

“To work industriously and steadily”: Frederick Law Olmsted and the Southern Work Ethic Revisited

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***Abstract:** Frederick Law Olmsted is widely admired by historians of the nineteenth-century United States and generally regarded as the single most important commentator upon slavery and the South. He toured the southern states in the early 1850s and published a series of reports in the New York Daily Times and the New York Daily Tribune. These articles were subsequently revised and compiled into three books, but it was their publication as a single, edited volume, *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861), which had the greatest impact. This article revisits perhaps the central insight provided by Olmsted: his criticism of the southern work ethic and the South's reluctance “to work industriously and steadily.” It does so within the context of current scholarly interpretations of capitalism in the late antebellum South, where most scholars have taken issue with Olmsted's view, presenting instead a dynamic and hard-working southern workforce. Why did Olmsted take such an overly critical view of the southern work ethic?*

***Keywords:** Antebellum South, capitalism, slavery, work ethic, travel writing*

... the citizens of the cotton States, as a whole, are poor. They work little, and that little, badly; they earn little, they sell little; they buy little, and they have little – very little – of the common comforts and consolations of civilized life.

To work industrially and steadily, especially under directions from another man, is, in the Southern tongue, to “work like a nigger” It is this habit ... of disdaining something

which they think beneath them, that is deemed to be the chief blessing of slavery.
—Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861) (12, 19)

Frederick Law Olmsted shaped the landscape of many American cities in the second half of the nineteenth century, although he is undoubtedly best known as the architect of Central Park in New York. What is less well known is that he entered the public domain in the early 1850s while sending back a series of reports from three tours of the American South covering eleven southern states and lasting fourteen months in total. Writing under the pseudonym “Yeoman,” Olmsted’s letters were published in the *New York Daily Times* and, later, the *New York Daily Tribune*. These articles were subsequently revised and compiled into three books: *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856); *A Journey Through Texas* (1857); and *A Journey in the Back Country* (1860). The three volumes enjoyed steady sales and a modest response in Britain and the United States, but their publication as a single volume, *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861), had greater impact. Co-edited with Daniel Reeves Goodloe – with a careful eye on public opinion and the American Civil War that began shortly before the book appeared – *The Cotton Kingdom* outsold the other three combined and enjoyed as significant a reception in Great Britain (where it was read by Charles Dickens, John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin amongst others) as it did in the United States.¹

Olmsted’s influence shows no signs of diminishing and has probably grown in importance over time. He is widely admired by historians of the nineteenth-century United States and generally regarded as the single most important commentator upon slavery and the South. As historian Dana White notes, Olmsted’s work was pivotal to no less than the entire “founding generation of Southern studies” (White 25).² He continues to be extensively quoted by southernists on a variety of topics. As John Inscoc puts it in the introduction to a new edition of Olmsted’s writings – itself testament to the continued importance of Olmsted’s work – “for scholars of southern history and of slavery, his name and his journalistic output have always loomed large” (Inscoc).³ The prediction of Harvard historian Charles Eliot Norton,

1 These combined works probably sold 25,000 copies in total between 1856 and 1861, a figure most likely exceeded by *The Cotton Kingdom* (Cox 222).

2 On Olmsted’s influence see, for example, two classic works by Clement Eaton: *The Mind of the Old South*, 197, and *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860*, xiii

3 My thanks to John Inscoc for allowing me to read his introduction to this forthcoming book, as well as

a friend and contemporary of Olmsted, has proven prophetic. Norton described Olmsted's observations as "the most important contributions to an exact acquaintance with the conditions and results of slavery in this country that have ever been published. They have permanent value, and will be chief material for our social history whenever it is written" (quoted in Roper 152).

It is within this context that the opening quotations of this article must be evaluated. Across the wide variety of subjects covered by Frederick Law Olmsted, it was his condemnation of the southern work ethic in the mid-nineteenth century, or more accurately the lack of any such ethic, that hit home most powerfully. His assertion was clear: slavery was an arcane labor system, breeding lethargy and inefficiency within the enslaved workforce. Worse, the effects undermined the entire southern economy, because menial work was regarded with contempt. Any white man engaging in manual labor was debased, despised, and, according to Olmsted, destined to follow the shoddy work ethic of the enslaved. The "habits of the whole community" and "the whole industrial character of the people" were affected. "No white man" in the South, he asserted, "would ever do certain kinds of work (such as taking care of cattle, or getting water or wood to be used in the house), and if you should ask a white man you had hired to do such things, he would get mad and tell you he wasn't a nigger." As historian Stephanie McCurry notes, visitors to the Old South regularly "commented on the absence of a middle class, the corruption of the work ethic, and the backwardness of the slave South in the scale of development," but none did it quite as powerfully as Olmsted (Olmsted, *Seaboard*, 82-83; McCurry 40 n.10).

