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## *The Civil Rights Revolution as Economic History*

GAVIN WRIGHT

This address urges Americanists to take the post–World War II era on board as economic history, using the Civil Rights Revolution to set an example. The speed and sweep of the movement’s success illustrates the dynamics of an “unanticipated revolution” as analyzed by Timur Kuran, to be grouped with famous historical surprises such as the triumph of British antislavery and the fall of Soviet communism. The evidence confirms that the breakthroughs of the 1960s constituted an economic as well as a political revolution, in many respects an economic revolution for the entire southern region, as well as for African-Americans.

There seem to be three kinds of presidential addresses: autobiography; advice to the field; and real research. Finding it difficult to decide among these alternatives, I propose to do a little of each. One of my favorite past presidential addresses was the one by Jonathan Hughes, who told about an experience from a youthful sojourn in Alaska, developing the concept of “institutional gridlock” as a tool for economic history.<sup>1</sup> After learning that this year’s meetings would be held in Durham, North Carolina, I decided to do something similar, taking us back thirty-five years to my first trip to the South. In June of 1963, I arrived in Durham after a 40-hour bus trip from Traverse City, Michigan, to join a voter registration project in Warren County—a black-majority county in the northeastern part of this state on the Virginia border. That summer in North Carolina had an important role in convincing me to go into economics and economic history, because I realized then just how little I really understood about the economic bases for the institutions and attitudes against which we were struggling.

*The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (June 1999). © The Economic History Association. All rights reserved. ISSN 0022-0507.

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I would like to thank those who encouraged me to choose this topic for the presidential address at the Economic History Association meetings in Durham (Jane Humphries and Martha Olney were the most persuasive), and all of those who responded to the talk itself, many of whom had stories of their own about the 1960s. For advice on North Carolina politics, I thank Ray Gavins, and for assistance in economic geography, I thank Dick Walker and Amy Glasmeier. Special thanks goes to Jan de Vries, Paul David, and Bill Parker, for their memorable remarks in Durham. My deepest gratitude is to my wife Cathe, for help with the pictures and everything else.

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, “Great Strike.”

Let me immediately head off a possible apprehension. Do not worry, this address will not be about how I won the Civil Rights Revolution back in '63. My personal contribution to the cause was negligible. If I had never made that bus trip, indeed if that voter registration project had never taken place, the course of history would not have been much changed—maybe not even the history of the little town of Warrenton where we were based. My involvement may have had only one lasting effect, but that was to make me feel part of those events that swept the South and the nation so dramatically. Another factor in my decision to revisit that experience was learning in 1992 that a woman from Warrenton, Eva Clayton, who was the local sponsor for our 1963 project, was running for Congress in the First Congressional District of North Carolina. In November of that year she was elected. Eva Clayton and Mel Watt are the first African-Americans to represent the state in this century, and Eva is only the second African-American woman to be elected to Congress from the South in history (after Barbara Jordan). The idea that something I was connected with so long ago, in however small a way, was linked to such an outcome some thirty years later, is deeply moving to me. I returned to Warrenton last April and interviewed Eva Clayton about the events of the past 35 years, and her reflections form part of the basis for the thoughts set down here.

My advice to the field is largely implicit in what follows, but let me add one more explicit note before getting into substance. We American economic historians have to take the post-World War II era on board as history, if we hope to have an impact on the broader economics profession. For most of our students, the 1950s and 1960s and probably the 1970s are history already. To our economics colleagues, some of the biggest issues they grapple with are postwar-historical in character: The rise and fall of high productivity growth; the inverse fall and rise of inequality; the economic impact of sweeping social revolutions in race, gender, and ethnicity; the almost equally sweeping shift in regimes of regulation and deregulation. Despite this demand for our services, by and large we economic historians have yet to offer a wholehearted response. Certainly there are noble exceptions to my statement, so many indeed that it would be imprudent to attempt to list them. But if you look at the textbooks and at the journals, you would infer that the “great divide” between history and the present still stands at 1940/45. In this, the postwar era contrasts with the interwar years, on which we now have a large and sophisticated literature. By my count, articles in this *Journal* dealing with interwar topics grew from 7.7 percent in the 1970s, to 19.2 percent in the 1980s, and to 25.7 percent in the 1990s. But there has been almost no growth at all in postwar articles: 6.9 percent in the 1980s, and 8.1 percent in the 1990s; of these, a disproportionate number were conference presentations by scholars who are not regular participants in the Economic History Association.

It is not hard to think of reasons for this hesitation, and some of these even have some validity. It is not easy to deal with the recent past as history. I have relearned this fact of life myself in trying to come to terms with the Civil Rights movement, a topic on which the issues spill over into present-day policy debates all too readily. But we have to start somewhere, and I propose to set an example by interpreting the Civil Rights Revolution as economic history. It is possible to do so, because in contrast to many other postwar topics, we do have a moderate amount of good economic scholarship on the events of the 1950s and 1960s in the South. But while building on the work of others, I hope to show that the historical approach has something distinctive to add.

#### ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: REVOLUTION AS SURPRISE

My choice of “revolutions” as the theme for the 1998 meetings grew out of a personal experience of historical *surprise*. Although the project in Warren County had finished by mid-August, I missed the famous March on Washington of 28 August 1963 because I did not recognize its historic importance at the time, just as I had no appreciation for how rapid the changes in the South would be over the next three to five years. My own naive views had no particular significance of course, but I do not think I was the only one. As historians now tell the story, 1963 was very late in the long cycle of struggle and pressure that culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In retrospect we can see that many of the background conditions bolstering segregation had by then been undermined, by such deep structural changes as mechanization and the fall in cotton acreage.<sup>2</sup> These changes may have been necessary for the success of the Civil Rights movement, but they did not make success inevitable. As we saw it on the ground in 1963, significant social and political change was no more than a remote prospect for some distant future date. The extent of political mobilization within the South; the willingness of the federal government to “move to positions that would have been unthinkable only a few years before”; and the acquiescence of the South, by and large, in these measures—all these were utterly unexpected by knowledgeable observers, black and white. Having fended off the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown* decision for nearly a decade, many or most whites in the South “clearly did not believe that integration would take place in their lifetimes.” Even in 1961, the year of the sit-ins, theater managers in Durham held firm against a boycott campaign to integrate the movies, and the campaign died. As late as

<sup>2</sup> The political effects of mechanization are considered by Alston and Ferrie, “Paternalism.” The endogeneity of mechanization is emphasized by Whatley, “Southern Agrarian Labor Contracts” and “Collapse.” The emergence of active southern efforts to recruit industry are treated by Cobb, *Selling*; and Schulman, *From Cotton Belt*.

