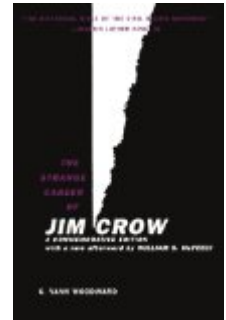


C. Vann Woodward. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xvii + 245 pp. \$14.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-514690-5.



Reviewed by Michael J. Pfeifer

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The Strange Career of Jim Crow, a Half-Century On

In 1988, historian Howard Rabinowitz assessed the "several careers" of C. Vann Woodward's seminal history of racial segregation in the United States. Writing out of the experience of his own extended scholarly debate with Woodward, Rabinowitz noted that *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* had evolved from a "lecture series" into an oft-used textbook on American race relations.[1] He evaluated the status of "the Woodward thesis," which posited that racial segregation did not emerge at the time of slavery's demise, but instead after a period of flux and experimentation in race relations that ended in the 1890s. Beginning in that decade, Woodward argued, a dramatic surge in racial extremism led to the promulgation of 'de jure' (by statute) segregation. Citing his own work that found that segregation had in fact emerged after 1865 in response to the demands of African-Americans that they not be completely excluded from public accommodations,[2] Rabinowitz asserted that the Woodward thesis was amorphous, over-emphasized law as opposed to

customary practice, and was "wrong" about the degree of fluidity in race relations prior to the 1890s.[3]

Yet Rabinowitz also argued in his 1988 reassessment that *Strange Career* made a crucial contribution in its focus on the history of segregation in the nineteenth-century South, as well as in its emphasis on a sea-change in race relations in the 1890s. Moreover, he praised the book's concluding chapters, which carried the story of the history of segregation and desegregation from the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that overturned the legal basis for the segregation of public schools in 1954, into the early 1970s.[4] In summation, Rabinowitz declared that "Woodward so broadened and modified his initial effort as to make it the best available brief account of American race relations." [5] In a magnanimous but ironic and tenacious rejoinder to Rabinowitz entitled "*Strange Career* Critics, Long May They Persevere," Woodward acknowledged that he may have erred in stressing the "chronology before the sociology and demography of the subject," [6] but stressed that he had good reason

for doing so. Given the common perception of white Americans and white southerners in the early 1950s that "race relations had 'always been that way,'" the first and foremost goal of *Strange Career* had to be to prove that "race relations had a history."^[7]

Fifteen years after Rabinowitz engaged Woodward in the pages of the *Journal of American History*, in light of the recent passing of both historians (Rabinowitz in 1998 and Woodward in 1999), and nearly fifty years after the initial publication of *Strange Career*, the publication of the commemorative edition of the book offers another opportunity to reevaluate this extraordinarily influential work.

Originally delivered as lectures at the University of Virginia in October 1954 in the wake of the *Brown* decision, Woodward published a first edition of *Strange Career* in 1955. Subsequent editions updated the account of American race relations through 1957 and 1966 and incorporated and responded to the work of scholars Leon Litwack,^[8] Richard Wade,^[9] and Joel Williamson,^[10] who had found segregation in the antebellum North, in the antebellum urban South, and in Reconstruction-era South Carolina, respectively. A final revision in 1974 added a concluding chapter that dourly traced the aftermath of the legislative achievements, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, of what Woodward termed "the Second Reconstruction." Woodward commented bleakly on the outbreak of riots in African-American inner cities in the North, the rise of a separatist black nationalist politics that eschewed the integrationist thrust of the NAACP and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Richard Nixon's successful appeals to working-class white voters who opposed racial integration in the election of 1972. Beyond the original text, the commemorative edition includes an afterword by William S. McFeely that usefully sketches the book's history and its citation by Martin Luther King, Jr., in a

pivotal speech in 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama, that Woodward attended.

