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# CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

## True North

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

MOST HISTORIES OF THE AMERICAN black freedom struggle focus, unsurprisingly, on the events of the 1950s and '60s that ended legally authorized racial segregation across the South. But overt racial discrimination—and, indeed, some forms of out-and-out segregation—also existed in the North, where African Americans resisted second-class treatment long before *Brown v. Board of Education* sounded legal segregation's death knell in 1954.

*Sweet Land of Liberty* is an intentionally ironic title for a political history that surveys efforts to improve black northerners' lives from the 1930s through the '90s. Thomas J. Sugrue, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, apologizes in an endnote for "the enormous geographic and chronological scope of this book," but his rich and sprawling treatment often reads like a tale of just two cities—Detroit and Philadelphia—which he repeatedly places at the center of a complex story that ranges from the upper Midwest to New England.

Sugrue builds the first half of his history, covering the period before 1960, around what he sees as an ideological shift in the mid-1940s. Before the end of World War II,

he argues, most northern civil rights proponents—many of whom, black and white, came from the political Left—believed that African-American inequality was fundamentally an issue of economic power, "that class and race were intertwined, that jobs were necessary for freedom, that unionism was a prerequisite to civil rights." During World War II, those activists succeeded in significantly raising popular consciousness of racial discrimination as a political issue, largely because their efforts "coincided with the American battle against fascism abroad." Between 1940 and 1946, membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the premier civil rights group, rose from 50,000 to almost 450,000. Meanwhile, wartime industrial employment needs and the availability of good jobs stimulated black migration to the North. Between 1940 and 1945, Detroit's auto industry workforce shifted from three percent black to 15 percent, and by 1946 more than one-third of Detroit municipal workers were black.

**SWEET LAND OF  
LIBERTY:**  
The Forgotten  
Struggle for Civil  
Rights in the North.

By Thomas J. Sugrue.  
Random House.  
688 pp. \$35

In 1944, Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal published his hugely influential study *An American Dilemma*, in which he argued that racism so contradicted the nation's basic creed as to leave whites highly susceptible to moral suasion that racist practices were downright un-American. Sugrue says that Myrdal's analysis "would wholly reshape the postwar struggle for racial equality in the North" because of its argument that "individual psychological or emotional deficiencies" were

Open housing succeeded only in allowing a handful of blacks to move into white suburbs. It did not break down the inner-city ghettos.

the crux of the problem, and because it indicated a clear optimism that equality could be attained through widespread personal transformations.

To the lawyers who litigated *Brown* and to the Supreme Court justices who cited Myrdal to support their ruling against racial segregation, *An American Dilemma* was a landmark in the national struggle for black equality. But Sugrue believes that changing the focus from black economic advancement to whites' "hearts and minds" actually harmed African Americans' real interests, especially when schools and housing—the North's epicenters of racial inequality—took center stage in the early 1960s.

What Sugrue terms "the poisonous link between housing segregation and school segregation" furnishes a central thread for his post-1960 story. In major metropolitan areas, "northern public schools were nearly as segregated as those in the South," notwithstanding the absence of written laws or racially explicit policies. In 1961 the NAACP proclaimed that "schools segregated in fact are as harmful to our youth as are schools segregated by law," but in the North the roots of the problem lay in "the ostensibly race-neutral concept of neighborhood schools" and the extent to which housing practices concentrated citizens in racially homogenous neighborhoods.

None of *Brown's* participants had considered how the case would affect northern schools. The

large-scale postwar development of suburbia moved millions of whites beyond big-city boundaries, and while that migration opened older neighborhoods to new black residents, efforts to improve inferior, all-black schools quickly demonstrated that "what constituted a neighborhood was ultimately a matter of politics" rather than of demarcations such as topography: Administrators quietly "gerrymandered" school attendance zones to preserve segregation.

Sugrue writes that "the battle against housing discrimination . . . was perhaps the most consequential of the entire northern freedom struggle," and indeed "would ultimately be one for the hearts and minds of white Americans." But he uses Myrdal's formulation only to assert its failure, for in his eyes the efforts to open white suburbs to black families "proved to be one of the great failures of postwar racial liberalism." Open housing succeeded only in allowing "a handful of middle-class and wealthy blacks" to move into white suburbs; it did not break down the inner-city ghettos in which many lower-income black families remained trapped. "Choice was a white freedom," Sugrue incisively observes. "In 1970, northern cities remained nearly as segregated by race as they had been in 1940." In the roughly two decades following, "rates of housing segregation rose in most of the North."

