Book Review

IN SEARCH OF THE NEW SOUTH: THE BLACK URBAN EXPERIENCE IN THE 1970s AND 1980s

By Robert D. Bullard

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The search for a “new South” assumes that the “old South” is dead—that the old South of the “lost cause,” of separate restrooms, and of governors blocking schoolhouse doors is no more. To a large extent this is true.

There is more school integration in the South today than in any other section of the country. More whites supported the election of Douglas Wilder for governor of Virginia and Congressman Mike Espy of Mississippi and Congressman John Lewis of Georgia than whites who voted for Mayor David Dinkins of New York and Mayor Wilson Goode of Philadelphia. As Hodding Carter III wrote in a recent TIME essay “the South as South, a living, ever regenerating mythic land of distinctive personality, is no more.”

What the disappearance of the South as we have historically known it meant to blacks in the 1970s and 1980s has been systematically documented in Robert Bullard’s book, which focuses on the black experience in six large cities. These six case studies of Houston, New Orleans, Atlanta, Memphis, Birmingham, and Tampa, explore the status of African Americans in terms of economic development, demographic change, educational opportunity, housing and residential patterns, and political mobilization. This systematic documentation makes it possible for Bullard to pull the chapters together for a comparative analysis at the conclusion of the volume. He also places the six cities in the wider context of regional growth in his introduction to the volume.

The central question addressed in the work is “to what extent have blacks in the South benefited from growth in the New South?” For all six cities the answer appears to be the same—when compared to whites, blacks in the South have gained relatively little from the changes of the last two decades.
While the creation of nonagricultural jobs in the South reversed the decades-long trend of black out-migration, black unemployment has remained more than two times that of whites in the region. Jobs were moving to the suburbs at the same time blacks were increasing their share of jobs in the central cities. And, in general, whites were not anxious to facilitate black access to these suburban jobs. In the metropolitan Atlanta region, for example, the mostly white suburban counties chose not to become a partner in the city’s modern bus-rail system (MARTA) thus limiting black employment opportunities in these job-rich counties.

Ownership of property, land, and private businesses has remained an illusive goal for blacks in the new South. In virtually all of the six cities studied, the urban highway system that has given suburbanites access to the central city has destroyed historic black communities. Not only has urban renewal removed black neighborhoods but the rural to urban migration stream has accelerated the decline of black land ownership. Black suburbanization has usually meant successive spillover from black neighborhoods or an extension of the segregated housing pattern typical of the central city.

The increasing urban concentration of blacks in Southern cities has meant that by 1980, African Americans comprised the majority population in Atlanta (66.6%), Birmingham (55.6%), and New Orleans (55.3%); and slightly less than half of Memphis’s population (47.6%). These majorities have led to black control of large urban school districts and city governments in the South. With a little over one-half, or 53 percent, of the nation’s black population, the South has produced nearly 62 percent of the nation’s black elected officials (1984). The dilemmas faced by black school administrators and city officials is much the same in the South as in the rest of the nation; how to provide a quality education and adequate city services with a declining revenue base. In short, the prosperity that has come to the new South has flowed directly to the suburbs and largely bypassed the urban South, which looks much like the urban North.

While the “New South” as such has no identity, this is not true of the individual cities that comprise it. Bullard’s book does a good job of comparing the six cities on a number of statistical indices, however, it fails to explain the differences that have developed in several black communities. For example, Atlanta and Houston are cited as having the largest black middle-classes in the region, yet Atlanta’s has produced a very significant political and business elite while Houston’s has not.

Houston and Tampa have sizeable Latino populations. The chapter on Tampa explains the separation that has occurred between African Americans and Afro-Cubans, while the chapter on Houston ignores the relationship between blacks and Chicanos. In rapidly growing Tampa, it is suggested, newly created suburbs are much less resistant to integration than established suburbs. Yet in the