E*TRADE

Interpreting Some Overlooked Stories From the South

By PATRICIA COHEN

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The gripping black-and-white photographs of civil rights protesters in the South reflect the black-and-white morality tale that generally accompanies them. Hateful, jeering white mobs and attack dogs versus peaceful marchers asking to vote and to walk in the front door.

Associated Press

A class in Arkansas, integrated but sparsely attended, in October 1955.

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Bettmann/Corbis, from "There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975"

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the head of a civil rights march in Albany, Ga., on Dec. 16, 1961.

That story line is true, but so are others. A new generation of historians is exploring some of the untold stories of the civil rights movement and its legacies: the experiences not of heroes or murderous villains, but of ordinary Southern whites. And their research is challenging some long-held beliefs about the nation's political realignment and the origins of modern conservatism.

"You want to pry below these great narratives of good and evil and black and white," said Jason Sokol, 29, who wrote "There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975" (Alfred A. Knopf). "For those of us who didn't live through it, there's more of an effort to not simply celebrate the civil rights movement and how extraordinary it was, but to place it within the broader arc of the 20th century."

This new wave of historians, many of them young, believe that one cannot understand today's housing, schooling, economic development or political patterns without understanding the mostly apolitical white Southerners of that era. None of these scholars play down the inbred racism of the region, but they argue that the focus on race can obscure broader economic and demographic changes, like the dizzying corporate growth, the migration of white Northerners to the South and the shifting emphasis on class interests after legal segregation ended.

The conventional wisdom, said Jacquelyn Hall, director of the Southern Oral History Project at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is that the general backlash to the civil rights movement "was exported out of the South to the rest of the country," and that the Republican Party benefited from the shift. But she said a raft of new scholarship is showing "the strength of the Republican Party in the South is linked to the economic boom in the South." Corporations moved down to the once-solidly Democratic South and brought with them traditional suburban Republican voters. Their interests matched up with a growing neo-conservatism in the North. "What's going on is much more a regional convergence story as opposed to the South influencing the rest of the country," she said.

Conservative appeals to limit the government's reach and emphasize individual freedoms resonated not only in the South, but in the North as well, said Joseph Crespino, 35, whose book, "In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution" (Princeton University Press), was just published.

The racial and religious conservatism of whites, for instance, "converged in unexpected ways in the fight over federal tax policy toward Southern private schools," Mr. Crespino writes. He said that while many Southern whites set up "segregation academies" for the sole purpose of avoiding school integration, others were genuinely interested in sending their children to church schools for religious reasons. "By the late '70s, this issue of defending church schools against harassment by the federal government and the I.R.S.," Mr. Crespino explained in an interview, led to the "mobilization of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians."

Mr. Crespino, who grew up in rural Mississippi, said his research was partly inspired by his experience. Many of the African-Americans he met in the deeply segregated precincts

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of Chicago while he was an undergraduate at Northwestern University had come from his home state and were struggling with the same issues they had had down South. “Rather than treating white Mississipians as these racist pariahs in larger postwar liberal America, I wanted to treat them as part of a broader popular reaction against modern liberalism,” he said. “I wanted to show how central the resistance to civil rights policies were in shaping modern conservative policies.”

Mr. Sokol also found the truisms not always to be true. “Everything I had read said that the urban South — Atlanta, Nashville, Raleigh — was more progressive than rural backwaters,” he said. Though that is true to a point, Mr. Sokol said, he found “plenty of instances of retrograde racism in urban areas and the Upper South,” as well as “stunning changes in places which in the popular imagination are the worst places in the South.”

Like Mr. Crespino, Matthew D. Lassiter was motivated to research his own Southern roots. He found a gap between the history he had learned in school and his experience growing up in its wake in Sandy Springs, a white, middle-class suburb of Atlanta. “I was trying to find my own people, my parents and grandparents,” said Mr. Lassiter, 36, who wrote “The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South” (Princeton) published last year. “There were a few white Southerners who were liberals, a larger number throwing the rocks with the rioters and the vast group in the middle were left out of the story.”

As a graduate student at the University of Virginia, he taught undergraduates and assigned the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” in which he wrote, “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride towards freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than justice.”

Mr. Lassiter, who now teaches history at the University of Michigan, said: “Who are these moderates? They don’t seem to be participating, yet they’re completely complicit in the system of Jim Crow.”

Mr. Lassiter’s book looks at how the federal government subsidized white flight to the suburbs, where middle-class whites could embrace colorblind values but still maintain all-white enclaves and schools. “When you look at suburbs and middle class, then you start getting a national story,” he said. “White suburbs outside Charlotte are reacting the same as white suburbs outside Los Angeles or in New Jersey.”

Kevin M. Kruse, who grew up in Nashville and now teaches at Princeton University, focuses more on rank-and-file segregationists than moderates. In his 2005 book, “White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism” (Princeton), he argues that in moving to the suburbs, “white Southern conservatives were forced to abandon their traditional, populist, and often starkly racist demagoguery, and instead craft a new conservatism predicated on a language of rights, freedoms, and individualism.”

That Southern whites have become the leading edge of academic research is not all that surprising, Mr. Crespino explained: “The first generation of scholarship looked at key figures and key organizations. The second generation focused on recovering the roots of the movement, and telling the story of African-Americans. ”

“One of the topics that was left to the side,” he said, “was white Southerners and their resistance to the movement and its implications for national policy.”

Taylor Branch, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a trilogy on King, suggested that another reason for the long neglect of this group has been the difficulty in getting ordinary white Southerners to tell their stories. “I do think that subject is one of the harder ones to write about because those people are quite reticent and not that prominent,” he said, referring to people he knew from his own childhood growing up in Atlanta. The subject of civil rights made “otherwise intelligent people seem evasive.”

James C. Cobb, a senior historian at the University of Georgia, has written several books about the South and praises the new scholarship. Although he said some people may perceive this work as an apologia, there is now generally “more ideological leeway to go back and see how white people behaved during this period.” Still, he warned, “You have to be very careful” not to make this inquiry a justification of veiled racism. “We can go overboard in downplaying the racial angle,” he said. After all, while opposition to busing may not stem from racism, he said, the effects on blacks are the same.

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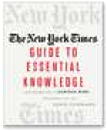

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Although the scholarly books published in the last couple of years focus on widely different areas — metropolitan power centers, rural backwaters, employment practices, schools — nearly all make the same point: The idea that the South is exceptional, a region apart from the rest of the country, is no longer true. Though the thesis discomfits some professors of Southern history, Mr. Kruse argues “a lot of those regional differences have really dropped out the closer we get to the present day.”

It may turn out that what is most distinctive about the latest research on the South is its claim that the South is no longer distinctive. Mr. Lassiter’s and Mr. Crespino’s latest project is editing a book titled “The End of Southern History.”

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