

# Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus

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For thirty years, the idea of liberal consensus has governed interpretations of post-1945 history. Coined by John Higham in the 1950s, it appeared at a time when older ideologies of the Left and Right seemed to have vanished, leaving broad agreement on the proper political contours of American society. The consensus was thought to pertain primarily to questions of political economy and class relations: Everyone agreed that the productivity of American capitalism and its capacity to spread affluence throughout the social order had made questions of class inequality meaningless and that political conflict would be limited to well-regulated and institutionalized struggles among interest groups over how much affluence would come their way.<sup>1</sup>

By the early 1960s, civil rights had become a central plank of that liberal consensus. These were the years when the nation-state undertook a second Reconstruction to complete the work left unfinished by the first. Popular support for this renewed commitment to racial equality seemed overwhelming. A deep and widespread revulsion against segregation spread through the nation as millions watched Sheriff Bull Connor unleash his dogs and high-pressure hoses on peaceful civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Hundreds of thousands—Black and white—joined the March on Washington in August 1963 while millions endorsed their efforts. In 1964 and 1965, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, the most significant pieces of civil rights legislation in a hundred years. And Lyndon B. Johnson won a landslide victory over Barry Goldwater in 1964, in no small measure because of his outspoken support for civil rights. White southerners, of course, did not share this determination to end discrimination against African Americans. But the fact that the South stood outside the “consensus” did not damage the notion of consensus, for the South was regarded as a backward region that did not truly represent the United States. Once the South was forced to become part of the nation—and the civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965 were meant to accomplish just that—the liberal consensus would prevail there too.

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<sup>1</sup> John Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History,” *Commentary*, 27 (Jan. 1959), 93–100. For the best definition of the idea of liberal consensus, see Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York, 1978), 67–98.

The idea of a consensus on questions of civil rights in the early 1960s has recently attracted the attention of prominent liberal journalists disillusioned by the racially polarized condition of our own time. Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, Jim Sleeper, E. J. Dionne, and others see the early sixties as the last moment when a majority of the American people were truly committed to integration and when the nation's serious racial problems were amenable to solution. Then the consensus fell victim to Black riots, Black nationalism, the New Left, white backlash, and the rise of the New Right. Those taking this point of view offer different explanations for liberalism's collapse, but they all express a nostalgia for the halcyon days of 1963 and 1964 and a desire to recapture that optimistic political moment.<sup>2</sup>

Missing from these liberal journalists' works and from parallel accounts by professional historians is a serious examination of the constituencies that were part of the liberal racial consensus. It is easy to identify a liberal establishment that supported this consensus—in churches and synagogues, in government bureaucracies, in universities and foundations, in sections of the media—but it is difficult to determine how far beyond this establishment the consensus extended. Electoral returns from 1964—when 61 percent voted for LBJ—do not suffice as evidence. Nor do public opinion polls on questions of civil rights.<sup>3</sup> What we want to know is how white Democrats in the North responded when given the opportunity to take a stand on civil rights. To this crucial question, Arnold R. Hirsch and Thomas J. Sugrue offer some startling and disturbing answers.

Hirsch and Sugrue have gone to little-used sources, found actors and behaviors that were simply unknown to us, and used their findings to compel us to rethink what we thought we knew. They have discovered “massive resistance” to integration in the North among working-class and lower-middle-class whites, a resistance dating back, not to 1963, but to the very dawn of the integrationist era—the 1940s. Their discoveries will not provide comfort to those who long for the “peaceful” days of 1963 and 1964. To the contrary, if Hirsch's and Sugrue's findings are borne out by further research into Chicago, Detroit, and other northern cities, we will have to confront the possibility that a liberal racial consensus was never anything more than a comforting mirage.

Hirsch's article on Trumbull Park continues a line of investigation that he began with his important but underappreciated book, *Making the Second Ghetto*, a study of race and housing in Chicago from 1940 to 1960. In that book, he first brought to light what he called “an era of hidden violence,” when working-class and lower-middle-class whites repeatedly attacked Blacks—their persons and their property—who had moved into their neighborhoods. Trumbull Park Homes, a public housing project, figured in that book, but only as the site of one among many incidents

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991); Jim Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York, 1990); E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York, 1991). This perspective also informs the arguments in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Gallup polls in 1964 and 1965 reported that 72% of whites outside the South supported Lyndon B. Johnson's civil rights program. See Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 36.

spanning a fifteen-year period.<sup>4</sup> In his current article, Hirsch has focused on Trumbull Park and, in a riveting narrative, exposed the resistance to integration in all its ugliness.

