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History 220 – North of Jim Crow, South of Freedom
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Comparing the Miller / Sugrue Frameworks

In this essay I want to focus on how two different frameworks – Miller’s illustration of racial liberalism and Sugrue’s portrayal of reactionary anti-liberalism – are used to explain racialized disparity in Detroit. In the wake of the First Great Migration, racial liberals develop a contradictory ideology which supports progress while refusing to acknowledge existing inequality¹. Furthermore, I’ll describe the role of language while arguing that both ideologies come from a belief that civil rights activism and black migration are socially unacceptable² and demonstrating how this contributes to a detrimental outcome. With nearly 90 percent of Detroit’s white population in segregated areas³ by 1940, it is clear that both ideologies play a major role.

Firstly, northern racial liberals believe that peace (a prerequisite for racial equality) cannot occur if we don’t tolerate the present racial inequality. They prohibit race from public discourse⁴ while marginalizing activism and drawing associations between African-Americans and various societal problems⁵ in order to claim that maintaining the existing racial order is the

¹ Miller, p. vii. Snow Flake Grigsby publishes statistical demonstrations showing that racial inequality exists (p. 166).

² We can see an example of this with Josephine Gomon (Miller p. 247) who supports the Sweets extensively but believes that if she pushes too hard for integration she will lose her position. Similarly, Detroit Mayor Jeffries is essentially persuaded (or intimidated) by rioters into going against black demands for municipal employment, effectively nullifying Grigsby’s efforts (Sugrue p. 110).

³ Sugrue, p. 24.

⁴ Miller, p. 69-70.

⁵ Ibid., p. 265.

best form of progress. For example, the Walker-Roosevelt photograph is a depiction of passive African-American gratitude toward well-intentioned race liberals⁶. Through its ahistorical nature, the photograph ignores the hidden aspects of the long fight for racial equality.

Advocating political equality while refusing state enforcement, northern racial liberals reach their peak during the 1920s⁷. Sugrue also describes how anti-liberals have similar disastrous results on the African-American community's economic well-being – real estate agents actively work to prevent “detrimental” members from being introduced to neighborhoods⁸, which draws on northern race liberals' covert form of residential discrimination. Housing is a major source of conflict between liberals and anti-liberals; local governments have the option of implementing New Deal policies in whatever way they choose⁹. Anti-liberal homeowners lobby local governments even as the New Deal professes commitment to public housing¹⁰. Thus, the militant pro-eminence domain and anti-liberal homeowners¹¹ capitalize on prevailing stereotypes perpetuated by northern race liberals and justify this on the basis of rights rhetoric¹².

⁶ Ibid., p. 2-3.

⁷ Miller, p. 4.

⁸ Sugrue, p. 46.

⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 60-61.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 73.

¹² Just as northern race liberals use the language of respectability and uplift, Sugrue notes (p. 227) that homeowners use the language of individual rights and freedom of choice to perpetuate residential segregation.

Both frameworks describe policies of containment; Miller's colorblind racists mask racial hierarchies while dismissing disruptive elements¹³ as merely opportunistic and self-serving¹⁴. Similarly, anti-liberals weaponize automation (and patriotic sentiment) to regain control over unions and workers' rights¹⁵ while northern race liberals disingenuously claim workforce integration¹⁶. Race liberals like Herbert Russell believe that segregation is natural¹⁷ and deny its economic basis and benefit to whites¹⁸. While anti-liberalism is more activist (conservatives like Cobo quickly put barriers on the expansion of public housing¹⁹), race liberals take gradualism as the best path toward equality²⁰ due to a belief that African-Americans are natural freeloaders²¹. As a result, black activists use this language to challenge race liberals²² in their claim that the

¹³ Miller, p. 5-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵ Sugrue, p. 131. It is also noted that organizations like the UAW are unconcerned about automation except for its effect on the overall employment rate (Sugrue p. 134). Those hit hardest are older black workers (Sugrue p. 145).

¹⁶ Miller, p. 8. On page 38 Miller also notes how workers at the Ford plant are seen as interchangeable parts regardless of their ethnic identification. Essentially, northern race liberalism is primarily a system of race management which is (just like anti-liberalism) a policy of containment.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁹ Sugrue, p. 83-85.

²⁰ Miller, p. 19. Race liberals take the dilapidation of places like Paradise Valley as an indication that black Detroiters naturally have a negative effect on city life (p. 53) thus perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy that allows certain traits such as poverty to be linked to African-Americans for the purpose of seemingly race-neutral policy.

²¹ Ibid., p. 23. This same topic comes up in the Blain and Murphy disagreement (p. 131) and is exacerbated by the welfare state.

²² We discussed this in class, and I think that it is the crux of Miller's argument – that northern racial liberalism is inherently contradictory in its claims about the state of progress. In fact, Miller also says (p. 48) that race liberals believe maintaining urban peace is just as morally upright as progressive reform is.

North is the land of racial freedom²³. For example, the Sweet family's defense uses respectability and the language of rights²⁴.

One key difference to note is that while race liberals view government intervention in the context of political utility and intentionally limit government institutions (as in the case of Smith²⁵), anti-liberals want government entities instituted specifically to halt and contain the spread of the African-American middle class. In Detroit, real estate brokers and the federal government partner to perpetuate segregated neighborhoods²⁶. While both frameworks are a form of victimization and shifting blame, northern racial liberalism is the general reluctance to advocate for social integration²⁷ while anti-liberalism is advocacy against it. Anti-liberals explicitly perceive African-Americans as a threat to their property, stability and livelihood²⁸. These frameworks have different methods and opinions but their goals are largely the same; the effort to contain what is perceived as an urban crisis by forcing civil rights activists to make concessions and compromises between what is morally good and what is politically useful²⁹.

²³ Ibid., p. 25. In class we talked about how African-Americans look for true freedom in the North but remain south of freedom even without Jim Crow.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

²⁶ Sugrue, p. 43.

²⁷ Miller, p. 219.

²⁸ Sugrue, p. 210-11.

²⁹ As Sugrue mentions on page 173, the Fair Employment Practices Commission was simply too small and could not effectively address civil rights concerns – a product of compromise.

References:

Miller, K. (2017). *Managing Inequality - Northern Racial Liberalism in Interwar Detroit*. New York and London: New York University Press.

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