

Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity

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Recommended Citation

Gleeson, David (2007) "Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.9.2.6

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss2/6>

Review

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Spring 2007

Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. Oxford University Press, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195089592

Regional Identities

Understanding the South

James C. Cobb has set for himself the monumental task of writing the history of identity in the South from the American Revolution to 2005, the year of publication of this work. Without getting bogged down in too much theory, Cobb defines southern identity as the search for and perception of a common regional culture by people who live and have lived in what has been classified as the most unique region in the United States. In the process, this identity needed an other in which to define itself against. Southerners have settled on the North as the contrasting symbol of, as Cobb puts in on page 9, a triumphantly superior America to which everything southern is compared, but more often contrasted. He also recognizes that this comparing and contrasting is a two-way street, with the North also using the South as the definition of other.

Indeed, Cobb points out that from the revolutionary era through the Civil War it was usually northerners who emphasized the distinctiveness of the South. Only during the sectional crises of the 1850s and resulting construction of a southern nation between 1860 and 1865 did white southerners become interested in their own identity. He aptly titles this chapter *The South Becomes a Cause*. After the failure of the Confederacy, the Old Cause became the obsession of the New South. This focus on the results of the Civil War and Reconstruction came to dominate the southern imagination since then. Cobb thus believes, paraphrasing Robert Penn Warren on page 60, that the South was not born in Charleston or Montgomery but at Appomattox. By 1900 the New South propagandists had won the contest for defining post-War southern identity and created a very durable version of it. This identity was one that embraced the Lost Cause as well as a modern industrial future for the region in collaboration with

northern capital. But, despite all the paternalistic rhetoric of the likes of Henry W. Grady, it excluded African Americans and enshrined a regime of white supremacy.

It was from within the white community, however, that the first major criticism of this dominant identity came. From the Nashville Agrarians to W. J. Cash, the South, as a concept in its New South form, was attacked. Cash, in particular, challenged the New South myths in their entirety. Allied with this white southern critical self-examination, were the critiques by writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, who symbolized a more confident and militant African-American community which launched the second Reconstruction after World War II. During this second Reconstruction many southern white intellectuals' feelings toward their region turned toward guilt and shame. With the defeat of massive resistance by desegregation legislation in the 1960s, Cobb describes the result as a crisis in white identity.

Ironically, this loss of the old identity led to a boost in southern confidence when governors such as Jimmy Carter of Georgia embraced this new New South, as not something ostracized from the rest of the nation, but as a part of its Sunbelt. As America became Dixiefied and the South Americanized, it seemed that time would relentlessly make the South less southern and more American. Cobb, however, shows that this has not been the case. Black and white Americans in the region have continued to claim a southern identity. In a fascinating section on the African-American part of this phenomenon entitled *Blackness and Southernness: African Americans Look South Toward Home*, he highlights how black writers and commentators, born both inside and outside the South, have embraced a southern identity--one which has nothing to do with the Confederacy or Lost Cause, but rather with place, family, community, and culture. They have reclaimed a regional identity once only belonging to whites.

In his conclusion, Cobb also highlights that whites too have tried to reclaim a distinctly southern identity. He believes this process goes beyond the ethnic traits of food, culture and religion, so ably researched by sociologist John Shelton Reed, to something more political and potentially sinister. The fact that conflict has arisen over memorials to the Confederacy he finds particularly dangerous. He agrees with a Scottish journalist's impression of one of the leaders of the League of the South whose rhetoric is not of Jefferson Davis or George Wallace but of the terminology employed more recently by Serbia's most notorious ethnic cleanser, Radovan Karadzic (336). As a result, Cobb laments on

the same page, that a southern identity which can only thrive by demonizing or denigrating other groups exacts a terrible toll, not simply on the demonized but ultimately on those who can find self-affirmation only by rejecting others.

He believes also that an obsessive insistence on the importance of group distinctiveness can be intellectually constricting as well. Therefore, Cobb concludes by suggesting that scholars of the South should downplay distinctiveness when studying identity, something he believes very achievable, especially since he has highlighted how mutable southern identity has been. This proposal seems a bit extreme. Cobb admits as much, stating that in southern studies a conception of identity without distinctiveness is as heretical as Hazel Motes, who championed the church without Jesus in Flannery O'Connor's [novel] *Wise Blood* (337). This analogy is more apt than perhaps Cobb realizes. In his quest to abandon tradition and the past, Motes physically chastises and eventually blinds himself. Ultimately, in his ruined self mortification he ends up very close to the thing from which he was running away. By choosing to downplay and/or ignore southern distinctiveness, historians may be blinded too, and, like Motes, end up encouraging the very thing they were trying to deny. Scholars could be abandoning the field to the folks of the League of the South and their ilk.

Also, southern distinctiveness may be less harmful than Cobb acknowledges. The League of the South has minuscule support in the region, especially with the de-escalation of the flag disputes in Georgia and South Carolina. As heated as the rhetoric may be, it is a long way away from Karadzic and the former Yugoslavia. Cobb does make some other international comparisons. Regional identities in Ireland, Italy, etc., are mentioned, but it might have been more instructive to provide a deeper analysis. Take Ireland, for example. Its identity conflicts have been far more serious than those of the South. Over three thousand people died in the recent Troubles in Northern Ireland, an area which is about one-quarter the size of South Carolina with a population one-sixth that of Metro Atlanta. The South's identity crisis seems trivial when compared to it. The University of Alabama football team may mean more to certain southerners' identity, for example, than any Confederate flag or monument, and although there often fights between Bama and Auburn fans, you can still wear your colors around Birmingham without being murdered. In contrast, wearing a Glasgow Celtic soccer jersey in the wrong part of Belfast can still get you in serious trouble (and got a young man murdered in 2002). Indeed, the topics of popular culture and, particularly sport, get short shrift here in the

discussion of southern identity. Historian Fitzhugh Brundage caused something of a furor when he jokingly recommended, in an extended review of Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic for the Georgia Historical Quarterly*, that Confederate re-enactors would achieve a greater authenticity and perform a public service if they used live ammunition. The reality is, however, unlike Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia, the Confederate heritage conservators restrict themselves to shooting blanks at their Yankee enemies.

This reality does not mean that southern distinctiveness has no political implications. But, it does mean that these implications are often more complicated than they first appear. After 2004, for example, the Red State South became disparagingly known as Jesusland to many northern commentators, a region entrenched in a fundamentalist conservative ideology. Cobb rightly criticizes these commentators' ignorance of the robust role of change in the South. Just two years later, he has been proven correct. Heath Shuler's election to Congress from North Carolina and Jim Webb's election to the U.S. Senate from Virginia were key victories in the Democratic take-back of Congress. Webb, in particular, scared many southern liberals because he was fond of quoting Robert E. Lee. Also in his popular bestseller, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*, he urged white southerners to adopt a more distinctive identity to assert their economic, social and political position in American society. This identity stance is the very thing Cobb dreads in his conclusion. Yet, Webb is now a hero of the left with his strident criticism of both the War in Iraq and President George W. Bush. It seems that southern identity continues to confound easy descriptions. For us to understand the historical basis of this identity, Cobb has clearly shown that one will have to continue to read the classics by Cash, Woodward, Ellison, and others. However, his stimulating survey of southern identity is as good a place to start as any.

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