Why Southern History Matters

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With Between Slavery and Capitalism, Martin Ruef has produced a very important book that contributes significantly to our understanding of the monumental transformations that occurred in the southern United States after the Civil War. A great deal has been written by sociologists, economists, historians, and others about this region during this time period. Yet, few authors have been as successful as Ruef in getting the history, sociology, and economics of the subject “right.” Before justifying my high opinion of Ruef’s book, I need to do a bit of framing for the remainder of my essay.

In general, sociologists have neglected the South when attempting to trace the historical roots of modern American societal structures and social problems. I believe that this relative neglect can be traced back to the intellectual dominance, since at least the middle of the twentieth century, of the “Chicago School” of sociology over the school of southern regionalists that was centered primarily at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a result, much more effort has been devoted to documenting the causes and consequences of the extreme racial residential segregation that developed in northern cities during the first three quarters of the twentieth century than to studying the causes and consequences of landlessness and economic marginalization among southern African Americans during the same time period. Indeed, I would speculate that the attention devoted by sociologists to the single city of Chicago far exceeds that given to the entire rural population of the former Confederate States. As evidence for this regional imbalance, consider that Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton has been cited nearly 2,000 times since it was published in 1945. In contrast, Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties by Arthur Raper has been cited fewer than 200 times since it first appeared in 1936. Not everyone will agree with this brash generalization, and that is fine. I am willing to stand by it.

There is peril in neglecting the American South as we seek to comprehend modern conditions in the United States. The South embraced legal racial segregation and prohibited racial intermarriage longer than other sections of the nation. The vast majority of legal executions have occurred in southern states since the practice was reintroduced in 1976. The greatest concentration of evangelical Christians is in the South. And the history and influence of Dixie is evident in today’s political map of the United States. The sharp rightward shift of the Republican Party, beginning with Ronald Reagan, could not have been accomplished without a dependable southern base. In short, in order to fully understand contemporary American society, culture, and politics, it is important to know something about southern history.

When roughly four million southern slaves gained their freedom after the Civil War, many collateral changes were required in order for the region to adjust to the vast changes that accompanied emancipation. As Ruef carefully describes, institutions that existed to support a slave society were inappropriate for a society and economy based on free labor. How would a free workforce, composed of former bondsmen and women, be organized? How much corporal punishment of workers by employers would be tolerated? How much independence would be granted to the former slaves? How would the required supplies, materials,
and services required by the southern economy be provided and purchased? How would credit-worthiness be established and evaluated? How could the presumed racial inferiority of blacks, once so clearly signaled by their slave status, be maintained in a capitalist society based on free labor? How would economic development proceed? *Between Slavery and Capitalism* addresses all of these questions. And, as Ruef seeks answers, he emphasizes the uncertainty that accompanied profound institutional transitions like those experienced by the American South during the postbellum period.

Ruef describes three types of uncertainty that southern society faced as it transitioned from a slave economy to a capitalist economy. “Risk” involves decisions with an unknown outcome but for which the distribution of possible outcomes is known. “Classical uncertainty” exists when the distribution of possible outcomes is unknown but the possible outcomes, themselves, are classifiable. “Categorical uncertainty” is the most devilish of the three and, as Ruef observes, “From an institutional perspective, this source [i.e., categorical uncertainty] lies in circumstances of institutional flux and contention, not only where extant rules and social norms fail to provide expectations as to what outcomes are more or less likely, but also where the categories of possible outcomes are themselves in the process of being redefined” (p. 7, emphasis added).

Perhaps the most urgent and difficult adjustment required of the postbellum South, and one to which *Between Slavery and Capitalism* devotes considerable attention, was transitioning the southern agricultural economy from its dependence on slave labor to a reliance on free labor. This was an especially daunting adjustment because it was so tightly bound to the southern racial caste system. Of course, with the benefit of historical hindsight and the prior excellent work of scholars such as Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch (2000), we know that this dialectic ended in the rise of farm tenancy, especially sharecropping, and the infamous burden of debt peonage that would economically handicap southern blacks for decades.

Ruef engages this literature by viewing the “demise of the plantation” from the perspective of the actors who were required to navigate such difficult social and economic terrain and to negotiate a solution that would result in a stable, if highly stratified, agricultural economy. He does this with a focus on the uncertainty that the actors faced as they confronted the challenge. How could the desire by white landowners to replace slaves with subservient and compliant wage laborers be satisfied while also giving freedmen and women the independence and opportunity they sought? What institutional arrangements would evolve to solve this apparent conundrum? By relying on the concept of uncertainty to investigate this fundamental socioeconomic transition, I consider *Between Slavery and Capitalism* to be the most significant contribution to the topic since Ransom and Sutch’s classic treatment of the subject in *One Kind of Freedom*.

Ruef is equally successful in using institutional uncertainty to frame his analysis of the provision of credit and the execution of trade in the postbellum period. As he correctly notes, most prior research has focused primarily on the “upstream” consequences of this uncertainty: for example, the usurious interest rates charged by merchants and landlords for supplying tenant farmers and the trap of debt peonage that frequently resulted. *Between Slavery and Capitalism* reverses the analytical lens to consider the “downstream” uncertainty faced by suppliers and investors. For instance, Ruef asks, “In supplying fertilizer or other goods to country stores and their customers in the New South, how did wholesalers hope to manage risk and uncertainty? And why were they so often unsuccessful?” (p. 132).

