5.6. Cotton, Race, and Labor in the Post-Civil War South

Panel organizer: Whayne, Jeannie, University of Arkansas, USA

In the post-Civil War U.S. South and in post-unification southern Italy, the traditional elites' most pressing challenge was the need to reformulate either race or labor relations, or both, as they confronted a larger and politically active free population. In some regions, a large number of immigrants, determined to assert their rights as either workers or citizens. At the same time, the elites faced a daunting challenge: maintaining a continuity vis-à-vis the identification of their power with the connection to the cotton or citrus industries’ alternating fortunes. This panel looks at these challenges to the power of the landed elites and to the reshaping of their identity in the process, in different regions of the U.S. South and especially in southern Italy. Specifically in South Carolina and Sicily, violence erupted as a direct consequence of these challenges, in one case through Ku Klux Klan actions. In North Carolina, landless farmers challenged elite control by attempting to impose segregation in the countryside in order to distinguish themselves from black laborers or to improve their own status. In Memphis, Tennessee, meanwhile, a race riot reflected a collision between African American and Irish immigrants, the two main groups challenging the elites’ power. However, within a few years a fragile and surprising political alliance developed between them until the infamous yellow fever epidemic of 1878 enabled the cotton elite to reassert control. Here, as in much of the U.S. South, the elite’s power after the Civil War continued to be based largely on the connection to cotton as a means of maintaining their ascendency, even in the face of the declining importance of the crop. Despite some inevitable differences between the case-studies, in both the U.S. South and southern Italy, violence was the premier factor that allowed the elites to maintain political control through intimidation of rural laborers. At the same time, cultural control, reinforced through connections to cotton in one case and to citrus in the other case, often supplemented violence as a means for the elite to maintain their power. This panel contrasts how American and southern Italian elites and laborers responded to rural and agrarian upheaval in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and then demonstrates how, in the twentieth century, the losing of King Cotton’s grip on the American economy altered elites’ own hold on southern society.

Chair: Hahn, Steven, University of Pennsylvania, USA

5.6.1. The King is Dead: The Culture of Cotton in Memphis, Tennessee
Giesen, James, Mississippi State University, Starkville, USA

From the mid-nineteenth century through the upheaval of the American Civil War, until the mid-twentieth century, Memphis, Tennessee served as one of the most important shipping and marketing centers for the cotton industry. Culturally, the city fused its identity to the crop. Politically and economically, its most powerful forces, whether politicians, social organizations, companies, or culture brokers, were those trading on their connection to cotton, not only to the crop itself, but when happened when cotton production and marketing shifted away from the city? This paper will explore the demise of cotton from the city’s economy with an eye toward how its citizens and business interests maintained its cultural claim to the crop in the years that followed. It will show through an examination of Cotton, Incorporated, the Cotton Jubilee festival and parade, and popular portrayals of the crop and plantation landscapes, how Memphis was able to cling to its identity in a time of vast economic and racial changes in the city and region.

5.6.2. Capturing Cotton’s Metropolis: The Struggle for Political Control of Memphis Government, 1865-1900
Whayne, Jeannie, University of Arkansas, USA

In the context of a changing racial and ethnic configuration in the late-19th century, this paper provides an analysis of the political and economic development of Memphis, Tennessee, a city that became the largest inland cotton center in the Mid-South region by 1860. The position of Memphis on the Mississippi River was an advantage but also presented the city with devastating environmental problems. The analysis pivots around three things: the riot of 1866 led by Irish working class men and Irish police against the freed people of Memphis; the tenuous coalition of black and Irish voters in the 1870s which elected an Irish mayor; and the 1893-1894 cotton panic which empowered the city to control the cotton market through the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878. The success of the cotton elite to defeat an unusual alliance between African Americans and Irish immigrants precluded formal disenfranchisement in Tennessee. This paper will contribute to the growing literature of disenfranchisement in southern cities but also place it in the context of a struggle for power complicated by a disease-related environmental issue. Furthermore, the cotton elite’s success in seizing control of city government enabled them to influence the Corps of Engineers and the United States Congress, in securing a substantial appropriation to remediate problems along the city’s waterfront in the second half of the nineteenth century, an environmental problem that plagued the city’s cotton economy well into the twentieth century.

Participants

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Dal Lago, Enrico, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

An increasing number of scholars have examined the period of reconstruction in the post-Civil War U.S. South in comparative perspective with contemporary social, economic and political developments in other countries (Peter Kolchin, Ethelbert D. Hahn). Studies on the nineteenth-century U.S. South and southern Italy have hinted at the possibility of contrasting social and labor relations in the countryside between heavily agricultural regions that by the second half of the 1860s had either reincorporated or newly incorporated into unified nation states through the U. S. Civil War and through Italian national unification. This paper compares the Reconstruction U.S. South with post-unification Southern Italy by investigating violent practices of labor control in the cotton-producing regions of upcountry South Carolina and in the citrus-growing regions of coastal western Sicily. In one case, labor control through violence led to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, while in the other case it led to the beginning of proto-Mafia activities. Sustained comparison of the two case-studies shows clearly that, even though different in a number of ways, both types of violence ultimately had among their aims that of maintaining political control through intimidation of rural laborers. While in upcountry South Carolina violence and intimidation served the purpose of controlling African American labor by keeping it in the cotton plantations and farms, in western Sicily the same tactics served the purpose of keeping many Sicilian peasant and day laborers in the citrus fields.

5.6.3. The Politics of Rural Violence in Comparative Perspective: South Carolina vs. Sicily in the late 1860s

Dal Lago, Enrico, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

In the decades between the Civil War and Great Depression, a labor system based on the exploitation of African-American and white farm workers flourished in the rural U.S. South, benefitting the planter and merchant elite. Small white farmers, unhappy with this system, envisioned a different one: one wherein they might rise in status to become yeomen. They imagined a number of strategies, economic, social, and political benefits would accompany their elevation in position. The most promising of these strategies was the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, while in the other case it led to the beginning of proto-Mafia activities. Sustained comparison of the two case-studies shows clearly that, even though different in a number of ways, both types of violence ultimately had among their aims that of maintaining political control through intimidation of rural laborers. While in upcountry South Carolina violence and intimidation served the purpose of controlling African American labor by keeping it in the cotton plantations and farms, in western Sicily the same tactics served the purpose of keeping many Sicilian peasant and day laborers in the citrus fields.

5.6.4. Challenging the Southern Elite: Small White Farmers’ Visions for a New and Segregated Rural South
Herbin-Triant, Elizabeth, St. John’s University, New York, USA

In the decades between the Civil War and Great Depression, a labor system based on the exploitation of African-American and white farm workers flourished in the rural U.S. South, benefitting the planter and merchant elite. Small white farmers, unhappy with this system, envisioned a different one: one wherein they might rise in status to become yeomen. They imagined a number of strategies, economic, social, and political benefits would accompany their elevation in position. The most promising of these strategies was the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, while in the other case it led to the beginning of proto-Mafia activities. Sustained comparison of the two case-studies shows clearly that, even though different in a number of ways, both types of violence ultimately had among their aims that of maintaining political control through intimidation of rural laborers. While in upcountry South Carolina violence and intimidation served the purpose of controlling African American labor by keeping it in the cotton plantations and farms, in western Sicily the same tactics served the purpose of keeping many Sicilian peasant and day laborers in the citrus fields.

Panel

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