1963, the Kennedy Administration planned a moderate approach to public accommodations, applying only to interstate commerce in the strict sense. Extrapolating trends of the previous half century, these cautious, realistic expectations were only reasonable.<sup>3</sup>

Yet when I returned to North Carolina three years later in the summer of 1966, to work on the Parker-Gallman sample in Chapel Hill, the place was utterly transformed, the revolution all but complete. Thus I see this as a prime example of discontinuous historical change, an “unanticipated revolution” like the triumph of British antislavery between 1790 and 1807, or the fall of Soviet communism in 1989. It is the sort of event about which conventional economics has little to say, but which we economic historians should take as our specialty.<sup>4</sup>

These phenomena are elegantly analyzed by Timur Kuran in *Private Truths, Public Lies*.<sup>5</sup> In Kuran’s framework, individuals hold private opinions based on true preferences, but these may differ from their publicly stated positions, which are also a function of what they *expect* other people’s opinions to be. Most individuals do not want to come out too differently from the prevailing norm, especially on a sensitive issue like race. These conditions give rise to a *propagation curve*, relating actual public opinion to expected public opinion (Figure 1). A number of motivations would support a relationship of this shape: in addition to preference falsification out of fear of deviation, one would also expect that a belief in the efficacy of political engagement would be a positive function of expected public opinion. If the curve has the shape depicted in Figure 1, we have two possible stable equilibria, one at 20 percent, the other at 100 percent, and the possibility of an unstoppable bandwagon effect carrying the system from one of these two points to the other. After the revolution, nearly everyone will claim to have been on the right side early on. As Seymour Drescher writes about the slave trade issue, Arthur Young and others “implied that they had known for an

<sup>3</sup> The statement about “unthinkably radical” positions is by Geoffrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), quoted in Chong, *Collective Action*, p. 224. Chong also describes the 1961 Durham movie boycott (p. 174). The statement about white expectations is by Barksdale, *Indigenous Civil Rights Movement*.

<sup>4</sup> Several people who heard the talk in Durham questioned whether the wave of the future was really unanticipated as of 1963; surely anyone could see what was “blowin’ in the wind” by then. My response was to point out that this sense of retrospective certainty is exactly what the Kuran model predicts! But I should certainly acknowledge that others may have been more prescient than I, perhaps by a wide margin. But for all those who could see where things were going as of 1963, one may take the date back by a year or two or three, and the argument surely holds. Morris reports the astonishment of a CORE protester, when the sit-ins at Woolworth’s in Birmingham actually began to work, *Origins*, p. 230. Lewis recounts his feeling of resentment when Thurgood Marshall arrived in Nashville in 1961 at the height of the sit-ins, urging the activists to turn the issue over to the courts, having made their point. Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*, p. 113. Clearly Marshall foresaw only more of the slow, incremental progress that had been experienced since the 1940s.

<sup>5</sup> A different but complementary analysis is developed by Chong, *Collective Action*. A good introduction to this class of models is Schelling, *Micromotives*, chap. 3.

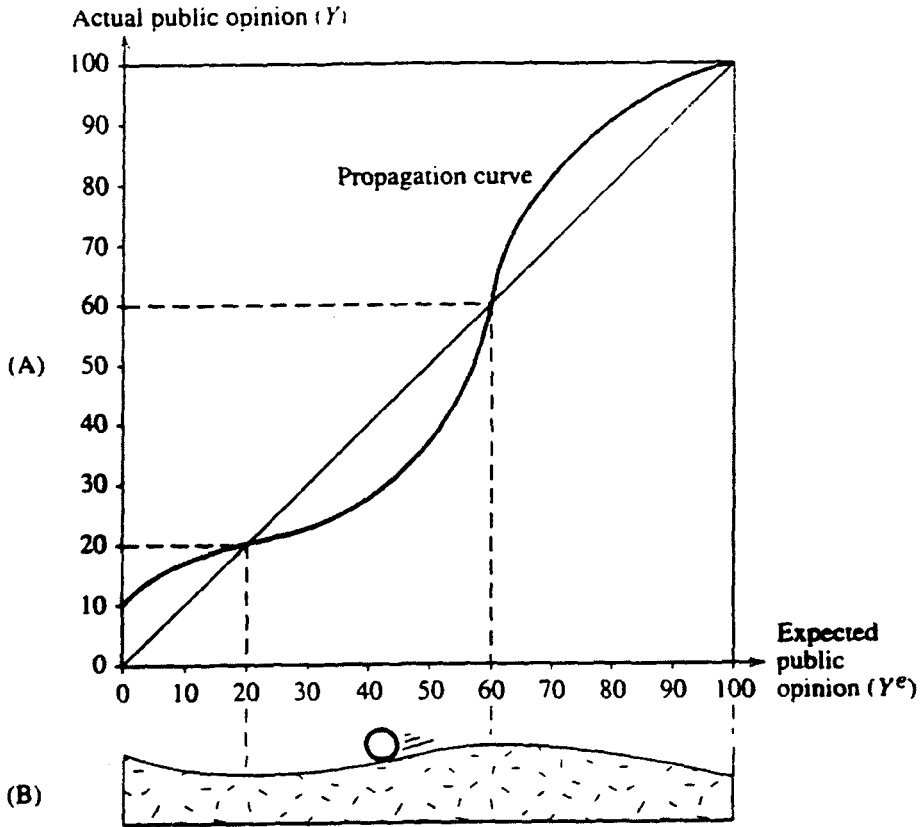


FIGURE 1  
PROPAGATION CURVE RELATING ACTUAL TO EXPECTED PUBLIC OPINION

Note: Reprinted from *Private Truths, Public Lies* by Timur Kuran. Copyright © 1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press.

age what they had discovered only yesterday.”<sup>6</sup> Many features of this scenario fit the Civil Rights Revolution and its aftermath fairly well.

#### CIVIL RIGHTS: AN ECONOMIC REVOLUTION?

But if the pace of Civil Rights legislation surprised many people, did the movement taken as a whole constitute an *economic* revolution? From the tone of much historical writing, one might readily conclude that it did not. One recent survey concludes as follows:

What did the civil rights movement achieve? With a few exceptions, historians and political scientists are more likely to stress what it failed to achieve. School desegre-

<sup>6</sup> Drescher, *Capitalism*, p. 86.

gation did not yield the social and educational dividends envisaged by its supporters, who often erased segregation de jure only to see it transmuted into segregation de facto. The integration of public accommodations has been far less significant than once thought. The enfranchisement of southern blacks has not upset white domination of state politics. A distressing number of blacks suffer from poverty, crime, drugs, and family breakdown.<sup>7</sup>

Although the last sentence is undoubtedly true, one is struck by the absence of evidence on economic effects, in the paragraph and in the literature surveyed. In many treatments, attention focuses on the South through the turbulence of the early 1960s, but then shifts, along with that of the national media, to the late 1960s violence in northern cities, often described as a reaction to disillusionment over the limited and largely symbolic gains of the movement.

