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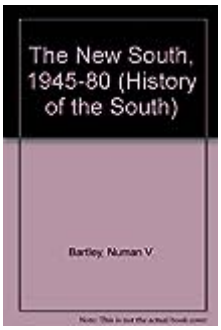

Numan V. Bartley. *The New South, 1945-1980.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995. xvi + 548 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-2122-1; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2038-5.

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The Great Disappointment: Numan Bartley's New South

Over the years, in teaching the historiography of the American South, I have found myself often referring to a "school of disappointment." A typical member of the "school of disappointment" (or a "Disappointed") is a southern liberal or radical, white or black (but usually white), whose formative experiences were shaped by the postwar South and particularly by the Civil Rights Era. As urbanization, industrialization, and farm mechanization transformed the southern economy; as new social classes rose to power and submerged classes rose in revolt; and as increasingly effective outside pressure bore down on the South's remaining "peculiar institutions," hopes were high for a real transformation of southern society. Convinced that liberalism was America's future, that the South was only lagging behind the rest of the nation, and that the demolition of structural barriers to convergence would inevitably bring the region into line, liberals foresaw a southern politics and society emancipated from domination by traditional oligarchies and racial obsessions, one that would be free to express, and realize, the "true" interests of the southern common people, white and black.

Though much about the South indeed was transformed, especially in the great rush of change sweeping through the region in the 1960s, the highest hopes of those liberals were not realized. Issues of race, far from being neutralized by the end of segregation and the rise of black political power, stubbornly refused to go away, continuing to divide those who those liberals felt should be united by economic interest. Instead of "populist" coalitions, the region became dominated politically by neo-Whig coalitions primarily concerned with using state power to encourage economic growth; business remained in the saddle, and indeed even increased its power, while workers remained unorganized and dominated.

Much of southern historical writing since 1970, I would suggest, has arisen out of this sense of disappointment, this souring on the hopes of the postwar years. Disappointment, for instance, has informed much of what C. Vann Woodward has termed the "continuitarian" school of southern history, which in essence contended that the changes in southern life since the Civil War, however remarkable they have appeared at first

glance, were in fact illusory–that the shadow of the plantation darkened the ground even at the High Noon of the Sunbelt.

Of these "Disappointeds," none has been so open in his disaffection from the modern South, or as influential in expressing it through his own writings and those of his students, as has Numan V. Bartley. For the past quarter of a century Bartley has been seeking to understand why history has not turned out as he hoped; beginning with his collaboration with Hugh Davis Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction*, he has over the years tried out a variety of explanations for the failure of the liberal project. His new work, *The New South, 1945-1980*, culminates the quest. Intensively researched over the last twenty years, it is also a deeply personal book, a great personal protest against the drift of the South in our time.

This *crie de coeur*, though, is awkwardly embedded in what could be termed a historiographical dinosaur: the eleven-volume LSU Press-Littlefield Fund *History of the South*. Conceived in the 1930s, when southern history was still defining itself as a field and when the expression of sectional grievance was still at the heart of the southern historical enterprise, its purpose was to construct an authoritative edifice from the empirical materials industriously being fabricated in the academic brickyards; its guiding presumption was the old "noble dream" of capturing "objectively" in text the "factual" story of the past. Most of us have long since surrendered those hubristic expectations, as the subject matter of history has exploded, as theoretical approaches have proliferated, and as the assumptions of consensus underlying the project have been undermined by the entry of previously excluded perspectives into our discourse. Nonetheless, we still approach such monuments as the LSU series expecting authority. Especially is this true of the post-Reconstruction volumes; Woodward's *Origins of the New South* defined its subject as few books in American history have done, and George Tindall's *The Emergence of the New South* remains after thirty years *the* indispensable work on the World War era. In taking its own place in the LSU pantheon, *The New South* bids to become the starting reference point for future work in the period.

