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BOOK REVIEWS

COTTON FIELDS AND SKYSCRAPERS by David R. Goldfield
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982)

The contrasting symbolism in the title of the book is both striking and provocative. Cotton Fields is especially loaded with stereotypical imagery that evokes a myriad of highly charged emotions. The description in the opening paragraphs of chapters one and two ably demonstrates the connection with Cotton Fields by painting a vivid picture of the romanticized version of the southern ideal which is such an integral part of the tradition of Dixie. However, it is an appropriate introduction to a theme that is treated throughout the book, as noted on page 161 of the last chapter.

With skill, sophistication, and finesse, Goldfield astutely narrates the development of the southern city and its role in southern history. The emphasis on the region as a basis for understanding urbanization is an interesting approach that is long overdue. Goldfield’s approach reminds me of an essay by Samuel P. Hayes entitled, “The Structure of Environmental Politics Since World War II,” in the Journal of Social History, Summer, 1981, and a short introduction to a portion of Lewis E. Athernton’s Main Street on the Middle Border, entitled, “The Small Town in the Gilded Age.” The introduction to Athernton’s work speculates that “perhaps someday an historian will write a history of the United States in terms of the rise and decline of specific regions, developing the notion that certain regions seized the leadership of the country at particular periods in history” (p. 57). Samuel P. Hayes’ article discusses a type of “historical conceptualization” that allows for the study of “human affairs” at different levels of society in an interdependent context. It suggests a “three-tiered approach” that includes “the grassroots,” “the region,” and “the nation” (p. 719). Despite the fact that the concept of region is used in the study of the frontier or westward movement in American history, both essays imply a new application of the term. Goldfield uses the concept to study the process of urbanization in the south. Although the focus is primarily on the south as a region, he succeeds in informing the reader about local conditions (grass roots) and national developments. Simultaneously he describes the role that a region played in the national economy in relation to another.

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Goldfield laid the basis for this approach in an earlier article, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," in *The American Historical Review*, December, 1981. His discussion of the conceptualization and application of the terms regional and urban is impressive and demonstrates both a thorough grasp of the literature and an ability to think independently about it. The author's familiarity with the writings of urban experts and with a broad range of literature from various fields is obvious throughout the book, which reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. It is reassuring to find historians well represented in this body of literature and refreshing to observe a historian making such skillful use of novelists and essayists, and at the same time draw upon scholarship from experts in other disciplines. Goldfield's work and approach reflect the methodological and research orientation found in much of the new history developed since the 1960s.

Goldfield's central argument is that the southern city is the hallmark and preserver of the south's distinctive tradition and that the difference between cities of the north and south can be traced to the southern tradition. Urbanization, therefore, will not result in the south becoming a replica of the industrialized north. The author argues that urbanization has not changed the southern tradition, but rather the region's tradition has determined the character of urbanization. This, in turn, has given rise to cities that are urban in their own right but distinctly different from those in the north. This phenomenon is explained by examining the factors that have formed core characteristics for this region and dominated southern history. Specifically, these factors are: 1) a rural life-style (dominated by a single staple crop); 2) a biracial society; and 3) a colonial economy.

Goldfield cogently develops this theme and supporting argument in four chapters that are packed with analytical insight and informative discussion, that include a description of the phases in southern urban development from colonial times to the present. The entire work was enlightening. However, I found the last three chapters especially stimulating. They focused upon urbanization during the antebellum era, the postbellum era, and the post-World War I era. Urbanization in southern society has its origins in the early period in American history. The basis for southern urban society emerged during the colonial period and developed during succeeding periods.
By the antebellum period it was apparent that the south was not moving along the same lines or at the same pace as in the north with respect to urbanization. Goldfield points out that the larger industrialized cities did not materialize in the south as they did in the north. He says that the difference was not due solely to physical environment, but largely to the dominance of a single staple crop, namely, cotton. He contends that cotton determined the rural quality of life in the south, which reinforced its dependency on a slavery base and the support of a biracial society. This led to economic dependency on the north and eventually regional colonialism (pp. 29-35, 37, 58-60).

The American economy was regional until the 1840s, when a national economy began to emerge. By the 1850s, southern leaders became aware of the dominant influence of northern industrial cities on the national economy. During this decade southerners sought to break out of the dependent mode. They felt that the southern city was the key. They had fallen behind the north because they neglected to build their cities. Urbanization would result in greater industrialization and increase commerce and trade, which in turn would bring about economic parity with the north. This would lead to the elimination of the south's dependent status. Goldfield contends that this effort was a major influence on the south's perception of the competition and conflict that ultimately led to the Civil War. In other words, he posits an urban interpretation to the sectionalism that culminated in the Civil War.

The main thesis of chapter three is that the postbellum period did not give rise to a new south. Despite the fact that the postbellum spokesmen were primarily urban entrepreneurs and city boosters who proclaimed the cities as the "offsprings" of the new era, Goldfield argues that they were really rebuilding the urban model that existed before the Civil War. The major difference was that the new leadership reconciled itself to the colonial status of the south and hoped that the business community would profit sufficiently to move their cities forward toward progress.

