

Book Review

The Crux of Race

John McMillian

Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 576 pp.

In the winter of 1991, several hundred historians, journalists, students, and laypersons gathered at Wake Forest University for a commemorative symposium on W. J. Cash's classic study, *The Mind of the South* (1941).¹ One participant, Larry Tise, described the event as "a *happening* . . . in the 1960s sense of the word." C. Vann Woodward, perhaps the most distinguished historian ever to study the American South, noted the large number of attendees who were not professional scholars and found himself explaining that this "cultural phenomenon" owed to something more than a simple interest in Cash's fifty-year-old book. In addition, people were inspired into attendance by his *subject*. It probably should not be surprising, then, that many of the panel discussions provoked unusually strong reactions. Many of the most contentious questions involved the degree to which historical legacies of racism and white supremacy have become manifest in the South's contemporary identity. As one observer noted, many participants "seemed moved by a desire to see, at long last, a satisfactory resolution of the South's history of oppression."²

But this will not be so easily accomplished. As Leon Litwack demonstrates with his compelling new book, *Trouble in Mind: Black*

Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow, the intractable nature of racism, in the South and in the nation at large, has been a fundamental feature of postwar American life. Emancipation from slavery hardly meant the advent of freedom for the 4 million African Americans who lived south of the Mason-Dixon line at the close of the Civil War, and the legacy of Southern racism remains a flash point of controversy today. What else could account for the perennial battles over the meaning of the Confederate flag? While most Americans see the "Stars and Bars" as a salient reminder of slavery, secession, and segregation, many others hold that the flag simply invokes an array of immemorial Southern traditions, ranging from patriotism, honor in battle, and chivalry toward women to picket fences and apple pie. This latter tendency of thought has even been reduced to a bumper sticker sometimes seen in the South, featuring a Confederate flag resting next to the inscription: "Heritage Without Hate." Perhaps the academic equivalent of this notion can be found in Eugene Genovese's attempted rehabilitation of the conservative intellectual tradition of the Old South, despite the fact that this ideology has always served as a bastion for white supremacy.³ Both of these attempts to divorce an ill-defined "Southern heritage" from the racism upon which this heritage revolves are doomed to failure, for without a ubiquitous tradition of white domination, the South would simply not be the South. One might just as well try to make an S & M film where no one gets tied up.

Many of the landmarks of scholarship on the postbellum South make this point, albeit in a somewhat more subtle fashion. The very factors that gave rise to a revolution in the historiography of slavery—the civil rights movement, the spread of Nazism, a growing sociological assault on racism—also contributed to an effort on the part of many progressive and liberal scholars to confront and expose the nuances of white racism. These scholars attempted to analyze this legacy's corrosion of American ideals, in both the past and in the present. In the aggregate, these studies properly understood race—and the economic and political purposes of racism—as America's central dilemma. Yet unlike Litwack's book, most of these other studies primarily addressed *white* contributions to racial discourse in the age of Jim Crow.⁴ Although Southern whites were much better positioned to set the terms of race relations (by virtue of their greater power and legal authority), Litwack reminds us that African Americans of this era also began to formulate ideas about whites.

[A]s they staked out their claims to becoming a free people, they projected a very different vision of the future . . . During Reconstruction, they seized the opportunities to make [their] goals a reality, to re-order the post-bellum South. It was a time of unparalleled hope, laden with possibility, when black men and women acted to shape their own destiny. (p. 9)

Litwack begins *Trouble in Mind* by invoking Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) as a perfect parable for the existential dilemmas of African Americans who suffered at the hands of Jim Crow. "What the white South lost on the battlefields of the Civil War and in Reconstruction," Litwack notes, "it would largely take back in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth century." Though this is a questionable assertion (since it assumes that race, rather than slavery, was the "issue" of the Civil War), it doesn't detract from Litwack's larger focus on "how the first generations born in freedom, more questioning of their 'place' and less inclined to render absolute deference to whites, encountered (and in a certain sense helped to provoke) the most violent and repressive period in the history of race relations in the United States" (p. 6).

Litwack draws on a historical tradition begun in the 1960s and early 1970s, when a generation of historians (Litwack included) engaged new sources—slave songs, spirituals, folk tales, and Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives—in order to gather a more complete and more balanced assessment of the peculiar institution.⁵ As in this book's predecessor, *Been in the Storm So Long* (1979), Litwack aims in *Trouble in Mind* to retrieve the voices of ordinary, laboring black Americans, who were almost always poor, often illiterate, and usually had to rely on shrewd and unorthodox means of self-expression. Although *Trouble in Mind* is less a study of "black leadership and ideology" than "a story of daily struggles by black men and women to wrest some meaning and value out of their working lives" (p. 187), the book retains a coherent theme. Indeed, nearly every page of the text, like evidence in a lawyer's brief, contributes to the argument that racism must be understood as a critical feature of American history. "America was founded on white supremacy and the notion of black inferiority and unfreedom," Litwack writes, "a notion each new wave of immigrants assimilated as quickly as the epithet 'nigger'" (pp. 7–8).

