The Mind of the Master Class

History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview

The Mind of the Master Class tells of America’s greatest historical tragedy. It presents the slaveholders as men and women, a great many of whom were intelligent, honorable, and pious. It asks how people who were admirable in so many ways could have presided over a social system that proved itself an enormity and inflicted horrors on their slaves. The South had formidable proslavery intellectuals who participated fully in transatlantic debates and boldly challenged an ascendant capitalist (“free-labor”) society. Blending classical and Christian traditions, they forged a moral and political philosophy designed to sustain conservative principles in history, political economy, social theory, and theology while translating them into political action. Even those who judge their way of life most harshly have much to learn from the probing moral and political reflections on their times – and ours – beginning with the virtues and failings of their own society and culture.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is Eléonore Raoul Professor of the Humanities at Emory University, where she was founding director of Women’s Studies. She serves on the Governing Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities (2002–2008). In 2003 President George W. Bush honored her with a National Humanities Medal, and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars honored her with its Cardinal Wright Award. Among her books are: The Origins of Physiocracy: Economic Revolution and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century France; Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South; and Feminism without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism.


Fox-Genovese and Genovese serve on the editorial boards of a number of scholarly journals and are co-authors of Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism. In 2004 The Intercollegiate Studies Institute presented them jointly with its Gerhard Niemeyer Award for Distinguished Contributions to Scholarship in the Liberal Arts.
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*History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview*

ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE
EUGENE D. GENOVESE
For Msgr. Richard Lopez,
Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta

A token of our love and of our appreciation for the immeasurable and inexpressible difference he has made in our lives
The necessity of rejecting and destroying some things that are beautiful is the deepest curse of existence.

—George Santayana
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Preface

In writing of what Yankees call “the Civil War,” what red-blooded Southrons call “the War of Northern Aggression,” and what we prefer to call “the War for Southern Independence,” we here refer simply to “the War.” For Southerners – liberal and conservative, black and white – and for no few Northerners as well, there was, after all, only one war that really mattered. In a few cases, however, we have used “War for Southern Independence” to avoid ambiguity.

Many articles, pamphlets, and books of the period were published anonymously. Where we have identified the author, the name appears in brackets; a question mark indicates that we consider the author in brackets probable. All words in italics were emphasized in the original sources quoted. We use “sic” only in rare cases in which it seems indispensable. Thomas Jefferson, John C. Calhoun, and numerous other Southerners and Northerners often misspelled words, omitted apostrophes in possessive nouns, and lapsed from the King’s (Queen’s) English. We have retained the original punctuation – for example, dashes for commas – except in a few cases. Nineteenth-century Americans used commas freely, and we have dropped some to ensure clarity of meaning.

A few technical terms are defined as follows. Arminianism: Man’s free will and the resistibility of God’s grace. Arianism: An ancient doctrine that affirmed the second-order deity of Jesus, attributing to Jesus the Son a nature different from (and inferior to) that of the Father. Socinianism (sixteenth century): Jesus a human being with a divine mission – a moral teacher. Pelagianism: Denies the doctrine of original sin and proclaims free will; sees Jesus as a moral teacher not as God; sees humanity as intrinsically good; insists that Scripture must conform to reason and that faith is theoretical, whereas moral action is of supreme importance – men can earn salvation by leading good lives and avoiding sin.

We have used some postbellum materials as legitimate sources for the antebellum period. Personal reminiscences written after the War (as well as writings on political theory, theology, and other subjects) must be used with the utmost care, as we have done our best to do. The War compelled drastic revisions in people’s thinking, so that thoughts expressed in the 1870s were often far removed from what the authors had thought before the War. We accept postbellum views only to the
extent that they clearly represent the essentials of the author’s antebellum thought. Thus we accept much of, say, Robert Louis Dabney’s *Systematic Theology* (1871) as consistent with his long-held views.

Other materials, which some readers might expect us to have used, we have used little or not at all. Poetry enjoyed a privileged place among Southerners’ favorite genres. Men as well as women read—and wrote—large amounts of poetry, not always discriminating between the good and the bad. According to an apocryphal but nonetheless famous anecdote, John C. Calhoun forswore writing poetry when he found himself beginning a poem with, “Whereas . . . .” Not all aspiring poets were that self-critical, although most erred on the side of flowery sentiment rather than the side of political discourse. Notwithstanding the aspersions cast by hostile Northerners, who harbored their own share of amateur poets, educated Southerners recognized and admired superior poetic talent. Many were steeped in the ancient poets, in Shakespeare and Milton, and in later British and French poets, as well as in the German Romantics, the French Symbolists, and others, including such Northerners as Longfellow. Southerners may not instinctively have seen recent and contemporary poetry as a source of information. But if this explanation is plausible, it is also puzzling. For they held their own most talented poets in high regard, and those poets, notably Henry Timrod, devoted some of their most celebrated work precisely to historical and political questions. In any case, we do take some notice of the impact of Dante, Tasso, Goethe, and a few others on southern historical, philosophical, and religious thought.