Goldfield concedes that the enterprise was carried out under new circumstances. The Civil War altered some aspects of southern life and new structural arrangements replaced old systems. However, the basic character of southern life and the process of urbanization re-
mained unaltered. Goldfield contends that the south became more dependent on those factors that had determined the quality of southern life and urban development before the war. Its economy became more entrenched in a single staple crop with a new labor system—peonage—designed for the new situation. As the urban port cities of the south declined in influence, the antebellum-type city became more widely distributed. The urban-type city of the south was no longer limited to the ports and coastal regions. The new labor system was suitable for agricultural needs and therefore perpetuated the rural quality of southern life. It also reinforced the biracial character of southern society. According to Goldfield, the fact that the south did not attract large numbers of European immigrant workers tended to enhance the biracial nature of the society. He further states that the north played a greater role in the southern economy after the war. Northerners extended their business enterprises into the south and many southerners became more dependent on northern capital. The distinctive urban character of southern cities became more pervasive during this period; the rural quality of southern life did not diminish; and northern influence in the national economy became more dominant.

Post-World War I covers the period from the 1920s to the present. According to Goldfield, it was during this period that the metropolitan southern city emerged. Goldfield's discussion of this development in the last chapter indicates that a gradual process gave rise to a metropolitan regionalism in the south in contrast to the metropolis of the north that evolved into megalopolis. A metropolitan south did herald change, referred to by Goldfield as "A kind of sunlight," but he contends it was not really a new south.

Following World War I, some of the underpinning of southern society began to loosen. This loosening, Goldfield points out, was not of the south's doing and often without the cooperation from the guardians of southern tradition. The Great Depression and the federal government played an important role in encouraging the south to relinquish its single staple-crop economy. Many of the programs implemented by the federal government in response to the Depression led to agricultural diversification in the south. Also the federal government introduced new technology that replaced traditional agricultural methods and practices. The federal government provided economic
incentive by offering subsidies to participants in the new experiment. These factors helped to undermine the single staple crop upon which the southern economy was largely based, as well as weaken the peonage labor system. The federal government helped to expand industrial growth in the south. Goldfield points out that the New Deal programs to the cities benefited the entire south. Much of the financial aid designed to bring economic relief to workers in the south flowed into the region’s cities. These financial grants helped not only to alleviate unemployment and poverty but were used to improve the physical environment of the cities and the region. In many parts of the south the improvement of the physical environment had gone unattended, except in the business districts. World War II brought about a resumption of federal activity started in World War I. During World War II the government resumed the practice of singling out certain southern cities as centers for military industry. In fact, southern cities were sometimes favored because of their “chronic economic problems.” As a result of war-time industries and the policy of the federal government, the south experienced greater industrial growth, thus lessening its dependency on the agricultural economy.

Industrialization also was a factor that influenced the migration from rural to urban areas, beginning with World War I. Population movement flowed toward the cities, especially during the two wars. Southern cities benefited from this general migration trend, but this also led to an out-migration from the south to the north. The northern cities were more industrialized than southern cities. Therefore, when the two wars came, more jobs were made available in northern cities. Thus blacks, as well as whites, were drawn to the urban areas of the north in much greater numbers. Goldfield concludes that migration had a devastating impact upon the southern labor system, weakening it and posing a threat to the biracial society.

On the heels of World War II came the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which was an additional assault on the biracial nature of southern society. The Civil Rights movement not only posed a threat to the biracial system but challenged its legitimacy. Goldfield argues that the guardians of southern tradition could take no credit for this development. Blacks initiated the challenge and the federal government belatedly and reluctantly joined them. Goldfield says it was this alliance that resulted in civil rights victories and blacks receiv-
ing a voice in the biracial society. He says some have noted that it was the "good south," the so-called white "moderates" who used liberal rhetoric, that delayed the attack, rather than actively seeking to liberate the south from its biracial society. Although all walls of segregation did not crumble, the south and southern cities were never quite the same.

With the decline of the single-crop economy, the postbellum labor system, and biracial social structure, the old south was on the verge of becoming a new south. Goldfield states that small-city urbanization which had made southern urbanization distinctive for over a century began to decline in the 1940s. By the 1950s southern cities, along with cities throughout the country, were expanding. However, the expansion was primarily a result of annexation rather than a response to population demands as in the north. In the south annexation resulted from city boosters pushing the need for city planning. This is what gave rise to the metropolitan regionalism that characterized the south by the 1960s and 1970s.

Metropolitan regionalism coincided with the emergence of the Sun Belt, a phenomenon that included but was not limited to the south. Goldfield indicated that replacing the New South creed with the Sun Belt seemed to guarantee a new future for the region and a new south. But Goldfield says not so. He says the new future would not include the elimination of the secondary role played by the south in the national economy, at least, not for a while.

The south was part of the Sun Belt but many of its states did not reap the prosperity of Sun Belt states. The scene had changed, Goldfield says, but urbanization was different in the south. Southern cities were metropolitan not because of population growth but geographical expansion. They grew horizontally rather than numerically in proportion to their northern counterparts. Although skyscrapers have replaced cotton fields as symbols, the author argues that conspicuous structures have not changed southern culture. Thus Goldfield concludes that tradition has triumphed over urbanization.

_Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers_ makes a significant contribution to southern historiography. This is especially true in its emphasis on the role of the southern cities and the coming of the Civil War. Also
the discussion of the New South after the Civil War and into the 20th century is important for southern historiography. The book’s postulation of the dependency role of the south in the national economy and its questioning the validity of the New South Creed is certainly pertinent to any discussion of southern historiography. Another important aspect of the book is its claim of a distinctive urban tradition for the south. In this respect it makes a major contribution to the question of urbanization and American urban history. In addition, the book provides the basis for expanding a new methodological approach to the study of American history by refining and refocusing the regional concept. This book should provide the basis for a great deal of critical analysis and debate in both southern and urban history.

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