The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Howard Odum
two:
Odum: Sociology in the South

If one had asked most well-read Southerners in the 1930s, Who is making the greatest contribution to the understanding of Southern society? most would have answered “Howard Odum.” The Agrarians of Nashville seemed a gesture towards the past, but Odum was the future. If North Carolina was the most progressive of Southern states, its university was near the heart of that advance, and Odum was a leader in Chapel Hill. The liberal could tap Odum’s magnum opus, *Southern Regions of the United States*, and indicate a manifesto of the newest New South that seemed to speak with the scientific detachment of the sociologist, no longer the hyperbolic burblings of the mill owner. Edwin Embree of the Rosenwald Fund was only a shade more enthusiastic than most when he told Odum in 1936: “It is a magnificent work, one of the great landmarks in research that will be of inestimable service to students for decades. . . . Now you belong to the ages.” Amid the ephemera of journalism and polemic, Howard Odum seemed to be laying down a new and crucial stratum in the history of the South, its modern sociological definition. But the ages have been singularly unwilling to own their possession of him. One must ask, Who now reads an Odum book? Outside the esoteric cabbala of students of the Southern tradition, the answer is “Almost no one.”

He was notoriously unreadable, which has proved a hindrance to his intellectual survival. He veered, out of control, between the impenetrable jargon of the sociologist and the declamations of a tipsy bard. He once published three seminovels on a wandering Negro called Black Ulysses. Their staple was a chanting of lists—places, objects, people, remorselessly indiscriminate adjectives—and the dubious proposition that an eccentric grammar was lyrical. A cross between the worst mannerisms of Talcott Parsons and Walt Whitman did not, one feels, have a fair crack at intellectual longevity.

But survival is not all. One could not write a serious history of Southern thought between the world wars without an assessment of Odum. Setting aside the antebellum tradition of a George Fitzhugh, one of the first Americans to use the freshly minted word of Auguste Comte, Odum was the first modern Southern sociologist. The rows of books that issued from the University of North Carolina Press bearing his own name and those of his many students witnessed that he had sired a “school.” Several traditions converged on him: the indigenous creed of the New South, the emerging profession of the social worker, modern sociological thought, the new bureaucracy of higher education, the liberal interracial movement, the transforming hand of the New Deal. Out of the synthesis emerged a strange beast, not one of the pedigree Jersey bulls that he loved to rear, but a
ramshackle Minotaur, half thinker, half academic politician. From the
tension of these halves, there grew the intellectual phenomenon “Southern
regionalism.” But the route to it was devious.

Odum was born in 1884, on a small farm near Bethlehem in Georgia.
His early youth was far from auspicious. He was a sickly child in a family
where ill health and accident claimed a depressing proportion of his parents’
large family; partly because of this, he became awkward, shy, and uncertain.
His parents wrapped him in love, but his birthright was not an unmixed
blessing. For his mother had been born to a substantial slaveholding family,
born to expect a comfortable and gracious life. The war had wrecked her
life, as she often and freely told her son. It had killed her brother, maimed
her father, and destroyed the family wealth. More, it had obliged her to
marry far below herself, to a barely literate small farmer of rigidly orthodox
and fundamentalist persuasion. In compensation for her losses, she put her
energies into her children, a hatred of the North, and a frantic religious
zeal.

From his grandparents, with whom he had a close relationship, Odum
received equally complex burdens. John Wesley Odum had been a Con­
federate soldier, who had stuck through many battles, increasingly sickened
at it all. As the army was driven back, it came close to his family farm,
whereupon he deserted. Thereafter he was conscience-ridden when unable
to share in the heroic nostalgia of the war. And he liked to share his grief
with his young grandson, who always seemed to like to listen. On the other
hand, Philip Thomas, his mother’s father, had lost a leg and his affluence in
the war, but gained a clear and unalloyed bitterness towards the North.
Where John Odum was a confused, unsure if courageous, poor man, Philip
Thomas had a certain clarity of aristocratic purpose. His depredations
were not his own fault, but they were surely someone else’s and he would
have his grandson know that. Only from his father did Odum seem to
receive a simple love. True, he was a fundamentalist, but he was a kindly
man who liked to emphasize love more than guilt in his religion.³

And so Odum was reared in a complex moral world. He was told that the
war had been an evil thing, in which the South had unjustly suffered, but
there was the nagging sight of his grandfather Odum, who reminded him
that heroism was fugitive and shame common even in Southern families.
And he did not despise his grandfather, but cared for him deeply. More, he
was told that it was terrible that the old plantation had been ruined, and
saw the price paid by his mother. But his father, though poor, was a good
man and his family life a pleasure to him. When he left home and went to
teach in Mississippi in 1904, his letters were painfully nostalgic. In later
years, he was to remain stubbornly convinced of the moral worth of the small farm and attribute to it all manner of Jeffersonian virtues.

He was always to be sensitive, painfully aware of others' needs and emotions. This was to make him a good diplomat, though it occasionally palsied his capacity for action: everyone had to be placated before he could move forward. But he had an excellent memory, a talent for recitation, and an extraordinary capacity for hard work. In later life, he could make do with only the fewest hours of sleep. He often worked through the night, and would stop only for rumpling naps. Nonetheless he did not do particularly well at high school or at Emory College. He barely made the honor roll at Emory, a traditional Southern Methodist college, not noted for its unorthodox curriculum or its liberalism. In 1902, when Odum was an undergraduate, it dismissed a professor, Andrew Sledd, for the mildest of dissents from the Southern racial ideology. And Odum was majoring in the most traditional of subjects, the classics. He did well enough, but not so brilliantly that he could command a good position. He failed to get a job near his home, and was obliged to resort to an agent. Eventually an indifferent position in an obscure Mississippi high school was found, and Odum found himself unhappily in Toccopola.

