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VERDICTS

The Unemancipated Country: Eugene Genovese's Discovery of the Old South

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On 26 September 2012, Eugene Dominic Genovese, one of the most influential and controversial historians of his generation, passed away at age eighty-two after a lengthy struggle with heart disease. His principal writings focused on the history of slavery and the Old South. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) stands as a masterpiece, one of the great works of nonfiction published in the twentieth century. Scholars have had trouble coming to grips with Genovese and his thinking when he was alive; they will have trouble coming to grips with him and his thinking after his death. Gene, as his friends called him, destroyed most of his personal papers. The thought of someone writing his biography, he once told me, horrified him. Stubborn, but not stuck in dogma, he was also a moving target. He began his academic career as a Marxist atheist; he ended it as an observant Catholic. Along the way, two ideas remained central to his scholarship: paternalism as the animating feature in the world that masters and slaves made together in the Old South and the necessity of a moral social authority to thwart the inexorable rise of nihilism born of radical individualism.

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No brief essay can do justice to the range of Genovese's interests and scholarly labors. He published several dozen books and more than two hundred essays and book reviews. Misrepresentations of him and of his positions abound. A respecter of tradition, Genovese defined it as an "embodiment of 'givens,'" something that "must constantly be fought for, recovered in each generation, and adjusted to new conditions."[1] Several of his own embodied givens—a dismal view of human nature, man as an innately social being, power as naturally agglomerating power to itself, respect for organic hierarchy, measured repression as essential to the health of any social order—imparted continuity to his historical scholarship. It began and ended with an interpretation of the Old South as a slave society unique in world history, traditional in some ways, modern in others, a hybrid in, but not entirely of, a transatlantic capitalist system. To be sure, the Old South exhibited features of capitalism but lacked at the core what Marx and some non-Marxists would call the defining social relation of capitalist production: wage-labor.

Genovese joined the American Communist Party at age fifteen. Although expelled five years later, he continued to apply Marxist method, shorn by him of certain rigidities, to escape parochial blinders in his preferred field of historical inquiry. In interpreting the antebellum South, Genovese seized upon an insight from Marx in his critique of classical political economy. Burgeoning consumer demand in the world's most advanced economic zones where wage-labor prevailed had caused the recrudescence or expansion for commercial purposes of various forms of servitude in the tropical or semitropical regions that were producing commodities for the export market. Marxian explorations of political economy helped Genovese make sense of how certain groups and classes that profited handsomely from a capitalist system could generate beliefs that clashed with those driving the capitalist engine of prosperity.

As an undergraduate at Brooklyn College and as a graduate student at Columbia University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1959, Genovese set himself the task of plowing through rather stiff literature on antebellum Southern agrarian reform. *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1965), his first book, evolved out of this research. The title expressed his insistence that an examination of the economic abstracted from the political had limited value

[1]Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4–5.

for understanding the South's journey toward secession. Plantation slavery's commercial involvement with capitalism but cultural estrangement from it, Genovese believed, held the key to explaining the massive bloodletting that would forge the central event in America's national history. In ten combative and wide-ranging essays, six of which had been previously published, Genovese, then in his early thirties, wrestled with questions about the productivity of slave labor, its profitability, and the overall flexibility of the Old South's economy, given future likelihoods. As it turned out, the impressive scholarship of his good friends, economic historians Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman, indicated that Genovese had underestimated performance in all three areas. Yet Fogel and Engerman also credited Genovese with raising crucial issues related to antebellum Southern economic development. Slavery's impact on the dignity of labor, the articulation of internal consumer markets, and the underdevelopment of human capital created impediments to the antebellum South's capability to sustain economic growth.[2]

Genovese's first book indicated that he was no doctrinaire Marxist but, in the words of Stanford historian David M. Potter, one of the barons in Southern history, "a first-class intellectual" blowing fresh air into an old debate that had gone stale.[3] Genovese identified with the traditionalist camp of historians by seeing the Civil War (which he preferred to call the War for Southern Independence) as an irrepressible conflict, a clash of one civilization with another. "I begin," he declared, "with the hypothesis that so intense a struggle of moral values implies a struggle of world views and that so intense a struggle of world views implies a struggle of worlds—of rival social classes or of societies dominated by rival social classes."[4]

Genovese prepared the broad outlines of an ambitious course of scholarship early on in his career, and in his first book he gives hints of his broader project. In a slave society, slaveholders predominate in the ruling stratum, and Genovese wanted to master the essentials of their evolving worldview from the late colonial period to the formation of the Confederacy.

