The Persistent South: Southern Distinctiveness, Cultural Identity, and Change

Jeff Frederick, PhD
College of Arts & Sciences,
The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Pembroke, USA

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Abstract

In recent years, contemporary observers and scholars have argued that the distinctiveness of the American South has vanished. Historians sympathetic to this view have cited various causal factors including political shifts, economic changes, migration and demographic data, the rise of a suburban South, racial reconciliation, or a general sentiment that the North and South were always more alike than different. Southern exceptionalism, it is argued, is either gone or never was as significant as previously indicated. In fact, the operative and most persistent characteristics of the South have been cultural, not political or economic. As a result, reports of the distinctive South's demise have been premature. An examination of archetypal southern cultural characteristics such sport, food, gender, and presuppositions about family and faith indicate that the South in fact remains very much different from the rest of the country. Even elements of southern political culture remain relatively steadfast, most notably a predilection toward the politics of victimization. Despite the fall of the Confederacy, the end of slavery, the decline of the Solid Democratic South, and the comparative diminution of overt racial politics, northerners and southerners continue to manifest cultural differences and recognize these in each other. Southern culture persists.

Keywords: American History; American South; Southern Culture; Cultural Persistence

Introduction

In August, 2008, a Newsweek magazine cover story announced the end of the South, terming the region less distinctive than at any time in American history and noting that a majority of southerners had been born since 1980, a milepost year for some signifying the onset of an assimilated, mainstream South. Recent migration patterns, political realignments, and various census and polling data have led some scholars to ponder the notion

that the South has become Americanized, losing the trademark distinctiveness which echoed through various stages of the Old South, New South, and Modern South epochs. Works like the End of Southern Exceptionalism, The Silent Majority, White Flight, and The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism argue to one extent or another that given the rise of a two-party South with a mixed economy and a growing suburban presence, the times of southern distinctiveness are a changing. Some scholars even suggest that the North's political and racial characteristics have in fact never been all that different from the South, rendering Dixie's exceptionalism an overwrought stereotype (1).

Doubtless the South of the twenty-first century is different from previous incarnations. The 1970 Alabama gubernatorial campaign, won by George Wallace ushering in his second term, was rife with public racist appeals to a supposedly insidious "Black Bloc" vote seeking to elect the comparatively moderate candidate Albert Brewer. In a crowded 1970 Georgia gubernatorial campaign for the right to replace outspoken segregationist Lester Maddox, race was also omnipresent. An unnamed Georgia politician noted to the Atlanta Constitution "there's only one issue and you spell it N-I-G-G-E-R." One candidate in that campaign McKee Hargrett, announced the imminent demise of the "army of hippies, yippies, beatniks, peaceniks, pinks, reds, and yellows" once he was elected. Even so, Albany lawyer C.B. King, the first black candidate for governor, ran and won nearly nine percent of the primary total. By the twenty-first century, demagogic and racist appeals a la James K. Vardamann, James Eastland, or George Wallace were no longer commonplace in southern statewide elections (2).

Even as racially overt campaigns have largely receded, the number of successful minority candidates has increased. By 1989, Virginia elected African-American Douglas Wilder, and Florida tapped Hispanic former Tampa Mayor Bob Martinez to lead the Sunshine State. More recently, Bobby Jindal and Nikki Haley, Indian-Americans, assumed the governor's office in Louisiana and South Carolina, earning the votes of many social conservatives who decades earlier would have resisted in the name of white supremacy. As of the 2016 election, Republicans held control in 10/13 governorships, 23/26 U.S. Senators, and controlled every legislative house in the South. A couple of decades ago, these numbers would have been implausible. The Solid Democratic South – never as solid in practice as in theory—is gone (3).

