



BOOK REVIEW AUGUST 20, 2021

A Different New South?

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IF THE SO-CALLED SOUTHERN TRADITION SEEMED vulnerable in 1968, when Arlington House published Richard M. Weaver's *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, five years after his death in 1963, then it is, by now, resoundingly and utterly conquered. Nevertheless, Regnery Gateway deemed it worthwhile to [republish a paperback](#) version of that book earlier this year, having produced the previous 1989 edition.

The Southern Tradition at Bay is the revised doctoral dissertation that Weaver—a gentleman scholar representing a bygone era, not to mention a generalist who, on principle, resisted specialization—wrote under the direction of Cleanth Brooks during the height of World War II. John Crowe Ransom had directed Weaver's M.A. dissertation almost a decade earlier when Weaver was beginning to wean himself off socialism. Growing increasingly conservative, Weaver produced *Ideas Have Consequences* in 1948 and *The Ethics of Rhetoric* in 1953, establishing

himself as a household name among conservatives. Over the 1950s he emerged as an intellectual figurehead for the postwar conservative movement. The extent of his fame and the quality of his scholarship warranted the posthumous publication not only of *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, which appeared in book form a quarter of a century after it had appeared as a dissertation, but also of *Visions of Order* (1964) and *Life without Prejudice and Other Essays* (1965).

The underpinning claim of *The Southern Tradition at Bay* is that the agrarian South was a distinct civilization, defined by Weaver as “a discipline, an achievement in self-culture and self-control.” Piety, ethics, and restraint characterize a civilization properly so called, Weaver says, and their antitheses, in his view, are scientism, industry, and utilitarianism. Civilization values individuality and personality over standardization, centralization, and uniformity, in his paradigm, and possesses a natural hierarchy in which the “wise and good . . . bear responsibility and enjoy prestige.” Weaver associates the North with political abstraction and the radicalism of Thomas Paine, and the South with conservatism and a Burkean “doctrine of human fallibility and of the organic nature of society.” He submits that the “instance of Jefferson has led to a supposition that French radicalism found hospitality in the South,” but, on the contrary, “the South has a deep suspicion of all theory, perhaps of intellect.”

One might ask, “To which South does Weaver refer?” The South, after all, consists of multiplicities and contradictions; it encompasses numerous cultures and geographic spaces. The people of Appalachia are different from those in the coastal Carolinas, the bayous of Louisiana, the swamplands of Florida, the peanut farms and green foothills of Georgia, the arid Texas deserts, the Kentucky bluegrass pastures, the Chesapeake Bay estuaries, and so forth. To avoid the appearance that he attempted to essentialize the South as a homogenous unit with a monocultural purpose, his original publishers might have retained the title of the dissertation from which he drew this text: “The Confederate South, 1865-1910: A Study in the Survival of a Mind and a Culture.” These few words clarify that his “South” was not an ever-static subject but a mappable region with delineated boundaries and a distinct culture during a fixed but fleeting time frame. His portrayal of the varying behaviors and

backgrounds of Confederate soldiers from different regions evidences his awareness of the pluralism resident within the general heading “Southern.”

One theme that asserts itself here is the philistine tendency of Southerners that appears to have frustrated Weaver. In his chapter on Southern apologists, Weaver criticizes the litterateurs (e.g., Augustus Baldwin Longstreet) who abandoned their art for prosaic pro-slavery agitation and laments that the upper classes, which were more concerned with matters of religion that spilled over into politics, did not adequately appreciate writers like William Gilmore Simms. But the problem was broader than just arts and culture. Weaver bemoaned that the North pursued “science and rationalism” while the South clung “more or less unashamedly to the primitive way of life.”

The dearth of aesthetic and intellectual vibrancy in the South meant that Southerners lacked “a Burke or a Hegel” to provide a robust and systematic philosophy to buttress their journalistic advocacy. Southern apologists attempted to justify and vindicate their actions, clear their names, salvage their reputations, and lift the spirits of their defeated friends and family not principally with fiction or poetry or philosophy, but with complex and lengthy argumentation based on constitutional doctrines and legal principles. The result was uninspiring to those who were not already within the fold.

The bulk of *The Southern Tradition at Bay* reads like benignly descriptive history, as Weaver for the most part conceals his personal predilections, yet his tendentious Introduction and Epilogue reveal that he adopted his beloved South’s disdain for modernity. He acknowledged that he did not write “pure history,” but rather “a picture of values and sentiments coping with the forces of a revolutionary age.” His hostility towards economics and utilitarianism—both modern—sprung from his appreciation for rootedness, place, and custom. He suggested that, rather than rational planning or central design, the South resisted social experimentation and “held that society, though of intelligible structure, is a product of organic growth.”

Weaver's contempt for mass centralization was not Hayekian. He depicted—not unfavorably—an anachronistically medieval society differentiated by paternalism and caste, ruled by an aristocracy of classically educated but hypersensitive men who, to his expressed regret, were quick to take offense and overanxious to defend themselves against affronts to their honor.

Since Weaver's death, the South has assimilated what is good and true from other traditions, welcoming diverse members into its practices, habits, and fashions, expanding its cultural parameters and the opportunity for newcomers to participate in its customs without compromising its core values.

The chief negative Weaver identified in this stratified system was not the ugly dependence on human bondage, but the corrupting effect of slavery on the temperament of white masters. He believed that a prevailing sense of gentility and nobility contributed to the scarcity of creativity in the South, and he alleged that the loss of the chivalric ideal—which defined antebellum Southern culture—caused the “disappearance of generosity toward the weak and the vanquished.”

Noblesse oblige was, for him, central to the societal harmony and stability that required a dynamic reciprocity for its preservation: “The master expected of his servants loyalty; the servants of the master interest and protection.” This observation refers not necessarily to “slaves,” as in individuals with the legal status as the property of another, but to laborers over whom wealthy landholders owed duties of trusteeship according to romanticized notions of European feudalism. But in the American South, of course, those “servants” or “laborers” were almost all slaves.

Several lines work to discredit aspects of the tradition that Weaver apparently celebrated (though not without criticism). For instance, he proposes that, although the Ku Klux Klan “has since covered itself with odium by becoming a tool of bigotry, it may properly be thought of as the last expression of Southern political genius, and a not unworthy one in view of the conditions of the period.” Those inclined to admire elements

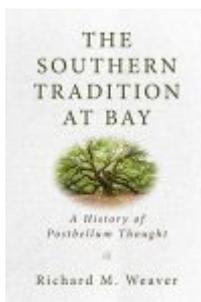
of the Southern tradition—its emphasis on kin, community, or the common good—will rush to separate themselves from such opinions, which, however common in Weaver’s era, are anathema today. Weaver’s legacy—and that of his subject—would have benefited from qualification or explication of these problematic passages, which have not aged well. His aside about “the innate feminine belief in social distinctions,” moreover, supplies an embarrassing example of his tendency toward unempirical overstatement.

Military leadership and heroism became masculine markers of Southern identity, which had suffered and fractured in the wake of the Civil War, Weaver explains. Statues and monuments erected to lionize the Confederate soldier were both a cause and a result of the emerging Lost Cause narrative that proliferated through martial memoirs, eulogies, diaries, speeches, essays, and songs. Weaver undertook extensive surveys of the abundant literature by and about Confederate soldiers and other men and women of the South to paint a proud people with strong personalities who labored to perpetuate a narrative that they had been unjustly subjugated by aggressive, sanctimonious, and hypocritical invaders who did not understand local realities.

Historians with little economic training who posit that slavery and capitalism were mutually reinforcing and inextricably tied would do well to read Weaver’s presentation of the plantation system that was predicated on the opposite proposition, namely the negation of free enterprise. Weaver credits John Taylor of Caroline as a precursor to Karl Marx, a curious commendation that explains, to some degree, why Marxist historians like Eugene Genovese came to appreciate the political economy of the Southern Agrarians. Weaver also expounded upon the economics of slaveowner George Fitzhugh, whose *Sociology for the South* was, in Weaver’s words, “unique in the boldness of its attack on the theory of free society.” Indeed, Fitzhugh outlined “the totalitarian state, which substitutes for individual liberty and free competition a fixed hierarchy and state provision for all classes.” Slavery and capitalism—neither of which Weaver applauds—are conflicting and incompatible in Weaver’s account.

Might the Southern tradition have *something* to offer that is humane and good, redeemable qualities unrelated to the cruelty of racism and slavery? Could there exist a conservative society committed to custom and manners, embracing mores and the ideals of valor and order, which is also tolerant, free, and open? Weaver acknowledges that there “cannot be a return to the Middle Ages or the Old South.” He recognizes, too, that “there are numerous resemblances between the Southern agrarian mind and the mind of modern fascism.” Maybe the answer—the way the South can move away from its historic negatives while retaining its enduring positives—entails the code of honor, which, as both the Southern and Japanese experience has shown, is deeply connected to the concepts of guilt and shame.

Since Weaver’s death, the South has assimilated what is good and true from other traditions, welcoming diverse members into its practices, habits, and fashions, expanding its cultural parameters and the opportunity for newcomers to participate in its customs without compromising its core values. The South is developing into a zone of duty and charity, norms and piety, kindness and etiquette, seersucker and sunflower dresses, hospitality and decorum, football and golf, leisure and formality—a warm climate where governments do not lock down their people during emergencies, a promising anomaly furnishing the social and economic conditions necessary for liberty to flourish. Overwhelming government is manifestly unneeded where the people are civil and self-regulating. And the South, with luck and blessing, might become that place. It will not look like the South that Weaver rendered; it must, and will, do better.



REVIEWED

The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought

by Richard M. Weaver

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