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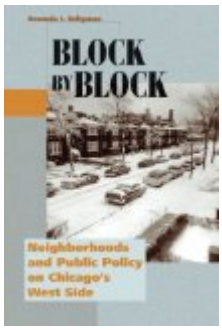

Amanda I. Seligman. *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xiii + 301 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-74665-4.

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Historians, sociologists, political scientists, urban geographers, and other scholars have rigorously documented the process by which, abetted by federal policy, postwar American cities evolved a pattern of segregated, hyper-segregated, and re-segregated neighborhoods. A salient part of that process, so the story goes, involved "white flight," the mass exodus of white families from the aging, once tree-lined "streetcar suburbs" built in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century city and which Sam Bass Warner memorialized in his classic, *Streetcar Suburbs* (1971).

The often violent story of postwar cities features in its cast not only the redlining Housing and Home Finance Administration, but also venal blockbusting real estate brokers and, of course, the rock-hurling, cross-burning white mob.[1] From time to time, all of these are present in Amanda I. Seligman's ***Block by Block***, but here the focus subtly shifts away from white neighbors as victims of unscrupulous realtors or from whites as hysterical racists. In Seligman's story, white Chicago West Siders are urbanites caught up in an inexorable process of neighborhood change, people valiantly defending their turf against city politicians and a demographic steamroller.

Seligman explores this "block by block" process of postwar neighborhood change within a discrete but important region of Chicago, the West Side, and more specifically, the Austin, North Lawndale, and West Garfield Park neighborhoods. Her focus is the period between 1947 and 1965, but crucial to her purpose of endowing these neighborhoods with a sense of place, ethos, and identity, she profiles each neighborhood within the larger framework of Chicago's history. That history encapsulates the Windy City's long and often violent saga of ethnic and racial conflict. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Allan H. Spear, William M. Tuttle Jr., Thomas Lee Philpott, and Arnold R. Hirsch all situated Chicago's racial history predominantly in the city's South Side. They focused on the pre- and post-World War II formation of Chicago's "black belt" that was shaped by riots, covenants, white and black politics, postwar renewal, and other events.[2]

Seligman shifts not only the venue for Chicago race history from South Side Chicago to the

West Side, but also the *dramatis personae* from black to white. While some black families had moved to the periphery of Chicago's West Side prior to World War II, in the 1947 to 1961 era, key events, such as the Second Great Migration plus the city's public housing and renewal activities, forced black home seekers to bypass the South Side and look westward toward still largely white Lawndale, Garfield Park, and Austin. Seligman's well-researched study documents the confrontation of often desperate African American home seekers and white ethnics bent on defending what they viewed as stable, but now threatened, residential space. The author argues that the residents of these West Side neighborhoods fought determinedly to preserve their homes against postwar "blight" and the threatening tide of black migrants. Although she does not exonerate her white West Side subjects from the charge of racism, she does vehemently deny their guilt of "white flight" and compiles a book full of evidence in their defense.

Rather than fleeing, West Siders mobilized to maintain the integrity of their neighborhoods. Seligman presents her evidence systematically. West Siders pressed the city to enforce the city's housing codes. They beseeched the administration of Richard J. Daley for federal conservation and urban renewal funding; they battled to have the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois located in the increasingly shabby Garfield Park; and (with aid and comfort from the school superintendent Benjamin C. Willis) they endeavored to preserve the "neighborhood school" concept and keep public schools segregated. The book convincingly makes the case that West Siders fought hard to "keep blacks out" of their neighborhood, and in doing so, especially singled out "blockbusting" realtors for their venom. They fought equally hard to keep whites in.

All for naught. Seligman stresses that, in the face of a Daley administration stubbornly committed to the (Daniel) Burnham Plan's historic focus on the downtown, West Side streetcar suburbanites proved politically impotent to compel the city to enforce housing codes, to steer federal renewal dollars to North Lawndale or Austin, or to champion Garfield Park for the University of Illinois site. Ultimately, blight and municipal callousness triumphed. Overcrowded housing, failing infrastructure, dangerous parks, and bad schools doomed the West Side.

