

Metropolitan Regions or Sunbelt Cities? The Fall of Houston and Denver, the "Resurgence" of New York and Boston

Sternlieb, George. *Patterns of Development*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy, 1986. Pp. xv, 289. Tables, index. \$22.95 (U.S.)

McComb, David G. *Galveston: A History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Pp 267. Maps, index

Bernard, Richard M. and Bradley R. Rice, editors. *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Pp. x, 346. Maps. \$9.95 paper (U.S.)

David C. Hammack

Volume 16, Number 3, February 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017748ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017748ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hammack, D. C. (1988). Review of [Metropolitan Regions or Sunbelt Cities? The Fall of Houston and Denver, the "Resurgence" of New York and Boston / Sternlieb, George. *Patterns of Development*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy, 1986. Pp. xv, 289. Tables, index. \$22.95 (U.S.) / McComb, David G. *Galveston: A History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Pp 267. Maps, index / Bernard, Richard M. and Bradley R. Rice, editors. *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Pp. x, 346. Maps. \$9.95 paper (U.S.)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 16(3), 301–304.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017748ar>

Oestreicher has set, however, a new standard of excellence in local social and working-class history.

Returning to Montgomery's point of linking social to institutional labour history in a local setting, we suspect that the Detroit study goes about as far as this route may take us. The author offers a rich description of the Knights and their diverse constituency, and quite obviously, the experience of the movement captures the dialectic between working-class solidarity and fragmentation on economic, cultural, and ideological lines. One is increasingly tempted, however, to assert that the rise and fall of the Knights was an autonomous political event with sociological roots and (above all) consequences, but not easily amenable to a sociological explanation, least of all on a local level. Oestreicher could have profited by the reading of the fine Canadian study, Kealey and Palmer's *Dreaming of What Might Be*, that edges toward this conclusion. In triumph and defeat the Knights had a character that defies the canons of Marxist orthodoxy, but so too have all important labour movements. A fragmented social formation was equally responsible for its rise as its demise. The fact is that the Knights *were* destroyed from within and without, and left in their wake the weakest working-class movement in the Western world, the sectional and exclusivist American Federation of Labour.

Virtually all of the local studies of the nineteenth century industrial city that have emerged over the last 10 to 15 years are a critique of the Commons or Perlman schools of U.S. labour history. These schools had either the vice or the virtue of attempting to link contemporary social reality and political dilemmas with the labour past. The "new" urban history may have started out with similar intentions, but has arrived at a different place. As the mysterious Mr. Quin once remarked, "There is no atmosphere in the present," and as the present situation for American workers and their communities goes from bad to worse, a far-reaching synthesis of what has happened remains elusive.

Allen Seager
Department of History
Simon Fraser University

**Metropolitan Regions or Sunbelt Cities?
The Fall of Houston and Denver, the "Resurgence"
of New York and Boston**

Sternlieb, George. *Patterns of Development*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy, 1986. Pp. xv, 289. Tables, index. \$22.95 (U.S.).

McComb, David G. *Galveston: A History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Pp 267. Maps, index.

Bernard, Richard M. and Bradley R. Rice, editors. *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Pp. x, 346. Maps. \$9.95 paper (U.S.).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s journalists, marketing consultants, and many scholars enthusiastically celebrated the success of the sunbelt; Houston and Denver competed, at the time, to be that belt's "golden buckle." Fiscal crisis and job loss meanwhile gave a sad, nostalgic twist to the title of journalist Ken Auletta's 1979 book on New York, *The Streets Were Paved With Gold*. Just a few years later, something over a third of the new office space in Houston, Denver, and many other recently booming cities was empty (it was said that there was more empty office space in Houston than total office space in Philadelphia, whose metropolitan region houses many more people than Houston's). And suddenly, in the mid- and late-1980s, property values have skyrocketed not only in Manhattan but throughout the metropolitan New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region — and per capita incomes are higher and rising more rapidly in Boston's New England than anywhere else in the United States.

This sudden reversal has exposed the shallow basis on which many economic consultants operate, confused journalists, and thrown a curve at historians. Here we have a case where it really does seem useful to step back from the headlines. George Sternlieb, the enterprising director of the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University, laments that press deadlines and client needs all too often force experts in his field to focus exclusively on "current trauma," thus losing the "broader perspective" that history makes possible (p. 3). If we look at a longer period of time and a wider range of phenomena, we may in fact be able to make sense of the episodic shifts that have caught so many — hard headed bankers and real estate developers no less than superficial pundits — by surprise.

