

The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861

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Review

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Wells, Jonathan Daniel *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861*. University of North Carolina Press, \$59.95, \$22.50 ISBN 0807828823, hardcover; 0807855537, softcover

Dixie's bourgeois

Social similarity of North and South

In **The Origins of the Southern Middle Class**, historian Jonathan Daniel Wells sets out, as his title accurately states, to find the origins of a Southern middle class that many other historians have located in the post-Civil War era. Wells argues that the Southern middle class of professionals, industrialists, entrepreneurs, clerks and commercial men that gained prominence after the Civil War were continuing behaviors, activities, and ways of thinking that began in the antebellum years. In fact, Wells argues that this group of people, by the 1850s, constituted a self-conscious class--a middle class--that clearly distinguished its own interests from those of the planter class on one hand and a white working class on the other. Wells's study makes an admirable contribution to recent works that have begun to seriously explore Southern urban bourgeois culture as a significant part of Southern antebellum life.

Wells divides his work into three sections. The first section is devoted to describing cultural interaction between middle-class Southerners and middle-class Northerners. According to Wells, these cross-sectional interactions were essential to the formation of the Southern middle class and its ideology. Members of the nascent Southern middle class, he argues, greatly admired Northern civilization, culture, and economic progress. Many even had northern origins themselves. Middle-class Southerners and Northerners traveled frequently between the sections, exchanging ideas on both economic and social issues. Middle-class Southerners also learned about the North and Northern ideas by subscribing to periodicals published in Northern cities. Wells finds that they read more Northern periodicals than Southern ones, and he states on page 42, the

ideas southerners read about in works published in the North would affect dramatically the evolution of class ideology. These periodicals, Wells argues, helped to create a national middle-class culture to which Southerners as well as Northerners ascribed. Middle-class Southerners took the intellectual and social culture of Northern periodical authors, adapted them to include slavery, and used them as the basis of Southern middle-class ideology.

In Part Two, Wells explores some of the key issues and cultural beliefs that laid a foundation for a new middle-class consciousness in the South. He argues that the Southern middle class coalesced around core values and attitudes, such as support for internal improvements, urban growth, middle-class domesticity and gender roles, public education, and cultural institutions such as libraries and lyceums. Middle-class Southern reformers, as Wells states on page 68, declared their intention to remake southern society with all of the tangible signs of progress, many of which they drew from Northern culture and society. In the process, they became convinced that their ideas of social and economic progress differed from those of both the planter class and lower-class whites. This conviction led many to begin actively distinguishing themselves culturally, as a class, from those other portions of white Southern society. Moreover, a middle-class culture in the South, Wells argues, was able to form even before the appearance of large manufacturing industries, because connections with the North had already begun to spread a middle-class ideology into the South.

In the third section, Wells turns his attention to the 1850s when the middle class of the South really began to emerge as a major force in Southern society and in politics, at least for a time, through the Whig party. Especially in urban areas, the Whigs promoted a political agenda that encompassed many middle-class aims, including internal improvements, temperance, public education, and support for commercial interests. Wells argues that postwar reformers who sought to create a new South were in fact building on the very ideas that prewar middle-class Southerners promoted. The reason the antebellum reformers did not succeed was their failure to dominate politics.

During the 1850s, a middle-class consciousness became further defined around the issue of slavery. Although many middle-class Southerners had not supported slavery early in the nineteenth century, by the 1850s most had come to the conclusion that using slave labor in manufacturing and industrial enterprises was the key to the South's economic progress. In doing so, they came into conflict with growing numbers of white urban workers, who protested the use of

slave labor as a possible threat to their jobs, wages, and their ability to bargain collectively. This debate over the use of slave labor in industrial pursuits helped the middle class achieve a more cohesive class ideology by clearly distinguishing them from working-class whites.

In his last chapter, Wells relates why the formation of a Southern middle class contributed to the coming of the Civil War. Although the causes of the Civil War were varied and complex, Wells proposes that the prospect of a modernizing, industrial South (that the middle class actively promoted) threatened free labor in the North. If the South could, with slave labor, build a productive industrial sector, they could become a significant economic competitor of the North. Additionally, middle-class Southerners supported the expansion of industrial slave labor into the West, where free labor was less well-established. The debate over slavery thus drove a wedge between middle-class Southerners and middle-class Northerners who otherwise held so much in common.

Wells's study, as the author himself admits, is ambitiously broad, and many questions the book raises will require further scholarship, especially on a more localized level. Among these are several points that could use further explanation and clarification. Wells's concentration on the shared culture between middle-class Northerners and Southerners is argued elegantly and well. It does, however, seem to indicate that middle-class Southerners simply copied Northern ideas, behaviors, and goals, with the exception of attitudes towards slavery. Many of the same forces that shaped Northern culture, though, such as evangelical religion, were also prominent in the South. Southern evangelicals often led the way in reforms such as temperance and expanded educational opportunities. Additionally, there were many aspects of Northern culture that even middle-class Southerners disliked and wished to avoid. A fuller explanation of the origins of the Southern middle class might delve deeper into both the Southern roots for parts of the middle-class ideology as well as a more balanced attention to what elements of Northern culture middle-class Southerners did not wish to replicate, and why.

In terms of slavery, Wells makes the excellent argument that many middle-class Southerners came to support slavery for industrial and economic reasons. A question that remains largely unanswered, though, is how they viewed slavery as a social institution. Many middle-class Southerners hired or owned slaves as domestic servants, not just as industrial workers. Did their social

justifications for slavery differ from those of planters, or were they similar on this point?

Finally, it is not clear from Wells's work exactly what the relationship between middle and working-class white Southerners consisted of. He very convincingly argues that middle class ideology was formed in opposition to that of the working classes, but at other times mechanics and artisans, who were excluded from his definition of the middle class, seem to be included as having middle-class values and aspirations.

The Origins of the Southern Middle Class adds considerably to studies of the urban professional and commercial classes in the South. A provocative new study of Southern culture, Wells's scholarship raises as many questions as it answers, always a sign of good historical work, and will certainly help in moving forward our understanding of Southern society in the decades before the Civil War.

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