

A Question of Honor (Review Essay)

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Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: the political Culture of American Slavery*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985.

Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Some historians argue the South by the time of the Civil War was a culturally distinct nation from the North. What made the South so different? Obviously, a person can point to slavery, but there were subtler differences, which together formed a society unique from the North. An overarching sense of honor throughout the South was the driving force behind the behavior of members of Southern society. At least, that is the belief presented by Bertram Wyatt-Brown in his book *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* and shared, in part, by Kenneth S. Greenberg in his work *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery*. Wyatt-Brown early in his book provides a broad definition of honor:

essentially the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies, of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus. Family integrity, clearly understood hierarchies of leaders and subordinates, and ascriptive features of individuals and groups are guides for those evaluations (xv).

Greenberg never provides a direct definition of honor, possibly because he ties it in with republicanism. Also, it should be noted that although Wyatt-Brown does define honor he also offers other definitions when they are needed to help clarify a point he is trying to make. In fact, as Wyatt-Brown formulates and supports his otherwise very persuasive argument, he the constantly redefines honor. This occasional admittance that honor is too vague to clearly describe makes the reader start to think honor is perhaps just a buzz word applied by Southerner's themselves in hope of rationalizing their unique behavior from that of Northerners.

Southern Honor is based on a large body of primary literature including letters, court cases, and diaries as well as a substantial amount of secondary literature, with the latter being used to outline elements of behavior's relationship to honor. Wyatt-Brown believes it essential to use literature from Hawthorne to Twain as a means of introducing, and to better explaining honor. He believes the explanations to be necessary because it is almost impossible for a modern person to see how honor could exist in a violent culture that subjected an entire race to slavery. Greenberg also based his work on an extensive pool of primary and secondary literature that focuses the attention on the main argument:

Masters wanted to exercise authority over free people in a way similar to the way they ruled slaves. Having authority in the statehouse and authority on the plantation reflected and reinforced each other (1).

Elements such as religion, law, morality, and politics constitute shaping elements such as republicanism and honor for Greenberg and Wyatt-Brown. In other words, these distinct institutions and beliefs combined together created a person's sense of honor. While Greenberg focuses a great deal on explaining the political effects of such elements, Wyatt-Brown treats the whole of Southern society with politics as only a part of the greater outlook.

Within *Southern Honor* there are two base types of honor that are discussed which, at times, work in tandem with one another and at other times cause contradictions in Southern society: primal honor and gentility. Primal honor takes its roots from such old European cultures such as the Anglo-Saxons and Germanic tribes. This type of honor was used to describe archaic values and found a home in justification or explanation of tragically violent events. Primal honor could be seen in acts such as lynching, and in attempts to explain misfortune of the South during the Civil War. Gentility was used to mark appropriate social ranking, and consisted of three parts, sociability, learning, and piety. The levels of gentility were so subtle that members of Southern society were not always sure they had acquired the rank of gentleman. With those two types of honor as his guidelines, Wyatt-Brown works to outline the varied aspects of Southern society including familial and gender hierarchy, expectations for civil white male behavior,

gambling and fighting, acceptance into certain cliques, and lynching and charivari.

Along with those social aspects of honor is the bolder argument that the cultural gap that developed between North and South, which led to the Civil War, is also tied in with honor. The idea of Southern honor being tied into secession is also discussed within the Greenberg work. Before going into more detail on how honor relates into all of the societal aspects mentioned above, note there is a potential flaw in the honor argument. As was said earlier, Wyatt-Brown offers many different views of honor throughout his book, and at one point he presents honor as an almost intangible force: "It existed not in authenticity of the self but in symbols, expletives, ritual speeches, gestures, half-understood impulses, externalities, titles, and physical appearances. All these might conform with rational, innovative thought and action, but often enough, they were diametrically opposed" (6). If someone is attempting to describe the causation of a certain behavior or event it is most easily understood in the realm of something that can be measured or singled out. Southern honor appears to be involved in everything and nothing at the same time. How can someone base their argument on a "half-understood impulse"? Wyatt-Brown appears to struggle with his own definition of honor.

Wyatt-Brown suggests that politics at home were just as important to a Southern white man as were city, state, or national politics. One important facet of home life was child rearing. Wyatt-Brown argues that child rearing in the South was unique in the way it "subjected young to flawed prescriptions of shame and humiliation and the ideals of hierarchy and honor, a mode in sharp contrast to the conscience-building techniques of pious Yankees" (118). Yet, after making the statement about the importance of honor to the difference between child rearing in the South and in the North, Wyatt-Brown qualifies his statement. Wyatt-Brown points out that it would be an error to consider honor as the principal guide in childcare, admitting some Southerners believed the traditional approach to be faulty. The reader is left wondering what was the principal approach to Southern child rearing, if there was one. Also, how did other approaches connect to honor and development of the child in later life? At what point did honor become the driving force behind a Southern white male's life?

