Cultural History and the Coming of the Civil War: A Response to Mark Smith

At a conference a few years ago, one of my colleagues introduced Mark Smith as an historian working his way through the physical world. Smith’s well-researched and imaginative Mastered By the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), a study of time and time-consciousness in Southern slave society, marked his first effort. Now, Smith has moved from time to sound. His “Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America,” which serves as a precis for Aural Worlds: Listening to Sound, Noise, Section and Class in Nineteenth-Century America, eavesdrops on the sounds of antebellum America to examine questions of class and sectionalism.¹ From Mark Smith’s record, one might expect future works on sights, odors, and physical sensations, but the works he has already written establish him as an unusually gifted and prolific historian of the antebellum era and the slaveholding South. Firmly grounded in primary sources, informed by theoretical literature, and attuned to some of the central themes in nineteenth-century American history, Smith’s article well deserves a response. More, it invites a critical
discussion of the assumptions and methods of cultural history and its value in explaining the coming of the Civil War.2

Smith makes a compelling case for a social and cultural history of soundscapes. At the very least, the subject offers a clever historian like Smith a chance to play with words. For example, he tells us that merely focusing on an objective level of noise “deafens us” to the larger implications of the heard world (66).3 He relates that all “good (sound) men” applauded the march of modernization in the early and mid-nineteenth century (67). Not surprisingly, Smith the punster thanks a trio of historians for their “sound” advice on earlier drafts of the essay (97). On a more serious level, Smith presents aurality, not merely as a biological human trait that has remained consistent throughout history, but as an historical construct, much as others have portrayed reading and even sleeping.4 The evidence provided even in this short article, which Smith combs from newspapers, manuscripts, songs, poetry, slave narratives, and police records, abundantly illustrates that historical sources do permit us to recover the audible world of the past. Smith’s skill as a cultural historian goes beyond his creative and sensitive use of sources. He effectively draws upon the theoretical literature on sound to give meaning to his material without letting theory determine his analysis.

Smith admirably aims at connecting soundscapes to the larger themes of nineteenth-century American history, “in particular class formation, the market revolution, and, ultimately, sectionalism and the coming of the Civil War” (65). He proves especially adept at explaining how sound both reflected and shaped the views of antebellum elites and contributed to the creation of their social values and cultural authority. Smith correctly presents an intersectional elite that shared a desire to protect property and society from the excesses of democracy, although he fails to define its boundaries. Historians need to be reminded, for example, that Old School Presbyterians teaching in Columbia, South Carolina, shared fundamental theological and social values with their clerical brethren in
Princeton, New Jersey. Conservative Whigs sought for over twenty years to maintain the Union and frustrate the efforts of extremists in both sections.\textsuperscript{5}

Class remains central to Smith’s understanding of the construction of social power and legitimacy through soundscapes. In his efforts to historicize sound, Smith seems to follow an older Marxist tradition distilled to historians through the writings of such English scholars as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm: “Slavery as a mode of production had a particular and meaningful keynote to antebellum slaveholders; for northern elites, the sound of democratic capitalism and industry had its own soundmark” (92).\textsuperscript{6} In a nod to the Marxist tradition and American labor history of the past few decades, Smith gives slaves and northern industrial workers agency in the creation of soundscapes. He explains with great insight that “slaves used the art and skill of silence as an effective tool for resistance. Slaves turned the masters’ ideal of quietude against them” (74). Early industrial workers responded with similar forms of aural insurgency. Factory operatives in the mill towns of New England turned to religious silence for a refuge from the din of industrial progress. The early labor movement, unlike the slaves in the plantation South, could also make their voices heard through collective protest.\textsuperscript{7}

Smith’s use of evidence in writing a cultural history of sound remains open to questions. His normal practice seems to consist of extracting quotations from a variety of sources to suggest the sounds Americans heard and what meanings they ascribed to them. Thus, Smith quotes a writer to the Richmond \textit{Enquirer} who described “the rattling of the hammer, and the clinking of the trowel” on a trip to Switzerland in 1772, which to his ears sounded like “the progress of wealth and population” (67). Smith clearly wants to establish an association between sounds and material progress, but one might ask further questions. Why did this writer to the \textit{Enquirer} remember these particular noises in his Swiss journey? What else did he hear? What other sounds were recorded in his recounting? What might the traveler’s ears have missed? My goal is not to question the
integrity of Smith’s research (which I consider beyond reproof), but to wonder whether he provides only those quotes which support his argument. Clearly, Smith’s use of quotations from sources to illustrate and support his argument follows a long-accepted practice in historical writing. Yet his practice serves as a caution that we should all strive to attend carefully to the full context of our sources.

The history of sound can illuminate patterns of class formation, which makes an important contribution to cultural history, but Smith’s essay proves more ambitious because he tries to identify a causal relation. His claim that soundscapes reflected and shaped the growing sectional controversy over slavery implies that soundscapes helped to hasten the outbreak of the Civil War. In this respect, his description of aural sectionalism furnishes an opportunity to examine the relevance of the new cultural history to one of the most persistent problems in American historiography. What power does a history of soundscapes provide to explain the origins of the Civil War?8