This article revisits Olmsted's notion of the peculiar southern work ethic – the supposed failure "to work industriously and steadily" – within the context of current scholarly interpretations of economic behavior in the mid-nineteenth century South. No doubt influenced by the boom and bust economic cycle of the past decade, there has been considerable scholarly interest in the southern economy. Recent historiography has disagreed with Olmsted's interpretation, albeit with some exceptions and complications, although the final scholarly outputs of the late Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese stand as a notable exception. Among historians today, it is more usual to find a dynamic nineteenth-century South deeply immersed within international markets and acting as a key player in the expansion of

for his excellent comments on this essay. Robert Cook, and the editors of this special issue, also provided valuable critiques.

capitalism. In this historical vision, the slave economy was fluid, adaptable, and a vital cog in the global system and there is little sense of the once axiomatic incompatibility of slave and free labor. Plantations were generally highly successful economic units. Moreover, according to a recent and vibrant scholarly literature examining yeoman farmers, if slaves worked hard, then the vast majority of antebellum southern whites worked equally hard. The emerging picture is of an industrious, diligent southerner, finely tuned to market production by the eve of the American Civil War. This raises several important questions about Frederick Law Olmsted. Why did such a skilled ethnographer seemingly misinterpret the southern work ethic so drastically? Does this invalidate the usefulness of his writings and compromise his reputation? What can Olmsted tell us about the mindset of the United States in the critical decade before the American Civil War?

Plantation Capitalism?

Scholars have debated for decades the southern work ethic and the type of economic system that it characterized. Did the absence of wage labor and the failure to industrialize make the antebellum South a reactionary “pre-modern” society? Or was southern slavery simply a peculiar form of capitalism and planters just as acquisitive and “modern” as their counterparts in the North and elsewhere, if slower to follow the same path? Eugene D. Genovese stated in 1961 that planters exhibited “an aristocratic, antibourgeois spirit” that “recoiled at the notion that profit is the goal of life” (Genovese 333). This position was later refined in conjunction with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in a highly influential formulation: the Old South was “primarily determined by slave, not feudal or bourgeois, relations of production” and was “in but not of the capitalist world.” Slavery “pulled planters out of that orbit, stamping them with many of the features of pre-bourgeois ruling classes and driving them psychologically, ideologically, and in material interests into conflict with the northern bourgeoisie” (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, 16, 149).⁴ The Genovesian interpretation has much in common with that of Frederick Law Olmsted, especially in its depiction of a peculiar southern work ethic. Three further works by the Genoveses implicitly reaffirmed and refined this thesis: *The Mind of the*

4 A critique of this position is made in Johnson, “The Pedestal and the Veil”.

Master Class (2005); *Slavery in Black and White* (2008); and *Fatal Self-Deception* (2011). The reaffirmation is implicit because their earlier focus on economic thought and behavior and master-slave relations is secondary within an extensive, if not exhaustive, discussion of intellectual culture. Nonetheless, this culminating trilogy develops the Genoveses' earlier controversial contention that southern elites proposed "Slavery in the Abstract" – "the doctrine that declared slavery or a kindred system of personal servitude the best possible condition for all labor regardless of race," and upheld "a slaveholding system based on the antithesis of the principles that underlay the capitalist system and its prevailing economic theory" (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, *Slavery in White and Black*, 1, 191).

Robert Fogel has proven to be the fiercest critic of this view, although many others have followed his lead.⁵ For Fogel, antebellum slavery was unequivocally a capitalist enterprise. Planters gathered economic intelligence, responded to price fluctuations, were experimental and innovative and, above all, primarily motivated by profit in what he described as "a flexible, highly developed form of capitalism" (Fogel 64). A massive study of the South's wealthiest planters amplifies this view, showing just how widely the elite invested its money in a surprising variety of pursuits. They invested where the returns were greatest. Thus, historian William Scarborough argued, "large slaveholders, both in their economic motivation and behavior and in their family and inheritance practices, exhibited values little different from their free-state counterparts" (Scarborough 409). The internal slave trade ensured the smooth running of the southern economy as planters ruthlessly sold slaves when the price was high, or when they needed surplus cash, and bought when the price was low. Transnational interpretations have situated the South within an Atlantic and a world economy where staple crops were sold in Europe and further afield as planters responded with astonishing dexterity to the needs of distant markets (Schoen and Johnson). The majority of recent historians do not regard free labor, economic diversification, or the growth of an internal market as being so important in defining capitalism as the Genoveses do, and instead highlight the ruthless exploitation of the slave workforce driven by the profit motive. Some, moreover, have argued that the South *was* rapidly diversifying by mid-century; far from slavery and agriculture being incompatible with in-

5 Rockman usefully summarises recent interpretations of the capitalist Old South.

dustrial capitalism, the two worked very well together (Grivno).

