

### Segregation in the New South: Birmingham, Alabama, 1871 - 1901

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## Review

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**Harris, Carl V., completed and edited by W. Elliot Brownlee.** *Segregation in the New South: Birmingham, Alabama, 1871-1901*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$50.00 ISBN 9780807178379 pp. 285

Carl V. Harris was a distinguished professor at the University of California-Santa Barbara until retiring in 2011. He continued working on and discussing with his colleague, W. Elliot Brownlee, what became *Segregation in the New South* up to the time of his death at the age of eighty-six in 2018. When Harris's family asked Brownlee to complete the work, he agreed. The result is the present volume, Harris's second book, and the culmination of a career's worth of research and writing about the origins of segregation. While Harris's first book covered the same topic and reached the same conclusions about its sources, that landmark study focused on the political realm of Birmingham, Alabama. This book takes a largely different approach using sociological theory and social science methods to demonstrate how Blacks and whites interacted in that prototypical New South city. Although Brownlee completed and edited the book and deserves credit for that contribution, Harris is the primary author and will be treated as such in this review.

The book has nine chapters but with a "Coda" instead of a conclusion and an essay in an appendix on the Blumer model Harris used to frame the analysis. Herbert Blumer was a sociologist at the University of California-Berkeley. His thinking stemmed from his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, based on those of George Herbert Mead, which centered on what he called "symbolic interactionism". The book might have been better served if the appendix was integrated into the introduction so the reader would have known the methodology in full prior to reading the substantive chapters, though this is an author's choice. The details of the Blumer model theory lie outside this reader's ken but may be oversimplified as an inner ring of personal beliefs surrounded by an outer ring of societal beliefs, both of which lay the foundation for societal practices. In other words, the prejudice against Blacks created the adverse

discrimination of segregation that began in New South cities like Birmingham, Alabama, the so-called Pittsburgh of the South during this period.

Contrary to the arguments of C. Vann Woodward and his successors, Harris demonstrates that segregation began almost immediately after emancipation, not in the former slave plantation areas, but in the urban areas, even new ones like Birmingham. The chapters cover the same period of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age in different areas of life: education, housing, employment, leisure, public services, and public events like lynching. In each of these areas, Harris proves racism underlay all of these aspects of existence with the clear intent of relegating Blacks to an inferior social status. This is what W.E.B. Dubois termed “caste.” Black wages were almost half of whites’. Job opportunities put a ceiling on Black achievement. Schooling began as non-existent, and, when reform provided public schools, Black schools had always less than half the funding for white children. Housing was not only segregated, Black residents were often in the alleyways with no access to fresh water or sewers. Law enforcement served whites, not Blacks, and Black men were sentenced to long terms so they could be used as convict labor. The data and maps Harris deploys are irrefutable. Birmingham began and progressed as a segregated city long before the Progressive Era.

Harris also extensively analyzes elections in order to show the impact of racism prior to disfranchisement. Blacks did vote prior to disfranchisement. However, even when their ballots were essential to the white politician’s victory, Blacks were seldom rewarded for their support. On occasion, they were subject to public rebuffs, denunciations, and similar treatment to what they would have received from the even more racist opponent. This was the choice in Birmingham, as it was in much of the South. They were also taken for granted in the Republican Party. While constituting most of its votes in the South, after Reconstruction, Republican victories relied on the more populous North. This allowed Republican presidents to largely ignore their Black constituents in the South. When Black politicians and voters tried to wield influence, they met with only limited victories, if at all.

There are some weaknesses in this account. Harris’ characterization of Jim Crow as proceeding on the same basis as slavery is arguable. Slave status was justified by racism but adhered at birth. One could be light-skinned and mistaken for white, yet still be a slave. It is also difficult to prove motive in individuals let alone for a societal phenomenon. Did whites believe Blacks to be inferior, so they set up segregation in order to prevent waste? Did whites simply

hate Blacks so they discriminated against them in social practice and law? Were there deeper psychological forces at work including control over women and competition over resources? The discounting of other theories using the data would have been helpful in proving Harris' case. Finally, there is the presence of a decent amount of contradictory information that Harris acknowledges but does not allow to influence his conclusions such as Black economic and educational progress during this critical period.

Regardless of these minor points, Harris's book is an important contribution to the history of the New South, Black America, and the origins of Jim Crow. We now have a well-documented, well-written refutation of the Woodward school for Birmingham to add to the ones about Richmond, Charlotte, Atlanta, and New Orleans, among others. Though the implications of Harris' work for policy and contemporary debates about structural racism are beyond the scope of the present work, this book is essential reading.

*William James Hull Hoffer is a professor of history at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. He has written and co-authored several books on US legal history including *Plessy v. Ferguson: Race and Inequality in Jim Crow America*, and is presently writing a book on *Schechter Poultry v. U.S.*, the "sick chicken case" and the New Deal.*