Smith presents a strong case for the presence of aural sectionalism in antebellum America. He posits a basic difference between northern and southern heard worlds and suggests that “the radical individualism of Northern society . . . embraced a more elastic definition of necessary noise and acceptable sound” (89). Smith argues further that aural sectionalism powerfully influenced the growing estrangement between the North and South during the 1850s. He contends that “the northern bourgeoisie and southern master class construed one another as threatening the integrity of their respective acoustic environments and, by close association, their preferred set of social and economic relations” (83). For example, northern Republicans associated the sounds of the South with the economic stagnation created by slavery. Smith’s argument is compelling. By suggesting a contrast between a modernizing North and a more traditional South, he joins a distinguished group of historians, from James Ford Rhodes to James M. McPherson, who insist that fundamental sectional differences between the North and South explain the Civil
War. Smith’s construction of aural sectionalism thus confirms the current conventional wisdom that the sectional conflict was rooted in contrasting systems of labor in each region, which generated distinctive and increasingly conflicting world-views. More specifically, Smith confirms the fears that drove much of the sectional conflict in the last decade before the Civil War—that a Republican North would reduce the South to political slavery and that the expansive nature of plantation slavery might some day force the peculiar institution into Northern free society.9

A review of earlier paradigms in Civil War historiography suggests nonetheless some caution in assessing the relevance of sound history and cultural history to the sectional conflict. Chronology, for example, occupied an earlier generation of historians. Why did the South secede in 1860–61 and not earlier, say during the crisis of 1850? Why did seven states of the lower South leave the Union months earlier than the four states of the upper South? Smith’s discussion of aural sectionalism does not engage these questions, because it pays little attention to changes in soundscapes over time. His evidence seems chosen more for illustration than chronology. At least two of the quotes Smith uses, one from 1811 and one from 1815, predate the period of sectional controversy (67). As the tone of conflict became increasingly shrill during the 1850s, surely soundscapes would have become more sectionally charged. Does the cultural history of sound provide any independent indications of a change in the nature of sectional controversy? To put it another way, did soundscapes reflect or create sectional tensions?

Current trends in historical scholarship also have relegated the Revisionist argument that the Civil War was a “repressible” conflict to the province of historiography. Historians such as Avery O. Craven and James G. Randall, who wrote in an atmosphere of disillusionment after World War I, maintained that the Civil War was both unnecessary and avoidable. Minimizing the significance of slavery, they insisted that sectional differences were not fundamental and could have been peacefully resolved. Revisionists placed the
responsibility for the outbreak of war on sectional agitators in both North and South, both radical abolitionists and fire-eating secessionists. At a critical time, these historians argued, both sides lacked compelling and effective political leadership to prevent war.\textsuperscript{10}

Although the Revisionist preoccupation with avoidability seems conceptually dated today, their recognition of human agency and the failure of political moderation merits another look. Can the history of soundscapes tell us anything about the problem of moderation in an era of sectional extremism? Did a compromiser like Henry Clay or Stephen A. Douglas hear differently than the more radical Charles Sumner or William L. Yancey? The first part of Smith’s essay describes an intersectional elite attuned to the sounds of order and stability. These concerns clearly help to explain the drive for secession in the South and the Northern willingness to resort to arms to preserve the Union. Yet the political conservatives at the vanguard of moderation also expressed the desire for order. Future students of soundscapes who follow Smith’s lead might examine more closely the rhetorical similarities and differences between political moderates and extremists in the decades before the Civil War.\textsuperscript{11}

Finally, older works on the coming of the Civil War attended to a more complicated regionalism than the simple divide between North and South favored by contemporary historians. Frederick Jackson Turner, in \textit{The United States 1820–1850: The Nation and its Sections} (1937), noted six regions in antebellum America: New England, the Middle Atlantic States, the South Atlantic States, the South Central States, the North Central States, and the Far West. Turner insisted that these sections “were as clearly marked as they were influential in their relations with each other and with the Union as a whole.” He further hints that they were, “potentially, nations in themselves.” Avery Craven applied Turner’s insights to the coming of the Civil War, although he reduced his sections to four: a northeast, an Old South, a northwest, and a southwest. Craven, James G. Randall, and others attempted to explain sectional politics in regional terms beyond a simple North/South division. These historians, in keeping
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with their Revisionist emphasis on moderation, paid particular attention to the northwest and the Ohio Valley as border regions.\textsuperscript{12}

While Smith strongly demonstrates the existence of contrasting soundscapes in the antebellum North and South, he pays less attention to regional differences within each section. Like most contemporary historians, he thinks in terms of two sections rather than a variety of regions. Does the kind of regionalism Turner and Craven described provide a useful framework to explain the history of sound? Would a farmer in southern Illinois hear more like a Southerner than a midwesterner? Would he hear differently, for instance, than a Whig merchant from Chicago? In other words, do regions determine soundscapes? I suspect that Smith would incline toward a materialist explanation grounded in contrasting systems of labor.

The principal question in the effort to connect the cultural history of sound to the causes of the Civil War concerns the explanatory power of soundscapes. In what ways do soundscapes and cultural history untangle such problems as the sectional controversy over slavery, the disruption of the Second Party System in the 1850s, and the course of the South to secession? Can cultural history provide new ways to understand questions of Civil War historiography? These and other questions return us to the main one: To what extent did the cultural construction of sound mirror sectional differences or shape them? Smith recognizes both lines of influence, but his treatment of the issue remains murky. Mark Smith’s “Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America” should lead historians to pay more explicit attention to what might be called the “grand narrative” of nineteenth-century American history. To what extent might cultural constructs like time, sound, race, and gender suggest a new narrative framework? And, finally, Smith’s skillful and provocative exploration of soundscapes suggests that slavery and the Civil War should remain at the forefront of historical writing about the nineteenth century. An event that led to the destruction of slavery, triggered the most extensive social revolution in American history, and claimed over 600,000 lives should be hard to ignore.
NOTES


6. For Smith’s indebtedness to E.P. Thompson in his earlier works, see *Mastered by the Clock*, pp. 7–8.


