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BOOK REVIEWS

THE ORIGINS OF THE URBAN CRISIS: RACE AND INEQUALITY IN POST-WAR DETROIT BY THOMAS J. SUGRUE

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1. A critical book in a time of “redevelopment” objectives

Detroit was experiencing programs of redevelopment to compete with suburban models at the time *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* was first published in 1996. These were a follow-up to the policies of Coleman A. Young (Detroit’s first black mayor, in office from 1974 to 1994), which initiated the construction of the revealingly named “Renaissance Center” at the end of the 70s, the building of two new auto assembly plants (one for GM at the border between Detroit and Hamtramck, and the other for Chrysler on East Jefferson Avenue) during the 1980s, and the development of new skyscrapers (notably “One Detroit Center” in 1993) and sport stadiums during the 1990s. This urban change, generated by policies implemented during the 70s, 80s and 90s, led to two possible Manichean postures: either criticising the way the redevelopment projects were undertaken and holding the liberal approach of public intervention as responsible (a frequently expressed opinion by Washington during the Reagan years), or seeing this change as an encouraging sign of a “renaissance” of the Motor City, with unemployment decreasing and capital seeming to cease its permanent drain out of the city (this cessation ended up being only temporary). In this book, Thomas J. Sugrue, who is a professor of History and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and a native De-

troiter himself, takes an intermediate position: although he is clearly not optimistic about his hometown's future (and rightly so, given the downward slope Detroit has followed since then with the bankruptcy of 2013, dealt with in the preface to the new edition), he does not consider that liberal policies are the fundamental cause of the decline of this metropolis but sees them rather as a practical scapegoat for right-wing politicians. Consequently, he moves the analysis away from a simplistic short-term political criticism to a longer-term and structural perspective, focusing on the racial divisions of Detroit, which underwent strong evolution during the post-war years, leading to a veritable turmoil in the Motor city. Hence, it goes without saying, this book has a deeply political content.

2. A methodology combining structure and agency

Although it is eminently political, the book is far from being a pamphlet and conveys a clear methodological choice from the author, which is anchored to a rigorous theoretical framework. First, the approach adopted by Sugrue is mainly holistic, his analysis of the urban change is much more focused on social structures (according to race, ethnicity, gender and class) and institutions (such as Civil Rights movements, Unions, Homeowner's Associations, local and federal political institutions) than on individuals' rationale and strategies (which would correspond more to an individualist methodology). However, as often in modern sociology, Sugrue does not oppose the two methods. Although his analysis focuses essentially on collective dynamics, he does not exclude individual interactions. Therefore, his methodology is not in any way sectarian: it illustrates a clear pluralistic approach by combining both qualitative (through interviews collected from newspapers or other research sources, witnesses etc.) and quantitative (use of statistical tools, such as residential segregation indices) means of analysis, together with geographical tools, such as maps (to illustrate territorial dynamics), and a strong emphasis on history, which makes the scholar's dual competence in sociology and history crystal clear.

This predominantly holistic and multidimensional methodology is very well anchored to Thomas J Sugrue's structuralist and sociospatial theoretical framework. As will be discussed during the summary and thesis (see below), the author's analysis is one that gives a greater importance to social structures (according to ethnicity, race, gender and class) and social and political institutions to explain social dynamics and change (which explains the more holistic methodological approach). Although agency is not excluded from Sugrue's thesis, with some examples of individual interaction being exploited

(such as the example of “Mo” Humphrey’s¹ job interview, a black man whose bad manners, bad writing and lack of conscientiousness made him utterly unemployable), there is still a primacy given to structures over agents. Moreover, Sugrue’s framework is clearly one of sociology of space, which is perfectly logical when studying such a segregated city as Detroit (by ethnicity before the war, by race after the war, and by class within each racial community during the black sprawl and the white flight). The thesis puts strong emphasis on the geographical perspective, both from a residential point of view and an industrial point of view (which mutually influence each other, as will be discussed below).

