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Review of "Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia"

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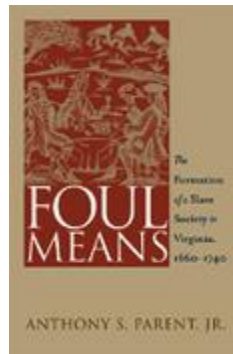
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Anthony S. Parent Jr. *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2003. vii + 320 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8078-2813-0; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8078-5486-7.

Reviewed for H-South by Michelle LeMaster, Department of History, Eastern Illinois University.

Foul Means: A Conspiracy Theory for the Seventeenth Century?

In *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740*, Anthony Parent undertakes to reassess the rise of slavery in the Old Dominion. As one of the most powerful and populous states of early America, Virginia's decision to adopt a system of racialized slavery demands close investigation. A monograph exploring this understudied era in Virginia's history is a welcome addition to the historiography of the colonial period, and it is to be hoped that this will be but the first of many to delve into this neglected era. Parent also offers a striking new analysis of the critical transformation from indentured servitude to chattel slavery. He rejects Winthrop Jordan's assertion that the introduction of African slavery to Virginia came about as an "unthinking decision." Instead, Parent maintains, the shift to slavery involved a calculated plan under which "a small emerging class of great planters with large landholdings and political connections brought racial slavery to Virginia." In short, he maintains, "during a brief period in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, a small but powerful planter class, acting in their short-term interest, gave America its racial dilemma" (p. 2).

In order to make this radical new argument, Parent utilizes Marxist class analysis. "Class analysis," Parent states in his introduction, "is a heuristic method that not only unearths the relationship between the slaveholders and the enslaved but also illuminates the totality of the colonized society" (p. 2). A study that introduced the "totality" of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Virginia society indeed would be a welcome addition to the historiography of colonial America. However, Parent does not completely succeed in

providing this "totality," focusing most of his attention on "the origins, behavior, and ideology of Virginia's great-planter class" (p. 3). One might ask how well Marxist categories of analysis pertain to a society that did not itself employ an ideology of class. Much more crucially, the various classes in Parent's early Virginia remain unclear and under-defined. The group designated as the "great planters" remains somewhat vague, in spite of the great degree of control Parent assigns to them. They are defined simply as those planters who had

"[d]iversified their wealth beyond land and labor to include business activities and plural officeholding" and "had accumulated two thousand or more acres" or "had personal estates worth more than two thousand pounds" (p. 30). Parent focuses his attention on the prolific William Byrd I and William Fitzhugh as exemplars of this great planter class. One might ask how well Byrd and Fitzhugh typified "great planters." In addition, it seems doubtful that the "great planters" possessed the unquestioned dominance of Virginia politics and society that Parent attributes to them. His great planters appear as a monolithic group exercising a hegemony in the colony that seems anachronistic. Parent fails to delineate the divisions between members of the wealthiest class in Virginia, as well as the contests between the older, pre-Bacon's Rebellion elites and later emergent Revolutionary Era leading families. Parent does not explain at what point Virginia's "great planters" established the dominance he attributes to them, nor how they did so. In addition, Parent fails to demonstrate that the "great planters" possessed any distinct class consciousness that would cause them to define a distinct set of interests. His definition of other classes is even less satisfying, and the groups he terms middling and small planters remain undefined, although the "great planters," he claims, often developed policies to protect their standing against challenges from these groups. He further fails to demonstrate the difference in interests between the various class groups he identifies. One is led to ask, if the policies of the great planters were the cause of class tensions, why did the voters (presumably most of them middling and small planters, who would have made up the numerical majority of the electorate) return them to office again and again?

Parent's treatment of the other key group in his story, African and African-American slaves, is much more compelling. Parent devotes a significant amount of attention to slave rebellion, arguing that slave resistance to the evolving system of bondage helped shape the ways that the legal framework of the institution developed. Parent's account of slave resistance provides for gripping reading, in particular his attention to the 1730 Chesapeake Rebellion, which he terms the largest uprising in colonial America. Such rebellions, Parent argues, demonstrated "that blacks were not only conscious of their racial and class degradation but collectively attempted to change their condition" (p. 135). Yet while Parent's portrayals of black agency are moving and dramatic, he fails to demonstrate conclusively that any sense of class consciousness existed among Virginia's enslaved Africans, or how such class consciousness came about. In his defense, the records may not allow for such an analysis. In addition, however, one also wonders if slave resistance was as wide-spread and effective and Parent implies. He further does not address other less dramatic ways in which Virginia's enslaved population worked to make their way in this strange new world of chattel slavery.