But can such a powerful personal statement simultaneously lay claim to such authority? *Origins* certainly does, and it is to Woodward's *magnum opus* that Bartley's achievement will be most commonly compared. However, *Origins* was written in a much different time, and its present sway has much to do with the cumulative weight of its influence; were it to appear today, I suspect Woodward's personal blinders would be more evident to us, and his neglect of broad areas of southern life more glaring. Bartley's effort, by comparison, confronts perhaps insurmountable problems not of its own making, notably the difficulties inherent in embracing the vastly expanded subject matter of modern southern history in a single comprehensive narrative. More important, though, the anger that underlies his vision, and that gives it its peculiar power, also critically narrows and distorts it; while at its best *The New South* is compelling social criticism, it can also at times be crotchety, wrongheaded, and oblivious to some of the most important dimensions of the modern southern story.

To understand wherein *The New South* succeeds and fails, one must first discuss the nature of Bartley's disappointment. That disappointment is rooted, not simply in the failure of "liberalism" in the postwar South, but in the failure of a specific sort of "liberalism," which he identifies with the New Deal but which he more commonly refers to as "popular-front liberalism." In essence, popular-front liberalism is the old Woodwardian dream of a "populist coalition" translated into the terms of modern industrial society: an interracial coalition of the southern working classes pursuing a politics of distributive justice. Why did that vision come a cropper? In the past, Bartley has experimented with various forms of "continuitarianism": continuing ethnocultural identity, the persistence of traditional elites. In *The New South*, though, he takes a strikingly different tack: the problem lay not in the South's past, but in the very character of the changes it underwent. Postwar industrialization and urbanization replaced the traditional elite with an expanded middle class, and made material gain and personal gratification the region's household gods. Individualism and self-fulfillment eroded old bonds of community and faith. Southern culture "disintegrated," leaving the region by 1980 an increasingly bland replica of an unattractive American bourgeois culture. With the loss of southern distinctiveness came a loss of social solidarity; the individual might have unprecedented opportunities to advance herself, but the powerless were stripped of the cultural resources they needed to confront a rampant capitalism.

Above all (and here Bartley's rage is palpable), liberals themselves deserted the "popular front"; with the rise of the Cold War, the main stream of American liberalism shifted away from concerns with economic justice and social solidarity and toward a preoccupation with individual rights. First, in the Civil Rights Era, the liberal

project became a preoccupation with extending "equal rights" to black southerners, a project laced with condescension toward the "benighted South" and especially toward those poorer whites whose "backwardness" was (unjustly, according to Bartley) deemed the major obstacle to its fulfillment. Informed by a cosmopolitan ideal of a South, and an America, centered on individual autonomy, "rights-based" liberals lacked appreciation of the deeper asymmetries of power afflicting blacks and whites alike; they cared little that the very success of their movement ultimately hinged on the realization by the ascendent southern urban middle class that the traditional props of white supremacy could be jettisoned without harming the structural foundations of their own power. The tendency of "rights-based" liberals to see traditional southern communities, white and black, primarily as pathological products of Jim Crow and white supremacy led them to take steps that eroded those communities, and along with them the social and cultural safety nets poorer southerners had historically relied on for security and respect. The result was spreading social alienation among both poorer whites and inner-city blacks, and, worse, an ever more rancorous division between the two groups. Finally, it led liberals to their present obsessive preoccupation with "lifestyle choice," transforming liberalism from an ideology of social justice to an intellectual prop to yuppie libertarianism.

A powerful argument, this–and one that has much to recommend it. No account of the Civil Rights Era I've seen, for instance, is more appreciative of the class dynamics of the movement. While the concept of "rights-based" liberalism is hardly original to Bartley, he deploys it effectively to deal with the central paradox of the movement, the sourness arising from the very midst of its successes. Moreover, he is dead-on in his central criticism of modern liberalism; its obliviousness to the central problems of class power that still burden all too many southerners. Above all, he successfully treats that much-put-upon group, the southern white working class, with the dignity and compassion it deserves. Powerless and unorganized in their work lives, forced to bear the costs of desegregation while more affluent whites hightailed it to the lily-white suburbs, their traditional communities and values assaulted by supercilious cosmopolitans and deindustrialization –they have suffered far too much, not least from the neglect and even the contempt of academics. (The British labor historian Patrick Joyce once told me of how, as a visiting professor at a major southern university, he had been appalled at the disdain of his colleagues for the southern white working class.) It is time they were given their due in the story of the postwar South, and Bartley deserves our thanks for giving it.