It has not been often that Mississippi has offered fresh perspectives to young Southern intellectuals. But it happened that Odum, who decided to do some graduate work at the University of Mississippi and was obliged to ride the twenty-one miles from Toccopola to Oxford, came across one of the few sociologists in the South. Odum began conventionally enough, by writing a master's thesis on "The Religion of Sophocles," a singularly grim topic for a young man's leisure hours. But he met Thomas Bailey, a recently minted doctor in psychology from South Carolina and California. Bailey was working intermittently on the race problem in the South, a venture that was to cause some controversy on the campus. He encouraged Odum's haphazard interest in folklore, especially of the Negroes who were so omnipresent in Mississippi. He told Odum of the new social sciences, a discipline in which Bailey vested great hope for solving the problems of the region. He suggested that picking up the unconsidered trifles of black life in the South might contribute towards a higher degree at one of the universities of the North. Odum had read G. Stanley Hall's study *Adolescence* when he was graduating from Emory in 1904 and it had impressed him. Bailey had studied with Hall at Clark, and he knew about William James, Herbert Spencer, Franklin Giddings. He had even dabbled in Hegel. Not a thorough or original mind, Bailey did know a little of what was going on in the intellectual world of the social sciences and told it to an impressionable young man, as yet uncertain of his future. It was natural that in 1909 Odum went north to study with Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts, and took with him the raw material of his research on Negroes.
G. Stanley Hall was the aging *enfant terrible* of American psychology: extremely energetic, unorthodoxly candid, schooled in the best, but yet ill-formed ways of German and American psychology. He seems to have given Odum a measure of confidence in his own ability, and two significant intellectual gifts. He involved the young Southerner in the new discipline of social work, as it intermingled with psychology. Deeper than that, he gave his stamp of authority to the less weighty belief of Bailey in the immense potential of the social sciences. Like most of his scientific generation, but with intoxicating force, Hall had the Comtean vision of a new era when the intellectual elite would order a better world. The psychologist, Hall frequently observed, “is called to-day to be a sort of high priest of souls as in an earlier age the great religious founders, reformers, and creators of cults and laws used to be, for the day of great leadership in these fields seems to have passed. If he is concerned, as he should be, with the education of the race, nation or individuals, he is not content merely to fit for existing institutions as they are to-day but he would develop ever higher powers, which gradually molt old and evolve new and better institutions or improve old ones.” Education was the key to this transition, “the one and chief hope of the world.”

During the late 1870s, Hall had studied in Leipzig under the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. The main achievement of Wundt had lain in establishing laboratory techniques for exploring psychological reactions. He had made a few faltering steps towards defining a physical basis for the psyche, before Freud turned the new discipline towards more abstract lines of analysis. But Wundt was also a neo-Hegelian social philosopher. Although he broke with the pure idealist doctrine by insisting that philosophy rested upon psychology, and the latter upon physical laws—as Hall put it, “all the secrets of the soul and, therefore, from the position which Wundt assigns psychology we may infer he believes of the universe are wrapped up in nerve cells and fibers”—Wundt subscribed to a modified Hegelian social organismism. According to Hall, Wundt showed “how personality emerged through the interaction of self and others in such a way that the individual himself became ‘a special phase of society.’” Ten fat volumes of *Völkerpsychologie*, the psychology of the folk, were produced over many years by the German in a miscellaneous attempt to fuse psychology, social psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. Hall, although he had grave doubts about Wundt’s experimental work, was much more enthusiastic about folk psychology. In his autobiography, he was to urge that “Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*, far too little known by his disciples, should and will some day be seen to be more important for the proper training of professors than his psychological textbook.” Elsewhere Hall observed: “As we now conceive the self or ego as made up of many different and partially independent qualities and trends, united in and by an inscrutable something
far deeper than consciousness, so the conception of a collective, Volk, mass, crowd, mob, group, herd or community soul, which we can never come to know by the study of any number of individuals but which is just as real and even just as unitary as their souls, is now everywhere gaining ground.”

It is said that Odum ploughed his way through all of Wundt’s ten volumes. From the frequency of his later references to Wundt, it is certain that he read some. As late as 1947, Odum spoke of “the folk psychology of Wilhelm Wundt, a social psychology capable of forming a complete framework for the study of folk sociology.” In this, he was cultivating a dying and esoteric intellectual creed, for Wundt had little impact upon the development of social psychology.

Odum stayed only a year at Clark University. In 1910, he moved on to Columbia to take a second doctorate under Franklin Giddings. With Giddings, Odum developed a relationship closer than that with Hall. In later years, he was to plan a biography of his mentor. When a new journal of sociology was founded at Chapel Hill, Odum not only gave it a name, The Journal of Social Forces, that echoed a favorite Giddings phrase, but had Giddings write the first article. Giddings was even persuaded to donate his personal library to the University of North Carolina.

Franklin Giddings was a founding father of academic American sociology. As with Hall, Giddings had been deeply influenced by Comte and Spencer. Before 1900, he had developed a typology of social evolution that combined traces of Comte, Hegel, Spencer, William Graham Sumner, and even a touch of Frank Lester Ward. Like Comte, Giddings saw social evolution as a historical succession of three traditions, the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific. Tribal society had led to tribal feudalism, which had evolved into the “ethnic nation.” A developed form of feudalism had produced the “civic nation.” But Giddings added an idealist touch by offering “consciousness of kind” as a baseline for defining a society. “A society,” Giddings observed, “is a group of like-minded individuals . . . who know and enjoy their like-mindedness and are therefore able to work together for common ends.” In short, society was a mental as well as a material organism.