Much of the repression of the Jim Crow era stemmed from the fact that many African Americans were quick to test the limits of their freedom, often to the surprise (and even

horror) of white Southerners. With heightened expectations, a firm desire to improve their position in life, and perhaps even a measure of faith in the possibilities for a biracial democracy, the first generations of African Americans born out of slavery sought equal participation in various social, economic, and political arenas. Whereas some scholars have emphasized the advent of legal segregation at the turn of the twentieth century, Litwack points out that the separation of the races was first achieved through "[c]ustom, habit, and etiquette." These informal codes were reified into law, however,

when whites began to perceive something of a threat from younger, so-called "uppity" blacks—the "New Negroes," who seemed not to "know their place" and who stirred "white fears of social equality." Legal segregation began on railroads and streetcars, for example, because these were some of the first places that blacks and whites came together "on such an equal footing" (p. 235).

Meanwhile, black schools became "a case study in deliberate and criminal neglect" (p. 235). As local and state governments enforced policies designed to keep African Americans uneducated, many whites aided these efforts by harassing blacks who aspired to anything more than the most rudimentary industrial education, and even this form of vocational training sometimes raised eyebrows. Several black children in South Carolina, fortunate enough to attend school, had to hide their books to avoid intimidation from local whites. In Walton County, Georgia, the

local Ku Klux Klan broke into the house of one black teacher and burned every one of his books. African Americans who tried to vote were intimidated and threatened, whites having decided that voting would fill blacks with "absurd and dangerous aspirations." Thus, as W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out, the one thing white Southerners feared "more than Negro dishonesty, ignorance, and incompetency" was "Negro honesty, knowledge, and efficiency." Litwack further contends that when whites employed "terror, intimidation, and violence" to "subvert Radical governments and

black voting," this "betrayed white fears" of black progress (p. 5).

Litwack supplements much of the existing literature by underscoring the degree to which Jim Crow had a totalizing effect on millions of black lives. In addition to the elaborate legal apparatus that kept many blacks in peonage, unable to vote, and in separate and inferior public facilities, various Southern folkways and codes of racial etiquette reinforced the inferior caste position of African Americans. Some domestic workers gained exceptions to the rule of Jim Crow, for example, but this was precisely because their subordinate position was already clear: "The black nurse with a white baby in her arms, the black valet looking after the comfort of a white invalid," an Episcopal minister in Napoleonville, Louisiana, explained,

have the label of inferiority conspicuously upon them; they understand themselves, and

The very factors that gave rise to a revolution in the historiography of slavery—the civil rights movement, the spread of Nazism, a growing sociological assault on racism—also contributed to an effort . . . to confront and expose the nuances of white racism.

everybody understands them, to be servants, enjoying certain privileges for the sake of the person being served. Almost anything the Negro may do in the South, and anywhere he may go, provided the manner of his doing and his going is that of an inferior. Such is the premium put on his inferiority; such his inducement to maintain it.

On this basis, the poorest illiterate white could claim a standing in society denied to the wealthiest and most intelligent and educated black. (p. 242)

Litwack notes that "the gratuitous insults, the daily reminders of 'place,' (and) the tensions and dangers black people faced every working day took their inevitable toll . . . The slightest deviance from the racial code, no matter how intended, could produce immediate concern in a black person" (pp. 330-331). While always maintaining economic control over their tenants, some white landlords also perpetuated the practice of concubinage, through which they maintained sexual access to the female sharecroppers.

Paradoxically, those African Americans who followed "accommodationist" strategies for racial uplift, by working hard and saving their money, were usually prevented from enjoying any success that came their way. Any ornaments of achievement, such as a nice home, nice clothes, or a thriving business, made the African American who owned them a special target for scorn from and humiliation by whites. Litwack tells of an African-American farmer who spent years supplementing his income through labor at a sawmill, finally saving enough money to buy a small home and escape the servitude of tenant farming. Soon afterward, white marauders raided the man's home, reducing his life's labor to naught. Politicians, landowners, storekeepers, bankers, and the local police all

seemed to conspire together to exert extra-legal repression on blacks who evinced even the mildest of resistance. The stacked courts of the criminal justice system were always a special concern. The specter of prison-labor camps and chain gangs, Litwack notes, "brought a chilling sense of terror and a renewed sense of vulnerability to black homes" (p. 23).

