

The economic and political migration



From the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt: The Economic and Political Migration After the end of World War II America experienced a dramatic shift in population and wealth from the Northeast to Southwest. This shift resulted in a marked decline in the urban areas of the Northeast and Great Lakes region that came to be known as the rustbelt. Once the center of heavy manufacturing and the economic hub of the nation, this area lost jobs and government support beginning in the 1940s. This shift has been explained by theorists as a result of international economic influences fueled by the government's lack of political will to prevent the eventual demise.

The shift to the west was promoted by the federal government's massive wartime defense spending that centered in the western states and most notably California. In addition there were tax breaks for the oil industry as well as the social security program that helped sustain the area's growth. Perry and Watkins contend that once the western cities gained the advantage of defense spending, they were able to capitalize on that advantage by the theory of "cumulative causation" (Walton 409). Perry and Watkins further argue that the sunbelt cities that prospered from this advantage also erected artificial developmental barriers in a shift away from the New Deal liberalism, and this perpetuated the process. (Walton 409). As the rustbelt declined, it was unable to attract new economic activity in the changing face of technology.

William Julius Wilson puts forth a more contemporary theory. Wilson states that the cities of the Northeast declined due to "economic transformation" (8). He describes this as a shift in metropolitan development strategy that was driven by the change in industry from production based to capital and technology based (8-9). More modern machines were replacing the methods

popularized by Henry Ford. International competition further eroded the cities and diminished the value of physical capital. These well paid manufacturing jobs were replaced by low wage retail and service positions (Wilson 11). For many cities, the decline has been permanent.

While Cleveland and Detroit have continued to be plagued with economic hardships, other cities have been able to adapt. Pittsburgh, once the steel capital of the world, has been able to rebound by becoming a technology and banking center. Boston has capitalized on their breadth of educational institutions to capture a major foothold in the field of biomedical research and development (Ritzer).

In conclusion, government policies may have been able to delay or diminish the rapidity of the decline in the rustbelt, but Wilson's theories on its causes made the process inevitable. The complexity of the problem goes beyond the notions of a political and social backlash against the New Deal as put forth by Perry and Watkins. Though they contributed to the problem, the technology and industrial forces that came together during the middle of the 20th century created the dynamic economic shift. The current prosperity of Pittsburgh and Boston can serve as a model for other rustbelt cities grappling to escape the continuing decline.

Works Cited

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