

12-2009

# Review of Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order.

Daniel P. Kilbride

*John Carroll University*, [dkilbride@jcu.edu](mailto:dkilbride@jcu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kilbride, Daniel P., "Review of Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order." (2009). *History*. 29.

<http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/29>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact [connell@jcu.edu](mailto:connell@jcu.edu).

DANIEL KILBRIDE  
John Carroll University

ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE and EUGENE D. GENOVESE. *Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2008. Pp. xv, 314. Cloth \$80.00, paper \$22.99.

Historians faced with constructive criticism will find no better model than the scholarship of Eugene D. Genovese and the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. For over forty years their interpretation of the antebellum South has inspired research on the lives of the enslaved, the world of the slaveholders, and social class relations between planters and ordinary southerners. In response they have softened their core argument that large slave-owners established a quasi-feudal society in the slave South in a self-conscious rebuke to the bourgeois world growing up around them. They have conceded that slaveowners fully participated in the cultural life of their times. But their essential argument has remained the same: the logic of slaveowning placed white southerners in an antagonistic position vis-à-vis the capitalist, middle-class world emerging in Great Britain and the antebellum North.

The authors' *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' World View* (2005) argued, with painstaking thoroughness, for the development of a distinctive southern conservative secular and religious tradition. This book makes a more focused argument: the region's distinctive conservatism was not the provenance of a small cadre of intellectuals but of slaveowners more broadly. They insist that slave-holding and nonslaveholding folk accepted the doctrine they call "Slavery in the Abstract," the idea that "declared slavery or a kindred system of personal servitude the best possible condition for all labor regardless of race" (p. 1).

This is a bold argument, and Genovese and Fox-Genovese support it with an overwhelming volume of direct quotations from an amazing diversity of sources. It is abundantly clear that white southerners harbored deep reservations about the moral foundations of so-called "free" society. They believed slavery provided those in bondage with better material conditions than the urban poor in Europe and the American North. Yet whether southern intellectuals spoke for slaveholders as a group is debatable at best. So is the argument that white southerners endorsed, if only implicitly, the doctrine of "Slavery in the Abstract." I think that neither argument can be carried. Nevertheless, the book under review is the most sustained and mature articulation of an interpretation that has shaped scholarship on the nature of the American South for nearly fifty years.

To make this argument, the authors examine southern ideas about the mid-nineteenth century "labor question," the views of southern travelers to the North and to Europe as well as those of European visitors to American shores, the opinions of southern political economists, proslavery social thought, and even the actual conditions of poor people in free labor societies. This book marshals an enormous volume of evidence to show that ordinary southerners, slaveholding and not, sincerely believed that slaves fared better in their moral and material lives than working people in the North and Europe. Moreover, many of their contemporaries in these societies agreed. If southern political economists could not contribute a vigorous economic component to the proslavery argument, neither could non-southerners deny the misery that the expansion of industrial capitalism had inflicted on the mass of ordinary women and men. Proslavery ideologues had a lot of company when they predicted that poverty and injustice were endemic to free-labor societies. Nor were they alone in predicting social revolution in these societies if liberty meant, in practice, the freedom to scratch out a meager living at the edge of subsistence.

Interestingly, the authors approach white southerners' commitment to "Slavery in the Abstract" less as a historical problem than a logical one. Very few slave-owners endorsed reducing poor white people to a state of legal subordination. Thus, in order to sustain their argument, the authors are forced to maintain that the logical end of the slaveowners' worldview was "Slavery in the Abstract." Hence John Adger, a Presbyterian divine, "embraced the logic of Slavery in the Abstract" even while he explicitly denied that white southerners would do any such thing (p. 44). Even Andrew Johnson, perhaps the ultimate *herrenvolk* democrat, "embraced the essentials of Slavery in the Abstract" (p. 59). The argument is unconvincing since the authors marshal no evidence that Johnson ever stated his belief in such a doctrine.

Nevertheless, this book has real merits. It states clearly and uncompromisingly that southern culture was fundamentally at odds with its northern counterpart. It is based on an unparalleled sample of published and manuscript sources. It makes an argument that compellingly explains the growing gulf between southerners and northerners; its depiction of southern culture makes the Confederacy's defeat truly an event of world-historical significance. And, not the least, it is the culmination of a scholarly collaboration that has been remarkable, and maybe even unparalleled, in its productivity and importance. This book may not command agreement, but it surely warrants our respect.