The class essence of the Confederacy in the American Civil War

A further comment on Free State of Jones

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The recent film, *Free State of Jones* (directed by Gary Ross) was condemned by numerous media figures and film critics, perhaps most notably op-ed columnist Charles Blow of the *New York Times*. According to Blow, the film "tries desperately to cast the Civil War, and specifically dissent within the Confederacy, as more a populism-versus-elitism class struggle in which poor white men were forced to fight a rich white man's war and protect the cotton trade, rather than equally a conflict about the moral abhorrence of black slavery," bemoaning the "white liberal insistence that race is merely a subordinate construction of class."

Blow goes so far as to suggest that Newton Knight, the historical figure who waged a guerilla war against the Confederacy, was a rapist because he and an escaped slave were lovers. (See: "The right-wing, racialist attacks on the film Free State of Jones")

In their attacks on the film, figures like Blow are in fact denigrating some of the noblest individuals in American history—people who risked their lives to defeat the Confederate States of America and destroy its economic base, slavery.

Blow and others who attack the film do not bother to consider its historical merits, suggesting that the plot must have been contrived to create a "white savior." But this is not fiction. History provides ample evidence of pro-Union, Southern poor whites and slaves uniting along class lines in opposing the Confederacy's war to expand slavery into the west, Mexico, and elsewhere.

Slavery defined class hierarchy in the Antebellum South. "Dixie" was unmistakably characterized by a ruling oligarchy of slave owners who exercised disproportionate political power within the Confederacy and throughout the United States.

Writing in 1861 for the *New York Tribune*, Karl Marx noted "the number of actual slaveholders in the South of the Union does not amount to more than three hundred thousand, a narrow oligarchy that is confronted with many millions of so-called poor whites whose numbers have been constantly growing through concentration of landed property and whose condition is only to be compared with that of the Roman plebeians in the period of Rome's extreme decline."[1]

The southern ruling elite openly attacked the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution for their assertion of human equality. Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, explained the principles behind which the slavocracy fought:

"The prevailing ideas entertained by him [Thomas Jefferson] and most of the leading statesmen [Founding Fathers] at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically…This idea, though not incorporated in the constitution, was the prevailing idea at that time… Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error…Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man."[2]

The planter class branded poor whites—those who did not own slaves—as "white trash."[3] Inequality created fears that poor whites would not answer the call to arms. One planter in North Carolina exclaimed, "I heard from several sources, that the people who did not own slaves were swearing that they 'would not lift a finger to protect a rich men's negroes'… infused among the ignorant poor [is] the idea that there is an antagonism between poor people and slave-owners."

In moments of candor the southern elite frankly acknowledged that the central issue was class, not race. "The poor hate the rich and make war on them everywhere and here especially with universal suffrage," wrote planter James Henry Hammond, the former governor of South Carolina. "The war is based on the principle and fact of the inequality of mankind, for policy we say races, in reality, as all history shows… it is classes."[4]

Jones County, Mississippi, the central location of *Free State of Jones*, differed from most other counties in the state, in that it was predominantly non-slaveholding. According to Victoria Bynum, in her book *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War*, while "Mississippi emerged as a preeminent slave-holding state and leading cotton producer … Jones county, in contrast, remained the domain of nonslaveholders and small slaveholders throughout the antebellum period. In 1860 slaves comprised only 12.2 percent of its total population, the lowest of any county in the state … yeoman farmers still comprised the overwhelming majority of the population."[5]

War made the true class nature of the South even more palpable. Aside from the Confederacy instituting the first draft in American history and military defeats at Iuka and Corinth in Mississippi, 1862's "Twenty-Negro Law," which exempted the planters from

military service—or allowed them to return home from service—if they owned 20 slaves (later 15 slaves) or more, sent class resentment through the soldiers like an earthquake. Newton Knight and his soon-to-be partner Jasper Collins abruptly deserted the army, only to find themselves waging a bitter guerrilla war with other poor deserters, women, and slaves against the Confederate state.

