

Changes in the Union: A Critical
assessment of *Antebellum Southern
Exceptionalism* by James McPherson

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In considering McPherson's main argument - "The South changed relatively little, and, because so many Northern changes seemed threatening, the South developed a defensive ideology that resisted change" (McPherson 49) - he was correct. However, only to the extent that he argued, it was not just Southern fears of a changing North that started the war. By examining McPherson's argument through the lens of Southern change that Deyle demonstrates, one can see the whole country was in a state of change. By examining McPherson's argument through the lens of slow, difficult, Northern, change that Levine demonstrates, one can see the consequences of that change within the North. Then by examining the fears of the Northerners, through the social lens that Grant demonstrates, one can see that the North was just as fearful of the south. Yes, McPherson was correct, however, he did not go far enough; McPherson was examining through a lens of Southern resistance he failed to see the North's reactions and what they were reacting to. Ultimately, each society could be claimed to be the results of uncontrollable changes within the early 1800s, changes that when the country was to undergo change again in the 1840s, seemed irreconcilably different.

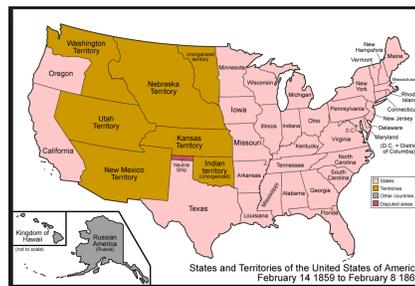
McPherson would argue that the south hadn't changed. That, "the South changed relatively little, and because so many Northern changes seemed threatening, the South developed a defensive ideology that resisted change" (McPherson 49). Deyle would say McPherson wasn't looking at the bigger picture. When one thinks of the South in the antebellum time period they think of the slave market. But this slave market couldn't have been created without changes to the existing structure of the South. The region-wide slave market was created in part "with the invention of the cotton gin in 1792 and the explosion of King Cotton in the early nineteenth century" (Deyle 52). The South's economy changed rapidly, these states went from producing tobacco, rice, and indigo to cotton and slaves. Yes, there is a difference in that the North's

manufacturing industry made more in money but the North’s manufacturing industry came about at the same pace the South’s slave/cotton industry did. McPherson would point out the rate of change, how “the North was more urban than the South and was urbanizing at a faster rate” (McPherson 44); when looking at it economically this seems to be the case but the South, according to Pessen, was also in the process of urbanizing. And one cannot deny that “before the war the South was wealthy, prosperous, expanding geographically, and gaining economically at rates that compared favorably to those of the rest of the country” (Pessen 14). In fact, one could argue that the South changed quicker than the North.

If one would start the South’s change with just the economy taken into account, the South’s change would start in 1793 with the invention of the cotton gin. While the North’s wouldn’t start until the 1820’s with the industrial revolution coming to America, this revolution’s end is post-dated to the civil war. The North for all its changes was still very similar to the South in where life was lived, “In the revolutionary era less than a half of one percent of the Northern population lived in the region’s three largest towns...” (Levine 48). This was a trend that would continue into the 1840s.



Map 1.1: US 1820



Map 1.2: US 1860

To say the South did not change in the antebellum period is to say that the country did not grow. Consider maps 1.1 and 1.2, they offer representations of the United States in the year 1800 and

the year 1860. These maps demonstrate just how rapidly the country, as a whole, was changing, within 60 years the continental United States of America had taken shape.

While the country was changing economically as a whole, these changes also spurred developments within each society with regard to each other. Or at least as far as the other society was concerned. Perception wise, this creates collisions as the ideas within each society were seemingly “unable” to work together, even though they had done so for the 30 plus years beforehand. However, as noted the country had expanded. This expansion ultimately brought up the question of the future of the country. One collision is in the rise of the domestic slave trade in the South and free labour markets in the North. Just as conditions in the North with the free labour markets posed problems so too would the conditions of this domestic slave market pose problems for the South. “On one hand it was essential for the smooth running of the slave system, as well as the foundation for the region's primary source of wealth. Yet the very nature of the business was offensive to many people and difficult to hide.” (Deyle 59). This system was offensive because it illustrated a direct attack on the “liberties” of the country. It was offensive because of the light it put America in, in comparison to other countries in the world. The very picture the domestic slave trade presented, with images such as, the slave coffles in front of the white house, certainly made the Americans look uncivilized.

