconvincing because thinly documented and contradicted by much other evidence. 84 Some people, including planters themselves, may have likened the planter class to a seigneurial aristocracy. Unlike the lords of the textbook manor, however, Southern planters depended heavily on outside trade, participated enthusiastically in a money economy, and sought

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83 For an excellent criticism of the enormities in Luraghi's work, see Bennett H. Wall's review essay, "The Myth of the Planter Past," Plantation Society, 1 (1979): 273-80. Space requirements dictate that I lump together the views of Genovese, Moore, and Luraghi that do not always coincide and that, in Genovese's case to his credit, are being modified and refined in each new essay he publishes.


85 Genovese's assertion that slaveholders "distressed the city and saw in it something incongruous with their local power and status arrangements" is documented by a single piece of secondary evidence, The Political Economy of Slavery, 24. For numerous testimonies to the alacrity of large planters in establishing town residences for themselves, their evident delight in doing so, and the great influence they enjoyed in cities, see Huffman, "Town and Country in the South," 366-86; and Dorsett and Shaffer, "Was the Antebellum South Antiurban?" 93-100. Equally unpersuasive are Genovese's assertions that while Southerners were "dreadfully repressed...in their sexual mores," ostensibly harboring "unconscious wishes about mother or sister or something equivalent," and that "many travellers" thought Southern values distinctive from Northern; The Political Economy of Slavery, 28-30, and The World the Stakeholders Made, 96, 146. Genovese based the latter observation on uncited comments by Tocqueville and Achille Murat. In view of the many dozens of visitors who found that most of the important American values commanded national, not sectional, obedience, it is hard to disagree with Degler's contention that the South's "system of values" was "quite congruent with [that of] the rest of the country"; Place our Time, 68. For an effective refutation of the notion that the Creole elite were beyond greed and grasping, indifferent to money, and contemptuous of those who lived to amass it, see Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Early New Orleans Society: A Reappraisal," JSIH, 18 (1952): 20-36.
continuously to expand their operations and their capital. Marx once said that the limits of the serf's exploitation were determined by the walls of the lord's stomach. The limits of the slave's exploitation were determined by the expanding walls of the world cotton market.

That slavery is not the classic labor system associated with a Marxist definition of capitalism is, of course, true. The problem with Marx as Pundit of capitalism, for all the undeniable brilliance of his interpretation, is that he was, as he conceded, more interested in changing the system than in explaining it. Those of us content with merely understanding so complex a phenomenon as capitalism know that, whether in its labor system or in other respects, it is a flexible and constantly shifting order, susceptible of diverse definitions. The Southern economy did differ in important respects from the Northern, developing special interests of its own. Yet, far from being in any sense members of a colony or dependency of the North, the Southern upper classes enjoyed close ties with the Northern capitalists who were, in a sense, their business partners. The South was an integral component of a wealthy and dynamic national economy, no part of which conformed perfectly to a textbook definition of pure capitalism. In part because of the central place in that economy of its great export crop, cotton, the South from the 1820s to the 1860s exerted a degree of influence over the nation's domestic and foreign policies that was barely equalled by the antebellum North. India within the Empire indeed! The South's political system of republicanism and limited democracy, like its hierarchical social structure, conformed closely to the prevailing arrangements in the North, as they also did to the classic features of a capitalistic order.

The striking similarities of the two antebellum sections of the nation neither erase their equally striking dissimilarities nor detract from the significance of these dissimilarities. Whether in climate, diet, work habits, uses of leisure, speech and diction, health and disease, mood, habits, ideals, self-image, or labor systems, profound differences separated the antebellum North and South. One suspects that antebellum Americans regarded these matters as the vital stuff of life. The point need not be labored that a society, one-third of whose members were slaves (and slaves of a distinctive "race"), is most unlike a society of free men and women. An essay focusing on these rather than on the themes emphasized here would highlight the vital disparities between the antebellum South and North. And yet the striking dissimilarities of the two antebellum sections do not erase their equally striking similarities, nor do they detract from the significance of these similarities.

