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Ideology and the Making of Jim Crow

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Ideology and the Making of Jim Crow

Ideology played a major role in the creation of the Jim Crow South. In order to cope with the South's loss in the Civil War, white southerners, rich and poor, male and female, fostered the ideologies of the Lost Cause and of white supremacy. The Lost Cause taught southerners to respect and to honor their past and to hold sacred their noble fight in the Civil War. This history, which served as a civil religion for southerners, reinforced their Victorian ideals of virtue, honor, and patriarchy.¹ It also strove to maintain the social order of white supremacy that was preeminent during the antebellum period. This quest to preserve white supremacy legitimized Democratic Radicals, such as South Carolina's Ben Tillman and his white supremacist Red Shirts terrorist group. The Red Shirts were one of many white supremacist groups which antagonized, attacked, and lynched blacks at every possible opportunity. With white Protestant churches condoning and supporting this type of behavior, Tillman's compatriots elected him as governor of South Carolina and subsequently as a U.S. Senator for the state.²

Women, for their part, were also instrumental in glorifying a white supremacist culture through groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Through a careful selection of books and other educational materials for public libraries, they hoped to censor books from future generations that could potentially be used to view the South in a negative light.³ Additionally, through the spread of propaganda against blacks by the media and with the depiction of black males as beasts who preyed on white women, the

¹ David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002; 2004), 2, 30.

² Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000; 2000), 2.

³ Elizabeth Hayes Turner, "Women, Religion, and the Lost Cause," in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, vol. 2: *The New South*, 2d ed., Major Problems in American History, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 209.

belief in white supremacy and in the Lost Cause was strengthened. White supremacist sentiments peaked in the early 1890s with the political challenge posed by the newly-formed Populist Party towards the governing Democratic Party.⁴ The Populists were cotton farmers who were hurt by the economic depression of the early 1890s. Feeling that the Democrats were not paying adequate attention to their needs, they fused together with black males in order to challenge the Democratic governments in the South. This threat to Democratic leadership united Conservative Democrats, who were only moderately discriminatory towards blacks, with Radical Democrats, who were strongly white supremacist individuals. In unison, the Democratic Party overcame the Populist threat.⁵

The very idea that blacks could come back to power for the first time since Reconstruction ended, increased white supremacist feelings among white southerners. These intensified feelings resulted in the Radical faction of the Democratic Party coming to power. This Radical faction within each southern state worked systematically to disfranchise blacks in the latter part of the 1890s. Disfranchisement was not a deviation from southern culture; it was an extension of southern culture and beliefs into the legal realm. Support from every facet of southern society allowed Jim Crow to prosper. Jim Crow society encompassed schools, churches, social groups, the rule of law, the media, white men and women, along with the poor, uniting for the common purpose of keeping blacks on the bottom rung of society. In order to achieve this task, they needed to glorify white culture, also known as the South's Lost Cause. Inherent in this ideology were white

⁴ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, Gender and American Culture, ed. Linda K. Kerber and Nell Irvin Painter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; 1996), 92.

⁵ Edward L. Ayers, "Alliances and Populists," in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 152.

supremacy and the belief that southerners had a noble and respectable past that deserved to be celebrated.

Before one can understand how ideology nurtured Jim Crow, it is necessary to take a more in depth look at the power and influence of the ideologies themselves and how they played out within southern society. Born in the late 1890s in Georgia, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin witnessed and experienced the culture of the Lost Cause firsthand. In *The Making of a Southerner*, Lumpkin explains that preserving memories of and honoring Civil War veterans became a national pastime for white southerners. In order to bring meaning to a war-torn society, she explains that reunions of Civil War soldiers were held as often as possible so that they could safeguard the ideals of the Old South that they cherished.⁶

The Old South that they desperately tried to recreate was “a time of happy slaves, gracious masters, and beautiful chaste women.”⁷ There was an order to society from top-to-bottom. Lumpkin asserts that her “father was an inveterate reunion-goer and planner. So were literally hundreds of his kind, men who were also of the Old South’s disinherited, who had lost so much and regained so little, materially speaking.”⁸ Not only did these reunions serve to instill pride in southerners whose lifestyle was turned upside down by the war but they also served to educate younger generations who were either too young to remember the Civil War or were born after it.⁹ By praising the virtues of the Old South, these reunions also strengthened the ideal of white supremacy.

Despite the patriarchal overtones of southern society, women were just as instrumental as men in supporting and perpetuating white supremacy and the Lost Cause.

⁶ Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1946; reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, Brown Thrasher Books, 1991), 112.

⁷ Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 20-21.

⁸ Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner*, 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.