Seligman's unique angle on postwar neighborhood change proves insightful. After the initial shrill, cross-burning violence, white neighbors, she argues, did not pack up and leave. They created a host of organizations (e.g., the United Property Group, the Greater Lawndale Conservation Commission, North Lawndale Citizens Council, Garfield Park-Austin Community Council, Organization for a Better Austin, and others) and launched often well-financed campaigns, backed by corporations, such as Sears and Roebuck, to keep the West Side an institutionally stable and economically viable community where white families could resist the blandishments of unscrupulous blockbusters.

However thorough, interesting, and convincing, Seligman's plaintive portrait of postwar West Side Chicagoans heroically and against all odds manning the battlements begs at least some reframing, a few clicks on the telescopic lens. Her story, for one, shares a chronological framework with Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* (2003). Although Cohen's venue is principally Newark, the dynamics of mass consumption she elucidated embraced the nation. Chicago's African Americans, like Newark's, failed to benefit from the G.I. Bill (also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944), suffered high rates of postwar unemployment and underemployment, and, as Seligman observes, experienced a dearth of affordable rental and purchase housing leading to overcrowding and blight.

Whites, however, whether in Newark, Philadelphia, or Providence, found no such discrimina-

tory barriers to consumption. As Cohen observes, "the suburban home itself became the Consumers' Republic's quintessential mass consumption commodity, capable of fueling the fires of the postwar economy while also improving the standard of living of the mass of Americans."[3] ***Better Homes and Gardens*** and ***Life*** magazines never featured West Side Chicago's foursquare flats, Philadelphia's row homes, or Providence's "triple deckers" as the epitome of the American Dream. In fact, white families began leaving my white North Philadelphia row house neighborhood and its comparatively underfunded school system long before racial change struck, what ***Philadelphia Bulletin*** reporter Peter Binzen labeled, ***Whitetown, U.S.A.*** (1970). Despite the "cracks in the picture windows" and the crabgrass (and the leaking septic tanks), quarter-acre lot suburbia, home to sparkling new shopping malls, gleaming modern one- and two-story schools, and automobile friendly industrial parks, lured white mortgage toting veterans and also white factory workers with freshly negotiated union contracts. Herbert Gans in ***The Levittowners*** (1982) even found these places to be affordable and socially sustainable. In the 1950s and 1960s the green-lawned split level homes (septic tanks and all) in places called "Just-A-Farm" seemed an obvious alternative to gritty, underfunded, pre-Renaissance urban America.[4]

But, as Seligman has discovered, whether Philadelphia, Providence, or Chicago, not every white neighbor in every neighborhood caught suburban fever. Perhaps the uneven pace of deindustrialization explains this delay. Sears anchored Chicago's Lawndale. Ethnic institutions kept Italian families living in Providence's Federal Hill neighborhood, while the once fashionable, park-studded, streetcar suburb of Providence's Elmwood hemorrhaged white families to the crabgrass frontier. A little more demographic analysis and description of the West Side housing stock might have helped explain how area homeowners resisted the allure of the "Consumers' Republic." Otherwise, this book affords a fresh and unique perspective on a troubled era in the history of America's streetcar suburbs.

Notes

[1]. On redlining see, among others, Kenneth T. Jackson, ***Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 197-218; and Amy Hillier, "Redlining in Philadelphia," http//cml/upenn.edu/redlining/intro.html.

[2]. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, ***Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City***, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962); Arnold R. Hirsch, ***Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Thomas L. Philpott, ***The Slum and the Ghetto: Neighborhood Deterioration and Middle-Class Reform, Chicago, 1880-1930*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Allan H. Spear, ***Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); and William M. Tuttle Jr., ***Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*** (New York: Athenaeum, 1972).

[3]. Lizabeth Cohen, ***A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*** (New York: Knopf, 2003), 195. On other postwar suburbs, see Jackson, ***Crabgrass Frontier***; and John F. Bauman, "The Providence Problem: Postwar Renewal and Neighborhood Deterioration in a New England Industrial City" (paper presented at the Third Biennial Urban History Conference, Phoenix, Ariz., October 2006).

[4]. On suburban septic tanks and their problems, see Adam Rome, ***The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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