According to Olsen, an antiparty political culture conditioned white men in Mississippi to interpret Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in 1860 as a threat to their manhood and a challenge to their honor, causing them to secede from the Union. By scrutinizing returns from thousands of elections during the 1840s and 1850s, Olsen demonstrates conclusively that party labels had negligible influence on elections for the numerous and powerful county and precinct offices. What mattered instead were personal loyalties to neighbors and friends. These loyalties were not just reflected in political decisions but also created by political activities.

Each of the state’s many counties was divided into five police districts with multiple precincts served in every election by seven paid election officials. These men, plus all those running for local office, comprised a major fraction of eligible voters, ranging from about 15 percent in densely settled regions to as many as 66 percent in less populous areas. The local electoral administration incorporated this sizable group of white men into a hierarchy of offices that neatly meshed with the hierarchy of wealth and status. The result was a local administrative apparatus that emerged from, and reinforced, private power and privilege.

Olsen’s thoroughly researched analysis of the operation of this local power structure is the highlight of the book. By probing beneath the level of party ideology and state and federal election campaigns, Olsen sketches an unsurpassed portrait of ground-level politics in the antebellum era that should cause historians to reconsider time-worn assumptions about the relationship between parties and the practices of grassroots politics.

Outside Mississippi and other states of the deep south, Olsen argues, parties mediated between electoral levels and encouraged open, partisan competition that ultimately institutionalized and moderated political conflict. In Mississippi, however, parties were denigrated as sources of corruption, inefficiency, and unwarranted privilege. This antiparty tradition kept parties weak and left the face-to-face practices and assumptions of local politics unmediated by institutional counter-pressures.

Although Olsen presents ample evidence of antiparty rhetoric, his interpretation of it is open to at least three challenges. First, it is not clear that the strength of antiparty rhetoric was correlated with the weakness of parties. It seems likely that plenty of antiparty rhetoric could be found in states with strong parties, such as Ohio and New York, undermining the case for a distinctive Mississippi tradition of hostility to parties. Second, Mississippi Whigs might have been amazed to learn that the state had a deep-seated antipathy toward parties. The Democratic party dominated Mississippi to such an extent that what Olsen attributes to an antiparty culture might have emerged instead from entrenched one-
party rule. Third, that antiparty rhetoric often came from party spokes-
men Olsen leaves largely unexamined. Perhaps arguments about corrup-
tion and unqualified officeholders represented ways for party supporters
to express discontent with the local political power structures.

Whether stronger parties would have moderated Mississippi white
men’s instinctive response to the election of a Republican president as
an assault on their masculine code of honor seems even more debatable.
Olsen asserts a gradient of party strength that coincided with the timing
of secession: Mississippi and the deep south that seceded first had weak
parties; the border slave states that seceded after Fort Sumter had stron-
ger parties, but not as strong as the free states and the border slave states
that stayed in the Union. As a hypothesis, this claim merits investigation,
but whether parties anywhere had the influences that Olsen attributes to
them is open to question. At least in the antebellum United States, par-
ties may be better understood not as the Weberian institutions Olsen
seems to assume but as distinctive forms of the face-to-face local political
regimes that he so effectively documents.

Michael P. Johnson
Johns Hopkins University

The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South
Carolina. By Manisha Sinha (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina
Press, 2000) 362 pp. $55.00 cloth $19.95 paper

The puzzle of secession continues to fascinate the chroniclers of Amer-
ica’s past. Historians have long debated who supported the break with
the Union, as well as when and why they did so. The stakes are high.
The answers reverberate through contemporary political debates about
flags, reparations, and national monuments. Sinha wades straight into the
center of this discussion. Drawing on the standard tools of the historian’s
trade—personal papers, newspapers, political speeches, and federal cen-
sus returns—Sinha argues that secession was a deeply conservative
movement led by a cadre of South Carolinian planter politicians willing
to sacrifice democracy on the altar of human bondage.

That antidemocratic impulse thrived in antebellum South Carolina.
A dense population of slaves spread widely across the state along with a
political system that had always been stingy in terms of equal participa-
tion made the state fertile ground for the secessionist leaders. Largely
protected from meaningful challenges from Unionists and upcountry
yeomen, antebellum South Carolina’s slaveholding secessionists refined
an ideology designed to secure their property in people.

Despite a careful reading of secessionist writing, Sinha falls short of
explaining fully what motivated her counterrevolutionaries. The own-
ership of many slaves—which she demonstrates through an analysis of
manuscript census returns—is insufficient explanation. Not every south-
erner who took up arms during the spring and summer of 1861 was a