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Michael Mizell-Nelson, University of New Orleans

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BATISTA-ERA HAVANA ON THE BAYOU

Michael Mizell-Nelson

Kent B. Germany. New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2007. ix + 313 pp. Figures, appendixes, notes, bibliography, and index. $59.95 (cloth); $24.95 (paper).


These three books constitute an almost century-long timeline of economic development failures and missteps amid the sensory pleasures and political and street crime New Orleans is infamous for. Mark Souther points out that “New Orleans wears a mask, flaunting its beautiful architecture, delicious food, frenetic revelry, and fascinating folkways while hiding its face—decadent slums, deprivation and crime, and apathy and despair” (pp. 228-9). Both faces of New Orleans, masked and unmasked, the tourist landscapes along the Mississippi River and the working poor ghettos, are to be found in these enlightening and complementary studies.

Some of the earliest surviving film footage of New Orleans dates from just before the United States entered World War I when the Ford Motor Company produced city travelogues promoting automobile ownership as a portal to travel. These frames capture New Orleans just before the period Anthony Stanonis depicts so well in Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918–1945. Long shots panning the city’s smoke-filled skyline might remind one of a typically industrialized center. Most of New Orleans’ smoke, however, stemmed from its unchanging status as one of the world’s most significant transfer points. Rather than production, this air pollution represented ships and railcars passing through, carrying both freight and visitors.
The transitory sources of those wisps of smoke also represented the failure of New Orleans’ business leadership to adapt to changes in the economy first confronted before the Civil War. New Orleans leaders confident in the city’s status as the third largest city in 1840 continued to place their faith upon servicing the cotton and slave trade and chose not to diversify. Similarly, business leaders believed in the natural power of the Mississippi River and did not invest in railroads as Chicago and other cities had. Complacency and a lack of vision characterized the city’s economic elite then and throughout the twentieth century. What little manufacturing existed was tied to the agricultural products served by the port: cotton, sugar, coffee, and grain. The underdevelopment of its manufacturing industries and underinvestment in its human inhabitants combined early on to misshape the city’s economic future.

Tourism need not necessarily doom a city’s economic success in other areas, as San Francisco and other port cities demonstrate. Tourism out of balance, however, can damn a city when the public image is cast as somewhat more family-friendly than Batista-era Havana.

Stanonis’s monograph contributes substantially to the growing field of tourism studies by examining the formative period of New Orleans’ “modern, or mass tourism” industry, he argues. More than with perhaps any other United States city, to understand New Orleans’ precarious existence before and after Hurricane Katrina one must examine tourism’s role in misshaping its economic destiny as well as the perceptions of outsiders and potential investors.

Stanonis connects the origins of the city’s modern tourism industry to the appearance of the mass-produced automobile. The decentralization of transportation represented by roadways and cars following the Great War also meant that passenger railways lost their monopoly over visitors. Seeking to fill a hole in the economy, local business leaders assumed much more active roles in promoting tourism and courting conventions of white professionals. The Association of Commerce and new organizations attempted to reconfigure a city best known before the war for offering businessmen an open sex market as an archaic, romantic destination for middle-class families.

Stanonis maintains an intricate balance as he moves between the city’s business advocates and preservationists, cultural defenders and critics, and politicians and outside observers. In telling how the myth of New Orleans as the “uncalculating, leisurely, and morally lax” destination was constructed, he interweaves the city’s cultural, social, business, and political histories. His facility with period literary sources offers insight throughout, and he balances those literary figures who served the myth with counter-narratives. Stanonis’s cultural critique of New Orleanians’ depictions of race reveals few surprises, but enlightening perspectives stem from his less familiar source material. He examines some of the dangers awaiting African-American tourists and residents caught in public spaces considered off-limits to non-whites.
Depictions of Carnival—while also familiar—are freshened by accounts of family vacationers and individual travelers. The popular image of Mardi Gras as a non-commercial event only recently tarnished by lucre is replaced by Stanonis’s description of businessmen’s calculated efforts to increase their profits by creating more public spectacles. Such plans countered the private indulgences of the elite carnival krewes whose street parades were more about making grand entrances to their balls rather than tossing throws to the strangers along the route.

