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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

After Slavery:
Black Labour and the Postwar Southern Economy

John T. O'Brien

Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf 1979).

Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1977).

Daniel A. Novak, *The Wheel of Servitude: Black Forced Labor after Slavery* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1978).

Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press 1978).

Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1978).

THE VICTORY OF THE North in the Civil War did much more than crush the southern Confederacy. It also abolished slavery and inaugurated a massive effort on the part of the victors to spread the practices, values, and benefits of the free labour system throughout the South. The three Reconstruction constitutional amendments, civil rights acts, and military reconstruction bills set the terms under which the South was to be transformed. In the conquered area army officers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, northern philanthropists, southern unionists, and freedmen promoted change away from traditional courses and toward the ideal of democratic, capitalist development. They struggled to remake the South in the image of the North at the ballot box and the work place, in the public schools, and in legislative assemblies. They achieved some success, but suffered many failures as well. Southern whites remained committed to racial superiority, freedmen remained poor, and the southern economy performed badly. These failures were obvious by the mid-1870s, when the reconstruction experiment officially ended. The

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five volumes reviewed here are anatomies of those failures. Their patient is the defeated South: its symptoms included black poverty, racist institutions, and economic stagnation. Despite efforts to integrate the South into the nation's democratic, free labour economy, the region continued to be characterized by a sluggish economy and authoritarian labour practices. These studies are concerned, as most postwar southerners were, with the question of labour.

Secessionists gambled for high stakes when they left the Union. They staked their lives, property, and peculiar institution on their ability to compel the North, at the negotiating table or on the battle field, into acceding to their demands. The ensuing war took a terrible toll of lives, and defeat not only brought the destruction of slavery but also threatened to break up the plantations, distribute land among former slaves, and eradicate the social base of the South's ruling class. As the Confederacy's fortunes darkened, great and revolutionary changes seemed to be in the offing. Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* chronicles the daily economic and social disruptions rippling out from the battlefields to the plantations and analyzes the changing relations between masters and slaves, citizens and freedmen, from the firing on Fort Sumter to the beginning of Radical Reconstruction. Using diaries, newspapers, and former slave narratives, he takes readers on a leisurely tour from Virginia to Texas. He reveals a South beleaguered by Yankees from without and by restive slaves and anxious masters within. His close-up depictions of ordinary whites and blacks, his movements backwards and forwards in time, and his emphasis on nuance and irony combine effectively to slow the passage of time and to show a society not so much collapsing as being pried apart in slow motion. The South's unconditional defeat seemed to set the stage for a revolutionary transformation, but as the book's title indicates the potential transformation was limited and conditioned by the weight of history and tradition, which simultaneously shaped the imaginations both of the victors and the vanquished and tempered the freedmen's aspirations.

Early in the war, before Union armies had penetrated deeply into the southern hinterland and before the North had committed itself to emancipation, masters and slaves responded ambiguously to the disruptions caused in their daily lives by the hardships and uncertainties of the war. While some slaves grew restive and recalcitrant, others seemed unmoved, and while some masters fretted about their slaves' loyalties, others loudly claimed that slaves would forever stand by and protect them. After 1863, however, a clear pattern of slave response emerged. Whenever Yankee troops entered their neighbourhoods, most slaves fled to their lines for freedom. This was the moment of truth for slaveholders. Often their most trusted slaves deserted them, while in many instances those considered rascals remained loyal. The war made the unpredictable predictable. It revealed, "often in ways that defied description, the sheer complexity of the master-slave relationship, and the conflicts, contradictions, and ambivalence that relationship generated in each individual." Slave behaviour, Litwack adds, "invariably rested on a precarious balance between the habit of obedience and the intense desire for freedom." (162) Yankee military successes tipped the balance increasingly in favour of freedom.