It will surprise few that *Strange Career* remains required reading for those interested in the history of race in the South and in the United States. Reading the introduction and first four chapters of *Strange Career*, entitled "Of Old Regimes and Reconstructions," "Forgotten Alternatives," "Capitulation to Racism," and "The Man on the Cliff," is still revelatory. None of the essentials eloquently argued here by Woodward (again, some of them incorporated from scholars who published after his first edition) are really debatable. Jim Crow segregation of the races was not compatible with the physical coercion and the economically necessary intimate association of African-Americans and slaveholding whites under slavery, thus Jim Crow did not originate in the South's Peculiar Institution (pp. 12-13). Jim Crow practices and laws first appeared in the antebellum North and in the few cities of the antebellum South (pp. 13-21). Reconstruction was a period of considerable flux and testing of race relations in which a harsh and rigid racial system had not yet solidified (pp. 25-29); the same was true for the fifteen or so years that followed "Redemption" in the mid- to late 1870s (pp. 31-65). Something important happened in the 1890s that led to the triumph of a radical white supremacism and a severe constriction in how whites sought to define the boundaries of race relations through legal segregation and disfranchisement (pp. 67-102). 'De jure' Jim Crow was a significant evolution from 'de facto' segregation practice, as law offered the authority of the state to a particular understanding of racial interactions (pp. 102-109). Beginning in the late 1930s, the system of Jim Crow came under increasing challenge; the white South in the mid-twentieth century turned away from the isolated path which it had shared with South Africa's segregationist apartheid regime (pp. 118-147, esp. pp. 121-122).

What is most striking about reading the first two-thirds of the book is how well it supports what we now understand about the formation of racial ideologies. In the 1980s several scholars, most notably Barbara Fields, a student of Woodward's, cogently articulated theories of the social construction of race.[11] This theoretical work has had a significant impact on subsequent scholarship on racial identity in American history. Woodward's analysis in *Strange Career*, written thirty years prior amid a cultural landscape in which assumptions of racial hierarchy among whites were only beginning to be questioned, is wholly consistent with our current theoretical understanding of race. In Woodward's analysis, understandings of race are changeable and unstable, and they take form in a particular historical context of social experience and political rhetoric and law.

Beyond what Rabinowitz and others have told us about a substantial amount of southern Jim Crow practice and law that predated the 1890s, other aspects of Woodward's treatment of the history of race in the postbellum South will seem limited to a current reader. Woodward in 1988 acknowledged the importance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urbanization, especially the growth of "the interior cities of the newer South in advancing segregation." [12] He quoted historian John Cell, who had highlighted the salience of urban growth in his 1982 comparative study of the origins of segregation in the American South and South Africa: "As Cell puts it, Jim Crow was no rural redneck: 'First and foremost he was a city slicker.'" [13]

It seems increasingly clear that the mixing of newly migrated whites and blacks in novel urban spaces contributed much to the heightening of racial tensions after 1890. Large-scale, brutally ritualistic lynchings, often on sexual allegations, typically occurred in such locales. After 1900, a white urban middle-class coalesced, fearing that rampant racial violence discouraged the economic development of the South's growing towns and

cities. This bourgeois element disavowed the informal and often lethal means through which white supremacy had been reinforced in rural settings. They sought instead to restore order with a rigid racial hierarchy imposed through formal law and legal agencies. The means to this end included 'de jure' segregation of urban space; physically excessive, race-conscious urban police forces; and "legal lynchings," lightning-speed capital trials of African-Americans that observed the forms, but not the substance, of due process law. [14] Woodward emphasized the reaction to the political disorder of the Populist Revolt by conservative Democrats and frustrated white Populists as a key element in the rise of Jim Crow and disfranchisement. Responses to the tensions of urbanization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are at least as important a part of this story, if not a greater one.

The fears provoked by the encounter of relatively anonymous African-Americans and whites in urban spaces were deeply informed by understandings of gender and sexuality. Underlying these anxieties was a vastly intensified concern about the interaction of white women and black men, accompanied by the construction of gender ideals by whites that sanctified white femininity and vilified African-American masculinity. Historian Joel Williamson in the 1980s stressed how the psycho-sexual pathology of leading white southern intellectuals led them into 'radical' negrophobia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[15] More recently, scholars Grace Elizabeth Hale and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore have shown the centrality of African-American and white notions of gender in the making of the culture of segregation and in the formation of white supremacist politics in North Carolina.[16] It seems obvious in light of the decades of scholarship since *Strange Career* that the attempt to spatially separate blacks and whites can best be understood with some reference to racialized understandings of gender and sexual difference.

