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Review Of "The Problem South: Region, Empire, And The New Liberal State, 1880-1930" By N. J. Ring

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930* by Natalie J. Ring

Review by: PETER SCHMIDT

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The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930.
By Natalie J. Ring. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. Pp.
334. \$60.00 cloth; \$24 paper)

With this book, her first, Natalie Ring steps up to play a key role in shaping U.S. southern studies. She is part of a “global South” cohort investigating the comparative cultural histories of slavery and postslavery cultures in the New World, including the U.S., the Caribbean, and Latin America. This new paradigm in the study of the Americas has generated some of the best anthologies and monographs in recent years, including Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn’s *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004) and Jennifer Rae Greeson’s *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (2010), not to mention stunningly original fiction such as Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). The term *global South*, more broadly defined, actually dates from the 1950s and 1960s, when analysts of global underdevelopment in Africa and Asia as well as the Americas deployed it as a way to investigate how the inequities of today have their roots in colonial schemes of development.

Ring’s distinctive contribution is to *historicize* conceptions of the global U.S. South more lucidly than anyone has yet done for the crucial post-Reconstruction period from the 1880s through the 1930s. At least since the eighteenth century, the U.S. South has been described by many as the nation’s Other—a foreign entity in the body politic, an exception to the American exceptionalist narrative. In other ways, however, as Ring shows, the South very much participated in American expansionist dreams, most notably in the antebellum period with plans to increase the power of the slave states in Congress by the colonization of the Caribbean and northern Mexico. Ring’s study concentrates on how Progressivist reform projects for the South paralleled equally ambitious attempts to transform the new U.S. tropical colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Understood in such a transnational context, the post-Civil War South became

not just the nation's Other (though it was still thought of that way) but also a proving ground: the "problem South" became "global" in the context of American imperial ambitions to modernize decadent tropical economies and cultures at home and abroad.

Ring's research explores a rich range of archival and published sources, including Carnegie Corporation archives, the records of the Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question, and addresses on "America's race problems" at the 1901 meeting of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences—not to mention congressional reports, sociology treatises, medical tracts, theories of "race friction" and "racial adjustment," fiction, journals and periodicals, travelogues, essays, editorials, letters, and many others. Her readings lucidly contextualize specific documents within broader discursive patterns. She repeatedly teaches us to think paradoxically, not simplistically, and to cross disciplinary boundaries. And though she focuses on discursive practices, she pays close attention to the historical record of what happened when policies validated by "problem South" rhetoric were put into practice.

Ring's chapters on diseases, cotton, poor whites, and the color line trace how the "transnational circulation of people, governing strategies, reform practices, and scientific theories linked regional, national, and global spaces together" (p. 321). She also demonstrates how reformers reaffirmed distinctions between a supposedly progressive center and a periphery in need of modernization. Further, as well as dissecting how underdevelopment was defined by particular domains of knowledge, such as medicine or sociology, Ring memorably shows how such discourses *migrated* and cross-fertilized each other. "Scientifically" validated theories of "miasma" contagion or the supposed degeneracy of peoples of color in the global South, for instance, are also shown to shape projects aimed at reversing the supposed cultural and racial degeneration of southern *whites* (chapter four, "The Poor White Problem as the 'New Race Question'").

Many topics opened up by Ring's study invite further exploration. I can mention just a few. It is too bad that Ring's purview could not

extend fully into the decade of the New Deal, comparing its reform programs and rhetoric with earlier precedents. Second, in contrast to many examples of hegemonic linkages between academic, capital, and state power, Ring traces an alternative strain of early twentieth-century global South discourse by analyses of the writings of George Washington Cable, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other figures—including Kelly Miller, who is unfortunately less well known but is given generous treatment by Ring. *This* strain of global South discourse was profoundly anticolonial, though not always consistently so. At its most progressive, it focused on the moral imperative of transforming subjects into citizens with inalienable rights and opportunities for suffrage, education, and upward mobility in the postcolonial world. How such conflicting visions of the proper goals of a Progressivist “new liberal state” could emerge from the same historical nexus needs more study.

Natalie Ring’s *The Problem South* has given us rich new data sets and interpretive models on which to build. And as her conclusion eloquently says, most of the paradoxes and problems of the 1880-1930 era unfortunately continue to bedevil us in 2012, both locally and globally.

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William Alexander Percy: The Curious Life of a Mississippi Planter and Sexual Freethinker. By Benjamin E. Wise. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Pp. 368. \$35 cloth)

In this excellent biography that analyzes the life of William Alexander Percy (1885-1942), historian Benjamin Wise accomplishes a number of things. At the most basic level, he delineates Percy’s mul-