

**Michael Bonner**, *Confederate Political Economy. Creating and Managing a Southern Corporatist Nation*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2016, pp. 260

Recent developments in the study of Corporatism have sparked renewed interest in its historiographical and theoretical dimensions – an interest that crosses various disciplines, from history to political science, from economic ideas to law and juridical thought. This multi-disciplinary revival of corporatist studies can certainly lay claim to the merit of promoting an admirable – and unfortunately quite rare – synergy in humanities and the social sciences, engaging a range of specific research fields and scholars with a multiplicity of backgrounds, analytical tools and scientific objectives in a fruitful dialogue that has yielded remarkable results.

Perhaps one of the most interesting insights to emerge from this set of studies is a fresh integrative, interdisciplinary and transnational approach that brings out the intimate connection between the subject – Corporatism – and modernization, industrialization and the emergence of mass society.

Three of the elements composing this new academic trend are worth special mention: a) the theoretical peculiarities of Corporatism, i.e. its key concepts and principles;<sup>1</sup> b) the diffusion of Corporatism in both

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<sup>1</sup> P. Schmitter, “Still the Century of Corporatism?”, in F.B. Pike, T. Stritch (eds.), *The New Corporatism: Social-Political Structures in the Iberian World*, Notre Dame, IN, Notre Dame University Press, 1974, p. 86. Since then, a vast body of literature has been produced on the concept of Corporatism, especially recalling the difference between “social corporatism” and “political corporatism”. See, among others, M. Maraffi (ed.), *La Società neo-corporativa*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1981; A. Cawson, J. Ballard, *A Bibliography of Corporatism*, Florence, European University Institute, 1984; L. Ornaghi, *Stato e corporazione. Storia di una dottrina nella crisi del sistema politico contemporaneo*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1984; P.J. Williamson, *Varieties of Corporatism: A Conceptual Discussion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985; Id., *Corporatism in Perspective*, London, Sage, 1989; H.J.

space and time, embracing previously unexplored geographical regions and often cloudy historical periods;<sup>2</sup> and c) the development of a multidisciplinary and transnational methodology that has progressively revealed all of its potential in tracing the broad circulation and application of corporatist models and experiments in Europe, Latin America and other parts of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Bonner's research on Confederate Corporatism during the American Civil War (1861-1865) stands at the crossroads of these three analytical axes. As the author declares in the introduction, his main focus is on the political-economic strategies actually applied by the Confederate authorities during the war against the Union. Exploring the concrete functioning of the Confederate system – i.e. investigating the specific and tangible interactions between governmental institutions,

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Wiarda, *Corporatism and Comparative Politics. The Other Great "Ism"*, Armonk, Sharpe, 1997; J.L. Cardoso, P. Mendonça, *Corporatism and Beyond: An Assessment of Recent Literature*, ICS Working Papers, 1, 2012, pp. 1-31.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on the transnational circulation of corporatist ideas and legislation is by now quite extensive. Therefore, it is sufficient to recall the following recent volumes: A. Mazzacane, A. Somma, M. Stoleis (eds.), *Korporativismus in den Südeuropäischen Diktaturen*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2006; G. Santomassimo, *La terza via fascista. Il mito del corporativismo*, Rome, Carocci, 2006; I. Stolzi, *L'ordine corporativo. Poteri organizzati e organizzazione del potere nella riflessione giuridica dell'Italia fascista*, Milan, Giuffrè, 2007; *Les Études Sociales*, no 157-158. *Les sciences sociales et la corporation (1850-1945)*, 2013; O. Dard (ed.), *Le corporatisme dans l'aire francophone*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2011; S. Cassese, *Lo stato fascista*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010; A. Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2010; D. Musiedlak (ed.), *Les expériences corporatives dans l'aire latine*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2010; M. Pasetti, *L'Europa corporativa. Una storia transnazionale tra le due guerre mondiali*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2016; A.C. Pinto, F. Palomanes Martinho (eds.), *A vaga corporativa: corporativismo e ditaduras na Europa e na América Latina*, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2016; A.C. Pinto (ed.), *Corporatism and Fascism. The Corporatist Wave in Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See especially A.C. Pinto (ed.), *Corporatism and Fascism. The Corporatist Wave in Europe*, cit., and M. Pasetti, *L'Europa corporativa*, cit.

