ABSTRACT

THE STRUCTURAL IMPERATIVES BEHIND RACIAL CHANGE IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Bobby M. Wilson

While it is agreed that capital made use of race to restructure for more profitable production, there have been few attempts to incorporate race within the general framework of historical materialist inquiry and class politics. This paper discusses the historical construction of race in Birmingham, Alabama for the industrial, Fordist, and post-Fordist phases of U.S. capitalist development. No other industrial city in America would rely upon black labor so early in its industrial development as Birmingham, providing the opportunity to examine the social construction of race from an early stage of industrial capitalism. While southern periodizations of capitalist development correspond in some ways to those of the regulationists, they also diverge in other important ways, precisely because the southern road to capitalism was different, defining the path for the entry of blacks into capital-labor relations.

In the United States, the industrial, corporate (Fordist), and post-industrial (post-Fordist) phases of capitalist development have produced different important shifts in labor relations, technologies, and forms of industrial organization (Gordon, 1977, 1978; Aglietta, 1979). The restructuring of American capitalism also entailed changes in race relations. This paper examines the social construction of race for each of these phases of capitalist development in Birmingham, Alabama.

Any analysis of the social construction of racism within the United States must begin with the slave economy, which drove capitalist development in the South down a different route to industrialism than the classical path taken by England and the northern United States (Moore, 1966; Wiener, 1978). According to Lipietz (1986: 19), history did not provide a single path to capitalism:

... the emergence of a new regime of accumulation is not written into the fate of capitalism even if it does correspond to some tendencies that can be observed. Regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation are outcomes of the history of human struggles: outcomes that have succeeded because they ensured some regularity and permanence in social reproduction. Thus, there is no sense in trying to comprehend any concrete social formation (even the currently dominant one) as a standardized, inevitable pattern.

Lipietz goes on to urge (p. 25),

... let us see how every country functions, what it produces, for whom, how, what the forms of wage relations are, what successive regimes of accumulation developed and why. And
let us be very cautious when we attempt to throw a net over the world so as to catch the established relations between the regimes of accumulation of various national social formations.

While regulationists recognize divergent paths to capital accumulation at the national level, they do not at the subnational regional level. We must take care not to throw the same net over the whole of a particular nation-state, disregarding the subnational regional level, which may produce regimes of accumulation that are consolidated by regulations sustained by regional norms to form a distinctive territorial capitalism (Storper and Walker, 1989; Page and Walker, 1991). Regulationists and others who stay at the level of the nation-state cannot account for the South’s divergence from the classical route to industrialism. While southern periodizations of capitalist development correspond in some ways to those described by Aglietta (1979), they diverge in other important ways, precisely because the southern road to capitalism has been different, providing the path for the entry of American blacks into capital-labor relations.

While it is agreed that capital made use of racial (plus gender and ethnic) divisions of labor to restructure for more profitable production, there have been few attempts to explain why racial divisions exist (Reich, 1981; Bowby et al., 1989; see also Bondi, 1990). A major concern of postmodernist and neo-Marxist debates should be the incorporation of race within the general framework of historical materialist inquiry and class politics (Harvey, 1989; Mitchell and Smith, 1990). It is the expectation that this paper will serve to bring the matter of race in U.S. capitalist development into more debate among geographers.

**Birmingham, The Industrial City of the South**

In Birmingham racism became manifested for the first time on a large scale in an urban-industrial complex. No other industrial city in the U.S. would rely upon black labor so early in its industrial development, so that Birmingham provides an opportunity to examine the social construction of race at an early phase of industrial capitalism. Because of Birmingham, the prospect for large-scale industrialization following the Civil War was far brighter for Alabama than for any other state in the American South. Birmingham was “one of those rare map spots where coal, ore, and fluxing material for iron-making lie side by side,” contributing to Birmingham being quantitatively efficient in production (Simpich, 1931: 754). The iron ore for the Birmingham furnaces did not have to be transported several thousand miles as at Pittsburgh, allowing Birmingham with its cheap labor to produce steel at a cost 26 percent lower (Marshall, 1967). This cost advantage caused Birmingham, which was only incorporated in 1871, to claim by the turn of the century that it was the “Pittsburgh of the South” and the largest city of its age in America. But growth of the steel industry in the South did not threaten production at Pittsburgh, which continued to expand its capacity because of the “Pittsburgh Plus” basing point system that priced steel despite the location or cost of production (Stocking, 1952).

While the location of resources played a role in Birmingham becoming the leading industrial city of the South, this factor alone is not sufficient to account for such growth. Access to an abundant supply of raw materials only provides the necessary conditions for production: given the means of production, there must be a sufficient amount of labor to be absorbed in the production process. Birmingham, located just outside the black belt of Alabama, was accessible to the large pool of black labor that became available after the abolition of the slave mode of production. At the time of Birmingham’s incorporation in 1871, Jefferson County had a black population of only 2,506, but as early as 1880 thousands of blacks had migrated into the county from the plantations of southern Alabama and surrounding states to mine coal and make iron (Table 1). The black population of the county increased more than 50-fold from 1870 to 1920 when it reached 130,000 and more than doubled as a proportion of the county. By 1890, blacks comprised 43 percent of Birmingham’s population, and in 1910, 1920 and 1930 they made up just under 40 percent, the highest black percentage of any U.S. city with more than 100,000 population. Before the Great Migration of blacks to the industrial North, blacks constituted more than 50 percent of the workers in the mines and furnaces of the Birmingham area (Worthman, 1969).

Because of its level of industrial development, Birmingham became for the South the center of major confrontations between workers and capitalists. In the 1930s it was the center of communist organization of the southern working class, and the Birmingham branch of the party was largely a black organization due to the large black labor force (Kelley, 1990). And it is no accident that in the 1960s one of the fiercest battles for the civil rights of blacks in the U.S. was fought in Birmingham where for several decades capitalists and workers struggled to protect their class interests. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963: 45) said, “In the entire country there was no place to compare with Birmingham... The challenge to nonviolent, direct action could not have been staged in a more appropriate arena.”
Racial change in Birmingham

Table 1 Distribution of the Black Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Birmingham Total</th>
<th>Birmingham Black</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>Jefferson Co Total</th>
<th>Jefferson Co Black</th>
<th>% Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>12,345</td>
<td>2,506</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>3,086</td>
<td>5,035</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>26,178</td>
<td>32,142</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>34,185</td>
<td>56,917</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>132,685</td>
<td>90,617</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>178,806</td>
<td>130,291</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>259,678</td>
<td>167,957</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>267,583</td>
<td>175,150</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>326,037</td>
<td>208,616</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>340,887</td>
<td>219,542</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>300,910</td>
<td>206,464</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>284,413</td>
<td>223,716</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>265,968</td>
<td>228,521</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Race and Capitalism

Racial categories are real, not simply surrogates for hidden, material forces. The dominant racial population does not dissolve into the bourgeoisie and subordinate racial population into the proletariat; racial prejudice and group sentiment cannot be dismissed as superstructure or false consciousness (Greenberg, 1980: 406). Race must not be placed in the natural realm nor in what C. Vann Woodward (1974: 128) called the “realm of ideas, moral principles, and their agitators.”

