



## THE FORGOTTEN STRAND SOCIALISM IN THE SOUTHERN CONSERVATIVE TRADITION, 1850–1950

On the fringes of Southern intellectualism, migrating from university to university, mentor to mentor, a man named Richard Weaver is the entry point by which Daniel Judt, TD '18, brings us into the school of thought he has uncovered. Weaver was enamored with Southern tradition and the hierarchy and honor that came with it, and with socialism as a thoughtful stance against capitalism – and he held these positions at the same time. What makes this seeming contradiction so amazing is that it seems to have been repeated in thinkers throughout history, who saw a path to maintaining their Southern lifestyles in this seemingly far-fetched conjunction. In short portraits and well-traced legacies, Judt's thinkers come alive.

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On an autumn day in 1939, twenty-nine-year-old Richard Weaver was driving through the “monotonous prairies of Texas” when he experienced a “revelation.” Weaver was in the third year of a graduate teaching post at Texas A&M, and he felt intellectually lost. As an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky, he had become an ardent socialist. But then he entered Vanderbilt to pursue a master’s degree and studied under the Southern Agrarians, an informal group of twelve men best known for their manifesto in defense of Southern culture and traditionalist values, titled *I’ll Take My Stand*. Their influence had left him politically adrift, “poised between the two alternatives”: socialism and agrarianism. On that autumn day in 1939, Weaver made his decision. He realized that “clichés of liberalism...were becoming meaningless to me.”<sup>1</sup> He finished his year at Texas, packed his bags, and set out to “start [his] education over” as a late-but-happy convert from socialism to what he called the “church of Agrarianism.”<sup>2</sup>

Less than a decade later, Weaver – now a professor at the University of Chicago – published *Ideas Have Consequences*. The book was a jeremiad, a short but potent cry for the Old South that drew heavily on Weaver’s agrarianism. *Ideas* called on 1950s America to return to tradition – specifically, Southern tradition. By Southern tradition, he meant a society based on classical European thought: a civilization with hierarchy, moral absolutes, and small plots of private property – an anti-modern, anti-industrial America.<sup>3</sup> Weaver’s little book left a sizeable mark on modern conservatism. *Ideas* drew praise from a parade of 1950s conservative intellectuals, including William F. Buckley, Jr., Russell Kirk, and Willmoore Kendall.<sup>4</sup> Richard Regnery later called *Ideas* one of three books that “provided the intellectual basis for the modern conservative movement,” therefore making one of modern conservatism’s founding fathers a socialist turned Agrarian.<sup>5</sup>

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Part of the foundation of Weaver’s “revelation” was his realization that Agrarian values stood in direct opposition to socialist ones. As he later wrote, the Agrarians were a

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1 Richard Weaver, “Up From Liberalism,” in *Modern Age* 3 (1958–59): 23–24. [http://www.mmsi.org/ma/03\\_01/weaver.pdf](http://www.mmsi.org/ma/03_01/weaver.pdf)

2 Quoted in John J. Langdale III, *Superfluous Southerners: Cultural Conservatism and the South, 1920-1990* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2012), 88.

3 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

4 George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 41; Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 94.

5 George Nash, “The Influence of Ideas Have Consequences on the Conservative Intellectual Movement in America” in *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver’s Ideas*, ed. Ted J. Smith (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 82.

“brilliant group” with positions “antithetical in almost every point to socialism.”<sup>6</sup> To today’s reader, this makes perfect sense. We think of socialism and conservatism as nemeses, situated at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Yet the Southern-traditionalist position on socialism and communism was never quite so simple. When Weaver wrote *Ideas*, he contributed to a century-long trend of Southern traditionalists treating socialism as both friend and foe in their fight against Northern industrial values. Most immediately, Weaver drew on the Agrarians of *I’ll Take My Stand*, but both he and the Agrarians also owe their own fight against industrial corrosion – and their complex relationship with socialism – to an even older Old South thinker: George Fitzhugh, who defended slavery and Southern culture in the 1850s as nothing less than “the best and most common form of socialism.”<sup>7</sup>

If Weaver’s influence on modern conservatism is as significant as advertised – and I believe it is – we ought to look carefully at his intellectual influences. When we do, we find a group of anti-industrial, traditionalist Southerners who searched for a way to transcend sectionalism and gain national recognition. In their effort to reach beyond the South, those thinkers – starting with Fitzhugh and running all the way through Weaver’s Agrarian professors at Vanderbilt – wrestled with their relationship to socialism, sometimes even clinging to a tortured affection for socialism’s more successful critique of industrial capitalism. In the end, Richard Weaver brought this heritage out of the Old South and introduced it into modern American conservatism. The problem is that American historians cemented the idea of a Liberal Tradition just as Southern traditionalism found a national platform. Historians wrote Fitzhugh and the Agrarians out of American intellectual history at the precise moment that Weaver wrote them in.

## II

Richard Malcolm Weaver grew up a Southerner and a socialist. Raised in Weaver-ville (named after his great-grandfather, Montraville Weaver) and Lexington, Kentucky, Weaver enrolled in the University of Kentucky in 1928. There, he joined the Liberal Club and wrote a proudly leftist column for the college newspaper, the *Kentucky Kernal*.<sup>8</sup> Though Weaver later blamed his left-wing professors for his liberalism, calling them “Social democrats... [who] read and circulated *The Nation*,” at the time he remained “persuaded entirely that the future was with science, liberalism, and egalitarianism, and that all opposed to these trends were people of ignorance and malevolence.”<sup>9</sup>

In one of his *Kernal* articles in 1930, Weaver reviewed a controversial new book

6 Weaver, “Up from Liberalism,” 23.

7 George Fitzhugh, *Failure of Free Society: Or, Sociology of the South* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1854), 72.

8 Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 87.

9 Weaver, “Up from Liberalism,” 22.

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that had just come out of Vanderbilt University, some 200 miles south of Lexington: *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The book was a defense of traditional Southern values, a cry against materialism, a lashing out against industrial capitalism. Weaver wasn't sure what to make of it. In his review for the *Kernal*, he noted that the Southerner in him appreciated the Agrarians' refutation of the South's "intellectual barrenness," and added that his socialism meant that their critique of capitalism appealed to him.<sup>10</sup> But the book's traditionalist values – the constant praise of hierarchy and aristocratic social order – were too much. Weaver concluded that *I'll Take My Stand* was a "striking if ineffectual rally against the onward sweep of industrialism."<sup>11</sup> Though he may not have realized it at the time, Weaver's uncertain review of Agrarianism mirrored the Agrarians' own wavering feelings on socialism.

