Book examines blacks' struggle for equality in North

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER
Sunday, January 11, 2009
1/11/2009 2:36:35 AM

Working at the YMCA in Jersey City in the 1920s, Anna Arnold learned that economic exploitation and racial discrimination knew no regional boundaries. Northerners and Southerners, she learned, shared a basic philosophy: "In the South, the weapon was a meat axe; in the North, a stiletto. Both are lethal weapons."

With some justification, Thomas Sugrue, a professor of history and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that most histories of the civil rights movement focus on the South. Presenting the struggle as a morality play, pitting nonviolent protestors against segregationist red-necks, they bring Northern blacks back in during the 1960s, where they serve as spoilers, "rioting, embracing a divisive identity politics, and sparking a white backlash." In "Sweet Land of Liberty," Sugrue supplies a sweeping and searching re-interpretation of the black freedom struggle north of the Mason-Dixon line from the 1920s to the present.

Blacks have made significant gains, he acknowledges. Public accommodations are now integrated; good jobs are available, especially in the public sector; and blacks have considerable political clout. Progress, however, did not come because whites rejected prejudice as irrational and pathological. It came from decades of "boycotts, pickets, agitation, riots, lobbying, litigation, and legislation." The white majority, as theologian Reinhold Niebuhr predicted, would not grant blacks equal rights until "forced to do so."

Sugrue demonstrates that racism was — and is — embedded in American economic, legal, and political institutions: a devastating combination of persistent employment discrimination, the flight of capital from Northern cities, the lack of residential mobility, and the deficiencies of unequal education. Consequently, even as they worked to educate whites about racism, civil-rights activists engaged in a power struggle with the political and corporate establishment. At best, Sugrue concludes, victories have been "half-won."

Although he insists it is a mistake to draw a bright line separating militant black nationalists and civil-rights moderates, Sugrue agrees that Black Power activists succumbed to simple slogans, sacrificing a diverse ideology to "dichotomies of integration versus separation, nonviolence versus violence, conks versus Afros," and reinforcing white stereotypes and fears.

In the 21st century, Sugrue points out, blacks and whites have fundamentally different perceptions about the role of race in the United States. Forty-three percent of blacks and only 19 percent of whites believe that the gap in standard of living between the races has widened in the last decade. More than twice as many blacks as whites believe that blacks "almost always" or "frequently" face discrimination in the workplace, real estate, restaurants, or retail outlets.

According to Sugrue, blacks are "closer to describing the reality." Stuck in cities that have lost manufacturing jobs and a viable tax base, young blacks face discrimination from employers who generalize about their "motivation and discipline based on where they live."

It's a grim situation, unlikely to improve any time soon. Even with a black man in the White House, it seems, African-Americans may well remain between Barack and a hard place.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Associate Images: