

STEVEN HAHN. *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1983. Pp. xvii, 340. \$29.95.

Basing his sweeping reinterpretation of southern society and politics from the 1850s to the 1890s chiefly on an intense study of two counties in the Georgia upcountry, Steven Hahn argues that white southern yeomen were transmogrified largely against their will from subsistence farmers in the antebellum era to producers, particularly of cotton, for local, national, and international markets after 1865. During the 1880s, many small farmers, in what he depicts as an effort to defend their "Revolutionary republican heritage" (p. 240), opposed such laws as those that required owners to fence in their animals, instead of letting them roam freely down village streets, or through neighbors' corn fields. Reacting against their changed socioeconomic roles and against the credit relations that their abandonment of self-sufficiency necessitated, yeomen voted "independent" in the 1870s and Populist in the 1890s. These clashes between Democrats and their opponents reflected not simply material self-interest, Hahn asserts repeatedly, but profound cultural differences between smallholders who adhered to a preindustrial "republican producer ideology" (p. 283) and the forces of "bourgeois individualism and the free market" (p. 282), here represented by small town merchants and a developing "agrarian bourgeoisie" (p. 244). Engagingly written, provocative, fashionably blending simple social statistics with cultural "Marxism," this book, winner of the Nevins dissertation prize, has already attracted considerable attention.

Far from victims of the slavocracy, antebellum white hill-country yeomen lived in relatively egalitarian communities largely free of "the hegemony of the marketplace" (p. 282); could expect substantial upward mobility, at least if they did not move; borrowed money from neighbors or from merchants who charitably charged no interest on their credit accounts until the end of the year (p. 72); enjoyed substantial legal protection if they did become debtors; exercised considerable power in local politics; and went to war not to protect slavery but to defend the independence of "communities of petty producers" (p. 133). Beginning in the 1850s, but especially after 1865, this edenic scene was disturbed by the extension of railroads into the area and the lure of initially high cotton prices and decreasing fertilizer prices, which fostered a major rise in cotton production and the growth of small market towns in the highlands. The fence laws and restrictions on hunting, fishing, and poaching made it more difficult for land-poor people to keep pigs and cows and to supplement their diets with game. Lien laws and loopholes enacted in the homestead exemption enabled agriculturalists to obtain credit and to mortgage property and crops, and merchants, therefore, proliferated. Consequently, the once relatively undifferentiated communities became divided into creditors and debtors, owners and tenants, townspeople and wool hat boys. (The 20 percent of the people of the two counties who were black in 1880 play little role in Hahn's analysis.)

Hahn's contentions that white farmers were damaged by legal changes, which he realizes were necessary to make it possible for yeomen to borrow, and that they were afraid to give up their "proud independence" by devoting a larger percentage of their efforts to producing crops for sale are undercut by his own statistics. When after 1865 a choice between subsistence farming, on the one hand, and cash crops, mortgages, and credit, on the other hand, finally became possible, yeomen, especially those who owned the smallest number of improved acres, chose the market (pp. 196-97, 298-306). Instead of trying systematically to establish connections between coalitions in the stock law elections and in those involving the Populists, he merely mentions five leaders who fit his model (p. 277). Strangely, in a book so centrally concerned with Populism, Hahn devotes only a twenty-page epilogue to the 1890s, makes little effort to show that the Populist party's appeal in these counties reflected a desire for a "cooperative commonwealth" or a fear of the market, and never explains why yeomen took until the 1890s to fight back vigorously against the market's incursions, which had begun decades earlier, or how a struggle assertedly involving such a deep cultural schism could be so brief. Failing to

connect radicalism's alleged roots with its branches, he likewise neglects to test his ideological thesis explicitly against the simpler materialist hypothesis that Populism was the direct product of self-interested clashes, greatly intensified by the agricultural depression of the 1890s, between farmers and creditors, established Democratic elites and political outsiders, staunch defenders and potential disturbers of the racist order. Hahn's powerful rhetoric, in other words, obscures his refusal to confront the question of whether, in this case, class conflict needs a cultural gloss.

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