

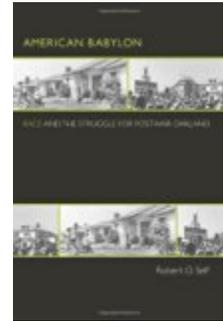
H-Net Reviews

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Robert O. Self. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. xvi + 386 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-12486-5; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-07026-1.

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Babylon on the Bay

We are all familiar with the biblical story of Babylon. In ancient times, this once great city, the imperial capital of the Babylonian empire, declined under the weight of its own decadence and corruption, becoming an epic symbol of the promises and perils of power, materialism, and cruelty. Centuries later, historian Robert O. Self has recapitulated this proverbial plight in his path-breaking study of postwar Oakland, California. Though the two cities are separated by great time and space, the metaphor, borrowed from some of his subjects, proves apt. For as Self shows in this rich and detailed work, the story of postwar Oakland is also a turbulent tale, one that exposes the extents and limits of affluence and avarice, prejudice and politics, and their threat to the urban experience.

Beginning in the aftermath of World War II and ending deep in the 1970s, the book narrates the political struggles over jobs, property, space, and resources that gave rise to California's two most enduring postwar political cultures: a black power political movement in the city of Oakland and a conservative, tax reform political movement in the neighboring suburbs. Self argues that these movements were not separate political developments; rather, they grew in tandem out of the racial inequalities of New Deal and Great Society liberalism that nurtured the rise of the suburbs and hastened the decline of American cities. By illuminating the connections between the black power and tax reform movements, Self's work makes a compelling argument for disposing of the longstanding urban-suburban binary that has dominated

postwar historical scholarship. Alternatively, he calls for a broader approach that embraces the city and the suburb as part of one metropolitan system that forever changed the social and spatial context of American politics and culture. Thus, in the end, Self's story, though contained to Oakland, California, is also a story about America and the social and political realities of postwar society in the Metropole.

Organized chronologically but anchored by overlapping themes, the book is divided into three sections that trace the evolution of Oakland from a rich symbol of urbanism to an "exploited colony" strangled by the "white noose" of suburbanization (p. 256). In the first segment, Self merges the histories of city planning and urban space with the histories of politics and social strife to recapture life in the postwar "industrial garden," the metaphorical representation of the garden city that (ideally) blended the best features of suburban development and urban living (p. 9). Located in Northern California on the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay, postwar Oakland stood poised to fulfill the promises of the industrial garden. Following World War II, boosters lured both white and black working-class Americans to the city. These new migrants—and the city itself? "initially seemed to reap the benefits of postwar liberalism, which Self broadly defines as New Deal liberalism, moderate market regulation, racial liberalism, and classic individualism. But for Oakland residents, the various meanings of liberalism also raised questions about power and control, questions that sharpened racial divides and political identities as

entrepreneurs, assisted by the federal government, created new homogenous suburban communities rooted in a culture of homeownership.

Self's second section, which covers the years 1954-1965, brings his readers into the settled industrial garden to demonstrate where and how mid-century reengineering and technology—exemplified by the development of BART, the Bay Area's commuter rail system—reconfigured the contours of urban spaces and thus reshaped the political dynamic. Indeed, metropolitan space, or how and where urbanization produced “markets, property and communities” is a dominant theme throughout the book (p. 96). As federal, local, and private investment redeveloped the patterns of housing and employment, African Americans in west Oakland neighborhoods were denied the advantages of city services, and were relegated to impoverished civic spaces where good homes and good jobs—the promises of postwar liberalism—eluded them. However, as Self argues, these African American communities were not idle. In “creative, productive, and even halting and unsuccessful ways” African American residents of Oakland—behind the initiatives of civic leaders such as Donald McCullum and Percy Moore—responded to such structural changes by moving away from liberalism and its discontents toward their own programs and political culture.

The third and final section brings to fruition the political activism of both African Americans in the city and their white suburban rivals. Decades of anger and frustration spurred a series of political revolts, the black power movement and the Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers rejected postwar liberalism and the metropolitan growth that had marginalized and impoverished African American communities. At the same time, white suburban homeowners, weary of paying high taxes for California's postwar growth, also retaliated against the liberal state by way of a tax revolt that culminated in the 1978 passage of Proposition 13, a measure that limited property tax in California. This ostensibly allowed white suburban residents to evade the costs of an African American city. By the late 1970s, African Americans had entered mainstream municipal politics, as evidenced by the election of Mayor Lionel Wilson in 1977. But the city that Wilson was left to govern was barely a shadow of the hopeful “industrial garden” of three decades earlier. Starved of resources and beleaguered by decades of social and political strife, the Oakland with which Self leaves us, like Babylon itself, is a symbol of an urban vision gone terribly awry.

Self's excavation of postwar Oakland and all of its political, social, and spatial nuances was no easy task, made clear by his exhaustive research in primary sources, including local, regional, and national newspapers, dense archival collections, neighborhood association and political organization reports, and a passel of oral histories. Self complements his written words with tables and maps that assist his readers' comprehension of the dramatic spatial and demographic changes that triggered the contrasting political revolts that focus his story. His work thus serves as model not only to scholars of cities, suburbs, politics, and twentieth-century America, but also to any writer endeavoring to recapture a place in time as well as its change over time.

Well beyond being thorough, Self's work is also quite timely. The recent publication of *The New Suburban History*, co-edited by Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, rejects the time-honored stereotypes of a peaceful suburban paradise and recasts the suburbs as central battlegrounds in the twentieth-century struggles over race, class, and politics.[1] Self's work heralded this historiographical move away from an imagined suburbia. And by bridging the theoretical divide between city and suburb, he also dispels popular and scholarly conceptions about the “urban crisis,” proving that we—as scholars and as citizens—cannot alleviate the problems of urban American if we do not understand the compound and far-reaching processes that caused them.

This book also makes an important contribution to new directions in political history, especially with regard to African American urban political history and the scholarship on the civil rights movement. Following scholars such as Jeanne Theoharis and Komози Woodard, who edited recent anthologies of black freedom struggles in the North, Self takes the civil rights movement out of the South by laying bare African American political experiences on the West Coast. Rather than reducing such experiences to by-products of the civil rights movement, Self forces us to understand them on their own terms and for their own contributions.[2]

In a work so important, so comprehensive, and so fresh, finding room for improvement is an inevitable challenge. But ironically, some of the book's greatest strengths—its depth, its breadth, and its reach—also impair and interrupt the narrative, occasionally making it difficult to locate the key points and follow the story. Subheadings within chapters lead readers to various parts of the whole, but they do not transition seamlessly. For example, in his very first chapter, which introduces read-

ers to the industrial garden, Self covers topics that range from the Metropolitan Oakland Area Program and the imagined city to the rise of Oakland's Working Class and its African American workers. While these subjects establish important patterns in the history of Oakland, they are also strong independent themes that do as much to break apart the main idea as they do to advance it.

Yet, in spite of its density—and perhaps even because of it—this book is essential reading for scholars of race, labor, cities, suburbs, and politics, as well as for anyone interested in the pursuit of social justice in America. Self ends his work by reminding us that we must move beyond the traditional paradigms of white and black, city and suburb, crisis and flight in order to better understand how postwar liberalism and the processes of urban and

suburbanization produced the political cultures we still reckon with today. Only then will we fully understand, and hopefully heed, the lessons of ancient Babylon and of our own Oakland, California.

Notes

[1]. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History*, Historical Studies of Urban America Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[2]. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1960* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); and Charles Payne, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

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