The Genoveses' later work recognized a growing commercial spirit and the planters' intellectual move toward modernity in the late antebellum decades. It is impossible, however, to reconcile the scholarly view that southern planters had the same work ethic as their northern and European counterparts with the Genovesian paradigm or with the view of Frederick Law Olmsted. In particular, the insistence that the basic master-slave relationship was paternalist, not capitalist, remains the most controversial aspect of the Genovesian interpretation. Like Olmsted, the Genoveses assert that work is best carried out willingly by individuals who will benefit materially from its success, not by coercion. "A man forced to labour under their system," wrote Olmsted, "is morally driven to indolence, carelessness, indifference to the results of skill, heedlessness, inconstancy of purpose, improvidence, and extravagance" (Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 104). As the title of their final volume suggests – *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* – the Genoveses continue to insist that plantation work culture was paternalist. Planters took care of their slaves, grieved when they died, and self-identified their role as Christian stewards. This intimately shaped the work process. Paternalism, defined as reciprocal rights and privileges negotiated by owners and slaves, organically developed in a dialectical process of accommodation and resistance. The enslaved worked as they were directed within parameters acceptable to them, but were collectively more obstinate when demands exceeded the norm. Restating their earlier position, the Genoveses argue that the enslaved "translated the masters' largesse and condescension into 'rights' for themselves," playing upon and reinforcing their "masters' sense of noblesse oblige and of being kind, considerate, burdened, and self-denying Christians." Thus, planters put up with the sullen demeanor of their work force, petty theft, and many other inefficiencies inherent within the system, demonstrating their ability "to tolerate and even chuckle over behavior that would have driven employers of free labor mad" (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception*, 66, 61).

Genovese's paternalism thesis has many similarities with Olmsted's interpretation but has been rejected wholesale by the vast majority of southern historians.⁶ William Dusinger's bleak portrayal of slave life on rice plantations is possibly the archetypal dismissal. He presents owners as

6 There are some exceptions, most notably Ford (on planter ideology) and Ashworth (on the South/planters as pre-modern).

cold, calculating, uncaring, and overwhelmingly motivated by self-interest, demanding as much labor as they could while brutally suppressing resistance. Indeed, the term resistance so inaccurately captures the imbalance of plantation power relations that Dusiaberre uses “dissidence” instead. The consequences for the enslaved were chilling: “Powerless, undervalued, despised,” Dusiaberre maintains, “many slaves came to esteem themselves for some of the same qualities whites valued in them” (Dusiaberre 269). Walter Johnson concurs that slaves had limited agency and were valued as no more than commodities with a set price. Slave bodies were groomed and shaped to realize their maximum potential value on the market and, from childhood, slaves were commodified in the eyes of owners who fed and exercised their property in the expectation of a high return. Johnson insists that “any slave’s identity might be disrupted as easily as a price could be set and a piece of paper passed from one hand to another” (Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, 19). Others find capitalism and paternalism as essentially incongruent as the antebellum decades progressed. James Oakes argues that it was “intense devotion to the capitalistic spirit of accumulation” that made “paternalism so anachronistic to the nineteenth-century South” (Oakes 191).

However, other interpretations suggest paternalism should not be discarded so quickly. Focusing on the working relationship between the enslaved and their owners, Jeffrey Robert Young argues that paternalism and capitalism were exceedingly compatible, not mutually exclusive. Countering notions that brute force and the threat of separation were always the best options, this argument in some ways revives Fogel and Engerman’s controversial idea that rewards on offer encouraged the enslaved to adhere to a version of the Protestant work ethic – they worked hard because they were rewarded for doing so. Significantly, opportunities arose precisely because of the complexity and rapid mechanization of plantation agriculture in the late antebellum period, which provided greater opportunities for skilled slaves. Sugar planters provide the best example of the fusing of capitalism and paternalism. Richard Follett uses the concept of “market paternalism” to describe management on Louisiana sugar plantations, which were at the forefront of mechanization in the nineteenth century. The operation of expensive machinery required a high level of expertise, thereby providing slaves with a bargaining tool, as did the need to harvest cane as quickly as possible during the “grinding season,” notorious for its intensity as the cutting, transporting and processing of sugar cane had to be intricately synchronized around-the-clock. Planters could not afford any stoppages in

