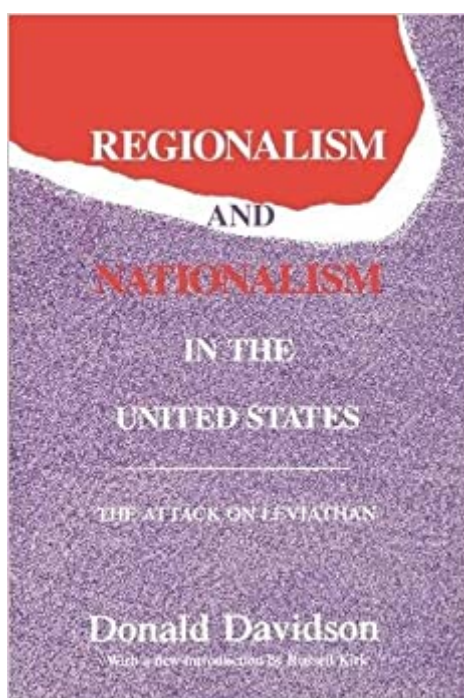


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Regionalism And Nationalism In The United States : The Attack On Leviathan (Library Of Conservative Thought)



Synopsis

A quarter of a century before Lyndon B. Johnson popularized the slogan "The Great Society," Donald Davidson wrote his critique of Leviathan, the omnipotent nation-state, in terms that only recently have come to be appreciated. "Leviathan is the idea of the Great Society, organized under a single, complex, but strong and highly centralized national government, motivated ultimately by men's desire for economic welfare of a specific kind rather than their desire for personal liberty. " Originally published as *The Attack on Leviathan*, this eloquent volume is an attack on state centralism and an affirmation of regional identity. Davidson's work is a special sort of intellectual as well as social history. It reveals an extraordinary mastery of the literature on regionalism in the United States, with special emphasis on the work on Rupert Vance and Howard Odum in the social sciences. Davidson looks at regionalism in arts, literature, and education. He favors agriculture over industrialization, and "the hinterland" over cities, examining along the way varying historical memories, the dilemma of Southern liberals, and the choice of expedience or principles. His book is a forceful and commanding challenge to those who would push for central authority at the sacrifice of individual and regional identity. Davidson concludes with a devastating critique of nationalism leading to a supra-nationalism. Ultimately, the heterogeneity of human desires comes up against the uniformity of world systems and world states. Davidson offers instead a broad world of intellectual history and commentary in which individualism allies itself with communities as a means for stemming the tide of collectivism and its base in a world state. For Davidson, Leviathan, the monstrous state, is a devourer, not a savior. As several peoples rise to strike down their own Leviathans, this courageous book may be better understood now than it was in 1938. Donald Davidson was part of that movement in American letters known as the Southern Agrarians. He was a poet, critic, historian, and political analyst. He spent most of his life at Vanderbilt University, and was himself born in central Tennessee. He is best known as the author of *The Tall Men* (1927) and a collection of essays, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* (1957).

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Customer Reviews

At the risk of terrible understatement, it's pretty clear that the Southern Agrarians did not have a huge impact on the political climate of their era (primarily the 1930s). However, while their political success was small, the ripples of their intellectual impact continue to be felt today. And so while parts of this book, one of the most articulate presentations of the agrarian position, are somewhat dated, there's still a lot of value for modern readers. The book got off to a slow start for me.

