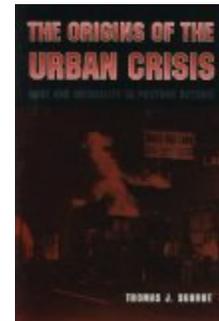




Thomas Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. x + 375 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01101-1.

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## The Structure of Urban Crisis

Thomas Sugrue's well-researched and incisive portrait of postwar Detroit offers readers important insights into debates about the contemporary urban crisis and its relationship to race and post-industrial decline.[1] Sugrue implores historians and social scientists to rethink their assumptions about the "origins" of the urban crisis. He persuasively argues that those phenomena usually associated with deteriorating cities—particularly de-industrialization and white flight—were not "responses" to the urban rebellions and social discord of the 1960s. Rather, they were the structural circumstances which "created" anger and frustration among African American residents and ultimately inspired the red hot summers of the 1960s. De-industrialization and white flight, Sugrue demonstrates, changed the contours of Detroit well before 1967. In fact, these processes began in full force in the 1940s, and by the 1950s they had already affected the city's geography and reshaped residents' understandings of race and urban politics.

Sugrue is not the first historian to suggest that the structural roots of urban poverty and inequality precede 1960. However, his work goes beyond this relatively bland assertion. He demonstrates that plant closings, automation, chronic waves of unemployment, and the movement of industry to suburban, rural and other hard-to-unionize areas in the late 1940s and 1950s detrimentally effected the economies of urban centers in the North. Furthermore, he shows that neighborhood based struggles against residential integration exploded in these decades, arguing that in order to understand national politics in this era, historians need to spend

more time focusing on local struggles. "Housing," Sugrue explains, "became a major arena for organized political activity in the 1940s, where Detroiters, black and white, fought a battle that would define Detroit politics for decades to follow" (55). Sugrue thus attacks the notion implicit in social scientists' accounts of urban decline that race relations in Northern cities were relatively harmonious before the black power movements and urban rebellions of the 1960s, arguing that explosions of racial antagonism were central to Detroit's culture as early as the Second World War.

Sugrue separates his book into three sections: "Arsenal," "Rust," and "Fire." He uses the first section to lay out the economic, racial, and physical geography of the city in the 1940s and to expose its relationship to electoral politics, arguing that white Detroiters lost confidence in liberalism and the New Deal state as a result of their experiences "defending" their neighborhoods against black homebuyers. While Detroit had far more single family houses than any other large city, and while it was comparatively spread out, overcrowding and a rapidly expanding population put enormous pressure on Detroit's housing stock by the beginning of the Second World War. No areas were more crowded than black neighborhoods, whose boundaries were far better defined—and enforced—than any other part of the city. This strain forced black residents to push on the geographic constraints imposed on them by greedy landlords and a racist culture.

Black Detroiters devised numerous strategies to manage their community's expansion. Sugrue argues that

white Detroiters experienced these tactics as threats to their own economic and social stability. Any suggestion of imminent integration, he suggests, left white homeowners desperate, afraid that their single most important investment—their house—would become worthless. The redlining practices of the Federal Housing Authority reinforced and reflected white homeowner's anxieties, for the FHA refused to insure mortgage loans to improve or purchase houses in black and integrated areas.

Sugrue is quick to point out, however, that FHA redlining practices cannot fully explain the defensive hysteria, the white violence against black residents, or the lightening-paced abandonment of block-busted areas. These trends can only be understood as part of an emerging political identity based on white homeownership and forged in opposition to liberal politicians and the New Deal state. White homeowners, he suggests, understood the defense of their neighborhoods as a defense of their rights as citizens and their freedom as individuals to make choices about their lives. Thus, white homeowners developed a political language to define themselves as a political interest group whose struggles were antithetical to the rights of African Americans. Sugrue connects these trends to electoral politics, demonstrating that conservative politicians swept into the city's administration by deploying caricatures of racial anarchy, miscegenation, and integration as the decisive outcome of liberal policies. Sugrue further argues that this was the pre-history to Michigan voters' overwhelming support for George Wallace's presidential campaign in 1968 and 1972, and to the emergence of Reagan Democrats in the 1980s.

In the second section of his book, which he calls "Rust," Sugrue chronicles the disparity between the experiences of Detroit residents and popular images of post-war affluence and harmony, paying particularly close attention to the disproportionate impact of economic restructuring on African Americans. Labor shortages combined with black activists' work on a local and national level forced employers to hire African Americans into previously segregated sections of factories during the Second World War. However, discrimination from the city's increasingly conservative unions meant that black workers had many fewer opportunities to achieve upward mobility than their white ethnic counterparts, even when Detroit's industrial economy was healthy. Thus, while the integration of factories and neighborhoods was not particularly numerically significant—the city remained largely segregated, and black workers continued to be shut out of the majority of well-paying jobs—Sugrue

demonstrates that integration had an enormous impact on the attitudes of black and white residents and on their relationships with each other and the city. Black Detroiters, bolstered by civil rights successes and by the anti-fascist rhetoric of the war, successfully organized activist groups and displayed a new sense of entitlement to equality on the streets. White Detroiters took a defensive posture towards these moves by black residents, intent on holding on to whatever privileges they already enjoyed and seeing any gains made by African Americans as a threat to their own well-being.