Another film travelogue conveyed scenes of the Vieux Carre as quaint slum. Stanonis describes the old quarter’s remaking according to the desires of wealthy preservationist women. New Orleans’ genteel women worked hard to make the area appealing to the nation’s tourist imagination, seemingly as a more colorful variation on Henry Ford’s depiction of the past as Greenfield Village. The elite women won the battle over the old quarter’s infrastructure, but they began to lose the war over its soul during World War II, according to Souther, whose work picks up roughly where Stanonis left off.

Souther’s thematic structure offers excellent overviews of the packaging of elements of the city’s culture: most notably, jazz, Mardi Gras, and the French Quarter. The main title, New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of the Crescent City, stems from a former newsletter published by the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau, and its use here is apt. The phenomenon of authentic New Orleans culture being paraded or prostituted in order to fill hotel rooms and convention banquet halls offers a rich array of materials for understanding post–World War II New Orleans. Carnival ballroom pageants, formal street processions based on classical mythological themes as well as music traditions emanating from the street all were commoditized in attempts to lure ever more visitors.

Souther’s approach is very much a top-down history. The damage that tourism has caused to New Orleans’ economy appears via statistical data, but the study makes it difficult to see the working class as anything but victims or source material for tourism marketing. Several major attempts to unionize hotels are left out of this study, including one effort in the 1980s and the most promising campaign, the Hospitality, Hotels, and Restaurants Organizing Council (HOTROC). This AFL-CIO project stretched from the late 1990s and lasted into the twenty-first century. The story behind the failure of even this best organized effort is sorely missing—especially given the rediscovery of the city’s entrenched poverty post-Katrina.

The impoverished nature of tens of thousands of New Orleanians left to be rescued by boat and helicopter quickly generated third world allusions. Despite the worldwide interest in the conditions of New Orleans’ poor, the media paid scarcely any attention to international hotel chains as beneficiaries of oppressive conditions in the New Orleans labor market. For several
decades, the same chains that pay union wages in other major convention cities have successfully fought off attempts to unionize by frightening and firing individual workers. Publicly, the chains argue that the city’s lower cost (i.e., standard) of living renders higher wages unnecessary. The failed efforts to organize the thousands of workers toiling at the bottom of the convention and tourism industry must not be ignored. Some of Souther’s best observations refer to the arguments of economist James Bobo, the University of New Orleans economist who upset local business leaders in the 1960s and ’70s by noting the continuing absence of a thriving middle class in a port city that for most decades had loped along without much need for one (p. 161).

Souther provides an excellent narrative of the development of carnival trends in the 1960s as well as plans for the Superdome as not just a sports stadium but also a new home for Mardi Gras parades. Disneyfication and the focus upon authentic versus inauthentic representations of the past is an aesthetic argument lost on the city’s working poor. The Disney allusion discussed in Souther’s “Creole Disneyland” chapter does not fit New Orleans well. Batista-era Havana, a Caribbean destination minus the beaches, comes closer to representing the image and sometimes the reality of the city. Anyone who has had to listen to hooting and shouts of “Bourbon Street!” as his or her plane touches down in New Orleans understands how a city’s branding can irrevocably damage its future. Immediately following the flooding of the city, not even George W. Bush could avoid making the obligatory reference to good times spent with his college buddies in New Orleans despite his supposed role in helping to rally support for the city. Disney’s name conveys some sense of controlled organization, foresight, and visitor safety that remains absent from New Orleans.

Souther hints at the role that small business owners in the Quarter played in misshaping New Orleans’ image, but he does not focus upon the Bourbon Street Merchants Association, one of the most powerful forces in shaping the ugly image of Bourbon Street, and, ultimately, the city itself. The vision of the quarter shared by preservation-minded ladies of the early and mid-twentieth century lost out to T-shirt shops, increasingly lewd floorshows, and 3-for-1 drink specials. The demise of Canal Street as a thriving shopping district has left Bourbon Street as the closest approximation to the city’s main street. No matter how many times locals seek to correct visitors with statements such as: “That’s not New Orleans. Bourbon Street is for the tourists,” the image has stuck. The gentrification of Royal Street, known for its antique stores and art galleries, was accomplished along lines amenable to the preservationists. Visitors find such upscale shops one block over from Bourbon’s entertainment corridor, but such things cannot trump the sights and odors attached to Bourbon Street. Local elites bear much of the responsibility for the retardation of the city’s economy, and all three authors make that case. At the opposite
end of the social spectrum, many Bourbon Street property owners established small business success upon the fortunate accident of their ancestors having settled in the city’s slum most ripe for commercial exploitation.

