Eugene Genovese (1930-2012) – Historian of American slavery

Tuesday 15 January 2013, by PHELPS Christopher (Date first published: 1 January 2013).

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AFTER HIS DEATH last year at the age of 82, most obituaries of Eugene Genovese — the historian of American slavery whose masterpiece, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, was published in 1974—stated that he traveled from left to right, from Marxism to conservatism.

While not incorrect, that characterization ignores the duality of reaction and revolution in Genovese's thought, the conservative impulses that ran through his radicalism even at its high point, and the consistencies that underlay a life that began in the Communist Party and ended in the GOP.

In his approach to history, morality and politics, Genovese's story bears comparison to a classical tragedy in which a strength becomes the basis for a hero's unravelling. His radicalism was founded upon opposition to bourgeois culture, making possible a subsequent reactionary politics also founded ostensibly upon opposition to bourgeois culture, even as it put him in alliance with capital.

The 1960s and 1970s, when Genovese first made a name for himself, were a moment when slavery's history was not a specialized academic subfield so much as a topic of broad interest among American intellectuals. With the Black freedom movement on the move and the Civil War and Reconstruction marking their centenaries, the long-ago American past seemed to hold powerful answers as to how American racial oppression originated and why it had persisted.

Simultaneously, the Vietnam War gave rise to massive protest and with it a new social history that altered the prisms through which the past was observed. Black history, labor history, and women's history all experienced their renaissance.

Although Genovese was a well-known radical historian in the 1960s, he never really embraced the New Left or its notion of "history from the bottom up." Social history to him, as he later put it in a passage written with his wife Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, was about "who rides whom and how."

Along with this explicit interest in power from the top down, Genovese opposed "presentism," the mining of the past to justify present-day politics. But the present Genovese inhabited, precisely because conventional power was being upset, was the moment for a brash young Marxist historian of slavery to make his mark.

The Young Genovese

Genovese brought considerable personal strengths to his work: a muscular prose style; an ambitious willingness to explain social totalities; a powerful aptitude for argument; and a personal fearlessness, shown not only in his willingness to take on the liberal custodians of the historical profession but his willingness to challenge Marx himself, whose imagining that Abraham Lincoln's homespun origins made his administration a workers' government Genovese found fanciful.

These formidable attributes were matched by a hard-edged, streetwise proletarian persona. Born in Brooklyn early in the Great Depression, his father a dockworker, Genovese eschewed two dominant institutions in Italian-American life, the Church and the mob, and joined the Communist Party instead. He did so in 1945, at age 15, just as hardboiled William Z. Foster came to power in the Party.

With memories of the wartime Grand Alliance between the United States and Stalin's Soviet Union fresh, with the ardently left-wing New York Congressman Vito Marcantonio still in office, it seemed a moment of promise for the left, but the Cold War and McCarthyism soon closed down options. Badly on the defensive, the Communists devoured themselves in purges. Genovese was expelled from the Party, only to be subsequently discharged from the U.S. military as a subversive.

These were hardening experiences, but a hard-as-nails radical of Genovese's type could find compensation for defeat at home by looking elsewhere: to Stalin's Soviet Union; to China, where revolution triumphed in 1949; and to Italy and France, where out of the Resistance to fascism came mass Communist Parties with tremendous popular sway.

The taking of comfort in inexorable history lingered on as a habit in Genovese's thought, as did other survivals of the revolutionary Stalinism the Party had inculcated in him, a politics he continued to express in the mid-1960s by proximity to, and perhaps membership in, the Progressive Labor Party, which looked to Mao's China as the true legatee of Stalin's will.

Not only Genovese's politics but his sense of history was premised on appreciation for modes of production that provided concrete alternatives to bourgeois society. Above all, he opposed a moralizing method whose start and end was that slavery was bad. He associated such moralizing with a sentimental liberalism, beginning with that of the abolitionists, blind to the exploitations of capitalist wage-slavery.

