Discourses of Work and Consumption in the Demise of the Southern Cotton Mill Village System

Toby Moore

Department of Geography
University of Iowa

While the motives and methods of the Southern textile industry in constructing and maintaining its mill village system have received considerable scholarly attention, the demise of that same system has garnered significantly less interest. Despite a recent turn in the literature toward a focus on the post-war era [including Flamming, 1992; Minchin, 1997; Clark, 1997; and Simon, 1998], the only book length study of the village system remains Herring's 1949 *Passing of the Mill Village.* None of the recent works has had as its central focus the sales themselves, although they have added much to our knowledge of the political and social changes that accompanied the transition out of village paternalism. Both recent and past research, much of it published at the time of the sales themselves, has tended to stress such immediate causes as the rise of the cheap automobile; labor surpluses following the Depression; New Deal wage and hour legislation; and the labor strife of the era [Pope, 1941, pp. 192-195; Gilman, 1956, p. 279; Simpson, 1966, p. 17; Hall, Leloudis, Korstad, Murphy, Jones and Daly, 1984, p. 356; and Andrews, 1987, p. 197].

This paper seeks to add to our understanding of why and how the mill system passed into history by examining the process from the twin perspectives of discourse theory and the political economic theories of the Regulation school.[1] The divestment of the villages is thus analyzed as part of a changing discourse by which Southern textile mill owners and their fellow elites sought to exert labor and social control in the region. This discourse entailed both rhetorical and material practices: home ownership had to be sold as a concept in order to sell the homes as real estate. By looking more closely at such broader changes incorporated in the demise of the village system, we can better understand how cotton mill owners and workers in the South radically restructured the relationship between work and home at mid-century.

[1] Limitations on length preclude a discussion these two bodies of theory, which political geographers have drawn on extensively in recent years. However, it should be noted that my use of discourse is derived largely from that of Barnes, T. and J. Duncan (1992), in which discourse includes "narratives, concepts, ideologies and signifying practices ..." For an introduction to the Regulation school, see Boyer, R. (1990); also important to my understanding is Peck, J., and A. Tickell (1995); and Crump, R., and C.D. Merrett (1998).

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While space does not allow for a comprehensive chronology of the rise and fall of the village system, a capsule summary is in order. Southern mill owners, initially reliant on water power, built villages out of both necessity and choice in the late 19th century. In order to maintain a stable work force, companies had to provide housing and at least nominal facilities for churches and schools. Avoiding incorporation skirted municipal taxes and guaranteed mill managers' authority over the communities in which their workers lived. Even after steam and electricity replaced water as the main source of power and remote sites no longer were necessary, Southern mill building continued to be exercises in town building, with village constructions continuing through much of the 1920s. By 1930, approximately 600,000 people lived in mill villages from southern Virginia to Alabama. A study in 1934 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that 126 of 131 Southern mills offered company-owned housing, while in the North, where mills had begun to sell off their villages, only 25 of 60 mills did so.[2] Southern mills began selling their villages in the late 1930s. Sales stalled during the war, when labor shortages made housing a tool in recruiting workers, but resumed quickly and peaked around 1950. By 1958, a real estate company specializing in village sales estimated that 73 percent of village houses in the South had been converted to individual home ownership [Furman to Grier, 1958]. Sales had slowed to a trickle by the 1960s, until impending federal fair-housing legislation spurred a burst of activity. By the mid-1970s, only isolated villages remained, although the sprawling Cannon Mills complex of Kannapolis, North Carolina, survived well until the 1980s as the last of the Piedmont mill villages.

"Teach the boys and girls to work:" the Discourse of Production

The mill village system in the South took a proven model for labor control and adapted it to meet local conditions. Southern elites—whether they were wealthy planters, middle-class townspeople, industrialists or some combination—faced a growing political dilemma in the late 19th century. The dilemma was what the South would do with the quickening stream of impoverished, landless or small-holding whites on the verge of leaving their farms: people Southerners called poor whites, or "the yeomanry." Middle-class and elite whites could portray poor whites as solid pioneers, Christian Anglo-Saxons of deep faith and conservative values who formed a bulwark against the immigrant hordes of the north. Yet they also considered these same people

