Layer 1: A View from Chapel Hill

During the 1920s and 1930s, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill became an epicenter of debates about how to create sociological knowledge by identifying and addressing the problems of the South.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the institution of higher education aspired to become a national research university and an intellectual leader in the region, the opportunity to address the region’s cultural, economic, and social conditions was led by two increasingly prestigious institutional units: University of North Carolina Press (UNC Press) and the Institute for Research in Social Sciences (IRSS). William “Bill” T. Couch, who took the reins of UNC Press in 1925 and became Director in 1932, published work that did not shy away from the South’s problems, demonstrating that reflexive, critical scholarship could come from within the region. Regularly publishing work by acclaimed sociologist Howard Odum and the IRSS, Couch began to question if academic prose driven by statistics adequately communicated the challenges of the region to scholarly and popular audiences as it often failed to accurately represent the actual lives of the people being documented.

The stakes of the debate heightened with the Great Depression, which placed the American South under a microscope. The region’s economic precarity combined with a culture of segregation further cemented the region’s reputation as anti-modern, backward, and impervious to progress; questions about the region’s fitness for full inclusion and citizenship abounded.[[2]](#footnote-2) How to assess and represent the challenges of the region became a central debate.[[3]](#footnote-3) Two warring schools of intellectual thought framed the academic and literary representations of the South.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Agrarians, based at Vanderbilt University, romanticized a return to White, rural, folk culture arguing sociological scholarship was the handmaiden of Northern intellectuals bent on the erosion of Southern traditional values. Howard Odum and his UNC-Chapel Hill colleagues, on the other hand, advocated for systematic, scientific studies of the region through fieldwork conducted by experts so that solutions to social problems could be identified. The evidence constructed a region that was distinct due to its regional culture but also a part of modernity and therefore the nation, earning them a reputation as advocates for “the New South.”

Couch and UNC Press offered another angle on the debate. Attuned to the literary marketplace, Couch understood that readers – who were primarily White, urban, affluent and held significant social and political power in US society - were eager to learn about the region. UNC Press, he argued, should be at the center of releasing cutting edge scholarship about the South, for the press and its authors were best positioned to produce academically rigorous intellectual work. They should be not be “inoffensive” books or hyperbolic literature but ask difficult and challenging questions, he contended.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather, they should be books that offered a lens into the region, often aided by a sociological bent.

While Couch appreciated scholarship that offered sociological knowledge, especially those concerning the Southern region written for a broader public, he questioned the field’s quantitivate turn in the early 20th Century. He did not believe that faceless, generalized statistics in dense academic prose effectively communicated the conditions in the region. An ardent believer that the South had much to offer the nation, which would only improve if the region addressed their serious issues, he set out on a mission to find more ways to document and understand the region. The New Deal would open up an exciting opportunity to put his ideas into action. This layer explores the larger historical context and academic debates in Chapel Hill that led to Couch’s idea of the Southern Life History Project.

*Welcome to Chapel Hill*

Paving Franklin Street was just one sign of a town on the rise in the 1920s.[[6]](#footnote-6) Chapel Hill was growing as the state’s flagship University expanded and approved over a million dollars in construction projects.[[7]](#footnote-7) Half a million was designated for Graham Memorial Hall, a student union intended to serve as the center of student life. Named after the President of UNC during World War I, the building’s name and prominence signaled the university’s aspirations. Edward Kidder Graham had sought to transform UNC into a research university that, as he stated, “would emphasize the fact that research and classical culture rightly interpreted are as deeply and completely service as any vocational service.”[[8]](#footnote-8) His emphasis on the pursuit of study and research in the liberal arts was shaped by contemporary debates about the goals of the modern university. UNC, he argued, should become a preeminent research university committed to molding students with a concern for the public good.[[9]](#footnote-9) To realize these goals meant building the necessary infrastructure, and UNC had plans to expand southward from Franklin Street rapidly.