such circumstances, and so provided extra rations at peak periods as well as financial wages for overwork outside of normal hours. According to Follett, “The reciprocity of paternalism provided business-conscious planters with an ideological vocabulary for negotiating a contractual relationship with the slaves that aided plantation productivity” (Follett 155-56). While something of a victory for those held in bondage, the reality was that such bargaining ensured the smooth running of operations for what was a very small outlay.

Slaves were harshly exploited but they took the opportunity to accumulate wherever possible. It was not only being in charge of expensive machinery that provided such opportunities. Slaves worked their own gardens, which they were allowed to tend once plantation duties were complete. These plots encouraged entrepreneurship and involved the enslaved in market transactions that could be lucrative. It would be easy to exaggerate here, and garden plots for the majority of slaves most likely supplemented weekly rations and provided a few extras for their family, but undeniably a few amassed considerable property and wealth by growing and selling cash crops and livestock (Hudson 77-94). This activity suggests the enslaved were more used to handling – rather than being – commodities, and calls into question not only Olmsted’s depiction of shoddy slave work but also the notion that the enslaved were without agency. John Campbell argues that “As market participants – who produced, sold and purchased their own property – slaves temporarily experienced one of the central attributes of freedom: the purchase and sale of labor power and the enjoyment of its fruits” (Campbell 131). Such findings strongly indicate that historians must do more to integrate money and property in the slave quarters into their interpretations of not only how but why the enslaved worked.

Off Plantation: Hard Work or Hard Drinking?

The work ethic on the plantation has been explored in a number of imaginative and sometimes contradictory ways, but no ambiguity exists in recent studies of yeomen farmers. Contrary to Olmsted, the reality was that southern farmers in the Old South, as in the North and the West, toiled long hours to operate successful farms. Today historians are agreed that at the time of Olmsted’s travels in the early 1850s, the yeomen class as a whole had moved a considerable way from taking a cautious, “safety-first” approach in their outlook – concentrating on satisfying household needs – toward a far

more aggressively market-orientated position than has hitherto been appreciated. Recent studies emphasize increased production of cotton during the 1850s, the leading cash crop, by not only planters but also by less wealthy farmers. In Mississippi, for example, farmers increased cotton production by 148 per cent in the 1850s, from 484,000 to 1.2 million bales (Bond 54). Women were an essential part of this growth. Farmers' wives took charge of the home – preparing food, cleaning, making clothes and other household items, taking care of children – and most farms depended upon their labor (and that of daughters) as well. Olmsted, like other travelers in the South, was seemingly oblivious of their important role.⁷

This recent historiography of southern yeomen shows a remarkable similarity to interpretations of Olmsted's native New England that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. Those interpretations depicted New England's rural economy as fluid and in flux by the late antebellum period (if not earlier), as farmers engaged more and more in profit-orientated activity (Brown and Billington). This dynamic orientation away from subsistence farming reflected industrialization, urban growth, and transportation improvements (most crucially, railroads), and the availability of new sources of credit. Clearly, such developments were more advanced in the North than they were in the South, and parts of the southern upcountry or back country remained traditional and rooted in strong, sedentary kin networks in which face-to-face exchange proceeded by barter as frequently as by cash. Nonetheless, core values of thrift, routine, toil, and deferred gratification encouraged by market production increasingly became the southern norm. By mid-century, it was essential to engage with the market in some form in all but the most isolated communities. This shift was seen in changing cultural values too as the yeoman gospel of hard work dovetailed neatly with the gospel of evangelical religion (Osthaus).

