



The political economy of slavery;: Studies in the economy & society of the slave South

Eugene D Genovese

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These studies fall under the rubric of “the political economy of slavery,” not “the economics of slavery,” because they are concerned less with economics or even economic history as generally understood than with the economic aspect of a society in crisis. They argue that slavery gave the South a social system and a civilization with a distinct class structure, political community, economy, ideology, and a set of psychological patterns and that, as a result, the South increasingly grew away from the rest of the nation and from the rapidly developing sections of the world. That this civilization had difficulty in surviving during the nineteenth century – a bourgeois century if any deserves the name – raises only minor problems. The difficulty, from this point of view, was neither economic, nor political, nor moral, nor ideological; it was all of these, which constituted manifestations of a fundamental antagonism between modern and premodern worlds.

The premodern quality of the Southern world was imparted to it by its dominant slaveholding class. Slavery has existed in many places, side by side with other labor systems, without producing anything like the civilization of the South. Slavery gave the South a special way of life because it provided the basis for a regional social order in which the slave labor system could dominate all others. Southern slavery was not “mere slavery” – to recall Louis Hartz’s luckless term – but the foundation on which rose a powerful and remarkable social class: a class constituting only a tiny portion of the white population and yet so powerful and remarkable as to try, with more success than our neo-abolitionists care to see, to build a new, or rather to rebuild an old, civilization.

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