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of Woodward's analysis in the first two-thirds of *Strange Career* was his tendency, as Howard Rabinowitz put it, to see African-Americans as "objects" rather than as "subjects." Woodward did, however, make the transition to seeing African-Americans as full participants in the story of American race relations in the final chapter he wrote for the 1974 edition.[17] As Rabinowitz and many subsequent historians have pointed out, the demands of African-Americans for their rights was crucial to the "origins and development of segregation" as well as to its demise.[18]

Resistance to segregation, for example, led Homère Plessy, a light-complected African-American, to contest a Louisiana statute that segregated railroad cars. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the legality of "separate but equal" public accommodations; Jim Crow statutory enactment soon mushroomed throughout the South. African-Americans played crucial roles in making this history; but in Woodward's account they were "not aggressive in pressing their rights" (p. 28) or "confused and politically apathetic" (p. 59). A number of monographs in recent decades have fleshed out our understanding of the African-American experience of Jim Crow as well as of black resistance to it.[19] These interpretations throw into relief the monochromaticism of an analysis that represented African-Americans as passive receptors and as undifferentiated objects of racial discrimination.

The final two chapters of *Strange Career*, "The Declining Years of Jim Crow" and "The Career Becomes Stranger," have a different kind of value than the book's initial portions. This is primary documentation, by a committed and highly insightful observer, of the tumultuous events that changed southern and American life in the twenty years after *Brown*. In these chapters, Woodward shifted his focus to a national context and articulated an influential view of the Civil Rights Movement and the federal government's renewed and

expanded commitment to integration and the protection of the rights of African-Americans as a "Second Reconstruction." [20] Woodward's lens as a southern liberal with profound historical perspective both illuminated and obscured his analysis here. For example, he treated the black nationalism of the mid- to late 1960s at some length, but mainly to disparage its racial separatism and alleged ideological incoherence (pp. 197-208). Woodward clearly was not sympathetic to the social and academic currents of the late 1960s and early 1970s that ran counter to a mid-twentieth-century liberal's understanding of integration and pluralism. Yet this is also history written nearly as it happened. A reader gets a visceral sense of the rapid, unpredictable, and contingent nature of change in the post-*Brown* era. Those who want interpretations with greater context and more recent perspective will look elsewhere,[21] but Woodward's account of the era remains valuable.

In sum, perhaps *Strange Career* can no longer stand alone in the syllabus, but it endures as a central text for those who seek to understand the history of race in America.

Notes

[1]. Howard N. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis: Assessing the Strange Career of Jim Crow," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1988), 842-844.

[2]. Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[3]. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 845-848.

[4]. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 848-849.

[5]. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 856.

[6]. C. Vann Woodward, "Strange Career Critics: Long May they Persevere," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1988), 857.

- [7]. Woodward, "Strange Career Critics," 861.
- [8]. Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
- [9]. Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).
- [10]. Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).
- [11]. Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May-June 1990), 95-118; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).
- [12]. Woodward, "Strange Career Critics," 860.
- [13]. Woodward, "Strange Career Critics," 859; also see John Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 134.
- [14]. See the discussion of the urbanization of north Louisiana and the decline of lynching in Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (forthcoming, Urbana: University of Illinois Press), ch. 5. For an overview of the growth of towns and cities in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55-80. For an analysis of southern segregation in the context of related cultural changes, specifically the rise of consumer culture, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).
- [15]. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), esp. 111-179.
- [16]. Hale, *The Culture of Segregation*, esp. 85-119; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. For an interpretation that argues that antebellum white southerners were more tolerant of illicit sexual liaisons between white women and black men than were postbellum white southerners, see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19th-Century-South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- [17]. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 855.
- [18]. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 855-856.
- [19]. See, for example, Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). Also see the superb website, "The History of Jim Crow," =<<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/home.htm>>, accessed March 28, 2003; and the four-part PBS documentary series *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, that originally aired in October 2002.
- [20]. For Howard Rabinowitz's qualms about comparing the "first" and "second" Reconstructions, see Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 851-853.
- [21]. An excellent recent overview is James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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