At the heart of civilization, Giddings located a principle of “demogenic association.” By this, he meant “social processes, stemming from a people, a ‘demos,’ with a shared awareness of each other, and of their social unity, going beyond kinship membership.” Civilization was “that intercourse, both varied and organized, which develops great civic peoples ever increasing in wealth and in population and ever growing more democratic in mind.”

He purported to find three stages in the growth of a culture. The first, and lowest, stage manifested itself in a desire for homogeneity in politics,
religion, manners, and habits: this led to national and social unity. The second, and higher, stage came "whenever the nation learns to appreciate the value of unlike-mindedness in the population: the value of doubt, scepticism, and denial in the social mind; the value of individual initiative and voluntary organization; the value, in short, of variation and criticism, as causes of progress." It was characterized by international intercourse, free thought, forms of legality, and the exercise of conscious rational policy. In this way, the early stage, the "Military-Religious" society was supplanted by the "Liberal-Legal" society. It, in turn, would eventually be replaced by an as yet undefined, but "truly democratic" civilization.¹⁰

When Giddings, in discussing the earlier stages of social evolution, had talked of the bonds of social unity, he had employed many of the notions more comprehensively and darkly stated in Sumner's *Folkways*. From Sumner, via Giddings and cross-fertilized with Wundt, Odum picked the idea of folkways as a basic tool of social analysis. Sumner, however, was more ruthlessly materialist in his interpretation of the origins of social mores. To him, their main source was man's link to his economic environment. When that changed, man's customs changed with it. Meanwhile, folkways that began as unconscious, spontaneous, and uncoordinated sentiments in the social organism, grew to order the running of society by becoming uniform, universal in the social group, and imperative.

Unlike Giddings, Sumner was timid about the chances of ordered rational reform. He did concede that, out of the unthinking mores, "later and more formal differentiation of structure may arise and ... conscious control (to some extent) may take place." But he was on the conservative wing of Social Darwinism. This caused him some difficulty. For he argued that the mores were absolutes, right for their time and place. Nonetheless, he was a Christian gentleman and was obliged to admit the occasional necessity for moral and social reform; thus he had to find some place for change. But he constantly insisted that any such action had to be based on a profound understanding of the folkways. The social authority of the folkways would crush any ill-conceived tinkering. Sumner's illustrations of this included a pertinent one for the young Odum. "In our southern states," Sumner had written in *Folkways*, "before the civil war, whites and blacks had formed habits of action and feeling towards each other. They lived in peace and concord, and each one grew up in the ways which were traditional and customary. The civil war abolished legal rights and left the two races to learn how to live together under other relations than before. The whites have never been converted from the old mores. Those who still survive look back with regret and affection to the old social usages and customary sentiments and feelings. The two races have not yet made new mores. Vain attempts have been made to control the new order by legislation. The
only result is the proof that legislation cannot make mores. We see also that mores do not form under social convulsions and discord."

Odum picked up ideas from all of these men, with no great coherence. Hall and Giddings could be made to coexist, though Hall put more emphasis on the individual psyche in social progress than did the cheerfully Gladstonian Giddings. But the neo-Hegelianism of Wundt and the conservative Social Darwinism of Sumner were ill matched. It was unclear how laissez faire and Auguste Comte could get along. Odum's eclecticism was his lifelong weakness as an intellectual but his strength as a propagator of the new sociological doctrines. For he took back with him to the South notions that, commonplace enough in the intellectual community of the North, were heretical for a Southerner of Black Belt orthodoxy. He imported most of the basic assumptions of the new science of society: its substitution of scientific methodology for metaphysics, its evolutionary perspective, its materialism, its use of classificatory, comparative, and historical methods of study, its groping towards social psychology and its impulse towards purposeful social action. Handled with too much rigor and too little delicacy in a suspicious society like the South, that could have led to a respectable explosion. Occasionally, even the amiable Odum was to tread on a landmine.

Carrying this intellectual mélange to the South, Odum put himself at the forefront of intellectual change in the region. Effecting a peculiar blend of pre-First World War sociology, he made no theoretical advances on it. As his theory grew older, he found little time or inclination for the fresh infusions of later years. Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Tönnies, adaptations of Marx, played no part in his intellectual biography. Chronologically, Howard Odum was of the second generation of American sociology. Intellectually, he was a survival of the first. Typical of these late Victorian gentlemen, he had some very grand ideas. In time, they were to be turned upon the South and that, as will be seen, did odd things to his sociology.

The nine years between Odum's departure from Columbia and his arrival in Chapel Hill in 1920 were fragmented. He had wanted to return immediately to the South, but frustrated by the absence of posts in either sociology or educational psychology, he accepted a brief job with the Bureau of Municipal Research in Philadelphia. The city was involved in a controversy over the advisability of segregating its school system. The author of *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro*, recently published by Columbia University Press, was hired to make a study of the problem. Unsurprisingly, Odum concluded that segregation would have beneficial
consequences. Nonetheless, he had budged a little on the racist theories of his dissertation. At Columbia, through friends if not lectures, he had come into contact with the new theories of Franz Boas, which suggested that environment, not innate racial traits, was most responsible for the cultural and psychological characteristics of ethnic and racial groups. Odum partially assimilated this view. He tried to give as much weight to environment as he could, without actually abandoning his racist assumptions. When he found a problem intractable, or when he was being intellectually lazy, he recurred to the explanation by genes. 12

