

America's Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham

Bobby M. Wilson, 2000
Rowman & Littlefield, Inc.
Lanhan, ML.
288 pp., US\$27.95

and

Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements

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The new African American urban history broke the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological barriers erected by the first generation of black urban historians. Labeled the *ghetto-synthesis model*, this approach pursued a race-relations perspective and focused on the physical and institutional structure of black communities and the degree to which whites regulated and controlled black life.

Starting with Joe W. Trotter's **Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45** (1985), this new approach emphasized agency, proletarianization, the diversity and complexity of African American communities, kinship and communal networks, class and culture, and the role of city building and urban elites in shaping the black residential experience¹ While these new studies have extended the frontiers of knowledge, they did not locate the black urban experience in the context of capitalist development and the socio-geographical realities that flow from such a political economy.

This remains an untold story. Consequently, black urban history does not construct a frame of reference that makes possible understanding the present and gaining perspectives for the future. For example, Trotter's wonderful book on Black Milwaukee provides insight into the making of a black industrial proletariat, but gives no hint that the powerful forces of de-proletarianization were already at work in the 1940s. The proletarianization of black workers was a prologue and epilogue of things to come.

Bobby M. Wilson, in **America's Johannesburg** and **Race and Place** completes this missing chapter in the new African American urban history. These two complementary volumes on Birmingham, Alabama places race and place in the context of postmodernism and capitalist development. **America's Johannesburg**, which details the main aspects of Wilson's theoretical and conceptual framework, should be read before **Race and Place**.

The author uses a historical materialist approach to analyze this nexus between capitalist development and race and place. To augment his Neo-Marxist analysis, Wilson borrows from critical theory and utilizes the conceptual framework of the French school of political economy called the regulationist school, which distinguishes between *extensive* and *intensive* regimes of capitalist accumulation. The basic theme undergirding both books is *the perennial problems facing African Americans are caused by their location in the economic order and by the continued restructuring of capitalism as it moves through the industrial, Fordist, and Post Fordist periods of development*.

America's Johannesburg explores the development of race-connected practices in Birmingham over time and explains the role of the city and its institutions in holding back or assisting individual and groups that cultivated, promoted, and carried out such practices. Wilson investigates the rationale for such practices and analyzes their impact on African Americans. He uses the first half of the book to explain the theoretical and conceptual framework by analyzing the slave

experience in Alabama. The remainder of the book examines Birmingham from its founding in 1871 to the present.

Wilson says the study of racism in Birmingham must start with an analysis of the slave experience. Blacks, he says, entered capital-labor relations through slavery and their position at the bottom of the labor market was never really altered. Because of the need to control and keep blacks in a subordinate position, during the antebellum period, a state sponsored superstructure was built to support the slavocracy and to dominate African Americans. Once built, the system was never dismantled. Consequently, although the nature and character of racism changed over time, the position of blacks in the economy did not.

Within this context, the notions of white superiority and black inferiority were not mere cultural artifacts, but part of the complex and elaborate system of structural racism that kept the working class divided and that kept blacks tied to the bottom of the economic order. In turn, the location of blacks in the economic order shaped all other aspects of their lives, including their relations with white workers, other people of color, and their material conditions of life, including the neighborhoods in which they lived. Thus, capitalist development in the United States, contrary to Marxist theory, left race-connected practices largely intact.

Throughout the industrial, Fordist, and post Fordist periods, the location of blacks in the economic order remained the same. At each stage of development, capitalism restructured racism and restructured the methods it used to dominate and control blacks. Within this framework, the virulence of racism ebbed and flowed over time, and there were even moments when unity between black and white workers took center stage. Sometimes local regimes supported racism and used it to divide the working class. At other times, especially when the economy was strong and little competition existed among workers, race relations improved and cross-class unity took place. However, elites always held the *race card*, and whenever it was needed, they played it.

Capitalism not only shaped race but also it continually restructured place. At every stage of development, from industrialism to Fordism to post-Fordism, capitalism refashioned the places occupied by blacks. From the slave quarters to sharecropper's villages to suburban slums to ghettos and poverty concentrated neighborhoods, capitalism restructured the black living space, but it did not change the fundamental nature and character of these black places. They remained settlements characterized by bad housing and a dilapidated physical environment.

Wilson concludes by saying that race-connected practices are functional components of the political economy of capitalist development. Once created, racism became so deeply embedded in the social consciousness of whites that it extremely difficult to exorcize. Consequently, elites could be use the *race card* whenever it was needed to divide the working class and pit white workers against black workers. White skin privilege was the key component in this racist formula. As long as whites held a superior position in the economic order, they will also have a higher standard of living than blacks. Historically, this reality kept whites from abandoning racism and from being consistent allies with African Americans. Undergirding white skin privilege is the segmented labor market, which minimized black competition with whites in the labor force. This was made possible by keeping blacks from obtaining the type of education, training, and opportunities that would make them competitive with whites.

