

**The Origins of the Urban Crisis** – Response by David Eagle, October 11, 2009.

Sugrue's thesis is that understanding the problems in Detroit requires us to begin in the 1940s and 50s, not in the 1960s as many scholars contend. He integrates the stories of individual Detroiters with a broader historical description of the political, social, economic, industrial and spatial climate of Detroit from the 1940s onwards.

Racism, for Sugrue, is a complex and tangled cultural phenomenon which presumes and protects a particular racial hierarchy at the ideological, spatial, political and structural levels. As Jackson points out, racism is equally about devaluing of blacks **and** exalting whiteness (1998). Racism is far more than an ideology – according to Sugrue the most powerful effects are felt at the spatial level (9; c.f. Kobayashi and Peake (2000)). Spatial segregation reduces the sites of meaningful intergroup contact and leads whites to conclude that blacks are morally deficient. This reinforces white prejudice and leads to a deeper entrenchment of racism both politically and structurally (93). This also means that the way racism is socially enacted varies across changing situations and contexts (95). Looked at in the aggregate, the 1940-60s were a time of incredible gains for blacks in America; attending to space and location we hear a paradoxically different story.<sup>1</sup>

Sugrue also emphasizes that segregation does not create a deficient black/urban/poor culture; if cultural deficiencies were a root of the problem, then the many attempts to modify the habits of blacks would have created measurable benefit. Sugrue does not ignore the role of personal agency, however he never views agency as individual rational choice, but as social action embedded in a larger framework.

In this book there is the consistent claim that theories of the underclass too often rely on thin historical evidence. The popular notion is that liberalism failed to achieve its ends because of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sugrue's bleak appraisal of post-war Detroit bears certain affinity with Weber's critique of the fully rationalized and bureaucratized capitalist society (2003).

radicalism of the 1960s and the increasing militancy of the black community. Sugrue argues that history shows the politics of whiteness, at least in Detroit, operative before WWII to create persistent individual, structural, political, economic and spatial discrimination of whites against blacks at all sorts of different levels from unions to corporate planning to anti-communist McCarthyism.

This analysis leaves largely unexplored why racism, once unleashed, is so difficult to contain.

What lies behind the fact that racism so quickly and deeply establishes itself in a social order?

Sugrue could have also provided a clearer connection between racism and industrial change.

Cable and Mix (2003) convincingly argue that in an industrial economy that must deal regularly with periods of decline, skin color is an all too convenient way to hierarchically order labor.

Sugrue's plot of racial politics also only occurs along the axis of black-white. Attention to other racial dynamics would have enriched his account. Gay (2006) shows how Latino migration and settlement in traditionally black neighborhoods has created a negative effect on black attitudes towards Latinos.

In terms of policy, Sugrue opposes focusing on the "deficiencies" of the poor. In Detroit, the primary issue for many poor young blacks was not cultural deficiency, but the lack of entry-level employment opportunities. In his view, gradual, compromised solutions rarely produce significant outcomes. He argues that grass-roots "free" market capitalism, suburbanism, and deindustrialization are by no means neutral forces, but are deeply structured by white racism. These larger, structural issues must be addressed in concrete fashion in order to create meaningful change.

## References

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