But not completely. For his treatment of race and class also veers dangerously close to wishful thinking of a sort common to southern liberals of an earlier time: a belief that the racial divisions of southern society have in fact been superficial, the product of elite manipulation, and that, given the right leadership, those who should be united by common economic interest could transcend those superficially formidable divisions. To be sure, Bartley thinks he sees strong evidence that the late 1940s opened a window of opportunity for such a "populist coalition" to emerge. The South, he observes, had been solidly supportive of the New Deal; furthermore, his own earlier work on southern politics showed a persistent "new Dealish" strain, particularly among lower-income white southerners, reaching well into the postwar years. If there was potential, there was also leadership; southern "popular-front" liberals, under the banner of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), were united as never before, and poised to spearhead a postwar drive to democratize southern political and economic life. That they failed, Bartley believes, was no fault of their own; rather, they were done in by the rising anti-Communist obsessions of their labor-union and northern liberal allies, who withdrew their support just when it might have been most effective. That betrayal, in turn, set the pattern for all the other, grander, liberal betrayals that Bartley decries in the remainder of the book.

Bartley's argument fits well with a sizable body of recent historical literature extolling the radicals of the 1940s and blaming the Cold War (and the Cold Warriors) for having destroyed the last, best chance for social justice in America. It has certainly become clear that the 1940s was a critical decade for the South, a time when politics was beginning to open up, when the labor movement had real momentum, and when the exact nature of the emerging movement for racial justice was still incompletely defined. However, I find Bartley's version of events a bit too melodramatic. Contrary to his contention, what he terms "popular-front" liberalism was no potent force in the late 1940s. Far from being a broad coalition, the SCHW was on the fringe even of southern liberalism, itself a small and increasingly fractious tendency. Moreover, since its founding in 1938 the SCHW itself had been sporadically riven by controversies over Communist influence, owing as much to the behavior of the Communists themselves as to that of the "Cold Warriors." In his account Bartley relies heavily on the perspective of Clark Foreman, the SCHW's last head, who

firmly blames the postwar troubles of the organization on conservative reaction. Yet Foreman's behavior itself was hardly above criticism. According to John Salmond's biography of Lucy Randolph Mason (whom Bartley describes as a "right-wing unionist"), she regarded Foreman as an absentee leader, inattentive to the need to build a grass-roots organization, and too eager to annex the organization to the anti-Cold War priorities of his friends in Washington and New York, on whom he and the SCHW were increasingly financially dependent. Had the Conference been a genuine popular-front movement at the grass roots, the Cold War would have been no more a problem than it was for the later Civil Rights movement; that it was is arguably at least as much the fault of the "anti-anti-Communists" as of the Cold Warriors.

If Bartley overplays the role of Cold War politics in the decline of southern liberalism in the 1940s, he fatally underplays the importance of racial issues. Southern liberals in the 1930s, of both moderate and radical varieties, sought to keep issues of race carefully in the background–radicals because their priorities lay with empowering the poor of both races, moderates because theirs lay with curing the interlocking pathologies of the region as a whole. Above all, though, liberals feared the race issue for its explosive potential–a potential that expanded sharply as Depression-era scarcity gave way to wartime economic and social dislocations. "Rights-based liberalism" in the World War II South was not a diversionary tactic of threatened liberal capitalists; it was an agenda increasingly forced on white liberals by black southerners, for whom neither concern with region nor concern with class ever overrode their paramount interest in the fight against segregation and racial discrimination, and who increasingly felt the time had come to press their priorities onto the liberal program. With the increasing salience of racial issues, the fault lines both in regional and in "popular-front" liberalism came under serious strain.

