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[Introduction to] Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South since 1920

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**POVERTY AND PROGRESS IN
THE U.S. SOUTH SINCE 1920**

edited by

Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman

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PREFACE

Poverty, disease, and illiteracy had long bedeviled the U.S. South, even before the agricultural depression of the 1920s became subsumed within the Great Depression of the 1930s. The essays collected in this volume examine a variety of responses to economic depression and poverty; they recount specific battles for civil, educational, and labor rights; and they explore the challenges and alternatives to the corporate South in the post World War II agribusiness era. Scholars from both the U.S. and Europe assess how far the South has come both socially and economically in the last century, what forces (from the Sears Roebuck Catalog to the Civil Rights Movement) have been at work in its transformation, and whether the region's reincarnation as the Sunbelt has lifted the burdens of southern history. Their research reveals that globalization brought progressive ideas to the South early in the twentieth century but that unfair labor practices have lingered through century's end. Contributors assess labor strikes and demonstrations that have not always found a place in histories of the region and revisit and reassess key southern figures from Erskine Caldwell and James Agee to Albert Gore and Lyndon Johnson. They draw our attention to neglected writers whose representations of poverty deserve more critical attention and provide literary-critical readings of contemporary authors and filmmakers. The essays examine history and folklore, letters and memoirs, fiction and journalism, documentary film and public celebrations, in order to convey some of the political and cultural implications of poverty in southern places.

In the first of the collection's essays, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz considers the response of interwar southern fiction writers to rural poverty. The writers that he examines did more than simply depict the deprivation and inequities of life for the southern white rural poor; they recognized their humanity, worth, and diversity of thought, which encompassed not only aspirations for educational opportunity and economic advancement, but social and political conservatism.

By examining the responses of rural southerners to the Sears Roebuck catalog which had achieved a wide southern circulation by the 1920s, Marcel Arbeit uncovers another aspect of southern storytelling and aspiration for personal development beyond simply material acquisition. Arbeit draws on autobiography and fiction centered on the experiences of the lower and lower-middle classes to reveal a world in which the Sears catalog served as both a wish book and a dream book that enabled impoverished young readers to fantasize about lifestyles and opportunities far removed from the drudgery of their own lives. The catalog, Arbeit finds, also functioned for some adults as an aspirational guide.

In his writings for serious magazines and newspapers in the 1930s and early 1940s, novelist Erskine Caldwell focused on the underside of southern life by condemning lynching, portraying the depths of poverty, and describing the deleterious effects of the New Deal on tenants and sharecroppers. Edwin Arnold's essay explains that while Caldwell created some unsympathetic characters in his fiction, he regarded himself primarily as a social reformer and was unafraid to expose the South's ills at a time when others defended their region against its

external critics. Despite Caldwell's later disavowals, he espoused support for Communism during the Depression.

James Agee also endorsed Communism during the 1930s, impressed by its avowed humanitarian concern. Robert Brinkmeyer's essay focuses on the narrative strategy that Agee employed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as he sought to enable his readers to understand the poverty, dignity, and individuality of southern tenant farmers, and to comprehend the rootedness of tenants' problems in a prevailing social and economic system, which Agee believed could be changed by an enlightened majority. Brinkmeyer argues that Agee sought to move beyond stereotypes of the poor and to inspire his readers to work for change by detailing the lives of the impoverished without sentimentality, preachiness, or condescension.

Although the fate of dispossessed agricultural workers understandably dominates studies of southern rural poverty in the 1930s, the decade also saw the great textile strike of 1934. However, the workforce of the Dutch-owned American Enka rayon plant in Hominy Valley, North Carolina, did not participate in the strike. In her study of the mill, Anneke Leenhouts argues that American Enka successfully cultivated good labor relations by drawing on its Dutch experience of benevolent paternalism. The company built good quality mill houses and fostered company spirit by offering its workers sports, social, and cultural activities.

American Enka, like other southern textile mills, excluded African Americans from its workforce in the 1930s. The black struggle against oppression features in several of the collection's essays. Elizabeth Hayes Turner explores the evolution of Juneteenth from an African American celebration of the announcement of emancipation in Texas in June 1865 to today's national and multiracial celebration of black history and culture. After the retreat of Juneteenth into the private sphere during the 1940s, the successes of the civil rights movement made possible its reemergence as a public celebration, one with which some politicians have been eager to associate themselves in the not always fulfilled hope of political gain.

While historians have quite correctly noted the endurance and fortitude of African Americans, Sharon Monteith's study of Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* is a reminder that oppression, poverty, and the harsh struggle for survival brought casualties, but anger and resistance as well. Monteith places this 1969 novel about Depression-era poverty in the rural South in the context of the Moynihan Report of 1965, the War on Poverty's failure, and the emergence of the Black Power movement. In a detailed reading, she situates Sarah E. Wright's novel between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright and Alice Walker and Ernest Gaines, and she emphasizes the abject poverty at the heart of the novel's concerns.

