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Review Essay
The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, $17.95). Pp. 389. ISBN 0 19 508959 6.

J. David Woodward, *The New Southern Politics* (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006). Pp. xv + 426. ISBN 1 58826 397 5.

Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). Pp. xvii + 341. ISBN 0 691 12209 1.

There was a time in the late 1960s and early 1970s when many people predicted the end of the South and, by extension, the obsolescence of the study of southern history. If the existence of the Solid South depended on a regional commitment to an agrarian economy and to racial segregation, then the disappearance of both would mean the end of the region as it had been known. Similarly, many people wondered if there was room in the academy both for (what was then called) black history and black literature studies and for southern history, literature and studies. Whatever the case with the study of southern literature – and it may be that Faulkner and the main figures of the southern renaissance are taught less than they once were, even in the South – the study of southern history, especially political history, seems to be flourishing. The three books under review here are cases in point.

One of the staples in the study of the South has been the question of the nature and persistence of southern identity. James C. Cobb's *Away Down South* offers a fluent and readable overview of the historiography of southern difference. From it flow several interesting points. First, America has been the site of disputes about racial and regional identities from the start. Identity politics was by no means the invention of embittered New Left fugitives from the 1960s. American politics and history has rarely just been about "the economy, stupid"; rather, matters having to do with regional, racial, cultural and religious differences have played major, often determining, roles. Regional self-consciousness, even the threat to secede, was articulated in early nineteenth-century New England before it was an issue in the slave states. It was, notes Cobb, "not southerners but New Englanders who were

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the nation's 'most precocious sectionalists'" (17). And yet the North, especially New England, has been able to pass itself off as standing for the United States as a whole rather than just itself or greater New England. It is instructive to consider the title of F. O. Matthiessen's great work of literary and intellectual history, *American Renaissance* (1941). Not only does the Harvard professor ignore Southern writers; no mid-western or western ones come under scrutiny either.

Moreover, as Cobb and John Shelton Reed have reminded us, regional identity is no longer tied, if it ever was, tightly to geographical areas. Reed once suggested that travellers could tell when they were still in the South if the yellow pages of the phone book had a listing for the "Dixie Cleaners" or "Dixie Café." If you are in Montana or Vermont, it is highly unlikely you will find any such listing; if you are in Missouri, it may depend on what part of the state you are in. Others have suggested the grits and/or biscuit test. If southern fare is served with breakfast at motel restaurants, then you are still in the South. But southern identity as a kind of ethnicity suggests that the South is where southerners are, not that southerners where the (historic) South is. The classic text here is John Egerton's oft-cited *The Americanization of Dixie* (1970), which suggested that the influx of "outsiders" into the South, its urbanization and industrialization, and the lessening of racial conflict were creating a South increasingly like the rest of the nation – for better or worse. Though Cobb does not really take up the question of whether northern Virginia or Miami/South Florida is really "southern" any longer, a good bit of the historic South simply is not. Ironically, the subtitle of Egerton's book has proven, if anything, more prophetic – "the southernization of America." The spread of country music in the post-1960s period, especially peaking in the 1990s, underlined the fact that there were racial and class, as well as just regional, dimensions to its appeal. Another irony is that it stopped being "country and western" and became just plain "country music" just about the time it went west and north in earnest.

Anyway, if you want a sure-footed, interesting and often witty guide to the history of southern identity, then Cobb's book is the one book to have. That said, much of it has a certain over-familiarity to it that makes the reader – or perhaps "professional" readers – wonder whether the issue of southern identity is not due for a rest rather than a revival. Moreover, because Cobb resists discussing the theoretical issues raised by identity talk, he must resort to a kind of analysis-by-narrative which all too often means that he substitutes broad historical coverage for analytical depth. *Away Down South* lacks a certain edge or combativeness to it, as though Cobb is aware that southern identity is an issue whose time may have come and gone. On the other hand, he is very good on the "color" of southern identity. For most of its history, concern with southern identity really only pertained to white southerners and many, even most black intellectuals, were content to let them have the issue. But with the return of African Americans to the South since the 1960s it can no longer be taken for granted that black people living in the South are not also black southerners.