3. A racially structured decline

The thread of the author’s thesis is clearly visible through the outline of the book, and the evocative titles chosen for all three parts: Part One: *Arsenal*; Part Two: *Rust*; Part Three: *Fire*. In other words, the distribution of jobs (in industry particularly) and the residential segregation of post-war Detroit according to race made Detroit a hot-bed of growing racial tensions (*Arsenal*), which were enhanced by post-War metropolis deindustrialisation (which created an increase in inequalities amongst blacks) and both institutionalized and informal discrimination (*Rust*). This led to a reshaping of Detroit’s residential segregation and geography, through the white flight and the black sprawl. Such urban change was particularly conflictual (*Fire*) and Sugrue points out the intensity of the violence caused by the initially strong resistance from white neighbourhoods, and the impossibility for blacks to access the newly born suburbs (through governmental subsidies) which were politically chosen to remain white. Ultimately, the object of the book is to explain the decline of Detroit after the second world-war, the post-war years being structurally those that triggered off this negative dynamic. These structures are Industrial Geography; Housing; and Employment. Combined and permanently impacting on one another, they drove Detroit’s decline.

Sugrue emphasises at the out-start on the industrial geographical structure of Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s. Firstly, although “to the casual observer the design of Detroit seemed anarchic”², it had an internal logic, with a complex railway network giving automotive plants (which represented 60% of the industrial jobs) access to parts and

¹ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p168.

² *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p18.

raw materials. Non-automobile related industries (often inherited from the end of the 19th century) were not a negligible part of the city's industrial geography, often strategically positioned, such as the chemical industries, close to the Detroit River allowing easier access to transportation. Moreover, the rapid industrialisation that Detroit underwent during the first half of the 20th century, and that grew suddenly and rapidly during the Second World War (+40% in manufacturing jobs between 1940 and 1947), intensified this geographical structure and acted as a pull factor both for capital and the labour-force (particularly with the decline of the southern "black belt"). This industrialisation was accompanied by the strong emergence of Unions, which were decisive actors in the city's industrial functioning. Thirdly, the industrial structure of Detroit defined the identity of the metropolis through many symbols, such as the famous Ford River Rouge plant, making it the "Motor City". Consequently, what is at stake with Detroit's industrial geography – and the job distribution this implies - is both the immaterial considerations, such as the city's identity and symbols, and the material considerations, such as firms and homeowner's positioning strategies (concerning access to transportation and exchange opportunities for companies, and access to jobs and a familiar community life for individuals). Therefore it impacted simultaneously the cities infrastructures, labour market, and housing market, as well as collective representations.

As stated, the housing and community structure of Detroit stems directly from its industrial geography. Indeed, industrialisation led to the development of white working and middle class neighbourhoods composed of tens of thousands of detached single family homes on the West side, with people fleeing from inner city blocks of flats that were increasingly becoming (over)populated by blacks, most often in despicable conditions, black housing being most often sub-standard and over-crowded. Hence, Detroit became increasingly racially structured rather than ethnically structured (with Polish and Italian migrants (amongst others) becoming integrated with the broader "white working class"). Blacks were concentrated in four major neighbourhoods (Paradise Valley, the inner West Side, Conant Gardens and the Eight Mile Wyoming) due to their economic disadvantages (low income jobs and discrimination in the labour market) and discrimination in the housing market due to initial legal discrimination through racially selective covenants (made illegal by the *Shelley vs Kraemer* decision of 1948), "steering" practiced by real estate agencies as regards black families to reproduce the spatial patterns, and discrimination regarding access to mortgages. This concentration of blacks in overpopulated neighbourhoods of the city logically led to their deterioration, which nourished stereotyping against blacks and reinforced the two previous factors. This created a veritable vicious circle between the causal factors of racial segregation,

which was enhanced by the sluggishness of the building industry and ossified by the Second World War. In this way, residential segregation was crystallised, leading to a hotbed of tensions on issues such as Public Housing, resulting in the 1943 Sojourner Truth riot and the anti-public housing policies of the Cobo administration during the 1950s. Redevelopment programs exacerbated the urban crisis, with the total failure of “slum clearance programs” to allow express way constructions during the 1950s.