[2] "Personnel Policies in the Cotton-Textile Industry" (1936). Northern mill villages had also begun to be swallowed up by urban growth in a way that most Southern villages had not, and there were other differences in the village systems as well: for example, the reliance by Northern mills on multi-family tenements. Although there is no comprehensive census of mill village populations for the Piedmont, South Carolina published mill village population estimates, from which regional estimates can be made. In 1930, the state had an estimated 179,603 people living in mill villages, and 5,701,431 spindles, or 31.74 spindles per village resident. Applying that formula to the total number of spindles in the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Virginia and Tennessee, would yield a mill village population of 611,665 people.

ignorant, prone to violence and drunkenness, and shiftless in their work habits. Cash's portrait of the yeomanry is a good indication of how the "better classes" saw "white trash" Southerners:

> The men might plow a little, hunt a little, fish a little, but mainly passed their time on their backsides in the shade of a tree, communing with their hounds and a jug of what, with a fine feeling for words, had been named "bust-head." And finally, as the very hallmark of the type, the whole pack of them exhibited, in varying measure, a distinctive physical character—a striking lankness of frame and slackness of muscle in association with a shambling gait, a boniness and misshapeliness of head and feature, a peculiar sallow swartness, or alternatively a not less peculiar and a not less sallow faded-out colorlessness of skin and hair [Cash, 1941, p. 25].

The supposed laziness of poor whites—"their time on their backsides"—was particularly worrisome to Southern elites, for it seemed uncomfortably close to their caricature of the region's other great political threat, the now-emancipated slaves, who were rapidly being disenfranchised and intimidated into powerlessness [for the origins of the myth of Southern laziness, see Bertelson, 1967].

Southern elites did not need to look far to see evidence of lower-class white discontent. Like Southern blacks, poor whites caused trouble through much of the politically and economically unstable 1880s and 1890s, the first decades of the cotton textile boom in the region. Poor whites flocked to the Farm Alliance and Populist movements, powerful challenges to elite power which ultimately failed, largely on the question of race. But the short-term success of these movements, and the possibility that poor whites and blacks might make common cause, frightened the region's Democratic rulers, who had long relied on agriculture to absorb the energies of the yeomanry and provide for their economic welfare. Now, with farms failing, they sought to industrialize in such a way that would satisfy labor requirements while at the same time avoiding the class antagonisms of the Northern experience. Southern industrialists needed a rural people to learn how to work in their factories, but they did not want them to become Workers in the way Southerners believed that working-class whites in New England had come to see themselves [Pope, 1941, p. 49; Tullos, 1989, pp. 170-171; Edgar, 1998, pp. 457-458].

It was to these "poor whites," then, and to those of their fellow elites who were dubious of the merits of industrialization, that the cotton mill campaign directed its claims of moral uplift through labor, combined with a fierce sectionalism. Southerners had to be taught that the path to regional and personal redemption from defeat and poverty lay in physical labor, and that such labor was not the domain of blacks but of Christian whites. "Out of our political defeat we must work out a glorious material and industrial triumph, " the Raleigh *News and Observer* editorialized in 1880, a week after the presidential election. "We must have less politics and more work, fewer stump speakers and more stump pullers, less tinsel and show and boast, and more hard, earnest

work. We must make money–it is a power in this practical business age. Teach the boys and girls to work and teach them to be proud of it." [quoted in Mitchell, pp. 89-90]. The narrator of novelist Walter Hines Page's 1909 *The Southerner* found in the mill village the answer to the South's epic defeat:

> O My Southern Brothers, you who have silent, deep-calling moods when you catch the ambition of our father's fathers and of their fathers who were among the great builders of the Republic ... Two great tasks have been done here–the foundation of our liberties has been laid and the wild continent has been subdued. The third task is ours–the right training of these delayed people, for upon this training rests the extension of liberty and the fruitful uses of nature ... here on this soil, life has the wholesome and simple purpose that helps men and that the worker grows by; for the builders of a civilization have never doubted the value or the aim of life nor ever suffered soul-weariness [Worth, pp. 326-327].