While the freshly paved street on which a generation new to car ownership drove Model T’s was a Southern booster’s dream, the main thoroughfare offered daily reminders of the social order.[[10]](#footnote-10) UNC and Chapel Hill leaders’ aspirations were shaped by racialized and gendered understandings of who constituted the public. Segregation defined Southern life and Chapel Hill was no exception. While African Americans had built and maintained a great deal of the campus since its creation in 1789 and were continually employed in domestic and labor-intensive work such as cooking and cleaning, they were denied entry into the classroom. In fact, the state would go as far as to offer scholarships for young Black men to attend institutions like the University of Michigan rather than desegregate.[[11]](#footnote-11) Chapel Hill’s and the state’s flagship university’s aspirations and challenges were indicative of the era.

*The 1920s and the Emergence of the Research University in the South*

The 1920s heralded a cultural shift made possible by post-war economic prosperity, an expanding consumer culture, and increasing progressive social mores.[[12]](#footnote-12) The accouterments of modernity such as cinemas and radios multiplied in urban spaces as millions of Americans moved from the countryside. New South boosters were also eager to advertise the region’s embrace of certain trappings of modernity including participation in commercial markets in rural areas, small towns and cities alike; a process that was well underway during the late 1800s.[[13]](#footnote-13) Trains connected small towns across the South to a national and global economy while the introduction of cars changed Southerners’ relationship to mobility. While eager to advertise certain kinds of modernity, White power brokers were less eager to advertise the Jim Crow laws designed to shore up segregation and maintain white supremacy which became a distinguishing feature that earned the South a reputation for being exceptional.

The calls for modernization were also echoed inside of Southern universities where intellectual elites argued that well respected institutions of higher education were a sign of progress.[[14]](#footnote-14) Efforts throughout the 1920s to raise the profile of UNC as a research university were part and parcel of modernization. Administrators and researchers shared the belief that those who actually resided in the region should have a say about its conditions.

The UNC Press was the first university press established in the South and just three years after its creation, Bill Couch took its reigns. Over his next 20 years at the Press, Couch would transform the publisher into one of the leading university presses in the nation, helping to fulfill the UNC administrators’ goal of establishing the state flagship as one of the top research universities in the South. Couch fulfilled the administration’s goal of scholarly research by dedicating the Press’ focus on the social, economic, and intellectual well-being of the Southeast region. The way the Press used its pages to publish research on the South reveals conflicts over who could publish, what counted as scholarly knowledge, and for whom to publish at UNC and throughout the region during the tumultuous times of the Great Depression and the reign of Jim Crow. In many ways, these conflicts of thought also played out in Couch’s own life.

Couch spent the first seventeen years in rural Virginia where his father earned a living as a local Baptist preacher. Seeking financial stability, the family moved to Chapel Hill in 1917 when his father decided to turn in the collar for the plow. Young Couch worked on the family farm, which floundered, and then was briefly employed by the Southern Power Company before matriculating at UNC Chapel Hill in 1920. However, his tenure was brief and he joined the Army as World War I waged. He returned to UNC-Chapel Hill two and a half years later and became involved in the student publication *Carolina Magazine*. Couch was still an undergraduate when he caught the attention of University librarian and UNC Press director Louis Round Wilson, thanks to his work as editor of *Carolina Magazine*. Recognizing an opportunity to shape intellectual thought, Couch became Acting Director when Wilson became suddenly ill.[[15]](#footnote-15) No small task for a 24-year old.

Young, assertive, and constantly walking a fine line between boorish, arrogant, and visionary, Couch brought an intense interest in the region’s working class, shaped by his upbringing on the farm. More broadly he was passionate about the future of the South, which required understanding its contemporary social conditions, an ideal project for a press charged with publishing cutting edge scholarship on the region. This sociological interest paired with a commitment to Southern liberalism placed him directly in conversation and at times contestation with acclaimed scholar Howard W. Odum and his newly formed institute.

