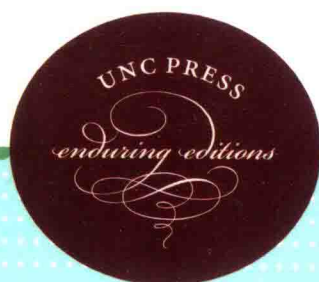


REGIONALISM AND THE
SOUTH

Selected Papers of Rupert Vance

RUPERT VANCE



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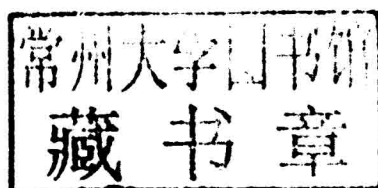
Edited with an Introduction

by John Shelton Reed and

Daniel Joseph Singal

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Acknowledgments

The idea of this book took shape while Dr. Vance was still living, and the selections from his work included here reflect in large part his own assessment of what, among his copious writings, is still of importance—although neither editor could resist adding a few of his own favorites as well. Many other people have contributed, in one way or another, to putting this book together. In particular, Dr. Vance's wife, Rheba, read the introduction and gently corrected us on a number of points. Several of Vance's former colleagues were also helpful.

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We also appreciate the assistance of two able young people, both associated with the Department of Sociology at Chapel Hill: Lynn Whitener, a graduate of that department, who prepared the bibliography and standardized the citations; and Bruce Geyer, a clerical employee, whose services went far beyond the secretarial, and well into the editorial.

We acknowledge elsewhere the cooperation of those who hold the copyrights on this material, but we wish, finally, to thank them collectively and less perfunctorily for their generous contribution to what is, inevitably, something of a memorial volume.

Introduction

Rupert Vance was born in Plummerville, Arkansas, in the closing months of the nineteenth century. He died in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, three-quarters of the way through the twentieth. For him, the South was always “home,” and in his lifetime he saw the region transformed.

Vance’s birthplace was a region still recovering from the Civil War. Its white citizens were suffering the consequences of defeat, occupation, and exploitation, and were engaged in inflicting some of the same experiences on southern blacks. In 1900, close to 90 percent of Vance’s fellow Southerners lived in the countryside, and the region’s cities—with a couple of exceptions—did not amount to much. The vast majority of Southerners were farmers and farm workers; nearly all were supported, directly or indirectly, by agriculture. They were supported, as Louis XIV once put it, the way a hanged man is supported by the rope. Southern personal income, per capita, was roughly at the level of Trinidad’s today—and was considerably less than half of that in the rest of the United States. Southerners, both black and white, were leaving the region in increasing numbers for employment, or the chance of it, elsewhere. When Vance was born, southern state legislatures were busy transforming discriminatory custom into the formidable structure of Jim Crow law, designed to fix the Negro “in his place” for eternity. Informal efforts to the same end were commonplace: blacks were being lynched at an average rate of two a week.

When Vance died, his adopted hometown had a black mayor, who was soon to take a cabinet position in the state government of North Carolina. Within a year, the Democratic party would nominate for president a former governor of Georgia, a “born-again” peanut farmer–businessman, backed by Southerners of both races and a good many non-Southerners as well. From the political left came warnings of a sinister entity called “the Sunbelt”: this region, which combined the South and Southwest, was alleged to be draining population, wealth, and influence from the old Northeast and achieving a baleful dominance in national affairs from a base of “agri-business” and extractive industry. Certainly the flow of population had reversed—more blacks and whites were moving to the South than were leaving it—and if per capita income in the South was still lower than that in the rest of the country, the gap had narrowed

substantially, and in absolute terms the great majority of Southerners led comfortable lives. Like the rest of the United States, the region had become an urban society. By 1975, less than a third of its people were rural, and fewer than one in a dozen actually worked in agriculture. For better or for worse, Atlanta had become the model of the "New South"—a hackneyed phrase popularized by an Atlantan over a century before.