Employment structures were also highly discriminative. First of all, although the automobile industry gave blacks the best opportunities (partly due to the Unions and because of links between black community institutions and motor companies), it was also the cause of many frustrations with black segregative distribution being arbitrary from one plant to another, concentrating people in unskilled and dangerous jobs, and institutionalised by employment agencies, hence forming a Gordian knot. However, in comparison to other sectors, black employees in the auto-industry almost formed an aristocracy in the black community, with tasks being even more racially separated in the steel industry, and even greater racial barriers to employment in the chemical industry (semi-skilled jobs), the brewing industry (due to employment through social connections), the retail sector (due to fear of client discontent and stereotypes of black unreliability) and construction (training acting as an extra racial barrier). Consequently, sizeable parts of the African-American community were limited to governmental and clerical jobs for those who did not have the chance to work in the auto-industry. According to Sugrue, three main factors explain the racial situation in the labour market: the “psychological wage”³ (white workers feeling superior to black workers, giving them better promotion opportunities); “residential segregation”⁴ (as discussed above); and the choices of employers and unions (i.e. the choice of favouring advances of seniority, which naturally disfavors blacks who serve as an “easily exploitable labour surplus”⁵ in case of economic fluctuations (Detroit was hit by two recessions between 1949 and 1960), reinforcing the image of blacks as an underclass. In this sense, Sugrue emphasises the fact that individual prejudices against blacks are only a part of the problem (confirming his more structuralist approach on the matter).

Detroit’s urban dynamics is nourished from the interaction of these three structures, which themselves are fueled by power relations between social groups and institu-

³ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p122, quoting David Roediger as the initiator of the concept.

⁴ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p122

⁵ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p119

tions, leading to major tensions and conflicts. Hence, increasing automation and deindustrialisation of Detroit during the 1950s, with decentralisation of big companies such as Ford (moving part of its production to Cleveland and Dearborn), led to the reshaping of Detroit's housing structures, with many whites being able to follow the outgoing investments in the suburbs whilst blacks sprawled out within the city boundaries. Consequently, non-metropolitan industrialisation was even more discriminative as regards black people than the city's industrialisation had been. Detroit's population started to decline (from the late 1950s), and the remaining population became increasingly "poorer" and "blacker"⁶, leading to a strong weakening of the metropolis' fiscal base (a vital point considering the evolution Detroit has undergone since then).

This trend led to a variety of reactions from the social actors and institutions within Detroit, often in a conflictual manner. The massive strikes taking place in May 1949, at Ford River Rouge plant, against speed ups, automation and decentralisation, were led by the Local 600 within the United Auto Workers (being partly communist it was finally silenced by McCarthy-type rhetoric). Labour Day, in 1951, also illustrated major concerns from workers regarding this situation. Instead, the major Unions moved towards a less confrontational posture, negotiating equal working conditions and seniority benefits in new plants rather than fighting against the deindustrialisation of the inner city, considered to be inevitable, and the UAW established increasing cooperation with the Democratic Party (at a national level) from the late 1950s/early 60s onwards, instilling themes such as "manpower development" favouring reconversion which, for instance, had a strong impact on Johnson's "Great Society". Black organisations, such as the Detroit Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), also evolved to an increasingly moderate position (giving a liberal tone to civil rights activism), focusing more and more on black empowerment to access skilled jobs (by supporting families, community work, basic schooling and also developing behind-the-scenes contacts with companies) and relegating its function to that of an unskilled job agency. The answers brought by institutions to discrimination were, at the very least, incomplete and did not take into account the structural geographical changes that the city was undergoing, which was both inter-racial (black sprawl and white flight) and intra-racial (an emerging black middle class started to detach from the poor inner-city over-populated tower blocks, although hopes of unrestricted residential mobility were not fulfilled). Many real estate agencies profited from the black sprawl (and white panic) to practice aggressive marketing strategies.

⁶ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p149

However, these changes occurred with white resistance of varying intensity. This resistance was within a very anti-liberal mind set (which conservative Mayor Cobo and populist politicians, such as Poindexter, benefited from during the 1950s and 1960s) in the context of McCarthyism, with “homeowner’s rights” being opposed to the civil rights movements’ demands. This opposition was far from being solely based on political rhetoric: the concerted efforts of community groups and estate agents were put into place to avoid what was referred to as a “black invasion” in white neighbourhoods. An example was the Plymouth Manor Association which asked members to sign a contract stating that they would not sell without broker and association agreements and offering preferential deals to home sellers that were negotiating with potential black buyers. Consequently, both political and social networks (exploiting important social capital) employed strategies to fight the black sprawl within white communities. This white resistance also took the form of strong violence in trying to maintain the “Colour line”. The example of the Wilson’s house bought on Riopelle Street in 1955 (in a white area) is particularly revealing of racial violence over the changes in housing geography Detroit was undergoing, with many cases of black-owned houses becoming veritable “racial battlegrounds”⁷. This often violent resistance did not succeed in containing the black sprawl in the long run. Neither did it stop the fundamental urban transformation of Detroit produced by the white flight and an increasing class division within the Afro-American community, caused by deeper socioeconomic and racial structures.