Specialists may wish more detailed analyses of certain large themes, which we expect to provide in volumes now in draft. Most notably, we here discuss only briefly the southern slaveholders’ critique of capitalism (“free-labor societies”) and their projection of a world in which some form of personal servitude would be the ordinary and proper condition of all labor regardless of race. We shall in a more appropriate place treat at length the rise and development of this unique proslavery ideology—unique in that it appeared in no other modern slave society—and demonstrate its widespread acceptance by the clergy as well as secular proslavery theorists and political leaders, including leaders of the yeomanry.

In awe, we thank Jeannette Hopkins, a great editor, for her extraordinary efforts—the more extraordinary since we know she did not always enjoy our interpretations, not to mention our biases.

For helping us to collect materials and for checking references and quotations we are indebted to Laura Crawley, Mary Margaret Johnston-Miller, Christopher Luse, and John Merriman. Alex Shulman’s skills kept us sane through assorted computer problems. Peter Carmichael generously shared with us material he culled from southern college publications.

Over many years we presented papers at professional meetings and published articles the substance of which has been woven into this book. A long list of colleagues criticized those papers and helped us to hone our analyses and correct errors. We could not possibly name them all here but want them to know that their efforts have not been forgotten. A number of colleagues read late drafts of this book: Robert Calhoon, Forrest McDonald, David Moltke-Hansen, and Mark
Noll. Others read substantial sections: Thomas Burns, James Oscar Farmer, Louis A. Ferleger, William W. Frechling, Donald Kagan, David Konstan, D. G. Hart, E. Brooks Holifield, Bo Morgan, Robert L. Paquette, Paul Rahe, Jeffrey Burton Russell, and Edwin Yamauchi. We do not want to think about the messes we would be in were it not for the painstaking criticism and insights of all of these critics. We received Michael O’Brien’s learned two-volume Conjectures of Order after this book was in the hands of our publisher and thus too late to take it into account. Having learned a great deal from Dr. O’Brien’s work and from our many discussions – and friendly arguments – over the years, we are very much in his debt.

This volume enjoyed the support of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, The National Humanities Center in North Carolina, the Earhart Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. We have also benefited more richly than we can ever acknowledge from the gracious assistance of libraries and librarians throughout the South.

Abbreviations

BDC  Biographical Dictionary of the Confederacy, ed. Jon L. Wakelyn (Westport, CT, 1977)
BRPR  Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review – and other titles
DBR  De Bow’s Review
DCA  Dictionary of Christianity in America, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL, 1990)
DD  Robert Lewis Dabney, Discussions: Evangelical and Theological, ed. C. R. Vaughan, 3 vols. (Carlisle, PA, 1982); DD* indicates material from vol. 4, also based on Vaughan’s editing (Harrisonburg, VA, 1994)
DHE  A Documentary History of Education in the South before 1860, ed. Edgar W. Knight, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill, NC, 1949–51)
DHUNC  Documentary History of the University of North Carolina, ed. R. D. W. Connor et al., 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, NC, 1955)
DQR  Danville Quarterly Review
HLW  Writings of Hugh Swinton Legaré, ed. [Mary S. Legaré], 2 vols. (Charleston, SC, 1846)
HT  The Handbook of Texas, ed. Walter Prescott Webb, 3 vols. (Austin, TX, 1952–76)
JER  Journal of the Early Republic
Abbreviations

JMM Jefferson Monument Magazine
JPH Journal of Presbyterian History
JSH Journal of Southern History
LCL Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, many editions)
LSU Louisiana State University
MMQR Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review [also Methodist Quarterly Review]
QRMECS Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South
RM Russell’s Magazine
SRN The South in the Building of the Nation, ed. J. A. Chandler, 12 vols. (Richmond, VA, 1909)
SLC Southern Lady’s Companion
SLJ Southern Literary Journal
SLM Southern Literary Messenger
SPR Southern Presbyterian Review
SQR Southern Quarterly Review
SR Southern Review
SRCR Southern Repertory and College Review [Emory and Henry College]
SWMR Southern and Western Magazine and Review
UNC-NCC University of North Carolina – North Carolina Collection
UNC-SHC University of North Carolina – Southern Historical Collection
USC University of South Carolina
UVA University of Virginia
VLM Virginia Literary Museum and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, &c.
VUM Virginia University Magazine
WMQ William and Mary Quarterly