Rupert Vance came to Chapel Hill in 1926 to join the Department of Sociology and the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina, both of which had been founded a few years earlier by Howard W. Odum. For the next half century, the South, its problems, and the changes taking place there occupied much of his attention. In a half-dozen books and scores of articles, in his classroom teaching and his work with graduate students, in lectures to varied audiences throughout the South and beyond, Vance applied his intellect and the tools of his discipline to the problems of his native region and, with Odum and his other colleagues, developed the intellectual apparatus of "regional sociology."

Although Vance is probably best known as a student of the South, he easily ranked among the leading sociologists of his generation not only in the South but in the nation (and, for that matter, in the world). In 1944, he was elected president of the American Sociological Society (now Association). The depth, quality, and encyclopedic range of his work set a standard for southern sociologists which has never been equaled.

The breadth of his interests was especially striking. He began by writing the definitive study of the South's cotton tenancy system, moved on to a magisterial portrait of the region from the standpoint of human geography, then to studies of its complex population problems, and finally to examinations of the process that had transformed it from an agricultural to an urban and industrial society. Along the way, he found time to compose remarkably insightful essays on the South's politics, culture, and history, as well as more general contributions to sociological and demographic theory. Unlike the work of many scholars, Vance's has never seemed dated: his masterpiece, *Human Geography of the South*, can be read with almost as much profit today as when it first appeared in 1932. His accomplishments also included over forty years of teaching and directing graduate studies at the University of North Carolina, in Chapel Hill, where he was made Kenan Professor of Sociology in 1946, and service as a consultant to innumerable government commissions and agencies and to the United Nations (on international migration).

Vance's achievement is all the more noteworthy because he worked throughout his career with a severe physical handicap. Born in 1899 in a small central Arkansas town, he contracted polio at the age of three and soon lost the use of both legs. Unable to obtain treatment or even proper diagnosis in his hometown—"It was hell to live in the backwoods then," he would later recall—he and his mother spent two years at the McLean Orthopedic Hospital in St. Louis, where he learned to walk with the aid of crutches. Although the affliction kept him from entering school until age ten, he was able to enter in the fourth grade and promptly rose to the top of the class. Thereafter his paralysis had no significant effects on either his education or his career. Colleagues would later marvel at how Vance kept up a full round of professional activities, including a busy schedule of travel to meetings and conferences. Nor did his handicap exclude him from the normal boyhood pastimes: a 1950 profile in the *Raleigh News and Observer* reported that he often served as umpire for youngsters' baseball games. "He stood on crutches behind the pitcher," it noted, "and he never reversed a decision."

Like his mentor Odum, Vance grew up in a rural community typical of the South in that day. His grandfather was a Confederate veteran; his father a New South-style cotton planter who managed his work force of sharecroppers from behind the counter of his general store. Several times, the elder Vance tried to escape the narrow confines of the cotton system by raising peaches, cantaloupes, or livestock, but each time the vicissitudes of the national market brought financial disaster. His efforts to prosper growing cotton also met repeated failure owing to the sharp fluctuations in the price of that staple. During the agricultural depression of the early 1920s, he finally went bankrupt and lost all his land. To his son this spectacle of hard work and initiative culminating in failure came to epitomize the overall plight of the South. Why, he asked himself, were capable Southerners like his father forever frustrated in their desire to improve themselves? Was something grievously wrong with the South's culture, or economy, or social system, or perhaps with the genetic makeup of its people?