It was not hard work southerners feared, for that was the daily reality for the vast majority, but being supervised by another. Olmsted's complaint of shirking actually referenced the heightened southern discourse concerning dependence and independence, and the concomitant stigma of working "under directions from another man." Dependence was a most abhorrent characteristic and southern men, of many different kinds, cherished their autonomy and position as head of the household. Indeed, northerners similarly

7 McCurry, 80, argues that "women's work in the fields, although customary, was customarily ignored and even denied" by both contemporaries and historians subsequently.

worried about their loss of independence in accepting new routines and industrial discipline during the first half of the nineteenth century (Rogers). This adjustment was particularly objectionable in a slave society, however, where dependence equated to subservience and thus working for somebody else was akin to being a slave. North Carolinian yeoman Hinton Rowan Helper wholeheartedly agreed with Olmsted's critique in his scathing attack on planters and slavery: "In the South, unfortunately, no kind of labor is either free or respectable." Helper complained that any "white man who is under the necessity of earning his bread, by the sweat of his brow, or by manual labor, in any capacity, no matter how unassuming in deportment, or exemplary in morals, is treated as if he was a loathsome beast, and shunned with the utmost disdain" (Helper 41). Helper's insistence that the South must abolish slavery and industrialize indicated just how deeply capitalist values suffused the yeoman class, even if few of his peers were prepared to go as far as he advocated (Brown, *Southern Outcast*, 91-123).

Capitalism and market involvement intimately shaped the lives of most southerners by mid-century, but one group stood as an exception. Some poor whites remained wedded to older, pre-modern ways and did indeed appear to accept a meagre existence that prized leisure over work, thereby fitting Olmsted's interpretation. Stranded on the bottom rung of the class hierarchy, the poorest southern whites owned little more than the clothes on their backs; recent studies provide a portrait of squalid life on the economic and social margins (Forret). Laboring was the most common form of work undertaken, although the enumeration was as likely to be food and shelter as wages. This group was despised for relying on temporary, irregular work, pursued with varying levels of commitment. Poor whites such as this regularly fraternized with blacks in a shadowy, clandestine lifestyle which earned them the epithet "vagabond." As I have argued elsewhere, the vagabond ethos was antithetical to those values encouraged by market production: thrift, routine, hard work, and deferred gratification. Vagabonds preferred a world of face-to-face contact, with friends and enemies, centering on the pleasures of the grog shop. Tall tales, gambling, and excessive drinking were the defining traits of a hyper-masculine subculture in which status was won and lost in brutal rough-and-tumble fights (Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale").

This type of poor white, comprising in 1860 perhaps 10 per cent of the adult male population in total, was swimming against the tide. Frances Kemble, English wife of a Georgian planter, noted how "planters are loud

in their execrations of these miserable vagabonds; yet they do not see that as long as labor is considered the disgraceful portion of slaves, these free men will hold it nobler to starve or steal than till the earth, with none but the despised blacks for fellow laborers” (Kemble 111). Kemble confusingly suggests that vagabonds hated blacks yet were content to work by their side. In fact, recent studies demonstrate considerable interracial fraternization between these groups that could be fractious but was more often mutually advantageous. Kemble is more accurate in capturing widespread disdain for vagabonds, but mischaracterizes the reasons why they worked haphazardly. They did not prioritize work or property, as did most others. Why would they when economic opportunities were so constrained in an agricultural economy where land ownership was essential? Vagabonds reveled in a brawling culture where peer status was decided by gambling and fighting. “Too lazy to distill honest peach or apple brandy, like the industrious yeomanry,” wrote Daniel Hundley in 1860, “they prefer to tramp to the nearest groggery with a gallon-jug on their shoulders, which they get filled with ‘bust-head,’ ‘rot-gut,’ or some other equally poisonous abomination; and then tramp home again, reeling as they trudge along, and laughing idiotically, or shouting like mad in a glorious state of beastly intoxication.” The Alabamian Hundley pandered to contemporary stereotypes here, but nonetheless was close to the mark in his stark contrast between yeoman and poor white (Hundley 268).

A Flawed Critic?

With the exception of vagabonds, then, the vast majority of southerners – even a number of slaves – seemingly worked conscientiously with the market in mind. While a handful of historians take a similar line of argument to Olmsted, the majority come to a different conclusion. Whether they are correct in asserting the South was essentially capitalist, or whether Olmsted’s interpretation retains the better analytical purchase, is beyond the parameters of this article. It is worth pointing out, however, that the recent trend presenting a capitalist Old South must reconcile its view with that of Olmsted, and his contemporaries, because in the mid-nineteenth century very few if any shared that interpretation. What remains to be examined is how and why Olmsted arrived at such an overly critical view of the southern work ethic.