As with Democratic hegemony and overt racism in politics, poverty, a longstanding by-product of the South's tortured racial past and dubious economic and political choices, has receded. Few airports are as modern or as busy as Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson. Charlotte trails only New York in scope and scale of importance in the banking sector. Orlando is the number one tourist destination in the world. In some quarters of the South, farming and

textile mills have been replaced by white collar jobs, and industrial parks have been joined by office parks. The architecture of the region includes growing skylines, symbolic of major corporations and their belief in the economic viability of a region President Franklin Roosevelt once called the nation's number one economic problem. The big business of professional sports has expanded across the South with football, basketball, baseball, and even new hockey teams taking root in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Florida. Northern retirees relocate to the South every year, for the weather and lifestyle, but also for the economic opportunities. Indeed of the eleven former states of the Confederacy, only Louisiana and Mississippi have experienced net out-migrations from 2011-2016. In 2016, only one of the five slowest growing economies of the fifty states was in the South, Louisiana, and the list of the fastest in personal income growth included Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. Long considered by the North to be an intellectual desert, many southern colleges have established outstanding academic reputations and draw promising students and faculty members from around the world. Lifestyle changes in the notoriously impervious South are observable. "I'm a Southern Baptist," Jay Grelen told author Rick Bragg, "I can't smoke. I can't drink. I can't cuss. And now I can't go to Disney World. So tea is the only vice left for me (4)."

Grelen may have overstated the demise of many of the South's cultural hallmarks southern culture has proven hardy. Two lane southern back roads still feature row after row of crops, road side stands, and tiny clapboard and cinder block churches. Southerners continue to pray and sing in church, structure life around family, and, as crime statistics still indicate, shoot family members with alarming frequency. These inconsistencies—the most religious region and the most violent-- are nothing new and are prime examples of southern confusion syndrome: the ability of southerners to exhibit contradictory tendencies without seeing the conflicting currents as inappropriate. Research data suggests that nearly 40% of citizens own guns, hardly a new phenomenon in a region where firearms are a rite of passage. In fact the men and women of the South hunt and fish, smoke and chew, swear, and drink as they have for centuries. Southerners continue to pass down family recipes for biscuits, cornbread, fried okra, and blackberry cobbler, from one generation to the next and even the way southerners eat remains distinctive. ". . . The institution of fried chicken," humorist Roy Blount Jr. once noted, "demands a great deal of the chicken and (his kinfolk) felt bound to hold up their end. They ate down to the bones, pulled them apart, ate in between them, and chewed on the bones themselves." Plenty of fried chicken still find its way into southern bellies each Sunday afternoon. A continuity of southern cultural distinctiveness is observable (5).

The elasticity of southern culture is all the more important given the remarkable changes to the region's economic and political institutions. In fact, no matter how solid the South's formative economic and political characteristics appeared, most have either been substantially modified or vanished altogether. Antebellum slavery died alongside two-thirds of a million Americans in the Civil War. The Confederacy, a four year experiment, died in 1865, though its memory has been institutionalized in a smattering of monuments and durable myths, some less believable than others. The low-wage, low-skill industrial economy that came in the late 19th century left for Central America and Asia a century later. The Democratic Party transformed from the den of white segregationists to the home of most southern African-American voters. The Republican party, nearly invisible in many parts of the South through the World War Two era, has established deep roots in the region, and the GOP has dominated presidential politics in the South in recent decades (6).

In the midst of all of these political and economic changes, southern culture has been a crucial stabilizing force. The distinctiveness, for example of southern sport, food, and faith remains a generational societal construct relatively immune to wholesale change. Sport remains among the aspects of daily life that generate the most southerner passion. Syracuse, New York reporter Bud Poliquin understood both the importance and distinctiveness of southern sport as soon as he traveled to Alabama to chronicle a college football game between his hometown Orangeman and the Auburn Tigers. "I have descended in college football's grand canyon," Poliquin wrote. "I have stood in its Alps. I have gazed at its ocean sunset. I have done all of these things and I've been changed forever. . . I knew, of course, that we were different up here. I understood that autumn Saturdays in our burg have never been given over to any kind of serious sporting fervor. I've accepted for a good, long while that a fair amount of our citizens regularly choose to pick apples or seal driveways rather than head to the Carrier Dome to watch the Syracuse University Orangemen at play. But, Lord have mercy on our college football souls, I've come to realize we're not merely quirky in these parts. And we're not just overly particular. No, having attended a game in Auburn, Ala. - which is like going to Mass in Rome - I'm convinced that, by comparison, we're as dead as the flying wedge (7)."

Poliquin's hyperbolic comments do indicate one clear conclusion: northerners and southerners see each other as culturally different in ways beyond simple accents, diction, and use of regional language. This is an important point and reflective of work done by sociologist John Shelton Reed who argued that southerners ". . . are seen and see themselves as less energetic, less materialistic, more traditional and conventional, more religious and patriotic, more mannerly and hospitable. Many of these cultural

generalizations existed in much of their present form well before the Civil War." Observations by Florence King, Shirley Abbott, Julia Reed on gender, fashion, and make-up, Hal Crowther, Bill C. Malone, and Jeffrey Lange on music, Robert Moss, John Egerton, and Elizabeth Englehardt on the importance of barbeque and other Deep South foods all point to a similar conceptual understanding: southerners simply see themselves as culturally different and many northerners agree. As important as regional culture is to the work of southern novelists William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Harper Lee and others of a certain generation, it is just as critical for 21st century writers like Larry Brown, Brad Watson, and Tom Franklin. Southern culture persists and does so distinctively (8).

Franklin, in his novel Hell at the Breech about 1897 Alabama, paints a word picture of male southerners, masculine expectations, and cultural practices that could have been written about a time 100 years earlier or later. "Below he could hear the cluck of the river," he writes of aging Sheriff Billy Waite, "smell its fishy wind, too. See its dull brown shimmer through empty spaces between the trees. He was glad to be here, eager to see his old friend, taste his whiskey, and eat whatever the old man would grill over the coals. Bit had a way with wild mushrooms—in an iron skillet with a slab of lard he could bring the holy spirit out of a deer's rump." Southern boys and men in every era of American history have been challenged by mainstream society to manifest toughness, physical exhibitions of masculinity, control of the natural environment, and uphold family honor (9).

The zeal southerners manifest for certain hallmarks of their culture may not be entirely productive. The Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the dormant Southwestern Conference have NCAA rap sheets for violations as long as the throwing arm of any Heisman Trophy winning quarterback. Plenty of southern communities have made the decision to expand their high school football stadium rather than build a computer lab, fund the arts, or fully invest in the intellectual climate of their youth. Robert Andrew Powell's eye-opening book about the professional atmosphere of youth football in Florida includes revelations about elementary school kids receiving limo and helicopter rides to games, drug dealer and gang involvement, and guidance counselors signing waivers to let failing students continue to play. Win-at-all costs is a pervasive element of masculine, sporting culture which dates to the Colonial era South even if the modern mechanisms—football, NASCAR, for example—are comparatively more contemporary developments (10).

Southern distinctiveness persists in other manifestations of culture as well. Frying most things in lard and drowning everything else in bacon grease comes at a price. The South is the unhealthiest region in the county with the highest obesity rates, and features the least access to public medical and dental practitioners. Such rankings have been largely true since the end of the Civil

War, and yet little seems to change with the South's diet and exercise routine. Family recipes continue to be passed down from one generation to the next, family celebrations and holiday gathering continue to feature the same traditional fare spread across the family table, and chefs across the world recognize the distinctive qualities of southern cuisine. As Julia Reed notes in Queen of the Turtle Derby, ask a northerner about the best meal they ever had and they'll mention a trendy restaurant or bistro. Ask a southerner, and they'll talk about a family recipe that a dear relative used to make in the kitchen (11).