Emancipation threw southern labour relations into a chaos and revealed to planters their utter dependence upon black workers. Fanciful hopes of replacing freedmen with white immigrants quickly vanished, leaving white southerners obsessed with the problem of black labour. Planters exorcised the demon of dependence by claiming that freedmen needed them more than they needed freedmen, that freedmen would revert to barbarism and fail to feed themselves without guidance and assistance from planters. This

revived planter paternalism offered protection for obedience, harmony for deference. Describing themselves as the freedmen's best friends, planters passed black codes, refused to sell land to blacks, obstructed black education, and resorted to terrorism and coercion when freedmen tried to rise above their station. Although planters admitted their military defeat and the impossibility of re-establishing slavery, they stoutly maintained that their cause had been just, that slavery had been morally defensible, and that blacks could never become their equals. Whatever else might be said about them, Litwack finds that their behaviour was at least consistent with their ideals.

The same can not be said for the Yankees. The emancipation proclamation turned an army of conquest into one of liberation, but it did little to diminish northern racial bigotry. Litwack published in 1961 *North of Slavery*, a searing indictment of northern antebellum racism. In the home of the abolitionists, most blacks could not vote, compete freely on the labour market, nor mix with whites in churches and schools. In the midst of a fearful struggle against the Confederacy, many northerners came to appreciate the utility of destroying slavery and enlisting blacks in the army, but most still found it impossible to imagine blacks as equals or to consider emancipation, as distinct from preserving the Union, worth much sacrifice. Evidence of mistreatment of blacks by northern soldiers poured in from every front and contraband camp. Soldiers' racial attitudes, Litwack claims, ranged from "condescension to outright hostility." (132) The history of the emancipation proclamation and of the controversy over allowing free blacks to serve in the army indicated clearly that military expediency was far more persuasive to northern whites than principles of racial equality. When the military emergency passed, the North's commitment to black freedom was compromised by peacetime concerns for restoring order, promoting loyalty among southern whites, and protecting private property.

Once the federal land seizure and redistribution program collapsed in late 1865, the vast majority of freedmen had to work lands owned by white men. Army officers and Freedmen's Bureau agents oversaw the transition on plantations from slave to free labour. Like planters, they fretted over the labour problem and wondered aloud whether freedmen would resume working quickly and voluntarily. To protect the freedmen's interests, they insisted upon written annual labour contracts and established courts for adjudicating contractual breaches and other disputes. At the same time, they reduced the freedmen's bargaining position by denying rations and material assistance to able-bodied freedmen and by punishing freedmen for refusing to sign contracts. Thus most freedmen drifted back to plantations and recommenced working on terms, which, except for wage payments, resembled traditional arrangements.

Finding that they could not escape agricultural labour, freedmen attempted to modify the conditions of their work. They slowed down, withdrew women and children from the fields, resisted the reimposition of corporal punishments, and changed employers after the harvest. At the end of 1865, freedmen throughout the South grumbled against low pay, gang labour, and suffocating white supervision. Many insisted on working for shares. Litwack points out that from the freedmen's perspective sharecropping, though a poor second choice after land ownership, promised greater independence and incentive than wage-paid gang labour. But sharecropping, instead of serving as a stepping stone to prosperity and autonomy, evolved into a system that produced debt, dependency, and harsh labour exploitation. "If the freedman's 'mania' for renting and owning land came to symbolize his yearning for economic independence and personal freedom," Litwack adds, "the betrayal of those expectations confirmed the persis-

tence of the old dependency. The former slaves found that all too little had changed." (448)

Thrust back into a position of economic dependence, freedmen searched desperately for other avenues to independence. They took control of their churches and supported schools for their children, initiatives which "reflected a growing if not fully developed sense of community and racial pride, even as [they] sharpened the separation from and accentuated the differences with both their northern friends and native whites." (500) Freedmen also organized politically and laid claim to equal civil and political rights in a series of state conventions held in late 1865. In these conventions blacks called for racial reconciliation based on white recognition of their right to education, equal justice, and the ballot. Blacks who insisted upon economic reparations or land confiscations were drowned out by those urging the equal application of fair laws. The moderate position prevailed: it scored its most impressive success when black men won the vote in 1867. Litwack concludes his study with a description of election day in that year. Somberly and with great dignity, tens of thousands of freedmen cast their first ballots, most for the Republican party. "Except for a few sporadic skirmishes," Litwack notes gloomily, "election day in most of the South passed quietly — and with it, some mistakenly thought, the old political and social order." (556)