Changes in race-connected practices are not the results of failures or successes at instilling a sense of humanitarianism and morality in the economic or political elites who would then move to erect or eliminate racial barriers. Racial changes and any challenge to them are best understood if placed within the larger context of capitalist development. While we must continue to embrace the importance of class in capitalist development, we must not deny race an ontological status of its own. It affects all three levels of social formation: economic, political, and ideological (Miles, 1982).

Although racism has existed since Columbus’ encounter with the New World, race-connected practices can take different forms as a result of the restructuring of capitalism (Jackson, 1989). These practices change “... shape, size, contours, purpose, function – with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system and, above all, the challenges, the resistances to that system” (Sivanandan, 1983: 2). This is not to deny the ontological status of racism, which drove the historical emergence of black slavery, black sharecropping, black labor segmentation, black ghettoization, etc. Because of capital restructuring, the recurrent features of racism can lead to different forms of race-connected practices. A Marxist analysis of racism should account for the different forms of race-connected practices (Nikolinakos, 1973).

Nonetheless racism is articulated and reproduced by people occupying positions in class relations and has both a material basis and material effects (Miles, 1982). To discriminate against blacks is to derive a surplus value larger than that afforded by the exploitation of the native white worker. American capitalists required racism not for racism’s sake but for the sake of intensifying the labor process and to maintain their domination over the political economy of Birmingham, Alabama and the American South. This regional strategy, according to Aglietta (1979: 171–172), provided the foundation for America’s racial system as it “spread from the South to the United States as a whole, and from the black population to all those who are not white in the strict sense.” The foundation for and dynamic of southern racism as confronted by the civil rights movement rested upon this regional strategy (Bloom, 1987: 58).

The Southern Route to Industrial Capitalism

The South grew on the back of slavery and has never fully shaken off its legacy. The profitability of the slave-economy is a secondary issue, a diversion created by Conrad and Meyer (1964) and more recently by Fogel and Engerman (1974). The question of profitability must separate the issue of success or failure of slave production in individual businesses from slavery as an economic system with regional impact that accumulated capital and economic growth (Genovese, 1967; Wright, 1986).

It is the system of class relations of production, not the producer’s relation to the market, which determines the regimes of accumulation (Brenner, 1977). Class relations of slave production did not permit intensive capital accumulation (Post, 1982). With economic and political power concentrated in their hands, the planters had a greater interest in consumption than in production, enslaving labor “in order that they themselves should live more grandly and not mainly for increasing production” (Dubois, 1964: 35). The slave economy accumulated tremendous personal wealth used mainly to consume luxuries, not to build up capital. Under industrial capitalism, labor enters the production process as variable capital that can be fired or replaced by machinery,
which gives capital powers of real possession and the ability to introduce new techniques into the labor process. Under the slave mode of production, slaves enter the production process as a constant element of production, burdening the owners of production with inflexible costs of labor reproduction. This non-capitalist character of slavery hindered industrialization in the South by blocking slave masters' "ability to reorganize the labour-process through technical innovation" (Post, 1982: 34). One critic of the slave system in Alabama observed that the little southern capital generated was not invested:

in a way to advantage the people and promote state welfare . . . What becomes of the twenty million dollars which our commerce distributes annually among the planters of Alabama? The Census of 1850 states that in Alabama one million dollars only is invested in manufactures, a portion in twelve cotton factories, and fourteen forges and furnaces, as compared to Georgia’s two million and Tennessee’s three millions (Quoted in Armes, 1910: 122).

By 1860 Alabama still had not developed a factory system; most establishments were small shops employing few workers and limited capital. Wage-earners in manufacturing represented only 0.8 percent of the population (U.S. Census, 1865). Investment in land and slaves brought high social status to their respective owners, but it did not contribute to an urban-industrial society within the South when the North was making the transition to industrial capitalism (Genovese, 1967; Wright, 1978; Meyer, 1988). From the beginning of settlement of the Midwest, class relations encouraged the development of manufacturing, though agriculture continued to be central, producing an agro-urban production complex (Page and Walker, 1991).

Only under conditions in which workers have been emancipated from slavery or serfdom and no longer possess the means of production will they “be forced to sell [their labor] in order to buy, to buy in order to survive and reproduce” (Brenner, 1977: 32). Capitalists ultimately have to expand and innovate to maintain their position in relationship to other competing productive units. The system of class relations based on slavery was a substantial barrier to the development and maintenance of a competitive relationship (Wright, 1978; Post, 1982).

The decline in the economy following the panic of 1837 caused some southerners to reevaluate the slave-economy as a viable economic system vis-à-vis the industrializing North. In 1846 Daniel Pratt, a New Englander and cotton gin manufacturer, emerged as the leading spokesman for industrialization in Alabama (Miller, 1972). The planters, however, feared the development of a southern industrial capitalist class and a factory working class that could become aligned with their respective northern counterparts. This caused the planters to distrust the city and its free labor system, which they saw as “something incongruous with their local power and status arrangements” (Genovese, 1967: 24).

To placate the planters, Pratt proposed the idea of manufacturing villages rather than industrial cities, maintaining that villages:

were healthier and more amenable to social control than cities. With a small, homogeneous [white] population such villages were secure from the crime and social ‘isms’ which disrupted Northern urban life. Settled amid farms and plantations and manufacturing items to serve the agricultural community, Pratt’s factory villages promised to complement rather than supplant the cotton and slave system (Miller, 1972: 11).

Pratt and other southern industrial reformers argued also that industrialism would lead to the employment of poor whites who, otherwise, might blame slavery for their economic condition. Forced to buy to survive, white wage labor would increase aggregate consumer demand and wealth in the region. But planters’ views of the world excluded any materialist conception of progress,

...to hold down a subject population, [they] have to generate an antirationalist, antiurban, antimaterialist, and more loosely, antibourgeois view of the world – one that excludes any conception of progress (Moore, 1966: 492).

