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Bobby M. Wilson. *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. x + 275 pp. $69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9483-9.

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Local History and Global Analysis

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The publishers of *Race and Place in Birmingham* classify the work within the fields of Geography and Race Studies. It might also be included within Political Science, Social Science and History. H-South regulars expecting a traditional history monograph should be warned. *Race and Place in Birmingham* demands a considerable effort of its readers, but those equal to the challenge will enjoy a fresh interpretation of the civil rights and neighborhood movements in Birmingham. At the same time, most readers will experience a more difficult but impressive analysis of modern capitalism and its effects upon social movements, as well as the author's prescriptions for societal change.

Wilson seeks to explain the dynamics of the two social movements in Birmingham not only as local phenomena, but also as the result of "larger structural and institutional forces" (p. 2). He begins with an analysis of postmodern politics as the replacement for interest group politics and pluralist theory. Whereas pluralist politics separated politics from private life, Wilson argues, postmodern politics provides the occasion for emancipation and development of different identities. Though class figures heavily in Wilson's analysis (and even more heavily in his prescriptions), class is only one aspect of a individual's identity. The postmodern world enables new identifies (individual and social) to emerge. Birmingham serves as the case study to illustrate the larger dynamics of national and international capitalism as well as local social movements.

Wilson's description of modernity indicts the tendencies of the nation state toward homogeneity, uniformity and standardization. These characteristics conform too closely, he argues, to the dominant features of capitalism, thus putting the power of the state in the service of the ideological/economic system. Wilson briefly recapitulates the history of Birmingham to establish that city's post-Civil War experience as an example of modernization. From pre-modern slavery to the Prussian route, Birmingham becomes industrialized and adopts twentieth-century capitalism without disturbing its race practices. In fact, the conditions of racism promoted segmentation of labor and helped to conceal economic inequality.

The Great Depression and the policies of the New Deal restructured the black community and created conditions favorable to the civil rights movement. The decline of tenant farming and the concentration of black population in urban areas–along with the rise in black churches, colleges and businesses–provided the context for social and political change. In other parts of the United States, pluralist politics in urban areas absorbed black voters without giving up real power. But the race policies of Birmingham allow no such accommodation. Furthermore, Wilson argues, the post-depression political economy emphasized stability and increased consumption–factors that further suppressed class differences. In Birmingham, an emerging black middle class

favored peaceful change and negotiation instead of direct confrontation.

Black identity begins to mature in the South after World War II. The worldwide anti-colonial movement combined with domestic changes and the writings of black intellectuals to nurture resistance based on racial identify, not class. In Birmingham, the white response to even tentative black requests for change was widespread, including local action, appeals to the state legislature, the organization of Citizens Councils and resistance by white unions. For a time, neither the political nor economic institutions of the city would alter the status quo. Change came to Birmingham only when that economic and political consensus broke down.

Wilson tells the story of the "Battle for Birmingham" (Chapter 8) succinctly. This is not a comprehensive history of local civil rights, but rather an example of his larger thesis. Under pressure from local blacks, the national government and, most important, the national and international press, the power elite of the city split. Although the political leadership remained adamant, the economic leadership began to weight the damage being done to the city's image and interests. The city adopted a new form of government, accepted biracial negotiating committees and eventually repealed segregation ordinances. These events, according to Wilson, were the result of post-World War II economic changes that–by the 1960s–tipped the political balance in favor of modest political reform. In the Fordist economy that came to the South, the appearance of efficiency and the ability of communities to attract capital investment was crucial. Racial turmoil became incompatible with economic development. "This moment was one of the few in U.S. history where blacks benefited from market forces in their struggle for racial equality. Capitalists attempted to avoid places with stigmas of racism" (p. 107).

The years after Birmingham's most difficult troubles saw an increase in the national welfare state and the development of specific, national urban programs such as the Community Action Program (CAP) and Model Cities. Wilson admires the grass roots process inherent in CAP, but views Model Cities as an attempt of municipal leaders to recapture control of anti-poverty efforts. Furthermore, national welfare policies tended to reinforce the assumption of those opposed to anti-poverty programs that blacks benefited disproportionately. Income distribution improved under such programs, but Wilson regrets that anti-poverty efforts weakened class identity and made no lasting changes in the structure of the capitalist system.

The capitalist system itself evolved toward the end of the twentieth century. The post-Fordist economy, according to Wilson, is international and highly competitive; investment capital is both flexible and mobile. Within metropolitan areas such as Birmingham, white flight and capital flight occur together, leaving greater concentrations of blacks in the central city. In the international arena, corporations move plants, investments and job opportunities with ease. The resulting dislocations in the labor market have weakened unions and cowed local officials into offering larger and larger inducements to maintain and attract both capital and the jobs that accompany the investments. National politics is driven to the right and emphasizes market values to the detriment of distributional policies and equity concerns. City planning follows the general trend by adopting standards that are ostensibly objective, but in fact serve corporate and elite needs.

Wilson illustrates one possible response to this bleak landscape by describing the rise of the neighborhood movement in Birmingham. From 1945 to 1975 thirty black-led civil leagues emerged to affect policy. By the 1990s, the neighborhood associations numbered over one hundred. These associations provide a channel for local concerns and serve as training grounds for political leadership. Wilson hopes that their presence will offset the modernist view of planning as normative and uniform in favor of a process that promotes diversity.

The concluding chapter of *Race and Place in Birmingham* identifies a dilemma at the core of the book: the postmodern politics of race identity and neighborhood encourage atomization and consequent harm to collective action. The exclusiveness associated with black identity, for example, may have served the cause of civil rights, but is inadequate to face down global corporate power. Wilson identifies a need for organizing principle that transcends the constraints of race and place (and ethnicity and gender). For Wilson, a renewed awareness of class provides the opportunity for an organizing theory. "The politics of the 1960s were not diversionary or reactionary, but they did contribute to a politics of desire, which is a critical precondition of achieving a real class struggle." In this view, postmodern politics provides a transition toward the reorganization of politics on a "global scale" (p. 212). Wilson suggests that such politics might organize around such issues as environmental justice and the promotion of an eco-friendly capitalism.

Race and Place in Birmingham suffers from several examples of careless editing. Some points are made repeti-

tively, and arguments from one chapter are apt to show up again in another. The vocabulary of Marxian analysis can be cloying, and the reader searching for the noble story of civil rights in Birmingham may give up before encountering the historical facts. This is not a book that would be automatically useful in a seminar on civil rights history, for example. But Wilson's view of class and postmodern politics is argued effectively, and the history of Birmingham provides a dramatic backdrop to the larger argument. Readers are advised to persist through the occasional weaknesses, to appreciate the research, to admire the depth of the analysis, and to consider seriously the point of view.

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