Been in the Storm So Long surveys the tumultuous years of the war and Presidential Reconstruction from the perspective of Afro-Americans. The result is a rich portrayal of hope and despair, boldness and temporizing, the promise of a liberating change and the security of an inequitable known, but another result is a lushness of detail that sometimes obscures patterns of behaviour. From the freedmen's perspective, all too little changed after emancipation. Power and wealth remained in the hands of whites who, for the most part, neither experienced guilt about the past nor wavered in their opposition to black equality. No matter how courageous or bold were the freedmen, the postwar settlement accepted by the North severely limited their ability to change dramatically their position at the bottom of southern society. Litwack lays most of the blame for the failures of Reconstruction on the North, for only the victors could have overturned the southern social order, a prerequisite for black advancement. Instead, the North reneged on its promise to redistribute land to freedmen, helped deliver black labour to planters on terms more favourable to employers than to employees, and abandoned freedmen to the rule of local white politicians. In the book, almost all northern whites are depicted as racists and most northern policies the result more of expediency than principle. Regrettably, the story ends when the North enacted the military reconstruction acts, mandating that new constitutions be written in the South and enfranchising black men. Litwack's pessimistic conclusion infers that the downward slide of freedmen continued unabated, but such an inference seems unwarranted in view of the advances made by blacks during Radical Reconstruction and the level of white terrorism aimed at blocking black progress and returning blacks to their "place."

Neither politics nor law play much part in the subjugation and impoverishment of freedmen in Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch's *One Kind of Freedom*. Cliometricians Ransom and Sutch are primarily concerned with analyzing the "economic consequences of emancipation" in five cotton states, and they are convinced that the postwar cotton economy effectively controlled and impoverished freedmen. For blacks the economic consequences of emancipation were uninspiring: slavery schooled them in unskilled agricultural labour and only a few learned trades; postwar planters and employers denied them access to land owning and skilled jobs; cotton production stagnated after the war, leaving most black labourers and sharecroppers little opportunity for improving

their standard of living. Freedmen gained economic freedom, the chance to choose employers, "but the southern economy emerged poor and stagnant, and the black man was the poorest of southerners." None of these results were inevitable. "It is our thesis that the lack of progress in the post-emancipation era was the consequence of flawed economic institutions erected in the wake of the Confederate defeat. This book is our attempt to identify these flaws and to assess the price southerners paid as a consequence." (2)

Both planters and freedmen had reason to be optimistic about the future in the immediate aftermath of the war. Extraordinarily high cotton prices justified the planters' decision to produce the crop with black gang labour. At the same time, the authors contend, freedmen benefitted from emancipation, receiving more than twice the compensation, as a percentage of the value of what they produced, than they had as slaves. Their actual earnings, however, increased by only 30 per cent because they produced less as freedmen. Between 1867 and 1870 freedmen forced planters to abandon the gang labour system in favour of sharecropping because they were dissatisfied with their low pay and close planter supervision. Faced with labour unrest and rapidly falling cotton prices, most planters yielded. By 1870, the authors claim, sharecropping had generally replaced gang labour, and with this change the plantation itself ceased to exist.

In accounting for the poor performance of the cotton economy, Ransom and Sutch examine a number of hypotheses — war time property destruction, diminished labour supply, the loss of benefits from economies of scale inherent in the shift to sharecropping — and find them all unconvincing. They argue that the emergence of new credit institutions after the war, more than any other single development, blocked economic growth and entrapped blacks in a cycle of debt and poverty. The postwar South, apparently a graveyard for planters and a purgatory for freedmen, was a paradise for rural merchants. They were the new winners in the New South. Their control over credit enabled them to exploit ruthlessly black labourers and to enervate the cotton economy.