Wilson shifts gears in **Race and Place**. In this work, he explores the impact of postmodernism and the post Fordism on the black community through an analysis of agency and the civil rights and neighborhood movements. Wilson places identity politics at the core of his analysis. He argues that the Civil Rights Movement was tied to the politics of racial identity, while the neighborhood movement was connected to the politics of place. Although these two movements transformed race and place in Birmingham, Wilson says they did not shatter the structural forces that continually reproduced an economic order with blacks located at the bottom. Consequently, despite impressive civil rights and neighborhood victories, African Americans were not able to

overcome the post Fordism forces of exploitation, domination, and exclusion. So, they remained at the bottom of the economic order.

To move their struggle to another level, Wilson says African Americans must link it to other movements, which are being waged by white workers, women, gays and lesbians, the disabled, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Native People, and Latinos. In essence, to overcome post Fordism, the politics of identity and place must merge with a broader movement. This does mean downplaying the importance of race and place, Wilson says. Rather it means finding ways to connect the black struggle to the struggles of other Americans. To accomplish this task, we must learn how to communicate across cultural boundaries and to transform race and place into porous forms of identity. Only then, will the conditions become ripe for building a broad coalition with the power to overcome the post-Fordist forces of exploitation, domination, and exclusion.

On this point, Wilson stresses that simple opposition to post Fordism is not enough to overcome its power and authority. For example, African Americans were bitterly opposed to Jim Crow and legal discrimination. But the existence of oppositional forces, alone, was not sufficient to topple the system. For this to happen, blacks needed to have adequate political and economic resources. The material conditions had to be right before the prevailing racial order could be overthrown. Before 1930, the black community was too weak to mount a successful assault against race-connected practices. The restructuring of the economy spawned by the Great Depression generated the necessary political and economic resources for blacks to challenge race-connected practices. In the aftermath of the depression, millions of African Americans left the rural countryside for cities in the north and south. This combined with growing opportunities in the industrial sector of the economy to proletarianize black workers, grow a college educated elite, spawn white collar workers, and expand the entrepreneurial class. Concurrently, the influx of millions of blacks into segregated urban centers led to the growth and institutional development of the black ghetto. By 1950, the black community was stronger than ever before. Now, after about 90 years of freedom, they had acquired the necessary economic, political, and community resources to challenge the race-connected practices of post Fordism.

Wilson argues that the Civil Rights Movement not only challenged race-connected practices, but also transformed black identity. This Movement was a cultural-political one in which blacks ceased to believe the words of their oppressors. They began to think, "I am somebody!"¹ As political consciousness increased, blacks sought to change the conditions of their lives and to create a new world where racial domination, segregation, and exploitation did not exist. Consequently, racial identity, social change, the battle against Jim Crow and legal segregation became one. Thus, the reconstructed black identity carried significant social meaning because it brought racial identity into politics.

The Neighborhood Movement followed the Civil Rights Movement as the struggle of African Americans shifted from a battle against Jim Crow and legal discrimination to a battle to transform and reconstruct the built environment. Capitalist development, Wilson says, always produces underdevelopment and horrendous living conditions for African Americans. However, it was not until the defeat of Jim Crow and legal discrimination that the battle to transform and reconstruct the built environment took center stage. The Neighborhood Movement, however, differed significantly from the Civil Rights Movement. Local and national regimes quickly gained control over this movement and made it dependent on governmental resources. Thus, the Neighborhood Movement, unlike the Civil Rights Movement, was coopted and lost its independence.

Another difference is that the Neighborhood Movement was informed by the politics of place identity. In most urban communities, including Birmingham, blacks lived in more than one neighborhood. Place identity, however, was rooted in individual neighborhoods, and this form of identity became more primary than race. This meant that the battle over the built environment

¹ Reverend Jessie Jackson popularized this statement.

never became a genuine citywide movement, even though many of the organizational structures that grew out of the government sponsored Community Action Movement had citywide structures.

In the end, Wilson says, while both the civil rights and neighborhood movements made important advancements for blacks, they never acquired the vision necessary to link them to a broader movement capable of overcoming the forces of post Fordism.

Bobby M. Wilson has written two pioneering books, which also share the same flaws. The most significant is that Wilson tried to do too much in these two books. For example, in **America's Johannesburg** he covers a time period that ranges from slavery to the post-Fordist era, attempts to elaborate fully his theory of race and place, and then provide a detailed case study of Birmingham, Alabama. Consequently, about half the book is a treatise on his theoretical and conceptual framework, with a sprinkling of examples from Birmingham to illustrate various ideas. The result is that Wilson tends to gloss over complex issues and make assertions that are never proven. So, not only is the primary source data thin, but also the book often drifts into abstractions, which makes it very hard to read. In this sense, because of the book's theoretical bent, it is more useful to view it as a work that sets forward a number of provocative hypotheses about race, place and urban development in the United States. Put another way, Wilson does not offer convincing evidence that his theory of race and place explains the development of Black Birmingham. As previously stated, these same problems are found in **Race and Place**. Nevertheless, these two books are extremely important, and every urban scholar should read them. Most significant, Wilson has constructed a theoretical and conceptual framework that can be used to study the black experience across time, as well as at specific moments in time.