bureaucrats, industrial leaders, and the citizenry – Bonner seeks to verify the intriguing hypothesis of the Confederate State as one of the first examples of an uncompleted, episodic, unintentional Corporatist State, in a sense a forerunner of the full-fledged European versions of corporatist institutional architecture that arose during World War I and especially in the inter-war period.<sup>4</sup>

As Bonner rightly recalls, the highly peculiar situation of the Confederate State obliged its political leaders and economic authorities to engage in innovative experiments in industrial policy and political culture. Indeed, the wartime framework embraces and characterizes the entire situation. The way State management developed between 1861 and 1865 cannot be properly understood without reference to the military necessities – above all raw materials, and the production of weaponry and the operation of railroads – if only because the Confederacy represents a possibly unique case of a nation whose entire existence was during wartime. Essentially, as the author affirms repeatedly, the main objective of Confederate leaders was to survive, and in this struggle they embarked on a process of institutional reconstruction that ultimately resulted in a particular kind of political-economic environment the author calls “the short-lived nature of the Confederate State in terms of ‘expedient corporatism’”.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most interesting insights prompted by the volume is that the conflict with the North to defend the new-born nation, its establishments and its economic interests led to a forced process of institutional innovation towards modernity. In this sense the author addresses a problematic theoretical discussion, since modernization certainly represents one of the most broadly debated issues in contemporary history.

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<sup>4</sup> The obvious reference is C.S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe. Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bonner, *Confederate Political Economy. Creating and Managing a Southern Corporatist Nation*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2016, p. 9.

Quoting C.E. Black, a theorist of comparative modernism, the author defines modernity as “the desire, expressed both by government and private enterprise whether in agricultural or industrial societies, to mobilize and rationalize national resources with the goal of achieving greater control, efficiency and production”.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, in developing a political-economic system that could resist the (armed) expansion of the Union and its liberal capitalist democracy – with its corollary of protectionist industrial policy to foster manufacturing (a death sentence for the Southern agricultural aristocracy) – and defend the secession, the Confederate leaders unintentionally created corporatist arrangements well in advance of the European corporatist systems of the twentieth century. Following the classic definition elaborated by Philippe Schmitter in his pioneering article of 1974, Bonner describes a corporatist system as “an arrangement of shared governance and responsibility between private and public sector in which government, business, and labor provide direction for mutually beneficial economic policies.”<sup>7</sup> This is a system where interest groups, sanctioned and recognized by the State, are given a certain degree of power and authority in policy formulation, fostering symbiosis between the political and the economic spheres of the society. The overall result was a kind of a paradox: in order to succeed in secession to defend the antebellum economic framework, the anti-modern hegemonic Southern group of slave and plantation owners eventually erected a political and economic machinery that produced a drastic discontinuity with the pre-war organization.

One of the first steps in this process, Bonner contends, lies in the constitutional background of the Confederacy. The new Confederate Constitution emphasized a number of centralized features, instituting extensive authoritarian governance, above all strong and extensive pres-

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<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 9.

idential powers, such as the six-year term of office and executive control over public expenditures.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this expansion of the executive was not balanced by the Supreme Court, which, although foreseen by the 1861 Constitution, was never implemented, leaving the President with unchallenged authority over political choices and legal interpretations.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned, against this legal background the most important systemic political-economic features of the Confederacy were dictated mainly by the necessities of the war effort: most essentially, of course, military production, weapons and ammunition, and the building and operation of railroads. This, Bonner argues, is why it was in these productive sectors that the expedient corporatist structure arose; it took three different forms, continuously fluctuating between: a) quasi-corporatist political-economic relationships – as in the case of the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Virginia, and the Shelby Iron Works in Alabama;<sup>10</sup> b) State-owned enterprises, such as a gunpowder factory built in Augusta, Georgia, headed by Confederate General Josiah Gorgas; and c) State-funded but privately managed factories, such as the Selma Manufacturing Company, an existing business that was purchased by the Confederate government. What emerged is a highly flexible system. The government did not leave private enterprises completely free to operate, but at the same time it did not seek to control the means of production. These findings allow the author to reject the description of the Confederacy as State Socialism, observing that such a description tends to overlook “the capitalists, both the agricultural capitalist slaveholders and the growing class of industrial capitalists, who facilitated the dramatically increased production of war materiel”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ivi, pp. 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, pp. 41-60.

<sup>10</sup> The connections and negotiations between these privately owned industries and the government are described in Ivi, pp. 71-101.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 222.

Neither allowing totally unrestricted private enterprise nor directly controlling the means of production, the Confederate government appears to have elected a sort of third way, what Bonner calls an expedient corporatist war experiment. The argument that this sort of Corporatism depended on military necessities is reinforced by the fact that the American authorities took a similar approach during World War I,<sup>12</sup> President Wilson's cabinet imitating the corporatist methods introduced by the Confederacy. Nor was such an approach limited to the United States. Rather, it characterized practically all the belligerents in the Great War. One particularly clear example is David Lloyd George's cabinet in Britain after 1916, which brought together representatives of all the economic divisions and classes in order to forge a joint national war effort, also controlling vital war sectors, such as (again) munitions production and raw materials.

Michael Bonner certainly has the merit of posing a stimulating historiographical question in asking whether the Confederate State can indeed be defined as an early corporatist experiment. However, his argument for this thesis is not without some ambiguity; he responds only in part to the main research question and leaves room for doubt. Several aspects deserve to be highlighted. First of all, as the author himself repeatedly observes, the Confederate corporatist experiment was driven essentially by the crisis of war, and all wartime governments tend to centralize and rationalize production, transportation and consumption. In this sense, attaining greater efficiency directed to military purposes can hardly be seen as a true sign of modernity. Instead, what we see is the very common tendency of wartime political authorities to forge strategic alliances with the economic sphere, which has an equally vital interest in winning the war. In these cases, the *raison d'être* of the pact between government and economy lies in the very survival of the élite, its cultural hegemony and wealth – not in any deliberate plan for

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<sup>12</sup> Ivi, pp. 191.

the corporatist transformation of the legal, political and economic foundations of the State.

Secondly, the Confederacy was not an industrial nation; it was mainly semi-feudal in its economic organization, based on agriculture, cotton exports and slavery, with a very weak and underdeveloped manufacturing sector. As recent studies have shown, modern corporatist theory is closely connected with the crisis of the Liberal State, industrialization and the rise of mass society – elements that were certainly lacking in the American South in the 1860s.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in the corporatist experiences of the twentieth century, the revision of the traditional Liberal conception of private and public law was demanded, and carried out, always as a response to the pressure of rising mass society and the new organisms stemming from industrialization, i.e. political parties and economic associations. The emergence of socio-economic groups and blocs made the Liberal idea of society as a collection of individuals untenable, while group pressure on the State made the nineteenth-century picture of a State untouched by socio-economic dynamics obsolete.

In the context of the US Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century, the agriculture-based political-economic corporatist system of the Confederacy is the evident product of a wartime emergency that consolidated the alliance between the political and economic élites – often, to be sure, expressions of the same ruling class – rather than an early experiment in Corporatism bringing together representatives of various economic interest groups and social classes. As the author himself argues, it is in fact hard to descry any clear pattern behind the Southern slave-owners' agricultural capitalist counterrevolution against the liberal capitalism of the North. Nonetheless, Bonner's stimulating narrative has the indisputable merit of inspiring broader reflection on the

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<sup>13</sup> See in particular I. Stolzi, "Private, public and collective: the twentieth century in Italy from fascism to democracy", in M. Rask, C. Thornhill (eds.), *Law and the formation of modern Europe. Perspectives from the historical sociology of law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

nature of Corporatism, posing a challenge to corporatist scholars who have analysed the inherent relationship of Corporatism to modernity and mass society.

To conclude, a final aspect deserves mention: the possibilities of corporatist strategies in non-industrial countries. In this sense, further research is obviously required to furnish even a tentative answer. It might well be fruitful, for instance, to set the corporatist aspects of the Confederacy in relation to the Latin American corporatist experiments of the twentieth century more than to the European experience.<sup>14</sup> Examining the Confederacy in the light of Brazilian or Argentinian politics might well yield a better understanding of how a quasi-corporatist system could develop in non-industrial society, defining its characteristics, objectives and promoters, as well as its similarities with corporatist experiments in the industrial nations.

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance A.C. Pinto, F. Palomanes Martinho (eds.), *A vaga corporativa: corporativismo e ditaduras na Europa e na América Latina*, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2016.