H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronald H. Bayor. *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvi + 334 pp. $16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2270-8; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4898-2.

Reviewed by David F. Godshalk (Shippensburg University)

Published on H-Urban (March, 1997)

Long before Billy Payne's Olympic dreams, Atlanta had been one of the most closely studied cities of the modern South. Writers have long recognized the work of prominent individuals associated the city–Henry Grady, W. E. B. Du Bois, Margaret Mitchell, and Martin Luther King, Jr.–in shaping the South and Americans' notions of it. Graduate students and academic writers have built upon Du Bois's pioneering work at Atlanta University and have produced detailed analyses of individual political issues and racial struggles in the city. *In Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, Ronald Bayor synthesizes this rich historiography and draws upon his own archival research to create a definitive history of the relationship between public policy and race in twentieth-century Atlanta. Bayor's work, however, is of much more than local interest. It also provides important new insights and findings for scholars conducting research on the political history of the modern South and on the shaping of twentieth-century urban policy.

Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta is encyclopedic, not only in its exhaustive examinations of individual public policy issues but also in its topical organization. After providing a brief overview of the early history of race relations in Atlanta, Bayor divides the book into thematic sections and chapters. Each section of the book focuses on an individual public policy issue and traces its evolution from the early twentieth century through the late 1980s. In early chapters, Bayor delineates three key transformations in Atlanta's political and social history–the shift from black disfranchisement to relative black political ascendancy, the shift from formal residential segregation to a less formal separation along racial and class lines, and the shift from overt job discrimination to the rise of federal and local programs aimed at encouraging equal economic opportunity for minorities and minority businesses.

In the third section of the book, Bayor catalogs the repeated refusals of white city officials to extend even the most basic city services to African-American taxpayers throughout much of the twentieth century–especially during the so-called "separate but equal" era of Jim Crow. There was no public high school open to Black Atlantans until 1924; nearly forty years later, Atlanta's schools remained the most segregated among major Southern cities. Even as late as the early 1960s, Mayor William Hartsfield could describe black neighborhoods as places where "lights stopped, streets, [and] sidewalks stopped" (p. 132). Whites could enjoy forty-two parks in the city while blacks had only three. Until 1962, the city hospital was completely segregated with black doctors unable even to practice on black patients within it. Despite widespread black criticism of police brutality and despite the indifference of white law enforcement officers toward the concerns of black community members, there were no black policemen in the city until 1948 and no black firemen until 1963. Into the early 1970s, African-Americans continued to be underrepresented in both departments, and they justifiably complained against rampant discrimination in promotions and in assignments.

In the past, scholars have tended to study public policy issues in Atlanta as part of broader analyses of the city's history, or they have focused their attention on briefer time periods and narrower subjects. The thematic organization of Bayor's book allows the author to provide the first comprehensive study of the evolution of all major public policy issues during the twentieth century. For the first time, readers have a single work to which they can turn for full discussions of segregation in residential zones, African-American struggles for equal educational opportunity, the gradual enfranchisement of black Atlantans, the growing employment of African-Americans in city government, and racial struggles over access to public transportation.

Despite its topical organization, key themes emerge

from *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta.* Bayor repeatedly shows how white politicians made even the most seemingly straightforward of policy decisions (like where to place a highway or where to extend mass transportation services) with an eye toward maintaining segregation and racial dominance. Similarly, Bayor skillfully draws upon oral interviews, government statistics, census records, and municipal studies to uncover the depth and breadth of the racial oppression against which Black Atlantans have struggled. This record of discriminatory public policy is all the more shocking given that it has occurred in a city enjoying a progressive image during much of the twentieth century, especially during the 1960s when white officials convinced many Americans that theirs was "a city too busy to hate." To be sure, a tradition of negotiation between white and black civic leaders discouraged violent or prolonged racial confrontations like those in Birmingham and Selma. Nevertheless, Bayor demonstrates that many African-Americans, especially a younger generation of activists and student leaders, recognized the city's racist realities for what they were. Looking back, Andrew Young revealed that, in Bayor's words, "neither he nor Martin Luther King Jr. regarded Atlanta as particularly enlightened or moderate prior to the 1960s" (p. 27).

The book's topical structure makes the work especially useful for historians conducting research on Atlanta or those doing comparative work on individual urban policy issues. At times, however, this framework obscures the chronological evolution of broader transformations in the city's public policies and in the mobilization of African-Americans for greater inclusion in decision-making. Only the most attentive of readers, for example, will be able to benefit fully from Bayor's early discussion of gradual political change and shifting political coalitions when she (he) reads later chapters on the struggles over individual policy issues. (For another discussion of Bayor's topical structure, see Cliff Kuhn, "Contours of the Color Line," *Southern Changes* v. 18: 27 (Summer, 1996).

As Bayor suggests, the blatant discriminations of the past took place during an era of economic expansion, rapid business growth, and increasing federal assistance to local governments. Ironically, this era of expansion and possibility was coming to an end just as African-Americans were coming to play a leading role in their city's public policy decisions. As recent city leaders have attempted to redress past discriminations, they have had to contend with the new realities of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s–the flight of white Atlantans and white capital into the suburbs, a decline in the availability of blue-collar jobs in the central city, and an end to the rapid expansion of federal assistance associated with New Deal and Great Society programs. Once more, the political visions of black leaders have narrowed considerably from earlier struggles that promised benefits for all African-Americans, regardless of class. The overriding concern of black politicians with economic expansion and their own need to cooperate with white business interests have restricted the benefits of economic programs and affirmative action policies primarily to highly educated and relatively prosperous members of the black community.

The economic and political bustle along Auburn Avenue once made Atlanta a potent symbol for the opportunities that the urban South might eventually promise all African-Americans. Even in the glow of Olympic glory, however, Atlanta now represents some of the lost hopes of the 1960s and 1970s. The city has one of the nation's highest rates of crime and one of its greatest concentrations of urban poor. The downtown area remains largely deserted at night, and Atlanta still has one of the most segregated school systems in the nation. Bayor masterfully reminds Americans that these urban problems are not simply the unintended consequences of private-sector decisions or misguided governmental policies. Instead, they are largely the legacies of public policy decisions once overtly designed to reinforce gross racial and economic inequalities.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: David F. Godshalk. Review of Bayor, Ronald H., *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=876

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.