Moore (1966: 496) goes on, “policies are not advocated in order to make humanity happier and certainly not in order to make people richer.” It was a way of life that condemned Social Darwinism and godless materialism (Wiener, 1978).

Between the 1840s and the outbreak of the Civil War, many planters accepted grudgingly the idea of industrial expansion, realizing that some manufacturing could bolster rather than weaken the slave system. Still, they retained their resistance to industrialization as an alternative to the plantation economy, leading them to favor a limited form of industrialization that would serve the needs of the plantation instead of the plantation serving the needs of industry. The interests of the industrialists in the slave south were subservient to those of the planters who joined with them to create a limited form of industrial development (Wiener, 1978).

The relationship between the planter class and southern industrial
capitalists in the postbellum South was not a simple one and is debated extensively by students of southern history (Cobb, 1988a). According to C. Vann Woodward (1951), the rising commercial and industrial class replaced the planter class, taking the South down the classical road to industrial capitalism. On the other hand, Wilbur Cash (1941) stressed the continuity of leadership and values among the planters and southern industrialists, arguing that the push for industrialization helped to preserve and extend planter influence, taking the South down the Prussian route to industrial capitalism and not the classical capitalist path taken by England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and also by the North in the United States (Moore, 1966; Wiener, 1979; Cell, 1982).  

In the Birmingham area the Prussian route did not threaten the hegemony of the planter class, which retained adequate political power to provide the mode of regulation but turned economic affairs over to the rising industrial class (Wiener, 1978). This arrangement between planters and industrial capitalists produced a regional space economy that kept factories out of, or at least at the edge of, the black belt (Cobb, 1988b).  

Under this arrangement, the loss of slave labor following the Civil War would not prove to be as significant a loss to the planter class as some may have once thought. A substantial redistribution of land never took place following slavery, eliminating any hope of blacks owning their land (Cell, 1982). Whereas the serfs of Europe upon emancipation got rights to land, “the American Negro slave was emancipated without such rights and in the end this spelled for him the continuation of slavery” (Dubois, 1964: 611). The plantation survived albeit in a different form, preserving the basis of planters’ wealth; they were “still lords of acres, though not of slaves” (Woodward, 1951: 128). Before the planters were laborlords, now they were only landlords (Wright, 1986).  

Because free blacks were no longer tied by law to the plantation as slaves, their labor was available for exploitation in the coal mines and iron mills of Birmingham and as tenant farmers in the black belt. In the 1870s northern capitalists agreed to relax federal reconstruction efforts to give the South a free hand over blacks in return for southern support of northern investment in the region. Speaking in Atlanta, President Hayes told blacks that their “‘rights and interests would be safer’ in the hands of the southern white man than in the care of the Federal government” (Woodward, 1951: 46). The southern ruling classes accepted the idea of a free labor system but reserved the right to exploit black labor by any means possible, barring slavery (Baran and Sweezy, 1966; Wright, 1986). According to one Alabamian of the period, “The Negro bears the same relation to us now, de facto, as heretofore. We controlled his labor in the past (at our own expense) and will control it in the future (at his)” (quoted in Wagstaff, 1969: 337). And another commented that the new industrial order in Birmingham was nothing “but a continuation of the old” (quoted in Wiener, 1978: 216). The labor system that replaced slavery was just as isolated and repressive, which was a substantial barrier to the development of an intensive regime of capital accumulation in the South.

The Industrial Phase: Industrialization With Cheap Labor

Before the Civil War, the ruling class favored high-priced labor because it owned labor. Afterward, it considered an abundant supply of cheap and exploitable labor to be the key to economic growth, moving the southern economy closer to industrialization but still far from the classical route to industrialization (Wright, 1986). With their access to the cheap and exploitable industrial reserve army of the black belt, Birmingham industrialists could easily increase the absolute size of their labor force, allowing for the extraction of “absolute surplus value” (Aglietta, 1979: 50). The exploitation of this large black labor force contributed to rates of surplus value that were higher than for the United States as a whole (Table 2). In 1880 the rate of surplus value in manufacturing for Jefferson County was almost three times that for the United States, and for the iron industry the rate was over five times that of the U.S., contributing to Alabama ranking fifteenth in overall manufacturing.  

Before the 1890s, the steel industry was based around skilled “internal contracting” in which skilled workers were often contractors who hired and fired their own employees, set their wages, disciplined them and determined production methods to be used (Nelson, 1975; Stark, 1980; Larson, 1980). In the Birmingham area blacks worked as unskilled laborers in the mines for white skilled laborers who were also contractors, separating blacks not only from white workers but also from owners of production. By making use of contractors, owners could avoid responsibility by pointing the finger at the contractor while reducing capital outlays to a bare minimum. And in some coal mines convicts leased from the state by the mining company worked for these contractors who paid the mine operator for the labor of the convict (U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor, 1885).  

Improvements made in machinery and operating methods made the skilled craftsperson obsolete by the 1890s. The extraction of absolute surplus value involves not only increasing the absolute size of the working class but also “a fundamental lack of differentiation between individual wage-labor units” (Aglietta, 1979: 70). The technical and social condition of labor during the industrial phase of U.S. capitalism
Table 2  Percent Rate of Surplus Value

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U.S. Manufacturing</th>
<th>U.S. Steel</th>
<th>Birmingham Area Manufacturing</th>
<th>Birmingham Area Steel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>(122)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>(285)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>(89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>(83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>(219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>(111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>(107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977*</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>(126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>(134)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Value in parenthesis pertains just to the production of iron and steel and not overall production in manufacturing.

Source: Data used in calculating rates of surplus is from the U.S. Census of Manufacturing.

was based on the “homogenization of labor, a spreading tendency to create more uniform working conditions among American workers” (Gordon, 1978: 37; see also Gordon, Edwards and Reich, 1982). In the iron and steel industry employers sought to introduce technology that would reduce their dependence on the skilled puddlers, mechanics, and rollers, reproducing labor homogenization (Brody, 1960).