Odum was indicative of the research aspirations of the university yet his job title reflected its past: University President Harry W. Chase recruited him in 1920 as the Kenan Professor of Sociology. Odum’s appointment signaled an institution in flux as his research was at odds with William Kenan, the name behind this endowed chair. Born in North Carolina, Kenan was a confederate Civil War veteran and served briefly on UNC’s Board of Trustees. He later became infamous for his participation in the Wilmington Massacre of 1898 in which White leaders in the Southern Democratic Party led a coup d’état against the local government that resulted in the murder of White and Black citizens and harkened in a repressive white supremacist government. [[16]](#footnote-16) Odum’s progressive research combined with an endowed professorship named after this unapologetic white supremacist was emblematic of conflicting impulses within the university.

Born in Georgia, Odum received a B.A. from Emory College in 1904, a M.A. from the University of Mississippi in 1906, a Ph.D. in psychology from Clark in 1909 and a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia University in 1910. He taught at the University of Georgia and then served as Dean at Emory College from 1919-1920 before arriving at UNC.[[17]](#footnote-17) His research agenda used scientific methods to study folklore and music of the South and was marked by a progressive approach to race relations. His progressive stance was largely informed by the friendships he made while conducting research with African American communities.[[18]](#footnote-18) Odum was in a position of power as an endowed professor in charge of the newly formed Department of Sociology and of the School of Public Welfare, which would become known as the School of Social Work.

*A Center for Sociological Knowledge About the South*

In 1924, Odum opened the Institute for Research in Social Science (IRSS), which would bring together and build the careers of some of the most important scholars of social life of the 20th century including Arthur Raper and Rupert Vance. The creation of IRSS (which eventually would be renamed the Odum Institute in its founder’s honor) signified an important investment in scholarly inquiry about social relations in the South and helped to modernize the new South through intellectual thought that championed liberal ideas in politics and race relations.[[19]](#footnote-19)

IRSS scholars published hundreds of books and articles mostly through their journal *Social Forces* and the UNC Press, both of which Odum helped launch in 1922.*[[20]](#footnote-20)* Odum and Couch recognized that their organizations were not only positioned to be local thought leaders but to shape how the nation understood the region. Moreover, IRSS’s funding was critical to the financial solvency of UNC Press and, consequently, made Odum a powerful voice in the direction of the university press, which often placed him in direct conflict with the fellow White Southerner almost two decades his junior. The stakes of their agreements *and* disagreements heightened as bureaucrats, intellectuals, and the broader public debated the future of the South during a time of economic, cultural, and social turmoil that severe global economic depression exacerbated.

*The Great Depression: A Nation in Turmoil*

The financial crash on October 24, 1929, which became known as Black Tuesday, had been decades in the making. While the economy grew after the depression of the 1890s and World War I, recurring economic panics following the Civil War served as regular reminders of the U.S banking system’s vulnerabilities.[[21]](#footnote-21) Already feeling the impact of global agriculture markets as prices waxed and waned, conditions for agricultural workers only worsened. The nation’s history of settler colonialism resulted in U.S. citizens pushing westward, colonizing native people’s lands, and pursuing agriculture on precarious ground.[[22]](#footnote-22) Millions of acres of land due to over farming and drought left their plows still, and by the 1930s resulted in millions of people migrating in search of subsistence.

Despite the signs, the general sentiment of the Coolidge and the Hoover administrations was that laissez-faire economic policies were working. Government intervention in business and financial markets was curtailed as taxes were reduced and isolationism was the proclaimed strategy for foreign policy, even as the U.S. significantly meddled with and reshaped Latin America. Hoover planned to continue the course until Black Tuesday reminded the nation that its financial institutions remained on precarious ground. Years of unsustainable speculative capital resulted in the crash of the stock market and an economic crisis that quickly moved across the Atlantic. The exigencies of agricultural markets, world war, and capitalism meant too little too late to prevent environmental and economic destruction.[[23]](#footnote-23) By 1932, unemployment surpassed 12 million.[[24]](#footnote-24) The ripple through the economy would leave almost one in four Americans unemployed. Millions of Americans were challenging Hoover’s approach to governance and looking to sign-up for a different path.

