The World the Liberal Capitalists Made (Book Review)

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Like his first book, *The Ruling Race* (1982), James Oakes’s new volume offers a broad portrait of the South from the Revolution through the Civil War. Like that first book, too, *Slavery and Freedom* pursues its thesis with dogged energy. “Southerners took their definition of freedom from the liberal capitalist world which produced them and of which they remained a part,” Oakes argues, “and this could only mean that *southern* slavery was defined as the denial of the assumptions of liberal capitalism” (p. xiii). American slavery, in other words, was a negation of the values white southerners held most dear, a negation of a liberal society that defined itself by individual rights of property and family. Slaveholders revealed what they valued most by what they denied their slaves.

Oakes delineates the especially stark dichotomies that marked slavery in the United States, dichotomies bred by liberal capitalism. He distinguishes North American slavery from slavery elsewhere and from other forms of subordination such as serfdom, indentured servitude, wage labor, and marriage. “Only the slave’s subordination was total; only the slave was cut off from society, a permanent outsider, socially dead” (p. 14). Race, moreover, made slavery in the American South especially clear-cut, as “‘black’ slavery and ‘white’ freedom produced the most extreme dualism in the long history of proslavery ideology” (p. 31). Because the South arose quickly at the behest of the burgeoning economy of Europe, the region never had a chance to become a “patriarchal” society where “even the lowliest persons were part of an organically unified social hierarchy” (p. 70).

Oakes sees himself steering between two extremes. At one pole are those (he cites Immanuel Wallerstein) who argue that the world market was so pervasive that “modern slavery was capitalist in every way that matters.” At the other pole are those (he cites Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese) who argue that “a social system founded upon the labor of slaves could never be truly capitalist, and that slavery was in fact tied to a historically ubiquitous
'merchant capital' that was never strong enough to overturn the social basis of any society” (p. 55). While the first position fails to reckon with the uniqueness of slave labor, Oakes argues, the second fails to reckon with the pervasive effects of capitalism throughout the slave society.

Oakes goes to some lengths to stress what he does not mean: “This does not mean that the slave South was, at bottom, a liberal capitalist society. Nor does it mean that liberal capitalism was thoroughly compatible with slavery. In the end the universalization of rights and the dynamic force of free labor overwhelmed and destroyed slavery. But southern society emerged within rather than apart from the liberal capitalist world, and that made a crucial difference.” The difference it made, according to Oakes, was that “the ambiguous relationship between slavery and liberal capitalism thereby became intrinsic to the Old South, not merely the basis of sectional animosity” (p. 79).

Oakes devotes much of Slavery and Freedom to the way fundamental social relations turned around the liberal axis of freedom and slavery. Marriage and kin relations among both races, the evolution of law and government, the dealings between nonslaveholders and slaveholders—this is the terrain through which Oakes traces the meaning of slavery in liberal America. In each context, Oakes finds paradoxical relations surrounding liberal ideals and southern slavery. These discussions are often insightful and ingenious in their complexity, making this book more subtle and supple than Oakes’s first volume.

White southerners were forced to raise their children not only to rule slaves, for example, but also to respond to other whites’ demands for freedom and equality. With no entailed estates, parents had to train their children to hustle for themselves, to recreate the planter class anew with their liberal energy. Thus, slavery permitted planters to nurture liberal values in their children, values which in turn perpetuated the planter class and slavery, which in turn bred more conflicts with liberalism and the world it dominated in the North.

Many of the planters’ tensions grew out of their inability to claim any governmental power that was clearly their own. The slaveowners lived within a liberal republic, had to exercise their power through popular parties, were forced to deal with representatives of states that held no slaves. Within the South, Oakes argues, class differences crystallized into conflicts between black belt slaveholding Whigs and upcountry nonslaveholding Democrats. Even as liberal politics clarified the distinction between slave and free, in other words, it threw the planters into conflict with white men who owned no slaves. The battles between the classes were not battles over slavery itself but over manifestations of slavery’s presence in some parts of states and not in others: reapportionment, voting qualifications, internal improvement and
banking. On the national level, too, slavery led to a long series of oblique struggles, erupting not in a straightforward battle over the justice of slavery but in fights over the sphere of the Supreme Court, the dispensation of lands in the West, the power of states to set their own laws. Slavery thus posed a persistent problem for the liberal state and the liberal state always threatened the interests of slaveholders. Slaveholders could neither turn their backs on electoral politics nor control political events.