The refrain of "teach the boys and girls to work" served to shield mill owners from charges of exploitation, while making industrial work for cash wages a social as well as an economic endeavor. Part sincerity and part salesmanship, it was a rhetoric that played well in the small towns of an impoverished region. "We make American citizens, and run cotton mills to pay the expenses," claimed one cotton mill pioneer [Pope, 1942, p. 16]. A South Carolina industrialist echoed that sentiment: "Our mills shall be run not only to make cotton cloth, but to make the right kind of men and women as well" [Edgar, 1998, p. 488]. The roar of textile machinery, a Cabarrus County, North Carolina, preacher said at the dedication of a local mill, was "work's anthem to the Lord," and the mill's smoke "daily incense to the Lord" [Hall, et al., 1986, p. 24]. A Salisbury, North Carolina, evangelist one night told a revival that "the establishment of a cotton mill would be the most Christian act his hearers could perform"–and the next night, the town's first mill was organized [Cash, 1941, 181]. Textile pioneer H.P. Hammett, who founded mills in Piedmont, South Carolina, put it this way: "It is clear that what the South needs more than anything else is diversified labor, and to realize that to labor is respectable, and to be idle is not respectable" [Mitchell, 1921, 197n].

A critical feature of this discourse, preached from the pulpits of Southern churches and the editorial pages of Southern newspapers, was a silence on, or even a mistrust of, the rewards of labor. Work was a spiritual end, not an economic means, and to the extent that consumerism was addressed, it was as a temptation to laziness and moral decadence. Protestant preachers, often funded by the mills, told their congregations that economic and social injustices were temporal, and beyond the cares of the church. To be sure, many mill workers moving to the new textile towns of the South recognized and celebrated their new access to the world of cash wages and the commodities it allowed them to purchase. Yet on a discursive level, the joys of consumption

were drowned out in the exhortations to labor [Weber, 1958, pp. 155-183; Pope, 1941, pp. 164-165; and Hall, et al., 1986, p. 124].

This work-centered discourse entailed delicate matters of gender as well as race. Janiewski found both racial and sexual elements in the textile pioneers' campaign to "teach the boys and girls to work." The planters' "carefully constructed" racial and sexual hierarchies were threatened by the industrialists' need for the labor of white men and white women. "Unless they could make work 'respectable for white persons,' either racial chaos, class conflict, sexual disorder, or economic disaster might occur" [Janiewski, 1991, pp. 74-75]. Turning women into wage earners and placing men under the direct control of mill owners and foremen represented a dangerous re-ordering of gender relations.[3] By preaching the spiritual benefits of physical labor in the cotton mills, mill owners hoped to maintain the old hierarchies in the brave new world of Southern industrial capitalism.

The mill owner's answer to the riddle of industrializing under such conditions was the cotton mill village, the portal through which Southern farm families for half a century passed into the factory system. Yet by the onset of the Great Depression, pressure on the village system was intensifying. Social and technological changes such as the rise of the cheap automobile, the introduction of "scientific" management on the shopfloor, and the centralization of production under integrated corporate structures all had an impact. Radical and liberal critics attacked the system as feudal and exploitative; national journalists and novelists embarrassed Southern textile officials by portraying the villages in a negative light. A series of labor struggles in the Southern mills, most notably the violent strikes of 1929 and the 1934 General Strike, with its "flying squadrons" and declarations of martial law, forced Southern mills to rethink their strategies of labor control through spatial control. The new industrial order of the New Deal rested on a Fordist system of increased wages and limited work hours, changing the economic equation in which mills operated their villages. The 1933 Cotton Textile Code reduced the standard workweek to 40 hours, making shift work permanent and changing the balance between the labor capacities of the mills and the capacities of the villages [Wright, 1986, pp. 208-212]. While the Code's effectiveness in raising real Southern textile wages is debatable, it did move those wages toward a cash basis. Textile wages, a key variable in determining whether mills could afford to sustain the village housing and whether employees could afford to buy them, slumped slightly following the Supreme Court's invalidation of the NRA in 1935, but recovered quickly and continued to trend upwards until the early 1950s [Wright, 1986, 213-214]. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, aimed directly at the low-wage South, set an initial minimum of 25 cents an hour, increasing each year to an eventual 40 cents an hour. In the spring of 1939, more than half of the country's 690,000 workers earning less than 30 cents an

[3] See also the "cotton mill novels" of Erskine Caldwell and Sherwood Anderson, in which women's work in the mills is suffused with intense sexuality.

hour lived in the South. When the minimum wage under the FLSA rose to thirty-two and a half cents per hour in October, 1939, it affected 44 percent of Southern textile workers [Wright, 1986, p. 219].