So too with relations between blacks and working-class whites. The flip side of Bartley's sympathy for southern white workers, alas, is a tendency to romanticize them, particularly to soft-pedal the importance they themselves placed on maintaining white supremacy. But while he is right to dismiss the old Myrdalian view associating southern white racism with "redneck ignorance," the fact remains that southern workers relied heavily on the "whiteness" of their cultural identity, and were adamant on maintaining it. To be sure, as Bryant Simon's forthcoming work argues, preoccupation with "whiteness" lost much of its saliency for southern workers in the 1930s relative to "class" issues, but it was returning to the foreground even before the beginning of World War II. Furthermore, as Jeff Norrell and Mel McKiven have shown us, even successful organizers of southern white workers had to accommodate to their racial views; the unionized Birmingham iron and steel industry was hardly an example of the "popular front" in action. Like Woodward, Bartley wishes to find a road not taken, a road to which the South might indeed return. However, as wonderful as it might be to imagine a postwar South in which racial conflict was replaced by a broad, interracial quest for social equity, I think the case for just such an alternative, and the reasons for its failure, has not been made here.

But what of the road the South took? Bartley's interpretation of the course of postwar southern history, I repeat, is powerful and, as far as it goes, persuasive. But, as a volume in a series projected to be comprehensive and authoritative, it leaves out a striking amount, most particularly any aspect of the period that might lighten its tone. Poorer southerners, he tells us, were left out of postwar prosperity; that comes as a bit of a surprise to this reviewer, the son of a cotton-mill clerk who took the postwar escalator into middle management, gave all his children the college education he could never afford for himself, and lived to see one son with a six-figure salary and another gain tenure at Vanderbilt–a process, I can testify, hardly unique. In my native Piedmont the dissolution of the mill village system, industrial diversification, and the spread of technical institutes and public higher education gave a whole generation the chance to break out of the mills, in turn opening places for an influx of black workers once the Civil Rights Act of 1964 proscribed occupational discrimination–all developments treated slightly if at all in *The New South*. Federal anti-poverty programs, which Bartley scorns nearly as much as does Charles Murray (albeit for different reasons), nonetheless chalked up some signal achievements, such as the near-eradication of nutritional disease (remember the stories of kwashiorkor in South Carolina?). Clearly the postwar era bestowed its bounty with gross inequality; nonetheless, the postwar world, Cold War and all, has generally been a better world for southerners, white and black, from top to bottom.

It also continues to be an identifiably *southern* world. Bartley, like too many commentators on the "disappearing South," clings to a "modernization" model of social and cultural change that identifies southern culture with the "traditional," and sees the process of modernization as one of cultural erosion. (Interestingly, on this point

Bartley climbs into bed with the neo-Agrarian critic Walter Sullivan, the two united in their peevishness if not in their politics.) But just how "traditional" *was* the traditional southern culture? Arguably not as much as it's been cracked up to be. Created by an expansive Western capitalism, its social order built around independent households and those sophisticated business enterprises we call plantations, the region has always been enmeshed in markets, even if they've worked unevenly and inequitably. Its religion, as Allen Tate famously complained, was not appropriately "feudal," but was evangelical Protestant, a faith stressing individual experience and exalting inward grace and personal discipline above obedience to churchly authority. Finally, the "New South" had begun well before Bartley begins his narrative; if the South moved so easily to "modernize" after World War II, it was in large part because it was already well along the road.

If the southern culture was always more "modern" than Bartley suggests, modern southern culture is more "southern" as well. Here Bartley displays, to put it bluntly, a tin ear. He pays inadequate attention to the development of the region's foremost claims to cultural fame, its music and its literature. Following Sullivan and critics of similar mind, Bartley believes the "Southern Renaissance" to be over, its canonical themes–"family, community, the weight of southern history, and the brooding presence of the region itself"–deserted as "southern writing became part of the universal literature" (p. 267). But southern writing has *always* been "part of the universal literature"; do the French read Faulkner to learn about the South, or about themselves and the human condition? Nor does the shifting subject matter of modern southern literature mean that it has ceased to be "southern"; there remains in the region a vibrant community of writers and readers who see the *modern* South as a most viable subject, even while kicking the traces to which canon-builders such as Sullivan would harness them.