Rural merchants filled the void created by the demise of antebellum cotton factors. Before the war, cotton factors linked planters to sources of credit and markets. In return for a commission on the crops they sold for planters and on the goods sold to planters during the agricultural year, factors extended bank credit to planters, who secured credit with liens on their property, slaves, and crops. As a result of the war and emancipation, both ends of this credit system were unsettled. On one end, all southern banks failed during the war, creating a severe capital shortage. The postwar southern banks, now part of the national banking system, were concentrated in the larger cities, short of capital, and indifferent to the credit needs of the agricultural hinterland. On the other end, emancipation destroyed the planters' most valuable form of property, and at the same time falling property values diminished the collateral held by most planters. The shift to sharecropping meant that factors would have to do business with hundreds of petty producers lacking the property or reputation needed to secure loans. Most factors turned to other enterprises. Their places in the economic ecology of the region were assumed by a far more pestiferous species, the rural merchant.

Merchants operated outside the areas serviced by southern urban banks. Their bailiwicks were the thousands of cross roads and railroad sidings in the rural South where producers brought their cotton to be ginned and shipped. By securing good credit ratings from firms like R.G. Dun and Company, merchants could order goods on consignment from northern industrialists and jobbers and set up businesses without having to invest much capital. Merchants extended credit to small producers shunned by bankers. They kept their businesses small and their circle of

customers limited to avoid unwanted competition from other merchants. Familiarity with customers allowed merchants to discriminate between dependable and questionable borrowers, and crop lien laws, which gave merchants priority in claiming the produce of defaulting creditors, protected their investments. Rural merchants, then, combined the functions of provisioning labourers formerly carried out by planters and of financing production which factors once provided to planters.

Scattered throughout the rural cotton South, but rarely clustering in groups of more than two, merchants enjoyed a territorial monopoly over the custom of farmers and tenants near their stores. The control of credit, rather than the merchants' stock of goods, gave them monopoly power, for while cash customers could purchase goods from farmers and other merchants at reasonable prices, most farmers and tenants needed credit which could only be obtained from the local merchant and which came with many attached strings. One string was the enormous price mark-up on credit purchases, averaging between 30 and 70 per cent above cash prices. Another was the requirement that customers purchase all goods through the creditor, and a third was that debtors concentrate their labours in cotton production. In this way, the lion's share of the farmers' and tenants' earnings went to the merchant, and regional producers were forced to plant cotton even when their self-interest dictated food production. The more cotton the producers grew, the more cotton prices dipped and the more dependent they became on credit purchases of foodstuffs. Gradually, because of the merchants' hold on tenants and farmers, the cotton South became an importer of food and overly dependent upon the cotton market. Only merchants profitted from these trends. Tenants and croppers of both races slipped into debt, the regional economy stagnated, and capitalists chose not to invest in agricultural improvement or local industry.

While merchants plagued the cotton South and stunted its economic growth, white racism misshaped the region's economy. Whites were indisposed to educating blacks, employing them outside agriculture, or selling them lands. Trapped at the bottom of a stagnating economy, blacks could not improve their position except at the expense of whites, who showed no willingness to concede them a larger share of wealth. Racism, the authors contend, "distorted the economic institutions of the South, reshaping them so that the market signals — which normally direct resources toward their most productive employment and provide the incentive to investment and innovations that propel economic growth — were either not generated or were greatly weakened." (177) Racist whites succeeded in impoverishing and controlling blacks but at the expense of ruining the entire economy. The new credit institutions robbed producers of the fruits of their labour and also depressed labour productivity, impeded technological innovation, and fostered cotton overproduction. The kind of freedom extended to blacks left them stranded in the South, landless, denied alternative employment, and eminently exploitable by merchants. The economy "failed to reward individual initiative on the part of blacks and was therefore ill-suited to their economic advancement." It preserved "the inequalities originally inherited from slavery" and "tended to cripple all economic growth." (186)

