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BOOK REVIEWS

The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War

by Jay R. Mandle

Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978.

7 + 144 pp. 18.75 hb.

REVIEWED BY DANIEL R. FUSFELD

In the last twenty years historians, sociologists and economists have engaged in a great reevaluation of the black experience in the United States since the Civil War. The basic question is why blacks have not been able to enter the mainstream of American life and gain their fair share of the benefits of an affluent society. The response of liberal reformers is that racial discrimination kept blacks from obtaining adequate opportunities in the labor market or the educational system; the remedy is to open the labor market and the educational system and to try to eliminate racist attitudes. In this program the national government is seen as an independent source of reform that can set matters right, although real change will take time. Opposed to this view is the conservative reaction: a free America enabled blacks slowly to make progress toward full equality against great obstacles, but Federal intervention has created a welfare state psychology that now inhibits continued development of self-reliance and economic progress in the black community. A third view is presented by Marxists, among whom Mandle is included, who argue that the present condition of blacks is the heritage of an exploitive private enterprise capitalism that has functioned to the particular disadvantage of blacks.

Mandle's chief contribution to the debate is to demonstrate that the key to economic exploitation of blacks in the post-Civil War South was continuation of the plantation economy that prevailed in the pre-1860 slave economy, but without slavery. The war had not changed the basic economic fact of abundant land and limited population, and cotton remained a crop produced with a labor-intensive technology on large centrally-managed farms. A new form of coerced labor consistent with personal freedom for blacks was needed. Sharecropping was the means developed for assuring a low-cost, low-skilled supply of labor under the control of the landlord. Although sharecropping was carried on by individual farm families working relatively small plots of land, work was organized and supervised by the landowner as a large-scale, cash-crop operation. Sharecropping did not end the plantation system, but perpetuated it. Pre-war slavery was gone, but the cotton economy with its Bourbon ascendancy continued.

Mandle shows that coercion of black labor was an important characteristic of the labor market in the post-Civil War South, and the sharecropping plantation was the chief way in which it was institutionalized. He argues that an entire culture grew up around that institutional structure, and

that the economic relationships of the system were in large part responsible for the poverty, inadequate capital accumulation, and technological backwardness of the South.

The coercion of black labor and the economy based on it did not begin to disappear until opportunities for migration north after the ending of mass immigration from Europe enabled blacks to escape coercion — only to be subjected to more subtle forms of labor coercion in the Northern cities.

Mandle rightly points out, as have a number of other writers on the subject, that redistribution of land after the Civil War ("Forty acres and a mule.") would have radically transformed the southern economy, and ended plantation agriculture. The point should have been emphasized. Northern political leaders were unwilling to transform Southern landholding patterns to provide for a system of small holdings for blacks in a fashion similar to the small holdings provisions of the Homestead Act and the various railroad land grants that enabled the Great Plains to become an area of family farms. The economic base for the resurgence of Bourbon control in the rural South remained. A full analysis of the failure of Reconstruction would treat in detail the economic, political and ideological reasons for this aspect of post-Civil War policy — indeed, that topic must move to the head of the agenda of necessary research. Unfortunately, Mandle does not discuss these issues, for he is more concerned with the effect of the new plantation agriculture on the economy of the South.

Mandle pinpoints the importance of measures designed to limit the economic mobility of rural black Southern labor, emphasizing debt peonage and state laws inhibiting Northern employers from recruiting rural labor. But he does not mention the strict vagrancy laws passed throughout the South after the Civil War. He points out that blacks had little access to land ownership, but offers no explanation of why and how they were excluded from the settlement of western lands. He notes that northern employers recruited white immigrants from Europe, but not southern blacks, and attributes that to racism on the part of employers. But economic factors were also important: European immigrants, once here, could return home only at relatively high cost, while southern blacks could return south relatively cheaply; this fact made it easier to exploit and manage the immigrant. Mandle also points out that lack of industrial development in the South made it difficult for blacks to find jobs in the cities, which also reduced their opportunities. But in some parts of the South there was an incipient movement to use low-wage black labor in industry. Mandle does not analyze why that trend was aborted.

Mandle does not believe that legal and economic constraints like debt peonage (or vagrancy laws) were significant. Here he is deceived by data showing that up to one-third of all sharecroppers moved to different landlords in any one year. This shows mobility, but at whose initiative? It is

wrong to assume that it meant inability to coerce the labor force. A tenant knows when he is cheated, and it is difficult to get him to work hard another year. Landlords know that, too: when they cheated a tenant it was better to get rid of him and find another to take his place, perhaps by paying the fine of a vagrant arrested by the sheriff for exactly that purpose. Those of us old enough to know from experience what the rural South was like even in the last days of sharecropping in the 1930s would not be misled by data that show 33 percent turnover among sharecroppers. That figure shows a high degree of labor coercion, not a low degree.