Central to national debates about how to end the depression were questions about the role of the federal government and its ability to care for its citizens. By the time Roosevelt came into office in 1933, he was a seasoned veteran of U.S politics and attuned to the changing will of Americans. His election was built on his strong rebuke of 1920s laissez-faire policy and embrace of Progressive Era commitments such as the federal government’s active role in spurring, regulating, and reforming American labor and business. Roosevelt’s administration advocated for extensive federal intervention in the economy and providing social services to alleviate the effects of the depression. Such policies were possible because of a shift in the nation’s willingness to expand federal power if it meant relief and reform. Exactly how government should intervene, which branches of the government had authority for which tasks, and which policies and reforms to implement and for whom occupied national debates. The expansion of federal regulatory power through an activist government that regulated the economy and society became a central tenet of his administration's signature policies known collectively as the New Deal and its undergirding political philosophy as New Deal liberalism. Intellectuals from academia including Couch and Odum were active participants.

*The Great Depression and the Problem of the South*

In the South, the Great Depression exacerbated an economy mired by exploitative agricultural and industrial capitalists who created poor working conditions, offered low wages, and used the logic of white supremacy to maintain power. Intellectuals, including Couch and Odum, argued over how to assess and understand the impact of global depression on the region and which paths would best alleviate the conditions, a debate informed by a fraught relationship between federal intervention and the region’s White leadership. Federal government leadership and northern intellectuals alike understood the region as lagging behind the rest of the nation. Seen as impervious to change, the South came under a microscope as stereotypes abounded of an anti-modern, depraved, and uneducated region. The South’s economic woes, seen as exceptional and pervasive even by contemporary standards, combined with a culture of segregation enforced through Jim Crow laws and spectacular racial violence, left questions about the region’s fitness for full inclusion and citizenship.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Great Depression further animated regional debates about the character and future of the South among intellectuals residing in the region’s universities. The entanglement of the New Deal state and literary market with academics meant scholarship from academia impacted government policy and ideas about the region. Couch and Odum sought to position themselves at the center of these regional debates through the scholarship that they produced. While they argued for different approaches to understanding social conditions in the region, both were liberal progressives who were critical but still supportive of modernization. Neither was eager to romanticize Southern “tradition.” Their positioning placed them in debate with a powerful set of intellectuals based at another Southern university on the ascent, Vanderbilt University.

*An Intellectual Divide: Southern Agrarians vs Regionalists*

Questions about how to provide relief to and reform the South spurred a deep rift in academic and literary thought, provoking the intellectual community into two warring schools of thought: Southern Agrarians and Regionalists. Agrarians were best represented through Vanderbilt University academics John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson. Their 1930 manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand,* renounced modernization through industrial capitalism. “The younger southerners, who are being converted frequently to the industrial gospel, must come back to the support of the Southern tradition,” they wrote, adding that “they must be persuaded to look very critically at the advantages of becoming a ‘new South’ which will be only an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Looking to save “traditional Southern life,” they advocated for a return to agrarian life and the “culture of the soil.” Such calls for a return to traditional values were made without any discussion of the institutionalized systems of slavery that shaped such “tradition.”