At first, though, Weaver did not seem all that concerned with the Agrarians; his focus was socialism. In 1932, he graduated from Kentucky and joined the American Socialist Party.<sup>12</sup> He served for two years as the local Party Secretary, enthusiastically campaigning for socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas.<sup>13</sup> But at the same time, he began to feel disillusioned. "I discovered that although the socialist program had a certain intellectual appeal for me," he later recalled, "the members of the movement as persons... seemed dry, insistent people, of shallow objectives."<sup>14</sup>

In those same two years, Weaver began a master's in literature at Vanderbilt under the direction of the Agrarian John Crowe Ransom, one of the principal architects of *I'll Take My Stand*. He also met other Agrarians – including Donald Davidson, with whom he corresponded long after he left Vanderbilt – and found "that although I disagreed with these men on matters of social and political doctrine, I liked them all as persons."<sup>15</sup> Weaver read Ransom's other works.<sup>16</sup> He began to suspect that traditionalism had something to say, and that the Agrarians were the first group in a long time to say it well. He left Vanderbilt four years later, conflicted and uncertain. Then, on the road to Texas, came his "conversion" to Agrarianism.<sup>17</sup>

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10 Clifford Amyx and Richard Weaver, "Looking Over the Magazines," *Kentucky Kernel*, August 7, 1931, in *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver*, ed. Ted J. Smith (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 25.

11 *Loc. Cit.*

12 Weaver, "Up from Liberalism," 22.

13 Fred Douglas Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910–1963: A Life of the Mind* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 3.

14 Weaver, "Up from Liberalism," 22. Of note, however, is that Weaver did not say he left socialism because of its ideas. It was the people who turned him off.

15 *Loc. Cit.* In other words, the polar opposite of his feelings about socialists.

16 Weaver was particularly struck by Ransom's *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1930).

17 *Ibid.*, 24. "Conversion" is Weaver's word.

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The Agrarians, as they came to be known after *I'll Take My Stand*, were a loose group of twelve Southern intellectuals. Their leaders – John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson – were all at Vanderbilt in 1930. All coming from different perspectives in different fields of study, they had spent the 1920s growing increasingly determined to defend the South and her traditional values against what they saw as insidious Northern industrialism.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1920s, that Northern industrialism had begun to creep into the South. “New South” politics – famously popularized by Henry Grady and other postbellum Southern thinkers – called for a robust Southern industry that could keep pace with Northern capitalism and bring the South out of poverty. Davidson, Ransom, and Tate believed that the New South pandered to Northern industrial values that would destroy whatever was left of true, traditional Southern society. They wanted none of it.<sup>19</sup>

In 1929, when the Great Depression shook America’s faith in laissez-faire capitalism, Ransom and Davidson saw an opportunity to promote their own model. They began writing to their friends and gathering voices for a collection of essays.<sup>20</sup> In a letter to a promising former student, Robert Penn Warren, Davidson laid out the Agrarian model:

What we propose to do is set forth the fundamentals of a provincial, decentralized, local, agrarian life as opposed to the dominant brand of “American” life, which is industrial, “big city”...Though the battle is centered in the South, we shan’t hesitate to make a broad appeal that will attract restive spirits in all parts of the country...we shall not be “Southern” sectionalists merely, but philosophic sectionalists, upholding a fundamental rural economy, with ramifications in all directions.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of a “broad appeal” was crucial. The Agrarians intended to use the South as a model for their vision of a good society. But they would aim their message at all Americans – especially the industrial North. This meant breaking free from Old South tropes. Allen Tate emphasized in an interview: “I do not want to restore any previous age. I do not

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18 Paul Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 2–3. Conkin provides a narrow but excellent account of the development of the Agrarians as a group and as individuals. For the Agrarian influence on Weaver, see Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*.

19 For an overview of the New South movement and its origins, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

20 Donald Davidson to Robert Penn Warren, 20 January 1930, in Robert Penn Warren Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Box 21, Folder 399).

21 *Loc. Cit.*

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want to restore anything whatsoever. It is our task to create something.”<sup>22</sup> Davidson’s proposal worked. Warren, and nine other Southerners, accepted the call to arms.

The Agrarians’ urge to reinvigorate traditionalism caused an argument over the title of their manifesto. Davidson and Ransom liked *I’ll Take My Stand*, a clear reference to the Southern song “Dixie”: “In Dixie’s land, I’ll take my stand, to live and die in Dixie.” But when Warren got wind of this, he balked. The title, he wrote to Tate, was “the goddamnest thing [he] had ever heard of... block it if you can.”<sup>23</sup> Tate agreed—an appeal to “Dixie” would tar the Agrarians with Old South nostalgia. He, Warren, and Andrew Lytle—another contributor—proposed an alternative: *Tracts Against Communism*.<sup>24</sup>

The title dispute reveals a tension in Agrarian thought. Industrial capitalism ran directly counter to Agrarian values; that much was clear. But how to handle socialism in all its forms? As Weaver argued in the review he wrote for the *Kentucky Kernel*, socialists and Agrarians had something very powerful in common: a critique of the industrial system.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the Agrarians had no patience for socialism’s egalitarianism and intrusive State. And there remained the strategic question: if the Agrarians wanted to break from an Old South mold and appeal to a national audience, whom should they declare their main enemy? Davidson and others thought that Tate and Warren had it wrong. The true Agrarian opponent was industrial liberalism, not its communist foe. In the end, Davidson’s camp won. *I’ll Take My Stand* hit the shelves in 1930.<sup>26</sup>

Much of the Agrarian cause was standard European traditionalism filtered through a Southern lens. The book’s introduction, authored by Ransom but signed by all twelve Agrarians, distilled its argument to a simple motto: “Agrarian *versus* Industrial.”<sup>27</sup> Industrialism had poisoned American life. Traditional values—of family, of natural hierarchy, of small plots of private land and the American yeoman—had gone by the wayside, replaced by an urge for progress that left laborers in the dust and corroded human relations. The South, Ransom and his collaborators argued, stood fast as the final holdout, still defending true conservative principles.