The next few years were to deflect his attention from the race problem. In 1913, he accepted an associate professorship in “Educational Sociology and Rural Education” at the University of Georgia. In Athens, Odum entered a program, largely sponsored by Thomas Jackson Woofter, which was dedicated to Southern rural reform, and a city much devoted to the causes of the New South. His Jeffersonian sympathies were quickly and permanently reinforced. Standing on the left wing of the progressive movement in social philosophy, Odum was eager to urge the involvement of the university in social reform and the improvement of rural schools. He joined a campaign, jointly administered by the Athens Chamber of Commerce and the Clarke County Board of Education, to persuade the citizenry to increase school support by higher property taxes. It was successful, and rural school terms leaped from four to nine months. Active in the chamber of commerce, Odum urged that a chautauqua be brought to the city and that the chamber offer its support to the university's summer school. He brought guest lecturers, like Edwin Mims, into town. He sat on the board of education, and was a frequent delegate to various state, Southern, and national educational conferences. Wrapped in the enthusiasm of the Wilson presidency and settled among sympathetic colleagues, Odum was in an optimistic mood. 13

Then there was the war. His optimism didn't go, but it was chastened. If Sumner represented the gloomy forces of human irrationality, and Giddings the bright side, then the former had rather the better of it for a while. Hating discord, Odum disliked war; but he could identify with the scholarly president and supported the war effort. He was asked by the Red Cross to supervise the home service field work of their Southern Division. Like many an American intellectual, he was obliged to reassess his attitude towards Germany. His verdict was far from lenient.

In 1919, Odum accepted the deanship of the School of Liberal Arts at Emory University. This was a personally ambitious move. The college had recently migrated to Atlanta, it was expanding, and Odum entertained serious hopes of the university’s presidency. It was also still a Methodist institution, with powerful trustees bent on keeping it that way. 14 In this new capacity of being charged with reform within a Christian educational
tradition, Odum took the opportunity of an address to the "Educational Association of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South" in Memphis to talk about Germany.

He was painfully aware of how much the American educational system owed to Germany. The seminars of Clark and Columbia, his own title of doctor of philosophy had been inspired by the German example. No doubt he remembered how often the efficiency of the German Empire had been touted by progressive reformers before 1917. Perhaps he had done it himself. Certainly he had talked much of efficiency. But the Great War had changed all that. It had made Odum pronouncement anti-German. He reeled off a formidable indictment. German education, he insisted, had been un-Christian, anti-individualistic, obsessed with efficiency for efficiency's sake, too subordinate to the needs of the state, too specialized, too arrogant, scientific without a leavening of morality, antifeminist. More, its philosophers had been fundamentally misguided. "The erstwhile great philosophers," he had said, "Kant and Fichte [sic], Schopenhauer and Schelling, Nietzsche [sic] and the others, wrought 'well' in philosophy and generalities, but Ah, how poor in life and in their contribution to the Soul of humanity. Shall we not beware of generalities based on opposite extremes, if out of perspective with the great problems of life or the directing hand of an evolutionary providence in which God's destiny must guide and interpret? Shall we not beware lest we satisfy ourselves with generalities and philosophies insufficiently supported, when before us lie the virgin fields of inquiry and evidence upon which to build our structure of the future?" Although his tone was more pious than was his wont—the audience and his new position dictated that—his message was clear and verging on the anti-intellectual. If general systems of thought had led Germany to this, then the United States was better served by homespun pragmatism. In the long run, immediacy was the best guide.15

Whatever practical lessons Odum wished to draw from his recent experience were truncated when he and Emory University parted company under strained circumstances in 1920. It had not been a prudent match. The transformed Emory had been guided by the determined fundamentalist and antimodernist bishop, Chancellor Asa Candler, who had seen Vanderbilt University snatched from the control of the Methodist Church and was not about to see the same happen to Emory. He was against the theory of evolution, an ascetic, an opponent of coeducation, and a believer that religion was an inward theological experience and not a social gospel. Unfortunately, Odum was the reverse of these things. For a while, they cooperated; both wanted to expand the scope of the new university. But the alliance lasted only eighteen months before Odum grew so uncomfortable that he sent distress signals to Chapel Hill for a rescue bid. Mercifully, it was forthcoming.16
Howard Odum came to the University of North Carolina in 1920, not as a budding regional sociologist, but as the founder of a new School of Public Welfare. One might remember that his first doctorate was in psychology, and his first job application had been as an educational psychologist at Peabody College in Nashville. He had no sociological theory of regionalism; he just wanted to study sociology in the South. Chapel Hill offered serious hope that a Wisconsin-like alliance between the university and the state might be brought to bear on social problems. “As you know,” Odum told an old friend, Albert Bushnell Hart, “North Carolina has very advanced social legislation and the University is fitting into the state program with commendable service and dispatch. There is every indication that such cooperation will be given the University by certain other agencies, that it will have a real school of social work for the South next year with adequate professional standards, as well as emphasizing government and other social sciences in the regular curriculum, the doing of ‘social engineering’ work throughout the state, and the promoting of greater research.”

North Carolina did not have the first Southern school of social work: by 1918 two had been founded in Richmond and Houston. But as early as 1916, Eugene Branson had recommended to the president, Edward Graham, that Chapel Hill should have its own. The war disrupted its establishment, but in 1919 a council was held, attended by the state governor, to consider the matter further. Soon after the board of trustees set up the school. Its manifesto stated that there was a compelling need for students trained in the task of citizenship. Such a school would “help to train leaders, should offer short courses for workers in service, and should, in cooperation with the State and National agencies, render assistance to the cause of public health, to Superintendents of Public Welfare, Red Cross Workers, Secretaries of Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade, to school systems in their social problems, to Bureaus of Community Recreation.” The heavy emphasis of Odum’s main task can be gauged by a look at the school’s ten undergraduate and two graduate courses: in the principles of sociology, social problems, community organization, recreation, community health, family case work, child welfare, juvenile delinquency, statistics, social pathology, immigration, educational sociology, as well as Negro, mill village, and labor problems.