One wishes that Mandle had given greater attention to the larger economic trends that reinforced the coercion of Southern black farm labor. The world market for cotton was depressed for some fifty years after the 1860s, with low prices and low profits. Conditions were particularly bad during the quarter-century of long-wave stagnation between 1873 and 1898, when the sharecropping system was at its height. One might argue that if cotton prices had risen in the years after the Civil War as they had in the fifteen years preceding the war, the development of the Southern economy would have been entirely different. The question is moot, however: Mandle does not deal with it. I would also have liked some discussion of the effects of the depression of the 1890s, which seems to have set in motion a significant shift of blacks from the rural South into southern cities, competition with whites for jobs, and a white backlash that removed blacks from a number of occupations (carpentering and longshoring, for example) that they had filled for decades. The 1890s also began the trend of whites replacing blacks as sharecroppers, so that within thirty years in many parts of

the South a majority of sharecroppers were white rather than black. These points are not central to the argument, but they are certainly relevant, and it is a shame that Mandle did not bring them into his analysis.

Finally, Mandle gives little attention to the impact of the boll weevil and the depression of the 1930s, and the consequent decline of cotton as a staple crop. As the Southern economy changed, it was less necessary to have large numbers of low-wage workers, less necessary to maintain the plantation system. The northward migration of blacks may have been, in part, a safety valve that prevented an explosion of the exploited. Seen in this perspective the migration was both a cause of the breakup of the sharecropping plantations and a result of that breakup.

This is a useful and important book, in spite of its limitations. It takes the debate over the place of blacks in post-Civil War America one step further. It opens new lines of inquiry and raises new questions. Emphasis on coercion of black labor is a particularly strong point, as is the linkage of the society, politics and ideology of the South to its economic base in the sharecropping plantation. Freeing black slaves did not fundamentally change the economy of the South. Legally free blacks remained at the bottom of the economic and social order while their former owners remained their masters.

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Economics: An Anti-Text

by Francis Green and Petter Nore, eds.
London: The MacMillan Press Ltd. Distributed in the U.S. by
Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.
215 pp.; \$16 hb., \$6 pb.

REVIEWED BY LUIS TOHARIA

This is an altogether welcome book, especially for the many of us who find ourselves teaching standard principles or lower intermediate courses, using textbooks such as Samuelson, Lipsey and Steiner, Leftwich or Dornbusch and Fischer.¹ The aim of the book is to criticize "orthodox bourgeois" (neoclassical) economics as it is treated in these books, that is to say, at a quite elementary level. It does not pretend to be a critique of the whole body of neoclassical theory in all its sophistication. Rather, the role of the book is, according to its editors, to be "a subversive companion of the normal textbooks that are used in mainstream economics courses" (p. x), which may help to reveal their ideological undertones.

The book has already been reviewed very critically in *Capital and Class* by Tony Millwood and John Urry.² The criticisms presented in these reviews are, in my opinion, valid to a certain extent, although my general assessment is different from theirs, for I still think that the book is very valuable.

All chapters are roughly organized in a similar way: first, the orthodox theory is presented, sorting out its essential points; next, the criticisms made by nonorthodox, yet still bourgeois, economists are presented and their inadequacy pinpointed; finally, by insisting on the ideological character of both orthodox and nonorthodox bourgeois theories, an alternative analysis, drawn from a Marxist perspective, is sug-

gested rather than fully developed. This is, I think, one of the strengths of the book: to limit itself mostly to criticize orthodox theory, while directing the reader towards a possible way out in the study of Marxist economics, by including in most chapters an annotated bibliography which provides a guide for further study of the questions discussed.

The book is subdivided into four parts: besides the traditional micro/macro distinction, a first part deals with methodological questions, so often forgotten in mainstream textbooks, and a last one treats the question of the state, always blurred in standard theory and hidden within macroeconomics.

The first part ("Economic Methods and Assumptions") might be considered to be the core of the book, for it is there where the most general critiques of orthodox theory are presented. The three chapters are centered around the idea of the individual as the basic unit of analysis in orthodox theory, a theme giving name to Chapter 2 by Sue Himmelweit, where it is most fully developed. Himmelweit shows how this choice prevents any fundamental social change from being taken into account by the theory. Orthodox theory is committed to leave unaltered the prevailing (bourgeois) social order. Himmelweit also criticizes the Cambridge critique of orthodox theory, as merely representing an attempt to show its internal inconsistency while leaving unaltered its basic method, namely, individualism.³ All along this chapter, the notion of "commodity fetishism" remains latent. This is, I think, a minor flaw. While the concept is there, it could have been explicitly brought to the fore, linking it with the fact that neoclassical theory gives an ahistorical content to categories (not only the individual, but also the notions of e.g. goods, capital, wages, and profits) which are specific of a historical formation, namely, capitalism.