[2]Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, "Changing Views of Slavery in the United States South: The Role of Eugene D. Genovese," in *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*, ed. Robert Louis Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 4–5.

[3]David M. Potter, "Right to Defend the Wrong Reasons," review of *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, by Eugene D. Genovese, *Saturday Review*, January 1, 1966, 34.

[4]Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 7–8.

Masters forged that worldview in dynamic tension with their slaves. He knew he would have to ground the Old South's intellectual history in the intimacies of production and exchange on the plantation and in the relations of masters to groups in the South other than slaves. Protestant Christianity informed the spirit of the Old South's laws and mores. Its intellectual and cultural history, as he soon discovered, could not easily be segregated from its theological history. Since the Americas had generated multiple slave societies, Genovese would need to enlist the comparative method to uncover what was peculiar to the Old South's peculiar institution. Since the War for Southern Independence reflected a deep-seated clash of belief systems, he would have to explore the genealogy and lineaments of the Southern conservative tradition that became dominant with the maturation of the slaveholders as a class.

Political history emerges from man moving man, whether by consent or coercion. Although masters enjoyed a monopoly of force over their slaves, successful rulers knew when to shelve whip and gun and rule by other means. Genovese liked to speak of Machiavelli's musings on this point in chapter 18 of *The Prince*, the "two ways of contending by law and by force." His related attraction as a Marxist to Antonio Gramsci's meditations on the *Modern Prince* and the concept of hegemony stemmed in large part from Genovese's attempt to understand how in the maintenance of class rule, power was translated into authority by an intricate web of cultural transmission that directed challenges to the status quo from below into safe outlets.[5] In the trilogy that Genovese and his beloved wife Elizabeth Fox-Genovese composed together toward the end of their lives after both repudiated Marxism, the name "Gramsci" becomes conspicuous by its absence, although traces of Gramsci's influence on Genovese's conceptualization of the master-slave relation remain.[6]

Despite Genovese's public break with Marxism in 1994, when he pointedly asked the Left and its fellow travelers, "What did you know, and when did you know it?" about Communism's record-setting achievements in piling up corpses, he continued to credit the British Communist scholar Eric

[5]Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 25–27, 147–49, 440.

[6]Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Hobsbawm with having influenced him more than any other historian. Hobsbawm had "provided a model for those who are prepared to build upon what Marx had to offer without becoming imprisoned in formulas and dogmas."[7] In fact, Genovese had dedicated *From Rebellion to Revolution* (1979), a remarkable book that stands out as a sweeping interpretation of the changing patterns of slave resistance throughout the Western hemisphere during an age of democratic revolution, to Hobsbawm, "Our Main Man."[8] Yet, on the specific subject of paternalism, Genovese acknowledged a far greater debt to Frank Tannenbaum, one of his dissertation advisers at Columbia, whom Genovese called "the wisest man I ever met in academia." Tannenbaum had studied patron-client relations in Latin America as deeply as anyone and had written about the hacienda in ways parallel to Genovese's understanding of the plantation as a society in microcosm. No "professor or historian," Genovese said, taught him more about human relations of "superordination and subordination."[9] In 1947, Tannenbaum published *Slave and Citizen*, a pioneering comparative study of slavery in the United States and Latin America. Tannenbaum encouraged Genovese in this approach, and in 1969, Genovese coedited and contributed to what may be the first anthology ever explicitly devoted to the comparative study of slavery in the Americas, a volume Genovese dedicated to Tannenbaum.[10]

For any class of workers, Genovese stressed, slaves, peasants, serfs, or wage-earners, any order is preferable to no order at all. Like John C. Calhoun, he regarded the most resonant passage in the Declaration of Independence as a rhetorical excess and quite literally untrue. Human beings are not born free and equal but weak and dependent, in desperate need of protection and support from the get-go. For most of human history dependency on the wills of others had defined humanity itself. The antinomy between slavery and freedom became critical for Western social history, but has had far less meaning outside of it. Slavery stood at one end of a continuum of servitudes precisely because of the ignominy of the slave's lack

[7]Eugene D. Genovese, "The Question," *Dissent* 41, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 371–76; Paquette and Ferleger, *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*, 197.