Odum had identified himself closely with the new, and self-conscious, profession of the social worker. This seemed to him the way to get things done. In a letter to the house journal of social workers, the Survey, he was to offer a euphoric vision of the representative professional altruist: “Studying facts, making them applicable to folks with human interests and social instincts, utilizing methods, principles, convictions, persistently and almost stubbornly single-minded, he has achieved results, both small and
large in local, state and sectional applications. He has given himself heedlessly to the work, nevertheless with pride of personality, genius of foresight, a sort of subtle power and ability to 'put across' his plans, and a fearless and insatiable ambition for the cause for which he labors. Among his many other characteristics is his ability to influence leadership in various fields—the men and women interested in civic endeavor, the capitalist interested in philanthropy, leaders in labor reform, the law makers of the land, college professors, university presidents.”

This optimistic philosophy of public welfare was to be elaborated in editorials for his new periodical, the *Journal of Social Forces*. Eagerly, Odum stressed that the nineteenth-century tradition of “charities and corrections” was dead. The new public welfare was to be “a regular part of the organization and technique of government for making democracy effective in the unequal places.” It was to be the twentieth century’s main task, just as public education had been the main contribution of the last half-century. It was to be a distinct and “perhaps the last of the great stages of democracy.” Mindful of socialism and the excesses of German education, Odum was careful to emphasize institutional evolution. “There is need,” he wrote in the first number of *Social Forces*, “of a rebuilding and a restrengthening of the major social institutions, rather than the substitution for and breaking down of accepted institutional modes of life; but with the objective being the development of the perfected social individual rather than the unthinking so-called mass freedom.” Six institutions were basic: the home and family, the school and education, the church and religion, industry and work, the state and government, the community and association. Social disorders stemmed from human inability to perfect and integrate these.

Despite opposition to an unrestricted laissez faire, Odum was suspicious of centralization and bureaucracy. Although he wanted to extend democratic principles far beyond the mechanics of the ballot box, he warned that “to offer, as a substitute for democratic government, a centralized bureaucratic service uninformed and unsympathetic; or a dictation by an intellectual aristocracy; or dictation by a class group; or a 'super legislation' and censorship is un-American and violates the democratic principle of community participation in government.” Despite his concern for educated leadership, he cautioned against “the rule of the self-appointed intellectuals whose arbitrary, isolated and specialized training is mistaken for comprehensive education.” For Sumnerian reasons, it was folly to force the pace with incomprehensible legislation. The people must be offered their own community organizations to nurse them into the new era. If Howard Odum was a Comtean, he was a homespun American Comtean.

Southern problems played a prominent part in the new *Social Forces*, but Odum was insistent that it was not a Southern journal. In his first
editorial, he wrote: "THE JOURNAL, in order to be distinctively complete and adequate, will not be limited to any one section. The south, for instance, wants and needs the best from without as well as from within its own borders. It holds that, in matters of such import as social forces, local and contemporary factors become valuable stepping stones of dead social selves to higher things of progress, rather than ultimate objectives of truth. Provincial dogmatism is no more effective in the realms of truth and thought in Chapel Hill than in New York." Elsewhere he was to comment that "the term 'the South' is not accurate. There are vast differences between states and in many instances these differences are growing."23

The contention that social values should be judged by "scientific" criteria was potentially explosive. The 1920s saw many cherished Southern beliefs under strain. Howard Odum and Chapel Hill did not escape the buffeting of these years. Skirmishes with Southern conservatism were not infrequent. A project to study textile mills had to be called off in 1924 because of manufacturers' objections. For years, David Clark of the Textile Bulletin was to heap vilification upon Odum's reforming head. In the year of the Dayton trial, an antievolution bill was presented to the state legislature in Raleigh and the university was obliged to throw its weight publicly behind the evolutionists. Social Forces itself was to endure the violent censure of ministers for harboring atheists within its pages. Harry Elmer Barnes, in temerity and ignorance of the Southern milieu, once described the Bible as "an alleged sacred book" which was "a product of the folkways and mores of the primitive Hebrews." Worse, he cheerfully announced that two thousand years of religion had produced no definitive ethical system. This was too much for the fundamentalist preachers of Charlotte, North Carolina. They denounced Odum, Social Forces, modernity, and the university that bred them in their pulpits for months. Even the newspapers took up the cry. For a while, Odum's future hung in the balance.24

That he survived was principally because his position within the university was sound, and the politicians whom the university was obliged to respect did not take up the hue and cry. Moreover, Odum had learned from his headlong mistakes at Emory. Candler had once observed that Odum wanted "to build a university before breakfast—and build it his own way." Now he was all charm and cautious wiliness. When David Clark had begun his criticism, Odum confided to Harry Chase: "I shall... make a personal friend of Mr. Clark and have him working with us. See if I don't?" During the evolution controversy, he invited clerics to Chapel Hill to talk the matter over. No single tactic was more efficacious than the old one of wrapping his heterodoxy in the legitimizing guise of Southernness. In a letter to the press, he once began: "I ought to say at once that I am so Southern that in the old days in our rural community, from vantage point of log cabin and school house and the generations of native folk back of
me, we used to think of a person from a neighboring state as a sort of ‘foreigner’; and that for all generations of both sides of our house in this country—from the Carolinas and Maryland to Georgia—we have been evangelical protestants of the simple and enthusiastic sort.” In private correspondence, he could write in mock innocence: “The bitterness of this whole attack . . . is startlingly amazing to me, an almost professional Southerner and so orthodox that it never occurred to me that we could give offense.”

Odum was cautious, but he had been willing to speak out against Southern “backwardness.” Again and again, he had condemned the Ku Klux Klan as un-American, undemocratic and un-Christian. Although the Klan was weaker and more “moderate” in North Carolina than elsewhere, that was an act of courage. In 1924 he had accused his section of ignorance, emotionalism, a lack of libraries and writers, laziness, and a stultifying fundamentalism. His indictment was republished as the introduction to essays on Southerners, culled from Social Forces. The list of subjects for Southern Pioneers in Social Interpretation reminds one, however, that Odum was reiterating the less complacent position of the New South school. Most heroes of the book—Walter Hines Page, Woodrow Wilson, Charles Aycock—stood firmly in that tradition. Odum observed the usual forms: a word of praise for the Old South, a plea for educational change, a panegyric to potential Southern wealth, a call for hard work and less sensitivity to criticism. Mildly revisionist was his talk of race as a social handicap; but he was vague, and meant no more than the usual liberal cry for a just administration of the segregation system.

