

1997

## Review Essay:--The Transformation of the Late-Twentieth-Century South

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### Recommended Citation

Mohl, Raymond A. (1997) "Review Essay:--The Transformation of the Late-Twentieth-Century South," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 76 : No. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol76/iss3/6>

## The Transformation of the Late-Twentieth-Century South

by RAYMOND A. MOHL

*The New South, 1945-1980.* By Numan V. Bartley. *A History of the South.* Volume XI. Edited by Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995. Publishers preface, author's preface, essay on authorities, index. \$39.95 hardcover.)

OVER the past few decades, the study of southern history has experienced an impressive scholarly renewal. Few areas of modern American scholarship have produced such exciting new work. Traditional subjects such as the antebellum South, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction southern politics and race relations have been reworked and reinterpreted. Recent social and cultural history approaches have given us new perspectives on slavery and slaves, the white and black working class, black and white women, urban and rural life, family and religion, and the cultural imperatives that shaped and molded the southern experience. Above all, however, southern historical scholarship has moved solidly into the twentieth century. This outpouring of work on the modern South— on southern politics, on race relations, on civil rights, on rural and urban change, and on many other subjects— has made possible Numan V. Bartley's compelling synthesis, *The New South, 1945-1980*, the eleventh volume in Louisiana State University Press's distinguished *History of the South* series.

Bartley's academic credentials for this masterful work on the post-World War II South are impressive. He has been writing about the modern South since the 1960s. His first book, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South during the 1950s* (1969), remains the classic study of southern white resistance to racial change and civil rights. Bartley has also explored other dimensions of modern southern history in his later work, including: *From Thurmond to Wallace: Political Tendencies in Georgia, 1948-1968* (1970);

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*Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction* (1975), co-authored with Hugh Davis Graham; and *The Creation of Modern Georgia* (1983). Numan Bartley, in short, has spent his entire academic career seeking to understand modern southern history, especially the region's political history, and this background has served him well in the preparation of his latest book.

This new synthesis on the late-twentieth-century South ranges widely across the full spectrum of postwar southern change. Like most good history, it effectively manages to balance the general with the specific. It outlines the broad, sweeping forces that affected the South and produced dramatic and modernizing change, while at the same time illustrating those forces with judiciously selected evidence from the story of modern southern history. Consequently, the book is both interpretive and narrative, and a compelling narrative at that. Bartley's *The New South* certainly will be regarded for some time to come as an essential starting point for any discussion of modern southern history.

Change provides the interpretive framework for understanding the evolution of Bartley's "New South." In 1940, the South was described as an economic backwater of the nation typified by agriculture and rural poverty. The region badly lagged behind the rest of the United States in economic growth, personal income, education, health care, indoor plumbing, and other measurable social statistics. It also had higher rates of illiteracy, homicide, suicide, and lynching. It had a "colonial" economy dominated by absentee owners, mostly from the Northeast, who controlled the region's access to capital and credit. By 1980, the terminal point of Bartley's account, the South had become, amazingly to many, an integral part of the dynamic and economically vibrant "Sunbelt" region. During that forty-year period, dramatic demographic changes, along with the mechanization of southern agriculture, resulted in a vast rural depopulation. As millions of people moved off the farm (about ten million people between 1940 and 1960 alone), the South experienced the explosive growth of an urban and metropolitan culture. The proportion of southerners living in cities more than doubled between 1940 and 1960, rising from twenty percent to almost forty-four percent. These demographic tendencies intensified still further between 1960 and 1980.

