George Fitzhugh, 1806-1881
**Sociology for the South, or, The Failure of Free Society**
Richmond, Va.: A. Morris, 1854.

**Summary**

George Fitzhugh was born November 4, 1806 in Prince William County, Virginia to an established southern family in financial decline. His physician father, also named George Fitzhugh, and his mother, Lucy Stuart, would later struggle as small-scale planters when the family moved to a plantation near Alexandria, Virginia. Young George was then six years old. Though he attended a local field school, Fitzhugh was largely self-educated. In 1829 he married Mary Metcalf Brockenbrough and moved near Port Royal, Virginia, where he had obtained a small plantation through marriage and practiced law. Fitzhugh subsequently worked as a law clerk in Washington, D.C. (1857-1858) at the office of Attorney General Jeremiah Sullivan Black in the land claim department. Relocating to Richmond in 1862, he also clerked for the Confederacy's Treasury Department. Following the Civil War, Fitzhugh was appointed a judge in the Freedman's Court (part of the Freedman's Bureau) but left in 1866. Despite later publications in *De Bow's Review* (in 1867) and *Lippincott's Magazine* (in 1869 and 1870), George Fitzhugh's postbellum life, like the lives of other proslavery apologist writers, was characterized by relative obscurity. Shortly after his wife's death in 1877, Fitzhugh retired to Frankfort, Kentucky to live with his son. Two years later in 1880, he moved near his daughter's residence in Huntsville, Texas, where he died July 30, 1881.

A vocal slavery advocate, Fitzhugh published a pamphlet titled *Slavery Justified* (1849), which was later reprinted as an appendix in his 1854 *Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society*. During an 1855 visit to Boston, Massachusetts and New Haven, Connecticut, Fitzhugh gave public lectures and engaged in lively debates with northern abolitionists on slavery. He remained convinced that slavery was a rightful, necessary form of labor and that southern blacks should stay enslaved. Despite Fitzhugh's penchant for racism, recent critical scholarship has reexamined his works and their critique of modern capitalism's industrialized, mechanized society in relation to Marxism and its theoretical offshoots.

In *Sociology for the South*, Fitzhugh sets out to demonstrate what he perceives as the overwhelming failure of free society. Opening with a critique of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, he also rejects Locke's theory of the social contract. Fitzhugh details the essential flaw of free trade, which, in privileging the wealthy and further subjecting the poor, puts society at war. Divinely instituted and universally practiced, slavery, he argues, promotes community, morality, and protection for the disadvantaged. *Laissez-faire*, on the other hand, manufactures human degradation, oppression, and selfishness. The pursuit of capital gain through free trade, Fitzhugh suggests, results in an overall moral decline. In triumphing individual self-interest and sacrificing the communal good, free competition yields only hostility. Citing the turbulence in England and France as examples, Fitzhugh bemoans the suffering of free laborers who, toiling under the myth of liberty, equality, and fraternity, actually become society's slaves. By comparison, slaves in the South enjoy the paternalistic favor and care of their masters, making their condition far superior to the lives of their free laboring counterparts. According to Fitzhugh, while the white race remains innately superior in morality and intellect, slavery does function as a civilizing force that elevates the enslaved. Ardently defending life in the South, Fitzhugh itemizes those problems prevalent in free society, which he argues range from the moral decline reflected in changing marital practices to the insidious psychological effects of mounting worker anxieties. Without such antagonisms, southern life under slavery connects human beings to one another and appears characterized by stability, peace, and brotherhood.

**Works Consulted:** Garraty, John A. and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; Knight, Lucian Lamar, comp., *Biographical Dictionary of Southern Authors*, Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1978; Lauter, Paul, ed., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Volume I*, 4th ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; Wilson, Charles Reagan and William Ferris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

See also the entry for [George Fitzhugh from the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*](https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/fitzhughcan/bio.html) available on this site.

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* [Sociology for the South, or, The Failure of Free Society](https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/fitzhughsoc/menu.html)