Moreover, the same could be said for the Labour Free system, “One of the most visible and worrisome products of commercial development and industrialization in the North was a growing dependent population - free of slavery, yes, but free of much property as well” (Levine 70). The North was not in the best of shapes either, poor farmers, poor labourers, all of the wealth was held at the top. The slums of the cities and the run-down farms of the rural areas presented a ghastly picture, these conditions would not begin to improve until well after the war.

These conditions were a clear demonstration of where the wealth in society was placed. That is not to say that society's wealth was stratified between the very rich and the very poor, it was more of a small group of rich planters and industrialist at the top, with the rest of the whites in the middle, and blacks - free or not - at the bottom (Pessen 15). These societies while producing wealth in different ways did structure up similarly, this structure though was to be challenged by the changes in perception these systems brought. Therefore, with regards to McPherson's argument, the South did not resist change. Deyle's argument allows for one to see that the South was in the process of changing just as much as the North. While Pessen's argument allows for one to see that these changes, while not making the societies complete replicas of each other, does offer a comparable environment, at least economically.

These changes in perception place themselves on a spectrum of equality. McPherson claims that these fears of not having a white supremacy were so much greater in the south and that they contributed to southern perception on a much greater magnitude. However, McPherson acknowledges also, "that Northerners were as committed to white supremacy as Southern's" (McPherson 46). What McPherson fails to look at is the perception among northerners that the South held all of the nation's power. Consider as Grant does, the rise of a sectional identity of the Northerner. "The notion of the South as a threat" can be broken into two ideas, "the South's ability to produce better statement than the North" and "its apparent unity in contrast to the disunity of the Northern states and Northern politicians" (Grant 114). It also speaks on what the slaves of the South afforded their masters. There was a perception at the time that because the Southerners could spend less time working they were learning more and become more culturally educated. This contradicts McPherson, he would have you think of the South as lesser educated but the North feared the opposite. Whatever the truth, it is the perception that mattered as this

was the driving force. And in the country at the time, for the North, as Grant notes it was, the perception of Slave Power and the Unity of the South. For the South, as McPherson notes, it was the fear that their Way of Life was being threatened. When taking into consideration Grant's argument, McPherson's own is ultimately expanded. It was not just Northern changes that brought these perceptual changes, it was the Northern perception of Southern change that prompted these fears to expand as well.

In conclusion, when noting McPherson's argument through these different lenses one can see how the causes of the civil war are complex. McPherson was correct in that the North's changes did help to cause a shift within the country. However, he discounts the South's changes to the extent that he claims the South was stagnant, as Deyle demonstrated with was just not the case. McPherson would also have the North's changes happening relatively quickly but as Levine demonstrates these changes were slow to happen and in many cases faced opposition from within. McPherson for all he focuses on in the North he does not look at the North's perception, as Grant demonstrated, Northern perception of the South was just as much a cause. McPherson's argument therefore has been expanded and contradicted. Ultimately, the civil war was caused more by changes that may or may not have existed. Certainly, the changes within the country, that McPherson alludes to, did happen and they did have an effect. However, it may be that McPherson does not give enough credit to the idea that the perception of monumental change did more to cause the American Civil War than these changes by themselves.

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Map 1.1: Taken from PowerPoint by Karen Leroux

Map 1.2: "Map Us 1860 – onaltk." *US Map*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://usmap.susanbhomes.com/>>.

Pessen, Edward. "How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?" *The American Historical Review* 85.5 (1980): 1119. Web. The version I obtained did omit the political section of the article