By the 1980s dynamically growing urban Florida, Georgia, and Texas had come to represent the "new" South. Rural and small town culture coexisted uneasily with the downtown skyscrapers and

burgeoning suburbs of the metropolitan South. Indeed, as Bartley portrays these changes, internal migration, urbanization, and the much more diversified economy that accompanied urban growth contributed to the decline, perhaps even the disintegration, of traditional southern culture based on family, church, and community. Urbanization brought new levels of social conflict and racial discord to the South. The postwar era witnessed powerful shifts in southern race relations, especially as the civil rights movement heated up in the 1950s and 1960s. Southern politics also experienced big changes over time, as the old conservative county elites who dominated local affairs gradually were displaced by moderate, liberal, or black politicians more attuned to the modernizing trends of the time.

Bartley credits World War II with initiating, or at least accentuating and accelerating, the massive changes outlined above. The war abruptly stimulated southern migration, as young men were mobilized into the armed forces; others, including blacks and women, migrated to urban centers in the North and South, seeking work in war industries. The South became an important regional force in the wartime military machine. Military training bases were heavily concentrated in the southern states. Year-round good flying weather made the South an ideal location for flight training. Big naval bases in Norfolk, Jacksonville, and Pensacola, and huge air bases in Texas and throughout the region brought the federal government into the South as never before. Aircraft factories in Georgia and Texas, and shipbuilding in Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi dramatically altered the labor market and pumped up local economies. These vast federal investments fueled economic and urban growth. Traditional southern social relations were rocked as well, as blacks and women found new places in the defense plants and shipyards. Blacks who had served in the military or worked in the defense industries emerged from the war with higher expectations for the future, setting the stage for the civil rights movement. Recent historians have concurred on the importance of World War II in triggering demographic, economic, and social change at home, and Bartley's work on the South confirms this analysis.

Bartley devotes considerable attention to the changing political landscape of the modern South. Indeed, tracing the shifting and often contradictory political tendencies of postwar southern politics forms much of the core of Bartley's book. Despite the na-

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tional image of a one-party Democratic South, southern politics was never monolithic. In the immediate postwar years, sharply defined differences and divergencies became commonplace. Southern New Dealers—committed liberals—carried their political principles into the postwar period and pursued a “popular front liberalism” focused on issues of class. The labor movement’s Operation Dixie, a CIO project that sought to build political and industrial democracy in the South, reflected the persistence of New Deal liberalism in the postwar South. However, the southern labor movement divided over the issue of race, with the left wing committed to interracial unionism and the right wing wedded to segregation in the unions and on the job. Other postwar liberals pursued interracialism and civil rights through other means, such as the work of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) and the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF). Both groups were quickly marginalized politically during the anticommunist frenzy of the McCarthy era, as right-wing opponents pinned the communist label on SCHW and SCEF. Bartley minimizes the importance of these small and underfunded organizations, but they were viciously attacked by mainstream southern politicians because they challenged the ruling orthodoxy on race and class.

That southern political orthodoxy emerged from the war in reinvigorated form, especially in the presidential election of 1948. In that raucous election year, conservative southern Democrats bolted from the party over the inclusion of a civil rights plank in the Democratic platform, running South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond for president on the Dixiecrat ticket. The Dixiecrats publicly emphasized the idea of states’ rights, but clearly race was their central concern. Although polling substantial voter support in the Deep South in a failed election bid, the reactionary Dixiecrats of 1948 nevertheless set the stage for the political cleavages of the next several decades.

As Bartley moves his analysis into the 1950s and after, southern political controversies converged with civil rights issues. As the civil rights struggle strengthened in the 1950s and as blacks began making gains in the courts and in national politics, southern conservatives dug in their heels to preserve “the southern way of life”; that is, they intended to maintain racial segregation no matter what the cost. Southern state legislatures and southern communities balked at school desegregation. White Citizens’ Councils sprouted throughout the region to mobilize public sentiment and counter-

act civil rights activism. Massive resistance was the consequence throughout the South. The Ku Klux Klan was rejuvenated in the postwar period, and violence against African Americans and civil rights activists was legitimized. Reactionary southern governors—Herman Talmadge in Georgia, Ross Barnett in Mississippi, George Wallace in Alabama—dramatized the commitment to segregation in speech and action. Even southern moderates, such as Florida governor LeRoy Collins, initially pledged their allegiance to segregation, as did his successors in Tallahassee, Farris Bryant, Haydon Burns, and Claude Kirk. And at the national level, presidents from Truman to Nixon (Lyndon Johnson was an exception on this issue) were reluctant to challenge the segregationists because they needed the political support of the southern conservatives in Congress, many of whom chaired important congressional committees because of their seniority.

The anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s, hyped by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, also played into the segregationist strategy of the southern conservatives. Standing up for segregation was a patriotic endeavor in the postwar South, but reactionaries in the South (and in the North, as well) believed that advocating civil rights for African Americans or supporting the civil liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights were part of a desperate communist plot to overthrow the “American way.” Eight southern states established anticommunist investigative committees or commissions, paralleling the House Un-American Affairs Committee and McCarthy’s Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security. In 1956, for instance, the Florida legislature created the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, initially to search for communists in the Miami NAACP; the committee later targeted homosexual professors in the state universities, who also were considered to be dangerous left-wingers. This bizarre witch-hunt in the Sunshine State, which carried over into the early 1960s typified the retrograde nature of mainstream southern social and political thought in the red-hunting years of the Cold War era. The climate of fear and repression promoted the idea that desegregation and communism were part of the same anti-American scheme. In a strange and twisted way, many southerners equated standing up for segregation with fighting communism.

The battle over segregation and civil rights completely dominated southern life and politics for several decades after World War II. Bartley does an excellent job exploring this complex subject. He

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demonstrates in some detail the growing southern disillusionment with the hard-line segregationist stance and the eventual emergence of a more moderate position— a position taken by “business progressives,” some powerful religious leaders such as Oral Roberts, and, by the late 1960s a new generation of progressive southern governors, such as Jimmy Carter in Georgia, Dale Bumpers in Arkansas, and Reuben Askew in Florida. By the 1960s then, moderate southerners gradually began to move the South away from the hardline segregationist ideology that had characterized the early postwar decades.

Even more significant than the southern moderates, however, was the impact of the civil rights movement. In two important chapters, Bartley traces the evolution of civil rights activism in the South, beginning with the student sit-ins in 1960. The author correctly notes the bottom-up, grass-roots nature of the sit-ins and later forms of activism such as freedom rides, voter registration, community organization, and protest marches and demonstrations. As Bartley writes, the sit-in movement not only challenged segregation, but “it was also a rejection of the racial diplomats and the NAACP” (303). At the grass-roots level, activist southern blacks became increasingly frustrated by the slow-moving, gradualist nature of the top-down leadership of the NAACP and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Other civil rights groups with more activist programs and more immediate goals led the charge against southern segregation— especially the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Local chapters of these two groups functioned more or less autonomously, suggesting that by the 1960s there were many civil rights *movements* rather than a single movement dominated by a few national leaders and organizations. Segregation was challenged all over the South by local people acting together and forcefully demanding change.

Bartley also demonstrates clearly that in the early years the civil rights activists got little help from Washington. President Truman was lukewarm on the subject of southern race relations, and his administration’s civil rights proposals (anti-poll tax, anti-lynching, fair employment practices legislation, and desegregation of interstate transportation) had little chance of congressional passage and did little to jeopardize “the underlying structure of racial segregation” (75). President Eisenhower supported voting rights, but he was unhappy about sending federal troops to Little Rock to en-

force school desegregation, and he had little patience with black demands for greater progress on civil rights. In Bartley's analysis, President Kennedy was no strong supporter of civil rights, either. He sought to retain the political support of conservative southern congressmen, thus no substantial challenge to segregation could be mounted. JFK did support voter registration, and he made some "symbolic" gestures such as the desegregation of the White House press corps. But Kennedy's Justice Department cavalierly abandoned civil rights workers and voter registrants in the South, who were subjected to violence at the hands of segregationist mobs. And for years, the FBI under Director J. Edgar Hoover had been claiming that the African American civil rights movement was being infiltrated and manipulated by communists, an argument that in the midst of the Cold War seemed to find easy and uncritical acceptance in Congress and the White House.