Is this a fair assessment? Northern developments have their own importance and their own history, but the Civil Rights Movement as such was a southern phenomenon, with economic as well as political goals. When we follow through on the regional consequences of the regionally focused movement, the conclusion is inescapable that change was revolutionary, and in my view, the integration of public accommodations belongs at the top of the list. When I asked Eva Clayton to reflect on changes since 1963, this was the first thing she mentioned. The public accommodations section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was in fact a constitutional revolution, reversing a Supreme Court decision of 1883 which held a similar measure unconstitutional.<sup>8</sup> It was also true social change, because activities such as eating and sleeping had long been among the most sensitive components of the color line in American culture.<sup>9</sup> Was this “merely” social change, or was it an economic issue as well? It certainly had economic consequences. Black people who lived through that era recall the *hardship* of traveling, when there was no certainty of finding a place to eat or stay overnight, and facing the bleak task of approaching the establishment door to ask.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of Chapel Hill’s crisis over public accommodations, a member of the University of North Carolina Political Science Department wrote an analysis pointing out: “In some respects, the plight of the Negro is worse under partial integration than under complete segregation, because he must constantly wonder when he will be accepted as a customer and when he will be rejected.” It was a good description of a multiple equilibrium system in transi-

<sup>7</sup> Fairclough, “Historians,” pp. 397–98.

<sup>8</sup> Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 (1883).

<sup>9</sup> The economic implications of racial norms are analyzed in Sundstrom, “Color Line.”

<sup>10</sup> Lewis describes his family’s preparation for an automobile trip in 1951: “There would be no restaurant for us to stop at until we were well out of the South, so we carried our restaurant right in the car with us. . . . Stopping for gas and to use the bathroom took careful planning. Uncle Otis had made this trip before, and he knew which places along the way offered ‘colored’ bathrooms and which were better to just pass on by. Our map was marked and our route was planned that way, by the distances between service stations where it would be safe for us to stop.” *Walking With the Wind*, p. 50.

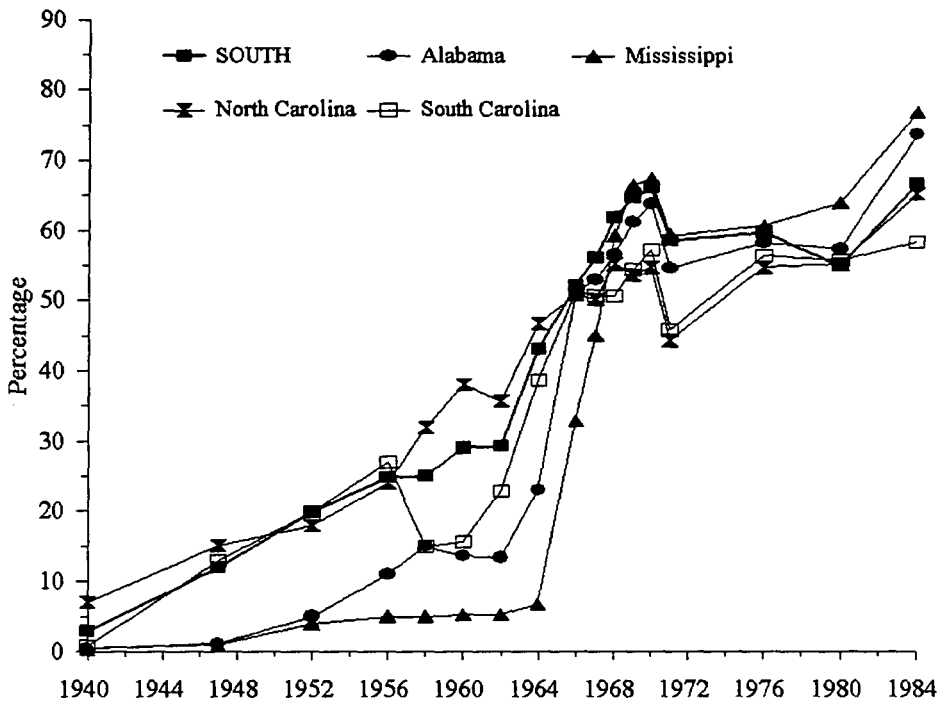


FIGURE 2  
PERCENTAGE OF VOTING-AGE BLACKS REGISTERED, SOUTHERN STATES

Sources: Voter Education Project (Southern Regional Council), as compiled in Garrow, *Protest*, pp. 7, 11, 19, 189, and 200 (1940–1971); and as compiled by Stanley, *Voter Mobilization*, p. 97 (1976–1984). Fluctuation around 1970 probably reflects revision of census population estimates, rather than changes in registration (Garrow, *Protest*, p. 200).

tion. Note, however, that even in Chapel Hill, long an oasis of tolerance and liberalism in the South, the struggle to integrate motels and restaurants was so bitter and contentious that local settlement proved impossible until passage of federal legislation in 1965. Local leaders and business proprietors privately welcomed this intervention, though they would neither say so in public nor support a local ordinance to the same effect.<sup>11</sup>

The voting rights revolution was equally swift (Figure 2). After long, painfully slow progress from the nadir of the 1900 through 1910 period, the rate of black voter registration accelerated in most southern states between 1955 and 1965, then surged forward to the 60 percent level after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These changes occurred throughout the South.

<sup>11</sup> As of 1964, three of Chapel Hill's five motels did not accept Negro lodgers, and 32 percent of the local restaurants maintained discriminatory policies of some type. Ehle, *Free Men*, p. 152. The statement by political scientist James W. Prothro is quoted by Ehle, pp. 206–07. Ehle concludes: "I know of few leaders in Chapel Hill, in either the liberal or conservative camps, who don't admit privately that the passage of the bill was helpful. . . . Mrs. Agnes Merritt and her husband run the Pines, and she said recently she was certainly grateful for that law, for she now had her old friends and customers back" (p. 327).