But the Agrarians’ most original argument—and the one most likely to catch a young Richard Weaver’s eye—concerned communism. Perhaps as a compromise of sorts, Ransom claimed that communism was the logical end of capitalist industrialism, thereby

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22 Allen Tate, “Letter to Grace Lumpkin,” *New Republic* (May 27, 1936) 75, quoted in Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 62.

23 Quoted in Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 43.

24 Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians*, 71.

25 Amyx and Weaver, “Looking Over the Magazines,” *Kentucky Kernel*, August 7, 1931, in ed. Smith, *In Defense of Tradition*, 25.

26 Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians*, 71. Davidson and Ransom did allow Tate to add a footnote at the beginning of his essay expressing his dissent.

27 Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper Torchbook Edition, 1962), xix.

combining two enemies into one. “Communists... are Industrialists themselves,” he wrote. “We therefore look upon the Communist menace as a menace indeed, but not as a Red one.” Forget the Soviets; America was already on its way to becoming communist from *within*, thanks to “the blind drift of our industrial development.”<sup>28</sup>

One essay in particular, “The Philosophy of Progress” by psychologist Lyle Lanier, laid bare the Agrarian view of socialism and communism (it’s worth noting that Weaver believed Lanier’s was the “most penetrating essay” in *I’ll Take My Stand*).<sup>29</sup> Lanier analyzed the philosophy of John Dewey, whom he identified as a socialist. He deemed Dewey’s critique of contemporary society “admirable.”<sup>30</sup> But when it came to curing America’s industrial disease, Lanier accused Dewey of trying to introduce a utopian socialism and, worse, of trying to “*remake human nature* to secure it.”<sup>31</sup> What would happen instead, Lanier went on to say, was a “centralization of political power...[that would] offer even greater possibilities of economic domination.”<sup>32</sup> This was Ransom’s argument from the introduction. Socialism provided a useful and correct diagnosis of capitalist ills. Its proposed solution, though, could only work in an alternate universe where humans were not inherently hierarchical, local beings. In America, socialism would inevitably morph into a kind of ultra-industrialism: instead of big business oppressing laborers and encouraging an unsavory devotion to materialism, the State would take over and encourage identical values.

*I’ll Take My Stand* never enjoyed the national success Davidson had hoped for in his letter to Warren. The Agrarians sparked momentary controversy and interest, but almost no one penned a favorable critique. Reviewers dismissed the Agrarians as neo-Confederates, utopians, and amusing reactionaries.<sup>33</sup> Just as Davidson had feared, *I’ll Take My Stand* quickly became known as a book by twelve sectional Southerners. Tate acknowledged that the Agrarians themselves were to blame. In a letter to a fellow Agrarian, he admitted,

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28 Ibid, xxiii. The reader will note (and has perhaps already noted) that I play fast-and-loose with “socialism” and “communism,” often using the two terms as synonymous and sometimes switching quickly from one to the other. A longer essay on this topic would address the ways in which definitions of “socialism” and “communism” changed in Southern traditionalist writings from 1850 to 1950. For now, though, suffice it to say that the Agrarians themselves never agreed on how to distinguish “socialism” from “communism”—indeed, they never really defined either term. One could reasonably say, though, that for the Agrarians “socialism” meant a critique of industrial capitalism based on (problematic) egalitarian principles. “Communism” was the outcome of this socialist critique. It helps to know that Tate instructed Ransom to avoid criticizing “socialism” in the introduction to *I’ll Take My Stand*, but still argued vehemently for *Tracts Against Communism* as a title (Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians*, 74).

29 Richard Weaver, “The Southern Phoenix,” *Georgia Review* 17 (1963), 12.

30 Lyle Lanier, “The Philosophy of Progress” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, 140.

31 Ibid, 142 (original emphasis).

32 *Loc. Cit.*

33 Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians*, 86, 90.

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“we made the South, and especially the Old South, an object of idolatry.”<sup>34</sup>

But Tate might also have implicated the Agrarian dispute over how to handle the relation of socialism and capitalism. Ransom’s merging of socialism and capitalism was clever, but it also made for an introduction that lashed out at both conservative Northern industrialists and socialists—the two main blocks the Agrarians would need to attract to transcend their Southern traditionalist roots. In a sense, there was not much to be done about this paradox. The Agrarians wanted to reach beyond the South. But Agrarian thought truly did oppose industrialism and socialism. Weaver noticed this inherent flaw. He later noted that *I’ll Take My Stand* was “both anti-socialist and anti-capitalist.” As a result, the Agrarian tract appeared “obnoxious or incomprehensible to many.”<sup>35</sup> Weaver saw this as a strategic, as opposed to theoretical, problem. It was perfectly coherent for the Agrarians to be both anti-capitalist and anti-socialist. But that stance did not do any favors for their reception.

In 1941, Davidson penned a mournful letter to all members of the group: *I’ll Take My Stand* was out of print. As a closing remark, Davidson bemoaned the “non-participation of those who ten years and even five years ago spoke out boldly, and were looked to by many interested persons.”<sup>36</sup> The Agrarians, it seemed, had stood down.

### III

After his revelation in Texas, Richard Weaver headed straight for Louisiana State University. The choice was a deliberate one. Baton Rouge had become what one historian called “a second home to Agrarianism.”<sup>37</sup> Weaver sought out renowned literary critic and Agrarian sympathizer Cleanth Brooks as his dissertation advisor.<sup>38</sup> From 1940 to 1943, he worked tirelessly on what he hoped would become a publishable history of conservatism in the postbellum South. He titled his dissertation “The Confederate South, 1865–1910: A Study in the Survival of a Mind and a Culture.”<sup>39</sup>

The marks of Agrarianism on Weaver’s writing were hard to miss. Weaver maintained that the antebellum South was “*the last non-materialist civilization in the Western world*,”

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34 Tate quoted in Eugene Warner, “South is U.S. Literary Center, Asserts Allen Tate, Noted Poet,” *Washington Post*, 5 January 1937, 13.

35 Weaver, “Southern Phoenix,” 7.

36 Donald Davidson, letter to Authors of *I’ll Take My Stand*, 3 January 1941, in Robert Penn Warren Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Box 21, Folder 399).

37 Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 89.

