Book Review: Joseph Crespino. In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution

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In 1967, Samuel Hill published his provocative work, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, with its intriguing argument for Southern religious exceptionalism. In the book, Hill posits that the central theme of popular Southern religion was a focus on fundamentalism and revivalism while eschewing the concern over social issues that pervaded national Christian institutions. Historians have since dismantled much of Hill’s argument, but the central thesis has recently seen a revival of sorts from the most unlikely of places. Joseph Crespino, along with fellow scholar Matthew Lassiter, has recently called for an end to Southern exceptionalism as an analytical framework in their work *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*. Overall, Crespino’s *In Search of Another Country* makes an anti-exceptionalist argument, but the author’s work includes elements that are surprisingly similar to Hill’s decades old narrative.

Crespino challenges several notions about white reaction to the civil rights movement, as well as the creation of modern conservatism in the United States. The author argues that the Southern strategy thesis, best exemplified by Dan T. Carter’s *The Politics of Rage*, oversimplifies the profound shifts taking place in the South. While white racism did play a role in the formation of the neo-conservative coalition, for Crespino, it is only part of a far more complicated story. Religious beliefs and anti-statism became entangled with racist backlash to civil rights, and
this binding together of separate conservative phenomena brought
Mississippi and the rest of the South into national political prominence.

Crespino analyzes the growing national importance of
Mississippi in a number of areas. First, the author is most interested in
the subtle ways race affected later political developments in the South.
By analyzing Mississippi’s political positioning in Presidential races,
Crespino demonstrates how Mississippi transformed from a state that
voted overwhelmingly for one of the biggest losers in modern Presidential
elections, Barry Goldwater, to a state fully in step with the conservative
tide that swept Ronald Reagan into office. In Presidential politics,
Mississippians tapped into a broader, nationwide conservativism by
deemphasizing race and further articulating other aspects of conservative
ideology, namely anti-communism and anti-statism. Crespino argues
that the first sign that things were shifting significantly occurred during
the Presidential election of 1964. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic
Party (MFDP) made inroads at the national Democratic convention to
seat African American delegates. Many segregationist Democrats were
already thinking of supporting conservative GOP candidate Barry
Goldwater because he opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act that Lyndon
Johnson had signed into law. The fledgling Mississippi Republicans saw
their opportunity to make huge strides in the state, and the work of the
MFDP finally pushed the Democratic segregationists to the other side. In
the election of 1964, with the rest of the nation voting overwhelmingly for
Lyndon Johnson, Mississippi, the staunchest of Democratic states, voted
for Republican Barry Goldwater because of his racial conservatism. But
Mississippians and other Southerners would not remain isolated politically
for long. Once ignored by Presidential candidates, Mississippians would
soon find new recognition as their conservative ideals, especially limited
government intervention, met a growing conservative trend across the
nation. Furthermore, Crespino argues that the culmination of the South’s
rise to national political prominence came not as the foundation for
Nixon’s Southern strategy but during Reagan’s Presidential campaign.

Second, Crespino reviews the importance of conservative
Christianity to Mississippians and their interaction with the rest of the
United States. While Christian reaction to the civil rights movement of the
1960s was mixed, one thing white Mississippi Christians began agreeing
on was that liberal Christianity threatened many of their fundamentalist
beliefs. Religious adherents and clerics from many different traditions
descended upon Mississippi to bring about racial change, both in their
churches and the state’s society at large. Mississippi Christians, influenced
by their fundamentalist ideology, believed that these ministers and lay
people were fostering a new Christian liberalism that deemphasized one’s
spiritual state while refocusing on social issues. While Mississippians
reacted against specific Christian organizations at times, such as the
National Council of Churches, more often they responded by aiming
their ire in a different direction: education. Crespino argues that Christian Mississippians created private Christian academies, at least in part, to offset the influence of liberal Christianity on their children. Because the federal government viewed these schools, labeled “segregation academies,” as an attempt to stymie school desegregation, a battle developed between the IRS and the academies over the schools’ tax-exempt status. Through the 1970s, Mississippi schools had to prove that they did not racially discriminate in order to receive a tax exemption, which many failed to do. By the 1980s, however, Mississippians had succeeded in turning national sentiment their way by making the issue a matter of separation of church and state rather than a racial issue. Reagan returned the Christian segregation academies’ tax-exempt status by eliminating the IRS rule.

Other reviewers have compared this work to Kevin Kruse’s *White Flight*, a book that looks at the development of segregation in Atlanta’s suburbs. There are significant differences, however, between the two. Crespino presents a more even-handed view of those whites that practiced strategic accommodation. Kruse’s historical agents are ardent, even violent, segregationists who learn that putting on a submissive face could be the best tool to maintain power. Kruse is far more skeptical, believing that the rhetoric of religious freedom and anti-statist was a mere façade covering white moderates’ true goal of continued racial segregation. Crespino’s analysis is more accepting of white moderates’ own beliefs, especially religious beliefs. In Crespino’s view, some whites truly did set up Christian schools because of concerns over liberal Christianity rather than race.

While Crespino’s book is certainly an important study of more recent developments in the South, it does have some flaws. The author largely favors analysis on the national level rather than the local. Crespino never considers the development of Christian schools through the lens of boards of education or local teachers. The same is true of politics. While Mississippians are busy casting ballots for Goldwater and Reagan, one is left wondering what is the state of local politics? Is the GOP making inroads on the state or county level? But perhaps the book’s biggest flaw reveals why the author does not often peer into the complexities of local matters.

Ultimately, the author wants to place Mississippi at the center of the neo-conservatives’ rise to power in the 80s. The strategy was simple: deemphasize radical racial hatred in favor of an accommodationist, anti-statist conservatism. Southerners jettisoned explicitly racial politics for the subtle, de facto racism of general white America. In this way, Crespino’s work fits neatly into the growing body of historiography calling for the end of Southern exceptionalism. In light of this overarching attack on Southern distinctiveness, Crespino’s choice of private Christian academies as one of the battlegrounds for the meaning of American and Christian conservatism is peculiar, mainly because it reflects one of the most staunchly exceptionalist theses in American religious history: Sam Hill’s central theme of Southern religion. Crespino agrees that Mississippi’s
private Christian schools were in some ways deserving of the label “segregation academies,” but he also wants the reader to take seriously the parents’ argument that their children were attending such schools in order to combat the influence of a secularizing society and liberal Christianity without reference to racial conflict. In other words, Crespino argues that one of the main ideological thrusts of the South’s inclusion in the conservative coalition, a backlash against liberalism, was contingent upon the peculiar nature of Southern religious belief. Reduced to its simplest formulation, Southern exceptionalism died because of Southern religious exceptionalism. Herein lies the problem with the Crespino/Lassiter argument. It is easy to see the destruction of Southern exceptionalism on the surface of general nationwide developments, but once one delves into more specific local events, the exceptional nature of Southern society and culture reveals itself.

Though Crespino may miss the mark when it comes to explaining specific causalities by ignoring local interests, his book is still significant for shedding light on the growing national importance of the South. Mississippians did construct a strategy of strategic accommodation to recruit non-Southerners to their side as well as binding racism in subtle ways with other conservative values. Crespino tells a complicated story. One cannot simply say that Southerners found a way to circumvent the system and adhere to their racist beliefs. While this is true for some, others had religious or anti-statist ideologies that superseded issues of race. Crespino shows that the ways in which these ideas became linked have had a lasting impact on modern politics that exists to this day.

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