Perhaps Olmsted was consciously writing polemically, seeking to intervene in the escalating sectional war of words between the North and the

South in the 1850s? Certainly, many travel writers attacked the South and its peculiar institution in the run-up to the American Civil War, ostensibly presenting their own particular observations but in reality following a familiar script. The “plight” of poor whites trapped in a life of misery and lethargy became a common trope in abolitionist discourse and was used to demonstrate southern slavery as an evil system for blacks *and* whites. Tales of poor white deprivation circulated widely in the antebellum United States. On close inspection, however, there is no evidence that Olmsted was purposefully engaged in a polemical exercise. He was not an abolitionist and, furthermore, dismissed abolitionism in general as divisive and misguided. As he confided to a friend prior to his trip, “I ... am a moderate Free Soiler” representing “pretty fairly the average sentiment of good thinking on our side” (Olmsted, *Papers*, 83). There is little reason to dispute the overwhelming consensus that Olmsted genuinely attempted to present what he saw fairly (Schlesinger; Boorstin 466). He essentially kept the promise made in his first letter to the *New York Daily Times*, published February 16, 1853, “to see for myself, and ... report with candor and fidelity ... the ordinary condition of the laborers of the South” (Olmsted, *Papers*, 86).

If Olmsted was not guilty of misrepresentation for political purposes, then neither was he writing from a position of ignorance that might also explain faulty judgments. Olmsted was a highly skilled ethnographer who drew from prior experiences both as a farmer and as a travel writer. Few other visitors to the South had been apprenticed to work on small farms in Connecticut and New York, as Olmsted had. In 1848, he managed to persuade his father to allow him to acquire a rundown, 130-acre tract on Staten Island, with the intention of restoring the farm to its former productivity by utilizing the latest agricultural practices. Olmsted persuaded his neighbors to form a local agricultural society. His decision to take the pseudonym “Yeoman” as his pen name for published newspaper letters was thus “both to keep his identity a secret, but also to emphasize the one authoritative claim on which he could rest his commentary – his own experience as a farmer” (Inscoc). We know relatively little of Olmsted’s farming experience – what he cultivated and how he did so – but such information might shed interesting light on his thinking. Moreover, Olmsted had already published *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer* in 1852, based on his tour of Great Britain and Europe in the summer of 1850. This book also emphasized Olmsted’s agricultural identity and indeed followed a similar pattern to his later southern trips, as he recorded and later wrote at length about what he

encountered. The experience of researching and writing *Walks and Talks* was surely a major factor in the success of subsequent works.

If we accept that Olmsted presented his views faithfully and accurately, then was his criticism of southern work habits explained by the rhythms of the farming cycle, or by the particular types of southerners he met? Olmsted spent much of his time in the South during slacker periods in the agricultural calendar, not harvest time. This might have contributed to his condemnation of the southern work ethic, although he was too experienced in farming to let it overly influence his position. More pertinently, Olmsted's interpretation was built on personal interactions. He claimed to have conversed with more than 500 individuals, an impressive but random number. Perhaps this particular sample skewed his evaluation of southern work habits unduly? Such an interpretation might carry weight if Olmsted disproportionately spoke with poor whites or witnessed vagabonds at close quarters. This was generally not the case however. Olmsted overwhelmingly interacted with those from the middling ranks – particularly farmers, skilled artisans, and small slaveholders. He found it difficult to find an audience with planters, especially those who were extremely wealthy, although he did have more success in gaining access to their plantations. Despite Olmsted's own frequent grumbling to the contrary, he rarely encountered the poorest southerners directly, although he spoke much about them with the yeomen and small slaveholders whom he met, and who regularly provided him with food and overnight shelter.

Indeed, it has not been sufficiently appreciated that Olmsted's condemnation of the southern work ethic stemmed in large part from conversations with the South's middling ranks. It was this particular dialog that directly influenced Olmsted's perception that menial work was scorned. Yeomen and small slaveholders regularly needed to supplement their work force, especially at harvest time, when they hired temporary white laborers. Just as regularly, they were scathing in their complaints to Olmsted about the lethargy and unreliability of their temporary workers. "The poor white people that had to labour for their living," a Virginian slaveholder told him, "never would work steadily at any employment" (Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 64).⁸ Moreover, historians Stephanie McCurry and J. William Harris both point out that Olmsted was one of many outsiders to *mistake* yeomen and even

⁸ See also Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom* 87-88 (especially), 147, 257, 327, 382, 391, 397. In general, see Grivno 113, 164-165; Bolton, 27.