We should start with the long-term rise to dominance of metropolitan regions as the basic form of human settlement throughout the United States. Half of the people in the United States lived in metropolitan regions by 1940, but *all* of the population increase of the next thirty-five years went to these great cities and their surrounding suburbs and satellites. In 1940 the great metropolitan regions were without exception located along the north and middle Atlantic coast, on the Great Lakes, the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers, and on the Pacific: by 1975 Houston, Dallas, Miami, Atlanta, Tampa, and Phoenix had joined the list, earning well-deserved reputations for rapid growth and optimistic business communities. It was in this context that so many observers proclaimed the "rise of the sun belt."

There followed an interesting debate about the reasons for the "sun belt's" success and particularly for the rapid growth of its cities after 1940. Richard Bernard, Bradley Rice and their colleagues emphasized political factors, and

particularly the boosting efforts of local business leaders. In a thoughtful introduction to their collection of essays, Bernard and Rice carefully reviewed the definitions of the "sun belt," arguing for a region that includes all of the states that lie south of the 37th parallel. Their sun belt includes southern California but excludes the rest of that state as well as most of Nevada and all of Utah, Colorado, Missouri, Kentucky, and Virginia. Drawing on the individual essays on the largest cities in this region, including New Orleans, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, Albuquerque, Los Angeles, and San Diego as well as the cities listed above, Bernard and Rice argued that four factors account for the growth of these cities between 1940 and 1980: federal defense spending, federal domestic outlays for retirement and highways, "a favourable business climate," and "an attractive quality of life."

In view of the fact that the sunbelt, however defined, is well known for a political conservatism that seeks to *limit* government activity and emphasize the "free market," Bernard and Rice's political argument is provocative. It is an argument that is supported by many of the anecdotes offered in the narratives of recent local politics that make up the accounts of individual cities in their book. David L. Clark makes the point explicit in his essay on Los Angeles:

It is perhaps ironic that conservatives, opposed in principle to Big Government, should grow in strength from the aerospace and defense sector, which has been the major cause of government growth since 1940. But that pattern is consistent with the region's history. Fiscally conservative aerospace managers lobby for federal defense appropriations today just as their western predecessors did for dam and irrigation projects (p. 285).

Clark might have added that the "fiscal conservatism" of sunbelt businessmen has rarely applied to great public works projects designed to promote local economic growth. Most of the essays on particular cities in this book dwell on such projects: water lines and highways in Clark's own piece on Los Angeles and in Bradford Luckingham's on Phoenix; highways, airports, and a mass transit system in Rice's Atlanta; highways, an airport, and the Trinity River Canal in Martin Melosi's Dallas/Fort Worth. A willingness to promote such projects, an ability to persuade the state or federal government to pay for them, and a commitment to low taxes — together with a hostility to labour unions — constitute the "favourable business climate" in these cities. Warm weather and the presence of professional football, baseball, and basketball teams (and perhaps the availability of inexpensive domestic servants) constitute the "attractive quality of life" that appeals to many businessmen.

Consistency and a unified point of view make the Bernard and Rice collection an unusually successful collaboration. Each author provides an independent essay, but an essay that touches on the same themes of economic

growth; Chamber of Commerce boosterism, local politics, and — very briefly — the situation of the impoverished and the large and important racial and ethnic minorities. None of the essays makes rigorous use of statistics, or of the archives; none really does justice to the economic and social conditions of the poor majority. Despite these limitations, the result is an unsurpassed introduction to the journalistic accounts of the rapid growth of the sunbelt cities since 1940.

But to their credit Bernard and Rice seek not only to describe, but to explain. Unfortunately, the descriptive narratives they provide cannot fully support the political explanation they prefer.

Other scholars prefer economic explanations that give more direct credit to market forces. Following a different tradition, George Sternlieb includes northern California and the Mountain States in his "sun belt;" he attributes the success of its cities to cheap labour and raw materials, especially oil (ch. 10). (Elsewhere, Sternlieb offers the unorthodox view, especially for an economist, that "ultimately new jobs follow the work force" p. 84). And in an account that generally follows the narrative style of the essays in Bernard and Rice's book, David McComb denies the local tale that the selfish, monopolistic rates of the Galveston Wharf Company and the far-sighted investments and political efforts of Houston boosters (efforts that gained federal assistance for the digging of the Houston Ship Canal between 1902 and 1914) drove trade to Houston:

Galveston's fate was shaped by technology, location, and human reason. It was too risky, too reckless, and too uneconomic to place extensive businesses or population on an unstable edge of nature. It has been an error for islanders to measure [their] importance according to population numbers (p. 68).