To Genovese, history's stages of passage meant slavery might in some early contexts have been progressive, just as feudalism had been. This threw out morality along with the bathwater of moralism, but Genovese sought explanation, not moral judgment, in the study of slavery.

Materialist Study of Slavery

Genovese's materialist understanding of history centered upon class analysis — not economic determinism, he emphasized — in which relations of production were the crux, with the master-slave relationship primary in understanding slavery. Slavery was a distinctive system within a largely capitalist world economy whose cotton trade reached to the textile mills of Manchester.

Genovese cautioned against romanticizing slaves by seeing them as perpetually heroic — as he felt Herbert Aptheker and the Communist Party routinely did. Open rebellion was rare among slaves, more rumored than real, despite the occasional Nat Turner. Rather, they shirked work or pilfered grain from the shed.

Yes, Black American slaves resisted — but not to mount a revolution on the order of Haiti's. What, Genovese asked, could account for American slavery's remarkable stability, longevity, and strength? Shouldn't we, he wondered, give the masters their due for forging so effective a system of class rule?

This was, needless to say, a provocation at a time when others were comparing American slavery to concentration camps. But it yielded Genovese's key concept, paternalism, the core idea of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

Slaveholder rule, to Genovese, was not just about the whip or the chain, not just about force and coercion. It succeeded mainly in the realm of culture, by winning spontaneous assent. Paternalism contained resistance and enabled it, perpetuated class rule and gave slaves moderate bargaining power. Thus the hegemony of paternalism forestalled ultimate clashes.

To Genovese, plantations were not capitalist firms and the slave South was a distinctive civilization within a larger American capitalism, with paternalism constituting a worldview that was profoundly anti-bourgeois.In Genovese's depiction, the planters were rural, not urban, against the literal meaning of bourgeois. They were aristocratic and archaic, not acquisitive, pecuniary or money-grubbing.

Celebrating Power

This characterization has since come in for myriad objections. After all, the books of a plantation had to balance. And as Eric Foner has observed, parents do not typically sell their children. But Genovese's portrait of the slaveholder mind helps a great deal to explain his political course, for Genovese always had a sneaking admiration for the planter class, both for its maintenance of power and its anti-bourgeois worldview.

"At their best, Southern ideals constituted a rejection of the crass, vulgar, inhumane elements of capitalist society," he wrote in his first book, The Political Economy of Slavery (1965). "The slaveholders simply could not accept the idea that the cash nexus offered a permissible basis for human relations."

Genovese's regard for the 19th-century planter class, his perception of it as a bulwark against bourgeois society, was tightly related — though the line of connection is not often drawn — to his appreciation for 20th-century Communist states. Both the world of the slaveholders and the Communist bloc were, in his analysis, distinct from capitalism, at odds with the world economy in which they were enmeshed.

Opposition to bourgeois culture was the common strand of Genovese's life, present at every phase. His youthful commitment to Stalin's Soviet Union, his mid-1960s affinity for Maoist China, his midlife expositions on slaveholder culture, and his late-life conservative Roman Catholicism and hankering for Old South conservatism: All took exception to bourgeois liberalism.

What Genovese's longings for collectivism and hankerings for organicism had in common were patterns of morality, pride, honor and psychology set against the individualist, competitive, atomized world of the bourgeoisie.

Just as his New York accent always stayed with him, even at his end-point in Georgia, Genovese never quite left the Brooklyn block. Italian-American identity was always crucial to his makeup.

It was no accident that his analysis of paternalism drew upon Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony." Gramsci's scribbling in notebooks while locked in a fascist dungeon in Italy may simply have recast the concept of ideology, using "hegemony" to evade Mussolini's prison censors, but it was a particularly subtle treatment of ideas in class society.

Genovese's creative leap — before most of Gramsci was even translated into English — was to realize that Gramsci's attempt to explain why the Italian working class acquiesced to fascism might have explanatory value if applied to American slave acquiescence under Southern slaveholders.

