
among black people themselves, . . . [that] speaks to the existential issues of what it means to be a degraded African (man, woman, gay, lesbian, child) in a racist society." This may be the rhetoric prescribed in the multiculturalists' handbook, but it is a rhetoric, I fear, that is largely irrelevant to the serious racial problems that continue to beset American society.

West talks about transcending race as, he asserts, blacks should have done when instead we rallied in large numbers behind the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Yet he mires himself in an essentially racist vision that makes it difficult to see how such a transcendence can be achieved. Why, one wonders, does he find it necessary to equate the violence-promoting lyrics of rap performer Ice-T with the public statements of former Los Angeles police commissioner Darryl Gates? More disturbing, how can a man whose claim on our attention here rests upon the morality of his denunciation of racism speak of "visible Jewish resistance to affirmative action and government spending on social programs"—as if the fact that some American Jews hold some ideas can be used

to ascribe these ideas to the entire group? West would certainly, and rightly, be offended by a similar-sounding charge that blacks as a group should be judged as engaged in an "assault on Jewish survival" because some criminals who are black have murdered some victims who are Jews.

In the end, the moral authority of Cornel West's voice in these pages must be supplied by the reader. If you come as a true believer, you will be entertained and energized by the eloquence and commitment of this "pre-eminent black intellectual of our generation." The rest of us perhaps must take our lead from the current fashion in literary criticism and read this text not for what it appears to be arguing but, indirectly, for what it can be understood to say about the curious disposition of influence and moral authority in the contemporary American academy.

—Glenn Loury is professor of economics at Boston University. His *One by One from the Inside Out: Race and Responsibility in America* will be published by the Free Press later this year.

The South Rises Again

THE PROMISE OF THE NEW SOUTH: *Life After Reconstruction.* By Edward L. Ayers. Oxford. 572 pp. \$30

When C. Vann Woodward entered graduate school at the University of North Carolina in the 1930s, southern history writing, he later recalled, consisted chiefly of references to injured sectional pride and pretensions to glories that never existed. Slogging through text after text, the man who would become the leading southern historian of his time quickly realized that he had never before read "prose so pedestrian, pages so dull, chapters so devoid of

ideas, whole volumes so wrongheaded or so lacking in point." With a succession of brilliant works, including his popular *Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), Woodward rectified the problem. His classic work, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951), covers those years after the Civil War that others had disregarded in favor of the southern golden age from Jefferson's inauguration to Lee's surrender. Woodward demonstrated that, by comparison with a prospering North, the South possessed a distinctively tragic past—a historical record of poverty, defeat, and internal strife that was not uncommon to most nations but to which the Yankee conquerors were the lucky exceptions.

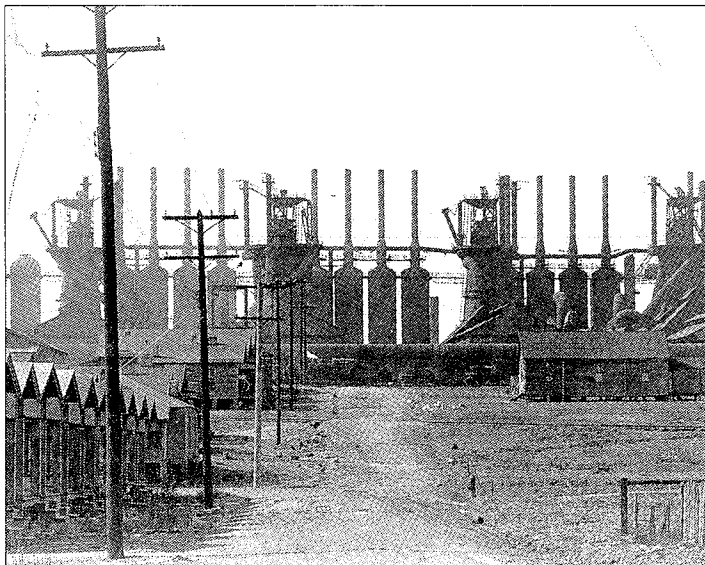
The hapless heirs of the Confederacy, in Woodward's story, staggered into the 20th century ill-prepared for the economic setbacks of the 1920s and 1930s.