38 Young, *Richard M. Weaver*, 3.

39 Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 89–90. Weaver’s dissertation was published posthumously under the title *The Southern Tradition at Bay*.

struggling “against the modern.”<sup>40</sup> With the South’s defeat in the Civil War, the region had come under attack from the “secular spirit of science, materialism, and democracy.”<sup>41</sup> In particular, Weaver bemoaned the downfall of what he termed “Southern feudalism... [which] possessed stability, an indispensable condition for positive values.”<sup>42</sup> His words could have come straight from *I’ll Take My Stand*.

Unlike the Agrarians, though, Weaver then implicated the South in its own downfall. The antebellum South had failed to recognize its “metaphysical foundation.” In other words, Weaver argued that Southern thinkers did not understand what they were fighting for. The South, Weaver claimed, “is in the curious position of having been right without realizing the grounds for its rightness.”<sup>43</sup> Southerners were too preoccupied defending slavery and the Old South to notice that the true threat was to their traditional values.

And yet this Southern shortcoming was not without exceptions. Weaver praised one thinker who *did* recognize what Southern conservatism sought to conserve. It was George Fitzhugh, Weaver wrote, who, in his socialist defense of the South, provided a “remarkable foreshadowing of the modern corporate state.”<sup>44</sup> This remark was telling: Fitzhugh’s thought exerted a clear and present influence on Weaver’s writing from his dissertation onward – when it came to the South, but especially when it came to socialism.

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Born in 1806 in the heart of tidewater Virginia, Fitzhugh had only the beginnings of a formal education (field school) before settling down to read law and move to his wife’s house in Port Royal. He owned a few slaves through his marriage, but he was no planter. Instead, he holed up in his local practice and produced a simply prolific amount of fascinating, original, and wildly repetitive proslavery writing.<sup>45</sup>

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40 Richard Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (New York: Arlington House, 1968), 388–90.

41 *Ibid.*, 110.

42 *Ibid.*, 57.

43 *Ibid.*, 388–90.

44 *Ibid.*, 35, quoted in Young, *Richard M. Weaver*, 79.

45 Michael O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 972–73; see also Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 341. The only biography of Fitzhugh is Harvey Wish’s *George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943). Because Fitzhugh’s education, travel, and correspondence were so limited, we need not scrounge around for hints to the origins of his ideas. Fitzhugh himself said he drew only from the Bible, Aristotle, and “our own successful experiment” – by which he meant the antebellum American South. He also read and frequently referenced Thomas Carlyle, whose biting critique of industrialism in British society Fitzhugh found spot-on. Fitzhugh insisted over and over that he pretended to no philosophy, hoping only

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Fitzhugh entered Southern proslavery thought at a crucial moment. By the 1850s, writers like Henry Hughes, George Frederick Holmes, and James Hammond had taken once-disparate arguments for their peculiar institution and unified them into a single, traditionalist defense.<sup>46</sup> This coalescing of proslavery ideology came as a response to an ever-greater threat from the North. By the 1850s, proslavery thinkers believed their society was under siege. Industrialization had reached its zenith in Western Europe and the American North. With it came a wave of anti-slavery thought, which in the United States soon cohered into Northern abolitionism. At the same time, socialism—then a wide-ranging movement responding to the brutal inequalities of unchecked industrial capitalism—began to catch on in earnest, especially in Europe. It was into this world of tectonic shifts in thought that Fitzhugh entered in the 1850s, eager to yell “stop!” to history and drive the argument for slavery to its most extreme conclusions.<sup>47</sup>

Even more than the Agrarians, much of Fitzhugh’s thought is standard anti-Enlightenment traditionalism. He believed man was a naturally social creature, “born a member of society.” He railed against “freedom” and “rights.” Man “has no rights whatever, as opposed to the interests of society...whatever rights he has are subordinate to the good of the whole,” he wrote in his first book, *Failure of Free Society*.<sup>48</sup> The Declaration of Independence, Locke, Jefferson—Fitzhugh attacked them all. The notion of “liberty” ran counter to basic human nature. Man was “born [society’s] slave<sup>49</sup>, and had no rights to cede.”<sup>50</sup>

By Fitzhugh’s definition, almost everyone in society—save rich, educated white males—was a slave. Slavery simply meant the forfeiture of liberty to “a common despotic head or ruler.”<sup>51</sup> It was a good and natural state. Different people were meant to be slaves to different masters. Blacks were domestic slaves. Women were slaves to their husbands. And masters, in a contorted twist, were slaves to their slaves.<sup>52</sup> They felt obligated to protect

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to “point out what is natural and universal” through observation and avid reading of British journals.

46 *Loc. Cit.*

47 I owe much of this hasty, wholly imperfect summary of mid-nineteenth century Western thought to two works. *The Anti-Slavery Debate*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) explores the link between anti-slavery and proindustrial thought. Drew Faust’s introduction to *The Ideology of Slavery* offers a look at this same moment from the view of proslavery Southerners.

48 Fitzhugh, *Failure of Free Society*, 26.

49 *Ibid.*, 25, 178.

50 *Ibid.*, 26.

51 *Ibid.*, 61.

52 Though this part of Fitzhugh’s argument might look like a revision of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, there’s no evidence the Virginian ever read Hegel. There is some debate as to whether he encountered Karl Marx’s work. Harvey Wish insists Fitzhugh read Marx’s early work, some of which had been translated into English by the late 1850s. Edmund Wilson, citing Wish, agrees

their property; the master “loves them [the slaves] because they are his.”<sup>53</sup> A society was good when everyone felt an obligation to someone else. This “association of labor” ensured that the strong would provide for the weak. “Slavery without domestic affection,” Fitzhugh conceded, “would be a curse.”<sup>54</sup>

Slavery without domestic affection was precisely what Fitzhugh believed had taken hold in the North. The Virginian used “free society,” “free trade,” and “free competition” interchangeably to refer to what we now know as industrial capitalism: “private ownership of the means of production and the freedom of the laborer to sell his labor power,” in the definition of one historian.<sup>55</sup> Fitzhugh believed such a system was not only against human nature, but also that it abused most of its members, especially the poorest ones: “The free laborer is excluded...shelterless, naked, and hungry, he is exposed to the bleak winds, the cold rains, and hot sun of heaven.”<sup>56</sup> Without the familial bonds of a slave society, humans turned on each other, and the strong overpowered the weak. “It has been justly observed,” he wrote, “that under this system the rich are continually growing richer and the poor poorer.”<sup>57</sup>