small slaveholders, as measured by southern standards, for poor whites (McCurry 41-43; Harris 80-81). While Olmsted's Old South was in actuality a world filtered through the eyes of the middling sorts, he personally mistook the crudeness of yeoman log cabins and the generally small size of cultivated acres, to denote this class as poor. This mistake was compounded in Olmsted's case because he ventured far from the beaten track, visiting the remotest parts of the South by horse and by foot at times. He was far more likely to find communities in the far reaches of the backcountry that sustained his impression of the regressive state of the rural South. Vagabonds were a small but notorious minority, and Olmsted undoubtedly exaggerated their numbers. In many ways though, the backwardness Olmsted described in parts of Appalachia, for example, was a genuine reflection of settlements that, despite rapid change across much of the region, remained remote from the market (indeed, some of these settlements would remain so for generations to come). It is almost as if the rustic backcountry environment that Olmsted encountered, seemingly immune to the "progress" found elsewhere, could only be the product of a lackadaisical work culture.

A few modern scholars challenge the position of Daniel Boorstin, Arthur Schlesinger, and others, who portrayed Olmsted as an unbiased critic, pointing instead towards the ideological purpose of his writings.⁹ Literary critic Carolyn Porter notes that while his investigations were extensive they discursively reinforced the dichotomy between North and South and "served always to demonstrate that the conjunction of cotton and slavery bred poverty – economic, social, and cultural" (Porter 363). Another literary scholar, John Cox, adapts Mary Louise Pratt's conception of the "capitalist vanguard" in characterizing Olmsted. Pratt argued that "advance scouts for European capitalism" – a diverse group including travel writers – arrived in large numbers in South America in the early nineteenth century intent on surveying and eventually exploiting economic opportunities. In contradiction of Olmsted's stated intent, Cox insists that he "is a prophet of a new economic order" intending "to reconfigure southern society entirely and to re-form the nation as a whole in the image of his native New England" (Pratt 146; Cox 164, 144).¹⁰ Historian Laurence Powell argues that it

9 Olmsted's objective reputation remains elsewhere, however: Rybcznski, for instance, contends that Olmsted "does not lecture but gently steers the reader to the conclusion that the facts demand. He understood that ordinary people are worth listening to, and he lets them speak for themselves" (123).

10 Pratt asserts that "Subsistence lifeways, non-monetary exchange systems, and self-sustaining regional

was Olmsted's distinctive northern background that fundamentally clouded his vision. *The Cotton Kingdom* "advertises itself as a travel account and a book of reportage, which it assuredly is," Powell notes. "But it is also an ideological treatise verging at times on the polemical, and it must be read on these two levels, bifocally as it were" (Powell ix).

This critique asks problematic questions about the fundamental elusiveness of objectivity. While rejecting any notion that Olmsted's observations were deliberately formulated for ideological purposes, it would be foolish to ignore this corrective to the earlier position that his work was entirely free from bias. Olmsted was an intuitive, skilled observer, but could only draw from his own particular perspective and his ideological baggage was clear. Olmsted's upbringing in the mid-nineteenth century North profoundly influenced his intellectual outlook. Charles Beveridge, editor of Olmsted's papers, stresses that "his image of the good society was to a large extent an idealized version of the New England town" and it is significant that Olmsted traced his heritage back to one of the original proprietors of Hartford, Connecticut (Olmsted, *Papers*, 7). Olmsted took the superiority of free labor to be axiomatic and accepted most parts of the emerging Republican critique of the South and its concern that slavery adversely affected economy and society. No outsider visited the South without preconceptions or a fairly well defined agenda, even when arriving with an open mind. Olmsted might not have been an abolitionist, but he was passionate about the superiority of republican, free labor society. His earlier condemnation of the British class system accused the English aristocracy of treating "their labouring class as a permanent providential *institution*, not to be improved" (Olmsted, *Walks and Talks*, 356-7). The very same sense of frustration, if not anger, was directed at planters who dominated the Old South. It encouraged an overly critical view of southern life and work.

Thus, even if Olmsted was an honest critic, it is nonetheless the case that his observations were to an extent *unconsciously* subjective, and reflected wider tensions between the sections in the 1850s. Most pertinently, Olmsted deemed personal drive and inquisitiveness, intellectual curiosity, and respectability (if not refinement) to be the quintessential qualities of civilized industriousness. As such, he could barely hide his contempt at what he considered to be the depravity and illiteracy of the majority of southern

whites. "The ignorance of the more brutalized slaves is often described by saying of them that they cannot count above twenty" Olmsted wrote. "I find many of the whites but little more intelligent." In a sweeping condemnation, he further asserted that "their destitution is not material only; it is intellectual and it is moral" (Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 233). Some imply that this tunnel vision is a fatal flaw in his work revealing more about northern values than it does about the South. What Powell terms Olmsted's "ideological preconditioning" compromised his analysis of the South and "prevented him from judging it on its own terms." Porter asserts that "*The Cotton Kingdom* registers the voice of the dominant white North" (Powell xxvii; Porter 363).

