

CARL N. DEGLER

PLACE OVER TIME

*The Continuity of
Southern Distinctiveness*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

THE IMMEDIATE origin of this little book was an invitation from the Department of History at Louisiana State University to deliver the Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in 1976. The deeper origins, however, are my long-held, twin interests in teaching and writing the history of the South. Although I was born and reared in New Jersey—northern New Jersey, to boot—I have been fascinated for almost as long as I can remember with the South. As someone once remarked to me, anyone born and reared in New Jersey, with its limited sense of identity and of place, might well develop a consuming interest in the South—where roots, place, family, and tradition are the essence of identity. Indeed, simply because I see that sense of locale and feeling persisting through the South's history I have called this book *Place Over Time*.

The subject of the book is that of the lectures I gave at Baton Rouge in April, 1976, but thanks to the gracious generosity of Louisiana State University Press, I have been able to expand the presentation in print. What appears here as Chapter III was not included in the lectures, because of the limitations of time in oral presentation. Yet from the beginning that material was an integral part of my overall subject,

for the purpose behind the lectures as behind this book has been to deal with two large questions of southern history.

My first objective was to examine the connection between the South's present and its past. As I explain in more detail in the opening chapter, that connection has been a bone of contention among students of southern history. Some, like Wilbur J. Cash, maintain that the South's history runs in an essentially unbroken line from the antebellum days to the second half of the twentieth century. Others, like C. Vann Woodward, assert that the history of the region has been discontinuous, disrupted from time to time by such portentous happenings as emancipation, the Civil War, the Populist movement. My response to this contention runs throughout the four chapters and is distilled in the title.

My second goal was more complex. I have attempted to understand the nature of southern difference from the rest of the nation, yesterday and today. Recently it has become fashionable to argue that the South's admitted historic difference from the rest of the United States is now over, that the modern South has lost its distinctiveness. Contrary to that view, I conclude not only that the South is still distinctive but also that the origins of that distinctiveness can be traced back to the years of slavery and the plantation. It is the persistence into the second half of the twentieth century of the social and psychological characteristics that first appeared in the antebellum years which convinces me that southern history has indeed been continuous and without serious interruption.

In the course of developing this argument I perforce take issue with Eugene Genovese's interpretation of the antebellum South. Professor Genovese has contended that the profound impact of slavery upon the region made the antebellum South develop a world view radically different from that of the remainder of the United States. As I try to show, that in-

terpretation seriously obscures the underlying similarity between antebellum southerners and other Americans, thus preventing us from recognizing the limits of southern distinctiveness.

Traditionally, southerners do not take easily to the dissection of their society and culture by outsiders, especially those who come from the North. Yet it is a measure of the South's self-criticism that many of the Fleming lecturers have been northerners. And certainly my own effort at analyzing what David Potter once called "the enigma of the South" was received with a critical attention that is the highest compliment that can be paid anyone's ideas. It is my pleasure here to thank the Department of History at Louisiana State University not only for providing me with the opportunity to put my ideas down on paper, but also for the cordial hospitality extended to my wife and me upon our visit there. Professor John Loos, chairman of the department, and Professor T. Harry Williams made sure that we saw, heard, and tasted—in the time at our disposal—what was memorable in Baton Rouge and its environs. The university, then in the midst of a delightfully balmy spring, provided a warm and attractive setting for our visit, which we shall recollect in tranquillity for years to come.

I wish also to thank Lewis Simpson, editor of the *Southern Review*, for publishing in his distinguished journal a portion of what appears here as Chapter II. My thanks go, too, to Jonathan Wiener, of the University of California at Irvine, and Barton Bernstein and Douglas Gamble, of Stanford University, who gave me the benefit of their critical readings of Chapter III; as a result, that chapter is sounder than it otherwise would have been. The anonymous reader of the manuscript for LSU Press has also earned my gratitude for his (or her) suggestions for improvements. I am also indebted to Beverly Jarrett, the

managing editor of LSU Press, for her excellent, expeditious, and understanding editing of my prose; and readers ought to be, too. Of course, those weaknesses and errors that inevitably remain in these pages are to be charged against me alone.

