

1989

Honor

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Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "Honor." *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

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in the South from the 18th century to the present appears to have been sparked by insult, by challenges to honor. Southerners believed a man had to guard his reputation and his honor, by good manners and, if necessary, by violence. Insult literally could not be tolerated.

Women, although traditionally venerated in the South, could have no honor—only virtue. The ultimate protection of honor lay in physical courage, an attribute not considered to be within a woman's sphere. White men also refused to concede that black men could possess honor, although black southerners recognized honor among one another. Further, the honor of wealthy white men could not be damaged by men of lesser rank. Honor came into play only among equals. Contrary to stereotype, though, honor was not restricted to the southern aristocracy. Men of every class felt themselves to be honorable and could not tolerate affront and still enjoy the respect of their peers. The elite alone dueled, of course, but the duel was only the most refined manifestation of honorable conflict, the tip of the iceberg. Fighting, shooting, stabbing, feuding, and shotgun weddings were considered legitimate and inevitable results of honor confronting honor.

An emphasis on honor, concurrently with high homicide rates, prevailed in the 19th-century South, although the cult of honor became less formalized (and probably more dangerous in the process) after the Civil War. Duels faded away; shooting scrapes became more common. The concept of honor also spanned the subregions of the South, lowland and upland, slaveholding and nonslaveholding. It even persisted in southern cities, where volatile rural folkways combined with urban poverty and crowding to make southern cities peculiarly dangerous places to live.

The South was not alone in this culture of honor. In different variations, it has flourished for centuries in Mediterranean cultures such as those of Sicily and Greece. Cultures of honor also flourished among the aristocracy of 17th-century England and among the Scotch-Irish, both of whom exerted decisive influences on southern culture in its formative states. The idea of honor did not prosper among the Puritans, Quakers, or Congregationalists and seems to be at odds with the impersonal relations of a predominantly commercial society. Honor never sank deep roots in the North.

The South, on the other hand, from its very beginnings seemed designed to nurture honor. Slavery and the society it spawned provided the conditions in which the notion of honor could flourish. Honor thrives in a rural society of face-to-face contact, of a limited number of relationships, of one system of values. Honor depends upon a hierarchical society, where one is defined by who is above or below him. Honor grows well in a society where the rationalizing power of the state is weak; an adherence to honor makes the state, at best, irrelevant in settling personal disputes.

Honor found itself increasingly on the defensive in the 19th century, not only from the North and England, but also from within the South. Honor, necessarily a secular system of values, clashed with the ideals of Christian virtue. Evangelical southerners deplored and denounced the

Honor

Southerners of the antebellum era made it clear that they subscribed to an ethic of honor, but they never specified exactly what honor meant. In large part, this was because the meaning of honor depended on its immediate context, on who claimed and who acknowledged it. In fact, honor might be defined as a system of beliefs in which a person has exactly as much worth as others confer upon him. Antebellum northerners and most 20th-century Americans have some difficulty understanding the idea of honor, for it runs contrary to what has come to be a national article of faith: each person, regardless of race, class, sex, or religion, possesses equal intrinsic worth—regardless of what others think of him. Insult has little meaning to people who share such a faith, but if one takes honor seriously, insult from a respected person can cut to the quick. Accordingly, much of the violence

violence and pride honor condoned. In their eyes, people who let their actions be dictated by honor allowed themselves to become mere slaves of public opinion. The vast majority of southerners, of course, whatever their religious inclination, killed or assaulted no one, and even those who did resort to violence did so only once or twice in a lifetime—still enough to send many more southerners than northerners to jail and penitentiary for violent crimes, although southerners were notorious for not prosecuting crimes of violence.

Black southerners, when once liberated from slavery, also adapted to southern codes of honor. White observers, particularly those from the North, were appalled that blacks fought and killed each other over the same apparently trivial provocations as white southerners. Indeed, the homicide rate of both races in the South exceeded that of both in the North. Southerners of both races, consciously or not, have held to their notions of honor far into the 20th century, even in northern cities. Those who find that high homicide rates today correlate with southern culture seem to be measuring the fallout of a culture of honor. Those who find a correlation with low literacy rates or poverty are describing the characteristics of a place in which honor can best survive in the present.

See also MYTHIC SOUTH: Militant South; Romanticism; / Hospitality

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Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (1984); Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (1973); Pierre Bourdieu, in *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (1965); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982).