The transition from working-class neighborhood to a street offering bawdy nightclub entertainment for white soldiers and defense industry workers during World War II took hold of the street’s ethos and never let go in the postwar years. Bourbon Street kept pace just ahead of the mainstream culture’s embrace of “adult entertainment.” In the 1930s, white female impersonators had been chased out of an underground French Quarter club to the fringes of the city, where it flourished as one of the nation’s leading clubs for heterosexual audiences—tourists and locals. After the sexual revolution, the Club My-oh-My moved back to the French Quarter; once considered too risqué for the central tourist district, the famed club now seemed tame in contrast to the nightlife in the quarter, and it closed in the early 1970s.

Souther does a great job of succinctly stitching the story of tourism into the city’ overall economic picture throughout his study. Souther’s level of detail is impressive. He provides good measure of New Orleans versus other southern cities, arguing that even during the period when the city might have been considered part of the Sunbelt, investment in the New Orleans economy did not result in nearly as many jobs as in its peer cities. The lack of private investment in the economy meant that even during the relatively flush days of the 1960s, the city’s impoverished neighborhoods remained largely untouched by the time of the Great Society.

The best-honed argument and the one that centers upon the heart of the city at a crucial period is found in Kent Germany’s study of the Great Society as it unfolded in New Orleans. Tourism exists on the fringes of what makes New Orleans or any city. In New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society, Germany wisely follows the Great Society’s federal funds deep into the neighborhoods not named Vieux Carre. Every idealistic college graduate heading to the post-Katrina city to gut houses or teach children should read his book. Germany is also to be congratulated for backgrounding conventional political history in order to focus on the cultural and racial politics stemming from federal investment in New Orleans’ neglected neighborhoods.

The Great Society created what Germany refers to as the “soft state,” “a loose set of short-term political and bureaucratic arrangements that linked together federal bureaucracies, neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, social agencies,” and local government to distribute more than $100 million in federal funds within a less than ten-year period. Soft also refers to the nature of these funds in the form of grants (pp. 15–6). Germany tells the story of how federal policy entered the city via bureaucracies manned by neighborhood activists and budding politicos.
Germany’s study charts the Great Society programs that coincidentally got underway following what had served for more than a generation as the city’s benchmark disaster: 1965’s Hurricane Betsy. It is sickeningly familiar to read of the work of an alphabet soup of local political and community organizations as the city struggles to overcome flooding caused by the failed federal levee program, the system intended to end all future Betsy-like flooding. Following forty-years of work monitored by the US Army Corps of Engineers, those levees left the city with not merely the city’s worst-case scenario but also the nation’s.

The depth of his research and facility with archival resources allow Germany to give voice to street-level community activists as well as the rising African-American community leadership. This is quite remarkable given the relatively few oral history interviews conducted or consulted. Germany considers the collection of black political organizations that Total Community Action funds helped to develop as a group that he labels “the Acronyms.” These were “the private, predominantly black neighborhood-based political groups” such as the 7th Ward’s COUP (Community Organization for Urban Politics) and the Ninth Ward-based SOUL (Southern Organization for Unified Leadership). Out of the dozens of political groups representing the black community, the surviving organizations and leaders “became the lions of local politics and masters of the War on the Poverty-Soft State” (pp. 251, 257). By the late 1960s, Total Community Action experienced a loss of support owing to the Nixon administration’s shifting more control over War on Poverty from local to federal organizations. Nevertheless, powerful individual black leadership and organizations had taken root (pp. 178–9).

