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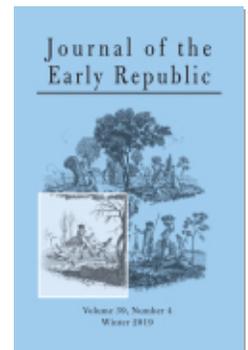
The Sweetness of Life: Southern Planters at Home by Eugene
D. Genovese (review)

Matthew Karp

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The Sweetness of Life: Southern Planters at Home. By Eugene D. Genovese. Edited by Douglas Ambrose. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. 275. Paper, \$29.00.)

Reviewed by Matthew Karp

Eugene Genovese died in 2012, leaving behind what is probably the most influential body of scholarship produced by a historian of the slaveholding South. Over almost half a century of writing—an epoch fully as long as the antebellum era itself—Genovese’s books virtually defined the field. From *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (1965) through to *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), and, with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (1983) and *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (2005)—Genovese unspooled a distinctive and powerful interpretation of antebellum slave society.

In a preface to this posthumously published volume, Douglas Ambrose offers a succinct summary of Genovese’s fundamental insight, which continued to anchor his work even as his political commitments moved from the Marxist left to the Catholic right: “The master–slave relation—an unequal but nonetheless contested struggle—provided the foundation of the southern social order and ‘permeated the lives and thought of all who lived in the society it dominated’” (xiv). Like most truly powerful historical interpretations, the significance of Genovese’s view of the Old South has become clearer through intense argument, not unanimous assent. In the last twenty years, even as much scholarship has overturned key elements of the Genovese interpretation—in particular, the idea that southern masters were innately hostile to capitalist modernity—much of the debate has unfolded on Genovese’s terms. Antebellum planters, we see today more vividly than ever, were a class defined not by region, agriculture, or even race, but by their ownership of slaves. While the supposed intimacy of that class conflict remains subject to fierce dispute, its ubiquity and foundational centrality does not.

Before his death, Genovese had almost completed a final book on the lifestyle habits and everyday cultural world of the master class. Lightly edited and insightfully introduced by Ambrose, this volume now takes

its place on the shelf as the great historian's final contribution to the history of the South. And in many ways, as Ambrose is at some pains to argue, *The Sweetness of Life* fits comfortably within Genovese's larger oeuvre.

Like most of his major works, including *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and *The Mind of the Master Class*, the book is structured not by chronology or geography but by theme. A topic is introduced—here, they include dining, hunting, dancing, and courtship—and a cascade of episodes is enumerated. Seldom does an episode or a character last more than a paragraph; most, in fact, earn no more than a sentence, although several favored witnesses (from Thomas Jefferson to Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson) recur throughout the text.

This thematic discussion ranges far across time and place, attentive to peculiarities and transformations, but nevertheless approaching the Old South as an essentially cohesive unit, from Virginia in the 1770s to Texas in the 1850s. “Nothing much changed in Georgia or anywhere else in the first half of the nineteenth century,” Genovese says of the southern mania for horse racing (238). This is not quite his verdict on every subject covered here, but it is often the guiding assumption.

At its best, *The Sweetness of Life* presents a collage of vivid and striking images from an oligarchic society, in which even the lightest pleasures depended on the heavy weight of bondage. The rollicking celebrations at the Georgia racetrack were ever darkened by the possibility that gambling losses might cause the sale of slaves. In the heat of South Carolina or Louisiana, a summer feast of venison patty, palmetto cabbage, and terrapin stew was endurable only thanks to the enslaved workers sweatily propelling the “punkah” fan on the ceiling (32). In all his works, it would be hard to find a better metaphor for Genovese's view of the pervasive master–slave relationship than the practice of enslaved domestics sleeping on the floor next to the owner's bed.

As usual, Genovese draws on a deep immersion in primary materials and an astonishing command of detail. Yet frequently here the details themselves threaten to overwhelm any larger thematic analysis. How important is it that John C. Calhoun had an unusual preference for Madeira after dinner, that Robert E. Lee possessed a “handsomely carved piano,” that the oysters served at the Montgomery Convention were “splendid,” or that Varina Davis heroically found eggs to make eggnog for Christmas at the Confederate White House (72, 51, 158)? Such observations, sometimes illuminating, sometimes trivial, tend to flit

past without sustained or linking commentary. While in previous books Genovese accumulated examples to build an argument—about slave-naming practices, for instance, or planter views of the Middle Ages—here he seems mostly content to let the examples speak for themselves.

There is a further problem. In a brief introduction, Genovese rather defensively admits his deep admiration for southern planters: “Yes, I do ‘like’ them,” he says, but—echoed here by Ambrose—such esteem only deepens his sense of their tragic blame for the “historical enormity” of American bondage (2). A capacious sympathy and a fine tragic sensibility are no doubt two of Genovese’s major virtues as a historian. But in this volume, more so than even his other late works, sympathy shades toward sentimentality, and worse, an intellectually dubious nostalgia.

The title is taken from a wistful quotation from Talleyrand, which serves as an epigraph: “Those who have not lived before the Revolution will never know the sweetness of life.” This announces the backward-looking angle of vision that informs the whole of the book. Alongside the vast range of manuscript materials, published letters, diaries, travel literature, and other contemporary sources, there is a substantial deposit of memoirs, early biographies, and local or regional histories, most of them composed, like Talleyrand’s epigraph, long after “the Revolution.” A number of Genovese’s most colorful stories even date from the twentieth century, woven in seamlessly with contemporary materials, and only barely visible within the thicket-like footnotes.

In this sense, it is appropriate that the book’s cover image—a white-pillared plantation house, with handsome carriages in the driveway—is a *Currier & Ives* lithograph that dates from 1871. While the original copy of Genovese’s first book depicted a slave auction in progress (from a sketch drawn before the Civil War), this last cover is so flooded with post-revolutionary nostalgia that it was chosen as the bottle emblem for Southern Comfort liqueur. In this trajectory, too, there is something of the tragic.

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