The surge in black voter registration raises a topic that should get more attention from economic historians: what is the connection between voting and economic advancement? Perhaps we neglect this question because we know it is difficult if not wholly intractable. But economic historians of the South are familiar with a vivid confirmation that there is indeed a linkage, at least at the extremes, namely the close association between disfranchisement and the severe setback to black schooling during the decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> From that low point, there was a long, slow improvement in the relative quality of black schools in the South, not driven by a reversal of disfranchisement, but by litigation, private philanthropy, and sometimes by market forces. Building on this cumulative progress, the political revolution of the 1960s generated rapid further progress in the form of school integration. According to Gary Orfield, the proportion of southern black students in schools more than 90 percent black declined from 77.8 percent in 1968 to 24.7 percent in 1972, a share that has been fairly stable since then.<sup>13</sup>

A few studies have tried to identify changes in public benefits attributable to black voting. The results often seem modest in objective terms: improvements in street paving, garbage collection, recreation facilities; more blacks hired for state and municipal jobs; more equitable access to FHA loans and agricultural extension services.<sup>14</sup> But in conjunction with these objective gains, black voter registration almost immediately ended the extreme racist rhetoric that until that time had been the hallmark of southern politics.<sup>15</sup> The economic value of this change is in my view inestimable, in both senses of that word.

Further, we should not underestimate the value of having representatives who truly want to engage, assist, and communicate with all of their constituents. Carol Swain recounts the experience of sitting for a time in the Congressional office of John Lewis, observing a steady stream of very ordinary people getting help with problems.<sup>16</sup> We had the same experience in Eva

<sup>12</sup> On the association between disfranchisement and school spending, see Margo, *Disfranchisement*; and Kousser, "Progressivism" The practice of diverting state funds from black to white schools is described and analyzed by Margo, *Race*, chaps. 3 and 4. The issue of whether on balance black taxes were actually subsidizing white schools is considered by Pritchett, "Burden."

<sup>13</sup> Orfield, *Public School Desegregation*, p. 4; and Orfield, Monfort, and Aaron, *Status*, p. 6. Some slippage in integration rates in the 1990s is reported in Orfield et al., *Deepening Segregation*. Measures of the relative quality of black schools are reported in Card and Krueger, "School Quality." Sources of progress are identified in Donohue, Heckman, and Todd, "Social Action."

<sup>14</sup> Keech, *Impact*; and Hanks, *Struggle*. After the election of a black mayor in Atlanta, employment of black municipal administrators jumped from 7.1 percent to 32.6 percent of the total, professionals from 15.2 percent to 42.2 percent. Eisinger, "Black Employment," p. 385.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson and Grofman, *Quiet Revolution*, esp. p. 215. The moderating effect of the VRA on Strom Thurmond is described by Kuzenski, "South Carolina," p. 30. Thurmond, who ran as a Dixiecrat in the Presidential election of 1948, in 1971 became the first southern senator to appoint a black staff aide, and he was the first to sponsor an African-American for a federal judgeship.

<sup>16</sup> Swain, *Black Faces*, pp. 89–97.



# **CITIZENS!**

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IN A REAL DEMOCRACY:**

**Wherein All Citizens Have An Equal Opportu-  
nity To Employment And Full Enjoyment  
Of All Services Of Any Store.**

**PLEASE READ THIS!**

**Why Spend Your Dollars In Any Store Where They Do Not  
Hire Any Negroes In Responsible Jobs? Why Spend Your  
Dollars For Drugs And Cosmetics And Not Be Offered Foun-  
tain Service In The Same Store? Any Self Respecting Negro  
Who Desires First Class Citizenship Will Not  
Support Such Stores And Businesses.**

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**Your Full Cooperation Is Needed  
In This Drive.**

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**DO NOT BUY IN WARRENTON,  
NORTH CAROLINA**

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FIGURE 3  
FLIER CALLING FOR BOYCOTT OF STORES IN WARRENTON, NORTH CAROLINA,  
SUMMER 1963

*Note:* The original is in the author's possession.

Clayton's office: a constant buzz of activity dealing with social issues of importance in that district, such as teenage pregnancy; and efforts to disseminate information about various internships and scholarships—the sort of encouragement routinely available to middle-class kids. Can the sum total of efforts of this type produce major improvements in the life chances of large numbers of low-income people? Perhaps not, but it may be more important than you think.

#### BREAKTHROUGHS IN THE LABOR MARKET

To find evidence of real economic gains for large numbers of ordinary people, however, attention must turn to the labor market. The demand for equal access to well-paying jobs was an authentic component of the movement, often getting top billing in local protests, as on the accompanying flier from Warrenton (Figure 3). Though it is rarely covered in the standard Civil Rights histories, integration of textiles was one of the most dramatic success stories, and it was unquestionably part of the Revolution in the minds of participants. This industry had been all-white for a century, but its percentage of black employees jumped to 15 percent between 1960 and 1970, and continued growing thereafter. This breakthrough occurred in all the leading textile states (Figure 4). According to a detailed study of South Carolina by James Heckman and Bruce Payner, the timing may be narrowed even more precisely to the mid-1960s. Heckman and Payner reject the interpretation that textile integration was merely the result of tight labor market conditions, as well as the claim that black educational gains can explain the change. Instead, it was a combination of tight labor markets, federal pressure (mainly through government contracts), and—as shown in a recent series of papers by Timothy Minchin—assertive black job-seeking in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Surprising as it may seem, to those familiar with the long historical tradition of treating southern cotton mills as miserable dens of exploitation, these textile jobs were “good jobs” by the standards of time and place, certainly so relative to most alternatives for blacks in the South.<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to the notion that the movement went into decline after 1965, passage of the Civil Rights Act galvanized actions toward integration by both firms and potential black workers. Heckman and Payner emphasize the initiatives taken by employers, for whom the pressures from the federal government served as a convenient excuse in pursuing their own self-interest more aggressively. Equally important was the effect of the act in bolstering

<sup>17</sup> Heckman and Payner, “Impact.” The implications of labor market integration for relative black incomes are discussed in Donohue and Heckman, “Continuous Versus Episodic Change.”