Still, if Britain and America are divided by a common language, Cobb rightly suggests that black and white southerners are "Divided by a Common Past" (to cite the title of chapter 11 in *Away Down South*). He offers valuable discussions of the complex ways Harlem renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson and Jean Toomer, along with the next generation of Richard Wright, Albert Murray, and Ralph Ellison – and he might

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have added painter Romare Bearden – represented and explored the South in their work. Cobb reminds us, for instance, that in their work the South was represented as "home" as well as "hell," a place to yearn to return to as well as a place to escape. If all of this sounds familiarly like the divided consciousness of white southern writers and intellectuals, it differs in one important respect: the lack of a guilt component in black southern identity. Black southerners did nothing wrong except have dark skin colour; the kind of white southerners Fred Hobson talked about in his *But Now I See* (1999) felt guilty for being and acting white and were rarely proven innocent.

Perhaps it is time to begin thinking more explicitly about a southern diasporic identity, one destination of the southernness-as-ethnicity argument. Blacks and whites who have made the trek or were lured "north toward home" simply did not remain, and have not remained, the same as those who stayed put in the South. Perhaps Cobb will turn his considerable cultural and historical acumen to that issue in the future.

If interest in the southern "mind" *à la* W. J. Cash, in the "central theme" of southern history (from U. B. Phillips to C. Vann Woodward), or in identifying the salient regional traits as John Shelton Reed does, has lessened, the study of the political culture of the South has flourished since the demise of Jim Crow in the 1960s and the entrance of African Americans onto the southern political stage as actors rather than merely as an important factor in southern politics. Just as Cobb is writing in response to the work done by Cash, Woodward, Reed and others, so J. David Woodard is explicitly working in the shadow of V. O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), easily the most influential work on southern politics ever published and a classic in American political science. Key's work took the measure of southern politics and political culture by analysing each state in turn and then generalizing from evidence gathered. In doing so, he offered neither just dry political-science-y facts nor windy generalizations. In fact, Key's monumental work generated a whole genre of similar works, including William Havard's *The Changing Politics of the South* (1972), Walter DeVries and Jack Bass's *The Transformation of Southern Politics* (1976), Alex Lammis's *The Two-Party South* (1990), and the closest work to Key's in scope and impact, Earl and Merle Black's *Politics and Society in the South* (1987).

Not only did each of these works essentially adopt Key's state-by-state format; they were also, except for Havard, written by political liberals and moderates much like Key in their core beliefs. Indeed, Key's basic assumption was that the South's politics would remain pathological as long as black southerners were excluded from it and as long as the South remained a one-party section. The ideal was a southern version of liberal pluralism, a politics based on the pursuit of individual and group self-interest rather than dedicated to the fantasy of white racial superiority and the unimpeachable virtue of the Democratic Party. A vital southern liberalism, Key insisted, also needed a strong Republican Party.

And Key's vision has been realized with a vengeance. The post-1960s South, while no longer a one-party system, is dominated, particularly at the presidential level, by the Republican Party. That said, the (white) South as a whole (for Woodard this means the eleven states of the former Confederacy) has remained a political culture dedicated to "minimalist views on the role of government and rampant individualism" (6). What Garry Wills has called the tradition of "anti-governmentalism" has

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won out hands down. Though Woodard does not make the point explicitly, the South plays the same role vis-à-vis the federal government that white southerners and conservatives generally accuse black Americans and poor Americans of – taking more from the federal government than they pay back in taxes (54). The hypocrisy of the conservative white South on this issue is breathtaking. It is a tribute to Woodard's honesty that he does not hide this fact, even though he has been an adviser to numerous Republican politicians at the state and national level, as well as holding a chair in political science at Clemson University in South Carolina.

But Woodard cannot quite decide how best to characterize southern political culture since he also draws upon Daniel Elazar's three dominant orientations of a political culture – "individualistic, moralistic and traditionalistic" – to identify southern political culture as "traditionalistic" rather than "individualistic" (6). The contradiction might be resolved by suggesting that, for conservative white southerners, individualism refers not to being autonomous and a freethinker but to being hostile to social-engineering notions of the state, i.e. liberalism. Similarly, the notion of "traditionalism" tends to denote a vaguely elitist devotion to the preservation of the status quo. Any notion of the common good in which equalizing resources or opportunity through state intervention is strictly off-limits, even if the federal government is offering to build a military base for the state or city in question. Tradition also entails an emphasis upon individual morality and stresses those values which allegedly preserve family and community.