In *The Promise of the New South*, Edward Ayers, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, offers a new narrative strategy, appropriate for our times. To be sure, we recognize many of the themes that Woodward introduced—the crop-lien system that ravaged the countryside and paid subsistence wages, and a ramshackle political system that

fers no unifying thesis, no memorable summation that helps the reader remember the findings. Indeed, as a young scholar influenced by the “new history” of our day—that is, by a historiography that highlights social, ethnic, and multicultural themes—Ayers is fortunate to be able to assume what Woodward had to prove: the South's distinctiveness. Thanks to Woodward's identification of southern uniqueness in the pre-World War I era, Ayers is free to range widely, and he does so with genuine relish. He fashions a visual and oral tapestry of many Souths, particularly through deployment of quotations from people of separate walks of life and subregions, and of different ages and colors. He discovers—from God knows where—diaries of black tenant farmers, petitions of poor white women with husbands in jail, expletives from mechanics, a suicide note from a lonely Texan, and reminiscences of shoe salesmen and of drummers on their dreary rounds. He has combed mail-order catalogs, patent-medicine pitches, and partisan broadsides for often-humorous reflections on the events of the hour. An eye-catching advertisement in an Arkansas newspaper sought

“two good hustlers, either sex, to introduce and sell Lightning Vermin Destroyer.” In this range of voices, Ayers discovers the movement of people seeking a better life, the restlessness and energy of the inhabitants.

Woodward painted a South hobbled by economic stagnation, with only a few places like Atlanta, Birmingham, and Richmond developing an urban vibrancy. Ayers's South, by contrast, is a land of growing settlements, large and small, where the frustrated farmer could leave the unsubmissive soil and clerk at a store before opening a shop of his own. Devoting a lengthy chapter to “Dry Goods,”



Birmingham steel mill, c. 1930

rewarded mediocrity and incited racial mistrust while ignoring real social and economic needs. Yet Ayers's post-Reconstruction South is headed not for the Great Depression but for the Sun Belt era. The title itself gives the clue. “Promise,” which suggests hope for the future, replaces Woodward's “Origins,” which, in the author's hands, implied an irony about a region of broken hopes, missed opportunities, and inclinations to self-deception.

Perhaps in reaction to what Harold Bloom has called the “anxiety of influence,” Ayers does not directly challenge Woodward (who was his dissertation adviser). Unlike Woodward's *Origins*, *The Promise of the New South* of-

Ayers explains how the South developed a consumer economy. Country merchants with their ready-made products not only eased the lot of overworked farm wives but excited rural aspirations to a better life. Such dreams led many into the textile-mill hamlets of the Middle South—a release from agrarian drudgery for some and a new enslavement of whole families to arrogant bosses for others. For Woodward, mine and mill owners and country storekeepers were still largely the rapacious creditors and cold-eyed employers who held the dependent classes in almost permanent bondage.

In Ayers, however, we find the beginnings of the current South—both its tackiness and its vitality. The post-Reconstruction South, for instance, took to baseball, football, and prizefighting as if they had been native sports, when in reality they were all imported from the North. In fact, Ayers's analysis of popular culture overwhelms the more orthodox concerns of politics and economics found in Woodward's *Origins*. While Woodward was trained as a political scientist, Ayers is primarily a social historian who seems a little off-balance in the political realm. He is more comfortable narrating lively vignettes about how John Heisman of Auburn inflamed the collegiate football craze or how Scott Joplin transposed banjo syncopation to the piano in the late 1880s. He even makes comprehensible the religiously tinted prohibition movement in a South where "Red Eye" and mellowing bourbon had reigned so long. With heavy female participation, the crusade sought to civilize a pervasive culture of male license in barroom and cathouse, check a serious problem of substance abuse, and solidify what we now call family values (references to which excited more southern than northern enthusiasm in the 1992 presidential election). Although the South remained behind the North in wealth, cultural refinement, and skilled workers, Ayers shows the section slouching toward a secular modernity that would have amazed

and probably appalled the honor-conscious fathers of the slaveholding era.

