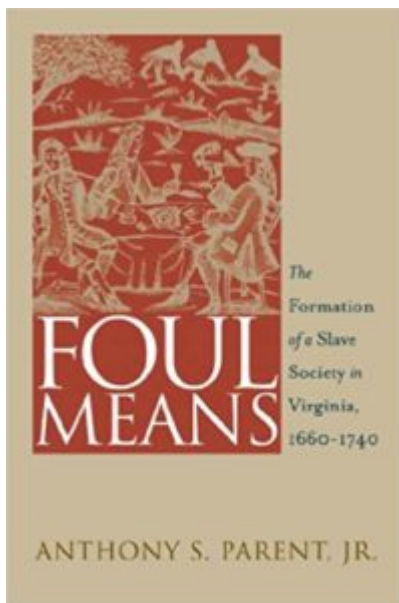
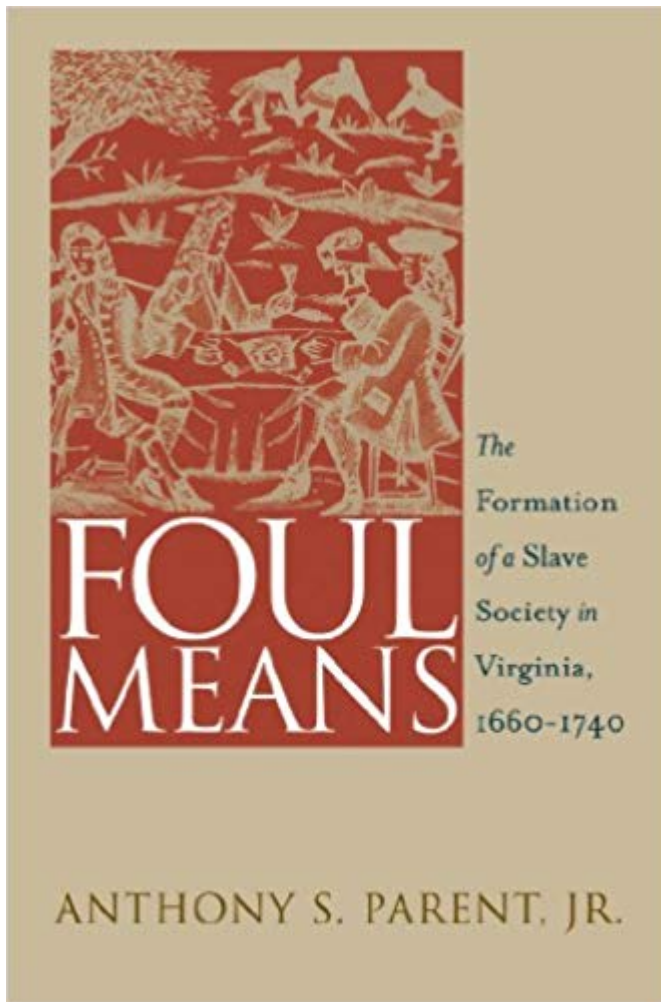


Meanings Foul . . . and Fair



Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740

Virginia has a peculiar hold on our national consciousness. The Old Dominion has never quite supplanted the Puritan colonies as the imagined wellspring of a distinctive American identity. It is too foreign, too different from how we imagine ourselves, to be moved to the center of our historical identity. Yet in the general population there is a continuing romanticization of early Virginia, really up until the American Civil War, despite the fact that this was the exact period in which chattel slavery lay at the core of Virginia's social and economic order.

In recent decades, of course, a backlash has developed among academics anxious to portray colonial Virginia's racist, patriarchal, and violent character. This backlash may be said to have begun with the publication of Edmund Morgan's classic *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975) and has developed along two chronological trajectories. Some, like Morgan, have focused on early Virginia's chaotic formative period between Jamestown's founding and the era around Bacon's Rebellion. These studies have examined the bloody wars with the Native Americans, the establishment of the tobacco economy, the effect on gender roles of an overwhelmingly male population, and ultimately the growth of slavery. Others, most notably Rhys Isaac and T. H. Breen, have focused on the developments shaping the attitudes of planters in the period between 1720 and the Revolution's outbreak in an effort to understand why a landed, slaveholding elite would turn to rebellion as readily as they did.