Memorial services that white women held for fallen Confederate soldiers reflected their commitment to preserving the southern way of life.¹⁰ Likewise, their acceptance of white male protection from black males who allegedly wanted to rape them shows their implicit role in supporting the southern cause. In order to explain the importance of women in maintaining the Lost Cause, historian Glenda Gilmore attests that “if a white woman rejected ‘protection’ and went about her business in an integrated setting or refused to make her husband a red shirt with a butterfly collar to wear to the White Government League meeting, the entire Democratic project suffered.”¹¹ In essence, this acquiescence allowed white women to become political figures. With a strong fight by millions of white women for enfranchisement in the 1910s, there was an equal opposition to their cause by other white women who were willing to sacrifice their political voice because they feared that it would lead to blacks regaining the vote.¹² This blatant antagonism towards blacks helps to explain how the Jim Crow South was born.

The idea of the Lost Cause that white women and men were fighting to preserve was also supported by religious establishments, especially Evangelical Protestants. Historian Paul Harvey explains that “white southern churches rarely sought to overturn the southern social and racial hierarchy but rather reinforced and even defined it.”¹³ This support for the southern cause was nothing new for the Evangelical Church, as it had been a strong supporter of slavery and of secession from the United States.¹⁴ While religious institutions supported the Lost Cause, this support should not be confused with the fact that

¹⁰ Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 25.

¹¹ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 93.

¹² Document, “Antisuffragists Raise the Race Issue,” in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 263.

¹³ Paul Harvey, “Redeeming the South,” in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 200.

¹⁴ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980; 1983), 4.

the Lost Cause was actually a civil religion of southern culture. By supporting the Lost Cause and the preservation of white supremacy, these ideologies achieved important legitimacy for southerners.¹⁵

Southerners were able to use religion to justify their white supremacist actions. For their part, the Evangelical Church intended to inspire a religious revival.¹⁶ While there was this ulterior motive, historian Charles Reagan Wilson maintains that “these ministers saw little difference between their religious and cultural values, and they promoted the link by constructing Lost Cause ritualistic forms that celebrated their regional mythological and theological beliefs.”¹⁷ Both civilians and church ministers believed that the South had a great civilization that was filled with virtue. White southerners believed that their proud history and culture had to be preserved at any cost.¹⁸

This mentality was shared by a Democratic Radical from South Carolina, named Benjamin Tillman, throughout his entire political career. His political career began as a terrorist leader of the white supremacist Red Shirts group. This fame was later used to propel him into the governorship in the 1890s and subsequently as a U.S. Senator for South Carolina. By 1877, southerners’ white supremacist views helped to unite all Democrats against the Republican governments that controlled the South. The new group of leaders who took control of the South were mainly Conservative Democrats. They were nicknamed the “Redeemers” because they took back control of the South’s governments from the North. Tillman was instrumental in helping the Democrats come to power in South Carolina.

¹⁵ Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 187.

¹⁶ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 33.

Tillman, who was born into a wealthy slaveholding family in South Carolina in 1847, was just coming of age towards the end of the Civil War. He was never able to enter the war, however, because he contracted a cranial tumor that forced doctors to remove his left eye.¹⁹ After he recovered, Tillman was able to gain influence within his society since he was an elite landowner and the leader of the Red Shirts, a white supremacist group. During his days as the Red Shirts' leader, he instigated blacks who were armed by the Republican Party into firing a shot at his group. Once his group claimed that they had been fired upon, it was open season on all blacks in the surrounding area.²⁰

Tillman's harassment of blacks also included intimidating black voters at the polls to ensure that they did not vote for the Republican Party. This tactic was successful in intimidating blacks as "Edgefield County [in South Carolina], with 2,722 white and 4,400 black men of voting age, produced over 5,500 Democratic and fewer than 3,000 Republican votes."²¹ Aside from reflecting white intimidation towards black voters, these results also reflect voter fraud with more votes being cast than there were voters in the county. Actions, like these, helped the South to overthrow northern Reconstruction governments. Paul M Gaston, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Virginia, believes that southerners fought harder and tougher against the North's Reconstruction governments than they did during the Civil War.²²

Despite being rich, Tillman used his occupation as a farmer to shield his image of prosperity. Beginning in the 1880s, he strove to portray himself as a common man. Historian Stephen Kantrowitz explains that he did this by attacking upper class men who

¹⁹ Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

²² Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1970; reprint, Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2002), 58.

he believed “betray[ed] white supremacy by asserting unwarranted authority over other white men—in effect, treating these white men not as equals but as slaves.”²³ In response, aristocrats branded Tillman as a belligerent man with the class, the demeanor, and the manners of the common people. Inadvertently this characterization of Tillman backfired on Tillman’s opponents and it “helped the Edgefield planter [to] establish himself as a representative of the white Southern ‘common man.’ ”²⁴ Despite Tillman’s feelings on the unfair treatment of poor white men, as governor his rhetoric against elite whites did not transform into economic help for struggling farmers. In fact, his opposition to blacks resulted in black laborers moving out of the state. The reduced labor pool resulted in higher labor costs for farmers.²⁵ Helping farmers was only a plank on his true platform of white supremacy. He did not intend to help farmers financially, only to elevate them socially. Since Tillman claimed to champion the farmers’ cause, he effectively kept the Populist Party out of South Carolina politics.