It is here that Fitzhugh arrives at the most striking and original piece of his argument: an unflinching embrace of socialism. By socialism, Fitzhugh meant any system that “provide[s] for sick and unfortunate members” of society.<sup>58</sup> British conservative philosopher Thomas Carlyle was a socialist. So was Louis Napoleon. So were abolitionists.<sup>59</sup> Anyone remotely anti-laissez-faire or anti-industry could qualify.<sup>60</sup> This gave slavery and socialism a common enemy, and from there Fitzhugh made his boldest leap, one he repeated dozens of times in his works:

Socialism proposes to do away with free competition; to afford protection

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(Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 344). But Eugene Genovese refuted Wish, convincingly arguing that despite some of Fitzhugh’s ideas about capitalism strongly resembling Marx’s, there is no concrete evidence whatsoever that Fitzhugh had encountered the German philosopher (Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*, [New York: Pantheon, 1969], 183).

53 Ibid., 46.

54 Ibid., 106.

55 Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 165.

56 Fitzhugh, *Failure of Free Society*, 107.

57 Ibid., 13.

58 Ibid., 44.

59 Ibid., 45, 291.

60 Fitzhugh’s definition of socialism is perhaps even broader and foggier than the Agrarians’. Though he mostly uses “socialism” and not “communism,” he occasionally opts for the latter, and one gets the sense that he means the same thing with either word. Genovese breaks down Fitzhugh’s socialisms into three categories: proletarian, feudal, and bourgeois. I suspect these categories are more Genovese’s than they are Fitzhugh’s..

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and support at all times to the laboring class; to bring about, at least, a qualified community of property, and to associate labor. All these purposes, slavery fully and perfectly attains.<sup>61</sup>

Human nature demanded a society with hierarchy and feudal protection. Industrial capitalism sought to remove the protection, thereby brutalizing human relations. Socialists wanted to break down capitalism and institute associative labor; so did slavery. And so Fitzhugh proposed an unlikely, but in his mind perfectly logical, alliance. Socialists and traditionalists; the far-left and far-right. He returned ceaselessly to socialism's similarities to slavery in *Failure of Free Society*, tugging at socialists' sleeves: didn't they see that railing against free society necessarily implied favoring slavery?

Fitzhugh's motivation for insisting on such strange bedfellows was at least in part strategic. He was an avid reader of British periodicals, and knew of the 1848 revolutions that had swept Europe by the time he wrote *Failure of Free Society* in 1854.<sup>62</sup> He doubtless recognized—and perhaps envied—socialism's success against his capitalist foes.

Strategy aside, however, there's no reason to doubt that Fitzhugh genuinely believed socialism was the traditionalist Southerner's intellectual partner. *Failure of Free Society* is a revealing title; the greatest threat to the values Fitzhugh sought to defend came from industrial capitalism. He had only to convince socialists of this truth. "Our only quarrel with Socialism," Fitzhugh concluded, "is that it will not honestly admit that it...is seeking to bring about slavery again in some form."<sup>63</sup>

Just three years later, though, Fitzhugh's tone toward socialism shifted. In his second book, *Cannibals, All! Or, Slaves without Masters*, Fitzhugh contradicted his proposed partnership with socialism: "We think that by a kind of alliance, offensive and defensive, with the South, *Northern Conservatism* may now arrest and turn back the tide of Radicalism and Agrarianism" [emphasis added].<sup>64</sup> Either Fitzhugh had radically revised his view on industrial capitalism (he had not), or something strange was at play. Why the sudden shift away from a sympathetic stance on socialism, and why the olive branch to Fitzhugh's arch nemesis, the Northern industrialists?

In *Cannibals*, Fitzhugh presented socialism as the gravest of threats. The socialist critique of capitalism was still correct ("the works of the socialists contain the true defence of slavery").<sup>65</sup> But the socialist endgame would be an utter disaster. Socialists and com-

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61 Ibid., 48.

62 Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 344; Wish, George Fitzhugh, 71.

63 Fitzhugh, *Failure of Free Society*, 70.

64 George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals, All! Or, Slaves without Masters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press edition, 1960), 245.

65 Ibid., 21.

munists “are as presumptuous as the anatomist who should attempt to create a man...they would heal the diseases of society by destroying its most vital functions.”<sup>66</sup> In a chapter he called his “trump card,” Fitzhugh accused the Northern socialist-abolitionists of seeking to abolish “husband and wife, parent and child, the institution of private property of all kinds...and the institution of Christian churches...[they attempt] to upset and reorganize society in the North.”<sup>67</sup> Socialism had arrived at its horrid conclusion, a nihilism that eliminated not just capitalism, but *all* forms of structure and hierarchy – including the natural ones.

Once again, Fitzhugh’s title proves helpful. “Slaves without masters” was a reference to the capitalist laborer, stripped of his protective overseer.<sup>68</sup> However, it was also a reference to socialism, which Fitzhugh described in *Failure of Free Society* as “slavery in all save the master.”<sup>69</sup> Socialism had become an extreme form of capitalism. Free society perverted natural values; socialism destroyed them. And so perhaps Fitzhugh’s about-face was primarily intellectual. By 1857, he believed socialism to be *more* hostile to his cause than the conservative, industry-loving north. Ransom’s argument in the introduction of *I’ll Take My Stand* was not so original after all.

And yet Fitzhugh’s treatment of socialism never quite mirrored the Agrarians’. Fitzhugh knew he had to attract Northern sympathy for his cause. Unlike the Agrarians, he always played a strategic hand. If he condemned Northern industrialism with all his might, he sympathized with socialists. If he turned on socialism, he extended a hand to Northern conservatives (though no doubt holding his own nose while he did). Historian Eugene Genovese suggests Fitzhugh’s reversal on Northern conservatism “constituted a strategic holding operation.”<sup>70</sup> Fitzhugh saw industrial capitalism was winning and civil war looming, and so made a last-ditch effort to preserve his traditional Southern system by uniting against a new common enemy: socialists. My own sense is that Genovese’s hunch seems right. We know Fitzhugh thought strategically about how he ought to present his argument to a Northern audience.<sup>71</sup> It’s possible the stubborn Virginian realized that if he

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66 Ibid., 22.

