

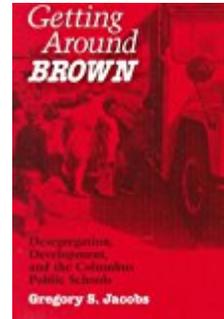
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Gregory S. Jacobs. *Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development, and the Columbus Public Schools*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. ix + 204 pp.

Gregory S. Jacobs. *Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development and the Columbus Public Schools*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1998. xvi + 291 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0721-5.



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It is one of the persisting misfortunes of American public life that racial inequality became politically and intellectually convoluted with the urban crisis at the tail end of the 1960s. Intertwined though they certainly were, too often the consequences of urban problems—the sheer malfunctioning of city life—were mistaken as having grown from white racism, pure and simple, and the misunderstanding led directly to poor public policy. There were times, moreover, when racial healing might have been more effectively promoted by attacking the general difficulties of the city rather than through specifically race-based solutions.

Nowhere were the racial situation and the urban crisis more confused—and their confusion more destructive to sound public policy—than in the case of busing for racial integration of public schools. Court-ordered busing was a creature of the long fight to put the 1954 Brown decision into practice against die-hard southern school boards. But it was the only tool in liberal hands when northern plaintiffs began to challenge the segregation of urban schools. Spurred on by both recent precedent and the still powerful desire to redress legitimate racial grievances, the courts deployed that tool. In so do-

ing they let loose a white backlash that brought riots to Boston, Louisville, Dayton, and other communities, votes to George Wallace and Richard Nixon, and a sharp cleavage between working-class Democrats and suburban liberals who shook their fingers at busing's opponents, but sent their own children to suburban or private schools. Busing was the clumsiest of tools, for it took account neither of the passionate commitment to the neighborhood school nor the vital importance of the neighborhood itself to functioning cities. It not only accelerated white flight, but undermined black control of those limited resources that segregation left to African-Americans—their own schools.

The main virtue of *Getting Around Brown*, a study of the desegregation struggle in Columbus, Ohio, is that Gregory S. Jacobs takes account of these complexities and distinguishes the problem of racial segregation from the urban crisis as a whole. Jacobs ties the narrative of public-school desegregation to a history of the city's residential development, and thus the book both examines racial issues and inquires into how the market in residential development shaped—indeed ultimately frustrated—school desegregation. It is an example of the sort of

monograph we need—and I think we need such a work on every major city— in order to have a real grasp of recent social history.

Anyone who knows Columbus has to wonder just how any such book could serve to illuminate national conditions. The city's main feature is its featurelessness, blandness its principal flavor. One can't make fun of Columbus as one used to be able to ridicule Cleveland: its rivers don't burn, they're just a little dirty. Columbus never had the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago or Pittsburgh; it never saw much virtue in ethnicity until real-estate developers unearthed a gold mine in the late 1970s by turning a once-thriving German quarter into an early example of gentrification—of course, not too many Germans are left there. The only reason the city ever amounted to anything—it was chosen as the site of the state capitol in the early nineteenth century—was that it sits roughly in the geographic middle of the state, which seems, somehow, appropriate. Not even its mediocrity recommends it as a sort of social common denominator; the city is so average that it resembles nothing. Not even Indianapolis is so utterly devoid of idiosyncrasies, and that is saying a great deal.

I am not being glib. For the economic and political underpinnings of Jacobs' story begin with the city's thorough ordinariness.

Take its economy. Columbus never developed the industrial base found in most other Ohio cities. Its labor history was never so tumultuous as Akron or Toledo. Nor did it attract the waves of immigrants that flocked to other towns. Home to the state government and a massive state university, it tended toward a professional and service economy instead. Columbus tasted only a part of the mid-twentieth century growth of production that benefited other midwestern cities and experienced a more modest influx of Appalachian whites and rural blacks as well. Never dependent on heavy industry, the city largely avoided the rust-belt syndrome. Columbus always seemed to pick up enough of every development to move along with the rest of the nation, but its pace was always moderate. Such was to the liking of its small, close-knit ruling class, a parochial but civic-minded bunch associated with a few families whose wealth rested on media, department stores, and real estate.

Racial conditions were similarly moderate. The African-American community, Jacobs tells us, took shape after World War I, when residential and economic discrimination combined to push a gradually growing popu-

lation into the areas east and northeast of downtown. As elsewhere, the paradoxical effect of segregation was the development of "an energetic community culture and a vigorous middle class" based on "a vibrant economy in an economy." The city's black leadership was instinctively conservative. "The result," Jacobs writes, "was a racial milieu in which confrontation was kept quiet, civic order maintained, and African-Americans received more than the crumbs but less than the loaf" (pp. 8-9).

Jacobs' characterization of racial conditions in the 1920s holds generally for the rest of the century, with the exception of the late 1960s. Faced with significant school segregation, a local school board dominated by white members who looked at Louise Day Hicks (Boston's infamous opponent of school desegregation) as something of a model, and a school administration filled with what one teacher described as officials with the "mentality of Nazi soldiers" (p. 22), not even Columbus's black community could stay still. Stymied demands for change mixed with the temper of the day into worsening race relations, particularly in those schools in "changing" neighborhoods where working-class kids were always potential rowdies.

