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# Review of Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South by Mark M. Smith

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ordinating management of the federal workforce. The federal budget replaced the “diverse vernaculars of all the particular bureaus and offices” with “a single, official administrative language,” rendering the work of these agencies “transparent” to executive oversight and thus vulnerable to executive control (p. 153). Responding to Stephen Skowronek (*Building the American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Kahn argues that new American “state” emerged not merely from the enlarged administrative capacities of particular bureaus, but from these formalized relationships among government agencies.

The newly empowered executive branch did not serve the cause of democracy, Kahn concludes. Though energetic and imaginative leaders like Franklin Roosevelt used their budget power to create agencies that gave the illusion of democratic participation, in truth the budget system as it emerged in the United States excluded citizens from budget making. The result was a “crisis of representation” (p. 214) that helps account for Proposition 13 and the tax revolts of the 1970s.

This brooding conclusion is perhaps too dark. William Nelson (*The Roots of American Bureaucracy, 1830–1900*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) has located a “crisis of representation” in the late nineteenth century, not the late twentieth. In his view political parties proved incapable of the pluralism demanded by the country’s increasing complexity and diversity. The budget and other administrative reforms served this purpose. To influence the budget process, federations of women’s clubs, labor unions, farmers, bankers, teachers, automobile owners, and others with an interest in government spending hired their own budget experts who became permanent fixtures in a political process that, while messy, was more inclusive than the party-centered decision-making system which preceded budget politics. More broadly, as James Savage (*Balanced Budgets & American Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) has found, modern debates over the budget process merely replay an argument over representation, public finance, and political morality that dates back to at least the Revolution.

For revealing the broader importance of public finance to American political culture, and for raising fundamental questions about the nature of the American state, *Budgeting Democracy* deserves a wide readership.

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*Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South*. By Mark M. Smith. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. Pp. xx, 303. \$45, cloth; \$16.95, paper.

Mechanical timepieces—clocks and watches—were among “the great inventions in the history of mankind,” to quote David S. Landes (*Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983: 6). “Not in a class with fire and the wheel,” he adds, the clock was “comparable to movable type in its revolutionary implications for cultural values, technological change, social and political organization, and personality.” This ubiquitous technological innovation helped the modern world attain sustained economic growth and has attracted such talented scholars, in addition to Landes, as Carlo M. Cipolla, E. P. Thompson, and Michael O’Malley. Now Mark M. Smith, assistant professor of history at the University of South Carolina, offers the first study of this invention’s penetration in to the antebellum American South.

Smith discovers that the Old South, rather than clinging to a premodern, task-oriented sense of time, increasingly embraced the clock as “the legitimate arbiter of work and social

organization" (p. 8). Ownership of timepieces steadily increased among white Southerners from the colonial period forward, so that at the outbreak of the civil War it encompasses two-thirds of all households. What the author terms "the gospel of punctuality" (p. 70) emanated from Southern merchants; spread through the postal service, steamships, railroads, and the telegraph; and by the 1830s had permeated the plantation economy. Emulating time-thrifty Northern managers, planters widely utilized clocks and watches to regulate slave labor. Although slaves themselves may not have internalized this *time discipline* to anywhere near the same extent as contemporary factory workers in the North and in Europe, the effective conjunction of "the whip and the watch" (p. 137) ensured that slaves exhibited considerable *time obedience*. A final chapter on the post-Civil War era concludes that the New South shared at least "one crucial continuity" with the old, slave South: "the way white southerners viewed, appreciated, and applied time" (p. 154).

Based on the author's dissertation, *Mastered by the Clock* buttresses these claims with a rich and impressive array of evidence, including census data, probate records, contracts to hire slaves, plantation account books, diaries, agricultural journals, and slave narratives. Smith also explores the obvious relevance of his findings to the interminable debate over whether slaveholders were fundamentally seigniorial or capitalistic. His focus on time sensibilities even adds a new dimension to postemancipation conflicts over the reconstruction of Southern agriculture. The fierce black resistance to resurrecting the plantation gang with wage labor turns out to have owed much to the freed people's desire to control their own time.

This book unfortunately is marred by Smith's unrelenting insistence upon wrenching the historical material into alignment with a Marxist interpretive superstructure. Not content to write a mundane technological history, Smith aspires to "an intellectual history of the southern time consciousness" (p. 215). That he is in over his head comes across noticeably in the second chapter, by far the book's least satisfactory. It starts by glibly positing a sharp trichotomy between "God's time," "nature's time," and "clock time" (p. 40) without precisely defining these terms nor apparently considering whether they are actually competing alternatives. Smith admits that his empirical evidence turns up no tension among these notions in Southern thought, yet it never occurs to him that the categories therefore might need reformulation.

*Mastered by the Clock* exhibits other, related shortcomings. Smith's philosophical conception of time is so radically subjectivist that it often muddles and warps the analysis. Repeated references and allusions to the "tyranny of the clock" are an irritating distraction that does not bring historical clarity to what remains mere metaphor. Despite a statistical appendix, the author's somewhat unsophisticated handling of quantitative data betrays a lack of advanced training in such techniques. And the text is not engagingly written or organized.

The historical literature boasts several fascinating works on the clock's development and on evolving concepts of time. This book will not become one of them. Nor will it enter the distinguished ranks of profound studies of the South's peculiar institution. Nonetheless, *Mastered by the Clock* has a material base of exhaustive research that makes a solid contribution to our understanding of the Old South.

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*Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama 1800–1840.* By Daniel S. Dupre. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 269. \$40.00.

In this book Daniel Dupre offers a history of Madison county, Alabama from the time of settlement in 1800 to 1840. He sees this work as "an exploration of the intersection of the frontier community and the broad forces of ideological and social change sweeping through early republic America" (p. 3). His emphasis is on the ideological conflicts that