

The Southern Way of Life: Meanings of Culture and Civilization in the American South

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Review

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Wilson, Charles Reagan. *The Southern Way of Life: Meanings of Culture & Civilization in the American South.* University of North Carolina Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$39.95 ISBN 9781469664989 pp. 616

During the past four decades, Charles Reagan Wilson has become a leading interpreter of the American South. *Southern Way of Life*, which he began writing in 1989, represents a culmination of Wilson's distinguished career as a historian of southern culture. Informed by critical regionalist theory, he carefully defines the South as a highly diverse place that includes divergent races, ethnic groups, and LGBTQ subcultures. For those interested in a general and very thoughtful survey of the history of the South since 1865, *Southern Way of Life* will likely become a standard work.

In his opening chapter, Wilson considers the roots of the South as an imagined region from the colonial era to the late antebellum period and the Civil War. He maintains that southern whites saw themselves as “emissaries of Western civilization” whose struggle to define themselves reflected non-white (including Blacks and Native Americans) “savages and barbarians” (18). Nineteenth-century southern whites embraced white supremacy and drew sharp racial lines. The advent of a global antislavery and abolitionist movement and its “moral and religious attack on the white South” heightened its isolation but spurred a defense of “slave civilization” and the emergence of what Wilson calls a “civil religion” and religious and cultural nationalism (27).

The Civil War and Reconstruction became important turning points. Southern whites, according to Wilson, saw Reconstruction as threatening their civilization, and its “redemption” included religious language and imagery of civilization. The violent response of southern whites, especially the Ku Klux Klan, became central to their defense. In addition, southern whites' Lost Cause memory of what the Dunningite school called the “tragic era” further helped southern whites to define their identity. During the late nineteenth century, boosters adapted a concept of

southern civilization in their advocacy of a New South, while a counter-narrative emerged with the rise of Populism.

Wilson is most original in his explanation of how understandings of southern civilization changed during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He maintains that, after World War I, “civilization thinking” became degraded (133). The Nashville Agrarians coined the term “southern way of life” and restated a more traditional version of the concept. During the 1930s and 1940s, new forces of change included the rise of a self-critical southern sociology at the University of North Carolina, the transformation of interracialism into integrationism, the development of new anthropological concepts of race, the shaky rise of labor unions, and a renaissance in southern literature. During the Depression and World War II, Black activists and cultural critics such as Charles S. Johnson, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston anticipated the civil rights revolution and further undermined older conceptions of southern civilization.

Increasing federal intervention after the *Brown* decision and rise of a Black-led uprising changed matters. White anxieties led to a resurgence of conservatism and resistance; organizations such as the White Citizen Councils used evasion and massive resistance to defend what they saw as the southern way of life. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolence, and Robert F. Williams’s belief in armed self-defense and Black Power represented basic differences in how Black people defined their southern identity. Wilson concluded *Southern Way of Life* by charting the post-1945 social and economic transformation and an increasing ethnic and sexual diversity to the region. He also explains forces such as suburbanization, the African American and white diaspora, and the ensuing spread of southern culture across America. Despite these changes, factors of race and religion today continue to dominate sometimes competing views of southern civilization.

It is difficult in a brief review to capture the depth and nuance of this 500-page book. *Southern Way of Life* is, simply put, a major achievement, and general readers as well as specialists will find much familiar but also much new about the history of the American South.

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