The warring, unproductive nature of New Orleans politics is evidenced not only in the racialized political blocs and the black political disunity Germany identifies a generation earlier, but in the all-or-nothing approach to cultural and political battles now as well as then: Baton Rouge versus New Orleans; Carnival elites versus city politicos; city council versus the mayor; black versus white city council representatives; housing development versus housing development; and ward versus ward. The dysfunctional groupings transcend time and color, and they develop even when there would seem to be no opposing side. The efforts to expand Latin American trade brought turf battles over control between the International House and the International Trade Mart, as Souther notes (p. 25).

Germany quotes an insightful Tom Dent commentary: “Politics in New Orleans has always been interesting because the game is played with such cynicism. New Orleans politics is trickster politics; ideology means nothing” (p. 302). Dent’s 1970s observation still fits the city post-Katrina. Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee was infuriated by negative comments African-American politician Karen Carter made in Spike Lee’s post-Katrina documentary about
the Mississippi River Bridge blockade arranged by a suburban Jefferson Parish police department. When Carter competed against beleaguered U.S. Congress- man “Dollar” Bill Jefferson, Lee indirectly supported Jefferson’s re-election by mailing an attack letter to Jefferson Parish voters in the Congressional district. Lee noted that he was withholding support for the tarnished Jefferson, but such subtlety was lost on the white suburban voters who played a major role in keeping Bill Jefferson in office.\(^1\) Germany documents the period when African-Americans became fully vested players in such games.

The same tendency is apparent in cultural and business realms post-Katrina as private foundation and public recovery money has birthed dozens of neighborhood and citywide recovery organizations with overlapping objectives and unclear parameters. For example, at least three separate attempts to memorialize the Mardi Gras Indian experience via museum projects have emerged post-Katrina, including two initiatives supported by a mother and daughter who could not compromise on their individual visions for a museum. The young urban professionals new to the city have formed their own organization rather than join the previously existing Young Leadership Council. Indeed, New Orleans has such a balkanizing effect that even new arrivals learn to play the game.

Germany proves adept at relating the complicated introduction of federal anti-poverty programs to New Orleans in a second wave in the late 1960s, all of which were responses to the assertion of black political power throughout the nation: Food stamps, model cities, the Concentrated Employment Program, and urban renewal. Germany conveys the coming together of New Orleans elites and community activists for various reasons. Some of the former sought to prevent rioting while others, such as members of the League of Women Voters, shared a genuine progressive desire to improve individual lives and living conditions. New Orleans’ delayed start to the food stamp program reflected the need to compromise. Despite grandiose rhetoric and confrontations, Germany noted that “[i]t was traditional American social welfare policy geared to relieve misery, reduce dissent, and reward its benefactors” (p. 179). The story of Thugs United and their brief, cooperative relations with the Chamber of Commerce and old-line New Orleanians make for some of the most engaging parts of the book. The fact that many elites would risk funds in order to engage with self-described street criminals attempting simultaneously to reform themselves and their neighborhoods speaks to the level of desperation white leaders experienced during the period (pp. 211–23). Warren Carmouche, the leader of the Thugs, was described in their newspaper as: a “‘Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of the Streets, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in niggerology and streetwork’” (p. 214). Carmouche’s story, as extraordinary as it seems, ended in the familiar way in which many of Louisiana’s politicians conclude their careers—amid reports of financial
impropriety. The Thugs episode proved to be a precursor to the city’s dealings with the Black Panthers.

Violence and the threat of violence provide the theme for the concluding chapter in the study: “Panthers, Snipers, and the Limits of Liberalism.” After establishing their headquarters in the Desire housing development, less than two dozen Panthers set about feeding breakfast to children and offering other support for residents of one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in New Orleans. The Panthers turned over two undercover agents to a mob, and additional violence erupted in the area. This led to a showdown with police, whose arsenal included an armored tank and machine guns, and the Panthers surrendered. Ironically, the Great Society funded the legal agency that represented the rights of the twelve Panthers charged. They were tried before an African-American judge and a majority black jury and acquitted—an unthinkable prospect only a few years earlier. Post-Katrina, one of the veteran Panther leaders, Malik Rahim, served as a celebrated figure for young, politically radical whites and others who came to New Orleans and volunteered for the multi-faceted Common Ground anarchist response to the city’s needs.

