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The South, the West, and the Rest

Edward L. Ayers

Westerners and southerners have long recognized their kinship. Since the days of Andrew Jackson, people from various "Wests" and "Souths" have seen in each other potential allies against various arrogant "Easts" and "Norths." The Civil War temporarily shattered the alliance, but it has periodically reasserted itself, from the time of Populism to the time of Sunbelt Republicanism. Southerners and westerners have often admired and adopted each other's style, whether in the form of gunfights, cowboy hats, or political rebelliousness. There is a reason that America's most widely popular music is called "Country and Western"—with the country accent, imagery, and content supplied in large part by the South.

Historians, too, have long found affinities between West and South. "Progressive" historians, in particular, in whose tradition David Emmons's engaging essay comfortably fits, built much of their view of the United States around a tripartite division of the country. Frederick Jackson Turner called it "sectionalism," while Charles Beard saw matters instead as the struggle of the "industrial" North against the "agrarian" South and West. In either case, the three regional poles acted as the armature around which most of the nation's political history was wrapped. This perspective was adapted for southern history by C. Vann Woodward, whose *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (1938) and *Origins of the New South* (1951) took much of their shape and power from a sectionalist interpretation of American political economy. In those books, the failure of the South and West to unite in the 1890s stood as a tragic turning point in the history of both regions.

Woodward did not stop there, but added southern tragedy, guilt, and regret to the Beardian stew, imparting a subtle Faulknerian taste to the sturdy progressive stock. In his *The Burden of Southern History* (1960) Woodward made the experience of defeat central to understanding the South's past. Many people seized on his insight. His interpretation resonated with those liberals who wrote most of southern history over the next several decades; it confirmed the opinions of other Americans of the way the South *should* have felt; it reinforced the view of history conveyed by many of the writers of the Southern Renaissance, especially Robert Penn Warren. Woodward's essay

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has provided a satisfying and subtle set of generalizations about the South for nearly half a century now, giving commentators a place they can confidently stand.[1]

Indeed, we have not made it far into Emmons's essay before we confront the South, Woodward, and the defeat thesis standing sharply defined against the western sky. The South is "the one undisputed region of the United States," Emmons confidently tells us. "No one doubts it." And no one doubts, either, that "what made southerners—or at least white southerners—distinct was their quite 'unAmerican' experience with shame, poverty, and defeat." It was the loss of the Civil War, Emmons argues, that made the South the South. Emmons believes that the "triumphant Yankees dismantled the South's complex social system based on racial slavery and . . . literally made the South over into their own image." Emmons argues that the South, as "a separate region," did not exist before Appomattox and Reconstruction; indeed, the very definition of the South for Emmons is "that part of the United States defeated and reconstructed by the forces of northern Republicanism." The South, as a result of this action by northerners, emerged "as a separate place, finite and comprehensible."

It soon becomes clear why Emmons characterizes the South in this way. He sees both West and South in large part as the projection of northern "blueprints." He needs the South as "a model" by which to measure the West: a region needs borders and it needs a common economic and political experience. The South clearly had both, and both were the products not of environment or even of slavery but of the Yankees.

I can see the appeal and utility of such a view. It offers much to us that the Progressive school offered to Americans in the first half of this century: clarity, an emphasis on specific political and economic events, a certain debunking power, and a certain edge against northerners/easterners. Emmons's insistence that timing, as well as geography, stands at the center of western history sets the West in motion in an exciting way. Putting capitalism and the evolution of the national state at the heart of western history makes sense.

What makes less sense to me is that Emmons takes us through his rigorous accounting of economic and political power only to return to regional character: "All of this, however, would be historically irrelevant if the people of this constructed region did not reveal certain distinguishing characteristics." Emmons sees "a distinctly western culture" emerging from these experiences with the northern-run capitalist machinery. Turning again to Woodward and the progressive tradition, Emmons gives a central role to illusion, legend, and "myth" in the creation of this culture. Progressive history, with its emphasis on the reality of economy and state, often turned to manufactured illusion as a way to explain ideas and beliefs that did not fit. Thus, a place such as the South, supposedly being rebuilt along northern lines, yet still unrepentant about its past, could only be explained by the "myth" of the Old South,

[1] For a useful overview of this theme, see Gaines M. Foster, "Woodward and Southern Identity," *Southern Review* 21 (April 1985): 351-60.

promulgated by those who had the most to gain from a New South. A "syrup of romanticism," Woodward wrote, made the new order easier to swallow.