But the mechanization and investment in fixed capital comes in different ways and at different times to diverse places and industries. Manufacturing was technologically far more advanced in the North than the South by the 1880s. The South was much more an isolated cheap labor zone and an area of absolute surplus value than the North, which had plenty of relative surplus value generated by highly mechanized industries long before the Fordist era (Brenner and Glick, 1991). The capitalization of western agriculture and railroads led to mechanization and increased demand for manufactured products that fed the development of the agro-industrial production complex of the Midwest (Page and Walker, 1991). This regional difference is sometimes attributed to natural factors: the South being rich in natural resources required less machine labor and more human labor for extraction (Cobb, 1982). Also, the difficulty of harvesting and natural frailty of the South’s two major crops, cotton and tobacco, made them the most difficult to mechanize so they remained labor intensive.

But the obstacle to mechanization in the South was more social than technical or natural. The planter class wanted economic results but without the corresponding investment in labor, machinery and modern methods, causing the South to seek out and maintain more labor-intensive industries than the North (Dubois, 1964). Technology suitable for southern agriculture was available and profitable in the late nineteenth century. Fleischig (1977) shows that no less than 242 cotton harvesters were patented in the nineteenth century, and the basic details of the contemporary picker are in patents granted in the 1880s. The gasolene tractor was developed in the 1890s and went into production in 1903, but its introduction into the South was delayed until World War II. In 1920, North Central states had six times as many tractors per acre of cropland as the Deep South (Wiener, 1979).

Due to the large exploitable labor force and the use of convict labor, the pressure to mechanize in Alabama’s coal fields was not as great as in other mining states (Northrup and Rowan, 1970). Hand loading of coal accounted for over 50 percent of mining occupations until the 1920s. Whenever machines were introduced into the coal mines, operators would demand a large wage differential between the 55 cents per ton paid for pick-and-shovel mining and machine mining, reducing the amount paid for machine labor at one mine in the Birmingham area to 7 to 10 cents per ton of coal. The rationale was that the wage earner was to be compensated by the increased tonnage made possible with machines and that the differential was needed also to pay for the depreciation of machines (Labor Advocate, 1900: 3). The real rationale was the protection of a cheap labor system, which reduced effective demand that contributed to the low consumption norm in the region and further impeded the development of an intensive regime of accumulation. Although hand methods in iron-making had been phased out as early as the 1890s in the North, they were still used in Alabama iron-making in the late 1920s (Kulick, 1981).

The ruling class considered an abundant supply of cheap and exploitable labor to be the key to economic growth. While mechanization might increase production and even lower the demand for labor, it also would increase the demand for skilled labor and raise costs for reproducing that labor, setting the stage for a more intensive regime of accumulation than that allowed by the Prussian system of class relations. In a region that took the Prussian route to industrial capitalism and had an abundant supply of cheap, unskilled and exploitable labor, the rate of mechanization lagged significantly behind the more industrialized North at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Prussian route isolated the southern labor market from national and international
workers, and the region did not develop the inflow of skilled labor that could adapt advanced technology to the southern situation (Wright, 1986). Whereas in 1889 Andrew Carnegie had declared the South, “Pennsylvania’s most formidable industrial enemy,” by 1900 he taunted Birmingham, “You have all the elements but you cannot make steel” (Woodward, 1951: 127; Rikard, 1983: 127). From 1879 through 1919 Birmingham continued to produce far below its optimum level (Harper, 1977).

A Step Forward: Industrialization and the Formation of a More Homogeneous Working Class

Although the level of mechanization in the southern labor force in the 1880s was lower than that generated by the more classical route to industrial capitalism, Birmingham workers, like wage earners everywhere, were “made indifferent and interchangeable as far as production is concerned,” making for labor homogenization and less institutionalized segregation in the workplace (Aglietta, 1979: 69). Instead of trying to produce a greater mass of use values with the same amount of labor as previously, southern capitalists increased the absolute size of the labor force, extending the scale of production based on identical norms.

Market pressures were strong enough that capitalists subjected black and white workers to the same discipline of control, nearly equalizing their wages (Wright, 1986). Speaking before a Senate Committee in 1883, one Birmingham industrialist noted that although it was difficult to get blacks into the more skilled occupations because of prejudice by white workers, he found blacks in these skilled positions were:

as good as white men; their yield is as good; they are steady workmen; they are reliable in every way, and their product is fully as good as anything we have got from white labor. In other departments, too, we have worked them generally with white men. We would have, for instance, a white man on one side of the rolls and a colored man on the other; we would work them in pairs in that way and we have no difficulty about it (quoted in Taft Research Notes, n.d.: 4).

J. W. Sloss of the Sloss Furnace Company in Birmingham also noted that there would be no improvement in labor by replacing one race with another. In 1883 there was no disparity between the wages of black and white miners at the Pratt mines in the Birmingham area, and integrated work crews labored under the supervision of both black and white foremen, contributing to class solidarity between black and white
it was a period in which the American working class made a step toward becoming in itself a class with the consciousness and identity to transcend racial, ethnic, and religious differences. Except for Gutman (1968), this period has gone unnoticed by most labor historians.

A Step Back: Institutionalization of Racism

After a period of racial opening in the late nineteenth century, the possibility of black/white solidarity in the South diminished as old prejudices and suspicions were institutionalized in the spatial and social fabric of the region. In the 1890s the alliance of farmers, blacks, city and factory workers threatened the ruling elites. This provided the impetus for restructuring of the southern political economy, making the period of racial solidarity among the laboring class transitory.

The southern ruling elites convinced white reformers to favor disfranchisement of blacks after making assurances that it would not lead to the disfranchisement of poor whites (Woodward, 1951). White reformers accepted the belief that the political power of blacks, still concentrated in the black belt, would prevent them from excercising the political influence to which they were entitled. According to Woodward (1951: 211), “The barriers of racial discrimination mounted in direct ratio with the tide of political democracy among whites.”

By the end of the nineteenth century institutionalized racism became the main strategy used by southern capitalists to control labor and maintain a competitive position in the marketplace. Cell (1982) calls the period, “the highest stage of white supremacy,” making black oppression and exploitation “as bad as it had ever been under slavery” (Baran and Sweezy 1966: 253). The remainder of America also took up southern attitudes on the race question and used them to justify imperialistic adventures and racial repression in the Pacific and the Caribbean, bringing under U.S. jurisdiction some eight million people of color (Woodward, 1974).

The growth of white supremacy did not initially deter biracial unionism in the coal mines of Birmingham. Labor leaders were very much aware of the importance of organizing both blacks and whites for the sake of working class interest. As late as 1904 Greer, the black vice-president of District 20, characterized his relations with the officers and members of District 20 as harmonious (Labor Advocate, 1904). Three of the eight seats on the district’s executive board were assigned to blacks, guaranteeing black representation (United Mine Workers Journal, 1908).

