Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age & The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit

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pp. 107-111

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Brandishing the banners of a cultural revolution, the social and political activists of the 1960s raged, shouted, and shoved their changes into the historical writing about the nation’s cities. By smashing the former narrative style of consensus urban history, traditionally dispensed in elitist fashion, these powerful forces of change demanded a new analytical history for the old top-down approach to urban historical writing. Recent examples are Kevin Boyle’s 2004 Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age and Thomas J. Sugrue’s new 2005 Princeton Classic Edition of his 1996 case study, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit. Both Boyle and Sugrue ask the same quintessential questions about urban transformation in Detroit. Who benefited? Who lost? And, they address those questions with engaging and scholarly responses, now expected of the historian of contemporary urban studies.

Sugrue’s new 2005 Origins preface analyzes a Detroit structured through a blue-collar neighborhood point of view. He scrutinizes his father’s old, collapsed, 1950s working-class home at the intersection of Chalfonte and Santa Rosa, as he looks backward from the twenty-first century to the burgeoning post-World War II auto industry town of Ford, Chrysler, Dodge, General Motors, and the endless other smaller factories where manufacturing jobs supplied parts for the big auto makers. Sugrue candidly describes the view as a grim urban vista.

Today, the ubiquitous modest homes on Detroit’s West Side have the haunting familiarity of other old Midwestern industrial centers. Abandoned, run-down wooden structures shadow weed-covered remnants of collapsed houses. Shards of window glass reflect broken blue-collar dreams of twentieth-century urban crisis neighborhoods. In the 1940s, America’s arsenal of democracy—boomboomtown Detroit—had the highest paid working-class in the country. Sugrue argues that the transformation of American cities, from boom to post-war depletion, resulted from a lethal triad. Disappearing jobs, workplace discrimination and inveterate racially segregated housing, reinforced by federal policies,
exhausted Detroit by 1950. He also argued that grass roots conservatism, especially where it concerned civil rights and racial equality, was deeply rooted in the North, and that the inequalities of race were tantamount to the New Deal’s rights revolution.

This new dimension of race in the historical discussions of urban history, applied by Sugrue’s Origins in the study of a currently depleted Detroit, also, has found its way into Boyle’s Arc of Justice. His openly realistic 2004 retelling of a 1925 Detroit race and discrimination murder case reaches right out of legal history in its application to the ongoing urban crisis. With the blurring color line of the American Jazz Age, life spiraled downward into mournful blues as dreams of big city success for blacks, traveling north in 1925, turned into sour notes composed of race hatred and bigotry.

Boyle’s Detroit history focuses on black Talented Tenth physician Dr. Ossian Sweet and his family, who sought the American dream and a home near the metropolis. The result: a mob attack by whites and the murder trial People v Sweet. Boyle argues that the continually fluctuating economic struggles of anti-immigrant whites of Sweet’s Garland Avenue neighborhood were ingredients for social explosion, when combined with Negroes attempts to move into the white man’s hard-earned domain.

Boyle, like Sugrue, also takes a journey to Detroit through the emotions of race and class. From page one of Arc of Justice, Boyle places the reader in the Jim Crow railroad car headed for the North. Not unlike the million and a half southern blacks who had left the South since 1917, Boyle’s bottom-up literary-train-ride-with-a-view forms a relentless commentary on the vitality of Jim Crow hatred in the twentieth century. His narrative parades legendary victims of bigotry past the reader’s train car window in a macabre ride from Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia through Mississippi, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., East Texas, Appalachian coal towns and mill villages in the rugged Carolina Piedmont. Each place gives up its evidence of prejudice, whether by placement of signs designating “white” and “black,” or through the memories kept alive by the designation of sites of lynching’s and murder-by-torture of blacks. Boyle constructs a scenario that places the reader in the body and mind of Ossian Sweet, during the racist Detroit summer of 1925.

Sugrue’s own attention to the reweaving of the American urban landscape after World War II contains persuasive warp and weft, connecting the suburban tapestry to deindustrialization, disinvestment, and depopulation. Although not a detailed discussion, Sugrue examines
super-neighborhood associations fashioned by suburban governments, and their use of zoning laws to exclude perspective home-buyers of moderate and low incomes, mainly non-whites. Research of other urban scholars confirms his contention about grass roots politics and housing policy in other diverse cities. Baltimore, Brooklyn, St. Louis, Chicago and Philadelphia were severely hampered by white racial conservatism. Indifference choked off racial equality well in advance of the 1960s.

Using detailed research of white mob terrorism, Boyle’s *Arc of Justice* recreates the pressure cooker atmosphere of the twentieth-century metropolis that boiled over into early Jim Crow violence. What had turned Anglo-Saxon businessmen into bitter racists in the ethnic cities they had enjoyed in the 1920s? What had gone wrong? To be sure, Sweet was European educated and a physician, and he was black. The strength of Boyle’s book lies in his capacity to assess and describe the inferior/superior responses of blacks and whites toward each other, in a volatile time of change and adjustment in America’s Jazz Age big cities. He gives crucial insight into the day-to-day, often, hand-to-mouth lifestyles of working whites, with their almost-but-not-yet suburban homes and cars, for which they were so deeply in debt. Boyle is explicit in showing how whites feared loosing to blacks that for which they had worked so hard, and how that fear became the every-day focus in their lives.

