REVIEW


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It is a universally acknowledged truth that reviewers critique books as they wish them to be rather than as they are. I will strive to avoid that tendency in writing about Jack Noe’s new contribution to the voluminous literature on southern memory. This is a nuanced, historiographically driven study of both the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and the larger politics of commemorating the nation at a time when it was still significantly riven across sectional lines. Noe gives us a thorough reading of this banner year and the preparations for it. It is a much-needed study of a particularly crucial turning point in the path toward southern and American nationalisms. As a historian of the US South, I am grateful for a book that so ably builds on and amends much of the best recent work on southern memory.

My chief criticisms lay in the direction in which readers of this journal are most likely interested. Noe begins his work with a description that places the reader squarely in the moment of the centennial celebrations. In that context, he notes that the celebrations served as a “performative expression” of newly emergent and competing nationalisms (p. 1). And yet, for readers attuned to festivity, celebration, and the cultural and social lives of commemoration, this is more potential than fulfillment.

Noe is a master of synthetic historiography across fields. In particular, he takes up questions of southern exceptionalism and applies them to the entanglements of memory and nationalism in the tenuous years of Reconstruction. Far from resolving the question of southern identity and its relationship to the celebration of national identity, he fruitfully complicates the dynamic with chapters that detail the southern relationship with celebrations of American independence from the antebellum period through the centennial.

Noe’s reading of the complicated antebellum and immediate postbellum celebrations of Fourth of July is particularly novel. His first two chapters do a fine job of dealing with these complexities while not fully segregating the celebrations across the color line. Indeed, Noe’s refusal to deal with southerners as a white monolith is particularly impressive given the relative paucity of sources on African American celebrations in these early years. His documentation of both Black and white southern claims to the holiday suggests the difficulties posed by patriotism for nearly all southerners, citizen or not. The evolving version of Independence Day as he portrays it in these two chapters is of a holiday with capacious meanings to a variety of groups. It was precisely this broad-based understanding of the celebration that led to white southern claims to their exceptional status as the true heirs of the nation’s founding principles. These claims grew markedly more complex during and immediately after the Civil War, and Noe’s analysis of these often-diverging understandings of southern American identity is rooted in both the scholarly

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literature and the ample primary evidence that he provides here.

Still, it is hard for me not to wish that Noe had deepened his analysis of African American celebrations. A narrowed temporal and regional focus like the one Noe adopts here would contribute enormously to histories of the use of festive culture. While the past two decades have seen important publications on such celebratory cultures, they have often been field-defining overviews (Mitch Kachun’s *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915* [2003]) or more focused studies on particular uses of festivity (Kathleen Clark’s *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863–1913* [2006]). Both works did more to open up avenues of study rather than foreclose possibilities. Yet Noe’s engagement with this literature treats the questions and complexities of festivity as a settled matter and not as an area in need of significant attention and additional research.

There are hints in chapter 3 of novel arguments about how the public sphere became a site for debate and celebration. For both the early origins of women’s work in Civil War memory and a genuinely new reading of when, how, and to what ends these elite white women entered into this work, Noe’s contribution here is important. I wish that he had done more to read these public spaces and their use, as these are potentially some of the best sources to reveal the participation of marginalized groups (African Americans, poor whites) in these cultures of celebration. A further reading of these debates in public would contribute significantly to an understanding of material and conceptual claims to space in the build up to the centennial.

Chapter 4 is a detailed reading of the politics of participation (and nonparticipation) in the centennial. Told mostly through the debate in Texas, it is a useful, readable primer on both the political machinations behind participating in the centennial celebrations and a larger glimpse into the rapidly changing perceptions of national and regional identities among white southerners. In particular, Noe exposes a “reunion rhetoric” that was truly only words and never deeds (p. 117).

After near exclusions of African American narratives in chapters 3 and 4, he returns to the multiple and differing experiences across the color line with chapter 5’s accounting of the experience of the actual centennial celebrations in Philadelphia. Here Noe shows how displays of whiteness and of nostalgia for slavery became definitive representations of southern identity. And in his sixth and final chapter, this ascendant southern nationalism is confirmed with the mingling of Confederate and American flags at Fourth of July celebrations. Noe makes note that this was not yet a universal celebration, but nearly anyone who has attended a small-town Independence Day parade in subsequent years can attest that it now certainly feels like a standardized part of the annual celebration ritual. Even in my own state of Alabama (where Noe was born), where Confederate Memorial Day is still officially celebrated, processions on the Fourth continue to frequently host displays that mingle the national flag with its treasonous counterpart.

It is that final point that reveals the particular stakes of Noe’s book and of celebratory culture more generally. The relevance of books on cultures of memory has only become all the more
important in recent years as politicians and far-right groups around the world have renewed their use of many of the same broad ideas about exclusionary nationalisms that Noe details here. My ultimate critique of this book’s failure to deal with culture and festivity lies in this realm. Because this is the sphere in which most citizens are likely to experience these beliefs, I wanted Noe to deal with them more. Cultures of festivity are not merely a window into other and more important debates but themselves worthy of consideration. The success of Contesting Commemoration lies in its novel contributions to what would seem like an overcrowded field. But it also suggests the necessity of further sustained attention to the culture and performance of the US centennial and other celebrations like it.
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