Davidson's presentation of the theory and history of American regionalism, in a section titled "The Nation We Are," is important, but much of it summarizes, or reacts to, the work of historians and sociologists now even more obscure than the Agrarians themselves (Frederick Jackson Turner being a notable exception). While Davidson makes important points about the endogenous or organic nature of regions, regional characteristics, and regional loyalties -- in distinction to the imposed, artificial, and largely arbitrary nature of political divisions like counties or states -- his focus on the social science of the 1930s is not a terrifically compelling read today. Once we get past that first section, though, the reading is much, much more rewarding. This is particularly true of the second section, titled "Immovable Bodies and Irresistible Forces," which focuses on defining the characteristics of various American regions and the people who live there. I especially enjoyed "Still Rebels, Still Yankees," which contrasts Brother Jonathan of Yankeetown, Vermont, with Cousin Roderick of Rebelville, Georgia. "The Two Old Wests," an exploration of how frontier, geographic, and cultural influences blended, with very different results, in the Old Southwest (Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and later Texas) and Old Northwest (Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and other parts of the modern "Midwest"), was fascinating. And "The Great Plains," a précis of Walter Prescott Webb's important book of the same title with Davidson's own expanded commentary, extends the analysis to the foothills of the Rockies. As a Seattleite, I would have liked to have seen Davidson carry his discussion all the way to the Pacific coast, but I can't complain about what he did do. Entertaining and valuable as all this is, the most useful section for modern students of politics

and regionalism might be the chapter titled "Expedients vs. Principles -- Cross-Purposes in the South." Davidson here makes a number of important, and still timely, points, including illustrating how attacks on the "backward" South are frequently Trojan horses for the imposition of another, usually Northeastern, political or social agenda. The author also argues, contra those who say the Constitution and federalist system are outdated because "the Founders couldn't foresee" the nature of modern society, that indeed, Jefferson and his contemporaries did foresee the coming of large-scale industrialism and the destructive effects it would have on agrarian society. Reading Davidson today, one can't help but wonder whether things are much worse, or perhaps a little better, than during his day. On the one hand, monopoly industrialism has in some senses given way to the "new economy" driven by high technology. On the other hand, American culture is more monolithic than ever, thanks to mass media and popular culture that are far more pervasive and homogenizing than in the '30s. Are there any discernable differences between Brother Jonathan's and Cousin Roderick's twenty-first century great-grandchildren? It's a question worth investigating, and Davidson's insights are as valuable and provocative today as they were nearly 70 years ago.

This book should be read by anyone interested in American political thought, and particularly on the history of localism, state's rights, and American conservatism. Davidson was one of the original 'Twelve Southerners' of I'll take My Stand fame, who was interested in defending the unique cultural, social, and political values of the American south. He takes a very combative view of regionalism, caught in a struggle with nationalism and national identity. It's really a struggle over flavors; a national culture and politics would wash out all of the unique and colorful elements of local societies, the customs and traditions that have been built up over years, that structure the lives of local citizens. National society would become increasingly homogenized, and democratized. Citizens would become identical, little automatons, and culture would eventually be controlled by the taste of the lowest common denominator. The precious differences between people, between regions, between New England, the West and the South, would no longer exist, and the ties to the past, that make the present tolerable, stable, and peaceful would be lost forever. Davidson, like the other 'Southerners' was unwilling to confront the biggest problem in the south. Race was one of the inheritances of the past, and one that would not be fixed within the southern tradition, as it was understood in the 1940's and 1950's. Race relations demanded a 'modern' solution, based on the idea that all citizens were Americans and individuals, entitled to their rights and liberties, and that local customs and traditions could not stand in the way of ensuring every citizen civil rights. But, to disregard Davidson (and disregard other Southern conservatives like Weaver, or Tate and the

others of the 12) is to risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As we drift into the 21st Century, it would be nice to have a greater sense of rootedness in a community, and an identification with local cultures and customs. 'Survivor', 'Big Brother', and 'The Weakest Link'- as are other tv shows- are a sure demonstration that our culture is increasingly focusing on the lowest denominator, and have abdicated any responsibility for improving the cultural level and understanding of Americans. The broader the audience, the more one has to appeal to base emotions and feelings. Finally, we are beginning to sense that the national government cannot fix all problems. It is too remote, and too clumsy an instrument for dealing with problems that are varied and diverse in different cities, counties, and states. The states and local governments, closer to the problems, with a better understanding of the regional and local diversity of social and political conditions are a better forum for experimentation and adaptation than the federal government. We still have something to learn from these conservatives. An understanding of their views towards localism, the importance of local cultures, and the preservation of traditions and customs, can help us as the US adapts to its own changing political and social environment.

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