Sugrue stresses the paradox of low-wage service sector jobs that replaced once-prolific manufacturing jobs, not only in Detroit, but in other pre-war industrial cities as well. His account of inner-city people of color trapped in bleak, isolated urban ghettos sitting out their lives in America’s Rust Belt towns, offers no-frills examples of victims of race and inequality. Sugrue argues that the coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in a distinctive period of two decades—1940s to 1960s—laid the foundation for America’s current urban crisis.

Sugrue’s exploration into Detroit’s social and political history of race hatred and inequality begins with a preview of Ford Motor Company. He continues his search by exploring the growth of the United Auto workers, examining pre-World War II underdeveloped and undeveloped black neighborhoods like Eight Mile (a focal point in the book), and by questioning housing shortages, class, status, industrial job loss, and economic distress. In spite of his family’s connection to Detroit’s West Side, Sugrue resists the temptation to personal inflection into his research. Yet, the reader remains aware that the incentive for his
in investigation lies within his own family experience, and motivates his desire to comprehend the causes of urban transformation.

Twenty-nine photos of the era, dispersed at appropriate intervals throughout the book, feature scenes of race riots, jubilant politicians reelected to support white working- and middle-class homeowners, dismal vacant lots owned by hopeful blacks, and rigid cement walls erected to separate blacks from white neighborhoods. Each is a visual testament in support of Sugrue's argument. In addition to the photo collection, there are ten maps indicating black population, income, and defended and undefended neighborhoods. Coinciding with the maps are seventeen tables from the U. S. Census Bureau and various other statistics and census tables indicating jobs for blacks in automobile and steel plants, household incomes, building permits, and high-poverty tracks that cover a period of seventy years. Together, all validate Sugrue's assertion that race and inequality reshaped a 1930s New Deal promise to provide housing to the poorest Americans.

To reinforce his own evaluation of a racist Detroit, Boyle introduces all the players in the city's famous murder trial People v Sweet. He includes the Ku Klux Klan, fraternal clubs, neighborhood associations, even police officers, who often became the bulwark of white supremacy in the big cities. He balances his assessment by profiling defense attorney Clarence Darrow and Irish-born Thomas Chawke, who fought to deliver a punch to big city Jim Crow, albeit temporarily, at the trial. The question of who shot white street-mob member Leon Breiner in Sweet's front yard on Garland Avenue was moot. Boyle argues that the trial was not about murder, but about racial hatred. And the lasting aftermath of the trial, allegedly, contributed to Sweet's suicide. Boyle's research into those who benefited from the trial serves to illustrate the tenor of the times. The NAACP's Father Robert Bagnall and James W. Johnson saw a chance to boost its organization by affiliating with the trial. Robert Toms and Frank Murphy later climbed to national and international prominence through their participation. For the student of urban history this serves as a yardstick to civil rights progress.

One problem that does stand out among Sugrue's argument is the absence of discussion about neighborhood schools and desegregation. He could have easily approached it in his "Homeowner's Rights" chapter on Schoolcraft Gardens, featuring homeowners, who, with the support of Detroit Mayor Albert Cobo, fought to prevent housing proponents from making it a side-by-side development for both blacks and whites. But, neither does Sugrue treat school desegregation as bete noire. His concentration on presenting detailed data of race and discrimination in
the 1950s urban transformation makes the inclusion of segregation a given to the student of urban history.

Boyle’s Arc illustrates the anxiety of whites who clawed their way along the narrow ledge between hope and despair to the top of Detroit factory ladders. Some finally moved to middle range housing on the outskirts of the city. His description of housing in between squalor and inner city, and the pomp of suburban Grosse Pointe, offers keen insight into what is often missing in other academic studies of similar situations. He illustrates white emotions that seethed beneath daily middle-class struggles to meet mortgages. Banks denied blacks mortgages and developers wrote restrictions into deeds to bar blacks from housing.

Sugrue’s grim urban vista is real and emphatic. He argues that the losers in the question of urban transformation are not public-private partnerships like Ford and General Motors. He believes they are the jobless poor and people of color trapped in the inner-city cycle, where race and inequality remain unresolved. Boyle’s placement of Jim Crow in the center of glittering Jazz Age Detroit provides a candid foundation for others to pursue. His is a welcome addition to the lived experience of the Jim Crow era and a springboard for more urban studies. The analytical and rich, bottom-up historical combination of texts by Boyle and Sugrue shines forth as evidence of energy and variety, released into the field of urban history in the transformation of the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. These forces continue to liberate significant historical information about America’s cities.