Mark Essex, like his famous predecessor in 1900, Robert Charles, was a relative newcomer to the city who, acting alone, engaged in a gun battle with police. Before he was shot to death and his body mutilated, Charles had shot 27 whites, including seven policemen. Following Charles’s death, white New Orleanians rampaged against blacks throughout the city. Essex unleashed years of rage in the aftermath of racial discrimination not just as found in New Orleans but also as experienced in the Navy and elsewhere. After holing up on a hotel rooftop, Essex’s sniping left six others dead before, he, too, was shot to pieces. Seven decades later, however, whites did not feel confident enough to launch a race riot.

The Black Panther experience and recent shots fired at patrol officers stoked police department anxieties regarding how many others snipers might have accompanied Essex on the rooftop of the Howard Johnson Hotel across the way from City Hall. The prospect of increasing radicalism and violence afforded educated black community leaders faster access to political power while the street-level representatives were marginalized. The shift in political fortunes as well as the increasing loss of white and black, middle-class taxpayers to the old neighborhoods brought a tattered end to the social and political experiment.

One might read these stories of government spending filtered through neighborhood groups and dramatic standoffs against the police and share the Reagan-era conclusion: poverty had won the war on poverty. Germany argues for a more positive conclusion. Germany and Souther—as had economist James Bobo in the 1960s and ’70s—identify the dearth of progressive, private investment in the local economy at the core of the city’s problems. A larger
and more relevant point made by both authors is that public sector spending could only take the city so far. Post-Katrina, the same problem looms. Public sector funds and charity from private foundations—rather than massive investment of private dollars—are to be the city’s saviors.

One could also conclude from Germany’s study that the Great Society in New Orleans—beyond opening political access to African-American communities and their leaders—is measured only in failure (p. 301). If Germany identifies any one heroic figure, it would likely be Mayor Maurice “Moon” Landrieu, the first white politician to integrate his mayoral administration and city government in a meaningful way. Racial epithets such as “Moon the Coon” indicate the sense of betrayal many New Orleanians felt in the wake of Moon Landrieu’s sea change in city governance. Racism has quite a half-life in New Orleans, so it is not surprising that many white New Orleanians blamed and continue to blame Landrieu and his liberalism for the demise of the city. Many believe that his son, Mitch Landrieu, lost New Orleans’ 2007 mayoral election because of the supposed “sins” of his father. Conventional wisdom suggests that some white New Orleanians refuse to vote for any member of the Landrieu family.

In addition to integrating the filthy game of New Orleans politics, at least another example of success stemming from the Great Society could have been identified by Germany: public higher education. The federal funding behind the community college development nationwide provided a meeting ground for generally white liberals who dedicated their lives—not two years or less before moving on to law school—to educating the poor. Federal funds fueled the college’s transformation from segregated trade school and the results, despite a period of classic Louisiana corruption during one of the Edwin Edwards’ administrations, have been much more positive. The 1964 Economic Opportunity Act and the 1965 Higher Education Act afforded thousands of New Orleanians potential futures denied their parents. The absence of the University of New Orleans is equally problematic. The institution is popularly known for its role in developing a homegrown middle class. (Southern University at New Orleans offers similar opportunities for African-Americans without means.) Both schools offered escape routes from a future of meager expectations for the black and white working and lower middle class. Nevertheless, these public institutions remain invisible to scholars. One reads journalistic accounts ad nauseum about improving the K-12 public schools for some imagined future populace; meanwhile, generations of high school graduates and drop-outs are released each May ill-prepared for life. Despite great attention afforded the K-12 education crisis and the students let down by schools throughout the area, there is little concern for what happens to those students who survive horrible educational institutions yet still seek individual routes to decent, legal earnings. Those disgusted enough working
in the tourist industry described by Souther or the underground economy often found economic escape via Delgado Community College. Before the Civil Rights era and investment of federal funds, Delgado Trade School served only white, working-class males. The late jazz musician and mentor Danny Barker walked onto campus in the early 1990s and expressed surprise at the numbers of African-American students. He recalled that Delgado had long been where all the “dumb white boys” went to school. Beginning in the late 1960s, New Orleanians from throughout the metropolitan area began to filter into what remains some of the nation’s most integrated classrooms.