Sugrue acknowledges that as early as 1963, polling data showed that "white racial attitudes had improved to an extent that seemed to bear out Gunnar Myrdal's optimistic predictions," but he forcefully insists that the change in attitudes "was not accompanied by a shift in behavior," an assertion supported by the demographic data of the time. With federal courts, and eventually the Supreme Court in 1974, holding that school district boundaries could not be swept aside to integrate students, absent evidence that those boundaries had been adopted with segregative intent, suburban whites were exempted from any responsibility to personally assist black advancement.

Sugrue uses this material to state his underlying



Before the civil rights era, segregation wasn't confined to the South: In a 1944 NAACP parade, Detroit marchers make a dramatic statement.

ing argument in its bluntest form: “The problem of housing segregation was one of political and economic power, of coercion, not choice, personal attitudes, or individual morality.” As most readers will recognize, that conclusion does not necessarily follow from the history Sugrue accurately recites, a tension that is most obvious when he rightly and repeatedly highlights how crucial the racist behavior of many white real estate agents and mortgage bankers is today in denying African Americans free and equal access to homes in predominantly white neighborhoods.

The emergence of “black power” rhetoric and black separatist ideologies in the mid- and late 1960s aided black America no more than Myrdal’s moral suasion analysis had, Sugrue argues. “A staggering array of new organizations” appeared on the northern urban scene during these years, but almost without exception they

were “intensely local” in focus, and “even at their peak of influence, they did not constitute anything resembling a coherent movement.” Such groups, Sugrue asserts, were just “a series of impulses” stemming from a desire to repudiate liberal integrationism.

One grassroots organization that did attain widespread visibility in many urban areas by the end of the 1960s was the now little-remembered welfare rights movement, whose advocates—mostly black women—sought to preserve and expand assistance targeted to the poor, primarily through the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Sugrue frankly confesses his uncertainty over how to evaluate the movement’s impact, though he notes that black poverty rates in the North fell sharply during the 1960s as welfare rolls expanded. Poverty rates held firm in the three decades after 1970, while

welfare benefits cumulatively declined: Adjusting for inflation, “median AFDC payments in 1992 were 43 percent lower than they were in 1970,” as interest in the war on poverty evaporated from the public agenda.

*Sweet Land of Liberty* deals with black employment far more sure-handedly. Between the late 1940s and the late '60s, cities such as Detroit and New York lost hundreds of thousands of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, and “over the course of the 1960s, government became the single most important employer of African Americans in northern cities.” Thus, “government became the most important vehicle for the expansion of the black middle class,” and by 1995 “more than half of all black professionals worked in the public sector.”

Blacks' concentration in the public sector

may be a more mixed state of affairs than Sugrue acknowledges, but he rightly emphasizes that in the North, as in the South, “the growth of the black middle class is the most obvious result of the civil rights movement.” Sugrue gives significantly less attention to the rise of black electoral politics in the North than many other historians do, and that too may be the result of his overarching belief that economic power is more important than moral claims, cultural innovations, or election results. *Sweet Land of Liberty* is a richly detailed tome, but many readers may wish Thomas Sugrue had drawn a clearer road map through his own urban sprawl.

DAVID J. GARROW, a senior fellow at Homerton College, University of Cambridge, is the author of *Bearing the Cross* (1987), a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

## First Man of Letters

Reviewed by Brooke Allen

FOR ELEGANCE, INVENTION, AND MELIFLUENCE, the English language is usually considered to have reached its apogee during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. But there is a case to be made for the 18th-century Augustan age, with the great critic, poet, philologist, and journalist Samuel Johnson as its brightest star. Observing Johnson in conversation with Edmund Burke, the young novelist Fanny Burney opined that for sheer brilliance Burke was “the second man in this Kingdom,” but that Johnson was “the first of every kingdom.” Praise indeed, for along with Burke, the most dazzling politician of the age, Johnson’s close social circle included Edward Gibbon (whose *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* achieved a sustained perfection in prose that has perhaps never been matched), Oliver Goldsmith, Adam Smith, Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the great naturalist Joseph Banks, the portraitist Sir

Joshua Reynolds, David Garrick (the Olivier of his day), and the irrepressibly naughty and amusing young James Boswell, who would one day write *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.*

In retrospect, it is easy to see Johnson standing as a sort of dividing line between the distant past and our own era.

While he identified himself as a Tory and saw himself as a conservative and upholder of tradition, this was true only in the most limited sense. He was passionately anti-militarist and anti-imperialist, and (unusually, for his time) deplored his country’s foreign adventures and the oppression of native peoples throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. He was just as passionate in opposing slavery. He spoke out loudly

### SAMUEL JOHNSON: A Biography.

By Peter Martin.  
Belknap/Harvard Univ.  
Press. 608 pp. \$35

### SAMUEL JOHNSON: The Struggle.

By Jeffrey Meyers.  
Basic. 528 pp. \$35