The relations between slaves and masters moved along the same axis, Oakes argues. Courts wrestled with the rights of slaves, with the law tending toward the extension rather than the limitation of slave rights. Slave resistance played a critical role in this conflict between the slaveholders and their liberal government, constantly bringing slaveholders face to face with the limitations of their power, constantly reminding the North of the violation of liberalism in the South. As Oakes puts it, “every act of human resistance that brought a slave before the law exposed the paradox of freedom and slavery. Repeated exposure, even in small doses, weakened the system until legal contradiction gave way to military conflict” (p. 193). State and national law, in other words, was not hegemonic, legitimizing the power of the planters, but rather distended, frayed.

Even the proslavery argument was trapped within liberalism. Advocates of slavery, according to Oakes, ultimately came down to the liberal bottom line: the property rights of slaveholders, the equality of all white men. While George Fitzhugh might scoff at liberalism’s ideals, most planters reflexively turned toward liberal values at the moment of crisis in 1860. The constitution of the Confederacy and wartime policy were conducted in accordance with these liberal ideals, not the exclusive power of the planters.

Emancipation, Oakes argues, removed the most overt contradictions of liberalism. The result was a South in which a planter-merchant elite ruled in a much less problematic way. The market steadily shrank yeoman farms, forcing small landholders into tenancy; land assumed an importance it had not held when slavery was the most important form of property; the planter-merchants triumphed over a disorganized and ultimately disfranchised political opposition. The property relations of liberal capitalism, if not its ideals of personal autonomy, finally ruled the South with little overt opposition and little resistance from outside.

Slavery and Freedom does not claim to be a history of the Old South, but rather an “interpretation” intended “not to prove my thesis but to render it plausible and coherent.” There is little differentiation by space and time here, no archival research. This is a book that asks to be judged, instead, by its contribution to an ongoing dialogue about the nature of the antebellum South. Oakes’s argument only takes on its full meaning when read against
interpretations that see the Old South as something other than liberal. Oakes modestly hopes his ideas will “provoke disagreement but not, I hope, anger. If I am very lucky, they will stimulate discussion” (p. xx). Those who find the interpretation of Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese compelling will almost certainly be stimulated to discussion and disagreement.

Oakes’s first book was a frontal assault on Eugene Genovese’s portrayal of the South in The Political Economy of Slavery (1965), each chapter answering what Oakes saw as a critical part of Genovese’s argument. Genovese, according to Oakes, asserts “that slavery was a pre-capitalist form of social organization whose ‘logical outcome’ was a paternalistic world view. And it was the slaveholders’ paternalism, as he sees it, that created a constant tension between the slaveholders and the capitalist market in which they conducted their business.” By contrast, Oakes “found major divisions within a diverse slaveholding class, along with a general tendency away from paternalism and toward an acceptance of liberal democracy and free-market commercialism” (Ruling Race, pp. xii, xiii).

The current book carries Oakes’s argument to a new level of sophistication, attempting to counter Genovese on a more theoretical plane. Genovese and Fox-Genovese, though, are moving targets, constantly refining their interpretation to embrace ever more complexity. The year after Oakes’s first book appeared, so did their Fruits of Merchant Capital (1983), where they argued that merchant capital created an array of reactionary slave-plantation systems, including, in their words, “an essentially hybrid system in the Old South, which raised a regionally powerful ruling class of a new type, at once based on slave relations of production and yet deeply embedded in the world market and hostage to its internationally developed bourgeois social relations of production.” In a memorable phrase, Genovese and Fox-Genovese described the Old South as “a bastard child of merchant capital,” developing as “a noncapitalist society increasingly antagonistic to, but inseparable from, the bourgeois world that sired it” (p. 5). Or as Fox-Genovese’s Within the Plantation Household (1988) argued, “the South was in but not of the bourgeois world. The tentacles of capitalism permeated southern society, but bourgeois social relations did not reign and did not dominate southern thought and feeling” (p. 55).