Southern Agrarians also felt that Northern progressive thought had infiltrated university halls in the South with their ideas about modernization through industrialization and consumerism. They particularly turned their scrutiny toward the emerging field of Sociology. Agrarians argued that sociological scholarship, much of which was published by UNC Press, aided in the erosion of Southern traditional values. Davidson saw “the sociologist [as] the twentieth-century successor to the nineteenth-century abolitionist. A disturber of the peace and the status quo, he abhorred the concrete, the organic, the religious, and preferred the abstract, the theoretical, and the scientific. Indeed, so blinded by charts, tables and statistics was he that he could not see the flesh and blood individual.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

As the poster child for Sociology and an advocate of “the New South,” Howard Odum and his UNC-Chapel Hill colleagues became the Agrarians’ chief opponents and symbolized the regionalism school of thought.[[28]](#footnote-28) Many of the “Chapel Hill Sociologists,” which they were labeled, may have grown up and worked in the South, but they were not reactionary romantics of the Old South like the Agrarians. While Odum and his colleagues saw great problems in the region, they advocated for systematic, scientific studies of the region so that solutions to social problems could be found, rather than calling for a return to tradition as did the Agrarians.

Though Odum is often referred to as the founder of this sociological approach of regionalism that centered scientific data to address social problems, his work along with his colleagues is directly indebted to W.E.B. Du Bois and the Atlanta School. Du Bois began working at the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory in 1897 at what is now known as Clark Atlanta University. Under Du Bois’ direction, the lab was the first to collect what was understood as objective, scholarly data about Black communities in the South.[[29]](#footnote-29) Their pioneering sociological methods produced data that challenged racist pseudo-science representations of Black communities and suggested improvements.[[30]](#footnote-30) Despite this much earlier and significant advance, Du Bois is rarely credited as the creator of modern American Sociology, regional methods, or the sociology of the South.[[31]](#footnote-31)

While Odum did not center Du Bois’ studies in his own work, he drew on many of his ideas, which guided the development of UNC’s Institute for Research in Social Science. Odum believed that addressing the many problems of the South began with better understanding its unique regional culture. He argued, “cataloguing the traits of the South was the first step toward merging the region with the rest of the nation while maintaining its distinctive culture.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Therefore, his studies were dedicated to this endeavor of cataloguing all types of Southern traits, including folklore, health, technology, and eating habits. His studies painted a dismal picture of an impoverished South in need of economic and cultural reform. To remedy these problems, Odum argued for adapting agricultural ways of life with industrial life to create a “‘new equilibrium between rural and urban’” in order to better integrate into the larger nation.[[33]](#footnote-33) Additionally, he called for improving “race relations through education,” but did not go as far as to call for an end to segregation.[[34]](#footnote-34)

*Shaped by Debate: Couch and the Role of UNC Press*

Amid this debate between Agrarians and Regionalists, Couch came into his intellectual own. While he distressed over the portrayals of the region as backwards and retrograde, Couch did not desire to romanticize or call for a return to “traditional Southern life” like the Southern Agrarians. He believed that romanticizing the region was as unproductive as vilifying the region for neither helped to identify the very real issues that left millions in poverty nor the possibilities for reforms. He worried that such facile and tired stereotypes of the region risked characterizing the South as beyond reform and change. Instead he argued that an emphasis on authenticity and realism would hold a mirror up to the South forcing it to acknowledge the social conditions of the region which included class animosity spurred by industrial capitalism, a social order maintained by racial violence, and economic conditions often producing poverty. Publishing cutting edge work of scholars who were experts in assessing social conditions in order to reshape the debate and characterizations of the region became a raison d’etre for Couch and UNC Press, helping to produce a cultural shift on two fronts. First, the Press showed that Southerners themselves possessed a critical lens about the region eventually publishing over 450 titles under Couch’s tutelage. Second, the Press actively reshaped how the nation understood the region, rather than simply following or responding to others.