Although President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society did not live up to its initiator's grandiose promises, Johnson deserves recognition for his contribution to civil rights legislation and other measures that helped create a biracial democracy in the South and an increasingly, if selectively, prosperous region. Tony Badger's essay examines the relationship between Texan Johnson and Tennessean Albert Gore, two politicians whose Washington careers began in the late 1930s and ended with the 1960s. Sharing much in their backgrounds and in their aspirations for regional uplift, the two men became political allies who helped to advance the South's economy and overturn legal racial discrimination. Yet, as Badger explains, their relationship was soured by a bitter personal rivalry for political influence and the nation's highest

office that was subsequently augmented by disagreement over American intervention in Vietnam.

Johnson and Gore occupied the uncomfortable position of being racial moderates at the height of southern massive resistance to public school desegregation in the 1950s. Paul Mertz's essay turns to the local level by exploring the role of Arlington's white moderates as Virginia adopted a range of massive resistance laws. Arlington schools were subject to a federal court desegregation order that, when implemented, would have triggered the closure of its public schools under new state legislation. White moderates formed the 3,400 strong Arlington Committee for Public Schools that argued for the continuation of public education, with or without desegregation, and that was prepared to challenge massive resistance through the courts. A suit became unnecessary when enforced school closures in some other Virginia locations brought successful court action that overturned massive resistance and restored public education. Massive resistance in the South began to retreat as many whites prioritized public education over segregation.

With *de jure* discrimination overturned, the African American struggle for equality focused increasingly on seeking to remedy the results of discrimination. Mark Newman's essay discusses the efforts of black plantation workers in Mississippi to raise their wages and limit working hours by forming the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU) and taking strike action in 1965. The strike failed because it accelerated an ongoing pattern of worker displacement by machines and herbicides, but also because of divisions within the civil rights movement and among its supporters.

Kieran Quinlan's essay takes a different approach to southern progress by reexamining the religious beliefs of William Alexander Percy and his younger cousin Walker Percy. Quinlan argues for a reconsideration of the older Percy whose apparent homosexuality and loss of religious faith make him in some ways more modern than his orthodox Catholic and clearly heterosexual cousin. Quinlan contends that Will Percy's religious thoughts had much in common with those of Catholic Modernists, while the Catholic convert Walker Percy roundly rejected the Modernists.

The collection's remaining four essays consider challenges to agribusiness and alternatives to welfare in the second half of the twentieth century. Nahem Yousaf discusses Stephanie Black's 1990 documentary *H-2 Worker*. Black secretly filmed the peonage experienced by Jamaican sugar cane workers in Palm Beach County, Florida, in the 1980s, allowing the workers to speak for themselves, with a minimum of narrative overview, and cross-cutting between the system's defenders and its critics and victims. The workers were part of a global plantation economy easily disposed of and replaced when they went on strike, much like the MFLU strikers in 1965.

Sarah Robertson's essay also discusses an effort to give voice to the impoverished and marginalized, while offering a wider criticism of the impact of corporations. Robertson analyzes Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) and finds within it tensions between Ray's eco-criticism and her wish to impart the humanity and individuality of her impoverished Georgia family. For Ray, her father was less a junk dealer than someone with the skills to recycle old products into new forms of his own inventive design. Just as Ray seeks to rescue her father

from redneck stereotypes, so she also wishes to rescue the poor from simplistic representation and belittling. At the same time she advocates protecting the land from the ravages of agribusiness, an effort that she believes would also serve to unite southerners, regardless of race or class. Robertson provides insightful but measured criticism of Ray's depiction of her family past and vision for a southern future.

Suzanne Jones's essay examines Barbara Kingsolver's 2000 novel, *Prodigal Summer*, set in southern Appalachia. Like Ray, Kingsolver also develops an environmentalist theme and similarly demonstrates commitment to community and family. Jones explains that Kingsolver avoids romanticizing indigenous farmers, while recognizing their knowledge and worth. Whereas Ray suggests that environmental concern can unite southerners of diverse backgrounds, Kingsolver intimates that a combination of local and newcomer knowledge and cooperation can help solve southern Appalachia's ecological and economic difficulties. Jones concludes that the novel largely succeeds by revealing the interdependencies of humans and the natural world.

Dan Carter explores the attitude of southern conservatives toward the issue of poverty over the past half century. For much of southern history, notes Carter, white southerners—particularly upper class white southerners—have viewed poverty through the prism of race. With the brief rise of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society during the 1960s, that connection became a critical building block for the political transformation of the region. But a new generation of white southern Republicans built their political success upon a philosophy that linked blackness, increasing welfare costs, and higher taxes to a once dominant Democratic Party. Carter concludes that although overt racist rhetoric has declined over the last twenty years, white southern conservatives continue to oppose any significant governmental support for the poor, often justifying their position on the basis of fundamentalist religion as well as traditional laissez-faire economics.

Threaded throughout the collection is evidence that positive change has come from within the South as often as from without—and not just from the region's progressive activists, educators, novelists, and politicians but from those who aspired to educational opportunity and economic advancement. This collection suggests that the study of the U.S. South's history, literature, and culture will continue to reveal new insights and directions that will sustain the vibrancy of southern studies and that will bring concerns of economic class more to the center of American studies.

Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman