

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

Panel organiser: 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 large and politically active free population, and also, in some areas, a large number of immigrants, determined to assert their rights, either as laborers or as citizens. At the same time, the elites faced a daunting challenge in 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 southern Italy. Especially in South Carolina and Sicily, violence erupted as a direct consequence of these challenges, in one case through Ku Klux Klan actions, in the other case through proto-Mafia activities. In North Carolina, landless farmers challenged elite control by attempting to impose segregation in the countryside in order to distinguish themselves from black sharecroppers and thus 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 ascendancy, 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 alike responded to rural and agrarian upheaval in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and then demonstrates how, in the twentieth century, the loosening of King Cotton's grip on the American economy altered elites' own hold on southern society.

Chair: Hahn, Steven, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 // 1300 – 1500 // Session 5 – Room A 022

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 what 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 nineteenth 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 ability of the white cotton elite to seize control of city government after the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878. The success of the cotton elite to defeat an unusual alliance between African Americans and Irish immigrants preceded formal disfranchisement statutes in Tennessee. This paper will contribute to the growing literature of disfranchisement 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 remedy problems along the city's waterfront caused by the growing severity of floods in the second half of the nineteenth century, an environmental problem that plagued the city's cotton economy well into the twentieth century.

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

An increasing number of scholars have examined the period of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War U.S. South in comparative perspective with contemporary socio-economic and political developments in other countries (Peter Kolchin, Rebecca Scott, and Steven Hahn). Studies on the nineteenth-century U.S. South and southern Italy have hinted at the possibility of comparing social and labour relations in the countryside of two heavily agricultural regions that by the second half of the 1860s had been 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 labour control in the cotton-producing regions of upcountry South Carolina and in the citrus-growing regions of coastal western Sicily. In one case, labour 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 the political status quo through intimidation of rural labourers. While in upcountry South Carolina violence and intimidation served the purpose of controlling African American labour by keeping it in the cotton plantations and farms, in western Sicily the same tactics served the purpose of keeping many Sicilian casual and day labourers 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, benefiting 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 economic, social, and political benefits would accompany their elevation in position. Many believed that the way to achieve this higher status was by distancing themselves from their African-American neighbors. To this end, a number of these farmers embraced an unsuccessful campaign to bring segregation to the North Carolina countryside in 1913-1915. Opposed by the white elite, this campaign failed. This paper uses the conflict over rural segregation to explore two competing views of what Southern society should be. There was more to the conflict over rural segregation than elite whites wanting access to black workers and middling whites not wanting black farmers around to compete with them. Indeed, the two groups had very different ideas about who should own land and who should participate in government. For small white farmers, rural segregation was part of a larger plan to build a countryside of tightly-knit, democratic white yeoman communities. Elite whites had a very different vision for the rural South. This case study illuminates the relationship between North Carolina's white elite and small white farmers, revealing just how tenuous the bonds that linked whites together were in the "solid South."

Participants

Dal Lago, Enrico

Enrico Dal Lago, Lecturer in American History at the National University of Ireland, Galway, received his PhD in History from University College London (UCL). He is the author of *Agrarian Elites: American Slaveholders and Southern Italian Landowners, 1815-1861* (2005) and of *American Slavery, Atlantic Slavery, and Beyond: The U.S. 'Peculiar Institution' in International Perspective* (2012), and co-editor and contributor of four additional books. His forthcoming monograph is entitled *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini: Abolition, Democracy, and Radical Reform* (2013).

Giesen, James

James C. Giesen is an associate professor of history at Mississippi State University, in Starkville, Mississippi. He also serves as director of The Center for the History of Agriculture, Science, and the Environment in the South (CHASES) and as executive secretary of the Agricultural History Society. His book, *Boll Weevil Blues: Cotton, Myth, and Power in the American South* (University of Chicago Press, 2011) won the 2012 Deep South Book Prize. He has also won awards for articles in *Environmental History* and *Agricultural History*. His new project is a long-term cultural history of cotton in the United States.

Hahn, Steven

Steven Hahn is the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor History at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (1983), which received both the Allan Nevins Prize of the Society of American Historians and the Frederick Jackson Turner Award of the Organization of American Historians. Also among his many

publications is *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (2004) which received several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in History.

Herbin-Triant, Elizabeth

Elizabeth Herbin-Triant is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at St. John's University in New York City. She received her degrees from Harvard University (AB) and Columbia University (PhD), and held a postdoctoral fellowship in Agrarian Studies at Yale University. Herbin-Triant is completing a manuscript entitled *"Great Rural Civilization" for White Southerners: Agrarianism and Rural Segregationist Ideology in the American South*. This manuscript argues that segregationist thinking in the Southern countryside developed independently from urban segregation, and grew out of a different tradition – agrarianism.

Whayne, Jeannie

Jeannie Whayne is professor of history at the University of Arkansas and vice president/president elect of the Agricultural History Society. She has published eleven books, including *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South* (2011), which won the John G. Ragsdale Award from the Arkansas Historical Association. Whayne has had fellowships at the Smithsonian Institution and at the Carter Woodson Institute at the University of Virginia. She is currently researching a book on the development of Memphis, Tennessee into the largest inland cotton center in the world by the mid 19th century.