But in 1904 many mining companies in Birmingham, with a racial strategy in mind, began to call for the open shop, would not accept last year’s wage scale, and demanded a reduction in pay and a return to monthly payday. In calling for a restructuring of working conditions, the president of Tennessee Coal and Iron noted that:

For years the authority exercised by the officers of this company over its coal mines had been growing less and less. The efficiency of the men, whether working by the day or on contract, was steadily declining and discipline had decreased with efficiency . . . The conditions forced upon the management by the union had become intolerable. The authority over your property in their charge, as to what should constitute a fair day’s work, and as to who should be employed, had to be restored and maintained, or all hope of permanent, successful competition with the products of other districts would have to be abandoned (Birmingham Public Library, Archives, n.d.: 48).

John P. White, then Vice-president of UMWA, described the racial strategy used by mine operators to accomplish this restructuring:

About 55% of the men who work in the mines of Alabama are negroes. The operators finding themselves defeated on the industrial field, resorted to drastic methods. The scenes were shifted gradually and the columns of the press began to teem with appeals to the prejudices and passions of men, and they injected the race question, claiming that the United Mine Workers of America were advocating social equality of the negro and the white man. Anyone who is a student of Dixie Land knows what effect this has upon the people of the South . . . as everyone knows, the entire South is slumbering with that racial hatred, ready to break out in wide-spread conflagration . . . Yet, it was necessary in order that the operators would not be defeated . . . If these captains of industry . . . are able to destroy the dignity of labor and crush the hopes and aspirations of the men who toil by bringing up this ghastly spectra of race hatred and social equality; then whenever a trade unionist desires improved conditions of employment; whenever he is unwilling to accept the dictations and tyranny of the employers, all that will be necessary to defeat him will be to inject the race question into the industrial cause, and that will suffice (Labor Advocate, 1908: 1).
American workers along racial, ethnic, religion, and gender lines made them “Prisoners of the American Dream,” in Davis’ (1986) salubrious phrase.

The Coming of Fordism: End of the Prussian Route
But Not of the Race System

Fordism came late to the South with the crumbling of the Prussian route. With the Depression of the 1930s the institutional bases for maintaining the Prussian route were thoroughly undermined. Under the New Deal agricultural policy the planter class shared federal farm subsidies with their sharecroppers, but not with their wage laborers. Planters gained by changing the status of their sharecroppers to footloose wage laborers, making them less dependent on planters than sharecroppers.

New Deal agricultural programs also gave farmers and planters the dependable and stable income needed to modernize. For the first time since the Civil War the planters were willing to mechanize, replacing variable capital with constant capital on a scale larger than ever. During the 1930s southern farmers purchased almost 100,000 additional tractors, significantly more than in the previous decade (Fite, 1984).

The decline of sharecropping, growth of wage laborers and mechanization led to a detour from the Prussian route to industrialization to one closely resembling the classical route to industrial capitalism. Instead of a limited form of industrialization to serve agriculture, southern industrialization would be served by a more mechanized agricultural system. And as footloose wage laborers, the former sharecroppers would be forced to sell their labor to survive.

The vertical and horizontal integration of the factory system under Fordism meant not only a centralization of control over capital and production but increased control beyond the workplace into the consumption arena. For the first time in history, Fordism created a “social norm of working-class consumption” to balance its growth, once productivity leaps ahead. Through this social consumption norm, “the mode of consumption is integrated into the conditions of production,” increasing the rate of surplus value (Aglietta, 1979: 152).

The Fordist model of industrialization is to extend successful industry and its firms into new territory, creating there what Lipietz (1986) calls “peripheral Fordism.” Soon after Henry Ford introduced automatic-assembly-line production at its Highland Park (Michigan) Model-T-plant, he expanded into new peripheries (Storper and Walker, 1989). The restructuring of the southern political economy during the 1930s provided the locational window of opportunity for Fordism to expand

John Mitchell, President of United Mine Workers of America, warned the black worker that he “would fall back to the old system in vogue a few years ago [the old contract system of post-Reconstruction], when he was compelled to do the work for which someone else received pay” (Labor Advocate, 1905: 1). The racial strategy proved successful, and the mine operators defeated labor (Ward and Roger, 1965; Worthman, 1969; Straw, 1975a, 1975b).

Although both black and white workers in Birmingham produced and had extracted from them surplus value and had more in common than they had differences in their economic arrangements, they were made more aware of their race than their working class condition. Upon inspecting a Birmingham mill in the 1930s, an official of US Steel asked the foreman how much pay white workers in the skilled jobs of roller received. The official considered the figure provided by the foreman high and ordered the plant superintendent to cut the wage, and said if the white workers complain he should “tell them that we got a lot of barefooted colored men who want [those] jobs” (Norrell, 1986: 676).

Southern ruling elites used race to force competition within the wage earning class, extracting relative surplus value but without the increase in mass consumption needed for an intensive regime of accumulation. Rather than joining with blacks against exploitation by capitalists, whites were only too willing to obtain work however small the income, extending the system of exploitation to the white working class also and contributing to a large white underclass in the state and low effective demand. Almost 38 percent of white Alabamians in 1960 had per capita incomes of less than $1500 compared to 32 percent of whites for America (U.S. Census, 1963a; U.S. Census, 1963b). In 1970 more whites (93,614) than blacks (86,821) were below the poverty level and the state became the third poorest state in the U.S. (Flynt, 1989). Southern white labor was “induced to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro,” states DuBois and “would rather have low wages upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage.” He writes,

“there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interest who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are so far apart that neither see anything of common interest.” (DuBois, 1964: 680, 701, 700).

DuBois’ description of southern labor reflects the Marxian notion of a “class-in-itself” with the white working class remaining structurally distinct from the black working class rather than a “class-for-itself” (Rex, 1983: 194; Roediger, 1991; Saxton, 1991). The fragmentation of
into the South during the post World War II period of overwhelming competitive advantage and rapid investment by U.S. capitalists. Much of the industrial development of the South in the post World War II period was directed and financed by northern capitalists through the establishment of branch plants, which produced over 70 percent of the southeast's total value of products in 1939 (Mclaughlin and Robock, 1949).