Although Litwack does not pause to consider how this era still witnessed the rise of a small black middle class, he does note some of the ways that African Americans coped with white intransigence. Black churches almost always played a central role in the community, offering spiritual, recreational, educational, and informational guidance. Moreover, "[f]ew of the postemancipation triumphs enjoyed by black Southerners could match the enthusiasms with which most of them greeted separation from the white churches" (p. 63). Sunday sermons "not only lent substance to [black] notions of freedom but also permitted them to enjoy a distinctive version of Christian worship that brought them, or so they thought, much closer to God" (p. 63). The dishonesty of white employers, landlords, and storekeepers reinforced the value of literacy and education for many blacks, who readily gravitated to school "in impressive numbers, often exceeding whites in their enthusiasm and attendance rates" (p. 63). Other blacks tried to use their new mobility, however limited, to "strike a better deal" with their employers. Sometimes they relied on the same tactics that their ancestors had used in slavery, sabotaging property or practicing "ritual deference" in the company of whites. Those who chose the latter course acted out the roles of humble, obsequious, and acquiescent servants as part of a "critical strategy for survival" in a land teeming with hostility and resentment. As one bluesman described:

*Got one mind for white folks to see
 'Nuther for what I know is me
 He don't know, he don't know my mind
 When he sees me laughing
 Just to keep from crying. (p. 433)*

This tendency to remain "behind the veil" while in the company of whites was no mere defense mechanism; it also had a clear pragmatic value. Blacks learned that by exaggerating and acting out white stereotypes, they could "manipulate these qualities for their own advantage . . . testing the limits of white tolerance and endurance" (p. 79).

In an early review of *Trouble in Mind*, historian Nell Irvin Painter chastised Litwack for depicting white Southerners as monolithic "oppressors" and blacks as victims with "no existence beyond their connection with whites."⁶ Painter is correct on the first point. Whereas previous historians have offered a nuanced understandings of the different ways that white Southerners understood "race," Litwack emphasizes the havoc that the South's most virulent racists wreaked among blacks, inviting his readers to consider the degree to which racial oppression *after* slavery continues to affect race relations in the political present. A more complete portrayal of the Jim Crow era might have emerged if Litwack had analyzed tangible issues such as the advent of segregation, the process of disfranchisement, the rise and fall of populism, the contested nature of work and public space,

and the importance of gender distinctions among Southerners. In relying so heavily on the history of white oppression, the book sometimes seems redundant. Litwack easily proves his point, but then he keeps piling on the evidence to make it irrefutable. But at the same time, Painter is almost dogmatic in suggesting that Litwack's study treats African Americans as "objects." To the contrary, his rich source material, which allows him to analyze African-American family life, music, folklore, religion, art, poetry, and oratory, reveals an unmistakable recognition of African Americans as actors in their own history.

Furthermore, even as he acknowledges that African Americans were oppressed as a group, Litwack offers many individual voices. In the aggregate, these voices tell us that with the collapse of slavery, blacks worked to foment social change across the fabric of the South, if not through organized political protest then through challenges to the customs and mores that relegated them to positions of social inferiority. In a sense, blacks paid dearly for requesting that America live up to its democratic principles. Their refusal to accept their "place" undoubtedly helped provoke the implementation of the Jim Crow system, a system so elaborate and repressive that Americans easily recognize it as "totalitarian," had it existed anywhere else in the world.

James Baldwin, recalling a visit to the Deep South as a reporter in the 1950s, noted

Any ornaments of achievement, such as a nice home, nice clothes, or a thriving business, made the African American who owned them a special target for scorn from and humiliation by whites.

that there was "more than enough to fascinate . . . there is the great, vast, brooding, welcoming, and bloodstained land, beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart. The land seems nearly to weep beneath the burden of this civilization's unnamable excrescences."⁷ If it often seems that these blemishes continue to haunt the South, this is perhaps because Americans have yet to fully accept the enduring power of the Southern legacy. Contrary to popular belief, the racist attitudes of the white South often hardened with emancipation. Recent (and unresolved) debates over the possibility that America might someday "apologize" for Southern slavery indicate that some (but by no means all) Americans are finally willing to concede—at least in some abstract, qualified sense—that slavery mocked the ideals upon which this nation was founded. But to extend this apology to the crucial era of Southern history *after* slavery, to cover several generations not only of Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement but also of state-sponsored terror and extralegal repression, remains beyond the realm of public discourse. Baldwin was right to suggest that the Southern past consists of more than the legacy of racism and white supremacy, but he also knew that this legacy remains the prism through which the South must be understood. Litwack's morally engaged study suggests that even today there remains little in the social terrain of the South that has not been tarnished, vitiated, or marked by the region's history of racism.

Notes

1. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941).
2. Paul Escott, afterword to *W. J. Cash and the Minds of the South* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), pp. 244–246.
3. See Alex Lichtenstein, "Eugene Genovese and Southern Conservatism," *New Politics* 6 (3) (1997): 59–67.
4. A very short list of the studies I'm thinking of might include George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987); Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) and *The Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).
5. See John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972); and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
6. Nell Irvin Painter, "Black and Blue," *Nation*, May 11, 1998, p. 38.
7. James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," reprinted in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction: 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), p. 485.