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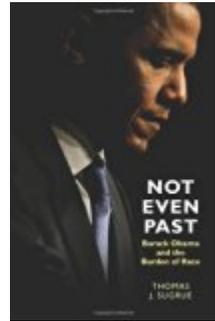
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas J. Sugrue. *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 165 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13730-8.

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Race and the Future of Obama's America

The title of Thomas J. Sugrue's *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* underscores what an unusual undertaking this work is for a historian. In setting out to explore a problem, the natural impulse for most historians is to push backward in time to its roots. In this compelling study of the personal, political, intellectual, and cultural roots of Barack Obama's relationship with race, Sugrue implicitly stakes out his expectations for the president's future actions on racial issues. This approach is not without risks, for Obama had been president a scant sixteen months at the time of the book's publication. How Obama might shift course over his presidency, especially if unleashed into a second term, is far from settled.

As a presidential candidate, Obama quoted novelist William Faulkner's comment that "the past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past," in his March 2008 speech on race in America. Despite the frequent suggestion that Obama's trajectory marks the emergence of a "post-racial" United States, both Obama and Sugrue, in different ways, argue for its continued salience. In Sugrue's analysis, Obama, "the nation's most influential historian of race and civil rights," sees the history of racism as having inscribed itself onto the American landscape but views discrimination itself as largely a thing of the past (p. 3). Sugrue, however, reminds us that those legacies are deeply relevant to Americans' twenty-first-century lives and fortunes. By contextualizing Obama's rise and tenure in office as one in which race structured the experience of the man and the nation, Sugrue pushes Obama's

invocation of Faulkner further than the president might accept.

In three intertwined, chronologically structured but thematically oriented essays, Sugrue traces the development of Obama's thinking about race. Each chapter is simultaneously about Obama himself and about the modern American context in which he operates. Part 1, "This Is My Story," takes Obama through his young adulthood, including his education and introduction to community organizing and politics. Obama was influenced by the southern civil rights movement, which he is too young to have observed directly. He developed a political style that combined a growing and common American reverence for a sanitized version of the movement with the pragmatism of black coalition builders who succeeded in urban politics. Part 2, "Obama and the Truly Disadvantaged," is set mostly in Chicago, where Obama worked as a community organizer, entered politics, and was influenced by the scholarship of sociologist William Julius Wilson. Sugrue places Obama among those who interpreted Wilson's scholarship to imply that economic improvement for African Americans is best shaped by universal policies that end up affecting blacks disproportionately, rather than targeted at blacks in particular. At the same time, having become "assimilate[ed] into Chicago's black bourgeoisie," he embraced a version of Christianity that imbued him with the spirit of racial uplift and freed him to invoke the importance of personal responsibility before black audiences, knowing whites would overhear (p. 85).

Finally, in part 3—“A More Perfect Union?”—Sugrue comments on the role of race in twenty-first-century America and unpacks Obama’s Philadelphia speech on race, which he calls “surely the most learned disquisition on race from a major political figure ever” (p. 118). It is in this chapter that Sugrue is most critical of Obama’s vision. Sugrue contextualizes Obama’s speech with a cavalcade of evidence that race still accounts for many of the ongoing disparities and wealth stratification in American life. But Obama’s Philadelphia speech revealed that he has adopted what Sugrue calls “normative color blindness,” even while acknowledging the important history of race and racism in American life (p. 114). Sugrue’s evidence for Obama’s belief in the “discontinuity” of racial discrimination is relatively thin; it rests largely in the

candidate’s distancing himself from the rhetoric and “experience of an older generation” of Americans like his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright (p. 120). Thus Obama has adopted the “fundamental optimism” of what Gunnar Myrdal identified as “the American creed” (p. 120).

Sugrue’s analysis suggests that Americans hoping that Obama will enact bold legislation, like the laws that represented the triumphs of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, will be disappointed. While philosophically able to point out where race has shaped the nation, Obama is analytically inclined to pursue general, not racial, uplift. Obama, in short, recognizes that race is “not even past” in America but will support only “post-racial” policies to remedy its effects.

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