Jones County wasn't the only enclave of resistance to the slaveowners' rebellion.

The state of West Virginia was born out of the revolutionary struggles of the Civil War. Antebellum Virginia had been divided geographically by the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains. To the east, the plantation system prevailed. To the west, however, the terrain and climate was not conducive to cash crop agriculture. Yeoman farmers, coupled with the state's socioeconomic ties to northern industry, fostered a negative outlook towards the chattel system of the South. Tensions had deepened in the antebellum as the eastern part of the state refused the western part's pleas for greater representation in government, and rejected a free public education system. The western counties seized on Virginia's secession from the union to itself secede from "the Old Dominion."

The Piedmont counties of North Carolina, particularly the Quaker Belt, also took up arms against the Confederacy. Before the outbreak of war, class tensions had already been simmering due to an inequitable tax code and the big planters' political power. As the war dragged on, support for the organization Heroes of America, or the "Red Strings," rose, reaching a membership of roughly 10,000. The secret organization protected run-away slaves, provided intelligence to the Union Army, interfered with the Confederate Army, and elected anti-war members to the state legislature and a local sheriff. By 1864, the organization spread to the mountainous western part of the state, gathering support from Raleigh artisans and yeomen farmers and organizing in plantation areas where slaves aided in the cause.

Undeniably, the Heroes viewed the war in class terms. A leader of the Heroes and a newspaper editor, Alexander H. Jones, ridiculed the aristocrats and empathized with the poor and slaves: "This great national strife originated with men and measures that were … opposed to a democratic form of government. … The fact is, these bombastic, high-falutin aristocratic fools have been in the habit of driving negroes and poor helpless white people until they think … that they themselves are superior; [and] hate, deride and suspicion the poor."[6]

In Texas pro-Union and anti-planter sentiments dominated in various parts of the state, including the San Antonio area and northern Texas. In the southern part of the state Hispanics, slaveless whites, and immigrants banded together in militia to oppose the Confederacy. Overwhelming Confederate military power forced many anti-slavery farmers to migrate out of state, where they formed exile communities adjacent to Brownsville on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, there defending themselves from Confederate incursions. German immigrants, crossing the Atlantic after the failures of the 1848 Revolutions against the aristocrats and kings of the Old World, joined the exodus, while others stayed and battled conscription in Texas. Anti-slavery and anti-Confederate beliefs were so widespread among German immigrants that Confederate officials enforced martial law, climaxing in the Nueces Massacre, in which 37 Germans were murdered.[7]

After the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, on April 9, 1865, Reconstruction began in the South. Initially, free blacks and poor whites held some political power, but when federal troops left the South, the former political elite took over the wheels of government. In the coming decades, their intellectual representatives spearheaded a rewriting of Civil War history known as the "Lost Cause," which buried the many examples of slaveless whites fighting against the Confederacy. These pro-southern historians created the myth of a "Solid South" that could be understood entirely in racial terms.

Advocates of identity politics today, such as Blow of the *New York Times*, cling desperately to this myth for a contemporary purpose—to divide the American working class along racial lines in order to protect and advance their own interests.

Notes:

[1] Karl Marx, "The North American Civil War," vol. 19 of *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers)

[2] Alexander Stephens, Cornerstone Speech, March 21, 1861.

[3] Marx and Engels, "The American Civil War, May 30, 1862," in *Marxism and the Science of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 135.

[4] Thomas Ruffin, *The Papers of Thomas Ruffin* vol 3, ed. J. G. Roulhac Hamilton, (Raleigh: Edwards & Beoughton Co. 1920) letter Dec 12, 1860; George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 244.

[5] Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Chapter 3, p. 2.

[6] Eric Foner, "The South's inner Civil War," *American Heritage*, (March 1989).

[7] David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* (New York: New Press, 2008); William W. Freehling, *The South vs The South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).