His education had given him a broad background to draw upon in his search for an answer. Taught to read at age four by his mother, he soon developed an appetite for books that his family found hard to satisfy, even though they purchased Dickens, Irving, and Scott by the set. The results of this early exposure were later reflected in his own writing, which was always clear (and not just "for a sociologist") and often

elegant. He attended college at Henderson Brown, a small Methodist school in Arkadelphia, where he edited the college paper and yearbook, was president of the Young Men's Christian Association, and served as class valedictorian. Although he majored in English, his first love, he also encountered a gifted teacher named B. S. Foster who introduced him to social science. Intrigued by the new field, he accepted a scholarship to Vanderbilt to study for a master's degree in economics. His studies there with Augustus Dyer, a stodgy and resolute exponent of classical laissez-faire, left him with little taste for economics unleavened by sociological analysis. He found the double-distilled southern progressivism of Edward Mims (later to write *The Advancing South*) more attractive, though, and he was exposed to such fellow students as Ralph McGill (about whom he was later to tell some hilarious stories) and some young literati who were later to number among the Nashville "Agrarians."

After Vanderbilt, still unsure of his choice of profession and unwilling to enter law school (as his father advised), Vance entered a period of apparent drift, but one in which his social views were in actuality maturing rapidly. He took a job for two years as principal of a small Oklahoma high school, then taught English for three years at South Georgia College in McRae.

Vance later attributed much importance to his time in McRae. His social views were developing, he recognized, in a liberal direction, and while they had been fairly unremarkable in the Southwest and at Vanderbilt, they were enough out of place in South Georgia that his colleagues sometimes accused him of being a disguised Yankee. (This experience almost certainly had something to do with his life-long interest in sub-regional differences, an interest he turned to good account in his *Human Geography of the South*.)

All the while, he was avidly reading many books and periodicals, especially H. L. Mencken's iconoclastic *American Mercury*. (Until he met Mencken, Vance said, he had always assumed that the man ate little children for breakfast.) It was during this period that he also discovered Howard Odum's *Journal of Social Forces*, with its hard-hitting editorials cataloging the South's ills and proposing programs of action to meet them. This kind of *engagée* academic sociology appealed to Vance because it provided a way both to implement his commitment to reform and to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. And, after considering Columbia University and Chicago, he chose Chapel Hill as the place to do his graduate work, primarily because of the chance to work with Odum.

A young and energetic southern-born sociologist, Odum had come to Chapel Hill in 1920 to found an academic empire. He came as first director of the university's School of Public Welfare and as chairman of its new sociology department (the only one in the South). Two years later he began the *Journal of Social Forces*, with himself as editor, and in 1924, with support from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, launched the Institute for Research in Social Science. His two basic goals were closely related: he wished to promote the scientific study of southern society so that people in the region could begin tackling their immense problems in constructive ways, and he hoped to provide an opportunity for talented Southerners to train in the new social science disciplines unhampered by financial cares or constraints on their freedom of inquiry. To those ends the institute offered fellowships to promising graduate students willing to investigate aspects of southern life. The stipends were high and the length of tenure was open, and there was no obligation to teach. Vance was one of the first to take advantage of these attractive terms, and so began an extraordinary association that was to last until Odum's death nearly thirty years later.

Odum was in his early forties when Vance came to Chapel Hill at age twenty-seven, and from the start relations between the two men were warm and mutually admiring. Keenly aware of Odum's sensitivities, Vance always maintained the humble role of student, of the loyal disciple both grateful to and slightly in awe of his master. And there was much to be grateful for. Odum provided Vance not only with institutional support and personal encouragement but, just as importantly, with the drive to theorize and generalize which would ultimately raise Vance's work well above simple description. In addition, Odum reinforced Vance's sense of mission about the South—an unapologetic assumption that something must be done about the problems they were studying. Vance always acknowledged his intellectual debt to Odum: one of his last published articles was, in effect, an act of homage to his mentor, an attempt to rescue one of Odum's concepts from what Vance thought was undeserved neglect. For his part, Vance contributed as much as anyone to realizing Odum's vision of Chapel Hill as a center of regional scholarship and what is nowadays called "policy research." In both volume and quality, his publications helped put North Carolina on the national academic map.