Although New Deal policies undermined the institutional bases of the Prussian arrangement, the consumption norm of the South still remained lower than that outside the South throughout the era of peripheral Fordism. New Deal policies to raise the wages of laborers hit hard in the South where the attraction had been low wages. Low wage unskilled jobs were made scarce by the passage of the 1938 Federal Labor Standards Act, which forced southern capitalists to pay higher wages. These were still lower than those outside the South, but wages rose enough so that investment in labor-saving machinery increased. Mining companies in Alabama introduced labor-saving machinery on a large scale.

The conditions of job scarcity and surplus labor produced by increasing mechanization reinforced the interests of whites in racial separation and minimized economic pressures to overturn racial segregation (Wright, 1986). Men in jobs eliminated by mechanization were laid off before others having less seniority but working in occupations unaffected by mechanization (Northrup and Rowan, 1970). In 1940, blacks in the bituminous coal industry of Alabama were laid off in disproportionate numbers (Table 3).

The arrival of new industries into the South was no guarantee of improved job opportunities for blacks (Wright, 1986). Many branch plants built in the South either did not employ blacks, or relegated blacks to unskilled and low-paying positions (Mclaughlin and Robock, 1949). In 1950 blacks were 43 percent of the population in the Deep South, but only 21 percent of new nonagricultural jobs went to blacks (Persky and Kain, 1970).

For blacks lucky enough to get and retain jobs, promotion was established based on race. Almost all the blacks employed in the bituminous coal industry of Alabama in 1940 were in largely repetitive and unskilled occupations (Table 4). By 1950 nearly three-fourths of employed black males in the Birmingham area worked as laborers and operatives as opposed to only one-fourth of employed white males. Of the employed black females, 85 percent were in domestic service and other services (laundries, etc.). And an analysis of job placements through the Birmingham Office of the Alabama State Employment Service indicated that service occupations and unskilled work accounted for 85 to 88 percent of all black job placements in the period 1948–1951 (Hawley, 1955).

Most workers understood which were “white” jobs and which were “black” jobs. Since blacks knew and kept their place, they were “tolerated and even liked by whites. What whites hated was the [black] who believed in and acted on the principle that all men are created equal” (Baran and Sweezy, 1966: 253).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Total Black Employment in Bituminous Coal Industry of Alabama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Miners</td>
<td>17,898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>9,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Black</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Black No.</th>
<th>Black Percent</th>
<th>White No.</th>
<th>White Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and Sales</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftmen and Foremen</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1,945</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives</td>
<td>9,496</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>10,576</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,605</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>13,417</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

low consumption norm, which was an extension of the racial stratification of the wage-earning class (Rikard, 1971).

One would assume that as economic concentration and the scale of the firm increased, the power of labor ought to increase also, facilitating collective action among workers and “reverberating throughout an interdependent and concentrated economy” (Piven and Cloward, 1979: 97). But once racism has been deeply implanted in social consciousness, racial divisions within the working class could be introduced by industrialists even into large-scale industry, inhibiting the solidarity necessary for effective strike power and assuring the segmentation of labor observed in the U.S. throughout the period of Fordism (Aglietta, 1979).

Urban Development in the Industrial and Fordist Phases

The agglomeration and concentration of production under the industrial form of accumulation meant that housing for the large force of unskilled labor had to be found. The owners of industries sought to resolve the problem of housing the workers by becoming directly involved in real estate. Many of those investing in the built environment of Birmingham during the industrial phase were capitalists who also owned land companies. For instance, the Birmingham Ensale Land Company, founded in 1886 by industrialist Henry DeBardeleben and James W. Sloss, had a capital stock of $450,000 and built the industrial suburb of Ensley. And the United States Steel corporation provided the land for the planned development of Fairfield. Company-built housing provided for qualitative efficiency of the production process by cutting off workers “from individual ties of family, or bonds of neighborhood proximity or supplementary activity that [may] link them to a noncapitalist environment” (Aglietta, 1979: 154).

Before 1900 there were no Birmingham ordinances about the separation of the races listed among the city codes. Capitalists reinforced labor homogenization by housing both black and white workers in the same locale as the mines and mills. Superintendents, skilled and unskilled workers, blacks and whites, immigrants and convicts all lived within walking distance of mines and mills. Birmingham industrialist Henry DeBardeleben built his home two blocks from his rolling mills, and E. M. Tutwiler, developer of many mines in the Birmingham district, lived at a mining camp with several hundred black convict laborers (White, 1981).

Industrial housing patterns approached those often found in the ante-bellum cities of the South. Like the urban slave owners of the ante-bellum South who found it wise not to segregate slave housing, the industrialists of Birmingham did not keep the two races very far apart.

At most, only rows of houses segregated black and white workers with a black row and a white row often standing back to back. In some mines blacks lived on the summits of steep hills that overlooked the mines, and whites resided on the lower slopes (Flynt, 1989).

By not segregating the workers by communities or mining camps, class solidarity is made easier. Hosea Hudson, a black labor leader and communist in the 1930s, recalled his experience in trying to organize workers in Atlanta:

You miss one worker here [Birmingham], you get the other next door. But over there in Atlanta, you got to go from here over cross town to see the next steelworker. He'll talk well, but getting him to go from over yonder to over here and this one over here to meet together, that was the problem I had. And it kept me running around, just running around (Painter, 1979: 228).

Workers are more likely to follow each other if they are territorially concentrated than if they are territorially apart (Storper and Walker, 1989).

By 1944 several city ordinances had resulted in the racial segregation of residences and other activities. As the industrial labor force became more segmented along racial lines, it contributed to the significance of the economic variable in Birmingham’s housing pattern. According to the findings by Tauber and Tauber (1965), almost 60 percent of the actual housing segregation in Birmingham for 1940 was a product of black-white socioeconomic differences, compared to an average of 43.3 percent for 15 US cities studied. Occupying the lowest rung of the economic ladder, blacks occupied 66 percent of the slum dwellings but made up only 40 percent of the population (U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Housing, 1948). Blacks for the most part became renters while whites became homeowners, fragmenting the working classes not only along racial lines but also along classes of housing. Only 3.5 percent of the residential land zoned for blacks was single-family detached housing, compared to 61.5 percent of the land for whites. A Birmingham News (1947) survey found that blacks able to move into better housing could find no neighborhoods in which to buy or build. Only two small sections were available for black single-family dwellings, and both were fully occupied.