The cotton economy, the authors argue, so entrapped blacks in poverty and dependence that political repression and legal disabilities were rarely needed to keep them in their lowly station. The economy, based as it was on notions of blacks' laziness and irresponsibility, guaranteed their failure and reinforced white supremacy. So self-fulfilling was the system that "it required a series of shocks from without to awaken the southern economy from the stupor into which it had fallen." (196) The boll weevil blight and the opening of jobs in the North for blacks after 1890 breached

the outer defenses of the system and fostered a small but growing migration of black labourers out of southern agriculture. Southern legislatures responded to the unsettling of labour relations with racist enactments. "Not until after the economic system began to lose its power to insure that the racial 'inferiority' of blacks would remain well established," the authors claim, "did southern states begin to pass Jim Crow laws." (197) The legal crackdown failed, however, to staunch the flow of blacks out of the cotton South or to preserve the postwar cotton economy. Today that system is only an unpleasant memory, but, as the authors conclude sadly, its legacy of racism continues "to poison our society and to weaken and distort our economy." (199)

A model of clear and logical argumentation, *One Kind of Freedom* raises almost as many questions as it answers. Like *Time on the Cross* by Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, it attempts to lay bare the workings of the southern economy and explain the treatment and behaviour of Afro-American workers by economic modeling and profit-maximizing behaviouralism. In both books, the core economic dynamics are wrapped tightly in the gauze of racism, which together determine individual and mass action. Missing from the calculations of economic performance or racial interaction are considerations about the role of the state, law, politics, social pressures, ideology, or culture. The result of such narrow analysis is at times paradoxical. Thus, in *Time on the Cross*, the system of rewards and incentives held out to slaves in part explains the economic success of the slave South, and in *One Kind of Freedom* the lack of incentives for free black workers accounts in large part for low productivity and the weak economy. At other times, the results are puzzling. *One Kind of Freedom* consigns planters to oblivion after 1870, but is it true that the planter class ceased to exist after that date? Is it reasonable to believe that the boll weevil and black outmigration, and not the threat posed by Populism to entrenched economic and political élites, triggered Jim Crow legislation? Populism does not merit even a mention in *One Kind of Freedom*, and yet the Jim Crow laws, especially those taking the vote away from blacks and large numbers of poor whites and segregating public facilities, appear to have been aimed against lower class political insurgency by robbing the poor of the vote and reinforcing racial animosity among them. Ransom and Sutch have performed an enormously valuable service by analyzing some of the workings of the postwar cotton economy. Ironically, their greatest service may be to sharpen the focus of subsequent studies on the interplay, which the authors do not exploit, between the economy and socio-political structures and forces.

Daniel A. Novak fleshes out and modifies some of the findings from *One Kind of Freedom* in his short legal history, *The Wheel of Servitude*. Freedmen, Novak argues, never had a chance of freely pursuing their own economic self-interest. Their erstwhile allies, the Union army, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the Radical Republicans, gave too little attention to economic liberty, concentrating instead on civil and political rights. If the Yankees gave scant attention to the labour question, the planters did not make the same error. Their black codes made vagrancy a criminal offense, punished employers for competing energetically among themselves for black workers, reduced the economic options open to blacks, permitted the apprenticing of black minors to planters against the will of their parents, and legalized the convict labour system. The Bureau struck down some of these statutes, but more importantly allowed the anti-enticement and convict lease laws to stand. The Bureau also helped solve the planters' labour problems by persuading and coercing freedmen into signing annual contracts while refusing to set minimum wage or share levels for workers.