Yet Vance proved to be different in many ways, both temperamentally and intellectually, from his master. Odum's training had been in the

organicist brand of sociology which was dominant before World War I. As a result, he tended to view the ideal society as a seamless web in which all groups and social institutions functioned harmoniously with one another. Odum regarded any sign of conflict as aberrational and potentially dangerous; political conflict as the worst. Thus, his ideology of "regionalism" included a blueprint for southern society in which consensus was so strong that the projects of academic social planners and the desires of the common folk would be instantly, automatically reconciled. More solidly grounded in the newer developments in social science, Vance had no such illusions. For him, conflict was at least a given, if not a positive good, as evidenced by a memorandum he wrote to Odum after reading the manuscript of Odum's *American Regionalism*:

I believe I must be wanting a more hard-boiled view of social conflict. Conflict we will always have with us. How does Regionalism take [sectional conflict] out of the realm of hard knocks and place it in the realm of discussion and reasonable "due process" of policy-making? And what about class conflict? . . . Maybe it comes down to this, that we can't take a point of view without taking sides. Still I have the feeling that we need to be sure of the alternatives, if necessary to argue one side and then the other, show the interest involved.

Vance's graduate school paper on "Stuart-Harmon" (a thinly disguised picture of McRae, Georgia) contains a forthright treatment of class, racial, and generational conflict, and his dissertation, while it makes a scapegoat of no one, nevertheless recognizes that tenant and landlord necessarily have some divergent interests.

Vance's fascination with southern politics, a subject not for those squeamish about conflict and one that Odum largely ignored in his own work, led him to undertake a series of articles on populist-style southern politicians, beginning with a sketch of Jeff Davis of Arkansas, "A Karl Marx for Hill Billies," published in *Social Forces* in 1930. This article, perhaps more than any other, shows Mencken's influence. Vance was not the only reform-minded young Southerner to read the *American Mercury*: as Fred C. Hobson, Jr., has pointed out, Mencken was something of a hero to many. Having flayed the South in his famous essay "Sahara of the Bozart," Mencken was encouraging those Southerners who were trying to remedy the situation that he had (exaggeratedly) diagnosed, and he published works by many of them in his magazine. His relations with

Odum and his students were warm and supportive, and Vance admitted in later years that his piece on Jeff Davis was written with the *American Mercury* in mind. Still, it appeared in Odum's journal, not Mencken's.

Vance also differed from Odum in the style and approach of his writings. What someone once said of Kant could be said as well of Odum: he was both like and unlike Jehovah—he spoke through a cloud, but without the illumination of the thunderbolt. Vance's work, on the other hand, was always lucid and well organized, proceeding through clear-cut logical analysis to an identifiable conclusion. In some ways, Vance served as an interpreter for Odum, clarifying and substantiating the latter's ideas on regionalism, making them comprehensible to readers who could not pin Odum down in person for an explanation. On at least one occasion, Vance even tried valiantly to repair Odum's prose, after plowing through the draft of a 1938 book:

My first impression [wrote the former English teacher] was that the materials were undigested and the manuscript was rather hastily done. [For example,] I look for a resolution, a point of view or a summary at the end of many chapters, and I find sometimes an abrupt conclusion and sometimes a quotation. . . . I would like to see [in] the manuscript the emergence of what might be called a point of view. Some of the most original and challenging of your ideas are stated as assumptions rather than emerging from the discussions as conclusions. Again, I see certain slants that are taken without being explicitly defined or argued.

This memorandum (which goes on) tells us something of the nature of the relationship between the two men. So may the fact that Odum apparently left the manuscript unedited.

These contrasts between the two were apparent in Vance's *Human Factors in Cotton Culture*, a revised version of his doctoral dissertation, published in 1929. Whereas Odum's writing on the South tended to be upbeat and optimistic, Vance's portrait of how Southerners were trapped by what he called "the cotton culture complex" was strongly pessimistic. Ever mindful of his father's experience, he stressed the ruinous unpredictability of the system, emphasizing how the cycles of the cotton market or the vagaries of the weather could destroy men's livelihoods virtually overnight and lead them to irrational behavior. He employed statistics and graphic literary detail to depict the lives of ordinary tenant farmers, again drawing on his personal recollections, and presented anything but

a pretty picture. The resulting book was, as one reviewer aptly put it, "a rare combination of sound economics and human interest."