There is an element of truth in this, but it explains too much. It strips people of social memory, of loyalty to their own remembered past. It makes people's minds as easily manipulated by elites as progressive historians believe regional economies and governments were; ironically, in turn, it gets non-elites off the hook for their reactionary beliefs. It is ultimately a patronizing perspective even as it claims to strip away illusion.

Moreover, the idea of "culture" that underlies such a vision is far too simple. Anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Marshall Sablins have been encouraging us for two decades to abandon images of culture as a possession, individual characteristics, easily manipulated things. Instead, culture is multiple rather than singular, a fluid, negotiated, and contested set of symbols, possibilities, and constraints that do not lend themselves to easy cataloging. I will leave western historians to fight out for themselves the nature of western culture; I know how independent the westerner's character is. I will resist Emmons's notion of the South, though, and if I can suggest that the South was not a "model" of a real region, something solid and fixed against which to measure the West, perhaps these comments might prove useful to readers of this journal.

First of all, as Emmons says in a note, "it goes without saying that black southerners did not view Appomattox or the Reconstruction that followed it as defeats." In other words, the entire trinity of guilt, defeat, and shame applies only to the white South. That is a large concession, since it reads out a large portion of the region's population, a portion that has helped create much of what is recognized as southern culture in the first place: much of its music, religious style, food, accent, literature. . . . It also reads out that large portion of the white southern population that has shown no sign whatsoever of bearing a burden of guilt, of having learned the improving lessons of defeat and impoverishment. Given an opportunity for a fight—whether in the Spanish-American War of the 1890s or the Persian Gulf War of 1990—the South has not minded its hard-earned lessons but has jumped into the fray with unabated enthusiasm.

The chastened-in-defeat thesis does not take into consideration that large portion of the white South which, to this day, eagerly accepts as the core of its "heritage" the supposedly shame-faced Confederacy. That portion would appear to be, in fact, an actual majority in Georgia, which just last year voted down a plea to remove the symbol of the Confederacy from the official state flag. Woodward, in later editions of *Burden* and in his memoirs, has expressed his own doubts about the defeat thesis as a description of actual southern culture or identity. Rather, it offers a way for reflective people to use the South to think about America. That is different from the way David Emmons uses it here.

The "cultural imperialism" of which Emmons speaks still lives, still trivializes the West and the South, still reduces the people of both regions to character parts in the national drama. (We divide up the violent roles between us.) Unfortunately,

progressive history encourages the belief that the West and the South can be easily characterized and contained, and done so in relation to the North and East. Better, it seems to me, to resist these generalizations, to make the West and South harder to think about, to be as ornery and difficult as these regions have been rumored to be.

The line I like best in Emmons's piece comes near the end: "like the South, the American West is a place. It is in the geographically western part of the United States and it includes everything in that part." That strikes me as the most fruitful way of looking at matters—not by extracting some essence, defining some key "characteristic," finding a "distinct culture," not even trying to draw clear borders. Include, do not exclude. Look for interaction, internal struggle, redefinition. In the case of the South, I am confident in saying that white and black southerners, rich and poor southerners, provincial and cosmopolitan southerners, have continually made and remade one another in their nearly four hundred years of living together. Their interaction over generations—not the Union Army, the Republican party, or northeastern corporations—has done the most to construct whatever "South" has been constructed. Progressive history lets us get at only a part of history, and not necessarily the most interesting part.

As a southern historian, I look to the exciting New Western History to help us move beyond ways of seeing things with which we have become too familiar and comfortable. We are indebted to Professor Emmons and the *Western Historical Quarterly* for renewing what I hope will be a long conversation.