Nonetheless the buffetings of the mid-1920s softened Odum’s boldness. When the crisis of the Southern intelligentsia broke at Dayton, John Ransom and Donald Davidson were to rally to the fundamentalists. Edwin Mims stuck to the progressive cause. Odum insisted on ambivalence. Partly at the suggestion of H. L. Mencken, with whom he had contracted an unlikely friendship, he went to witness the trial in Tennessee. “On to Dayton!” Mencken had chortled. “The greatest trial since that before Pilate!”

Odum came back, saddened that the issue had ever arisen. He admitted in Social Forces that William Jennings Bryan had been accurate to claim that most Americans were fundamentalists. Equally, it was clear that most of the intelligentsia were not. Between lay a “vast, yawning distance.” “Now it may be said,” Odum argued, “that such distance has always existed between scientist, scholar and common people; and so it has, except that it has not been a conscious distance of antagonism and battle line. Nor has the scholar and scientist in other generations attempted to extend his science and his scholarship into service and democracy, and therefore made contacts so broad and so directly related to the folk. Nor have the taxpayers been so marshalled by visible and invisible agencies against
learning and education." Unhappily, Odum was persuaded that this struggle between modernism and the old ways would grow, in religion, in race, in industry. He could only suggest that sociology must learn to bridge these gaps. "May we not therefore propose a truce from duelling, a peace without victory, a generation of social study and research," he hazarded. "Better a decade of research than a cycle of futility."

It was instructive that, while the Agrarians would be driven by Dayton to decide where they stood on the religion and science debate, Odum brushed that aside. He was not so much interested in the intellectual implications of Dayton, as fearful of its social consequences. While his religious commitment had been softened by his observation of fundamentalism, he remained content that he could render both to God and to the Caesar of the sciences without inconsistency.

In the decade from 1920, Howard Odum was to build up an administrative empire. This interwove intimately with the development of his thought. For Odum was not only the New South turned sociological; he was the Southern intellectual become organization man.

Odum's power rested on three sources: the university, the foundations, and the state of North Carolina. The source of his strength within Chapel Hill was a close personal friendship with Harry Chase, the president of the university. They had been intimates in graduate student days at Clark, and even gone wooing together. It had been Chase's idea that Odum come to North Carolina. The relationship was reciprocally beneficial. Odum's hasty ways made enemies on the campus, as did his commitment to modernization. Chase helped to protect and encourage him. Conversely, Odum the Southerner was serviceable to a university president who, being a New Englander, was subject to the suspicions of both faculty and public. Moreover, Odum brought money in his train.

Links with the New York foundations seem to have been established during Odum's days in Georgia. As early as 1920, he wrote to Chase: "The last of May I shall go to Philadelphia and New York on my own account. I may say that my expenses are paid so that you will not feel disposed to fear too large an expenditure of my funds. I shall make a little skirmish around to discuss with some friends the possibility or probability of finding some moneys for our school." His war experience had forged close links with the American Red Cross, which was to undertake the salaries of two professors and a woman teacher in the new School of Public Welfare.

Looking back in 1954, Odum was to recall that one and a quarter million dollars had flowed through him from the foundations. By the humble standards of academe, this was a great power. He was to become an
expert at handling that suspicious man, the foundation executive. Beardsley Rum! of the Rockefeller Foundation was moved to call him a "master manipulator." This was an art that required time and effort to master; there were early mistakes. But he worked at it, to fashion a niche in a notoriously unstable world. His links with New York were occasionally better than those of his own university president. Rupert Vance used to tell of Frank Graham, Chase's successor, cooling his heels in an outer office. Odum breezed in, and was immediately ushered into the inner sanctum. Odum's techniques were simple, but reasonably effective. He kept up a steady stream of correspondence that kept the nabobs involved in his projects. He stressed the social utility of his research. He asked them down to Chapel Hill, where they were installed in the commodious Carolina Inn. One foundation executive was manipulated to impress another. He bombarded them with extravagant plans, and then permitted himself to settle for less. He sat indefatigably on committees, to leave a trail of organizations in his wake. Traditionally, the foundations were interested in starting projects, not keeping them going. And Odum was, par excellence, a man who started something and then moved on to something else.

The third part of Odum's support came from the politicians of North Carolina. Chapel Hill lay within easy driving range of Raleigh, the state capital. Odum came to know and intermittently advise a succession of state governors. In 1921, Cameron Morrison asked him to a conference on race relations. In 1930, O. Max Gardner asked him to investigate prison reform in the state. Later—though this is another story—Odum fitted into the local New Deal by running the North Carolina Civil Works Administration. But most of his dependence on the state government was, naturally, mediated through the university.

On these three resources Odum relied during the 1920s. This was his first empire. That there was a second can be readily explained. The first came down round his ears. And the process of reconstruction helps to explain the emergence of Odum, the regional sociologist.