*UNC Press and the Ecosystem of Publishing*

UNC Press participated in a larger growing ecosystem of commercial and university presses shaping how intellectuals, policy makers, and the reading public understood the South. The commercial book industry grew substantially in the 1920s and 1930s led by some of the most prominent publishing houses such as Houghton, MacMillan, and Viking and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *Atlantic*, and *Nation*. Centered in New York City, the commercial publishing industry's primary audience was the White, urban middle and upper class. While sales slowed, book publishing actually maintained a solid footing during the 1930s. One area that caught the attention of publishers, critics, and readers attention was the South. The publishers noted consumers’ - mostly bourgeois urban White consumers residing in urban communities - interest in the exotic and ‘Other;’ places and people outside of their social and cultural milieu. In many ways, it was such an interest that helped spur the Southern Literary Renaissance.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Importantly, the commercial book industry did not shy away from work that addressed issues in the South, much to the chagrin of the Agrarians who saw Southern presses as complicit in the erosion of Southern values. Agrarian champion, Donald Davidson, included publishing in the “great Northern offensive of the 1920s,” which began during the Harding Administration and aimed to attack “Southern life and its characteristic institutions.” He argued that:

This attack was more abusive and unrelenting than anything the Southern states have experienced since the last Federal soldier was withdrawn from their soil. In the nineteen-twenties there was no single institution, like slavery, upon which attacks could be centered. They had a vaguer objective in the so-called backwardness, or ‘cultural lag,’ of the South. The Northern press, with all of the Southern press that takes its cue from New York...unanimously agreed that the South [was] guilty of number crimes against progress...’ ultimately creating ‘an image of the benighted South, a savage South of racial hatred and religious fanaticism.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Entering the literary marketplace were books by authors such as Howard Odum who identified and addressed the South’s problems, novelists such as Erskine Caldwell and Grace Lumpkin, as well as magazine articles on the very topics these books discussed such as mill workers’ labor struggles and the conditions of tenant farming.[[37]](#footnote-37) As a result, the commercial press became a site where reformist messages that called for changes to oppressive conditions in the South such as racial violence, poverty, and the industrial-capitalist order took precedence over agrarian romanticism. These publishers were the precise Northern presses that the Agrarians railed against as they saw the presses as demonizing the South and its culture.

*Publishing Scholarship About the South*

While commercial publishers were publishing more books about the region, they were still few and far between compared to the scholarly output of Southern academics, which UNC Press harnessed. By the 1930s, academic publishing through a university press was in vogue. While there had been fits and starts in the United States, the early 1900s saw the ascendency of university presses with the rise of the research university. Institutions like Johns Hopkins University argued that knowledge should not be limited to those who could participate in the daily life of the university but rather should be more accessible to broader publics.[[38]](#footnote-38) One mechanism of dissemination was publishing. However, commercial publishers knew the audience for scholarly works was marginal, particularly when it came to potential profits. University presses, on the other hand, were non-profits and had major institutions, some of which would become the most affluent non-profits in the world by the 21st century, behind them.

When Couch took the reins of UNC Press, he was unamused with the university press landscape. Looking to court rather than shy away from contentious and controversial topics and ideas, Couch viewed other university presses as safe and cautious. “There is much in them which should be a warning and an example to us,” he stated, adding that “if the University Press, like Harvard or Yale, is to devote itself to bringing out nice inoffensive books—perfect examples of modern scholarship—it seems to me that the legislative gentlemen who protest at our expenditures have a real reason for their protests.”[[39]](#footnote-39) If anything, Couch believed the press should be more critical in order to further rigorous intellectual thought about the region.[[40]](#footnote-40) Publishing could be a form of intellectual activism, and playing it safe was a conservative stance that silenced rather than fostered intellectual inquiry.[[41]](#footnote-41) Such a philosophy helped to turn UNC Press into an intellectual leader known for publishing accessible, innovative, and often contentious scholarship, but put Couch regularly at odds with his board of directors and university leadership including Howard Odum.[[42]](#footnote-42)

