

History 323

Re: Questions w/ Ransom & Sutch, "Sharecropping: Market Response or Mechanism of Racial Control?"

Q. Why the rise of sharecropping

Q. How did sharecropping affect the growth of the southern economy?

Q. What do they conclude--was sharecropping a mechanism for racial control?

Questions:  
How does Ransom & Sutch do this  
Sharecropping  
R&S in response of

Re: Notes from Ransom & Sutch "Sharecropping: Market Response of Mechanism of Race Control"? from D. Sansing(ed.), What Was Freedom's Price? [Article placed on optional Library Reserve]

The nature of the economic structure immediately after the Civil War. The large plantations gave way to small farms, which rarely comprsed more than 40 acres of cultivated land and invariably operated by a single family. Frequently their tenancy was under a sharecropper arrangement. The South lost its self-sufficiency in foodstuffs concentrating on cotton while purchasing pork and corn from local retail merchants. The large financial intermediaries disappeared and the underwriting and marketing of the cotton was taken over by the rural merchants. There were literally thousands of these country stores, each serving a limited clientele in its own neighborhood.

The essay tries to explain why sharecropping sprung up to dominate the tenant-landlord relationship and the agriculture of the postwar South. A system that did not exist in the south prior to the Civil War.

Chart on p. 54 shows that in 1880

*questioned (20%)*

<u>Tenure</u>	% of total farms			% of total <del>cropp</del> acreage in each class		
	White	Black	All	White	Black	All
Owened	41	7	48	51.0	9.8	60.3
Rented	4.8	9.6	14.4	6.7	6.9	13.6
Sharecropped	16.6	20.3	37.0	11.8	13.8	25.6

While only about 37% of all farms were sharecropped the majority owned farms were made up of small owner-operator enterprises. Nonetheless sharecropping was more important in determining the economic future of the former slave than these figures suggest. About 54% of all black farmers were sharecroppers. By 1880 there was not a single large plantation or plantation-size ~~land~~ farm to be found according to the authors.

Sharecropping was not immediately introduced into postwar agriculture. Planters tried other means to get black workers to work the plantation-sized farms by the old gang labor system for wages or for a fixed share of the harvest. But this system was only temporary it was replaced pretty quickly by the sharecropper arrangement.

Why?

The basic decision by blacks to hold back labor. The authors estimate that this was reduced by 28 to 37%. Blacks preferred now to choose leisure over work hours that described those they worked under slavery. (rate of exploitation was 50 to 60%). The contraction of the labor supply. . . In addition to cut backs the women and children were free to stay out of the fields. . . This contraction of labor supply had the effect of creating a sellers market for their labor. Blacks were in a position where they could make demands. The former planters tried to prevent a competitive labor market in the opening days of the postwar South by black code devices (see the Cohen article)

But these infringements on black civil liberties was overturned by the Congressional Reconstruction legislation, etc.

Once the planter class had to respect the freedman's civil liberties the competitive labor market came into effect. Since freedmen insisted on a share of the crop rather than wage labor and a return to the old gang labor system there was little the white planter could do but respond. The author's state that blacks imposed their preference for tenancy upon the landowners at a time when there was no effective resistance. Blacks were aware that in this matter they were in the driving seat.

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(Check Litwack, Been in the Storm Too Long) For experiments tried with white immigrants and how these failed.

The reasons why the blacks choose this form of labor rather than a more remunerative wage system was because the gang-labor system smacked too much of the old dreaded and long-hated slavery system. If they could not own their own land then this was the next best means of expressing their new found freedom. To be out from under the Man's scrutiny and direct control.

Blacks choose Sharecropping because it afforded them greater rewards than wage labor. In addition to providing the necessary margin of independence they so desperately wanted (short of their own farm) it also provided the incentive that was not available in the wage labor system. Productivity under the sharecropper system meant additional income for both the land-owner and the tenant. So there was an incentive to work and produce harder. The authors are confident that sharecropping was adopted then because of the insistence of the freedmen and not as a white substitute for slavery for white chooses would be wage labor where blacks were under more control.

How did sharecropping affect the growth of the southern economy? Since sharecropping was an integral part of the southern agricultural economy what are the conclusions?

In general the southern economic structure stymied development by limiting opportunities for investment, curtailing migration, and concentrating production on a single cash crop. Sharecropping contributed to this outcome by weakening the economic incentives to invest in agriculture.

Because the harvest was divided between tenant and landowner any improvement in the farm would have to guarantee twice the normal return before the landowner would invest. The landowner would not have any incentive to invest in improvement (100%) if he would only receive back a 50% return. The tenant would not have any incentive to improve or invest in land and property that was not his only if he was assured that the returns of his investment would be seen at the end of the contract year. Every tenant was under a one-year contract that could or could not be renewed after the year. So tenants would go 50-50 with the landowner only on a quick return like fertilizer. . . But any other improvements that would take years to see the advantage would be ignored by the tenant.

These short terms investments in fertilizer, etc. could not lead to sustained growth in agricultural productivity.

Did sharecropping serve the ends of racial control?

As the system operated it did not disrupt white supremacy or white control over the politics, the economic investment patterns, or control over the social life of the South (see education, etc.) If anything sharecropping helped to maintain the disparity in income between the tenant and the landowner. . . . It did not threaten in any way the monolith of white supremacy.

In fact, sharecropping in its way acted an inhibitor to southern "modernization" and this alone assured that blacks would remain in the inferior position. That even relative advancement was impossible in a section in which "underdevelopment" was the key to southern development. The tenant farmer had little opportunity to learn the intricacies of marketing or finance. . . and sharecropping it cannot be proven was the first step in the agricultural ladder to eventual land ownership for blacks. In 1880 6.7 blacks in the south owned their own land. In 1900 the number stood at 6.5. . . . . Poverty kept the black man from owning land. Poverty kept him from leaving the South. Poverty prevented him from educating his children so their lot would be improved over the father, etc. . .

History 323

Re: Notes on Economy of Post-Bellum South

David G. Sansing(ed.), What Was Freedom's Price?(1978)

Willie Lee Rose, "Jubilee & Beyond: What Was Freedom?"

In this article Rose asks the question of whether Reconstruction constituted in any real sense a social revolution? A newly phrased concern that surmounts the old Beard-Hacker thesis. This article in this very useful series could be used in conjunction w/ material on the economics of the postwar South. The economics of this question are suggestive but a student could see how they fit into the tudy historical setting provided by the Rose article.

Rose begins with the concept of "revolution" as a social science term and then proceeds to note that wcholars of this period refine the idea and accept a more modest working definition for the events that ocured in the South from 1865 to 1877.

Have to note the constitutional and legal "turn around" in the fortunes of the former slaves. This was indeed a qualitative change. (although we recognize that the opportunity for realizing its meaning will take a hundred years).

Touches on the failure of the North to commit itself to underpinning the new freedom with economic quarantees. We take note of the hostility toward blacks in the North. She notes the early and limited experiments in turning over confiscated planatations to the blacks in the Sea Isles off of So. Carolina. And in Mississippi, etc. Rose's own Rehearsal for Reconstruction.

The collapse of this movement meant that the planatation system(most of the old owners remained in control)would survive and that slavery would be replaced eventually by the crop-lien system of exploitation. Rose notes that there were too many obstacles for this course of action to follow emancipation.

What was left to freedman was largely what he would make of his own freedom in the most limited opportunities provided him. It was this choice he was able to insist upon that probably brought about the tenacy system. The choice was to loosen the old ties of dependency. He resisted tow things: living in the planation quarters and (2)working for wages at "gang" labor.