It is always interesting to see how southern conservatives deal with the racial revolution in the South, since it was a revolution that almost no white conservative supported as it unfolded. For instance, Woodard's account of Reconstruction comes pretty close to the old story of the disastrous coalition of "rapacious carpetbaggers, traitorous native scalawags, and numerous illiterate freedmen" (128), though he forthrightly admits that white southern resistance to Reconstruction was aimed at regaining and maintaining control over the newly freed slaves. He also notes that the "Civil Rights Acts were enacted in 1870, 1871, and 1875, again over Johnson's veto" (130). The problem is that Andrew Johnson ceased being President in 1868 and the acts of 1870 and 1871 were anti-Klan acts, not civil rights acts in the sense that those of 1866 and 1875 were. (Woodard is also mistaken that Jackie Robinson became the first black major-league baseball player in 1946. It was 1947.) Finally, Woodard cites a criticism of the court's unanimous decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* (1954) that it "ignored historical considerations" (147). But Chief Justice Warren, who spoke for a unanimous court, did (probably wrongly) rule that it was impossible to decide whether the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment envisaged integrated schooling. And conservatives neglect to note that one of Warren's main arguments for overruling *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* was precisely that the historical importance of public schooling had changed drastically since the 1860s. To be sure, the *Brown* decision violated the rule of precedent (*stare decisis*) in overruling *Plessy*, but did it in the name of historical change.

If Cobb's book suffers from a certain underconceptualization, Woodard's suffers from a proliferation of categories. He expands on Elazar by picking out six aspects of political culture, i.e. how people "orient themselves for political action" (5). These then become the focus of his main chapters – "geography," "economy," "racial legacy," "religious values," "one-party politics" and "political leadership."

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Even if his emphasis upon these factors derives from his political conservatism, the liberal students of southern politics should welcome it is a valuable addition to the study of regional politics. Later he notes, "Perhaps the only regional attitude as distinctive as race in the South is religion" (208), thus suggesting that two of these factors are more important than others. Concluding with a chapter whose title, "The South and the Nation," echoes Key (and Pat Watters's unjustly neglected *The South and the Nation*), Woodard creates yet another list when he characterizes the South as "a mutineer to [*sic*] the uniformity of US culture" (388) that has contributed four legacies to contemporary politics: "Congressional" longevity and control (of the hated federal government), "Military Tradition," "The Confederate Flag controversy," and "Southern Womanhood" and family (390–413). How all these traits and characteristics, legacies and attitudes, forces and factors comport with one another is never entirely clear. All that said, Woodard's is a first-rate reference book that contains almost everything we need to know about southern politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century – except for much about the new Hispanic immigration into the region. He also uses the charts, graphs and maps very well and they add much to his narrative and analysis.

Finally, V. O. Key also assumed that the politics of the region would moderate with increased southern prosperity. And this has indeed happened. Regarding one of the most important questions of the presidential race of 2008 – can Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama win any southern state? – Woodard's analysis would suggest pessimism. His analysis of the social basis of southern politics places the contest between the cities (Democrats) and the suburbs (Republicans) at the heart of regional politics, with the once-powerful rural areas consigned to the sideline. At first glance, Hillary Clinton seems to have a better chance of breaking the Republican lock on the suburbs, but she is a polarizing figure, disliked by many white southern women as well as men. Obama might even pick off some of the suburban vote of moderately inclined white independents, but he of course needs a very heavy black turnout that, at the same time, does not excite the white voters to turn out in even greater numbers. Obama could pick up a surprising number of white votes in the South, but still not win enough to give him any specific southern state. This in turn means that the second crucial question becomes the only one worth trying to answer – can the Democrats win the presidency without winning any southern states at all?

The third book, Joseph Crespino's *In Search of Another Country*, is a marvellous study of Mississippi's efforts to come to terms with federally mandated desegregation, while retaining as much of the traditional ideology as possible and distancing itself from the crude, often violent, white resistance sponsored by the Klan and the White Citizens' Councils. Surprisingly, by the mid-to-late 1950s, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commissions, a kind of down-home combination of the FBI and the KGB, did less policing of black and white radicals than it did of the Klan's and the Citizens' Councils' less savoury activities. Crespino's ultimate purpose is to map the transition from Mississippi the pariah state to Mississippi the heartland of American conservatism.