This line of argument goes too far. The insinuation that Olmsted had essentially reached his conclusions before traversing the Mason-Dixon line does gross injustice to the quality and enduring significance of his work. It also rests selectively on statements from the 1861 introduction to *The Cotton Kingdom*, revealingly entitled "The Present Crisis" where Olmsted directly addressed the calamity caused by the onset of the American Civil War. This polemical essay reflected its author's growing antipathy towards the South that had steadily increased in the second half of the 1850s as Olmsted became involved in attempts to establish free labor colonies in Texas. The opening quotations to this article are taken from this twenty-page introduction, the only new material included in *The Cotton Kingdom*. There was no attempt to disguise that this was Olmsted's personal opinion, aimed intentionally at the sectional crisis. As such, it must be distinguished from the views presented in the three travel books which, while critical in many ways of the South and its economy, present a more rounded picture and were formulated in a far less polarized context. Moreover, Olmsted's personal opinion is easily disentangled from his broader observations and detailed descriptions of southern life. The usefulness of Olmsted's intricate portrait of the diverse South is not compromised by the introductory essay to *The Cotton Kingdom* or by more crass invectives from the earlier works.

The accusation that southern whites failed "to work industriously and steadily" not only flattens and simplifies the panoramic survey Olmsted presents, but is a conclusion explicitly undermined by his own pen. Olmsted visited the southern countryside, town, and city and spent as much time observing tobacco, rice, and sugar operations as he did cotton. In-depth descriptions of overseers, artisans, laborers and foremen, in rural, urban, and industrial settings, illustrated Olmsted's keen appreciation of

different forms of labor organization, some of which he admitted produced good results. In New Orleans, for instance, Olmsted noted that the regular infusion of immigrants, the industriousness of the urban setting, and the fact that whites generally dominated laboring professions, ensured a much higher quality of work than elsewhere (Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 233). Olmsted's condemnation of the southern work ethic was far more the result of conversations with southerners about vagabonds than it was based on his own empirical observations. Furthermore, it drew from the strong southern stigma against laboring under the directions of another, which Olmsted mistook as an aversion to work in general.

Finally, recent historiographical developments in the study of the southern economy complicate simplistic assertions that Olmsted is best portrayed as an agent of northern capitalism. If the Old South was already capitalist in many fundamental respects, what was there to reform? Answers here suggest it is dangerous to claim that Olmsted's views predominantly reflected a "capitalist" or a "northern" mentality. Both terms are uncomfortably amorphous and require further clarification. Olmsted is best characterized as part of the New England middle class, although by the early 1850s he was a well-travelled man who had lived on Staten Island for a number of years. Nonetheless, it is clear that Olmsted evaluated social and economic status by middle-class standards of material comfort, property, and, above all, education and literacy.¹¹ Olmsted's conceptualization of the southern work ethic incorporated a diverse range of factors, many of which were not connected to the work process at all. Most notably it was a product of class elitism. Snobbish castigations of the rough, primitive nature of southern society indelibly marked Olmsted's observations, but problems of poverty and economic stagnation were not purely a southern phenomenon. Antebellum New Englanders worried about rural poverty and isolation, especially as those perceived as more intelligent and energetic migrated to the West or to the cities as the nineteenth century progressed. While not as widely noticed as southern poor whites, poor farmers in the hill country of northern New England were regarded in a similar light (Barron 37-39).

Olmsted's "ideological preconditioning" is important to evaluating his published works, but is far from the only consideration. In many ways, and much more so than other travel writers, he transcended the restrictions of

11 McLaughlin emphasizes Olmsted "believed that education was an almost criminally neglected factor in stratified English society" (Olmsted, *Walks and Talks*, xxiv).

his own particular intellectual background. Olmsted remains the most astute observer of southern life before the Civil War. His critique of southern work culture stems in large part from his consistent revulsion at the many uncouth and uneducated rural southerners whom he encountered. He admitted as such in a scathing critique of “poor country people” selling goods in the marketplace – surely making them good capitalists – because of their “appearance and manners” (Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 180-81). Olmsted’s snobbishness does not detract from the wider significance of his work, however, so long as modern students distinguish between different groups of southerners more precisely than he did himself.

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