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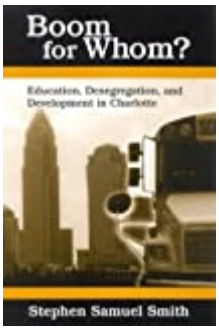

Stephen Samuel Smith. *Boom for Whom? Education, Desegregation and Development in Charlotte.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. x + 368 pp. $86.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-5985-0.

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Published on H-Urban (May, 2005)

The one fact that most historians of the post-war urban South know about Charlotte, North Carolina, is probably that the Supreme Court case that allowed mandatory bussing orders to be used as a means of achieving school desegregation, Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, originated there. Much less well known, however, is the aftermath of the Swann decision in the Queen City. Yet, as Stephen Samuel Smith demonstrates in this complex, carefully argued work, the years since Swann provide a fascinating case study of the relationship between educational policy, desegregation, development, and urban politics that challenges much of our received wisdom concerning these themes.

Boom for Whom? rests on two related theses which highlight the inextricable ties between what happened in Charlotte schools, boardrooms, and City Hall. First, Smith contends that bussing in Charlotte, although not championed by the city's business leaders until opposition to it threatened to develop into a crisis in the early 1970s, ultimately contributed more towards the development of the city than it did towards the economic welfare of its African American population. As Smith demonstrates, comparisons with other urban North Carolina counties show that, while the economic status of Mecklenburg County African Americans has improved more than that of their counterparts elsewhere, other counties have been more successful in narrowing the economic gap between the races, despite Charlotte's reputation for providing opportunities for African Americans.

The relatively peaceful acceptance of school integration, and the participation of Charlotteans of both races in devising an equitable bussing plan for the community, allowed Charlotte to attract businesses looking to relocate to the Sunbelt, but chary of entanglement in Southern racial dramas, to the city. Furthermore, the alliance strengthened in the 1970s between African Americans and businessmen who supported bussing guaranteed black support for pro-growth policies in the following decades. Yet business leaders did little to defend desegregation in the 1980s and 1990s, first against a mid-1980s magnet school plan which began a trend towards re-segregation, and secondly in the face of renewed opposition to bussing which culminated in a successful legal challenge in the late 1990s.

Secondly, Smith argues, Charlotte's economic boom, though in part fuelled by school integration, hastened the demise of bussing. The city's rapid growth was concentrated in the wealthy, white southern portion of Mecklenburg County, creating virtually all-white communities distant from the areas where most African Americans lived, making racial balance in the schools ever more difficult to achieve without long bus journeys. The failure

of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education to steer school construction away from such segregated communities into more racially diverse areas added to the problem, as did the fact that many residents of these outlying areas were recent arrivals to the region, having moved there when their employers relocated to Charlotte. Such people had little connection to the city or its desegregation struggles, and often did not understand why their children were being bussed to distant schools; indeed, some had moved to the outskirts of Mecklenburg County believing that they would be immune from bussing.[1] These individuals constituted much of the opposition to bussing in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in Federal District Court Judge Robert Potter's 1999 decision that bussing was no longer needed in Charlotte.[2]

Yet Smith's work is by no means intended to suggest that the pursuit of school integration was, or indeed is, a worthless goal. By analyzing test scores in Charlotte in the years since Swann, he shows that the period during which desegregation was at its peak, the early 1980s, was also the time when the city's schools best served both African American and white children. When re-segregation was allowed to begin in the mid-1980s, the educational achievement of all children fell correspondingly.[3] Smith is no cheerleader for desegregation, noting that even at its zenith in Charlotte significant racial and class-based inequalities remained, but he nonetheless convincingly supports his belief that, as Jennifer Hochschild states, "school desegregation is the worst option, except for the others."[4] Smith's realistic, careful analysis is a valuable contribution to the debate on the validity of integration as a means of improving the educational opportunities of African American children, especially given the scepticism regarding this strategy in recent years.[5]

Smith also contradicts the argument that meaningful desegregation post-Brown was made impossible by the inevitability of American residential segregation, by highlighting the political choices that facilitated greater segregation in Charlotte, particularly in terms of the failure to evenly distribute growth. He emphasizes the culpability of the Board of Education in this process, noting that their acquiescence in school construction in white outlying areas spurred further development in these places, as communities that included a school became more desirable locations. This argument is especially pertinent given the series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s concerning de facto educational segregation, as well as Potter's ruling in Charlotte itself, which stated that, as residential segregation was outside the control of local authorities, they were not required to take action to counteract its effects on racial balance in schools. Yet, in Charlotte, as Smith shows, the actions of local officials, including the Board of Education, clearly influenced the extent of segregation, and at the very least could have done more to discourage it.[6]

