

Rachel Sellers

Book Review

*The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*

Written By James Oakes

After learning so much about slavery and the coming of the Civil War during the summer sessions through extensive reading of primary sources, discussions, and presentations by important scholars, I still wanted to learn more about the slave owners' frame of mind in perpetuating the peculiar institution. With the politics, the cultural aspects, the economy, the ideology of 19<sup>th</sup> century America fresh in my mind, I was still intrigued by the fact that the country remained culturally fragmented after the Civil War. Lee's surrender crushed Southern pride and hindered the South's future socially, economically, and politically. However, the legacy of slavery would haunt the region for decades to come, and racial discrimination would remain institutionalized all over the country in spite of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. So, after going over the list of authors and books that I could choose from, I decided to check the previous works of some of the authors. While browsing the Amazon website I came upon an older book published by James Oakes in 1982 called *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*. I read the brief description of the book and thought it would help me to get a better understanding of the slaveholders, not only the plantation class.

The book is considered to be the first comprehensive history of the American slaveholding class from the latter part of the eighteenth century to the Civil War according to its publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. I found it interesting that he was choosing to analyze the slaveholders' class in a period in which most of the historians were focusing on works in which the institution of slavery was depicted through the eyes of the slaves due to the Civil Rights

Movement. With an introduction of nine and a half pages, Mr. Oakes discusses the reasons behind writing the book, as well as how he organizes the book. *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* is divided into three parts plus the epilogue, appendix, notes and vast bibliography adding up to 307 pages of dense and at times overwhelming writing. The way Mr. Oakes chose to divide the book clearly displays his background as a social historian in the 1980s: The Colonial Legacy, the Market Culture, and Plantations, Plebeians, and Patricians. It did not take me long to realize that some of his main arguments go against another famous historian Eugene Genovese, who wrote *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made* in 1974, whom he quotes several times. Oakes basically tries to discredit Genovese's central thesis that slavery gave rise to a special pattern of social relations within the developing capitalist system, whose essential characteristics derived from the master's ownership not only of the means of production but of the workers themselves. However, Oakes' attempt to challenge Genovese ends up full of contradictions.

In the chapter called Revolutionaries Slaveholders, Oakes first argues that slavery's ideological accompaniment, described as paternalism by Genovese, died by the end of the colonial era. He views paternalism as a withering force thanks to the democratic principles and increasing economic development that were unleashed by the American Revolution. According to him "the ideology and culture of slaveholding were not fully developed when Americans declared their independence from Great Britain" (p.34). In the chapter Master-class Pluralism he describes how out of the old aristocratic, paternalistic slaveholders a new class of slaveholders emerged: one that was diverse in its ethnic composition and religious affiliations. This new class had a humble background but moved South in search of economic opportunities, challenging the entrenched political and economic interests standing in the way of their prosperity. According to Oakes, "the dominant slaveholding culture grew out of the colonial experience in America and embraced the diversity of southern society" (p.68). He suggests that the expanding slave economy of the antebellum period led a worldview that pushed upward

mobility and social fluidity among the vast majority of American slaveholders. As such, slavery becomes the vehicle by which ambitious Southerners achieve their dreams of upward mobility.

Oakes does a good job in portraying the two central paradoxes existing in the slaveholding South: the most patriotic and liberty loving section of the country clings to the ownership of slaves and how the dehumanizing effects of slavery go against the owners' religious convictions in the chapter called *The Convenient Sin*. According to him, evangelical Protestantism attracted most of the religiously inclined slaveholders (p.96). He suggests that the culture of the region also produced a secular ideology that "explicitly repudiated the suggestion that slaveholding was immoral" (p.122). This same ideology apparently was ambiguous because the more slaveholders wanted to succeed the more they feared failure. If they succeeded they risked their soul, for they would not enter Heaven, but if they failed they would be disgraced in the eyes of their society, according to Oakes.

In one of the longest and most boring chapters Oakes focuses mostly on the antebellum plantation management giving great emphasis to the largest plantation owners, who he calls the "paternalist aristocrats". When he tries to diminish their influence in another chapter, by assigning plantation owners to groups of graduates of military academies, immigrants from the Northeast, the ones from the Chesapeake Bay, the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and the Mississippi, his analysis is not successful. The reason it fails is because he claims that this diverse group was the vibrant force in the antebellum South, not the aristocrat elite of plantation owners. Oakes gives little consideration to the fact that the paternalists were the forces behind secession. He also ignores that the paternalist's wealth resulted from an entirely different source from that of other wealthy classes count for nothing.

When discussing the "middle-class" character of the antebellum South, Oakes views the majority of lawyers in the country courts and legislatures as an indicative of the "middle -class orientation of Southern politics." By assuming this position, there is very little difference between antebellum

Southern politics from Northern politics , or even modern - day politics, North or South. Then he admits that the diverse slaveholding population included Indians and free blacks, as well as whites. That is when the title of his book *The Ruling Race* loses its impact and purpose.

Overall, in spite of the quality and the broad scope of the historiography presented by Oakes, his book fails to clarify the role of this very diverse group of people – the slaveholders, because in a way, he subordinates all other considerations to trying to prove Genovese's interpretation of slavery wrong. In the end, serious analysis of paternalism as the ideological expression of slaveholders struggling to maintain mastery in their contemporary nineteenth century world becomes impossible to understand due to the jumble of logical and historical fallacies. His reliance on explaining the pluralistic aspect of the slaveholding class falls short because he only describes the various segments of the slaveholders' class, without actually analyzing it.

In terms of organization, I find the book to be scattered, lacking continuity, and focus. Each chapter is like a deck of cards , and most use different decks. Some chapters contain very little other than wild cards, or does not fit with any other chapter. The only similarity among the chapters is the same anti-Genovese blueprint.

As a final thought, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*, fails to clarify certain points of the big topic of the relations between slaves and their masters because it is narrowly focused on the slaveholders. Can we actually know the masters without knowing their relationship with the slaves? I feel that the history of the masters and the history of the slaves only make sense when told as a single story of struggle between slaves and slaveholders – the one for freedom, and the other for domination. After all, slaves made the world of the masters and were always threatening to unmake it.

## Work Cited

Oakes, James. *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.