Such a rigid pattern of segregation not only reinforced labor segmentation but made possible the exploitation of blacks by owners of ghetto real estate who overcrowd and extract monopoly rent and prices (Baran and Sweezy, 1966; Harvey, 1985). Restricted to shopping in ghetto areas, blacks ended with inferior merchandise at higher prices (Tabb, 1970).
There was also varying access to public services. In 1914 the city built 17 parks for whites and only one for blacks, providing $15,000 annually for upkeep of the white parks compared to only $300 for the black park. Education appropriations per child in Alabama at the turn of the century were $18.86 for whites but only $2.81 for blacks. White school property in 1911 was valued at $97.84 per pupil and black property at $20.22 (Corley, 1979). Educating black workers was not a high priority because a strong but weak mind constitutes an ideal Taylorized worker, lowering the “social value of labour power” (Aglietta, 1979: 50). One owner of production in the Birmingham area complained that “he prevented labor trouble by hiring only those who could not read and that there were not enough illiterates to go around” (quoted in Flynn, 1989: 125).

The restructuring of the southern political economy contributed to a massive outmigration of blacks from the rural South to the North, shifting the supply of unskilled labor for northern capitalists from Europe to an internal source, the South (Davis and Donaldson, 1975). Almost 80 percent of the black population resided in the South in 1940, but by 1970 about half lived in the North (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979).

The growth of an urban black proletariat in the North meant also the growth of an urban black voting block, which caused New Dealers to eventually join with civil rights organizations to fight for equality of treatment for blacks. President Roosevelt’s decision to issue Executive Order 8802, providing for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries without discrimination, and his establishment of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices reflected the importance of the black vote in national elections, which “symbolized a coming of age for civil rights.” (Wright, 1986; Sitkoff, 1978: 334).

No one doubts civil rights gains, but according to Piven and Cloward (1979: 36) civil rights protesters gained “what historical circumstances have already made ready to be conceded.” As agricultural and industrial transformation swept the Deep South during the post-World War II period, the interest of the southern ruling class in continuing down the Prussian route and maintaining a racially repressive labor system had diminished by the 1960s. The Prussian arrangement lost ground to peripheral Fordism that increasingly would not support the disenfranchisement of blacks, leading to passage of the Voting Rights Act. The restructuring of the southern economy made possible other concessions on the race issue from the ruling elites.

From Late Fordism to Post-Fordism: Civil Rights and the Decline of Birmingham

The rigidity of long-term and large-scale fixed investment under the industrial phase began to weaken because of a more flexible and mobile capital during late Fordism. The mobility of capital has the potential of consolidating a global empire including people of color. Capitalists now attempt to avoid as much as possible the stigma of racism, which led to passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s (Baran and Sweezy, 1966).

Racial stigma has always distinguished the South from other places. During the early phase of Fordism, race did not hinder the expansion of industry into the South. But during late Fordism, capitalists began to exploit this regional difference to the detriment of the South. Speaking to the Rotary Club of Atlanta, Malcolm Bryan (1961), President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, warned the governments of southern states that if they “failed in their responsibilities to maintain law and order, the investment of that capital or the location of that plant with us is dangerous; for all rational men know that a mob turned loose on one man, or one class of men, or on one property, or class of property can also be turned loose on another man, or other men, or other properties.”

The southern commercial and business class took heed of this warning as it concerned itself with the effect of civil rights activities on investments in the region, causing it to sacrifice old racial beliefs and practices to maintain and attract new investments. Atlanta took heed before most other southern cities and became known as “A City That Was Too Busy To Hate” (Hornsby, Jr., 1982: 120–136; see also Cobb, 1982: 122–150). The strategies of the local ruling elites, who negotiated with black leaders as early as the 1940s, gave Atlanta a comparative advantage over other southern cities, especially Birmingham. This advantage was one of several that contributed to Atlanta becoming the center of control and decision-making for the growing Sunbelt region in the post-Fordist era.

Although the center of industrial production in the South for the first half of the 20th century, Birmingham’s comparative advantage was diminishing. Competing with other cities and attracting new invest-
ments to replace declining investments in the manufacturing sector were difficult because of civil rights activities and the negative publicity that the city received. A typical example of how the city was losing investments was a company that planned a new plant to make products out of steel, but when the riot over Freedom Riders erupted in 1961 the company decided Birmingham was out of the question. The company eventually built its plant in Tennessee, although it had to ship its steel from Birmingham (Saturday Evening Post, 1963). Because of racial unrest in the city, a top official of one of Birmingham’s leading banks was unsuccessful in convincing a big Ohio company that it should locate a pilot plant in Alabama that would have entailed investments of more than $40 million. According to the bank official, “... we asked for it [referring to past and existing segregation policies] and now we’re getting it [economically]” (Wall Street Journal, 1961). The head of a sales consultant firm commented, “We’ve become known as a city of reaction, rebellion and riot, and because of that we’re not gaining industry as fast as we should” (Wall Street Journal, 1963). Investment in new plants and expansion declined from $52 million in 1960 to only $11 million in 1962. Whereas in the 1950s Birmingham supplied more than half the steel consumed in the South, by 1966 its share of the market had declined to one-fifth (Connerly, 1991).

In the central business district retail sales were off 40 to 50 percent during the spring of 1963 when several retailers showed a net loss for the first time in several decades. The Federal Reserve Bank in Atlanta reported that in the four-week period ending May 18, 1963, department store sales in Birmingham were down 15 percent compared to the same period in 1962, while elsewhere sales were up 7 percent in Atlanta, 10 percent in New Orleans, and 15 percent in Jacksonville, Florida. There was also more commercial space for rent in the city than there had been during the Depression, with one block having 40 percent of its space for rent (New York Times, 1963).

The population of the Birmingham metropolitan area increased only 14 percent between 1950 and 1960 compared to 26.4 percent for all metropolitan areas in the United States. Between 1960 and 1961, the population of the metropolitan area declined for the first time ever. Resistance to civil rights efforts combined with the depressed employment situation contributed to a net out-migration of blacks (Hammer, Greene, Siler Associates, 1966). While the number of jobs was increasing in the nation as a whole, the number of jobs available in Birmingham dropped. In 1957 the metropolitan area had its highest employment, 246,000, but this declined to 228,000 by 1963. Birmingham, once considered the industrial center of the South, now ranked last among thirteen southeastern metropolitan areas in both numerical and percentage gains in nonagricultural employment between 1950 and 1960. Noting the Birmingham situation, John F. Kennedy in a 1963 meeting with more than 100 businessmen with southern concerns urged them that it would be in their interest to resolve the racial problem of the region (Meier and Rudwick, 1986).