Odum performed several functions on the Chapel Hill campus. He was the Kenan Professor of Sociology within the small but growing sociology department. He was director of the School of Public Welfare. From 1924, he was deeply involved in the affairs of a new Institute for Research in Social Science. These rested on a complicated system of grants. The Red Cross had provided a three year diminishing grant for the school, which paid the salaries of two professors and a woman field worker. From 1924, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation gave $60,000 for three years to the school. In addition, the Red Cross had moved its summer training institute for field workers from Emory to Chapel Hill, while the North Carolina Department of Charities and Public Welfare sponsored a six week course for county superintendents of public welfare. Quite separately,
the Rockefeller Foundation granted in 1924 a three year grant of $97,000 for the new institute. Thus Odum's time was divided between the particularist social work activities of the school and the more "theoretical" activities of the institute. It fell out that the school was a failure, while the institute secured a modest success.\textsuperscript{35}

By his own admission, the debacle of the school was partly Odum's own fault. It had been proposed that it and the state would work in tandem on social welfare problems. The university would train the social workers to staff the new county unit welfare system of the state. In turn, the state would support the school. Neither lived up to its billing. Odum gave only intermittent attention to the school, and next to none to specific advice for county officials. The state never produced the money to make the program effective. Moreover, the school had run into significant opposition within the university community and showed little inclination to supplant the foundation money, due to expire in 1927. Many faculty members were suspicious of the new discipline of sociology, even more of a public welfare approach that smacked of socialism. The Red Cross had insisted that the field work supervisor should be a woman, but the university would not permit a woman to be a faculty member. Moreover, the young ladies who attended the school's courses were inclined to be feminists, unsettling women who could be seen to smoke in public and discourse vociferously on matters that propriety denied them. Chase was a staunch ally, but his budget was limited and he could not blatantly defy faculty opinion.\textsuperscript{36}

In lieu of adequate university and state support, Odum was obliged to go back to the Memorial Foundation in 1927 for more money. Not surprisingly, they turned him down. There seemed little point in pouring good money down the drain. Odum was forced to admit to failure. "They were disappointed in the work we did for public welfare," he told his colleague Jesse Steiner. "They saw no cooperation on the part of the county and no promise on the part of the University. Some of the monies which we used... did not turn out well... We did not finish the leadership studies and the Chapel Hill study which Dr. Rumf seemed to think so well of. They may have an impression that we think more of what other people think of us than we do about serving our own folks." In April, Odum conceded his "blunders" and started a reappraisal.\textsuperscript{37}

The direction he was to take seemed obvious, implicit in the record of the last few years and suggested by New York. While the school had floundered, the institute had flourished. It is true that social research was regarded with suspicion by many faculty, even those on the board of the institute. But this had meant their failure to utilize the resources of the institute. Partly by default, partly by aggrandizement, Odum came to monopolize the institute.\textsuperscript{38} It became the research arm of the sociology department. Its research was more abstract, less dependent on the coopera-
tion of state and county governments. And its emphasis on the study of local problems pointed in a direction congenial to the Rockefeller Foundation. When Odum went to New York in May 1927, Rumil cordially but bluntly made his point. "What he said," Odum reported, "as near as I can quote him, was for us to 'forget what other people are doing and start thinking . . . . In the case of the Institute and the School both, I do not think it is a matter of choice with us whether we make them dynamic in our own region. It has been made very clear in the case of the Institute that if we do not we shall lose out, certainly at home and certainly with the Memorial. And, of course, the lack of appropriation for the School of Public Welfare is testimony of the other."

With typical dispatch, Odum accepted the new mandate. By late May, he was expatiating on the new situation to Steiner: "What I mean by making the Institute and School tie in with its local and regional problems is that most real new movements, new contributions, and new inventions do actually grow out of situations, and, if we study our own folk and our own problems and meet them, the reputation and scientific values will take care of themselves . . . . I am sure that I could get the money to build up a department of sociology as strong as any in the country if we are sure of its objectives."

Though of crucial importance, this shift to "regional problems" must not be distorted. Odum had had a long-standing interest in the South. But it had been a sociology practiced in the South, not a Southern sociology. He had been skeptical of regional generalization, and more interested in individual states. When Gerald Johnson had written for *Social Forces* in 1922, he had observed to Odum: "The article as it stands relates exclusively to North Carolina . . . but the change of a sentence here and there, with possibly the addition of a paragraph or two would no doubt make it sufficiently inclusive of the whole South to serve." Odum resisted the temptation to extend the particular to the general with such casualness. His first response to the publication of Edwin Mims's *The Advancing South* in 1926 was to suggest a state-by-state survey of the region. It was this sociological particularism that his experience in the 1920s had begun to weaken. The emphasis had subtly, but decisively, shifted. One thing had been made clear. Of the three possible power bases for the new sociology—the state, the university, and the foundations—the first two had proved unreliable. That left the foundations. If he wanted their support, he needed to broaden his base. If North Carolina alone could not sustain him, perhaps the whole region might.

Over the next decade, Odum reconstructed his empire on the basis of regional research. On sabbatical in late 1928 and early 1929, he spent much of it on the road. He was to travel some ten thousand miles around the region. Out of this grew his first extended foray into the debate about
Southern identity, *An American Epoch: Southern Portraiture in the National Picture*. He encouraged Rupert Vance to develop a “human geography” of the South. The University of North Carolina Press was proffered Rockefeller money to publish a whole range of books on the region. In cooperation with Will Alexander, an old ally in the interracial movement, the Rosenwald Fund was guided into starting a fund for regional research fellowships. Alexander had been persuaded by Odum’s new stance that “the regional plan is ultimately the best.” The $50,000 fund would be administered by a committee, nominated by the Social Science Research Council. Alexander was its chairman, and Odum was to be prominent in its running. Many of the new fellows would pursue their studies in Chapel Hill. As Alexander indicated, this was a beginning: “It is in fact an effort on the part of the Fund to help out our Regional Research Plans... Now we can quietly use this as the beginning of the regional studies. This money is by way of an experiment. If we make good with it there will be much more available.”

At the same time, Odum had persuaded the Social Science Research Council to establish a Southern Regional Committee. Its immediate objective was the organization of regional conferences on social research. Odum was its first chairman, and the committee was chosen largely at his discretion.