The bottom line of Sugrue’s thesis is best expressed in the preface to the 2014 Edition: The urban reshaping of Detroit which occurred during the post-war years, combined with its deindustrialisation, is what has led to its main demographic (population decline), social (poverty and unsafety) and economic (unemployment, capital flight, weakness of the fiscal base and 2013 bankruptcy) situation. In Sugrue’s thesis this structural process completely outweighs social (such as temporary “white resistance”) and political forms of contention. If anything, the people who think liberal policies are responsible for Detroit’s situation have, in fact, worsened it, with austerity measures being completely counter-productive, causing further impoverishment of the population, weakening the infrastructure and generally making the city unattractive for inhabitants and potential capital investments (which, in turn, exacerbates the city’s decline).

⁷ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p232

3. A dialogue with the legacy of classical urban sociology

First of all, Thomas J. Sugrue's analysis of Detroit's suburbanisation has points of comparison with Graham Taylor's sociospatial perspective⁸, explaining the phenomenon through the need for space for industrialists justifying important investments in real estate and infrastructure, despite the fact that their analyses are concerned with very different situations. He also adopts a similar analysis on industrialists' strategy to weaken the unions' influence through the decentralisation of the production apparatus in the urban space. This industrial decentralisation is followed by a population deconcentration, partly facilitated by technological and infrastructure breakthroughs in transportation, partly for economic reasons (populations logically following the industrial job opportunities), and partly for more cultural and symbolic reasons, such as the prominence of homeownership in the American psyche. In this sense, the causes of the black sprawl and the white flight are different expressions of the same symptom, which is to say the quest of homeownership and the importance of property, seen as a guarantee of freedom and independence in the American culture (these two factors being at its core).

In addition, his analysis of inner city segregation and its evolution can be aligned with that of the Taeubers in 1965⁹, with the example of the common practice of "steering" for example, which was a technique used by real estate agents to direct black families to black areas (either through "advice", information asymmetry or pricing) in order to reproduce spatial segregation.

However, these expressions of that cultural symptom are not only different, but they are especially discriminative. This point is at the heart of Sugrue's book, and it shares common observations with William Frey's analysis of suburbanisation. Indeed, William Frey observed that suburbanisation was almost exclusively beneficial to white people, which Sugrue confirms in his study of Detroit when he shows that if the black sprawl within the city led to resistance (which in some cases was very violent) from white neighbourhoods, the racial barriers in the suburbs were greater, forming communities that were even more closed than those within the city centre. However, in the case of Detroit, Sugrue goes much further than these authors in explaining the discriminative character of suburbanisation. Although he recognizes the influence of factors such as individual choices (due to cultural and economic causes, as mentioned above), he most notably stresses the importance of the governmental actions leading to this situation.

⁸ See *Satellite Cities: A Study of Industrial Suburbs*, Graham Taylor, New York: Appleton, 1915

⁹ See *Negroes in Cities: Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Change*, K.Taeuber and A.Taeuber, 1965, Chicago: Aldine.

In particular, he highlights the role of the Federal Housing Administration and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, which made the clear political decision to exclude African-Americans from help, and towns prohibiting zoning and the division of single family houses into apartments (with the clear objective of preventing the suburbs from becoming mix-raced). It should be noted that this form of institutional racism has also been pointed out by authors such as Bullard and Feagin¹⁰.

As a consequence, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* reflects a clear legacy from previous analyses concerning racial segregation and territorial inequalities. For instance, the sociospatial analysis of suburbanisation and of inner city segregation is comparable to Graham's and to that of the Taeubers' respectively. Moreover, Sugrue also describes a less original link (despite particularities specific to Detroit) between deindustrialisation and population de-concentration, the latter being the result of black sprawl and suburbanised white flight combined (after a violent transitional period of "flee or fight" among white neighbourhoods in the inner city). Therefore, it is the causal factors he opts for which endow his explanation for these conflictual urban dynamics with a certain dose of novelty. Indeed, his explanation very much insists on voluntary and endogenous factors, such as anti-union economic strategies, explaining deindustrialisation and suburbanisation, inter-racial power relations, explaining on the one hand informal residential segregation within the city before the almost complete accomplishment of the black sprawl and, on the other hand, the subsidised and politically encouraged white flight, rather than exogenous factors such as globalisation (which only really intensified from the 70s onwards). This choice is very interesting in that it provides an explanation for the singularity of the situation in Detroit, whilst exogenous factors apply to all the industrial cities in the US.