Bartley's chapters on the southern civil rights movement are among the strongest in the book. Although *The New South* is primarily a synthesis of published scholarship, the civil rights segment is grounded in original research in manuscript collections, including SNCC Papers, CORE Papers, SCLC Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers, Voter Education Project Papers, civil rights files from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and oral histories in the Kennedy and Johnson libraries and elsewhere. Readers will find this section enlightening for numerous reasons: the emphasis on individual and community action in the civil rights movement; the infighting among groups and leaders to control the movement; the cynicism of federal officials toward the struggle of black and white Americans to achieve full racial equality; the shift from nonviolent actions to black power strategies; and finally the political empowerment of African Americans in the South, as blacks achieved elective office in small towns and big cities throughout the region. By 1980, voters in Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Richmond had elected black mayors. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 put into law many of the goals of civil rights activists, but race did not disappear as a deeply divisive issue. For instance, the controversy over busing to achieve integrated schools kept the racial fires burning throughout the 1970s. But Bartley also reports a "softening" of racial attitudes by white folk during that decade that helped to moderate and stabilize southern politics. But these moderating tendencies did little to improve the economic condition of most poor blacks, even as middle-class blacks were get-

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ting elected to office or taking jobs in the expanding federal bureaucracy during the Great Society years and after. Political empowerment and economic empowerment did not necessarily coincide for most southern blacks.

Bartley brings his analysis of the postwar “new” South to a close with a chapter on the “Sunbelt South” of the 1970s. The term “Sunbelt” first achieved journalistic parlance in the 1970s as a shorthand for describing a cluster of powerful demographic, economic, and political changes in American life. In the late 1960s Republican strategist Kevin Phillips first conceived the Sunbelt as the nation’s politically conservative southern rim, a conception that conflated the South and the West and helped Richard Nixon gain the White House in 1968. In the 1970s as the nation’s industrial heartland suffered a nasty economic decline, observers discovered the reverse in the South and West— a thriving, expanding economy. A great demographic shift was also taking place, as the North and Midwest experienced severe population declines and the southern rim— especially Florida, Texas, and California— attracted unprecedented numbers of newcomers. For some, these complex changes suggested the emergence of a dynamic new region. The South had seemingly overcome its past and now appeared to be on the cutting edge of America’s future. Many southerners eagerly abandoned history and embraced the Sunbelt— after all, it promised economic development, metropolitan growth, full integration into the mainstream of national life, and modernization in multifarious ways. Others demurred, such as writer John Egerton, whose book *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (1974) argued that the South seemed “to be abandoning the best features of southern culture and adopting the least admirable traits of the North” (443).

The rise of the Sunbelt way of thinking initially challenged those scholars and writers who conceived of the South as culturally distinct from the rest of the nation. The theme of continuity in southern history has had a long and active life, but the Sunbelt phenomenon posed a serious interpretive alternative. Adopting Sunbelt imagery made it possible for southerners to escape a past shaped by poverty, injustice, guilt, and defeat. Bartley does not go that far, but he does concede that the South has changed substantially over the course of the late twentieth century. The forces unleashed by the war initiated a far-reaching process of southern change. The campaign for massive resistance and the economic and political changes that led to the Sunbelt South also contrib-

uted in important ways to the modern transformation of the region. "The nature of southern identity underwent a crucial change" (450), Bartley writes, a change characterized by the emergence of a dominant suburban lifestyle, adoption of national consumer tastes, and the replacement of traditional southern folk culture by autonomous individualism. The "new" South of the post-war era, according to Bartley, was a South that had lost much of its distinctive character and regional identity.