Radical governments in the South

offered some relief to freedmen by giving labour first lien on crops and by making employers and workers equally liable for breaches of contracts. Nevertheless, even during Radical rule, anti-enticement and convict lease laws operated and lower courts had little difficulty nullifying the effects of fair labour laws. After the Radical regimes collapsed, the legal structures designed to keep black workers "in a state of *quasi-slavery* were refined, strengthened, and made part of the fabric of southern life and law." (29) Throughout the South, the lien laws reflected changing power relations among merchants, labourers, and planters: immediately after the war, desperate law makers gave merchants first lien on crops; during Radical Reconstruction labourers received it; and finally after Redemption planters held it. Once the law favoured planters, they "got into the business of lending supplies themselves." (31) Thus did land owners fashion a legal system to support their own privileges at the expense of black workers. Their legal machinery persisted well into the twentieth century because federal courts and the Justice Department only belatedly and half-heartedly attacked legal peonage, and because southern legislatures, always alive to planter interests, found numerous ways to blunt those attacks.

Novak's findings lend support to Jay R. Mandle's claim that a plantation mode of economy dominated postwar southern agriculture. Central to the plantation mode of production is the employment of laws or other non-market factors to control and allocate labour. "What is essential to the functioning of a plantation economy," he writes, "is the existence of a nonmarket mechanism by which labor is mobilized in larger numbers and at lower costs for low-productivity agricultural work than would be the case with an operative free labor market." (14) Mandle's inquiry into *The Roots of Black Poverty* takes him over much of the same evidence examined by Ransom and Sutch and leads him to similar conclusions in several areas. He too claims that the ultimate source of black poverty lay in the underdeveloped state of the southern economy and that economic underdevelopment resulted in part from the impoverishment of black workers. The plight of the freedmen is by now familiar: the failure of land reform permitted planters to keep their lands and retain their economic and political power; denied access to land or alternative employment in or outside the South, most freedmen had to return to plantations as wage labourers. Freedmen forced a shift to sharecropping, but the new arrangement left authority and decision making about crop mixes with land owners. Anti-enticement laws and informal agreements among planters setting uniform wage and share levels discouraged competition for labourers and thereby reduced the freedmen's bargaining power. Blacks were able to move geographically within the system, and about a third of them changed landlords each year, but few could advance to land ownership or find work outside agriculture. Thus a labour market of sorts existed, but it functioned within narrow bounds and much to the detriment of black labourers.

The plantation mode of production dominated at least 300 southern black-belt counties as late as 1910. There cotton was still king, productivity low, and the country store ubiquitous. Planters profitted handsomely from the misery of workers and were supremely indifferent to labour-saving innovations. They did not demand improved machinery, and consequently inventors patented far fewer machines to improve cotton production than for corn or wheat growing and harvesting. In this way inefficiency appeared rational. "Behaving in a manner which economists consider rational," Mandle comments wryly, "southern planters refrained from shifting to more capital intensive but also more expensive 'advanced' production methods." Their "decision not to search for new production methods at once is testimony to the profit-maximizing behavior of the planters and to the efficacy of the

check on black labor's search for alternative employment opportunities." (70) Only after black workers began leaving the rural South did the plantation mode of production change, and only then did planters show greater interest in technological innovation and land improvement.

Jonathan M. Wiener, like Novak and Mandle, believes that planters ruled the postwar South. *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* is an ambitious, daringly constructed work. It begins with a demographic study of the top ten per cent of planters in five Alabama black-belt counties, which shows that about half of the 1860 élite families were still at the top of the heap in 1870. Their assets had diminished because of emancipation and land devaluation, but they held a larger proportion of the smaller pool of wealth. The "persistence rate" of the élite at first appears unimpressive until Wiener points out that the élite persisted only slightly more frequently during the 1850s. The other half of the top ten per cent of planters in 1870 was made up not of Yankee speculators, as some have claimed, but of southerners who had recently improved their holdings. The newcomers presumably shared the traditional élite's ideology. From this slender empirical base, Wiener concludes that the planter class survived the upheavals of the 1860s. He subsequently argues that the planter class profoundly shaped postwar politics and society in those five counties, in the state, and indeed in the former Confederacy.