Credit and trade in the postbellum South were destabilized by the disappearance of the not-so-invisible hand of “cotton factors” and the disruption, or destruction, of the traditional sources of credit and forms of mercantile transactions that prevailed during the era of slavery. According to Ruef, potential investors encountered substantial uncertainty as they assessed the credit-worthiness of local businesses and merchants in the postbellum South. What were their assets? How responsible was the proprietor? Indeed, given the paucity of local information, it was often difficult for investors even to discern the nature of local
businesses. What services did they provide? What items did they sell? Chapter Five of *Between Slavery and Capitalism* ("Credit and Trade in the New South") provides an insightful and fascinating discussion of how potential investors’ use of the R. G. Dun Reference Book expanded during the postbellum period. The Reference Book offered a classification of, and general credit rating for, thousands of businesses throughout the United States. Without many good alternatives, wholesalers and investors grew to rely more heavily on the Reference Book to guide their business decisions. Yet, as Ruef notes, “At the end of the Radical Reconstruction, perhaps the most damning indictment of the ‘hard’ information provided in the Reference Book was its limited ability to predict the insolvency of proprietors to whom credit was provided” (p. 153). This uncertainty, in turn, represented a barrier to economic development in the South.

Ruef argues that southern economic development was also hindered when local communities experienced what he refers to as “idiosyncratic” organizational complexity. He describes a set of “norms of community structure” that defined a hierarchy of organizational types that were present in southern communities—farms, general stores, saloons, hotels, blacksmith shops, and theaters. These norms assumed an ordered introduction of these organizational types. As Ruef explains, “The rules took on mundane, yet familiar forms: the appearance of a physician in a county was expected to be followed closely by the appearance of a drug store to fill prescriptions; the appearance of a hotel was followed by the appearance of a bar or saloon to entertain out-of-town visitors” (p. 180). According to Ruef, conformity with these rules reduced uncertainty while deviation from them (i.e., “idiosyncratic communities”) did the opposite. This is an intriguing possibility, but one that I cannot fully embrace until additional supporting empirical evidence is marshaled.

The challenges that southern society faced in trying to manage the uncertainties described in *Between Slavery and Capitalism* were formidable. And, as the history of the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly illuminates, it was not always successful. Sharp racial and class lines defined social relations in the region. Delayed agricultural mechanization and industrial development retarded the economy. Educational expansion lagged. Drawing from the parallel histories of emancipation in other New World societies, Ruef identifies three mechanisms that might have made the American experience less harsh, had they existed: (1) gradual emancipation, (2) partial emancipation, and (3) compensated emancipation. Alas, the emancipation experienced by the American South was immediate, total, and without compensation to the freedmen and women or to their former owners. As a result, Dixie’s journey between slavery and capitalism was harsh, contested, and violent.

*Between Slavery and Capitalism* contains much more than I can possibly describe given space constraints. The book’s strengths are many, including the sophistication of the theoretical perspectives that motivate the study, the innovative use of somewhat obscure data sources such as slave narratives recorded by the Works Progress Administration and labor contracts recorded by the Freedmen’s Bureau, and skillful analytic strategies that are applied to a wide variety of data. Its limitations are minor and do not at all detract from the book’s scholarly impact. To bring this essay back to the framing discussion at the outset, I would have appreciated knowing Ruef’s perceptions of the longer-term consequences of the South’s difficult transition between slavery and capitalism—for the region and for the nation. For example, the evidence compiled and the conclusions drawn in *Between Slavery and Capitalism* position Ruef nicely to expand upon the work of the economist Jay R. Mandle (1978) in his insightful book *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War*, which does take a long view. In fact, the subtitle of Ruef’s book, *The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South*, led me to anticipate such a discussion. But this is truly a minor quibble about an excellent and important book.

**References**


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Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing is a disturbing yet riveting narrative that takes the reader deep into the daily routines, racial animosities, periodic violence, and moral reasoning of special policing squads operating on the outskirts of Paris in impoverished French banlieues. After three years of trying to gain access, anthropologist Didier Fassin, now a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, spent roughly 15 months between 2005 and 2007 with anti-crime crews in an effort to provide a rounded account of the way disadvantaged residents—particularly adolescents and youngsters—of the so-called “sensitive urban areas” were treated by the police. The results are appalling but convincing.

Trotsky famously said, “there is but one international and that is the police.” Fassin brings this point home brilliantly, pointing out that from Watts to Brixton, from Chicago to Amsterdam, from London to [yes] Paris, virtually all major urban disturbances over the past fifty years have been marked by violent interactions between the police and ethnically or racially stigmatized residents who reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This, as the author carefully notes, is not to say the police are identical from place to place, but that the relations the police have with certain publics, the way the police are evaluated and disciplined (or not), and the accounts they themselves offer for their actions are, in fact, generalizable. This is a matter both asserted and demonstrated as Fassin makes excellent use of the ample (compared to France) ethnographic literature on the police in North America and Europe.

More critically, perhaps, the police practices and justifications that are highlighted in this monograph appear to be on the rise in most western democracies. A small sample: the subtle shift from a concern with law enforcement (“preventive policing”) to enforcing order (“repressive policing”), true particularly in blighted urban areas and often rendered with excessive zeal; the growth of a paramilitary police whose equipment and methods resemble those used by the army, especially notable when heavily armored riot squads are brought in to maintain public order; the managerially-driven intensification for tracking police performance by use of quantitative measures that are at best loosely coupled to crime rates; the mounting social and cultural distance between the public and the police who typically work in places they do not know, understand, or much care about; the increasing use of anti-crime squads made up of self-selected, aggressive officers who often work in plain clothes but whose constant visible presence in particular neighborhoods is experienced by residents as oppressive; the spreading police distrust of the judicial system that justifies an extension on the ground of police discretion; and so on (and on). These accelerating trends—mostly out of sight to the general public—suggest that the police go about their