The book eschewed easy solutions. Far from holding out hope for reform, Vance concluded that the dependence on King Cotton led to a "vicious circle" almost impossible to break, a system whose participants "form an economic harmony that often benefits all except the producer, a complex whole that is so closely interconnected that no one can suggest any place at which it may be attacked except the grower; and the grower is to change the system himself, cold comfort for advice." The book introduced a needed note of sober realism to subsequent discussions of the South's problems in the 1930s.

Still, in *Human Factors*, Vance did not really answer his basic causal question of what had gone wrong in the South; that answer came in his *Human Geography of the South*, which appeared in 1932. This massive work, with a bibliography long enough to boggle the mind of even the most compulsive scholar, surely belongs among the classics of American social science. Borrowing techniques from the French school of human geographers and from the new science of ecology, Vance tried to see if some natural factor—some inescapable attribute of the physical environment—could account for the ills of southern life. Methodically, he reviewed the region's physical features as they had interacted with its social development, only to conclude that all, from topography and soil content to water supplies, had been sufficient for prosperity. An especially provocative chapter on the southern climate showed that, if anything, the region's weather should have given it a clear advantage over the North in industrial production. Chapters on the supposed biological inferiority of the southern people demonstrated that what many observers had described as "laziness" could more accurately be attributed to inadequate diets and parasitic diseases like hookworm and malaria. The South's plight was not the fault of nature, then, but was in fact man-made. Natural forces may have played a role, but in the end, Vance insisted, "history, not geography, made the solid South."

More precisely, according to Vance, history had left southern society arrested in the frontier stage. Adapting his thesis from the work of the historian Ulrich B. Phillips—whose influence on Vance was second only to that of Odum—he maintained that the social and economic patterns of the South had been shaped essentially by the plantation, a frontier institution which produced cotton by almost literally mining the soil. During the nineteenth century, the rest of the country shed its colonial

status as an exporter of raw materials to become an industrial society. Because of its dependence on the plantation system and, later, the devastation of the Civil War, the South failed to keep pace. The region never built up a capital supply of its own and remained backward in technology and industrial skills. The result, Vance argued, was a "colonial economy," frantically exploiting its natural resources to pay for manufactured goods produced elsewhere. The North (he quickly added) was not to blame; rather, the tragic course of southern history had condemned the region to its poverty and dependence. To escape this fate, Vance believed, Southerners would have to strive consciously for urbanization and industrialization, and for a more diversified agricultural system that was less dependent on staple crops. More cautiously than Odum, he endorsed regional planning as the quickest and most efficient route to a mature economy, but he characteristically pointed out that any such program would have to take into account the entrenched folkways of a people still under the sway of the plantation mentality.

The publication of *Human Geography of the South* cemented Vance's reputation as a leading figure in sociology. Invitations began pouring in for him to serve as consultant on various projects, both scholarly and governmental, and Vance was usually quick to take them up. He actively lobbied for passage of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Bill and, after its enactment in 1938, frequently acted as advisor to the Farm Security Administration, which was created by the new law. In addition, he was among the founders of the Southern Sociological Society in 1935 and became its third president in 1938. His most important contribution to the organization, he liked to recall afterward, was seeing to it that the society met from the start only in hotels where its black members could attend all functions, including formal dinners. Finding such facilities in the South of the 1930s was not always easy, but Vance and others persisted in this policy, with the result that some other professional associations then getting under way in the region followed suit.

At the same time, Vance was becoming increasingly interested in the fledgling field of social demography. In 1938 he published a *Research Memorandum on Population Redistribution within the United States*, for the Social Science Research Council, attempting to set forth an agenda for research in an area whose importance was just beginning to be recognized by sociologists generally.