While Howard Odum and Couch’s personal relationship soured over time, Couch valued the cutting-edge research on the social and economic problems of the South coming from Institute for Research in Social Science. UNC Press became their publishing house printing 31 books from the institute between 1924-1934.[[43]](#footnote-43) Acclaimed scholars such as Arthur Raper and Rupert Vance produced studies on areas such as race relations, labor relations, government, and Southern history.[[44]](#footnote-44) Arthur Raper’s *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933), for example, used case studies to illustrate the prevalence of lynching, describe how White Southerners justified this form of vigilante violence, and explain the cultural and economic impact of lynching on the region.[[45]](#footnote-45) Reviewing the book in the *Journal of Negro History*, Rayford W. Logan offered praise for the book calling it “one of the most notable contributions to the literature about America's greatest shame” and noted that such a book came from a Southern press. He wrote, “Of more than passing interest is the fact that a book so condemnatory of the South should be published by the University of North Carolina Press, although this is by no means the first time that this publishing house has brought out books that do not portray that section as the domicile of chivalry.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Works like Raper’s garnered acclaim and ire for both the Institute and UNC Press.

Like Odum, Couch shared a concern for the region’s significant challenges. In fact, Odum alongside university leadership including President Harry W. Chase and prominent faculty such as Edwin Greenlaw founded UNC Press with visions that the press would be the center of intellectual life in the region by addressing pressing concerns. However, the rift between Odum and Couch began to grow as time passed. Complicated by the Press’s initial financial dependency on the IRSS, Odum and Couch increasingly disagreed over audiences and about what kinds of knowledge could reveal the challenges of the region. It didn’t help that Couch was disinterested in the quantitative turn underway in Sociology, spurred by the field’s interest in securing a position as a science. Couch believed in communicating to a broader audience than academics, which necessitated a strategy other than dense specialized prose or faceless statistics.[[47]](#footnote-47) After all, one reason he was earning a national reputation for publishing some of the most influential scholarship on the region was because of his belief that books should be accessible to a range of audiences. [[48]](#footnote-48)

*An Opportunity*

Couch noticed an opportunity to intervene in the larger literary market by publishing works that could appeal to a broader reading public that had stoked the Southern Literary Renaissance. Readers and Southern writers were no longer wading in the violent and stale waters of Southern exceptionalism and Lost Cause romanticism. They were looking for fresh, realist, and critical perspectives on Southern culture and society. Yet, Couch had developed reservations about the work produced as a part of the Southern Literary Renaissance for he was concerned that its focus on fiction did not fully capture the conditions of the South or the lived realities of its people. UNC Press, he reasoned, was positioned to reach the same audience with books that were grounded in rigorous scholarly inquiry written in an inviting nonfiction prose.

With national reputations and success in their respective areas, the rift between Couch and Odum grew even deeper. While Couch was persuaded by Sociology’s focus on social systems that led to societal problems, his skepticism of the very way sociology produced knowledge mounted. He understood the reliance on statistics rather than thick description as obfuscating the lived realities of people. However, he saw more promise in sociology’s method known as case history, which analyzed a single person’s life in detail, but that method, too, had its problems. Case history usually focused on people identified as deviant, and left little room for the subject’s own assessment of their life. Moreover, regardless of the method, Couch believed that scholarship in sociology purposefully produced prose that was less accessible to a more general public, which represented a signficant shortcome in motivating the public to address identified social problems. Couch troubled over how to effectively convey the social conditions of the region in order to convey the complexities of life in the South when a new door opened.

Roosevelt’s administration was engaging in an incredible expansion of federal power in order to bring about relief, reform, and recovery from the Great Depression. Cultural workers, including intellectuals and writers, would become part this “The New Deal” through a new agency called the Federal Writers Project, where Couch quickly rose through the ranks. The rise of the New Deal and the Federal Writers’ Project shaped Couch’s efforts to remake sociological knowledge about the South by giving him an opportunity to produce a new method of documenting and writing that centered the perspective of the people themselves.