The commercial and business class of Birmingham was convinced that if the city was to remain competitive in the 1960s, when capital was becoming more flexible and mobile, an image needed to be forged and an atmosphere created that would be attractive to both people and capital. With the greater mobility of capital, image building becomes as important as investment in new plant and machinery (Harvey, 1989). The political elites, led by Bull Connor, Commissioner of Public Safety, preferred and continued to follow the old color line of the planter class whose racial beliefs and practices had been very much instilled in the social and spatial fabric of Birmingham. Because of the restructuring of southern agriculture initiated as a result of the depression, the planter class was no longer willing to support the old social order and never came to the aid of Bull Connor, allowing the city’s commercial and business elites to seek a successful change in local government that led to his political defeat. The raison d’etre of the planter class was once the protection of white supremacy, but now it was the promotion of business and industrial development (Wright, 1986).

The defeat of Bull Connor provided the opportunity for negotiation with civil rights leaders and led to the conclusion to one of the fiercest conflicts in civil rights history and ended decades of legal segregation under the Fordist phase of capitalism. John F. Kennedy’s executive order, which mandated fair employment practices in companies holding federal contracts, forced United States Steel to use its authority to end discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made employment discrimination illegal, and black workers became more aggressive at challenging discrimination in the workplace. Federal legislation opened doors of public facilities to blacks in the mid-1960s. And black steel workers in Birmingham received promotions and back pay as part of a 1973 consent decree that settled dozens of employment discrimination suits throughout the steel industry.

By the 1970s the flexibility and mobility of capital intensified, mainly through the elimination of spatial barriers that occur in the production of particular spaces, especially investments in transport and communication (Harvey, 1989). The collapse of spatial barriers increased rather than decreased the significance of relative locational advantages. According to Harvey (1989: 293–294),

Heightened competition under conditions of crisis has coerced capitalists into paying much closer attention to relative locational advantages, precisely because diminishing
spatial barriers give capitalists the power to exploit minute spatial differentiations to good effect. . . . we become much more sensitized to what the world's spaces contain.

The greater sensitization to spatial differentiation has the effect of transforming some places from centers of production and development to the periphery, a place of redundancy and decline. Understanding this greater sensitization to spatial differentiation of global capitalists is essential to understanding the geography of race in the post-Fordist phase of capitalism. Most jobs that blacks gained access to because of civil rights legislation disappeared as Birmingham and other old industrial cities found it difficult to compete in a global market. This plus continuing automation and cybertaner in the workplace contributed to unemployment rates among American blacks in the 1980s averaging out to twice the rate of whites, leading to a growing black underclass (Wilson, 1987; Johnson and Oliver, 1991).

The place-based agenda of the civil rights movement is incompatible with the tendencies of a mobile capital, which produce new industrial places that may be inaccessible to blacks (Cole and Deskins, 1988). As capital transforms itself spatially, expanding across regional and international boundaries, it hides critical processes affecting blacks. As Soja observes (1989: 61), this transformation ‘...and its veiled instrumentality of power is the key to making practical, political, and theoretical sense’ of social conditions facing blacks who are now slaves to global organizations and markets. Sensitivity to this spatial transformation and the new industrial places taking shape should be on the black political and economic agenda as never before.

Conclusion

Racism cannot be overcome by merely denouncing it or calling for more legislation (Tabb, 1970). Capitalists conceded only what historical circumstances allowed, which to date has not produced full racial equality. Restructuring of U.S. capitalism has shifted blacks from one form of extreme economic subjugation to another: from slaves to sharecroppers; from sharecroppers to the repressive southern free labor system; and finally to the status of an urban proletariat characterized by low wages and high unemployment (Piven and Cloward, 1979).

The Southern route to industrial capitalism institutionalized racism, which made it impossible for the civil rights movement to produce a radical transformation of society. The southern shift of Fordism was a point of leverage for the civil rights movement, requiring the southern ruling elites to present their communities as being qualitatively efficient in the production process (Wright, 1986). But Birmingham was already experiencing decline by the 1950s, and the civil rights movement only pushed the city a little faster off the stage of industrial history.

Notes

1. The Southern road is not exactly the Prussian road of Germany, because of the South’s foundation in race – not to mention the South’s fragmented states and military defeat during the Civil War.

2. Surplus value, S, is value added by manufacturing, M, minus variable capital, V, human labor. Human labor yields surplus value in the proportion (M – V). The rate of surplus value is the ratio of surplus value to cost of labor, (M – V)/V. The higher the rate of surplus value, the larger the portion of total value added accruing to capitalists as surplus value and the smaller the portion of value added paid to labor as wages. The labor value of machinery is considered by Marx to be constant capital, having no impact on the rate of surplus value. The canceling of labor value of machinery from surplus value is one of many points that distinguishes Marx’s analysis from that of classical economics. See Philip J. Wood, Southern Capitalism: The Political Economy of North Carolina, 1880–1980 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 206–208, for a description of this method of determining rate of surplus value and problems associated with it.

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Debates

EUROCENTRIC BIAS IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN URBANIZATION: A PROVOCATION TO DEBATE

Rickie Sanders*

Problems associated with the study of African urbanization have been important research topics for geographers, economists, sociologists and other students of development. One characteristic of this research is the considerable borrowing and lending of conceptual and theoretical tool kits. On the one hand, this “eclecticism” has been positive in that scholars have not been bound by the arbitrary limits which typically define disciplinary boundaries (cf. Harvey, 1973). They have had the freedom to choose where an investigation began, ended, and the route it took to get there (Anderson, 1973). On the other hand, despite the interdisciplinary nature of this work, it has not wrought viable solutions to Africa’s urban problems nor has it succeeded in shedding any light on the nature of the urbanization process. Lystad (1965) has unflatteringly noted that many Africanists engage in the study of Africa to “advance their own agendas.” If indeed this is the case and it is as common as Lystad suggests, it is extremely disconcerting. Even more disturbing, and the focus of this paper, is that little systematic attention has been given to addressing more substantive questions of how and why this literature has fallen short. In fact, it now appears that the study of African urbanization has reached an “impasse” similar to that described by Booth (1985) in his analysis of development sociology.

This paper offers one explanation for this impasse. Namely, academic inquiries cannot be reduced merely to the interaction of facts and theories, nor are they prompted simply by ground-level realities. Rather, most contemporary academic practice is rooted in the history of the West and structured by that important, but unique experience. As a result, Eurocentric bias serves as a ribbon, running through the work of geographers, economists, anthropologists, sociologists, and other researchers. Concepts like economic development, formal/informal, and

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