

The South, the Nation, and the World: Perspectives on Southern Economic Development.
By David Carlton and Peter Coclanis. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.
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Reviewed by Sheldon Hackney

In the 1930s, the Regionalists at the University of North Carolina and the Agrarians centered at Vanderbilt University defined opposite ends of the southern ideological spectrum. Currently, however, the axis from Chapel Hill to Nashville is one of agreement. In *The South, the Nation, and the World*, we get the nourishing fruit of the collaboration between historians David Carlton, Albert R. Newsome Professor at Chapel Hill, and Peter Coclanis, associate professor at Vanderbilt.

This is food for serious thought. These essays, some published here for the first time, examine one of the central questions about the history of the American South since the Civil War: why has poverty been so persistent and economic development so slow? Scholars have usually focused on a circumscribed list: cultural values supposedly inhospitable to industrialization; the lack of investment in social overhead, such as education and roads; the baleful effects of racism, including the inefficiencies of a dual labor force; the empowerment of local elites, who had a short-term economic self-interest in the status quo; or perhaps even a conspiracy among Yankee corporations to keep the South shackled in its colonial dependency.

Coclanis and Carlton, in contrast, adopt a structuralist perspective. For them, the rate of industrialization and urbanization in the South is not surprising. Latecomers typically have a harder time making the transition to a modern economy. The history of the southern economy is thus explained by structural factors, such as the sparsity of capital-mobilizing institutions, the natural efficiencies enjoyed by businesses located in the manufacturing belt (now known as the rust belt), the absence of a pool of skilled labor or of concentrated urban markets, and other rational consequences of the marketplace.

Indeed, as the authors point out, after 1880, the rate of southern industrialization outpaced that of the nation. Therefore, the orthodox narrative of the South's being finally integrated into the nation's industrial economy as a result of federal defense expenditures

in World War II, or, as Gavin Wright would have it, by New Deal policies that drew the region into the national labor market, needs to be replaced by a more complicated, but more natural, process of lumpy and discontinuous change.

The Coclanis-Carlton interpretation has profound implications for the perspective on southern social and political history. The big question is, Did the South during the era of Jim Crow and racial disfranchisement have the capacity to change itself from within? Did fundamental change await the intrusion of external forces, such as the New Deal labor policies, forced-draft military-preparedness expenditures by the federal government, or the intervention of the federal courts, Congress, and the executive branch to bring about the destruction of racial segregation? Coclanis and Carlton answer that the South had the internal capacity for change, and that it indeed did so. They have gathered a lot of evidence, both economic and social, to support their side of the argument.

Still, I expect that this discussion will move through subsequent phases. For instance, Coclanis and Carlton view the collapse of Jim Crow as a cause of the sunbelt phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s, rather than as a result of black aspirations and activism stimulated by prosperity born of World War II. Did racial change cause economic change, or did economic change lead to racial change? They see lagging educational opportunities in the South as the effect of a depressed agricultural economy and a modern sector dominated by extractive, low-value-added industry, rather than as a cause of slow growth. In which direction do the arrows of causation point? Is it too obvious to think that such relationships are iterative?

For anyone wanting to explore the economic or social history of the post-Civil War South, this is required reading. The scholarship is sound, the writing is compelling, the interpretations are sophisticated and bold. A new narrative of the South is here in the making.

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