67 Ibid., 85.

68 Ibid., 38.

69 Fitzhugh, *Failure of Free Society*, 70.

70 Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 232.

71 The question of how best to engage with a Northern audience was always on Fitzhugh’s mind. “I see great evils in slavery,” Fitzhugh once confessed to his close friend and fellow pro-slavery intellectual George Frederick Holmes, “but I think in a controversial work I ought not to admit them” (quoted in Faust, ed. *The Ideology of Slavery*, 6). We also know that Fitzhugh subscribed to abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* (Calvin Schermerhorn, “George Fitzhugh,” in *Encyclopedia Virginia*: [http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Fitzhugh\\_George\\_1806-1881](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Fitzhugh_George_1806-1881)).

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could swallow his pride and convince Northern industrialists to align themselves with the South, he might be able to preserve at least some element of his traditional society.

Either way, Fitzhugh acknowledged what the Agrarians would cautiously skirt: conservative traditionalists shared more with socialists than they did with conservative capitalists. Richard Weaver, the former socialist, probably understood Fitzhugh's conflicted affection for socialism more than most modern readers. But Weaver the Southerner probably understood Fitzhugh's eventual attempt at a Northern conservative alliance. Seventy years before Donald Davidson and the Agrarians set out to export traditionalist Southern conservatism to a larger American audience, Fitzhugh had followed the same instinct. Weaver, reading Fitzhugh in Louisiana under Agrarian tutelage, may well have recognized that the antebellum Virginian had grappled with the heart of the Southern conservative dilemma. To transcend its regional roots, Southern conservatism had to pick an imperfect ally: socialists or Northern industrialists? For Fitzhugh and the Agrarians, there was no good solution.

Like the Agrarians after him, Fitzhugh remained stuck in his time and place. In the 1860s, his writing grew acerbic and desperate. "We begin a great conservative reaction," he desperately proclaimed in 1863 as his South slowly crumbled under Union forces.<sup>72</sup> His racism, always present beneath his traditionalist grumblings, grew harsher.<sup>73</sup> He lived until 1881, long enough to see Henry Grady's New South take hold and his beloved Southern traditionalism attacked from within its own ranks. A century later, in 1960, historian C. Vann Woodward wrote: "In the America of the post-Civil War period, admittedly, it is impossible to imagine a more completely irrelevant and thoroughly neglected thinker than George Fitzhugh."<sup>74</sup>

### IV

One autumn morning of 1945, Richard Weaver sat down at his desk in Ingleside Hall at the University of Chicago.<sup>75</sup> The Second World War had just ended; modernism and the modern world were in shambles. Perhaps Weaver thought of his dissertation, of Fitzhugh, and the Agrarians. He wondered "whether it would not be possible to deduce, from fundamental causes, the fallacies of modern life." He took a few notes, and *Ideas*

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72 Fitzhugh quoted in Louis Hartz, *The American Liberal Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 145.

73 Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 235.

74 C. Vann Woodward, "George Fitzhugh: Sui Generis," introduction to Fitzhugh, *Cannibals, All!*, vii.

75 In Weaver's autobiographical essay, "Up from Liberalism," almost every major turning point in Weaver's life seems to have occurred on an autumn morning.

*Have Consequences* was born.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps more than any of Weaver's other writing, *Ideas* reflected a mix of Agrarian and Fitzhughian heritage. Weaver described a dark world plagued by "modern disintegration," where "modern man has become a moral idiot."<sup>77</sup> This world "desires to believe again in value and obligation."<sup>78</sup> Those values and obligations make up a laundry list of demands straight out of Weaver's Southern traditionalist lineage. A belief in absolute morals; "structure," which meant "hierarchy"; fraternity, which sounded exactly like Fitzhugh's "association"; religion; family; small plots of private property. I am hardly the first person to point out these links.<sup>79</sup> But few – if any – historians have bothered to look carefully at Weaver's treatment of socialism in *Ideas*. It is there that the influence of Agrarians and Fitzhugh shines brightest.

Weaver confronted the same Southern conservative dilemma as Fitzhugh and the Agrarians when it came to communism and industrialism. At first glance, he appears to have chosen the Agrarian approach. Weaver labeled socialist thought "the materialistic offspring of bourgeois capitalism." Like the Agrarians, he insisted that "socialism, whose goal is materialism... [turns] authoritarian; that is to say, it is willing to institute control by dictation in order to raise living standards and not disappoint the consumptive soul."<sup>81</sup> This sounded like Lanier and Ransom, redux. Capitalism and socialism were reaching for the same materialist values. The former would breed the latter, and neither would work.

However, Weaver could not quite bring himself to lump the socialists – or at least the communists – in with capitalist liberals.<sup>82</sup> "Hating this world they never made, after its debauchery of centuries, the modern Communists – revolutionaries and logicians – move toward intellectual rigor," he wrote.<sup>83</sup> "In their decision lies the sharpest reproach

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76 Weaver, "Up from Liberalism," 30.

77 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955), v, 1.

78 *Ibid.*, vi.

79 For example, George Nash: "In his mordant criticisms of industrialism and technology, in his negative appraisal of urban man and urban living, and in his plea for a society based on 'distinction and hierarchy,' he resembled no one so much as the authors of the agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*."

80 Weaver, *Ideas*, 37.

81 *Ibid.*, 125.

82 In keeping with Fitzhugh and the Agrarians, Weaver never settled on firm definitions of "socialism" and "communism." It seems fair to hazard, however, that for Weaver socialism came to mean something closer to social democracy (synonymous with "meaningless clichés of liberalism," as he put it) while communism, by the time he wrote *Ideas Have Consequences*, resembled a purer form of communitarian, anti-capitalist thought. Here, as I did with Fitzhugh and the Agrarians, I've chosen to treat the terms as interchangeable.

83 *Ibid.*, 9.