In spite of sporadic school violence and general uneasiness, the Columbus Public Schools managed to pass a bond levy in 1972 that provided revenue for an ambitious building program. Black board members quite reasonably saw the chance to build new facilities on sites that would attract a racially-mixed student body. But white board members balked and in demonstrating what in essence was bad faith, drove integration advocates to the courts.

Acrimony notwithstanding, the city followed a gradual and on the whole peaceful path to school desegregation. Indeed that slow path made it the last major school district to undergo court-ordered busing, rendered in *Penick v. Columbus Board of Education* (1977). In spite of the continued recalcitrance of white board members, the city successfully avoided the violence of Louisville and Boston, in large part because the business elite, concerned with maintaining the moderate image of the town, weighed in to compel either constructive cooperation or, at least, quiet acquiescence. The city then congratulated itself on doing what it does best: avoiding extremes.

The desegregation effort, however, developed so late that busing already had proved its flaws as a remedy to racial injustice and educational imbalance. White flight had been well underway in Columbus for years, and the black community, which Jacobs describes as having been ambivalent about integration from the start, could see

that it was losing its better students and teachers from schools that had been the mainstays of many neighborhoods. For African-Americans, the program was doubly disappointing: the process bore out the apparently intractable malice of whites, while serving to undermine dearly-loved institutions.

This much is a fairly typical story. So what can Columbus's experience tell us that other stories cannot?

The city, it turns out, has a certain peculiarity after all. Unlike most other large American cities, Columbus was not hemmed in by a ring of established suburbs when it began its mid-century growth. There was a good deal of unincorporated land around the city limits, and the city enjoyed a practical monopoly on water and sewer services. In the 1950s, a forward-looking mayor decided that the city would share those services with new developments only in exchange for annexation to the city. Developers, as a practical matter, had to agree to incorporate new construction into Columbus. "As a result," Jacobs writes, "the city was able to stave off suburban encirclement while securing a substantial portion of Franklin County's new development" (p. 124).

But school district lines were not necessarily redrawn to meet the physical boundaries of the city. Initially, in the 1950s, the State Board of Education favored large, centralized districts in redistricting fights, and even as late as the mid-1960s many people assumed that Columbus Public Schools would become a metropolitan, probably county-wide district. This utterly sane vision, unfortunately, ran up against the obsession with local control, the growing suburban political clout, and white racial fears. The state rather abruptly changed its policy on district transfers, and annexed municipalities were able to maintain their local school districts even as they technically became part of the city. Columbus Public Schools, Jacobs observes, were thereafter denied a partnership in the city's growth. The best the city schools could manage was a sort of unhappy truce: in exchange for agreeing not to seek the transfer of schools from suburban districts, Columbus schools would share the tax revenue from industrial and commercial development and get jurisdiction over any unincorporated land annexed to the city in the future. But even this "win-win formula," as it is called, collapsed when a local philanthropist-turned-hypocrite, Leslie Wexner, used his clout to tap into city services without annexation for a luxurious suburban community he built in the late 1980s.

The Wexner episode threw into relief what had been the real problem in Columbus all along: school segrega-

tion was less obviously a result of on-going, overt racism than of the schemes of residential developers and their realtor allies who enjoyed the best of both worlds. The city would provide the infrastructure for new housing, even when those new houses were built in suburbs whose schools were locally-controlled. Like contemporary versions of Simon Legree, the developers not only took advantage of racial fears but surely exacerbated them by stressing how their new homes were outside the city school district and by refusing to build within the district. They made possible, as Jacobs nicely describes it, not so much white flight as "avoidance." In so doing, developers doomed any hope of effective school integration.

Clearly, school integration was a bad place to begin the delicate business of building racial trust. The passionate commitment to neighborhood schools, especially when mixed with what clearly were potent white racial fears, made school integration the most difficult part of the whole legacy of racial subordination in America.

It would have made more sense to avoid stirring up this intractable issue and addressing racial inequalities through strategies designed to ensure fair housing, economic opportunity, and controlled growth. Seeing racial injustice as part of the problem of the urban eco-system as a whole would have recommended a commitment not to destroying neighborhood institutions but strengthening them. Such an approach would have mitigated middle-class flight outward and kept tax money in the city district. And it would do, in this regard, to note that Columbus has returned to a neighborhood-school strategy at the behest of many African-Americans, not least school-board member Bill Moss. One of the beauties of American cities in this century has been that homogenous neighborhoods have attracted self-segregating populations, which then abutted contained public places and institutions where integration and equality of opportunity and condition are prerequisites for civilized life. A steadfast commitment to promoting the varied blessings of urban life—which I am certain would require the sorts of rigorous limits on development that appear in Portland today—would benefit everyone, and in establishing common ground, in part by establishing developers as a common enemy, may well have promoted racial trust far more effectively than any race-based program conceivably could.

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