The relationship between the planter class and black labourers which Wiener discusses fits closely the descriptions offered by Novak and Mandle and therefore it differs from Ransom and Sutch's in that the planter, not the merchant, exercises control over freedmen. Alabama's black code expressed the planters' racial and labour outlooks. Freedmen forced the shift to sharecropping, but that shift in no way lessened the land owner's power. When freedmen withheld their labour or resisted corporal discipline, planters resorted to legal and extra-legal coercion of labour. Planters, Wiener argues, took Alabama and the South on the "Prussian Road" to modernity. Instead of practising capital intensive agriculture and permitting a free labour market to function as western commercial farmers did, they relied on "the coercion of labor, to extract a larger surplus not by increasing productivity through improved technology, but by squeezing more out of the laborers." In so doing, they preserved and intensified "the authoritarian and repressive elements of traditional social relations." (71-2)

Alabama's Radical government threatened the planter class in two ways. It gave labourers first lien on crops for unpaid wages or shares. It also attempted to promote industry by enacting a general incorporation law, offering corporations the privilege of limited liability, and prohibiting the state from directly assisting internal improvements. Planters wrecked the Radicals' plans when they redeemed Alabama in the 1870s. They further displayed their animosity towards industrial development by obstructing the growth of Birmingham.

Planters did not wish to promote an industrial transformation of their state that might alter favourable political alignments or siphon off black agricultural workers. They did see, however, the utility of encouraging profitable resource extraction. They supported a railroad scheme linking Birmingham to Mobile that would carry iron ore and coal from that city to the port for shipment to industrial centres outside the state. Birmingham interests favoured an alternative plan linking their city to Louisville and encouraging iron manufacture and coke production at home. The planters fought hard and nearly won. From their perspective, Wiener writes, "the object of development was not the creation of an industrial economy, but rather the strengthening of agriculture in general and plantation agriculture in particular." (182) Only an eleventh hour intervention by the powerful Louisville and Nashville Railroad saved Birmingham

from defeat. The planters continued to vent their hostility by refusing to invest in the city's industries and by blocking internal improvements beneficial to the city.

Planters were no more enamoured of merchants than industrialists, and after skirmishing against them with indifferent results they triumphed over them convincingly in the 1870s. Immediately after the war, capital-starved planters acquiesced to a bill giving merchants first lien in order to attract capital. Some planters went even further and opened country stores. Wiener thinks that the emergence of planter-merchants constituted "the most significant feature of postwar social developments," for then many planters "gained an additional lever for extracting an economic surplus from the underlying population." (84-5) Radicals momentarily upset this arrangement when they gave labourers the first lien. Even in this period, when planters allied with merchants against freedmen and white Radicals, the planter press waged an ideological battle against merchants, calling them parasites and mocking commercial values as inferior to the manly, honourable, and gentile values of land owners. By 1871 planters possessed sufficient political power to force a weak Radical government to pass a lien law giving them priority over all other creditors on the crops of defaulting sharecroppers. Four years later, a Redeemer legislature enacted the "sunset law" prohibiting merchants from trading with blacks between sunset and sunrise. In 1883 planters received the "iron clad" lien, superior to merchants' liens, on the crops and property of debtors. Merchants tacitly admitted their defeat by moving in considerable numbers out of the black-belt counties and into white yeoman counties. Planters pressed their advantage further in the 1880s by allying with agrarian radicals in calling for the outlawing of merchant liens. A merchant counterattack, spearheaded by the demand that planter liens be disallowed, brought planters to their senses and induced them to compromise. As a result merchant liens were outlawed in black-belt counties, but strengthened in white counties.

Wiener believes that planters triumphed throughout the South as well as in Alabama during the nineteenth century, and that planters, not industrial and commercial promoters, turned the New South creed to their advantage. If he is correct, then Ransom and Sutch suffered myopic vision when they focused on merchants and left planters in the background. The history of the crop lien laws offers impressive support to the view shared by Wiener, Mandle, and Novak, and points up the limits of the cliometric analysis. This important dispute aside, these studies agree on some of the essential causes of black poverty and oppression after emancipation. They argue persuasively that slavery badly prepared blacks for employment outside agriculture after the war. Freedom without economic independence became something less than freedom, even the pinched freedom white industrial workers in the North enjoyed, because those holding wealth and power in the South blocked black advancement and because the postwar economy stagnated. While planters and merchants extorted a high proportion of the earnings of black workers, southern courts, sheriffs, and vigilantes periodically disciplined and punished dissatisfied blacks. The same system that delivered cheap black labour to land owners enervated the entire agricultural economy and made capitalists and planters reluctant to modernize and improve agricultural production. Three decades after emancipation, most Afro-Americans were mired deeply in debt and dependency.

All the studies of Reconstruction and its aftermath reviewed here explore and bemoan the tragic failure of the nation to live up to its egalitarian ideals. Northerners, from President Andrew Johnson down to sub-assistant commissioners of the Freedmen's Bureau, bear much of the blame for that failure. There can be little doubt that many army officers and Bureau agents treated freedmen shabbily, but

emphasizing their racism obscures a more important problem. Once the national government abandoned land reform, federal officers in the South, whether racists or racial egalitarians, could do little to improve the freedmen's material well-being. They confronted a social problem unknown in the America of their time, the existence of a mass rural proletariat in need of work which could only be supplied by land owners. Faced with this unprecedented problem, federal officers applied the time-tested values and practices of the free labour economy of the North. Years later planter-dominated legislatures rigged the labour market, but the basic problem was that even a free labour market produced different and less satisfying social consequences for black workers in the plantation South than it did for free workers in northern rural districts, where the majority of the tillers of the soil owned it. When the Virginia legislature copied the Pennsylvania vagrancy statute in 1866, the lawmakers knew perfectly well that it would be far more coercive in their state than it was in Pennsylvania. It is not at all clear whether freedmen would have fared much better in the postwar South if vagrancy and anti-enticement laws had not been enacted so long as land remained in the hands of their former owners. When scholars declare that freedmen did not prosper in the South, they are at once stating an empirically provable fact and inferring a comparison with white workers. There never existed, however, a large class of landless white workers, analogous to the freedmen, who had to work others' lands. Thus, while racism surely worked against blacks, it is hard to determine whether a white rural proletariat would have fared much better in a plantation economy.

The one group whose historical experiences was most like those of freedmen was southern poor whites, croppers, and tenants. Unfortunately, little is known about this class either before or after the Civil War, and the studies under review ignore them. In *The Populist Moment* Lawrence Goodwyn examined the debilitating effects of debt and the crop lien system upon tens of thousands of small white farmers and tenants in the South during the 1870s and 1880s. Whereas Goodwyn explored the connections between conditions surrounding southern farmers and their responses to them, the books reviewed here concern themselves mostly with detailing the conditions and describing the treatment of blacks. The only black response to oppression given attention is their insistence upon working for shares. These studies extend in time and into freedom the analyses of black oppression under slavery. Valuable for their analyses of the structures of oppression, they do not carry forward the rich social history of Afro-Americans which recent scholars of enslaved blacks have provided. They hardly touch at all the histories of the black family or the culture of the freedmen, nor do they help to construct a coherent narrative out of such diverse chapters in black history as the migration to Kansas in the 1870s or the rise of the Colored Farmers Alliance in the following decade. Only after the histories of southern black and white labouring people are written will the activities of planters, merchants, and politicians be more fully comprehensible. These studies of the postwar South have carefully dissected the region's political economy and laid bare its economic and democratic failures. Social histories of southern working people are now urgently needed.