

## H-Net Review

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**David L. Sjoquist, ed.** *The Atlanta Paradox*. Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000. 300 pp. Tables, maps, bibliographies, index. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-87154-808-9.

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### A Rising Tide Raises All Ships . . . But Not in Atlanta

From the time of Floyd Hunter's depiction of its "community power" to Clarence Stone's definition of its "urban regime," Atlanta has been a prominent subject of study.[1] Most recently, its inordinate growth has engendered a new burst of scholarly attention to the city and its region. But instead of asking, "Who rules?" this research asks, "Who loses?"[2] David Sjoquist and colleagues address this question with a variety of unusually rich and revealing economic and sociological analyses.

Atlanta, Sjoquist writes, "is a paradox of substantial racial segregation in a community with a reputation for good race relations and of high inner-city poverty in the face of substantial growth" (p. 1). This latter part is a paradox because studies have indicated that strong economic growth in a metropolitan area usually improves the lot of the inner-city poor. In Atlanta, however, metro area jobs increased by 4.1 percent a year between 1980 and 1996 but in the city by only 1 percent per year.

How to explain such inequality? Researchers rightly cite segregation and discrimination as strong factors, but there are others that must be considered. Many poor blacks may not be able to get jobs because the pattern of metropolitan growth has created a spatial mismatch between them and the jobs available. And they may lack the human capital, the employment information, the job-seeking strategies, and the social capital to get work. To test these possibilities, findings from in-depth interviews with households in both black and white neighborhoods were analyzed as were two sets of interviews with employers[3], along with census and other statistical data. These analyses are prefaced by a wealth of geographic and demographic as well as historical background information.

We learn, for example, that Atlanta has the nation's oldest publicly funded metropolitan planning agency but has nonetheless sprawled into a 20-county MSA by 1990 (the largest in the country by number of counties). By 1996, the city represented only 11 percent of the area's population, and its proportion of jobs had fallen to 25 percent. Job growth has been predominantly in the northern suburbs, and blacks have indeed taken advantage of this: The proportion of blacks in these favored suburbs has increased from 9.4 to 25.2 percent between 1980 and 1996.

But over 60 percent of the region's blacks, and most of the poor among them, remain in Atlanta (and the southern suburbs).

One lapidary reason for this concentration is that as late as 1962, Atlanta officials were building walls (literally) to keep neighborhoods segregated and confining blacks to a disproportionately small share of the city's land.[4] Highways built via urban renewal also created concrete borders, as is likewise well documented historically. Black neighborhoods were denied urban services, including transit, so that as unskilled jobs departed for the suburbs, they were increasingly locked into poverty (since 40 percent of families there do not have cars).

While this physical segregation persists, other contributors are encouraged that it could be overcome today. Using black and white neighborhood diagrams, they convincingly demonstrate that over 50 percent of blacks are willing to locate in "whiter" neighborhoods, and about 75 percent of whites would be comfortable in neighborhoods reflecting the metro area's racial composition of around 25 percent blacks. The diminution of segregation is confirmed by another contributor's measure: Between 1980 and 1996, the dissimilarity index fell from 76.2 to 61.4 (below the national average of 66.4). The more revealing, and disturbing, finding, however, is that 90 percent of blacks still perceive a "triple threat" in trying to buy a house in Atlanta's white suburbs. Even if they can afford it, they don't believe they'll find a real estate agent who'll show it to them, an owner who'll sell to them, or a bank that'll lend to them.

Poor blacks can't afford these suburbs, of course. And because these suburbs have the most unskilled jobs and the least public transportation, the proverbial geographic mismatch between jobs and housing does obtain in metro Atlanta. But the research here has unearthed a more fundamental problem than geography and transportation, which is that 80 percent of inner-city blacks don't even know about these suburban jobs--a problem both of isolation and information. And as a consequence, earnings inequality persists. Atlanta area family income generally has risen to 120 percent of the US average, but for inner city black families, it has not changed. Such earnings inequality has a compound impact on black women, not just because their gender and race already combine to put them at the very bottom of the job hierarchy, but also because so many more black women are heads of households (75 percent, as compared to 50 percent whites) and thus have childcare responsibilities while also needing to work.

