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Book Review of The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South

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The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968. By Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. Pp. xii, 220. Tables, maps, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

In recent years a rich literature examining the establishment of black ghettos in northern cities has developed, including Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (1983), Kenneth Kusmer's *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (1975), Gilbert Osofsky's *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (1963), Allan Spear's *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (1967), Henry Louis Taylor's *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (1993), and Joe W. Trotter's *Black Milwaukee: The Making of An Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (1985). Less attention, however, has been paid to the establishment of racial ghettos in southern cities. Christopher Silver and John Moeser have addressed this relative lack of attention to "the separate city" in the southern metropolis in their new book that focuses on the development of separate black communities in Richmond, Memphis, and Atlanta during the mid-twentieth century.

According to Silver and Moeser, many southern cities grew increasingly racially stratified during the twentieth century, resulting in separate black communities, due to various forms of public and private discrimination by white elites. The extensive use of racially restrictive covenants helped establish racially homogenous neighborhoods in many southern cities during the first half of the twentieth century. After 1940, as Silver and Moeser demonstrate, the placement of public housing and urban renewal efforts—both directed by local officials—helped solidify the increase in residential segregation. By 1960, Atlanta, Memphis, and Richmond, like many other southern cities, were considerably more residentially segregated than they had been in 1940. At the same time, with limited exceptions, African Americans had little voice in the political process as a result of various restrictions on the black vote.

Beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s, however, African Americans in many southern cities, particularly Atlanta, began to exercise influence in local politics, initially through coalitions with white political groups in support of sympathetic white candidates. In time, in each of the three cities that are the subject of this study, the black community exercised its political power to elect black mayors and council members. These political gains were the result of three factors: the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that removed barriers to the black vote, an increasing black population relative to the white population, and enhanced black political mobilization that emerged in reaction to white resistance to school desegregation and in conjunction with the onset of the civil rights movement.

Yet this increased black political power did not break down patterns of racial segregation in southern cities. The civil rights movement and its

ensuing legislative gains did eliminate *de jure* segregation and did provide opportunities for some African Americans to escape the cultural, economic, and geographic isolation which had increasingly characterized the urban black community. But those African Americans who benefited most appreciably from these gains were those of the middle class who possessed the economic wherewithal to leave the ghetto. For lower-class African Americans, on the other hand, the separate city characterized by racially isolated neighborhoods and schools that developed during the Jim Crow era has persisted until the present. As Silver and Moeser note in their concluding chapter, the challenge for the urban South remains the issue of how to reduce the racial and economic separation that continues to prevent much of the urban black community from enjoying full participation in the economic life of their cities.

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