The antebellum North and South were far more alike than the conventional scholarly wisdom has led us to believe. Beguiled by the charming version of Northern society and politics composed by Tocqueville, the young Marx, and other influential antebellum commentators, historians have until recently believed that the Northern social structure was far more egalitarian and offered far

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80 My source for this epigram is my class notes for a graduate course in medieval economic history that I took thirty years ago at Columbia University. Fortunately, the authority for the citation is the reliable and admirable Karl Helleiner, my teacher.
Edward Pessen
greater opportunity for upward social movement than did its Southern counterpart and that white men of humble position had far more power in the Old North than they did in the Old South. In disclosing that the reality of the antebellum North fell far short of the egalitarian ideal, modern studies of social structure sharply narrow the gulf between the antebellum North and South. Without being replicas of one another, both sections were relatively rich, powerful, aggressive, and assertive communities, socially stratified and governed by equally—and disconcertingly—oligarchic internal arrangements. That they were drawn into the most terrible of all American wars may have been due, as is often the case when great powers fight, as much to their similarities as to their differences. The war owed more, I believe, to the inevitably opposed but similarly selfish interests—or perceived interests—of North and South than to differences in their cultures and institutions.

It is a commonplace in the history of international politics that nations and societies quite similar to one another in their political, social, and economic arrangements have nevertheless gone to war, while nations profoundly different from one another in their laws of property or their fundamental moral and philosophical beliefs have managed to remain at peace.
The Peloponnesian War, which, like the American Civil War, was a bitter and protracted struggle between two branches of the same people whose societies were in vital respects dissimilar from one another, appears to have owed little to these differences. In Thucydides’ great account, Athens and the Athenians were profoundly unlike Sparta and the Lacedaemonians, whether in “national” character, wealth, economic life, ideals and values, system of justice, attitudes toward freedom, or lifestyle. But to Thucydides, as to the leading spokesmen for the two sides, these dissimilarities were one thing, the causes of the war quite another. Athens and Sparta fell out primarily because both were great imperial powers. “The real cause of the war,” concluded Thucydides, “was formally ... kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable.” None of this is to say that sectional differences had no influence whatever on the actions of those influential men that in

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86 For the influence of Tocqueville’s “egalitarian thesis,” see Pessen, Riches, Class, and Power before the Civil War, chap. 1. In the early 1840s Marx believed that the conquest by Northern workers of the right to vote represented the “political emancipation” of the working classes—a necessary first step to full emancipation. And, influenced by his reading of Thomas Hamilton’s Men and Manners in America (1833), Marx also believed that class lines were regularly brushed aside in the Northern states. See Karl Marx, Early Writings, pt. 1 (New York, 1963), particularly “Bruno Bauer, Die Judenfrage,” in The Jewish Question, 12. Eric Foner has asserted that the Republican Party ideology, emphasizing the great social and economic opportunities available to Northern labor, was given “plausibility” and “a strong cultural authenticity” by the alleged closeness of the facts of Northern life to these claims made by Republican spokesmen; Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 33–34. Foner’s conclusions appeared just prior to the publication of a number of empirical studies that cast grave doubt on the accuracy of Republican propaganda—at least in this respect.

87 For a discussion and cataloguing of these studies, see Edward Pessen, “On a Recent Clometric Attempt to Resurrect the Myth of Antebellum Egalitarianism,” Social Science History, 3 (1979): 201–27.


89 Since I am using the causes of the Peloponnesian War only as a suggestive model for my brief consideration of the causes of the American Civil War, I trust I shall be forgiven for referring only to one study of that earlier war. My generalizations and quotations are drawn from Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, trans. Richard Crawley (New York, 1951), 15, 33, 40, 46–49, 50, 65–67, 80–81, 104–06, 118, 189, 233, 440, 509.
April 1861 culminated in the outbreak of the American Civil War. The point rather is that, insofar as the Peloponnesian War throws any light whatever on the matter, wars between strikingly dissimilar antagonists break out not necessarily because of their differences, important as these are, but because of their equally significant similarities.

Late in the Civil War, William King of Cobb County, Georgia, reported that invading Union officers had told him, "We are one people, [with] the same language, habits, and religion, and ought to be one people." The officers might have added that on the spiritual plane Southerners shared with Northerners many ideals and aspirations and had contributed heavily to those historical experiences the memory and symbols of which tie a people together as a nation. For all of their distinctiveness, the Old South and North were complementary elements in an American society that was everywhere primarily rural, capitalistic, materialistic, and socially stratified, racially, ethnically, and religiously heterogeneous, and stridently chauvinistic and expansionist—a society whose practice fell far short of, when it was not totally in conflict with, its lofty theory.