Restructuring Discourse, Restructuring Places

Mill owners by the late 1930s increasingly believed that making their tenants into home owners would help Southern textile workers, in the catch phrase of the era, "become better citizens." In September 1939, the trade journal *Textile World* ran a report by Mildred Barnwell, the secretary of the Southern Combed Yarn Spinners Association, in which she hailed the "new psychological attitudes" to be derived from the new arrangement. "It automatically removes him from the class of mill worker," Barnwell wrote, "to the class of property owner. By becoming a property owner he becomes in his own mind and in the minds of others a bona fide citizen of the community ... It makes him want to preserve law and order for the protection of his family and his home. It makes him want to see good business continue without interruption ...". By re-casting a Southern discourse of work into an American discourse of home ownership (and by extension consumerism), Southern mill officials hoped to head off the rising radicalism of their workers. Where six years before the Cotton Manufacturers' Association had summarily dismissed the idea of selling the villages, claiming their employees preferred to rent a company home, Barnwell now posited that for a mill worker to want to buy his home "is really the most natural thing in the world, for this country was built and developed through the urge of its people to own property." What was more, buying it on the installment plan was "the American way to a more independent future" [Barnwell, 1939, p. 64].[4]

One of the best explanations of this new strategy of labor regulation can be found in Herring's papers, in a letter from Greensboro textile magnate Caesar Cone Jr. Cone Mills had not joined in the pre-war wave of mills selling their villages, with the result that after the war the company still owned more than 1,500 village houses around Greensboro, housing about half of the company's employees. By 1948, Cone's village houses, most built before the turn of the century, needed to be renovated, and in the winter of 1948/1949, the company built 65 new houses to provide lodging for the workers who would be displaced workers during the renovation. Rents increased six-fold, from $1.25 per week to $7.50, for a five-room house, in an effort to make the villages self-supporting, but by early 1949 the company had decided that the planned modernization would be too expensive. A few months later, Cone stopped taking new tenants and made plans to vacate and destroy the "less desirable" houses, planning to renovate the remaining 700 to 800 houses and sell them to mill hands and their families.

[4] This refrain of home ownership, of course, was not uniquely Southern, and evolved with strong state support, particularly through federal guarantees of home mortgage loans.

Financial considerations, however, were not the only factor involved. Cone hoped that the sociological consequences of turning the villages into private neighborhoods would benefit the company as well. "It is felt that at some future time the company's labor relations will be on a sounder basis if all of its employees live among the general citizenry of the community," Cone wrote to Herring. His reasoning is worth quoting at length.

> The ultimate goal anticipated would be to have all kinds of citizens of Greensboro interspersed as homeowners among our own employees, who would also be home owners. If the "mill village" psychology that has long existed can be broken down (which might conceivably take a generation), it might give us access to the total labor force of the community, whereas at the present time it seems that there is some reluctance on the part of certain groups to accept cotton mill jobs ... The hoped-for goal in breaking down of the "mill village" psychology might result in a much better over-all labor picture, not only with respect to volume of supply but also with respect to day-to-day relations. It is conceivable that next door neighbors who are employed by a multiplicity of employers would be less inclined to criticize the individual employer who might be paying the highest wage and might be granting the greatest fringe benefits and might be providing the best working conditions. On the present basis, with all our village tenants working for one employer, it is easy for them to condemn little things that may come up since they have little access to neighbors who work for others [Cone to Herring, 1950].

Textile companies had various means at their disposal to convey this new discourse of home ownership and consumerism. Joanna Mills, undergoing a reorganization following the death of its largest shareholder, decided to sell its houses in the vicinity of Joanna, South Carolina, in early 1960. The company devoted the October 1959, issue of *The Joanna Way* company magazine to "Joanna Employees at Home—in Homes Which They Own." The magazine's cover featured a photograph of the W.E. Davis family, relaxing on a couch in their living room, a book open on the mother's lap. Inside the magazine, mill families posed (somewhat stiffly) on their porches or in their gardens. Joanna employees weighing the opportunity to buy their village houses could read interviews in which nine Joanna families "who have already purchased homes reveal their feelings: pride in ownership, joy in developing homes that suit them, financial security—a home—for payments as reasonable as rent." Throughout, the writer carefully pointed out the consumer accouterments of the new textile worker/consumer: televisions, a telephone that matched the color of the wall paper, a living room with formal furniture. Another article traced the career of Joanna's own LeGrande Shealy, who had left the spinning room of the Joanna plant to become a professional interior designer for a department store in Shreveport, Louisiana [*The Joanna Way*, 1959].