[8]Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

[9]"Eugene D. Genovese and History: An Interview," in Paquette and Ferleger, *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*, 198–99.

[10]Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Slavery in the New World: A Reader in Comparative History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), esp. v.

of an independent social or legal status. The slave thereby lost the corporate identity that had conferred personhood in a web of pyramidal relations and stations. The exercise of dominion by one person over another in even the most extreme relation of bondage may have been quite intricate. Dominion carried with it not only duties and burdens but fostered reciprocal dependency, as Hegel, among others, had pointed out. Authority implies legitimacy; legitimacy requires consent; and consent cannot be obtained without recognition of the subjective self even of the lowliest slave.

The other's accommodation to superior force and the threat of violence, which always hovers in the background, implied no necessary acceptance of the relation of inequality but rather opened the possibility of incremental gains as the slave negotiated the terms of bondage with a master who by the very practice of paternalism had come to recognize the slave's humanity. This recognition implied an ethical dimension, or a moral economy, to the relation of bondage. Masters who justified their superior position based on their fitness to perform certain special services occasionally had to face slaves who might hold them to account. Although masters may have deceived themselves about what they were in fact receiving from their slaves, Genovese insisted on seeing paternalism as a two-way street, a historically specific relation of domination defined by slaves as well as by masters.

In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, a virtual encyclopedia of the quotidian reality of slave life in the antebellum South, Genovese's finest flourish comes in a section entitled "The Rock and the Church." Here he explicates the means by which slaves redeemed themselves from the social death inherent in the logic of slavery by fashioning from their master's religion a distinctive African American Christianity. If the exercise of paternalism by the master acted to divide slaves from each other by drawing them closer to the master, African American Christianity acted as a counterweight, binding slaves together in communal solidarity. Given the gross imbalance of forces, open, violent resistance to white rule was tantamount to suicide. African American Christianity served slaves in this situation as a weapon of resistance and as a vital life-affirming source of hope and dignity that counseled against rash acts and self-destructive tendencies. On the question of slave agency, Genovese offered a more sophisticated twist to the debate on the validity of the Sambo stereotype of slave docility and the related question as to whether resistance or accommodation was at the core of slave behavior. The

master-slave relation, said Genovese, could yield both "resistance in accommodation and accommodation in resistance."[11]

Genovese understood that how property rights are defined in a society affects not only the allocation and distribution of economic resources, but the allocation and distribution of social, intellectual, and psychic capital as well. Slavery amounts not merely to property but to private property in human beings. Nowhere did Genovese equate paternalism with Ole Massa's benevolence. Nowhere did he deny the profit-consciousness and market-responsiveness of the generality of Southern planters. In fact, he knew full well that market forces, specifically the rising price of slaves in the antebellum period, was one of the contributing factors to the strengthening of planter paternalism. In reviewing *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson called it a work of "masterly scholarship" "without modern peer," but found the use of paternalism as a key analytical tool to be disappointing. "Genovese makes the great mistake," according to Patterson, "of claiming that the paternalism of the South was 'unique.' This is most decidedly not the case."[12] Patterson, who was preparing an impressive global study of slavery, saw paternalism in every slave society stretching from the Old South into antiquity. In so doing, he emphasized the similarity of all slave systems, which liberally extrapolated from the family metaphor in constructing polities of their own. Thus, for Patterson, paternalism, like certain definitions of capitalism, became a kind of universal truth. Explaining everything, they explained nothing, "causally, about the dynamics of Southern US slavery."[13]

At about the same time, Patterson's colleague, Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson, in another review of the book, had a different take. Genovese's delineation of "a unique form of paternalism" in the Old South found favor with Wilson, who called *Roll, Jordan, Roll* "one of the most important books ever published about American slavery." Master and slave, Wilson recognized, embraced paternalism but defined it differently, each according to his own needs.[14] Historically specific circumstances imparted to antebellum southern paternalism, to borrow from Edmund Burke, its distinguishing color and discriminating effect, in other words, its uniqueness.