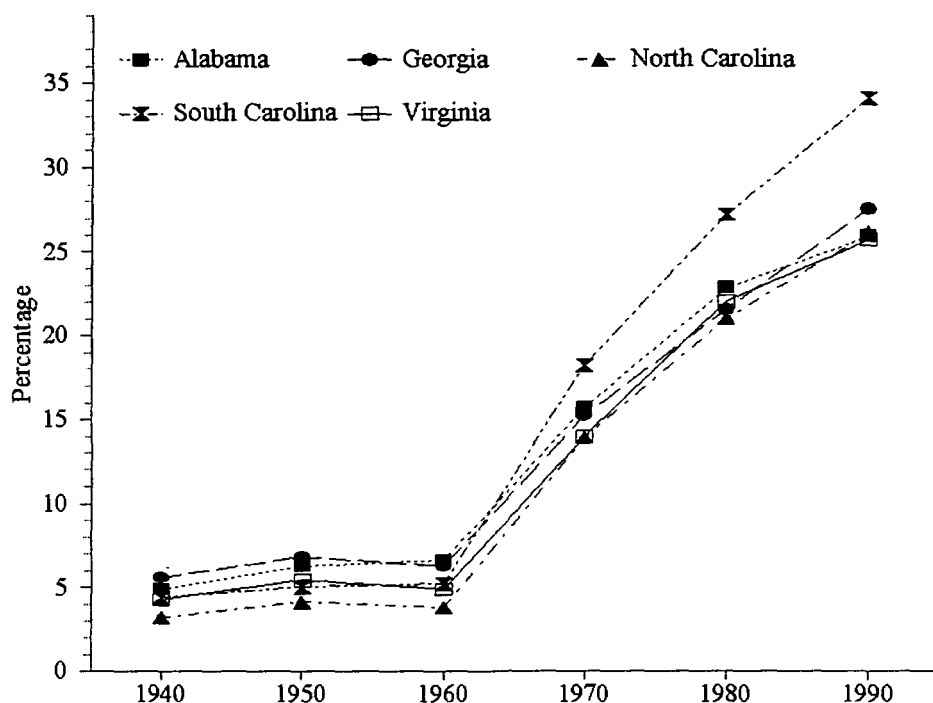


FIGURE 4  
PERCENTAGE OF TEXTILE WORKERS WHO ARE BLACK, FIVE SOUTHERN STATES,  
1940–1990

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Decennial Volumes.

the determination of black applicants; many leaders in textile areas followed the legislation closely, and well understood its implications. Floyd Harris, one of the first black textile workers in West Point, Georgia, recalled:

I was active in the social revolution that went on from the fifties, through the sixties and early seventies, so I was aware of what the black leaders were talking about. We wrote the laws and they passed the Civil Rights bill, and I knew that if the federal government made it a law it'd have to be followed. Our management here is smart, and they knew it too. Besides, that was the only way they could survive.<sup>18</sup>

Interviews taken by Mary Fredrickson recount the sense of deep social change that many new black textile workers experienced. Floyd Harris, for example, had been a mill porter until 1965, delivering the mail to a plant where the receptionist always called him “boy.” “Harris, then a man in his mid-thirties, repeatedly tried to get the woman to address him by his first name. In 1970, Harris, newly elected as one of the two black members of the local City Coun-

<sup>18</sup> From oral history reported by Fredrickson, “Four Decades.” Minchin emphasizes the continuing difficulties black applicants faced, even after initial integration. See “Color” and *Hiring*.

cil, became assistant personnel manager in the mill where this receptionist still worked. No words were exchanged as the two adjusted to a new hierarchy which placed Harris in a supervisory role, but as Harris recalled, ‘I hadn’t forgotten, and I’m certain she hadn’t either.’” In the 1970s, blacks in textile areas referred to integration as “The Change,” and believed that it accounted for the reversal of black migration flows between the 1960s and the 1970s.<sup>19</sup>

The case of southern textiles decisively refutes the claim by Richard Epstein that discriminatory segregation survived in the South only through the use of state power to enforce Jim Crow restrictions on competition. In contrast to the elaborate legal codes mandating racial separation in public conveyances, marriage, schools, public accommodation, and burial, the racial practices of employers were almost completely unregulated by law in the southern states. Only South Carolina required segregation in textiles work, but this law (dating from 1915) played no significant role in maintaining racial exclusion; in all the other textile states, the industry was just as segregated as in South Carolina, and just as resistant to change.<sup>20</sup> True, there were elements of uniqueness in the textile industry—particularly its residential character and the significant presence of women—but these underscore the *social* aspects of labor market integration, not the heavy hand of the state. And even though textiles was extreme in its almost complete exclusion of blacks, the mid-1960s breakthrough was experienced in a wide range of previously segregated southern industries.

Much of this debate misses an important aspect of the historical context, which is that the post-1930s acceleration of economic growth in the South took place under a labor market framework descended from the New Deal. It might be called the Progressive or High Wage regime, featuring strict social and regulatory limits on “substandard” wage levels; a strong role for organized labor; and extensive social investments in education, to facilitate the upgrading of labor standards and the advance of technology. For the country as a whole, this set of policies worked remarkably well in its time. But for the South, the implication was that wages were forced above market-clearing levels, creating a chronic labor surplus environment and a scarcity of jobs. Indeed, slowing the growth of low-wage southern competition was part of the political logic of this program in the first place. Under these conditions, Southern employers could be highly selective in their employment decisions, and in that historical era, the obvious basis for selection was race. This is not to suggest that segregation and discrimination *began* in the New Deal era; clearly, both phenomena have much longer histories. In fact, the

<sup>19</sup> Fredrickson, “Four Decades,” pp. 71, 74.

<sup>20</sup> Epstein, *Forbidden Grounds*. On the virtual absence of legal regulation of industrial employment, see Mangum, *Legal Status*; and Murray, *States Laws*. Epstein’s assertion that the textiles industry was uniquely subject to “an elaborate set of indirect legal sanctions” is simply inaccurate. For a refutation, see Donohue, “Advocacy.”

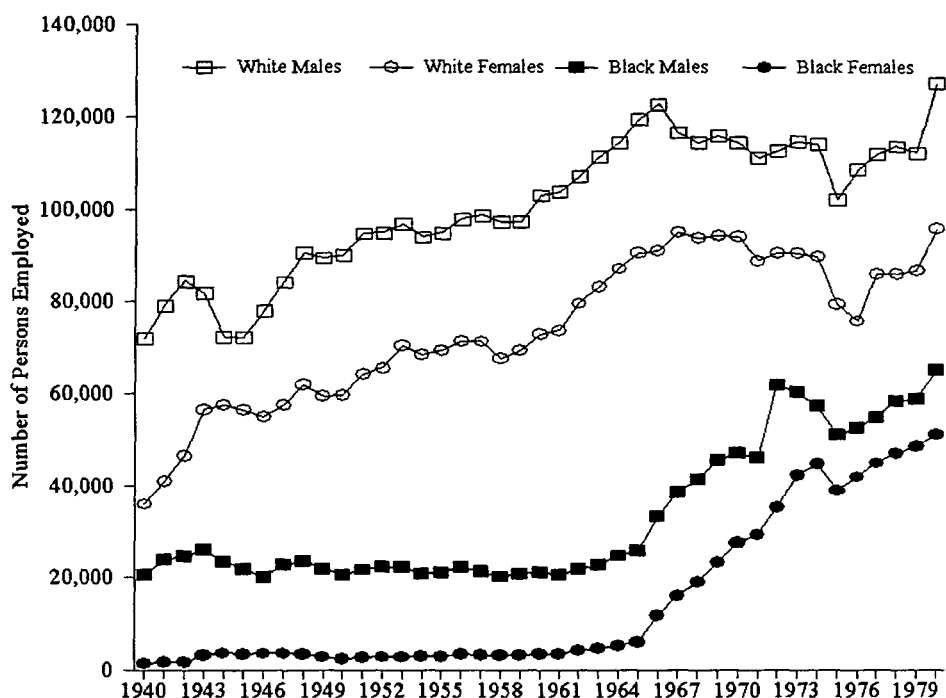


FIGURE 5  
EMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH CAROLINA MANUFACTURING, 1940–1980

