

REVIEW OF *THE MIND OF THE MASTER CLASS: HISTORY AND FAITH IN THE
SOUTHERN SLAVEHOLDERS' WORLDVIEW*
BY ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE AND EUGENE GENOVESE

by

Bridget Jack Jeffries

B.A., Brigham Young University, 2005

PAPER

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Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese. *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. \$33.99. xiv, 828 pages.

Slavery is one of the few human rights issues that has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis from near-universal toleration and acceptance to widespread censure and condemnation. The intellectuals of our day and age have little need to make a case for the evils of slavery; it is simply a given, on the same level of reproach as the evils of the Holocaust or the evils of child labor. However, it was only a century and a half ago that slavery was alive and thriving in our nation, and the remarkable thing about that is that the men and women who practiced it were anything but evil. *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese seeks to explore this issue.

Drawing on thousands of primary sources, decades of copious research, and the combined intellectual efforts of the formidable husband-wife Genovese team, *Mind of the Master Class* is a truly seminal work, the latest in an ongoing effort on the part of Civil War historians to demonstrate the mendacity of the old canard that the antebellum South had no mind. Fox-Genovese and Genovese contend that the Southern slaveholding elite *did* have a mind, a mind that looked to classical antiquity, medieval history, prior political revolutions and biblical theology as guideposts in sustaining its slaveholding way of life, a mind that provided robust intellectual engagement with its abolitionist critics in the North. The authors' goal is simple: they seek to present “the slaveholders as men and women, a great many of whom were intelligent, honorable, and pious” and ask “how people who were admirable in so many ways could have presided over a social system that proved itself an enormity and inflicted horrors on their slaves.” They hope that even those critics “who judge [the

slaveholders'] way of life most harshly [will] have much to learn from the probing moral and political reflections on their times—and ours—beginning with the virtues and failings of their own society and culture” (i). Fox-Genovese and Genovese openly confess their personal admiration for the Southerners while reassuring their readers that this admiration does not translate into personal acceptance of slavery (5).

The book is divided into five parts with a total of twenty-two chapters between them. The first of these segments deals with how the Southerners viewed the French and American Revolutions, their distrust for egalitarian democracy and individualism, and their attempts to defend slavery as “a historically recurring and justifiable feature of well-ordered societies from ancient times to present” (70). Fox-Genovese and Genovese point out that the “historically appropriate” question is not how any civilized Christian society could ever tolerate slavery, but rather, “What, after millennia of general acceptance, made Christians—and subsequently, those of other faiths—judge slavery an enormity not to be endured?” (69-70). The second section surveys Southern exploration of history itself, including their own recent colonial history and world history, culminating in their attempts to argue that “the freest societies in world history were based on slavery; and that freedom could be sustained only through the subjugation of all laboring classes” (225). Part three covers how the South incorporated classical antiquity and medieval chivalry into their modern worldview and culture, including their attitudes towards the role of women and suffrage, while part four takes an in-depth look at the religious questions pertaining to slavery and explores the Southerners' attempts to construct a biblical theology of slavery. The final section probes the conflict between Northern individualism and Southern corporatism as the institution of slavery hurtled towards its demise.

Mind of the Master Class is a remarkable work through and through, engaging, well-researched, well-written and utterly panoramic in its grasp of its topic of choice. In crafting their portrait of the Southerners' intellectual pontifications, the authors had to engage a wide swath of writings from other eras of history, then demonstrate how the Southerners interacted with those texts. For example, section three features a chapter on classical antiquity (249-304), a chapter on the Middle Ages (325-28), two chapters on how these elements were synthesized into the Southern ideal of chivalry and how that impacted their practice of slavery (329-64, 365-82), then a chapter on female slaveholders in the South and the Southern model of womanhood (383-406). A point from the latter chapter illustrates this synthesis in that the ideals of womanhood in ancient Sparta—with the Spartan women commanding their men to return with their shields or on them (384)—were adopted and emulated by the women of the South, who urged their men to come back from “the War for Southern Independence” either victorious or dead. Simultaneously, during the war Southern women gave Northern interlopers more difficulty than did their male counterparts (402-3). Fox-Genovese and Genovese demonstrate a commanding use of sources throughout and cite copiously, if not excessively, in making their case.

In spite of its ample positive qualities, *Mind of the Master Class* is not without its flaws. Fox-Genovese and Genovese appear to have allowed their professed admiration for the Southerners to cross over into favoritism on several occasions. They all but argue that the slaveholders had a much better case from the Bible than did the abolitionists, citing weak lexical arguments from the North (508) and Northern Christians who averred that they would sooner abandon the Bible than admit that it endorses slavery (499). They point out that abolitionists usually rested the bulk of their case against slavery on the Declaration of

Independence or “subjective conscience” while the Southerners typically began their arguments with the Word of God (628-34). However, abolitionists *did* articulate complex biblical hermeneutics for renouncing slavery, and these arguments are never fully explored by the authors, leaving the reader to the troubling conclusion that the authors are not putting abolitionism's best foot forward. Nevertheless, the alarming strength of the biblical case for slavery is something that is too often disregarded by complacent modern-day Christians who seldom have to deal with a serious challenge on the matter. Fox-Genovese and Genovese deserve credit for reminding their readers of the gravity of that debate.

The authors are willing to admit that the most prevalent biblical proslavery arguments—the ones that drew from the cursing of Cain and Ham in Genesis—were also the weakest (521), but in other places, they appear unwilling to challenge proslavery arguments from the Bible with the same intensity with which they challenged the abolitionist ones. This becomes clear in the brief section on Mormonism and its impact on the slavery debates. When Brigham Young officially confirmed the existence of Mormon polygamy in 1852, abolitionists joyfully turned the issue into a polemic against slavery, insisting that if Southerners were going to allow slavery because it was biblical, they would have to sanction polygamy as well. The Southerners retorted that Jesus and the apostles ended polygamy in the New Testament, and Fox-Genovese and Genovese never question this argument (514). In reality one can make a robust case for polygamy from the Bible that is nearly on par with the case for slavery, and the Northerners successfully used that point to expose the inconsistency of Southern proslavery hermeneutics, but the authors do little justice to this point.

While this is not a weakness *per se*, it should also be noted that *Mind of the Master Class* employs what might be considered a high learning curve. It demands that its readers

have some kind of background in Southern history in addition to the history of ancient Greece, ancient Rome, medieval Europe, Great Britain, France, and colonial America before they begin reading. Fox-Genovese and Genovese seldom stop to explain the events they are commenting on and readers unfamiliar with these historical and literary milestones will need to pause regularly to look them up in other sources or miss out on the full impact of the authors' work.

True to the hopes of the authors, *Mind of the Master Class* is an authentically transcendent work with far-reaching implications for issues facing Americans and Christians today. It is difficult not to hear echoes of the things argued by Southerners with confidence in the many theological and political debates of our time. Perhaps most importantly of all, the slaveholders noted the fall of many great empires that had preceded them and sought to escape such a fate and preserve their way of life in a variety of ways. They thought they could save themselves by being more pious, or by pressing the need for kinder treatment of their slaves, or with threats of violence against those who opposed them. Yet in all of their searching and all of their ruminations, the one notion they never seriously entertained was the possibility that their deeply cherished, time-honored, intellectually robust values might be wrong. Whether it was the failure of their Southern heritage or simply a human one, their hubris would never allow it. Let us not make the same mistake.