As a study of the transformation of a state political culture, Crespino's book is tough-minded and independent in judgement, and ultimately a crushing indictment of American conservatism. The ideological shifts that took place over at least a

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couple of decades began, Crespino notes, during the days of hard-core segregationist ideology of the 1950s and early 1960s, when "the segregationist fight" was linked with opposition to the "international Communist conspiracy"; in addition, an effort was made "to frame the segregationist fight as a Christian struggle" and to mount a "defense of traditional Christian values" (49) against both secular liberalism and the neosocial gospel theology of the Delta Ministry and the National Council of Churches (146). This process of ideological redescription served to subvert federal action against segregation, while claiming the higher spiritual and patriotic ground. Gradually, Mississippi's white moderates learned what Crespino calls "strategic accommodation" (11) to legal and political desegregation, while retaining as much "practical segregation" (18) in the private and social spheres as possible. During the 1960s, conservative politicians began learning what moderate officials and later national Republicans or conservatives would perfect throughout the 1970s: "color-blind conservative rather than race-specific language" (108). By Ronald Reagan's accession to the presidency in 1981, Mississippi was no longer a pariah state: "it was America writ small" (6).

Crespino traces this process with considerable nuance. There were certain real, if limited, changes in white attitudes and behaviour. The story of the triumph of conservatism all over the South, including Mississippi, was the story of the rise to power of affluent, overwhelmingly white, suburbs, a factor that Woodard also emphasizes in his book. Not stereotypical rural "rednecks" but "white suburbanites" (8) spearheaded the defence of the ideology of a colour-blindness that claims to abandon racism but actually only eliminates its more obvious manifestations. As Crespino notes, Mississippi moderates and conservatives also reached for the venerable doctrine of state's rights, a colour-neutral political idea, to guarantee white domination, at least in the social and private spheres. Insisting that conscious intentions and not institutional effects were what counts, what would have once been called "institutional racism" suffused the new post-1960s ideology (6–10).

Crespino challenges historians such as David Chappell when they claim that southern white Protestantism lacked a theology of resistance to the civil rights revolution and thus provided no great opposition to desegregation. Rather, he insists, a theology of resistance did emerge, one that stressed the need for educational institutions to play a central role in inculcating American and Christian morality (12–13). Although conservatives are staunchly opposed to social, political-legal and economic engineering, they are strong advocates of moral and spiritual intervention into the lives of both children and adults. It is from these ideological developments that one of the most contentious issues of the late 1970s emerged – the tax status of new private academies and certain religious institutions of higher education in the South such as Bob Jones University. Southern conservatives thought they should be tax-exempt as religious and educational institutions, while mainstream liberals thought they should be taxed as private institutions, since they did not meet Fourteenth Amendment (equal protection) standards, and white moderates distinguished out-and-out "seg" academies, which had been established to avoid school integration, from Christian academies that taught Christian theology and values as part of the school curriculum. As things have turned out, many of the Christian academies in Mississippi and elsewhere in the South now include a token

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number of African American students. It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry at the irony.

Finally, Woodard and Crespino tell roughly the same story of the emergence of a new version of white southern conservatism to replace the older agrarian-based, organic traditionalist conservatism going back to Richard Weaver and even to the Vanderbilt Agrarians. With Woodard we get the "big picture" of the South, but what makes Crespino's book so good is that it maps the emergence of the Mississippi version of post-1960s conservatism with intellectual rigour and exactitude. His larger achievement is to reintroduce this new southern conservatism to American conservatism. Mississippi and the South were not some sort of rural aberration, whose values were foreign to the rest of America. Indeed, one essential component of the "political theology" of American conservatism was perfected not only south of the Mason-Dixon line but south of the Tennessee border. It allowed its adherents to believe in good faith that they were colour-blind, believers in political and legal universalism, while working to build a society dedicated to the preservation of glaring inequalities of wealth and power. Thus, rather than having their access to opportunities widened, many white southerners remain distracted by a conservative ideology that panders to their worst instincts and stifles most of their best ones.

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