As with J. Mills Thornton's *Dividing Lines*, Smith thus shows that paying close attention to the local context produces a more nuanced picture of desegregation issues than approaches that focus on the national level.[7] However, it would have strengthened his argument to have elaborated further on who and what is meant by "the business elite" in Charlotte, and to have addressed the question of changes within this group over time. One Charlotte journalist has argued that, since the retirement of many of the "business elite" in recent years, there has been a power vacuum in the city, to the particular detriment of the school system.[8] It is worth considering whether the failure of the "business elite" to support desegregation in the late 1990s, therefore, was influenced by the fact that it was in a period of transition, with key members nearing retirement and perhaps less willing to become involved in lengthy controversies over education than in the 1970s. This in turn raises the larger question of whether the behavior of the "business elite" in Charlotte really did reflect the outlook and interests of a distinct social group or merely the actions of a particular generation of powerful, politically active individuals who believed in the importance of education to the welfare of the city.

The other major omission in *Boom for Whom?* is a sense of what school desegregation meant to Charlotteans, particularly students, teachers and parents, although Smith's careful analysis of school board election results does provide an overall indication of the level of public support for bussing. Whilst this is a somewhat unfair criticism, since Smith's focus is on leadership, his approach does tend to render the notion of integration a rather abstract, empty one. Inclusion of the perspectives of those affected by the changes Smith describes would add emotional texture to his work, as well as contributing to a more general understanding of the popular response to integration, given the backing most black, and many white, Charlotteans gave to pro-bussing Board of Education candidates throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Since recent scholarship has emphasized the high cultural and psychological costs of integration to African Americans, consideration of a city where black support for bussing remained consistently strong despite increasing inequalities could prove especially valuable.[9]

Smith's insistence on linking politics, education, and development, as well as his defense of bussing, have been amply justified by Charlotte's recent history. Since the introduction of a race-neutral pupil assignment plan in 1999, test scores in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools have dropped, especially relative to those of surrounding counties. Consequently, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s most white migrants to the area moved to Mecklenburg County, attracted by its reputation for good schools, they are increasingly choosing neighbouring Union, York, or Cabarrus counties instead. This change, combined with an increase in white enrolment in Mecklenburg County private and parochial schools, has led to a precipitous decline in the percentage of whites enrolled in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools, from 54 percent in the mid-1990s to 39 percent in 2005. The school system once heralded as a model of peaceful and successful desegregation is rapidly re-segregating; between 1995 and 2003, the number of African American students in Charlotte attending schools which were over 90 percent non-white increased almost tenfold.[10] Smith's warning of the consequences of placing the interests of development and the placation of vocal protest groups ahead of the educational needs of children may already be too late for a community on the brink of seeing its proud boast of being "the city that made it work" rendered a hollow mockery.

Notes

[1]. The city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County are consolidated; thus, the area's school system includes the entire county, so the bussing order applied to all children living within the county boundaries.

[2]. For a more in-depth analysis of Charlotte's anti-bussing factions than Smith provides, see Matthew D. Lassiter, "The Suburban Origins of 'Color-Blind' Conservatism: Middle-Class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis," *Journal of Urban History* 30, no. 4 (May 2004): pp. 549-582. Interestingly, Judge Potter himself, as a Charlotte citizen, was involved in the city's anti-bussing movement in the early 1970s.

[3]. Smith, pp. 78-79.

[4]. Smith, p. 241.

[5]. James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone And Its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 191-205, provides a useful summary of modern critiques of school integration.

[6]. Those decisions were Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell in 1991, Freeman v. Pitts in 1992 and Missouri v. Jenkins in 1995.

[7]. J. Mills Thornton, III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

[8]. Tara Servatius, "Crash of the Titans," *Creative Loafing Charlotte*, 2 March 2005.

[9]. Peter Irons, Jim Crowe's Children: The Broken Promises Of The Brown Decision (New York: Penguin, 2002), pp. 343-347, briefly summarizes this debate.

[10]. Tara Servatius, School Choice Consequences," *Creative Loafing Charlotte*, 2 March 2005.