Anthony Parent Jr.'s *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* is a noteworthy addition to this literature. It focuses on a period that has received relatively little attention and yet seems to be a time of crucial transformation in the colony's history. Before Bacon's Rebellion the colony was dominated by a faction around Governor William Berkeley. Tobacco export made possible by a mix of bonded labor and slaves drove the economy. By 1720, the extended kinship network known traditionally as the FFVs (the First Families of Virginia—socially true if not chronologically) were firmly entrenched in power and the economy was based overwhelmingly on the labor of enslaved Africans and African-Americans. How had this change occurred and what does it mean historically?

Parent turns to Marxist theory to structure his answer to the question of the origins of the slave system with markedly mixed results. Eight chronologically organized chapters examine "what Antonio Gramsci calls the dialectics of events . . . during Virginia's formative years, when it became a highly oppressive and antagonistic slave society. It employs a methodology of class." "Class analysis," he continues, "is a heuristic method that not only unearths the relationship between the slaveholders and the enslaved but also illuminates the totality of the colonized society"(2). In fact, though, his method is far more effective in looking at the former issue—the relationship between slaveholder and slaves—than the latter issue. The study does not address the society's totality, but rather focuses on the apparatus of control developed to maintain the slaveholders' property and power.

The sections that focus on the apparatus of oppression, from the planters' struggles for landed property at the end of the seventeenth century to the legal efforts to keep white servants and African slaves apart politically, socially, and sexually are a very worthwhile addition to our understanding of Virginia at 1700. It is here that his use of Gramscian-influenced Marxism is the most useful as he shows how those with power used the law to keep their place and inhibit any development of a sustained interracial alliance of servants and slaves. He rightly understands these developments as "impressing a racial system of justice into the statute books," that assured the planters' continuing hegemony (133). This emphasis on the mechanics of control is understandable, but much is sacrificed to make it work.

Given the influence of Gramsci on Parent, a more nuanced discussion of other forms of cultural control would seem to have been in order. Parent probes along these lines, looking at gender relations and what he calls planter republicanism (perhaps more accurately described as a predilection for Country thought). But these too are ultimately reduced to an equation with slavery at its base. While he is aware of the issues of control created by slave conversions, they might have been examined more in depth, as might ethnic and regional differences among the slaves, among white servants, and among whites more generally. Parent recognizes these issues, particularly in regard to slave and servant rebellions, but he downplays them. That is a self-conscious decision, as Parent focuses on "the specter of class war with blacks and whites fighting side by side against the great planters," an apparition that he feels is fundamental to understanding planter behavior in the period (141).

The society's totality disappears from *Foul Means* despite Parent's claim that a class-based examination will reveal it. Parent's broader interpretive framework encourages him to telescope all the developments in the society down to control over slaves and servants. All significant changes in the society are portrayed as originating in the slave system and the restriction of slave freedom. It seems to me there was a great deal more to these planters than their desire to control slaves and servants, and that the labor system's transformation impacted the entire society in ways beyond the creation of an apparatus of oppression. The planters succeeded in creating a race-based system of oppression, but they did not start out aiming at one. Indeed, I think Parent misses something about the period and slavery, mainly that elements within the First Families of Virginia must have used their contacts in the empire broadly and perhaps in the Royal Africa Company specifically to enhance their position at the expense of the seventeenth-century elite that had gathered around Governor William Berkeley. Those men who appeared in the Chesapeake after 1660 were people of ambition and their ambition took them ultimately to a place of authority in a society whose institutions and structure were, by modern standards, abhorrent. In their journey, they, like so many other people in the early modern world, violated modern standards of decency regularly and with callous disregard for those whom they affected. Yet to indict them in quite the manner Parent does makes us judge and jury over the past, a role scholars have become a tad too comfortable with in recent years.

These things said, *Foul Means* is a good book worth reading carefully. It is based on sound research in archival and secondary sources. Parent has focused on an understudied period that he rightly insists is crucial to understanding the development of Virginia's slave system. That foul system is crucially important to our perception of the colonial period, and thus to our understanding of ourselves.

This article first appeared in issue 4.3 (April, 2004).

Brendan McConville is an associate professor of history at SUNY-Binghamton. He is the author of *These Daring Disturbers of the Public Peace: The Struggle for Property and Power in Early New Jersey* (Philadelphia, 2003), and the forthcoming *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America*.