Consequently, Sugrue's book acts as an illustration of the theories concerning race and inequality in urban sociology, and even as a reinforcement of them, by giving his analysis a very political stance, by taking a longer term approach to explain how Detroit has become what it is today, and by highlighting the absurdity of some common political controversies on the topic. Indeed, he shows that (as stated in the preface to the new edition) "Detroit's bankruptcy is a grim epilogue to the story that I tell in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, with conjectural issues, such as the housing bubble, just reinforcing previous structures rather than acting as a significant cause in themselves". In this sense, this book is undeniably very pessimistic, showing that the force of the structures driving the city's decline are difficult to reverse (especially given the state of the council budget since the bankruptcy), despite some weak compensatory mechanisms

¹⁰ See « Racism and the City », R.Bullard and J.Feagin, 1991, in *Urban Life in Transition*, edited by M.Gottindiener and C.Pickvance, 55-76. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

such as the development of arts projects (being a cheap and, therefore, attractive city for artists and hipsters seeking a favourable place to develop their creativity) and cultural development that many urban planners are projecting. It seems unlikely that, in themselves, such phenomena could possibly be a solution to the outgoing flows of capital and inhabitants, those remaining being, for the major part, black working class.

Finally, Sugrue's criticism is politically very salient. By insisting on the importance of the infrastructure of Detroit and on education (which is further emphasised in the preface to the 2014 edition¹¹), which can only be reactivated through public spending (austerity measures just lead to a vicious circle in lowering attractiveness, inducing capital and human flight, weakening even more the metropolis' fiscal base), he denounces, once again, the simplistic idea, often exploited by right wing populists, that public spending and investments are the cause of Detroit's major difficulties. Rather than ruling out, on principal, public spending as a means of attempting to address Detroit's problems (despite them being very structural, as discussed above), Sugrue pleads for more sensible and targeted public spending which could improve long term public and human capital.

4. Lessons far beyond Detroit

Detroit is a very particular metropolis, but it is one from which the lessons learnt are relevant for many other urban regions and for which solutions will be needed on a bigger scale.

The history of Detroit since the Second World War is that of a segregated city which has declined, under the effects of deindustrialisation and suburbanisation, leading to an intensification of its segregation because of the black sprawl (within the boundaries of the city) and white flight (to the suburbs, following capital outflows and jobs). In this way Detroit underwent a fundamentally conflictual reshaping. This structural vicious circle, combining economic, racial and social factors, leads to more capital outflows and, progressively, to a demographic decline of the metropolis resulting in a weakening of the city's fiscal base (eventually causing its bankruptcy in 2013). If political errors committed since the post-war years might have had a reinforcing effect on these negative factors (and, therefore, are not exempt from criticism), they cannot be considered as being the actual causes of Detroit's urban crisis.

¹¹ *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas J. Sugrue, Princeton University Press, 2014, p xv to xxxi.

As a consequence, the main lessons that can be learnt from the case of Detroit are linked with the dangers of racial segregation and economic specialisation. The urban model of Detroit based on extreme economic specialisation (relying, fundamentally, on the auto industry) and high residential segregation proved to be completely unsustainable in the long run. Indeed, these endogenous structures make the urban space that much more vulnerable to possible exogenous factors (deindustrialisation; racial relationships; governmental policies, for instance with low inflation objectives under Carter and urban budget reduction under Reagan). These lessons extend way beyond the case of Detroit alone. Moreover, the solutions to these problems cannot solely come from the City Council itself, since investments in infrastructure and education to adapt to the 21st century's neo-liberal context of urban rivalry and competition cannot be implemented by local authorities (given their current fiscal situation). So, only much larger authorities (such as the Federal Government) can act counter-cyclically to address the vicious circle which cities like Detroit have now been locked into.