There were to be more pieces in the puzzle. That Odum had the standing to put them in place requires a brief detour to explain. While he had been on sabbatical in Florida, he had been surprised to receive a letter from the White House. Herbert Hoover had appointed as his “research and literary secretary” French Strother, the former editor of Walter Hines Page’s periodical, *The World’s Work*. Strother had been charged with keeping the president “informed upon the broad social currents in this country and to help him formulate ideas for furthering those social movements that are of the most public value.” This was bemusing. Having met Odum in Chapel Hill three years earlier, Strother turned to the sociologist for advice. At first, Odum suggested various journals that Strother might read. In time, a more ambitious project was born when Odum conferred with William Ogburn, chairman of the Social Science Research Council’s Committee on Problems and Policy. Ogburn chanced to be an old Columbia classmate. More, he was a Georgian. Thus was born the President’s Committee on Social Trends. Ogburn became its director, while Odum stepped back to assistant director, with the chief role of persuading the Rockefeller Foundation to fund the venture. Typically, Hoover did not want to expend public money.

In 1933, the committee was to produce two fat volumes on *Recent Social Trends*, which have proved of great value to historians. Politically, it became an embarrassing irrelevance. When Odum and Ogburn were
whisked, a little dazed, into the White House for lunches and dinners, Hoover had insisted that research should lead to action. But he gave them no money and obliged them to work quite outside the normal political processes. If this was a brain trust, it was a very remote one. Hoover's contribution amounted to little more than his name and a brief preface to *Recent Social Trends*. And the economic climate changed drastically. It is true that when Odum went to dinner with Hoover on 26 September 1929 the stock market was wobbling. But the president was sanguine that his administration and the economy were sound, and Odum shared that optimism. But 1933, the year the committee reported, was another matter.\(^47\)

Whatever was uncomprehended between politicians and social scientists was further obscured by Hoover's commitment to laissez faire. Most sociologists had a commitment to state action, even the fairly staid collection who authored *Recent Social Trends*. The impasse was fundamental; and it mirrored Odum's own confusions, for knowing Hoover had deepened his own belief in voluntarism. Although he voted for Roosevelt in 1932, much of his sympathy stayed with the Republican. Benjamin Kendrick felt obliged to console Odum: "[I] hope you are not too cup[sic] up about the election."\(^48\) Like many old progressives, Odum had been caught between two forces. Progressivism had not done enough, and the New Deal was to do too much.

All this dabbling in high places enhanced Odum's standing in his profession and in the South. In 1930 he became president of the American Sociological Society. As his own star rose, that of his university did not. The depression had badly hit the University of North Carolina. Ambitious plans for the university to take over the major responsibility for the Institute for Research in Social Science had to be shelved.\(^49\) While Odum found himself flatteringly wooed by Northern universities, he was threatened with a salary cut and a cry from the North Carolina legislature that the university be held more minutely accountable for its expenditures. He grew very concerned that Chapel Hill would be forced to buckle down to business and political interests. During 1931, he thought very hard about leaving.\(^50\)

Andrew Carnegie once remarked that a man was a fool who could not make money in a depression. True to this entrepreneurial tradition, Odum extracted the last piece of his imperial jigsaw from this unpromising situation. At a meeting with Will Alexander in Nashville, he confided his doubts and anxieties. Later Alexander wrote to him: "In view of the facts about the North Carolina situation, I did not feel justified in urging you to stay there. On the other hand, I was not convinced then, and I have been less so since, that the only alternative was to leave the South...I am ready to say now that I don't think you should leave the South, and that I believe an opportunity can be developed somewhere that that will enable you to do the thing that you have so marvelously under way." This
opportunity was a fresh grant. In December of 1931, Jackson Davis, the Southern agent of the General Education Board, was conferring industriously with Edmund Day of the Rockefeller Foundation. On the nineteenth of that month, Odum was informed through the secretary of the Social Science Research Council that an appropriation of $45,000 had been approved by the Board for a Southern Regional Study.

Thus armed, Odum was able to announce his relative independence from the University of North Carolina. Frank Graham was told that the money had been granted to Odum personally, and through him to the institute. He promptly asked for a leave of absence, with the concession that he might offer one seminar course. He observed ominously: “My understanding is that prospects for a minimum appropriation for the Institute for five years are good, and that by the time we are through this very comprehensive regional study you will have had time to take stock and work out plans for a more comprehensive financing of all the University’s activities.” The message was clear: ingenuity had worked this time. It might not do so again. If Chapel Hill wanted Odum indefinitely, the house must be set in order.

Thereby the pattern of Odum’s empire had clarified. From the Rockefeller Foundation, he received a basic grant for the institute. From the General Education Board, he had an appropriation for the Southern Regional Study. From the Rosenwald Fund, he shared in the patronage of the Southern fellowships. As an integrating and administrative device, there was the Southern Regional Committee of the Social Science Research Council: occasionally, the council itself disbursed small grants. In the background was the slim financial backing of a weakened university.

This network sounds dispersed and flexible. In fact, it was dangerously reliant on one resource. Both the General Education Board and the Social Science Research Council were financial siblings of the parent Rockefeller Foundation. Although the Rosenwald Fund was independent, there was an overlap of personnel between it and Rockefeller Plaza. Moreover, during the depression the fund was weakened seriously by the fall in stock market values and the Rockefeller Foundation stepped in to prop it up. The crucial nexus in all this was Odum’s friendship with Will Alexander.

Step by step, Howard Odum had committed himself to regional research in Southern sociology. He had the money, the bureaucracy, the graduate students and colleagues to gather and process the information. He had come a long way logistically from the tattered days of 1927, when his department had seemed to collapse around him. But the question remained. Where had all this taken him intellectually?