In fact, by the mid-1930s, Vance had begun to view population as an alternative explanation of the South's dilemma. The solid, scientific feel

of demographic theory strongly appealed to him; it was hard to argue against numbers. More important, as Vance was to demonstrate in *All These People: The Nation's Human Resources in the South* (his next major study, published in 1945), there could be no question that the South since the Civil War had been dramatically overproducing people. Again the fault seemed to lie with the system of staple crop agriculture, which encouraged families to have as many children as possible in order to have hands available for field labor. But, as Vance showed, whatever the short-run advantages for individual families, this system led to long-run disadvantages for the region and nation, since the huge reservoir of underemployed workers which resulted kept wages in the South at a bare subsistence level. Here, Vance thought, was the root cause of southern poverty. His solution once more was an industrialized and urbanized society, arrived at through planning, precisely because urban life and higher living standards would of themselves help to lower the birth rate and thus to solve the South's population problem. He had only limited faith, however, that such planning would actually come about. More realistically, as early as his 1936 article "The Old Cotton Belt," Vance foresaw the process in which the South would export its surplus population to the urban slums of the North, with tragic consequences for the country as a whole.

Vance continued his interest in demography, becoming president of the Population Association of America in 1952, but in the latter part of his career he focused his attention primarily on the subject of urbanization itself. In a 1955 article he claimed, accurately as it turned out, that a major "breakthrough" had taken place in the South around the middle of the preceding decade: the cities rather than the countryside had finally come to dominate the society. For Vance, the main significance of this development was its meaning for the South's relationship to the rest of the nation. As he observed in *The Urban South*, a symposium he edited at this time with a Chapel Hill colleague, Nicholas Demerath, the South in one critical area after another was finally catching up with the other regions. The indices of southern deficiency which he and Odum had charted for years were at last disappearing. Put another way, the circumstances that had prevented members of his father's generation from succeeding, despite their best efforts, appeared to be past.

Although this view was correct as far as it went, it clearly failed to take into account the other major change that was occurring in southern life during these years: namely, the civil rights movement, which in 1954 and

1955 saw both the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery bus boycott. Vance may well have hesitated to “trespass” in an area he regarded as the domain of his friend and colleague Guy Johnson, but in any case, despite his own liberal racial views, the changing structure of southern race relations simply did not receive the attention in his published work that, in retrospect, it clearly deserves in any account of the South’s modernization.

Another difficulty the contemporary reader may find in Vance’s work is the concept of regionalism itself. To a greater extent than is usually recognized, Vance was as much the father of regional sociology as was Odum. Indeed, Vance’s explorations in human geography, his charting of subregions and resources, led directly to Odum’s *pointilliste* portrait of the South in *Southern Regions*, an imposing study published in 1936. Vance was always far more conversant with modern social theory than was his mentor, and the gap between that theory and regionalism troubled him. To the charge that regionalists were engaged in “mere description” of particular locales rather than in the attempt to build a general science of society, Vance replied that description was a necessary preliminary operation: “The truth in the statement I do not find too disturbing provided one can go from description to generalization by good empirical methods. There are certainly sufficient regions and sufficient societies to offer basis for valid generalization.” To the accusation that regionalists in attempting to understand a region by dabbling in history, geography, and economics were doing everything *but* sociology, Vance replied ruefully: “I have sometimes said that it must be fun to be a dilettante, but dilettantes are not supposed to work very hard.” He added: “Regionalism focuses many disciplines on the one area under study, and anyone who follows this line takes a calculated risk that leads to trespassing on other people’s preserves.”

Nevertheless, he acknowledged (in a 1948 letter) that “all of these things [his extrasociological interests] have enabled me to examine one region from different facets, but they have not brought me much closer to the core and essence of sociology.” This lack of connection still troubled him over a decade later. In 1960, he was writing that “regional sociology has been much better at taking in other people’s washing, relating its contributions to those of geography, economics, political science, and so forth than it has been in relating regionalism to its own domain, that of general sociology.”

This uneasiness may have been aggravated by the postwar develop-