Delgado Community College continues to serve as one of the most important institutions for working-class New Orleans. From training for traditional blue-collar trades to certification for work in the medical industry as nurses or technicians, the community college offers one of the few signs of a viable government presence in the lives of white and black New Orleanians. The national community college movement developed one large foothold in the city, and each August some of the most determined yet ill-prepared students of both races begin their college studies via this portal. Here white liberalism meets poverty on the former’s playing field rather than in the experiments Germany identified.

Germany’s narrative ends with the Mark Essex sniper story, but he might as well as have ended later that year with the Jo Ellen Smith rape-murder, which resonated much more deeply with local whites. A nursing student, Smith visited the Fischer Housing Development in the West Bank Algiers neighborhood to tend to a patient. Despite warnings never to make home visits on her own, Smith was determined to tend to a dialysis patient. After her murder, Smith became the worst sort of symbol in a society obsessed with protecting its white women.

The following playground ditty that I heard recited in the newly developed suburban end of Algiers was my introduction to racial politics in New Orleans:

Roses are Red, Violets are Black,
If you go to Fischer Projects, you’ll never come back.

My childhood memories of the Essex incident remain more of a media event. The US Marine Reserve gunship helicopter hovering over downtown New Orleans was not all that different from the images depicting the Vietnam War. The Smith story resonated throughout white New Orleans in a much more personal manner. The larger lesson many whites drew from Smith’s murder was along the lines of: “See what happens when you try to help the blacks?” In contrast to the international spectacle represented by Essex battling police
on a rooftop, Smith’s murder presented yet another example of the increasing amount of violent street crime in the city affecting white as well as black residents.

The mid-1970s endpoint for Germany’s book leaves the reader wishing to follow the story further. One will find an overview of the city’s economic history after the Great Society succinctly explained in Souther’s work (pp. 190–1). The federal government bankrolled the city’s periods of economic success in the twentieth century, as Germany and Souther note. The story of how a city whose workers once built D-Day landing craft and later the Saturn rockets could slip so far behind other cities in the region warrants continued investigation into the larger economy and not merely the “soft state” described by Germany. Fortunately, these forays offer an excellent starting point for further investigation of one of the nation’s most working-class cities and its decades-long decline from unionized stronghold in the Deep South to a city noted for its poor and working poor.

Mark Essex’s sniping killed, among others, Deputy Police Commissioner Louis Sirgo. As had I, Sirgo’s daughter, Lisa, experienced the Essex sniper incident via television broadcast, except in her case the reportage conveyed her father’s death. She was fifteen at the time. Her memories of her father include falling asleep listening to him type his notes from his coursework at the University of New Orleans. Already near the top of the New Orleans Police Department command, Sirgo pursued a bachelor’s degree to better understand the changing world. He drew from his studies in sociology when making the sort of liberal-minded addresses regarding poverty and race that Godfrey Hodgson noted. Sirgo had only recently returned to the force, leaving a cushy administrative traffic job to serve just below the police chief.

The resilience of his daughter Lisa is inspirational and emblematic of many New Orleanians who persevere despite personal trauma. Most people would have left New Orleans for good in the aftermath of brutal tragedy played out on the world stage, but Lisa has established herself as an award-winning teacher in the Orleans Parish Public School system. Such stories may be dismissed as insignificant, but those dedicated to the city’s survival post-Katrina find sustenance in the example of those who refuse to give up.

Michael Mizell-Nelson, Department of History, University of New Orleans, is completing his manuscript study of race relations in public and private space in Jim Crow New Orleans. He also directs collections building for the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, an online database project regarding the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the Gulf Coast, available at: http://www.hurricanearchive.org
3. The repeated use of the term “HoJo” for Howard Johnson’s when discussing what New Orleanians refer to as the sniper incident or the Howard Johnson’s sniper incident is minor but regrettable. The hotel and restaurant chain based on the East Coast never developed much of a presence in New Orleans, and the slang reference never was used much by locals. Given the tragic nature of the incident, the repeated use of “HoJo” is distracting, and seems unconsciously flippant.
4. See America in Our Time (1978), 495.