Source: South Carolina Department of Labor, *Annual Reports*.

emergence of racial dualism in the labor market (where segregation serves to enforce a wage differential) was evident in the 1920s. But this regional trend was ratified and reinforced by national labor policies of the 1930s and 1940s, with the result that an entire generation of southern industrial jobs was reserved almost exclusively for whites. The picture for South Carolina, displayed in Figure 5, is particularly striking. Between 1940 and 1965, more than 90 percent of new manufacturing jobs went to whites, in what had been a black-majority state as late as 1920.<sup>21</sup>

This background context sheds a different light on the issue of job “qualifications.” Heckman and Payner report that textiles was the only South Carolina industry in which black males were underrepresented prior to 1960, after adjusting for “qualifications”—by which they mean “quality adjusted” years of schooling.<sup>22</sup> Unequal quality in segregated public education is the primary alternative to labor market discrimination as an explanation for the

<sup>21</sup> This interpretation of the impact of federal policy on southern labor markets is presented in Wright, *Old South*, chap. 7. The emergence of racial dualism in the 1920s is documented in Whatley and Wright, “Race.” World War II policies to narrow wage differentials (both by skill and by region) are described by Goldin and Margo, “Great Compression.”

<sup>22</sup> Heckman and Payner, “Impact,” pp. 150–59.

failure of blacks to share in the prosperity of the New South, emphasized in the work of James Smith and Finis Welch.<sup>23</sup> The evidence of educational inequality is incontrovertible. In the longer-term context of southern political economy, however, it should be clear that investments in education cannot be taken as exogenous to the labor market. When the Rosenwald Fund sought to provide financial support for black high schools in the South during the 1920s and 1930s, the fund sponsored a series of surveys of "Negro jobs" in various cities, so as to adapt the curricula to the jobs actually available. In place after place the response indicated that there were no black jobs for which a high-school education would be useful. Thus, black schools typically did not offer training in such subjects as stenography, accounting, bookkeeping, printing, or typing. The fund's curriculum expert acknowledged: "If commercial courses were offered in the negro school there would no doubt be tremendous pressure to get into them and the only result would be keen disappointment for nearly everyone." Understandably, the black high school in the textile center of Greenville, South Carolina, excluded textiles entirely.<sup>24</sup>

The glaring gaps in curricula between black and white high schools were still present as late as the 1960s. By that time, training in auto mechanics was one of the more popular options in vocational education, but with few exceptions, these courses were offered only at white high schools, not black. Thus when we read that the Ford Motor Company had zero black employees in its plants in Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis, and Norfolk in 1957/58, we may attribute this policy to a lack of "qualified applicants." But high school officials defended their programs by saying that their curriculum was a rational response to job availability.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes racial exclusion was enforced by union rules and seniority systems, sometimes merely by company personnel decisions and racial sensitivities. Either way, from an economic point of view the system was essentially in equilibrium, capable of lasting indefinitely if not disturbed.

Despite these discouragements, black educational attainment in the South continued to rise, and the relative quality of black schools continued to improve, under legal and political pressures from outside the region.<sup>26</sup> These long-term trends have to be included as part of the background conditions that made the revolution of the 1960s possible. In the case of textiles, change was facilitated by the fact that the industry finally ran into labor supply pressures, at a time when a large pool of willing and qualified black

<sup>23</sup> Smith, "Race"; and Smith and Welch, "Black Economic Progress."

<sup>24</sup> The discussion of the Rosenwald Fund is drawn from Anderson, *Education*, pp. 220–30.

<sup>25</sup> On curriculum differences in the early 1960s, see the series of city reports sponsored by the Southern Regional Council, *Negro*. On black employment in Ford's southern plants, see Northrup, *Negro*, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> See Card and Krueger, "School Quality." The implications of the rising black enrollments for labor force participation are discussed by Margo and Finegan, "Decline."

TABLE 1  
NET MIGRATION FROM THE SOUTH, 1870–1880 TO 1990–1995  
(in thousands)

Decade	White	Black
1870–1880	91	-68
1880–1890	-271	88
1890–1900	-30	-185
1900–1910	-69	-194
1910–1920	-663	-555
1920–1930	-704	-903
1930–1940	-558	-408
1940–1950	-866	-1,581
1950–1960	-234	-1,202
1960–1970	1,807	-1,380
1970–1980	3,556	206
1980–1985	1,810	87
1985–1990	971	325
1990–1995	754	276

*Note:* Figures for 1985–1990 and 1990–1995 are sums of the annual figures.

*Source:* Eldridge and Thomas, *Population Redistribution*, p. 90; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, pp. 94–95; Kasaida, Irwin, and Hughes, “South,” p. 35; Robinson, “Blacks,” p. 43; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, annual reports for 1985–1995.

workers was available nearby. In other industries, labor market dysfunction may have been less conspicuous, but if so, it was only because of the long period of outmigration that was both racially and educationally selective. The breakthroughs, however, applied to the labor market very broadly, not just to one industry.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, the gains in racial representation were not reversed when labor markets conditions declined in the 1970s, in contrast to earlier historical episodes. Perhaps the best single indicator of this historic shift is the reversal of regional migration flows for blacks, who have been moving *into* the region in large numbers since 1970 (Table 1). Many of these migrants may be returning to their family roots, but most of them are well educated, and are finding employment in the bustling, racially integrated metropolitan areas of the South. Thus, from a long-term regional perspective, one should not view either labor market integration or educational attainment as an exogenous force driving the system. More plausibly, we see a positive feedback between these two components of black economic progress.

#### AN ECONOMIC REVOLUTION FOR THE WHOLE SOUTH?

In a sense the foregoing is preliminary to a deeper question: Was the Civil Rights Revolution an economic revolution for the South as a whole,

<sup>27</sup> The most rigorous demonstration of structural change in southern labor markets during the 1960s is in a series of econometric articles by Kenneth Y. Chay. See Chay, “Impact”; and Chay and Honore, “Estimation.”