[11]Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 159–284, 598.

[12]Orlando Patterson, "The Peculiar Institution Again," *New Republic*, November 9, 1974, 37–38.

[13]Ibid., 38.

[14]William J. Wilson, "Slavery, Paternalism, and White Hegemony," *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 5 (March 1976): 1190–98.

Masters in the Old South, unlike those in the British and French Caribbean, tended to reside on their estates. The size of slaveholding units, the majority of them ten slaves or less, proved small by the standard of other major slave societies in the Americas. Creolization, the process by which the majority of the enslaved labor force became American-born and acculturated, took place before the American Revolution and thus narrowed the cultural distance between master and slave. The religious impact of the First and Second Great Awakening ameliorated slavery by reforming the relation in line with Christian precepts, in effect by creating a Christian slaveholding ethic. Abraham of the Old Testament became the model slaveholder for Southern masters in managing their "family black and white" within the plantation household. While hardly absent racial prejudice, Southern slaveholders articulated a coherent defense of slavery that transcended race. Maturation within a democratic republic of the slaveholders as a ruling class, albeit one never wholly united or free of dissonance, led in each Southern state to positive law designed to check the gross abuse of slaves by reining in the personal power of individual masters.

"Nowhere else in the hemisphere," asserted Genovese in one of his last publications before his death, "did a slaveholding class possess as much political power, internal cohesiveness, class confidence, and class consciousness."[15] Southern slaveholders viewed slavery as biblically and historically grounded. Sectional tensions erupted in 1861 into a death struggle in no small part because of profoundly differing interpretations of Scripture. No other slaveholding class more systematically developed a defense of slavery as a positive good. No other slaveholding class marshaled more impressive efforts to extend outside its boundaries a slaveholding empire in the Americas. Southern slaveholders conceded the argument that Northern free society was superior economically, but not morally superior to life in the South. Old School Calvinist precepts buttressed the system. They counseled against utopian projects and flights of fancy that tied human progress to the perfectibility of Man. Masters in an age of revolution came to see their slave society as "a bulwark against leveling tendencies and democratic excesses that threatened mankind with new forms of despotism."[16]

[15]Eugene D. Genovese and Douglas Ambrose, "Masters," in *Oxford Handbook of Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Robert L. Paquette and Mark M. Smith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 535.

[16]Ibid., 545.

The defense of states' rights came to intertwine decisively with the positive-good defense of slavery. The highly sectionalized vote in the United States House of Representatives on the antislavery amendments attached to the enabling bill for Missouri's admission to statehood in 1819 warned the South, now clearly revealed as a minority partner within the federal union, of brewing political storms. The systematic development of the Old South's proslavery argument emerged out of a need to respond to many groups, including masters, slaves, poor whites, the North, and the intelligentsia of a wider Atlantic world. In large part because of Genovese's scholarship, the very idea of antebellum Southern intelligentsia no longer seemed to modern American historians like an oxymoron. Indeed, in theology, diplomacy, political economy, and history, argued Genovese, the Old South's intelligentsia probably surpassed in quality its antebellum northern counterpart.

Genovese once told me before returning to the Catholic Church of his youth that the idea of the existence of a law without a legislator may be a creative fiction, but he found the future of modern man grim without it. At a certain moment in his adult life, while poring over the sermons of innumerable antebellum Southern ministers, he had a revelation about the modern condition. "The horrors [of Communism]," Genovese explained in answering "The Question," "did not arise from perversions of radical ideology but from the ideology itself."[17] Like James Burnham and Whittaker Chambers before him, Genovese discarded the distorting lens of Marxist ideology. By doing so, he was better able to discern the Legislator behind the Law. He died in peace.

[17]Genovese, "The Question," 375.