Yet none of these works recognizes the fact, stressed by Eric E. Lampard twenty years ago, that the regions of the United States have been growing more and more similar to one another in wealth, in economic activities, and in degree of urbanization since 1910.¹ In 1920, when per capita income was \$658 nationally, it was only \$531 in the southwest and \$371 in the impoverished southeast (44 per cent below the national average), but \$880 in the mid-Atlantic region and even more, \$889 (more than twice the level of the southeast and 35 per cent above the national average), in the far west. By 1960 regional disparities had narrowed: in the southeast incomes averaged 28 per cent below the national level of \$2,230, while in the far west they averaged 19% above, and by 1980 the range was from 18% above the national average in the far west to 16 per cent below in the southeast.² (It is worth noting that in 1980, at the height of the energy boom, incomes still averaged ten per cent higher in the Great Lakes states than in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana). In general, the wealthiest regions were the most highly urbanized; the far west, with the highest incomes, was dominated by large cities from its earliest settlement.

These increasingly similar incomes have been generated, as Lampard also pointed out, by increasingly similar economies. Bernard, Rice, and their colleagues provide scattered but telling bits of evidence for this phenomenon: in 1940 more than a third of Miami's labour force worked in the tourist industry, in 1980 only 10 per cent did so (p. 72); in 1977 the manufacturing sector in Dallas/Fort Worth earned 20 per cent of that region's income — exactly the national average (p. 166); by 1979 Atlanta had more than its share of people working for agencies of the local, state, and federal governments, including Georgia Tech and Georgia State universities and the National Centers for Disease Control (p. 42). McComb treats Galveston as an independent entity rather than as part of the Greater Houston Metropolitan Region. But Galveston's considerable vice district clearly served that larger region from the 1920s through the 1950s, and in the 1970s its largest employer, the University of Texas Medical Branch (pp. 191-199), joined with Houston's Texas Medical Center to give the region a medical complex nearly comparable to those of Atlanta, Baltimore, and Cleveland.³

As Bernard, Rice, and Martin Melosi note, federal policy was *directly* responsible for the decentralization of manufacturing, and particularly of aircraft manufacturing, during World War II (pp. 12, 165). Federal policy also expanded military bases in the south and west, accelerating the growth of San Diego, Albuquerque, San Antonio, and Tampa. There is no doubt that local business elites, supported by their United States senators, pushed hard for these policies with the explicit intention of helping their economies.

The question remains: were the federal and local policies favoured by local business elites responsible for the rapid growth of the sun belt cities? Not to the extent that Bernard, Rice, and their associates suggest. Federal actions did not always yield the long-term benefits that local elites sought. Arnold R. Hirsch points out that the National Aeronautical and Space Administration's Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans employed 10,000 in 1963, only 1,500 in the early 1980s (p. 115). More generally, in an ambitious and useful essay on the history of U.S. housing policy Sternlieb points out that federal housing subsidies designed to stimulate the economy during periods of recession usually go into effect too late to do much good. Instead, they often have the unintended effect of overstimulating the economy during subsequent periods of expansion (p. 53).

Nor do local business elites always get the governmental actions they seek. Melosi, for example, emphasizes the power of the Citizens Council, but he also describes its failure to link Dallas to the Gulf of Mexico through the Trinity River Canal. Nowhere did the business elite entirely control the agenda: the "power structure" that Floyd Hunter described in his famous study of Atlanta gave little thought to desegregation, yet desegregation, together with voting rights for Blacks, was arguably the most important event in Atlanta — and in Miami, Tampa, New Orleans, Dallas, and Hous-

ton — during the period covered here.⁴ McComb demonstrates that social (though not economic) desegregation was one of the great quiet stories of Galveston in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover expansion in many economic fields occurred without the benefit of specific government interventions. Among the cities described by Bernard, Rice, and their colleagues, this was true of financial activities in Miami, Atlanta, Dallas, and Los Angeles; oil management in Houston and also in New Orleans, Dallas, and Los Angeles; clothing manufacture in Dallas, Los Angeles, and neglected El Paso; and employment in transportation and wholesale and retail distribution everywhere.