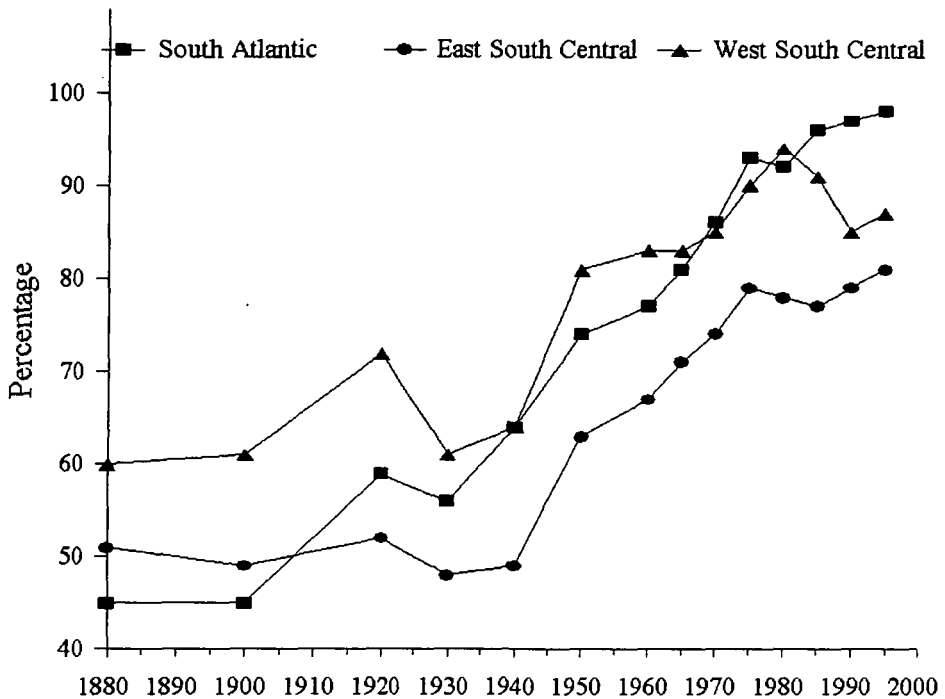


FIGURE 6  
PER CAPITA INCOME OF SOUTHERN REGIONS, AS A PERCENTAGE OF U.S.  
AVERAGE, 1880–1996

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, Series F287, F292, F293, F294 (with adjustments) and *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.* 1997, No. 706.

not just for the black population? One would like to think so. This assertion was certainly part of the rhetoric of the movement. Distributional equity was and is a defensible objective in itself, but the larger and loftier argument was that shaking off the albatross of segregation would liberate the entire region economically. Though deeper, this question is also much harder. We cannot use before-and-after econometric tests, because as Figure 6 reminds us, the modern acceleration of economic growth in the South clearly pre-dates the Civil Rights era. It is almost equally clear that promotion of economic growth had something to do with the success of the movement—even though, in Ralph McGill’s memorable statement, the southerners “seeking new enterprises never thought of themselves as the carriers of a virus that would destroy the status quo in their towns.”<sup>28</sup> As hard as this linkage is to prove, however, it is even harder to picture the South enjoying its modern prosperity in the absence of the sharp 1960s break with the past.

In my view, barriers to progress would not have arisen mainly from the efficiency losses of segregation—in that sense, the textiles example is indeed

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Nicholls, *Southern Tradition*, pp. 156–57.



exceptional—but from the inability of a segregationist South to join and take advantage of national and international networks of knowledge and culture. For example, with hindsight we can see that the Public Accommodations law was a *market enhancing* intervention, a simple rule that removed uncertainty and allowed free consumer commerce to flourish. But this impact is a matter of historical and cultural context. Segregationists had an equally strong legal case based on the rights of proprietors to choose their own customers, to say nothing of the rights of states to regulate intrastate commerce. Fears of adverse business consequences from integration were undoubtedly genuine, especially if competitors did not follow suit. But the overall impact was positive, in a region in which powerful economic interests and a growing body of public opinion wanted to do what was necessary to rejoin the nation and the national economy. Jesse Jackson was quoted recently to the effect that Atlanta would never have had CNN, the Braves, or the Olympics, if it had not been for the Civil Rights marches; another observer might choose different examples of the South's new, world-class prosperity, but fundamentally, I believe Jackson's statement is right.

But if the Civil Rights Revolution has benefited both black and white southerners, these gains have been by no means equally distributed. I wish that I could report to you that Warrenton, North Carolina, is now a boom town, and that the surrounding area is a full participant in the exhilarating prosperity of the New South, but this is far from true. The continued decline is not for lack of effort. The post-Civil Rights political leadership in the district has been considerably more energetic in promoting enterprise than its predecessors were. One of the most ambitious "new town" development ventures in the nation was located in Warren County: Soul City, operated by Floyd McKissick, a Civil Rights attorney from Durham, who wanted to shift the movement into a new, more economics-oriented phase after 1965. But despite some \$30 million in federal aid, and additional millions from state and local sources, today there is little to show for Soul City. Eva Clayton believes the name itself was too provocative, and this may be true; but the experience of comparable efforts elsewhere in the rural South has been discouragingly similar.

Thus the regional aggregates displayed in Figure 6 are to some degree misleading. A prominent feature of New South development has been its concentration in a small number of "hot" metropolitan areas. Per capita income in southern cities was more than 90 percent of the national average by the 1960s if not earlier, and by the 1990s no urban regional income gap remained. But in the nonmetropolitan areas, despite continuing outmigration, per capita income is barely 70 percent of the national average, showing little relative progress since the 1960s. In most southern states, one or two SMSAs account for between one- and two-thirds of job growth in recent decades.

Atlanta, for example, with less than half the population of Georgia, accounted for 68 percent of the state's net new jobs between 1979 and 1993.<sup>29</sup> Rural population decline is of course not peculiar to the South. What distinguishes this region is the very high rural population density that prevailed prior to the decline, an initial condition that often translates even today into deep poverty and limited hopes. It has often been said in recent years that in reality there are Two Souths, one urban and one rural. But because these rural areas are poorly integrated with each other as well as with the rest of the nation, it might be truer to say that there are many Souths, a metropolitan core and a large number of poor and declining remnants of former times.

The Civil Rights movement can hardly be held responsible for the spatial configuration of economic activity in the South. The shift in economic geography reflects broad trends in the national economy, such as the rise of a service economy with powerful tendencies toward agglomeration in metropolitan areas. Since World War II, falling transportation costs and flexible modern technologies have encouraged dispersion in the location of manufacturing. But labor-intensive manufacturing has proven vulnerable to international competition, and survives in the United States only when labor-saving technology reduces the number of jobs that the sector can provide. Thus, the post-Civil Rights southern economy has been affected by the same forces that have caused the slowing of productivity growth and the rise of inequality in the American economy as a whole, imperfectly understood as these may be. The severity of these economic shocks, especially for poor and disadvantaged communities, undoubtedly accounts for some of the impression that the economic promise of the Civil Rights movement has not been realized in practice. But these phenomena appear to be deep and global in character, not readily subject to deflection by regional business and political choices.

But we should not entirely rule out the possibility of a linkage between the Civil Rights Revolution and the shape of the New South economy. When I published *Old South, New South* in 1986, it seemed intuitively obvious that ongoing integration would tend to homogenize the country culturally and politically, slowly perhaps, but surely. Mancur Olson expressed a similar view in concluding his 1982 presidential address to the Southern Economic Association: "With a per capita income similar to the rest of the country, with institutional arrangements and racial policies much the same as those in the nation as a whole, and with rapid and inexpensive transportation linking it with the rest of the country, the South is losing its regional peculiarities . . . the South as an utterly distinctive region with its own sense of nationhood—the South of the old evils and the old romance—is already disappearing, and becoming one with the nation as a whole."<sup>30</sup> With the aid of addi-

<sup>29</sup> MDC, Inc., *State*.

<sup>30</sup> Olson, "South," p. 932.

tional years of hindsight, this persuasive logic of convergence now appears to have been premature.

Today the South appears more distinctive than ever. On a wide range of attitudinal indicators, southerners are consistently more conservative and more religiously oriented than residents of any other region. The South has been an outlier in Presidential elections for decades, so much so that many observers feel that the regional agenda has exerted disproportionate political influence on the politics of the entire nation, rather than the other way around. Objective measures of political choices, such as the “green index” of environmental conditions and policies, place the southern states in a distinctive cluster—in this case, at the very bottom of the national list. Poor environmental ratings are closely linked to the South’s persistent political drive to attract outside investment. Southern states held down nine of the top 15 places in a 1986 ranking of “business climate.” Corporate tax rates in the South have consistently been the lowest in the nation, while the region has been a leader in promotional advertising and in the use of bond subsidies and tax instruments for industrial recruitment. Thus the region has been peculiarly open to the global economic forces of the late twentieth century, and markedly polarized in its economic conditions. Is it surprising that critics refer to the South as the home of “look-the-other-way environmental policies and giveaway tax breaks”?<sup>31</sup>

How can we explain this persistent regionalism? It is not simply a matter of cultural persistence, as emphasized by Dixiologists such as John Shelton Reed, because the political posture of aggressive industrial recruitment was a *change* from the old isolationist regime.<sup>32</sup> What seems to have occurred, in the wake of the Civil Rights Revolution and the demise of segregation, is that in each of the southern states a new political equilibrium has been established in support of a particular brand of political economy. Of course this political leadership has historical links to the older, prewar South. But its manifestation as the distinctive *regional* economic tendency is the outcome of a complex political selection process, rather than a simple expression of exogenously defined regional economic interests. It is as though the South now derives its economic interests from its politics, whereas formerly it was the other way around. And as a consequence of decades of outmigration, blacks are a clear voting minority in every state of the South, and their capacity as a group to

<sup>31</sup> Regional distinctiveness in Presidential elections is shown in Black and Black, *Vital South*. Political and ideological regionalism is documented in Steed, Moreland, and Baker, *Disappearing South?* The green index appears in Hall and Kerr, *1991–92 Green Index*. Evidence on industrial recruitment is from Cobb, *Selling*, pp. 91, 263, 272. The concluding quotation is by Donald Schueler, “Southern Exposure,” *Sierra* 77 (November/December 1992), quoted in Bullard, *Dumping*.

<sup>32</sup> See most recently, Reed, *My Tears*. See also the Foreword to Steed, Moreland, and Baker, *Disappearing South?*, in which Reed notes that his favorite statistic in the volume demonstrates that born-again Yankees strongly resemble native-born southerners (p. x).

redirect political attention to social and educational goals has often seemed distinctly limited. To the extent that this political ascendancy was made possible by releasing the South from the shackles of Jim Crow, and to some extent constitutes a backlash against the politics of the 1960s, it is an ironic and surely unintended consequence of the Civil Rights Revolution.

But the historical measure of a revolution is not revealed by the loftiest ideals proclaimed at the height of its influence; by this test, all revolutionaries are doomed to disillusionment, and the Civil Rights Revolution is no exception to that rule. A better standard is how much of the revolutionary legacy remains after the economic climate has changed for the worse, and contrary political forces have resumed power. By that criterion, the Civil Rights Revolution has had a lasting legacy, in economics as well as politics, for the region as a whole as well as for African-Americans in the South. Yes, the emerging global economy offers vast new opportunities for formerly remote economies on the periphery. But only in retrospect does it seem obvious that the New South would participate in this new adventure so wholeheartedly. Not all countries and regions of the world have done so. The South might have followed the example of Quebec, choosing isolation over economic progress. Or it might have gone the way of Northern Ireland: two hostile peoples occupying the same geographic space, so suspicious of each other that compromise arrangements are painfully difficult to negotiate and even more difficult to maintain. Instead, the South has followed the American road of boosterism and racial inclusion, and on the whole we can be thankful for that.

For the poor people and regions of the South, disproportionately but by no means exclusively black, it is understandable that the Civil Rights economic legacy seems mixed if not altogether illusory. If you are not part of the action, there may not be much comfort in knowing that the rising opportunities of the New South are no longer racially exclusive; still less in the notion that market forces are beyond anyone's control. But at least the doors that were opened in the 1960s have stayed open, so that there is something positive to work for, and political and economic channels are no longer hopeless. This thought calls attention to certain limitations to the analysis of this case as an example of an unexpected revolution. The political processes in Congress and in the South did reach a climax in the 1960s, with the kind of finality suggested by Figure 1. But the Civil Rights Revolution might well have joined history's list of pseudo-revolutions, which swept in full of promise but did not really amount to much a few years later. It really only deserves its status as a landmark social revolution because of the follow through, the willingness on the part of large numbers of ordinary people to take advantage of new opportunities, and the corresponding ratification, enforcement and even internalization of Civil Rights principles on the part

of business, political, and educational leaders. These developments—people asserting their rights, people learning to live with integration—are much slower and less revolutionary, and it certainly has not been “all downhill” once the floodgates were opened in 1965. To the extent that some part of the revolution has been realized in the South, we have to thank people like Eva Clayton, who continued the work long after the political limelight moved on to something else. Because of their efforts, those of us who went South in the 1960s can feel today that we were part of something significant in the Civil Rights Revolution.

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