Two areas of *The Promise of the New South* deserve special mention. The first is Ayers's new and somewhat problematic approach to the region's economic record. The South between the wars (Civil and Great) was burdened with farm foreclosures, sharecropping, convict leasing on plantations and in the forests, and the lowest wages for farm labor in the country. To his credit, Ayers does not ignore these matters. Even "the growing southern cities," he writes, "were not so much signs of urban opportunity as of rural sickness." Cotton farmers were generally so encumbered with debt that they had fewer resources for crops to feed their livestock and themselves. Nor were those engaged in diversified husbandry necessarily better off than their cotton-growing cousins. Freight rates discriminated against the lightly populated rural South, and competition with midwestern farmlands was keen. Yet Ayers does not dwell sufficiently on the post-Reconstruction South's intractable woes. Like Chaucer, he rejoices in God's plenty, but he fails even to mention the medical problems of the rural poor—pellagra, rickets, typhoid, rheumatic and yellow fever, and syphilis. These were psychologically and physically depressing maladies that seemed to substantiate northern contempt for a "lazy" and woebegone section. Their omission from this account signals Ayers's preference for themes leading toward the more strutting Sunbelt of today.

A second theme, the relationship of black and white, Ayers handles with much sympathy and perspicacity. Some of today's troubles in the black family, he reveals, had their roots in this period rather than in slavery, under which the two-parent family was normal, despite forced separations by sale and bequest. Between 1880 and 1915 close to a third of black households consisted only of a mother and children, thanks largely to the low rate of employment for black men in the small towns where black women could at least earn a pittance as domestics.

As for southern racial violence, Ayers reveals that the lynching of blacks occurred less frequently in areas where blacks had large majorities, as in the Mississippi Delta or Alabama Black Belt, than in areas of economic dislocation and collective stress, into which smaller numbers of blacks had recently moved. Motives for a lynching were less likely to be retribution for the rape of a white woman than a desire to settle a particular score with an allegedly "uppity-minded" black homeowner or entrepreneur. Ayers has an eye for the telling detail. He relates, for example, how at a carnival in 1896 a white schoolboy unsuspectingly put on earphones and heard an Edison recording of a lynching. To his horror, the boy heard the crackle of the flames and the victims "asking God to forgive their tormentors." The pitchman, noticing the boy's distress, dismissed it: "Too much cake, too much lemonade. You know how boys are at a picnic."

Inevitably, perhaps, Ayers has lost some of the coherence that Woodward's more schematic and morally driven account provided. After all, Woodward wrote when the American giant patrolled the world against communism. Ever a skeptic, Woodward set before an unheeding nation seemingly bent on a career of world domination and world policing the example of post-Reconstruction southerners, who understood from the defeat of 1865 the cost of overbearing greed and national hubris.

By contrast, Ayers shuns moral prescriptions of any kind. He belongs to the post-Vietnam War generation, which recoils from the moral imperatives of irony, places faith in the voices of ordinary people, not of authorities, and prefers readers to draw their own conclusions without much authorial direction. At times Ayers's sheer piling up of unfailingly fascinating details has the effect—in the absence of an overarching motif—of leaving the reader intellectually benumbed.

Ayers's accomplishments, however, far outweigh such deficiencies. He has permanently altered our understanding of the New South by revealing a region with many faces, a region where the tackiest, cruelest, and most human moments are all jumbled together. Above all, he has produced a work of frequently stunning beauty. The elegance and sensitivity that he achieves are typical of few historical works, most of which retain a measure of the pedantry that the young Woodward found so disheartening 50 or so years ago.

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OTHER TITLES

Contemporary Affairs

PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. By Paul Kennedy. Random House. 428 pp. \$25

Paul Kennedy's best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) was, for all its imposing size, a fundamentally simple book. Kennedy's unit of analysis remained the sovereign state, which by

the 1980s already looked to be distinctly old-fashioned—the currency of imperial *Weltpolitik* rather than of the modern world economy. The Yale historian never offered a definition of state power but seemed to assume that it was ultimately measurable in military terms. With disarming frankness, Kennedy now recounts the criticism he received on this point, and his new book is presented as a corrective. Here he turns his attention to larger, transnational develop-