Parent lays out his argument in a series of eight thematic chapters, divided into three parts. In part 1, "Origins: Land, Labor, and Trade," he establishes a number of preconditions for slavery. In order to have a slave society, he states, a society must have "private, concentrated land ownership," commodities and markets, and it must lack an "internal labor supply" (p. 9). The great planter class "gained power by organizing land, labor, and trade to serve their interests" (p. 3). In order to ensure the first condition, the great planters violently seized Indian land, using servant and slave headrights to engross substantial amounts of territory in what Parent aptly names a "Landgrab." Students of white-Indian relations will find little here that is surprising, however. In addition, greater attention to the differences in English policies regarding Indians and Africans might have complicated the definition of race Parent employs (although unstated) throughout his work. He then moves on to lay out the shift from servant to slave labor in chapter 2, laying out many of the economic and logistical reasons for the shift to an enslaved African work force, citing the shortage of English labor after 1660 and the rise of more favorable market conditions for the purchase of African slaves. While the material is neatly laid out and engagingly written, there seems little that is new in this chapter, and little that counters Jordan's argument of an "unthinking decision" based on economic factors. In the third chapter, Parent demonstrates the downside of the shift to slavery, arguing that the new labor system did not solve the planters' problems, and instead "proved the rub causing friction between the great planters and English merchants" and also "changed the configuration of the tobacco and slave traders, organizing them along class lines" (p. 80). While the argument is intriguing, Parent again focuses more on the behavior of a few great planters and merchants, and less on the behavior or interests of lesser planters.

In part 2, Parent investigates the development in the slave system itself, in a section he names "Conflicts: Race and Class." Chapter 4 investigates the development of the legal system necessary to support a system of chattel slavery, noting the irony that these laws established a coercive state at a time when English law in general was moving toward great freedoms for Englishmen. However, there is little here that is new, either. Chapter 5 is perhaps the most compelling of the sections, investigating the impact of slave resistance on the Virginia slave code itself, and demonstrating the "black struggle for freedom and white determination to maintain slavery despite its costs" (p. 135). Parent maintains that the "great planters" used the fear of insurrection to "consolidate their power, strengthening regulations and disabilities against blacks, free and enslaved, and dragooning lower-class whites into supporting a racially ordered society" (p. 157). In the last chapter of this part, Parent then argues that the dependence of the great planters on the labor of enslaved Africans would lead to conflicts between planters, merchants and the crown, as well as between the great planters and middling and small planters. While this last section is suggestive, Parent again does not define the groups he is discussing, nor outline divisions within the planter class regarding policies of taxation and output reductions.

In the final section, Parent discusses "great planter" efforts to manage slave and lower class discontent through the development of an ideology he terms "patriarchism." He defines this new ideology as "an organizational belief system in which society is structured around the supremacy of the patriarch" (p. 199). Parent maintains that the great planters adopted the ideology of patriarchy to try to counter the decline in their own power

beginning in the 1720s with crown and ministerial efforts to subordinate colonial elites. Planters asserted that they were taking on the job of providing for the needs of the dependent members of society, and had the job of regulating the behavior of those dependents. In return, they deserved deference and obedience. In the final chapter, Parent demonstrates how planters carried this attitude of patriarchy into the religious realm, and began to favor teaching Christianity to their slaves in the interest of buttressing patriarchy and ensuring social order. The development of patriarchy offers some intriguing possibilities for understanding planter ideology in the decades leading up to the American Revolution. It also raises questions, however. What was the relationship between patriarchy and its nineteenth century successor, paternalism? To what extent was patriarchy a reaction to social unrest and an unstable labor system, and to what extent was it an adaptation of European ideas to a maturing colonial society? In addition, if planters became more open to slave proselytism, how do we explain the large numbers of slaves who remained unreached by Christianity until the second (not the first) Great Awakening?

Parent has asked important questions in *Foul Means*, and offered a unique, if not always convincing, portrait of an understudied era in Virginia's history. It is to be hoped that his work will inspire others to continue to pursue the study of this era, and the question of how slavery developed in the Old Dominion.

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