

Student A:

Race and Sympathy in Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

This week's readings are supposed to be about race, but race seems curiously absent from Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Slavery is everywhere in the book, of course, but slavery as a form of relationship between two races, "white" and "black," is harder to find. Instead Genovese reformulates slavery in terms of class relationships and the class-based attitudes--e.g., superiority and paternalism on the part of the slaveholders; dependency, muted resistance, and expectation of protection on the part of the slaves--that grew out of them. This can be seen, for instance, in Genovese's comparison of the quality of life of American slaves to that of Russian serfs and English workers, in which the racial basis of slavery fades out to be replaced by a comparative analysis of societies consisting of aristocratic elites and subordinated workers/peasants/serfs/slaves. (In her response paper, Jen points out that Genovese was in part reporting the slaveholders' self-justifications here. But Genovese was also largely agreeing with them; see his dismissal of abolitionists' counterclaims about the quality of the slaves' diet on p. 63.) Race does come into the picture throughout the book, but it was surprising to me how little it entered into Genovese's central idea of paternalism. That race was used as a justification for paternalism is obvious; but once that basic line has been drawn, I would argue, it plays little role in Genovese's analysis of the actual structure and practice of slave society.

Genovese's work also raised questions for me about sympathy for one's subject. His ability to get inside the heads of both slaves and slaveholders, and to depict the "worlds they made" as simultaneously deluded and entirely reasonable (within their context), is impressive. As we've discussed in class, it is important for the historian to be able to describe the past in terms more or less equivalent to those used by historical actors. But there were parts of Genovese's text that felt less like descriptions of how slaveholders felt, and explanations for how they could feel that way, than as justifications for it. The idea that "they did the best they could," given the society they were born into, is pervasive, even if Genovese occasionally goes out of his way to stress the basic immorality of slavery.

Much of my suspicion of the text comes, for better or worse, from reading the *Lingua Franca* profile of Genovese included in the class readings folder, in which his sympathy for authority and tradition--two values of central importance to Southern slaveholders--becomes apparent. (As does his tendency, astonishingly insensitive for someone who devoted much of his life to the history of slavery, to speak admiringly of strict former teachers as "slavedrivers".) Does striving for historical objectivity mean that, like Genovese, we have to admire the Nazis for being good socialists, or the slaveholders for being good patriarchs?