If federal, state, and local policies controlled by business elites do not account for sun belt growth, what does? Bernard and Rice emphasize the impact of another political factor, federal outlays for such non-defense programs as social security and interstate highways. The interstate highway system, in particular, was very helpful to cities, including many in the sun belt, that lay far distant from major concentrations of population and lacked access to cheap water transportation. Social security not only allowed retiring northerners to move to Florida's west coast and to Texas's Rio Grande Valley: it also bolstered the incomes of many who had spent their lives in the low-paid industries of the south. Sternlieb argues persuasively that federal housing-subsidy programs typically helped the rich more than the poor ("the analogy of feeding the sparrows by assuring oats for the horses comes to mind"), but insofar as they also acted in the fashion of a "lottery" they did transfer some wealth to the sunbelt. To the limited extent that federal health, hospital, highway, and urban renewal programs offered equal benefits to citizens regardless of their location, they also tended to raise incomes in the formerly impoverished southern and mountain states that constitute so much of the sun belt. Altogether, it is clear that federal domestic programs did indeed raise incomes in southern and mountain states, enabling people there to support more wholesalers, more bankers, more doctors, more government workers — and to pay their professional musicians a bit better.

But surely the transformation of American agriculture, and the massive dislocation of poor Black and White farmers, played an equally large part in the rise of the metropolitan south, where the growth of very large cities was really new. In 1920 more than 700,000 Black and nearly 900,000 White families lived as tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the south (another million and a half lived on farms they "owned" subject to their mortgages). Almost 500,000 Black and 700,000 White families remained as farm tenants in 1945, but the numbers dropped precipitately to 140,000 and 228,000 in 1959 and to a dwindling 21,000 and 118,000 just ten years later.⁵

A goodly number of these destitute families (and many former farm "owners") moved their poverty and their hope for a better life to the north; but most moved to cities in the

south. Although few realized their hopes, all did become far more fully integrated into the money economy, whether they earned their money above or under ground. (McComb's colourful stories of the families that made Galveston the "sin city of the gulf" after World War I demonstrate that a vigorous underground economy existed in at least one southern city long before the 1970s). Many more southern farmers than northern mechanics moved to southern cities between 1940 and 1980. To a very considerable extent the "rise of the sun belt cities" was the result, not of local boosterism, but of the abolition of subsistence farming in the south and of the long-delayed convergence of incomes between the southern and mountain states and the rest of the nation.

By 1980 that convergence was not yet complete (indeed in 1987 it was reported that regional incomes had begun to diverge again, with New England and the mid-Atlantic becoming relatively wealthier).⁶ But it had gone very far. Few subsistence farmers remained in rural southern counties that were being returned to timberland. Future population growth would have to come from natural increase (in an era of low and declining birth rates), immigration (in an era of increasing demand for restriction), or migration from other metropolitan regions (which offered, in fact, very similar opportunities). Sunbelt cities had already been supplied with plenty of shopping centres and, perhaps, with adequate universities and medical centres as well. Even without the drop in the prices of oil and other raw materials, they would have been hard pressed to sustain the growth rates of the preceding twenty years. The long-lasting trend of regional convergence and metropolitan region growth may, therefore, help explain the very recent stagnation of many sun belt cities. To account for the even more recent resurgence of New York and Boston, perhaps we need to turn to

Allan Pred and Michael Conzen's persuasive accounts of the persistence of early advantages in communications.⁷ That, however, would raise questions too complex and too numerous to consider in one brief review essay.

David C. Hammack
Department of History
Case Western Reserve University

Notes

1. Eric E. Lampard, "The Evolving System of Cities in the United States: Urbanization and Economic Development," in *Issues in Urban Economics*, ed. Harvey S. Perloff and Lowdon Wingo, Jr. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 81-139.
2. Eric E. Lampard, "Evolving System of Cities," p. 123, for the data on 1920 and 1960; data for 1980 calculated from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 429.
3. Because Sternlieb emphasizes competitions between central cities and their suburbs, and between central cities in one region and those in another, his occasional essays published in 1984 and 1985 and collected here offer disappointingly little to the student of metropolitan regions.
4. Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953).
5. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Bicentennial Edition, Part I, 465.
6. *New York Times*, 20 August 1987.
7. Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Michael Conzen, "The Maturing Urban System of the United States, 1840-1910," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 67 (1977): 88-108.