

Andrew Jakabovics

Week 12-

Just a few thoughts:

Genovese provides a description of slave life and culture that departs from the traditional narratives we have come to know culturally. His thorough review of the sources is indeed impressive. (I can't imagine slogging through 19 volumes of biographies!) The story that emerges from the review is somewhat unfamiliar. He establishes a hierarchy that effectively puts the slaves only slightly below their masters. To some extent, the slaves exerted power over the overseers, and as noted several times in the book, saw themselves as being superior to poor whites, who they saw as trash. This inversion of the expected power structure was not unfamiliar, however, to the rabbis of the Talmud, who noted, "One who acquires a slave, acquires a master over himself." Slavery in this context is much more similar to indentured servitude, but the general idea is that the list of obligations a master has to the slave is sufficiently long to create a recognition of the constraints placed on the individual we had assumed to have absolute authority. In this way, the notion of the familial power structure is not out of place. In Jewish law, minors (like slaves) do not have the power to acquire. Anything that comes into their possession belongs to the parents (or owners). While the parents thus potentially benefit from the activities of their children, they also have an obligation to teach them a trade, among other obligations. Is it possible to understand the mapping of the parent-child relationship onto the institution of slavery in a value-neutral manner? Is paternalism always negative? How does Genovese add to our understanding of post-Civil War race relations? It seems that slaves had a better shot at a fair trial than did free blacks a century later. Is it a function of resentment by former owners who felt betrayed when their slaves left rather than stayed or is it that the antagonism between poor whites and slaves developed into a racial rather than class divide? At one point, Genovese comments that slaves may have taken notions of Southern gentility and nobility far more seriously than the owners (who put on airs of said norms) did. Does this disconnect between expectation and reality play out in other aspects of slave culture? How do they manifest themselves in the postbellum period?