Finally, it is only proper to acknowledge the help of literally dozens, perhaps hundreds of scholars in southern history whose researches I have relied upon for my evidence and ideas. Without that body of work this book could not be. In the interest of keeping the footnotes to a minimum I have not always identified the sources of my information with a full citation when a textual reference would serve that purpose. Since books referred to in the text by author can easily be located, I have not cited those in the footnotes except to provide my source for a direct quotation. As usual, I am also indebted to the Institute of American History at Stanford University for providing funds for typing costs.

C.N.D.

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I The Distinctive South

AT ONE TIME in writing the series of lectures from which this book derives, I entitled them “The Course of the South to Distinctiveness,” in remembrance of a famous title of an essay by Ulrich B. Phillips. The resemblance between the two titles was certainly appropriate, for the distinctiveness of the South today, as in the past, is undoubtedly related to its having followed a course to secession. Indeed, that act of withdrawal from the United States may well be taken as the high point of southern distinctiveness. It was then that the South, or at least a large portion of the region, sought to realize itself as a separate national entity.

Even today, more than a century after that strike for independence, the South is a region set apart from the nation. Few Americans deny its historical distinctiveness. Howard Zinn in his book *Southern Mystique*, published over a decade ago, stands out as one of those few who minimized differences between the South and the rest of the nation. His argument was that those characteristics that are taken as southern, like racism, violence, nativism, and sexism, are simply American characteristics writ larger. Few other observers, however, have chosen to take Zinn’s path. The more common argument against the distinctiveness of the South has been one that actually admits it while denying it. I am thinking of those writ-

ers on the southern character who see the South being swallowed up in a rush to join the nation or being overwhelmed by modern technology and industrialization. John Egerton's *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, which appeared in 1974, sums up the point not only in the title, but also in the preface, where the author says "that for good and ill, the South is just about over as a separate and distinct place."¹ Over fifteen years earlier C. Vann Woodward made the same point with his metaphor of the "Bulldozer Revolution" in the South. By implication, of course, that approach assumes that until recently, at least, the South has been a distinctive region. Even when phrased in these qualified or historical terms, the denial of southern distinctiveness today is not entirely convincing. For not only was Woodward's observation made over fifteen years ago, only to be made again by Egerton, but almost twenty years ago, Harry Ashmore published *An Epitaph for Dixie*. In short, experience warns us that those who would bury the distinctive South, either by writing an epitaph or by saying *Farewell to the South*, as Robert Coles has recently done, may well find themselves in the position of those who prematurely announced the death of the most famous southern novelist.

The prevailing view today about the distinctiveness of the South was best expressed by V. O. Key, the distinguished analyst of modern southern politics who described the South in 1949 as "the region with the most distinctive character and tradition."² No, it is not the assertion that the South is distinctive within the nation that is at issue; rather it is the degree

1. John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), xxi.

2. V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), ix.

and the persistence of that difference. The reason I dropped the title adapted from Phillips' essay is that I want to emphasize that my purpose in discussing distinctiveness is to demonstrate the essential continuity of southern history. Thus there are two questions to be examined: how distinctive is the South and to what extent was there continuity in the history of the region? Historians have divided on both questions. Let me begin to examine the question of the degree of southern distinctiveness, and after that we can turn to the issue of continuity, which, as we shall see, is closely related to the question of distinctiveness.

In the writings of southern historian Francis B. Simkins there is no doubt that the South was different from the rest of the nation, both in the past and in the present. His *The Everlasting South* proclaimed the idea in its title and in its text. Although many modern writers have contended in recent years, Simkins complained, that the South had long ceased to be different, the facts are quite otherwise. "There is no reason," he wrote in 1963, "to discard Stark Young's contention that 'the changing South is still the South'. Indeed, it can be argued that the region, despite many changes, is as much different from the rest of the United States today as it was in 1860."³

Simkins' conception of the distinctiveness of the South is considerably more pronounced than that of other historians. David M. Potter, for example, would not "deny that there was distinctiveness in the Southern culture," but he could not see that culture as so distinctive as to account for an historical event like the coming of the Civil War. "Southern conservatism, Southern hierarchy, the cult of chivalry, the un-

3. Francis B. Simkins, *The Everlasting South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), xii.

machined civilization, the folk society, the rural character of the life, the clan values rather than the commercial values—all had a deep significant distinctiveness,” he admitted. Yet “this is not quite the same as separateness, and the efforts of historians to buttress their claim that the South had a wholly separate culture, self-consciously asserting itself as a cultural counterpart of political nationalism, have led, on the whole, to paltry results,” he concluded.⁴

Still other historians have gone even farther in minimizing the differences between North and South. Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., in *The Southerner as American* and Grady McWhiney in *Southerners and Other Americans* stress the similarities in southern and American cultures. McWhiney, for example, concludes that “the evidence indicates that differences between races and sections were no more pronounced than similarities.” Indeed, he calls the idea “that when the Civil War began Southerners were fundamentally different from Northerners . . . one of the great myths of American history. . . . Writers, intent upon showing the Civil War era’s conflicts and controversies, have tended to magnify the differences between Northerners and Southerners out of all proportion,” he argued. “In 1861 the United States did not contain, as some people have suggested, two civilizations.”⁵

All of the historians who minimize the differences freely admit a divergence between the South and the non-South on an issue like slavery. But they tend to see slavery as an anomaly, a burden that southern whites struggled under, if not always against. Sellers, for instance, calls his own chapter in

4. David M. Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 68–69.

5. Grady McWhiney, *Southerners and Other Americans* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 3–4.

The Southerner as American "The Travail of Slavery." His argument is that southerners were deeply ambivalent, even guilt-ridden about slavery simply because they were Americans, too. Even Kenneth M. Stampp, the historian of slavery, has set forth a version of this view in an essay entitled "The Southern Road to Appomattox," the substance of which is that the South breathed a collective sigh of relief when slavery was ended by northern fiat.⁶ To Stampp, slavery was a burden the South took on early in its history and was even prepared to fight to preserve, but it was far from unhappy that the institution disappeared in the holocaust of war. An implication that can be drawn from his essay is that the cultural differences between South and North were limited before the war and were, thus, considerably reduced thereafter.

Quite the opposite emphasis is seen in the work of Eugene Genovese, who considers the culture of the antebellum South so different from the North's that he talks of a divergence in world views or in fundamental values. C. Vann Woodward, too, has advanced this conception of the differences between North and South before the Civil War. His summation of the nature of the antebellum South depicts it as a "great slave society, by far the largest and richest of those that had existed in the New World since the sixteenth century, [which] had grown up and miraculously flourished in the heart of a thoroughly bourgeois and partly puritanical republic. It had renounced its bourgeois origins and elaborated and painfully rationalized its institutional, legal, metaphysical, and religious defenses. It had produced leaders of skill, ingenuity, and strength who, unlike those of other slave societies, invested their honor and their lives, and not merely part of their

6. Kenneth M. Stampp, "The Southern Road to Appomattox," *Cotton Memorial Papers*, No. 4 (February, 1969), University of Texas at El Paso.

capital, in that society. When the crisis came, they, unlike the others, chose to fight. It proved to be the death struggle of a society, which went down in ruins.”⁷

Genovese, unlike Woodward, has not written about the years after the Civil War, but it is clear from his and from Woodward’s conception of the society of the antebellum South that to them the war was a discontinuity in the history of the South. Indeed, Woodward has been quite explicit in setting forth his belief that the discontinuity in southern history is in marked contrast with the continuity of American history in general. It is discontinuity, Woodward contends, that “helps to account for the distinctiveness of the South and its history.”⁸ More recently he described the South as “long unique among the regions of the nation for abrupt and drastic breaks in the continuity of its history.”⁹ Southern historian Paul Gaston has also emphasized the sharp line between the Old South and the New. He accuses W. J. Cash of “misjudging the significance of key elements in the Southern experience; the Old-New South dichotomy which he minimizes is in fact a crucial one with which every search for the ‘central theme’ of Southern history must come to terms at one point or another.”¹⁰ It is true that W. J. Cash minimizes the discontinuities. In his evocative book *The Mind of the South* he makes quite explicit his conception of the southern past. “The extent of the change and the break between the Old South that was and the South of our time has been vastly exaggerated,” he writes. “The South, one might say, is a tree with many age

7. C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1971), 281.

8. *Ibid.*, 275.

9. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Rev. ed.; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), vii.

10. Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 11–12.

rings, with its limbs and trunks bent and twisted by all the winds of the years, but with its tap root in the Old South.”¹¹

My intention in this book is to demonstrate the continuity in southern history that has been either explicitly or implicitly denied by recent historians of the South like Woodward, Genovese, and Gaston. I propose to demonstrate that the modern distinctiveness of the South has its origins in the remote past, my assumption being that a South which is distinctive in the same ways over an extended period of time is a South whose history is without serious discontinuities. I recognize that in doing this I run the danger of constructing a monolithic South, a region without internal differences, a people without diversity—a South, in sum, that never was. But since I have elsewhere written at book-length about *The Other South*, I believe I can be excused if here I dwell upon the undoubted reality of *The South*. Let it simply be understood in the pages that follow that underneath and behind all of the generalizations and assertions of southern identity, the diversity that is also a part of the South is taken for granted, not ignored or denied.

To establish the continuity of the South's history we must first look at the nature of southern distinctiveness today; then we can turn to exploring the roots. There is, of course, a large literature on southern identity, but I will neither resurrect nor dissect it here. The fact of the South's identity is not as difficult as the worried literature on the subject makes out. Obviously, what the South is has both subjective and objective components. I intend to deal with both, but principally with the objective aspects that mark the South as a distinctive region. My approach to the question of southern identity is simple. Central to my definition of the South is that if there is

11. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), x.

a South then the people who live there should recognize their kinship with one another and, by the same token, those who live outside the South ought to recognize that southerners are somehow different from them. That is the subjective part of the approach I will follow. The objective part is that if there is in fact a South that exists outside the subjective images in the heads of Americans, it ought to be objectively discernible.

Let me look first, and briefly, at the subjective and self-conscious identification of the South. In 1957 the Gallup Poll asked a number of people spread across some forty states three questions: "Do you like Southern food"; "Do you like the Southern accent"; and "Do you like Southern girls?" The highest possible score was three, that is, a "yes" answer to all three questions. Those surveyed states that are generally denominated southern—the eleven states of the former Confederacy plus Kentucky and Maryland—had a mean score of 2.03. (Over 70 percent of the people queried answered "yes" to two or three of the questions.) The nonsouthern states' mean score was 1.03. (Only 29 percent answered two or three questions affirmatively.) In fact, no state outside those thirteen reached a score as high as 1.5; and only Washington, Arizona, New Mexico, West Virginia, and Missouri scored as high as 1.3.¹² And both West Virginia and Missouri had at one time been slave states.

This preference test does more than simply identify the states of the South. It suggests that there is not only a South, but a South that is subjectively recognized by insiders and outsiders alike. One of the identifying elements of a minority or ethnic group is a sense of difference from others that is internalized, as well as evident in comparisons with those

12. John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1972), 10–26 discusses the various measures of southern identity referred to on this page and the next.

outside the group. John Shelton Reed, a young southern sociologist, has recently tried to measure the strength of that sense of group cohesion or identification. When he asked a number of people whether they had an interest in, or sympathy for, a series of different social groups, he found that white southerners had higher indices of identification with their region than labor union members or Roman Catholics had with their organizations. (White southerners, on the other hand, had less sense of identification than did black southerners or Jews.) Even more striking is the finding of another attitudinal survey reported by Reed—that southerners and northerners viewed themselves as less alike than male and female persons, rural and urban people, and immigrants and natives. In the light of this sense of difference, it is not strange that Lewis Killian, in his book *White Southerners*, treats southerners as an ethnic group. Something of the source of that sense of difference, as well a measure of it, is revealed in a personal anecdote Killian told his editor. When Georgia-born Killian first went to the University of Massachusetts to teach, the editor writes, “he moved through a reception line of new faculty. Ahead of him were several Europeans. Despite thick accents, they were greeted without comment. When he got to the head of the line and introduced himself [in his Georgia drawl], he was asked if he longed for home. At that point, he reports, he did.”¹³

Surveys of attitudes and personal testimony do not tell us much about the content or sources of this sense of difference or about the reasons for group cohesion. Another survey by John Shelton Reed of forty-seven white southern college students in 1970, however, offers a clue to both the nature and the origins. The students were asked to list adjectives that de-

13. Lewis Killian, *White Southerners* (New York: Random House, 1970), x.