Sometimes those same family recipes make an appearance at dinner-on-the grounds, a post-worship service festival of faith, family, and food. Southern religiosity is in flux, yet still remains distinctive from much of the rest of the nation. At first glance, recent church attendance statistics suggest that old time religion is declining in southern societal importance. Millennials, for example, seem relatively disinterested in organized religion and the Southern Baptist Convention reports a 2016 reduction in total members, baptisms, and weekly attendance at both worship and Sunday School. Some of these changes are in fact more national than southern. "The Christian share of the US Population," Pew Research Center declared in 2016, "is declining while the number of US adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing." Even with the changing metrics of the Southern Baptist Convention, the number of churches in the association grew in 2016 as did the total amount of undesignated receipts or financial contributions. In fact, church attendance may not be an accurate measure of the cultural power of evangelical Christianity in the South. Many southerners are "culturally" Christian and evangelical, though they may not have darkened the door of the local sanctuary in some time. "There's a form of cultural Christianity," the Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore notes of this phenomenon, "that causes people to respond (that they are) 'evangelical' and 'born-again' as long as they're not Catholic, even though they haven't been in a church since Vacation Bible School as a kid (12)."

It's also distinctively southern and timeless to feel your cherished culture and values are under attack. In Alabama, political figures like Governor George Wallace and Chief Justice Roy Moore have consistently characterized the state and region as a victim of outside attacks, often by irreligious northerners or the federal government. Wallace termed the 1964 Civil Rights Act as a "fraud, a sham, and a hoax," an "assassin's knife in the back of liberty," and "a blackjack in the hand of the federal force-cult, the left-wing liberals will (use to) try to force us back into bondage." In a June, 2015 sermon, at a God and Country Celebration, Judge Moore predicted dire consequences for Christians as a result of the Obergefell v. Hodges decision recognizing same-sex marriage: "Welcome to the new world. It's just changed for you Christians. You are going to be persecuted (13)."

These notions of victimhood are nothing new. During the Constitutional ratification process, southern states indicated they had no intention of losing their slave-holding privileges in order to establish a more perfect union. David M. Potter, in The Impending Crisis, his monumental work on the dissolution of that same Union, argues that "southern nationalism was born of resentment and not a sense of separate cultural identity . . . the cultural dissimilarities of the North and South were significant enough to turn a campaign for the protection of southern interests into a movement with a strong color of nationalism." James Henry Hammond, an antebellum South Carolina planter, expressed a common view of his social class. "We ask," he averred of the Confederacy, "nothing but peace and to be left alone. The North seeks to subdue, plunder, confiscate, and enslave us (14)."

Post-Civil War, the white South grew even more distinctively southern as explanations of defeat, discussion of the loss of God's hand of blessing, and pathways toward moving forward focused on making only the essential changes that would allow the South to keep its most important distinctions, the cultural ones. The Lost Cause, a southern civil religion, became ubiquitous in the rise of organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the explosion of courthouse and town square monuments of Confederate icons. For some, the war itself became an example of northern aggression with the South an aggrieved party. Even as many statutes were removed from the public square by 2017, some white southerners held fast to a regional mythology that espoused the Civil War was fought over an abstract political philosophy—state's rights—and not the institution of slavery (15).

In the end, for all the changes over the last century and a half to both the North and South, Dixie remains different and surprisingly consistent from many cultural perspectives. In a 1976 speech, Alabama Governor George Wallace declared "the problem of law and order must be attacked. Whether you believe it or not the thugs have taken over the streets of America. In some cities in this country the American public cannot leave his home at night and walk the streets for fear of being mugged, robbed, or even shot." An Atlanta Journal and Constitution poll found similar beliefs in a 1987 survey of voters. And in the 2016 election, President Trump carried the South (except for Virginia) in part due to a cultural suggestion that crime and illegal immigration was out of control. For all the changes the South has experienced since World War II—civil rights, economic transformation, two party politics—fundamental presuppositions about faith, family, gender, anti-intellectualism, education, the proper role of the federal government, and definitions of community largely remain the same. The South was and remains a distinctive region that has made and continues to make clear cultural choices designed to mark it as different. Perhaps the more things change, the more they stay the same (16).

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