Moreover, as other contributors show, simply finding work is much more difficult for people living in disadvantaged areas, especially for these women. Friends and family, the "strong ties" that are usually most helpful in finding work, prove upon examination not to be very effective for people living in disadvantaged areas where there are by definition no jobs, and, as we've learned, they mostly do not know of the jobs available in the suburbs. Accordingly, what is demonstrated to be most effective are "weak ties"[5], ties to employed suburban acquaintances, for example. The trouble is, as these interviews also bring to light, poor blacks have few such weak ties, and even if they had them, only half of the black single women surveyed had informal support as with childcare, transportation, and money--the strong ties to take advantage of these weak ties. And while single mothers have fewer social ties generally, blacks are less able to count on kin than

whites for such help, another social capital deficit compounded.

Social capital can make all the difference. Some blacks, and especially black women, have done very well by it in the Atlanta CBD. They have done so, as scrupulously outlined in another contribution, by practicing "ethnic solidarity." Using such social ties has opened up--since blacks' political ascendancy in 1974 (with the election of Maynard Jackson as the city's first black mayor)--a plethora of public sector jobs. These positions have, in turn, it is correctly contended, enabled them to exercise "hegemony" over real estate, construction, and finance interests that want to work with the city. (It must be noted, as we are judiciously reminded, this social capital received strong institutional support from affirmative action and minority contracting policies.) Yet, as we have seen, the economic capital these blacks have gained through their social capital, like the suburbs' wealth, has not "trickled down" to the "truly disadvantaged."

What is to be done? One of the chief strengths of this volume is that it actually unpacks black perceptions and preferences, which enables Sjoquist to outline policy options that could actually get to the core of these complex and knottily intertwined problems. Yet from enforcing existing laws on housing and employment discrimination to overcoming spatial mismatch by providing information and transportation, these options require, as he acknowledges, economic resources and, especially, as I would stress, political will to be implemented.

It is therefore all the more worth noting that political realities have begun to catch up, at least incipiently, with these research recommendations. While the very notion of regional governance is, of course, anathema in a state with such a strong tradition of local authority, the sudden public notoriety Atlanta garnered as the national poster child of sprawl in 1998 quickly mobilized the Metropolitan Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and its leaders equally quickly convinced the new governor-elect to promote the creation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority in 1999. This GRTA has, technically at least, broad powers to address both transportation and land-use issues, and--who knows--perhaps it'll go so far as to promote affordable housing in the suburbs and make Atlanta one of the "regions that work." [6]

#### Notes

[1]. Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

[2]. Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, eds., *Sprawl City: Race, Politics, and Planning in Atlanta* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000); and Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

[3]. In addition to Atlanta, the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality includes Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, and it is based on a linked set of surveys of households (conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.) and employers

(conducted by Harry J. Holzer) between 1992 and 1994 and funded by the Ford Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation.

[4]. Apart from much of the data here, the other part of the paradox--"a reputation for good race relations"--is thoroughly exposed in Ronald H. Bayor's (the contributor of this historical background) full-length treatment, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and in Charles Rutheiser's *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (London: Verso, 1996), an anthropological exposition of Atlanta's image "uber alles" business politics.

[5]. Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973), pp. 1360-1380. As intimated here, these are ties to distant acquaintances who move in different circles and therefore have information that we don't have, not just the same information that we already share with our intimate relatives and friends.

[6]. Manuel Pastor, Jr., Peter Dreier, J. Eugene Grigsby, III, and Marta Lopez-Garza, *Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). For these authors, Atlanta actually comes in among "Regions with Above-Median Growth and Above-Median Performance in Reducing Poverty" (cf. pp. 128ff.), though their time-frame is just enough different to make comparisons with the data in Sjoquist, et al., difficult.



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