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yet to the desertion of intellect...nothing is more disturbing to modern men of the West than the logical clarity with which the Communists face all problems.”<sup>84</sup> And Weaver went on: “they [the communists] have never lost sight of the fact that life is a struggle... [communism] has generated a body of ideas with a terrifying power to spread.”<sup>85</sup>

These are decidedly un-Agrarian sentiments. Yet they echo an early Fitzhugh. Weaver seemed to take pleasure in taunting the “modern men of the West” (Fitzhugh’s “Northern conservatives”) with the communist threat. His praise for communism’s “intellectual rigor,” “logical clarity,” and “body of ideas” suggests that Fitzhugh – whom Weaver at one point cites – might have worked his way into *Ideas*.<sup>86</sup>

“Monopoly capitalism must be condemned along with communism,” Weaver wrote.<sup>87</sup> And indeed, he indeed attacked monopoly capitalism without mercy. But – in perfect keeping with Fitzhugh – Weaver never subjected communism to the same wrath. The worst enemy of *true* conservatism was not communism. It was the industrialist North.

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In 1955, seven years after Weaver made clear his rejection of Northern conservatives, the conservative North reached out to him. Weaver received a letter from William F. Buckley, Jr. The letter sought Weaver’s support. Buckley wanted to establish a new conservative magazine, a project not only to “renew the attack on the Left, but to consolidate the Right.”<sup>88</sup> Buckley called this strategy “fusionism,” and he aimed to bridge the divide between (mostly Northern) free market libertarians and (mostly Southern) traditionalists to form a united conservative front.<sup>89</sup> Here it was: Fitzhugh’s “alliance” with Northern conservatives, a century later. From 1955 until his death in 1963, Weaver wrote thirty-six articles for Buckley’s *National Review*.<sup>90</sup>

Just as Fitzhugh had done in the 1850s, Weaver tempered whatever affection for socialism he had left. He argued against integration on the grounds that “‘integration’ and ‘communization’ are, after all, pretty closely synonymous...the first may be little more

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84 *Loc. Cit.*

85 *Ibid.*, 122.

86 *Ibid.*, 182.

87 *Ibid.*, 134.

88 Buckley quoted in Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners*, 94.

89 The term “fusionism” is commonly attributed to Buckley’s co-editor at the *National Review*, Frank Meyer. But Buckley quickly assumed the role of fusionist-in-chief. “More than any other man it was Buckley...who personified fusionism,” writes George Nash (Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 184. For a complete discussion of fusionism, see Nash, 170–185).

90 Nash, “The Influence of *Ideas Have Consequences*,” in Smith ed., *Steps Toward Restoration*, 102.

than a euphemism for the second.”<sup>91</sup> (Recall Fitzhugh: “We treat the Abolitionists and Socialists as identical...the former contains the germ of the latter, and very soon ripens into it.”<sup>92</sup>) Rather than threatening industrialism with their “intellectual rigor,” the communists “hack at the present moral and physical order with all the resolution and enterprise of the old-time entrepreneur.”<sup>93</sup> If the Weaver of *Ideas Have Consequences* sounded like the George Fitzhugh of *Failure of Free Society*, the Weaver of the *National Review* had become the Fitzhugh of *Cannibals, All!*, willing, for the sake of a national forum, to drop his appeal to communists and soften his “anti-materialistic, anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist biases.”<sup>94</sup>

Whenever Weaver did revert to his fiercest Southern traditionalism, he had to take his work to smaller Southern journals. In the *Georgia Review*, he could write, “Socialism is by definition anti-conservative, and capitalism cannot be conservative in the true sense as long as its reliance is upon industrialism.”<sup>95</sup> The difference is subtle but important; Weaver couldn’t get away with such a blunt condemnation of capitalism in the *National Review*. When he did try to take similar prose to Buckley in a piece titled “The Southern Tradition,” Buckley turned it down.<sup>96</sup>

Why did Weaver make the tonal shift? Perhaps for some of the same reasons as Fitzhugh. Even in his dissertation, Weaver argued that Southern principles would only catch on if couched “in such presentation that mankind will feel that the march is forward.”<sup>97</sup> He had always found the North “comparatively willing to listen to criticism,” he wrote in 1950.<sup>98</sup> It was just a matter of critiquing industrialism the right way. If that meant dropping a Fitzhughian – or even an Agrarian – affection for socialism and making it the traditionalist’s worst enemy, so be it.

And besides, Weaver had already left his mark with *Ideas*. As George Nash notes, “books – and, particularly, great books – can outlive their authors, and such was the fate of Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*.”<sup>99</sup> Though he may have talked less about the evils of capitalism and more about the communist threat once he began writing for the *Review*,

91 Richard Weaver, “Integration is Communization,” in *National Review* (13 July 1957), 67.

92 Fitzhugh, *Failure of Free Society*, 291.

93 Richard Weaver, “On Setting the Clock Right,” in *National Review* (12 October 1957), 323.

94 Nash, “The Influence of *Ideas Have Consequences*,” in Smith ed., *Steps Toward Restoration*, 105–6.

95 Weaver, “Southern Phoenix,” 8.

96 Young, *Richard M. Weaver*, 173. “The Southern Tradition” was published posthumously in the *New Individualist Review* (Issue 3, 1964), 7–17. It was reprinted in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*.

97 Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, 395.

98 Weaver, “Agrarianism in Exile,” in *Sewanee Review* 58 (1950), 596.

99 Nash, “The Influence of *Ideas Have Consequences*,” in Smith ed., *Steps Toward Restoration*, 105–6.

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the marks that Fitzhugh and the Agrarians had left on Weaver's thought had already made it into the national spotlight. A century after Fitzhugh and some twenty years after the Agrarians, Weaver had brought Southern traditionalism, complete with its lingering affection for socialism, into the national fold.

But at the exact same moment that Weaver brought his intellectual roots to a national audience, American historians sent them back to the antebellum South.

### V

The same year that Richard Weaver began to write for the *National Review*, a political scientist at Harvard named Louis Hartz published *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Hartz argued that all American political thought came directly from the liberal Enlightenment. America had no feudalism, no *ancien régime* to conserve: the country simply took Locke's liberal philosophy and ran with it. The American right "exemplifies...big-property liberalism"; the left, "the European 'petit-bourgeois.'"<sup>100</sup> Both were liberals, just of slightly different shades. "Fundamental value struggles have not been characteristic of the United States," Hartz wrote. "The ironic flaw in American liberalism lies in the fact that we have never had a real conservative tradition."<sup>101</sup> In fact, he concluded, American thought had absorbed liberalism so completely that it no longer understood its own unanimity.