Ironically, then, as both sides have more fully articulated their positions, some of the distinctions between them have begun to blur. They agree that the South was deeply embedded in the international market for staple goods, that slavery was an important part of that system and yet deviated from it in essential ways, that the Old South was a hybrid marked by strong contradictions, that the planter class had no choice but to deal with an outside world that did not share its values, that slaves themselves forced the planter class
constantly to bolster its sense of itself with a proslavery argument, and so on.

Yet the fundamental distinction remains. For Genovese and Fox-Genovese, liberal capitalism is defined not by market relations, no matter how extensive, but by the dominance of free labor. The power of capitalism to transform every facet of social life is aborted when people own one another. The South, they argue, despite its position in a liberal capitalist republic, despite the presence of a nonslaveholding white majority, despite the profitability of slavery, became increasingly distinct from the society to the North. Paternalism was not an inheritance from a distant past, but something that grew stronger; the more the South was infiltrated by liberal capitalism, the more the slaveholders articulated the reactionary aspects of their regime as they recognized the profound threat the economic, ideological, intellectual, and political consequences free labor posed for slavery.

Oakes, on the other hand, argues that liberal capitalism defined the legal, economic, and political context in which American slavery developed. No matter what a few proslavery apologists might say, the slaveholders continually altered slavery to fit the market and the laws of liberal capitalism. The slaveholders could find no solid ideological, economic, or political position beyond the all-encompassing liberal capitalist world in which they had developed as a class in the first place. A self-conscious paternalism was a weak, and ultimately powerless, defense.

The South of Oakes and the South of Genovese and Fox-Genovese cannot be reconciled, for language and assumptions have created barriers that cannot be breached. No matter how sophisticated the theoretical perspectives, no matter how many epicycles may be added, only detailed accounts of history on the ground will clarify the strengths and weaknesses of each argument. Either interpretation will have to be embodied in the full range of the Old South's concrete institutions, ideas, and behavior if it is to be persuasive. And both sides have made it clear that a satisfying portrayal of the Old South will have to make room for great ambiguity and tension.

Slavery and Freedom disclaims any attempt to offer a complete portrait of the antebellum South, but the reach of its interpretive framework can be evaluated. Oakes's concern with the role of liberal capitalism leads him to slight several major elements of southern life. Although Oakes stresses the broadly political aspects of his perspective, his discussion of electoral politics, the most overt expression of power in the United States, is far too simplified. The evolution of politics depends on contingency, variation, and event, but those are all missing here, replaced (as they are in the work of Genovese and Fox-Genovese) by structure and pattern. Oakes neglects all the countervailing tendencies in southern politics, the switching loyalties, the changing tactics. The exciting work in the political history of the Old South has to be taken into fuller account by those who espouse either interpretation.
Oakes has almost nothing to say, either, about republicanism and its basis in hierarchy, gradation, and dependency. Relations of race and gender took on their full meanings only in the context of republicanism, which lived an uneasy life along with other ideological elements in the Old South. While many historians have worked to sketch the subtle connections between a republican white South and a republican white North, Oakes pushes those insights aside to make room for the paradoxes of liberalism.

Unlike Oakes's previous book, the current volume barely mentions religion. While liberalism was a secular ideology, it simultaneously resonated and conflicted with the Protestant religion espoused by so many southerners of both races and genders. The Baptist and Methodist churches, like liberal capitalism, celebrated the individual; unlike liberalism, though, Christianity also celebrated community, connections that cut across the divisions of the Old South. It was to the Bible that most white southerners turned for their proslavery ideology, after all, and it was to the Bible that black southerners turned for their hope and determination. No interpretation of the South can ignore the religion whose language and values permeated the region.

James Oakes has explored the power of liberal capitalism in the Old South with intelligence and imagination. But by dwelling on that element at the expense of everything else, he shows us only one set of the contradictions in which southerners were trapped. One light shining from one angle overexposes this subject, washing out the shadows that must darken any lifelike portrait of the Old South.