There are many who would disagree with this judgment, who would contend that even in the late 1990s the South has retained a unique cultural presence, and who would argue that despite the impact of big change and mass culture the South remains considerably different. In accepting the "Americanization of the South" thesis, Bartley perhaps too easily has dismissed the substantial contemporary evidence for the persistence of southern culture and the continuity of southern history. The South has urbanized, but as historian David Goldfield has suggested in *Cotton Fields and Sky-scrapers* (1982), persisting rural cultures have powerfully shaped southern urbanization. Southern manners, local attachments, and regional consciousness persist despite the on-going standardization and homogenization of American mass culture. The salience of religious belief and practice continues to distinguish southerners. Just listen to any radio station anywhere in the South on a Sunday. When strangers meet, the first topic of discussion often might be "What church do you go to?" Southern music and southern foodways remain distinctive, even as they become popular elsewhere. The South continues to be noted for its culinary delights: grits and collard greens, pecan pie and peach cobbler, fried catfish and fried okra, country ham and barbecued ribs. About what other region could a historian write of hogs as a regional cultural symbol?<sup>1</sup> Golf and tennis have captured the leisure time of Americans, but bass boats and pole-fishing symbolically reveal alternative leisure tastes in the South. Sociologist John Shelton Reed, who has made a career of writing about southern cultural persistence, has defined southerners as "people who eat grits, listen to country music, follow stock-car racing, support corporal punishment in the schools, hunt possum, go to Baptist churches, and prefer bourbon

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1. S. Jonathan Bass, "'How 'bout a Hand for the Hog': The Enduring Nature of the Swine as a Cultural Symbol in the South," *Southern Cultures* 1 (Spring 1995), 301-20.

to scotch."<sup>2</sup> Unhappily, the long tradition of southern violence has persisted, as well. In the mid-1970s, according to Reed, the FBI's annual uniform crime statistics reported that the list of places with the highest homicide rates was dominated by southern cities; only three non-southern cities broke into the top twenty-five most violent cities in 1972, for example.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond this tradition of violence, the South has also been characterized by a persisting culture of poverty. Autonomous suburban lifestyles may be typical for white middle-class professionals in the metropolitan South, but a large population of white and black poor people still dwell in the rural South. The interstates link suburban commuters to city jobs and speed travelers from one big city to another, but a drive through the back roads of the South presents an altogether different version of southern life and culture. According to historian Jacqueline Jones in *The Dispossessed* (1992), as late as 1990 rural poverty was still considerably more widespread in the South than in other sections of the nation. As Jones writes, "The parts of the rural South where poor households represented up to seventy percent of the total population remained in a time warp of sorts. The underlying continuity between antebellum slavery days and conditions of the 1980s was palpable."<sup>4</sup>

Bartley suggests that southern politics have been homogenized, particularly with the Republicanization of the South in recent decades. But the traditions of "cracker" politics (or more recently, "Bubba" politics) have lingered on into the 1990s. Florida politicians provide some good examples, especially Governor Lawton Chiles, a leading practitioner of the "that dog won't hunt" school of politicking. During the 1994 Florida gubernatorial campaign, for instance, Governor Chiles stumped challenger Jeb Bush (and journalists, as well) with this cracker line: "The old he-coon walks just be-

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2. John Shelton Reed, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture* (San Diego, 1993), 15. Reed's other books on southern cultural persistence include: *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Lexington, Mass., 1972); *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (Baton Rouge, 1982); *Southerners: The Social Psychology of Sectionalism* (Chapel Hill, 1983); *Whistling Dixie: Dispatches from the South* (Columbia, Mo., 1990); *Surveying the South: Studies in Regional Psychology* (Columbia, Mo., 1993); *Kicking Back: Further Dispatches from the South* (Columbia, Mo., 1995).