In an influential chapter, "The Reactionary Enlightenment," Hartz detailed one exception to the American liberal rule: George Fitzhugh. He rescues Fitzhugh from historical insignificance and praises his writing as "one of the great and creative episodes in the history of American thought," the only moment when American traditionalists began to inject dissent into the liberal mold. Hartz did emphasize, though, that Americans were right to reject Fitzhugh's proslavery logic.<sup>102</sup>

The problem, though, is that Hartz then demonstrates how little impact Fitzhugh had on American thought. Confronted by a nation, the South included, "wedded still to ancient liberal notions," Fitzhugh was "crucified by the American general will."<sup>103</sup> The Virginian's "great conservative reaction," as Hartz (and Fitzhugh) called it, "die[d] without impact on the mind of a nation."<sup>104</sup> Hartz resurrected Fitzhugh only to tell readers why he was hardly worth remembering.

Certainly, the combined force of *The Liberal Tradition* and Weaver's *Ideas* sparked interest in Fitzhugh and the Agrarians. In 1960, Harvard University Press republished Fitzhugh's *Cannibals, All!* In his introduction, C. Vann Woodward made certain to pay tribute to Hartz's

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100 Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 15.

101 *Ibid.*, 57.

102 *Ibid.*, 147.

103 *Ibid.*, 171, 10.

104 *Ibid.*, 177.

analysis of Fitzhugh: “Hartz is quite justified in placing Fitzhugh near the center and in the forefront of the Reactionary Enlightenment.”<sup>105</sup> Woodward thanked Hartz for giving “serious attention to a neglected and provocative thinker.”<sup>106</sup> And in 1962, *I’ll Take My Stand* went back in print. “Probably it is unusual,” Donald Davidson happily noted, “for a reprint edition...to receive [this] attention from reviewers.”<sup>107</sup>

However, *The Liberal Tradition in America* lay beneath nearly every analysis of Weaver, the Agrarians, and especially Fitzhugh. As a result, historians and reviewers treated the Southern traditionalists as rogue reactionaries from the sectionist South, individual flecks on an otherwise spotless history of liberalism.<sup>108</sup> If neither Fitzhugh nor the Agrarians ever escaped the South – or their respective moments in history – their thought cannot have much impact on Weaver. And, the logic goes, if Weaver’s traditionalism was smothered by a national (read: Northern) conservatism that loves free-market industrial capitalism, his Southern traditionalism cannot have had much impact either.

One historian comes close to breaking free from Hartz’s gravity.<sup>109</sup> In both *The World the Slave-Holders Made* and *The Southern Tradition*, Eugene Genovese attempted to trace a straight line from Fitzhugh to the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s to Weaver in the 1950s. Genovese even gave serious attention to Fitzhugh’s relationship to socialism.<sup>110</sup> He argued that conservatives from Fitzhugh to Weaver created “a tradition that has resisted bourgeois society, its atomistic culture, and its marketplace morality.”<sup>111</sup> But even as he connected these reactionary moments, Genovese acknowledged that Hartz “is right, of course, in saying...that no later American conservative has built on [Fitzhugh’s] work. American conservatism accepts and has always accepted capitalism as a proper so-

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105 Woodward, “George Fitzhugh: Sui Generis,” in Fitzhugh, *Cannibals, All!*, ix.

106 Ibid., x.

107 Donald Davidson, letter to Robert Penn Warren, 4 May 1963, in Robert Penn Warren Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Box 21, Folder 400).

108 For example, see Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*; O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order*; Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* and *The Southern Tradition*; and Woodward, “George Fitzhugh: Sui Generis.” There are far too many dissertations on Fitzhugh, the Agrarians, and Weaver to cite here. Suffice it to say that the four giants of American intellectual history cited above all accepted Hartz’s premise that Fitzhugh and his intellectual followers were forever Southern, isolated, and stuck outside national currents of American political thought.

109 I do not mean to imply that Hartz has had a death grip on all American intellectual history since 1955. Many historians have critiqued his liberal tradition thesis (see, for example, *The American Liberal Tradition Reconsidered: The Contested Legacy of Louis Hartz*, ed. Mark Hulliung [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010]). But when it comes to analyzing Fitzhugh and the Agrarians’ place in American intellectual thought, Hartz’s thesis looms large – and largely uncontested.

110 In particular, see Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 217–25.

111 Genovese quoted in David Brion Davis, “Southern Comfort,” in *New York Review of Books* (October 5, 1995): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/10/05/southern-comfort/>.

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cial order—if that makes it ‘liberal’, very well.”<sup>112</sup> And so Genovese, too, fell into line. The links he established between Fitzhugh, the Agrarians, and Weaver are part of a *Southern* conservative tradition, important but forever outside the realm of national conservative movements.

Up until 1955, Louis Hartz may well have been right about American liberalism. But in what can only be described as a case of incredibly bad timing, Hartz’s thesis became false at the precise moment he published it. Richard Weaver was introducing Fitzhugh and the Agrarians into the American liberal tradition (to use Hartz’s framework). Weaver wrote Fitzhugh and the Agrarians into a *national* American intellectual history; Hartz, in a perverse though unintentional twist, wrote them out.<sup>113</sup>

This unfortunate paradox—where the normally parallel wires of history and historiography met, crossed, and short-circuited—leaves us with a strange historical disconnect. We have forgotten the Southern traditionalist influence on modern American conservatism. In particular, we have laid aside the complex intellectual and strategic relationship that Weaver, the Agrarians, and Fitzhugh struggled with when they wrote about socialism. That relationship, and the profound tension it reveals at the heart of our nation’s conservative movement, is lost. It, along with its authors, remain stuck in the South and in the past. Ideas do have consequences—but only if they are remembered.

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112 Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 239.

113 In a spectacular perversion of history, Fitzhugh’s legacy recently resurfaced when the white nationalist website *Breitbart News* used Fitzhugh’s praise of socialism to argue that the American left had its roots in proslavery thought. See (or perhaps don’t bother) “The Very Best Form of Socialism: The Pro-Slavery Roots of the Modern Left,” *Breitbart News*, 6 August 2013: <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2013/08/06/the-pro-slaver>.

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## **TITLE IMAGE**

Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson, May 4, 1956. Vanderbilt University Special Collections and University Archives.