1. Guy B Johnson and Guion Griffis Johnson, *Research in Service to Society: The First Fifty Years of the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina* (UNC Press Books, 2018); Michel J Lacey and Mary O Furner, *The State and Social Investigation in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century US History*, vol. 59 (Princeton University Press, 2009); Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*, vol. 19 (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Mark C Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941* (Duke University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edward L Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (Vintage, 2010); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996); Bruce J Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Duke University Press, 1994); Fred C Smith, *Trouble in Goshen: Plain Folk, Roosevelt, Jesus, and Marx in the Great Depression South* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2014); The National Emergency Council, “Report on Economic Conditions of the South” (Washington, D.C., July 1938), Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/reportoneconomic00nati. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the history of the Great Depression by state, see: Douglas Carl Abrams, *Conservative Constraints: North Carolina and the New Deal* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992); Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (University Press of Kentucky, 2006); George Blakey, *Hard Times and the New Deal in Kentucky, 1929–1939* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986); Jack Irby Hayes, *South Carolina and the New Deal* (Univ of South Carolina Press, 2001); Ronald L Heinemann, *Depression and New Deal in Virginia: The Enduring Dominion* (University of Virginia Press, 1983); Douglas Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Jerry Bruce Thomas, *An Appalachian New Deal: West Virginia in the Great Depression* (University Press of Kentucky, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christopher M Duncan, *Fugitive Theory: Political Theory, the Southern Agrarians, and America* (Lexington Books, 2000); Bob Holladay, “The Gods That Failed: Agrarianism, Regionalism, and the Nashville-Chapel Hill Highway,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2005): 284–307; Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Louisiana State University Press, 1930). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (UNC Press Books, 1982), 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Images that will be incorporated in the layer include an image of Franklin Street in the 1920s and 1930s (Folder 1154: Chapel Hill: Streets: Franklin Street, circa 1920s: Scan 13, in the North Carolina County Photographic Collection #P0001, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Folder 1155: Chapel Hill: Streets: Franklin Street, circa 1930s: Scan 1 in the North Carolina County Photographic Collection #P0001, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ryan Davis, “Chapel Hill in the Depression,” *The Daily Tar Heel*, March 16, 2009, https://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2009/03/chapel-hill-in-the-depressionbr. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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13. Edward L Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2007); C Van Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For example, Tulane University and the University of Virginia articulated such aspirations under the leadership of Edwin Alderman. The connections between UNC and UVa continue. Born in North Carolina and a graduate of UNC, Alderman, who served as President of Tulane and then UVa, spoke at the UNC Presidential Inauguration of Graham. UVa would also receive support from the Rockefeller Foundation to create a social science institute, which would result in the largest area of expansion in faculty and also be called the IRSS. For more info, see Dumas Malone, *Edwin A. Alderman*, (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc, 1940). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (UNC Press Books, 1982), 273. Orvin Lee Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor’s Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy* (McFarland, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. David S Cecelski and Timothy B Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (UNC Press Books, 2000); “UNC Will Remove Plaques at Kenan Stadium Honoring Kenan Family Member Who Had Ties to Wilmington Massacre,” *WralSPORTSfan*, October 3, 2018, https://www.wralsportsfan.com/unc-will-remove-plaques-at-kenan-stadium-honoring-kenan-family-member-who-had-ties-to-wilmington-massacre/17891899/. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sanders, *Howard W. Odum’s Folklore Odyssey*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, ix–x. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The journal was originally named the *Journal of Social Forces* and changed to *Social Forces* in 1925. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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24. Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. As quoted in Fred Hobson, *Tell about the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (LSU Press, 1983), 180–81. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Howard W. Odum, “Promise and Prospect of the South: ‘A Test of American Regionalism,’” *Proceedings of the Annual Session (Southern Political Science Association)*, no. 8 (1935): 8–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Earl Wright, “WEB Du Bois, Howard W. Odum and the Sociological Ghetto,” *Sociological Spectrum* 34, no. 5 (2014): 453–468. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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32. Sanders, *Howard W. Odum’s Folklore Odyssey*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Odum, “Promise and Prospect of the South,” 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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40. Singal, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Orvin Lee Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor’s Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy* (McFarland, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
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