3. John Shelton Reed, "Below the Smith and Wesson Line: Southern Violence," in Reed, *One South*, 139-53.

4. Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York, 1992), 269-70, 286.

fore the light of day." In Panhandle lore, the he-coon was the oldest and wisest raccoon, and Chiles was presenting himself as the he-coon of Florida politics. In 1996, when President Bill Clinton campaigned for re-election in conservative parts of Florida, he announced that he had come "to find myself a he-coon."<sup>5</sup> It is not likely that the "he-coon" style of politics would have much appeal for voters in, say, Massachusetts or California. In Alabama, Governor Fob James has proudly asserted that the Bill of Rights does not apply to the state of Alabama— not the sort of statement that would be highly popular in, say, Minnesota or Oregon. Fob much prefers the Ten Commandments, and he recently threatened to call out the Alabama National Guard in support of a state judge who posted those ancient religious proscriptions on his courtroom wall. And where else but in the South would national politicians such as Jesse Helms or Strom Thurmond find continuing voter support over many years? Thus, despite decades of postwar modernization and homogenization southern politics still seems more than a bit peculiar.

From a broader, more conceptual point of view, Bartley pays too little attention to the considerable recent literature on the South as a shared concept, as a state of mind, or as a mythological place imagined by non-southerners. As historian Edward L. Ayers has written, "the South, contrary to so many words written in defense and in attack, was not a fixed, known, and unified place but a place of constant movement, struggle, and negotiation." Although a land apart, the South was also, as Ayers put it, "continually coming into being, continually being remade, continually struggling with its pasts."<sup>6</sup> Bartley's book has many strengths, but it has little to say about shifting southern imagery and its cultural meanings.

5. *Miami Herald*, July 12, July 18, September 7, 1996.

6. Edward L. Ayers, "What We Talk About When We Talk About the South," in Edward L. Ayers, et al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore, 1996), 62-82, quotations on pp. 81, 82. On this issue, see also Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore, 1979); Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield, eds., *The South for New Southerners* (Chapel Hill, 1991); Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle, eds., *The South as an American Problem* (Athens, 1995); Richard H. King and Helen Taylor, eds., *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures* (New York, 1996) The classic study by W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), despite many now apparent weaknesses, is also relevant to the subject of southern regional identity and cultural persistence.

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*The New South* has a sweeping range over four decades of recent southern history, but in the effort to synthesize Bartley has underplayed the startling degree of cultural diversity *within* the South. There is much on the civil rights movement and race relations, but shockingly little on African American life and culture in the South. Readers will come away from Bartley's book with little awareness of the role of ethnicity in southern life: of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Texas, Cubans and Haitians in Miami, Jewish retirees in South Florida, Central Americans all over the rural South, the long-established Chinese community in Mississippi, Native Americans in Florida, North Carolina or Oklahoma, Vietnamese fishermen along the Gulf Coast, Filipinos in Jacksonville and Pensacola, Asian Indians who run small southern motels (as in the film *Mississippi Masala*). Bartley's new South is populated by Baptists, revivalists, and televangelists, but it seems to have little room for Catholics, Jews, Muslims, or practitioners of other religions. Much of Bartley's treatment is focused on the traditional Deep South states, but peripheral southern states such as Florida are mostly ignored. With its rapid growth, retirement migration streams, and many immigrant newcomers, Florida does not fit neatly into Bartley's southern narrative. Bartley does relatively little with southern urban history, aside from a few pages sketching the growth of Atlanta and Houston; the most culturally unique southern (and American) city—New Orleans—is barely mentioned. Perhaps because Bartley's focus is primarily on the political narrative, he misses much of the social, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the modern South.

Writing modern southern history presents numerous interpretive challenges. Given the enormity of the subject, Bartley has effectively captured the patterns of postwar southern change. But not every student of the South will agree with his interpretation of those changes and their consequences. Nevertheless, *The New South* is a very important book— a big book on a big subject. Bartley has written an excellent synthesis with a driving narrative and a forcefully stated thesis. *The New South* has all the makings of a classic.