Moreover, possibly the biggest single story in modern southern history is the success of southerners in fashioning a cultural landscape recognizable throughout the world–a landscape in which the universal struggles of ordinary life are sympathetically rendered. Modern Nashville is an international tourist destination, a great cultural factory devoted to the pursuit of the profitable and the formulaic; but its success simultaneously nourishes one of the world's most remarkable creative communities, a community that produces, along with a flood of mediocrity (what culture doesn't?) some of the most exciting and moving of contemporary cultural productions. In expressing in their own idiom the universal needs of humans to come to terms with change, southerners have made their own modernization into a universal theme. Modernity is not opposed to southernness; it's just a different way of being southern, just as it is a different way of being human.

None of this cultural vitality, though, gets treated in Bartley's jeremiad. Nor, surprisingly, will you learn much about religion in the modern South. To Bartley, religion is "traditional," and by its nature "other-worldly." The rise of suburban megachurches with their health clubs and day-care centers he treats as an abandonment of faith for the things of this world; the rise of televangelists he interprets as a "direct[ion of] political disaffection into religious channels" (p.428). Maybe; but it's equally the direction of religious disaffections into political channels, as the rise of the Religious Right suggests. Astoundingly, Bartley largely neglects this development, possibly the most important in the South of the 1970s. In the midst of what Bartley depicts as a wasteland of rootless individualism and alienation arose a vigorous grass-roots movement, embracing the weapons of modernity but turning them against it–a movement, moreover, with profound long-term consequences for Bartley's primary concern, southern politics. Yet, because it fits ill into his "modernization" framework (and perhaps because grass-roots *right-wing* movements raise serious problems for his insistence on grass-roots impotence), the Religious Right gets little more than passing, and dismissive, treatment.

The treatment of the Religious Right points to a final problem with *The New South*: it ends too neatly. Bartley sees the 1970s as, in essence, the end of southern history; even the "Reagan revolution" is to him simply the logical conclusion of the moderate, neo-Whig consensus that dominated the South of the 1970s. To the contrary, there is arguably a real difference between the "New South" Democrats dominating the 1970s and the truculent breed of Southern Republicans taking power now. By reducing so much of the modern South to one bland, undifferentiated lump, Bartley misses an opportunity to illuminate the simmering South of our own time–its increasingly polarized politics, its obsession with symbols, its religious battles. For enlightenment on those matters, we need to turn to nonhistorians like Peter Applebome, whose *Dixie Rising* describes a South in ferment, a South whose history is hardly done. Or we need to turn to a freelance explorer like Dennis Covington, whose *Salvation on Sand Mountain* delves beneath the bland surfaces to find a South still capable of startling us.

The New South, then, is a problematic book. Unlike Woodward's or Tindall's volumes, its bid for magisterial status falls short; its coverage is too incomplete, and it is too eccentric in the battles it chooses to fight. To be sure, quarreling with the South is one of the finer southern traditions; Bartley is a good hater, and his hates, and his sympathies as well, are, for the most part, to my own taste. We need to be reminded of the unfinished business of southern history, the injustices left ignored, the complacencies unchallenged. If his vision seems to me both too dark and too dependent on wishful thinking for its rays of sunshine, there, too, he follows in a long tradition of southern historians, above all Woodward, who have insisted both that we face the grimmest realities and imagine the possibility of a different and better one. If *The New South* never defines the mainstream of scholarship in its period, it will nonetheless stand as an impressive personal statement, a work of passion in the great tradition of Woodward and W. J. Cash. Read it–it will give you much to ponder.

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