The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas Between Reconstruction and the Great Depression. *By Walter L. Buenger.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xxvi + 342 pp. Maps, photos, tables, notes, index. Cloth, $55.00; paper, $27.50. ISBN: cloth 0-292-70887-4; paper 0-292-70888-2.

Reviewed by Glenn Feldman

This book is written on two levels. As a linear study of "how politics, economics, culture, religion, and race [were] entwined in Northeast Texas" over time (p. xi)—specifically, from 1887 to 1930—it is successful and can be described as well written, thoroughly documented, clear, and highly informative. Chapters on politics, the economy, culture, the law, lynching and reform, women, and Confederate memory constitute a solid survey of the Texas region and the period, revealing that significant changes did occur.

When it strives to be more ambitious and to examine how "the connection and disconnection between memory and reality, between the past and the present shaped the modernization of a region" (p. xi), the book does not fare as well. Although provocative, in the end this theme is not convincing. Buenger makes the following arguments: First, that in 1887 the region of Northeast Texas was fairly "southern" and representative of the traditional South. Second, that, during the period between 1887 and 1930, Northeast Texas became "less southern" and more like the rest of Texas, or, in other words, more "Texan." In line with this second point, he contends that the region grew less conservative, less concerned with race, less enamored of "Lost Cause" ideology and Confederate symbolism, less dependent on a cotton-based economy, more politically open and liberal, more economically dynamic, diverse, and responsive to market incentives, less influenced by evangelical Protestantism, more accepting of women outside the home, more receptive to federal and other types of governmental activism, and generally more like the rest of Texas and less like the rest of the South. In addition, contrary to conventional historical understanding (and to the work of V. O. Key, Gavin Wright, John Steinbeck, and Edward Ayers), these changes occurred in Northeast Texas prior to the New Deal and World War II—events that historians have traditionally

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considered a watershed that transformed and modernized the South and "Americanized" the region. Finally, because these changes occurred in Northeast Texas before the New Deal *and* because Northeast Texas was representative of the greater South, Buenger concludes that these changes also occurred in the South prior to the New Deal and World War II. In effect, he maintains that the path to a modern Texas reflected the Northeast Texas model and revealed how the way was paved to a modern South.

Buenger is on solid ground until he presents this thesis, which unfortunately is the main point of the book and is based on a faulty logic that does not pay adequate attention to its own chronology. It may very well be true that Buenger's first three points of his thesis are fairly valid: that Northeast Texas was "southern" in 1887; that it became less "southern" and more modern and "Texan" between 1887 and 1930; and that these changes occurred in Northeast Texas before the New Deal and World War II. It does not follow, however, that this is the way things happened in the greater South outside of Northeast Texas. If Buenger's point that Northeast Texas became less "southern" and more "Texan" from 1887 to 1930 is valid (which it appears to be), it does not make sense to use Northeast Texas in 1930 as an exemplar for "the South." The author has just finished demonstrating that Northeast Texas, although perhaps once representative of the South prior to 1887, was decreasingly so after 1887. Buenger cannot have it both ways. Either Northeast Texas was like the South in 1930 or it was not. If it was not (as he first argues), then it does not follow that the important changes occurring between 1887 and 1930 within the Texas region also took place in a larger South.

In fact, the attempt to forge this link this leads Buenger to overreach. Basing his argument on the example of Northeast Texas, he states that the region (and a later "modern South") was not very concerned with race, the Lost Cause, its language or mythology, and, in fact, was open and accepting of governmental activism—even that of the federal government—a hugely sanguine estimation at best and a clearly inaccurate one at worst. At one point, Buenger credits Texans for writing "lynching out of their state's history . . . [l]ike [Texans did] slavery" and speaks of a modern southern willingness "to embrace the federal government's help"— highly misleading, if not downright wrong, assertions (p. xxvi). For one, the Union Army had something to do with writing slavery out of Texas and the South. For another, accepting the federal

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government's dollars or "help" in aiding economic development with corporate welfare is a long way from accepting its involvement as a way of life. It is also difficult to imagine a South or a Texas (then or now) where race has lost its resonance, where evangelical Protestantism is not powerful and, in some places, compelling, and where political conservatism has been eclipsed by an open politics that embraces federal activism. Clearly, a more accurate title for Buenger's book would have been "The Path to a Modern *Texas*."

Despite this reservation, which is not insignificant, too much time and energy should not be spent on this book's shortcomings. It has much good to offer. As a survey of the momentous changes in North Texas, and indeed in Texas, over the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth, the book is skillfully done and, in some places, superb.

Glenn Feldman is an assistant professor at the Center for Labor Education and Research at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

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