Sugrue's integration of economic and social history helps us better understand the decisions of Detroit residents in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, his attention to the material conditions within which Detroiters made choices about housing, politics, and race, sheds new light on the complicated relationship between white and black residents. In his third section, "Fire," he closely examines those white neighborhoods whose residents actively participated in Neighborhood Improvement Associations and which were the sites of violent clashes with black "pioneers." He concludes that the three most "defended neighborhoods"—those neighborhoods which mobilized the "fiercest resistance" to integration—shared certain demographic similarities. These three neighborhoods were all "bastions of single family homeownership" with "predominantly blue-collar populations" and "lower rates of female labor force participation than the city as a whole." They shared a "quasi-suburban atmosphere," were all "within a few miles of large auto plants" and "all but one was ethnically heterogeneous, with sizable Roman Catholic populations" (235-7). Furthermore, it was this segment of the white working class which was most actively defending its exclusive domain over the ever shrinking pool of skilled and semi-skilled work in the city's factories.

This demographic portrait of white resistance is central to Sugrue's argument about the political shape of white homeownership for it supports his claim that the most virulent defenders of white neighborhoods were the relatively stable segments of Detroit's working class population. These residents, he explains, were on the "front lines" of grassroots struggles against integration. White working class homeowners did not have the same recourse to mobility as their middle class and less economically stable counterparts; they could neither afford to buy a new house—especially if the value of their current property were diminishing—nor could they simply pick up and abandon their homes.

Sugrue thus concludes that white Detroit residents were increasingly disenchanted by the postwar liberal coalition because of their experiences and frustrations in their own neighborhoods. He argues that it is only after we understand the politics of homeownership in the 1940s and 1950s that we can understand why stable, white, blue collar workers came to equate liberalism and the New Deal state with blind allegiance to the rights of African Americans and with indifference to the plight of white workers. On the front lines of battles against integration, they saw themselves as the foot soldiers in a struggle for individual rights and for freedom from tyrannical and coercive liberal government.

Sugrue frequently reminds his reader that deindustrialization, white flight and urban decline were neither “inevitable,” nor “immutable.” Rather, they were products of “political and economic decisions, of choices made and not made by various institutions, groups, and individuals” (11). Thus, part of the reason that Sugrue attempts to integrate structural analysis with social history is because he is trying to understand the relationship between the conditions which shape experiences and human agency. However, his interest in structure often comes at the expense of a more intimate understanding of how people experienced the statistical realities that he highlights and can make his portrait seem like it was the only possible avenue. For example, in the last section of his book, he outlines black residential mobility in the 1940s and 1950s, offering an extraordinarily compelling statistical look at white neighborhood defenders. While each of these three chapters is rich in detail and attentive to the complexity of Detroit’s geography, they all offer a relatively anonymous portrait of the city and of political action. Thus, instead of animating the concerns of individuals Sugrue discusses the actions and anxieties of Detroit residents in the aggregate. Too often, the historical agents in his book are “African American leaders,” “open housing advocates,” “white church groups,” “civil rights organizations,” members of the “Catholic Interracial Council,” etc. Thus, relatively face-less groups seem to be making decisions and holding opinions.

This anonymity also means that the connections Sugrue makes between residents’ experiences in their neighborhoods and their workplaces are based on statistical observations, since he does not follow any individuals from home to work. This makes it difficult to understand how white and black Detroiters understood the complicated connections between their work experiences and

their experiences as urban residents. Furthermore, as other historians have noted, the work cultures in each factory were quite distinct, with different policies and practices about race and integration. But, because Sugrue talks about work experiences in the aggregate, he misses how different work cultures may have cultivated different relationships to integration at home.

The categories that Sugrue develops and uses, and the groups that he discusses, are extremely useful for understanding the city and for making sense of urban politics and race relations. In fact, as I have suggested, Sugrue’s insights are fresh, innovative and invaluable. However, it is hard to get a feel for grassroots politicization through the brief anecdotes that he offers which seem secondary to his structural observations. While Sugrue was clearly constrained by his sources, he could have spent more time animating the sources that he did find and building on these observations. While he does explain that “hundreds” of white residents wrote angry letters to politicians about integration, and cites some of these communications, he seems to use these sources only to support his larger observations, rather than finding new paradigms or ideas from the letters themselves. Furthermore, while he does use oral history collections housed in the Labor Archives at Wayne State University, he does not seem to have conducted his own interviews, and while it may have been difficult to find white “defenders” to talk about their experiences, he may have been able to find some contemporaries to discuss their impressions of the impact of these struggles on city politics. (It is difficult to be sure about this, since Princeton University Press did not include a bibliography).

Ultimately, the strengths of Sugrue’s book far outweigh its weaknesses. His meticulous structural analysis of Detroit’s transformation from a wartime boomtown to a city struggling with postwar recession combined with his detailed account of white homeowners’ often violent efforts to maintain control over the racial composition of their neighborhoods makes this an invaluable book for scholars interested in the twentieth century city.

#### Notes

[1]. Editor’s Note: This book has just been awarded the 1997 Taft Prize.

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