From Stalin to Buchanan

If Genovese's debt to Gramsci was worn on the sleeve, his Macchiavellianism was more disguised, fittingly, though as an Italian influence it was only slightly less significant for him. His first book did contain a very long, prominently displayed quotation from Macchiavelli, but the influence lay more in a callousness that made Genovese the subject of countless legends in the historical profession.

The ruthlessness he affected was simultaneously real and self-parodic, with both personal and political manifestations. "As Comrade Stalin, who remains dear to some of us for the genuine accomplishments that accompanied his crimes, clearly understood," wrote Genovese in 1968, "it is precisely the most admirable, manly, principled, and by their own lights, moral opponents who have to be killed; the others can be frightened or bought."

As late as *The Fruits of Merchant Capital*, co-authored with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in 1983, he disdained anyone who thought democratic revolution possible "without blood and terror" and held that Stalin had proven "cruelty and mass murder can be put to revolutionary as well as conservative uses."

The Communist states had a palpable historical reality, like the slave South, that to Genovese represented a durable opposition to the capitalist mode of production. Blood and terror were the price of their historic challenge to capitalism, and Genovese fancied himself a man of steel and iron.

At the 1969 convention of the American Historical Association, he opposed the presidential bid of New Left historian Staughton Lynd, whose histories of early American radicalism Genovese remorselessly attacked as idealist in *The New York Review of Books*. Genovese rejected Lynd's attempt to put the association on record against the Vietnam War as a mortal threat to the profession, calling for Lynd to be put down — and put down hard.

The radical historians whom Genovese opposed in the 1960s — Lynd, Jesse Lemisch, Howard Zinn, and others who were activists as much as scholars — were arguably not historians of his level of acumen and productivity, but they offer a far better moral and political example, having stayed the course across subsequent decades.

When Genovese won election in 1978 as the first Marxist to head the Organization of American Historians, he was already the kind of Marxist a liberal or conservative could accept, even appreciate.

Even in the 1960s, however, Genovese's politics had conservative undertones. "I do not fear or regret the impending Viet Cong victory," he said at a Rutgers teach-in in 1965. "I welcome it." This looked so much like treason and disloyalty at the time, and caused such shock in the press, that few noticed the love of power it contained.

Genovese's revolutionary commitment — like that of so many American radicals in the Cold War — was predicated on loyalty to another camp. The impending Communist advances in the world presaged the expansion of a mode of production, a system that if understood on its own terms appeared radical and subversive but in actuality exerted a deeply conservative pull on its loyalists.

Once this pattern of Communist advance became a pattern of reversal, with retreat and defeat afoot, Genovese's right turn began. His transformation in the 1980s and 1990s was not so much a function of capitulation to the ascension of Reagan or the New Right, as was the case for many others.

What mattered most in the specific instance of Genovese is that he had always oriented toward modes of production as bases for power and opposition. By the late 1980s, it was clear that the Communist states were giving way to capitalism as Deng's China and Gorbachev's Soviet Union instituted market reforms.

Who was riding whom was altering irrevocably. His old ride could take Genovese no further.

In a 1994 poison-pen farewell essay to the left published in *Dissent*, Genovese adopted the voice of a scold, finding the left guilty of the very amorality he himself had long advocated. His turn toward right-wing corporatism complete, he voted Republican in 1992.

Now with a politics close to those of Pat Buchanan, a culture warrior for corporatism, he could still position himself as an enemy of bourgeois liberalism — now seen as lodged most firmly in Hollywood, academia, and a relativist culture — while cultivating an openly declared appreciation for Southern life, paternalism, and Old South conservatism, conjoined to conservative Roman Catholicism.

So it is that Genovese ended life as a rebel for reaction, an inversion of his earlier confusion of bureaucratic reaction for revolution. He still imagined himself a contester of bourgeois hegemony while lodged in comfortable Republican quarters and Georgia universities. One of his last works written was a fond memoir of his wife, who had made her own parallel journey from feminist to feminism's scourge. His name for her, "Miss Betsey," was a planter term of endearment that betrayed much about how he, in the end, imagined himself.

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P.S.

* Against the Current n°162, January/February 2013:
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