

New South

The term “new south” has been applied to the American south at various points in American history, generally to contrast the then-contemporary south with the historical, often pre-Civil War south characterized by an aristocratic political culture with an economy focused on agriculture suited to the region, particularly the cultivation of cotton and tobacco. Originally adopted as a slogan by post-Reconstruction boosters of emerging southern cities such as Atlanta and Charlotte, the term was further popularized by C. Vann Woodward's history of the post-Civil War South first published in 1951.

Today the “new south” is best understood as describing the more inclusive political and economic order of the south after World War II, which saw a rather dramatic break from the past over this period. While many black and Hispanic citizens (both in the region and outside of it) remain marginalized economically and politically, nonetheless the region has broadly converged with the rest of the nation and arguably surpassed it in the development of the energy resources, automotive assembly, and service sectors.

The Agrarian Economy

During the settlement of North America by European colonists, the southern British colonies largely focused on agricultural production through the employment of slave labor and indentured servants. After America won its independence from Britain, the distinct southern agrarian economy persisted; while the northern states focused greater attention on the development of domestic industrial capacity, the south continued to emphasize the cultivation of cash crops, primarily cotton and tobacco, for export to the north and the broader global economy in exchange for imported, finished goods. The political and economic order of the region was largely under the control of wealthy slaveholders or “laborlords” who saw little value in investing in the development of the infrastructure (such as roads, railways, and canals, which were being promoted heavily in the northeast and Midwest) necessary for an industrializing economy.

While some industrial capacity and infrastructure was built in the region prior to the Civil War, the conflict left most of these assets in ruins. Economic power still largely rested in the hands of the former slaveholders who continued to control land despite losing their slaveholdings as a consequence of the war. After Reconstruction and the withdrawal of northern troops, political power also returned to the traditional elite, who continued to oppose what they saw as “excessive” public investment in infrastructure or education. Despite the end of slavery, the south remained a distinct economic labor market, with a relatively low-wage, unskilled labor pool that was not broadly suitable for industrialization.

Industrial Development and Urbanization

In spite of the region's disadvantages, however, in some areas of the south local industry developed; the textile industry in the Carolinas took advantage of the local supply of cotton and low labor costs to emerge as an important engine in regional economic growth. During the early twentieth century, the occasional election of populist and “good government” progressive politicians such as Charles Aycock in North Carolina and Huey Long in Louisiana, to governorships and other elected office led to the promotion of state investment in education and highways.

This development was sporadic until President Franklin Roosevelt administration's New Deal programs led to several economic development programs that benefited the south in particular, including the

establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority and Rural Electrification Administration. World War II also brought government investment into the development of industry in the region, most notably with the establishment of Oak Ridge, Tennessee as part of the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb; post-war government policies also promoted industrialization in the south to reduce the concentration of military installations and strategic industries such as shipbuilding and weapons production in the Midwest and northeast, which were seen as vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack.

Industrialization and urban development was also promoted by the development of practical electrically-powered air conditioning, which made the region's hot summers more bearable for outsiders, and increased government investment in infrastructure beginning with the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1916, most notably with the planning and development of the Interstate Highway System. After World War II, the south was seen as an increasingly attractive region for in-migration by non-native southerners due to the greater availability of higher-paying jobs and milder winters.

Political Change

The industrialization and urbanization of the south also led to political change across the region. Particularly in the Deep South states, politics had long been dominated by the large landowners, primarily based in the “black-belt” counties that produced cotton and were the heart of plantation slavery prior to the Civil War, joined by what Black and Black refer to as the “county-seat elite” consisting of a small service-oriented middle class (primarily merchants, bankers, and doctors). The county-seat elites were assisted in their political dominance by the practice of malapportionment in southern state legislatures (and Georgia's similar “county unit system” used in its Democratic primaries for statewide office), which led to whites in rural counties having vastly disproportionate clout in the states' lawmaking bodies and in Congress.

The growth of cities in the south reduced the electoral clout of the rural and small-town elites as urban whites gradually came to outnumber those living in small towns and the countryside. The effects of this growth became more pronounced after the Supreme Court found in *Baker v. Carr* (1962) that deviations in election rules from the one-person, one-vote standard could be challenged under the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause; malapportionment in state legislatures was found unconstitutional two years later in *Reynolds v. Sims* (1964). Urban and suburban white voters were also a source of opposition to the “massive resistance” strategy promoted largely by small-town and rural whites after the court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), particularly when massive resistance proponents began to propose the abolition of all public education as a means to avoid desegregation orders.

The 1950s and 1960s also saw dramatic increases in political participation by blacks spurred by the Civil Rights Movement's successes, particularly as a result of Congress' passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the 24th Amendment, which abolished poll taxes and literacy tests and provided for increased federal oversight of African Americans' voting rights by the U.S. Department of Justice. Black voter participation soared as a result of this federal intervention, and dramatic gains in black office-holding followed in the 1970s.

The New South Today

Since the 1970s, the southern economy has seen further convergence with that of the nation as a whole. In addition to the development of Houston as the site of the global energy industry, Charlotte established itself as a leading world banking center, two global air carriers (Continental Airlines and

Delta Air Lines) were based in the region, and American, European, and Japanese automakers increasingly sited their American assembly plants in the southeast. Politically the south has become the home of the most elected black officials of any region of the U.S., while Hispanics and other minority groups have also established a political foothold in the region as well despite the persistence of “old south” racial attitudes among parts of the region's populace. While the exact timing of the transition between “old” and “new” is unclear, it is apparent that a clear break with the old patterns of politics and economics has taken place.

Bibliography and Further Readings

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See Also

This volume: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* 1954; Civil Rights Movement; Economic Policy; Urbanization, Suburbanization

Other volumes: Agriculture (vol. 1); Cotton Culture (vol. 2); Civil War (vol. 3); Economic Policy (vol. 4, 5, 7); Reconstruction (vol. 3)

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