Aside from familial relationships, another interesting part of Southern culture was the implementation of lynch law. Along with lynching Wyatt-Brown includes a study of charivari, which is a less violent form of mob action. Brown gives a comparison by describing charivari as "a less blood thirsty, more festive occasion, more parallel with church ritual and custom than was lynch law, which was more a complement to ordinary judicial procedure" (440). One typical example of charivari would have been tar and feathering. Commonly an act of lynching or charivari was carried out against someone because they were viewed to have dishonored a family or group. Since families and special organizations were the basis of Southern culture, an act against a certain person of high social standing was seen as an act against the community. Wyatt-Brown also uses lynching to support the idea that the South had become unique from the North since lynching had been dying out in the North before the Civil War, but remained strong in the South. He offers an explanation as to why the South continued to lynch:

Only as society became more secular in character, more impersonal in its dealings, and more institutional in its forms of exchange and control did the ancient ideal of community justice erode. In the American South that transformation was somewhat slower than in the rest of the country. There, where a form of primal honor continued to flourish, one could find the same attitudes about aliens, deviants, and social underlings as once existed in very ancient times (442).

Wyatt-Brown convincingly argues that honor influenced, if not directly caused, acts such as lynching. One might wonder how he would examine the lynchings that did occur in the North around the time of the Civil War, even if they were fewer in number. Also, Wyatt-Brown limits his study of lynching to cases involving whites lynching African Americans, not offering an insight on how honor tied into the lynching of a white man.

How does honor relate to the causation of the Civil War? The Civil War was fought over slavery. In *Masters and Statesmen*, Greenberg works to display the almost bipolar personality of Southerners, mainly elites, by examining how republicanism and honor meant different things to the same man as they related to his life as a slave master and his life as a politician. As a Southern politician, a candidate was not supposed to actively seek public office because if someone strived to attain power it was seen as evidence of selfish ambition. Southerners typically viewed Northern politicians as aggressive, and therefore, corrupt. That was not the only aspect of Northern culture held in disdain by Southerners. One common fear was the subjection to the Northern system of labor, which Southerners worried could turn them into slaves themselves. As events in the antebellum U.S. led to a heightened sense of urgency over the question of slavery, Greenberg argues that Southerners could only foresee one outcome, "Southerners viewed the North as alien with its different labor system and foreign political culture. When community seemed impossible only

two options remained: to become an enslaver or to separate forever” (146). Wyatt-Brown reinforces the idea that Southerners saw themselves as having their collective backs to the wall. He asserts that the risks involved in secession mattered little to Southerners who believed their honor was at stake, and no matter the result, death was better than submission to the North. While both authors make a convincing argument that honor was related to secession, Wyatt-Brown would like to point to it as a major cause. Neither author can state with complete certainty that the North and South shared no similar qualities or that all Southerners took the idea of honor seriously.

The idea of disinterestedness towards holding public office was essential to Southern political culture, and honor was integral to passivity. Greenberg is forced to admit that passivity was not just a Southern phenomenon, and even Abraham Lincoln displayed passivity towards holding public office. Greenberg says that political passivity is a part of antebellum America and not just Southern political culture. Just as Greenberg was forced to admit that passivity was not unique to the South, Wyatt-Brown conceded that honor did not hold the same weight for every Southerner. He says, “Just as some Southerners were religious and others indifferent, so too some whites believed in honor and shame as the biblical stories presented them, whereas others took the ethic lightly” (25). Not only is it difficult to pin down exactly what honor is, it is also difficult to define its geographical scope and overall acceptance in the South.

Southern Honor does skillfully portray the South and the influence honor had on shaping practices and beliefs, but is not able to definitively portray honor as the main influence in Southern culture. At the base of *Southern Honor* is the assumption that Southern culture remained static for a number of years, from early colonial times until, in some respects, after the Civil War. Wyatt-Brown argues that the North and South were united under one common goal during the Revolutionary War, and since that time Southern mores experienced little change while changes occurred in the North at a much more rapid pace. From the assumption of a relatively unchanging Southern culture Wyatt-Brown uses evidence from many different time periods within the same chapter. It might have been useful to follow a chronological order and provide a comparison with what was happening in the North during the same time periods in order to make it clearer for the reader to see how the North and South diverged from one another with respect to honor. It also would have been interesting to see how Wyatt-Brown would have tackled passivity in politics in the same depth as Greenberg since it could have been used to strengthen Wyatt-Brown's over-all argument.

Wyatt-Brown states that "honor was a state of grace linking mind, body, blood, hand, voice, head, eyes, and even genitalia" (49). This definition of honor does not directly contrast with the first definition provided in this essay, but it appears to place honor in an individual's physical realm where honor, in the first example was a "cluster of ethical rules." If it is difficult to connect all of Wyatt-Brown's definitions of honor, it is also a struggle to accept that honor was the main driving force behind the acts of Southerners. And yet, it is impossible to deny that members of Southern society perpetuated some idea of gentility, or they would have, at least, liked to believe they were guided by a sense of honor.