Additionally, Tillman supported the lynching of blacks as long as it was done under his supervision. His anger was especially directed at black men who were accused of raping white women. Often times, these accusations were made by white men without any merit to their claims. This myth of the black rapist was widely accepted by southerners. Therefore, Tillman’s pledge as governor in 1892 to lead a “lynch mob” against blacks who were accused of rape found wide appeal.²⁶ Tillman’s support of white supremacy and the Lost Cause went hand in hand. He dedicated his entire adult life to the preservation of the South’s glorious heritage and its patriarchal society.

²³ Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

Beginning in 1883 with the Supreme Court decision to overturn the 1875 Civil Rights Act, the tide against black rights was turning in the South. Segregation had actually begun the previous year in Tennessee, but it would not catch on in all southern states until the end of the decade. Historian Joel Williamson explains, “For Conservatives, segregation meant giving the black person a very special place in which he would be protected. Far from putting down the self-esteem of black people, Conservative segregation was designed to preserve and encourage it.”²⁷ Likewise, it was intended to prevent white men from disgracing themselves in public by quarreling with black men.²⁸ Once Radical Democrats took over in the South as a result of the Populist threat, these modest intentions were exploited and expanded upon. With economic troubles abundant in the 1890s and the Supreme Court legalizing segregation in 1896 with its ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, there was an opening for Radicals who had taken control of southern governments to bring about the disfranchisement of black males. This disfranchisement was driven by the South’s desire for white supremacy.

Through literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses, and with the support of a white supremacist Supreme Court, the South was able to evade enforcement of the fifteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which gave blacks the right to vote.²⁹ By using subjective literacy tests, given by white males, illiterate white males were not prevented from voting at the same time that the literacy test was strictly enforced for blacks. Black disfranchisement was a victory for the Lost Cause because it reinforced the South’s belief that blacks were not worthy of citizenship. White males used black

²⁷ Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 197.

disfranchisement as a reason in itself to prevent blacks from regaining the vote. It was used to demonstrate their “unfitness for public life.”³⁰

After the Civil War, elite aristocrats had the strongest reason to support the Lost Cause and white supremacy since they lost their status as slaveholders. While elites supported these ideologies in an attempt to reestablish the old social order of the Old South, it needs to be explained as to why poor whites also shared these ideals. Poor whites were partially driven by economic forces to support these ideologies. They benefited from discrimination against blacks, especially segregation, because they were able to take away some of the industrial jobs that blacks had entered into. Furthermore, “the poorer whites also tended to belong to the same churches and sometimes to the same families as their wealthier neighbors.” Feelings of “debt, obligation, or gratitude” also tied poor whites to the elite.³¹ Rich or poor, white men shared a common history of superiority over blacks. Consequently, they both supported the Lost Cause. Women too showed their support for white culture by voting Democratic after they gained the right to vote.³² Former Populists also came around after their defeat by the Democrats and “accepted the white supremacist logic that their racial interests overrode their class interest.”³³ This was not a stretch for former Populists, who were white supremacists at heart and only used blacks as a political tool to help their agenda. Now it seemed that cotton farmers had to reconcile with the Democrats in order to rejoin the political arena.

Through the cooperation of women, schools, social organizations, churches, white supremacist groups and leaders, rich and poor white men, propaganda, and the Supreme

³⁰ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 119.

³¹ Edward L. Ayers, “Alliances and Populists,” 150.

³² Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 216.

³³ *Ibid.*, 145-46.

Court of the United States, the South was able to sustain Jim Crow disfranchisement until the 1920s when women gained the right to vote. Historian Glenda Gilmore maintains that “woman suffrage forever altered white supremacy’s style and cleared a narrow path for black men to return to politics.”³⁴ After black women were enfranchised, the belief in the “unfitness” of black males to vote began to wither away. While black males increasingly began to register to vote in the 1920s, segregation still remained prevalent throughout southern society.³⁵ The fight for the Lost Cause and white supremacy persisted.

Disfranchisement and the creation of the Jim Crow South were not inevitable. Had the economy not soured in the 1890s, there might not have been an opening to legitimize black disfranchisement. The urbanization of southern society in the 1890s, where whites often interacted with blacks, also helped to increase support for black disfranchisement.³⁶ While disfranchisement may not have been possible without the poor economy that brought on the Populist threat to Democratic rule, disfranchisement was not a far stretch from the beliefs of southern society. Since the end of the Civil War, white southerners united behind the Lost Cause that celebrated their heritage, maintained their white supremacist patriarchal values, and restored their dignity for their loss in the Civil War. While the poor economy of the 1890s was one of many factors that helped to bring about the disfranchisement of blacks and the creation of the Jim Crow South, disfranchisement would not have been possible without the southern culture that cherished the Lost Cause and its fight to maintain white supremacy.

³⁴ Ibid., xxi.

³⁵ Ibid., 224.

³⁶ Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 67.