Mill officials could also "bring some pressure to bear" on newspapers to run similar stories on the benefits of home ownership [Furman to Riegger, 1952], and local ministers could be relied upon to preach the new gospel. Given the impact of village sales on small communities and the influence of the textile companies, local newspapers readily complied. Southern papers and trade periodicals joined in transmitting the new gospel of private home ownership for textile workers. Pictures of smiling families, clad in overalls or their Sunday best, standing in front of a freshly painted home or next to a small flower garden, became a staple of post-war Southern journalism. In the churches, as Pope noted in Gastonia, "Citizens and ministers in the county joined heartily in approval, despite their previous apathy or opposition to the abolition of the villages, and began to praise the joys and virtues of home ownership ... Uptown ministers praised the movement as being in keeping with traditional American ideals–ideals they had not been greatly concerned to defend ... hitherto" [Pope, 1941, pp. 192-194].

Meanwhile, real estate agents, moving into the villages for the first time to survey lot lines and market the houses to the mill workers, took a more direct role in teaching people that home buying was in their best social and financial interests. "At the proper psychological time," a Greenville real estate company explained in 1954, "we open an office in the vicinity of the houses to be sold and execute the individual contract with each purchaser. Since most of the purchasers are uninformed completely about a real estate transaction, the job of selling the houses is partly a teaching job and the creation of a desire to purchase ... Our sales technique can be described as low pressure but effective" [Furman to Pennington, 1954]. Buying on an installment plan was nothing new to Southern cotton mill workers, who had long depended on credit from local groceries and company stores to feed their families. By extending this form of consumerism to home and automobile financing, textile companies locked their employees into long-term credit relationships with third-party finance companies, a development that, as Minchin found in his exploration of post-war unionization efforts, proved to be a powerful disincentive to strike [Minchin, 1997, pp. 141-149].

Conclusions

For half a century, mill village paternalism set the parameters for class consciousness and mobilization in the Southern textile industry. Company control of housing and community institutions such as churches and schools constituted a powerful weapon in the mills' ongoing fight against unionism and collective bargaining, yet the geographic concentration of cotton mill workers and their gradual isolation–geographically and socially–from both Piedmont townspeople and farmers developed into something quite different from what mill owners had intended. In a region in which powerful forces –religion, race, nationalism, among others–could be brought to bear against class consciousness, the mill village system produced a place-based form of worker identity

which, by the 1930s, was widely recognized as an obstacle to effective labor regulation.

Southern elites responded to the changing political and economic landscape by shifting the discourse through which they had sought to gain support and cooperation for industrial production. Through the mechanism of the village sales and a re-creation of the home as a site of consumption, mill companies sought to re-invent their workers as Fordist consumers, while re-claiming some of their increased wages for the mill's own capital investment and profit. Southern capitalists re-structured not only the relative importance of production and consumption but the very places in which cotton mill workers lived. The mill villages—places in which seemingly every institution and landscape feature had been closely aligned with the place of work—became places structured increasingly by their roles in the consumption of commodities. Mill workers rushed to renovate their village houses, planting lawns and adding porches or garages, to ready them for re-sale on the open market or to differentiate them from their neighbors' homes. Meanwhile, the mill buildings around which the communities had been built themselves became obsolete, to be replaced by suburban or rural plants with parking lots instead of villages as their necessary adjuncts. Families engaged in work outside the textile industry moved into the villages, as villagers retired from cotton mill work or took jobs in other industries. Community institutions such as schools, churches and local sports teams were stripped from their close connection to work and became more heavily commodified and more thoroughly integrated into the larger community.

This restructuring of place under a shifting discursive field was not totally successful: Southern cotton mill towns remained centers of a simmering anti-town, anti-elite sentiment. Union struggles continued, with sporadic but notable victories. The transformation to home ownership itself marked a significant victory for mill workers, who enjoyed rising living standards and improved work conditions. As a political strategy, however, the re-invention of the cotton mill villages was a clear success. Political mobilization of cotton mill workers along class lines became more difficult, as people working in mills and living in the (former) mill villages began to be as likely to identify themselves as consumers as with their roles as workers. Through a shifting discourse of consumption, textile companies encouraged their workers' integration into mass, American consumer society, and produced, at least in the short-term, a more stable economic and political system through which to pursue profit.

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