The white homeowners of South Deering, Chicago, who led the resistance to integration at the Trumbull Park Homes had not opposed this project when it opened in the late 1930s; nor had they terrorized the poor whites who arrived to live in this new and then all-white government housing. White homeowners did object to many of the values and behaviors exhibited by the project's poor whites, but they respected—or at least accepted—the right of those poor to live in their midst. They extended no such courtesy or respect to the Black poor. As soon as the first Black family moved into Trumbull Park in 1953—a “Black” family so “white” in color that no one at the Chicago Housing Authority even realized that the integration of Trumbull Park was underway—the campaign of violence and terror began. White resisters set off aerial bombs (fireworks that exploded in a series of flashes and deafening noises) outside the apartments of Black residents at thirty-minute intervals. They threatened to harm the persons and businesses of white milkmen, shop owners, and others who served Blacks. Gangs of whites assaulted Blacks who left the project to work, to shop, to use local parks, or simply to stroll down the street. Each Black tenant who ventured beyond the project required a detail of six to nine police officers to ensure his or her safety. Four hundred police officers proved insufficient to protect a group of Blacks who, on July 10, 1954, went to a local park to play baseball. Blacks could not even find sanctuary in neighborhood churches: the doors of South Deering Methodist Church were for years closed to them by the godly whites who worshiped inside. Blacks could enter Saint Kevin's Catholic Church for mass but they could never leave without being verbally, and sometimes physically, abused. This terror took a toll on Trumbull Park Blacks, and many fled to safer environs. The wonder is that any stayed. By 1959, the Black presence had leveled off to twenty families, a token number that local whites felt they could tolerate. Only then did the violence and assaults taper off. The whites of South Deering claimed victory.

This is a gripping and harrowing tale, one that Hirsch has painstakingly and imaginatively reconstructed from a range of little-used sources, the most interesting of which are the spy reports submitted by American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) “agents” who had infiltrated the workplaces and taverns where South Deering whites planned their attacks. Hirsch's work also reveals the huge gap that separated the white segregationists of South Deering and the white liberals determined to integrate the project. Virtually all the liberals—and there were many of them, working through the ACLU, the Chicago Housing Authority, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Catholic Interracial Council—came from outside South Deering. They descended on South Deering, just as they had on Montgomery, Alabama, to stanch the ooze of prejudice from the pores of local red-necks. As Hirsch draws us into his story, we are less and less able to see the North as fundamentally different from

<sup>4</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (New York, 1983).

the South. Thus the aptness of Hirsch's selection of the words "massive resistance" for his title—a brilliant appropriation that obliterates the distance long thought to divide North from South.

But how representative was Trumbull Park? Liberals of the time treated it as an aberration, "a running sore" on an otherwise healthy body politic. In another context, Lizabeth Cohen has made a strong case for what we might call "South Deering exceptionalism." South Deering steelworkers, she noted in her study of the Chicago working class between the wars, were among the few groups of mass-production workers who never joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and who were never exposed to the CIO's vaunted campaign to extirpate ethnic and racial prejudice from union ranks. In trying to explain this resistance to the CIO, Cohen stressed the "ethnic insulation, racial exclusiveness, geographical separatism, and employee dependency" on corporate welfare programs of South Deering. From her perspective, the parochialism and prejudice of South Deering workers are worthy of study, but these traits hardly characterized the majority of industrial workers of Chicago or elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> It follows, then, that massive resistance by South Deering whites in the 1950s was atypical. Such behavior might appear in other northern urban pockets (such as South Boston) left untouched by the political and social revolutions of the New Deal, but it would not surface among the working-class millions who had made New Deal liberalism their fighting creed.

Thomas Sugrue's article challenges this whole line of thinking. Sugrue convincingly demonstrates that the white hostility to Blacks identified by Hirsch in a neighborhood that the CIO failed to conquer was just as prevalent in a city that the CIO and the New Deal "owned"—Detroit, land of the mighty United Automobile Workers (UAW). Shifting the study of Detroit away from the factories and the capital-labor conflict that have long dominated post-1920 Detroit historiography and toward neighborhoods, home ownership, and city politics, Sugrue has discovered another powerful social movement in Detroit, running parallel to and intersecting with the city's famous labor movement. This was a movement of working-class and lower-middle-class Detroit homeowners—many of them CIO unionists—determined to keep their neighborhoods lily-white.

Drawing on a little-known 1951 report by the Wayne University sociologist Arthur Kornhauser, Sugrue shows that a remarkable 85 percent of poor and working-class whites—and a large majority of Detroit CIO members—supported residential segregation. Mobilizing themselves into countless neighborhood associations (Sugrue has identified 192 in the years from 1943 to 1965) they quickly established their influence in city politics, splitting the Democratic party and handing victory after victory to conservative Republicans who supported segregation. By the late 1940s, these groups had already fashioned a conservative populism that most historians believe only crystallized in the 1960s and 1970s. Their grievance was the one that George Wallace used with such devastating effect against Great Society liberals: that liberal elites were conspiring with the dangerous Black poor to undermine the

<sup>5</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990), 354.

rights of the "people"—the people understood to include only white homeowners. In Detroit, the local government's effort to build public housing—meaning Black housing—in white neighborhoods provided evidence of the liberal conspiracy at work. More than thirty years before "Reagan Democrats" began undermining the New Deal coalition in national politics, "Jeffries Democrats" and "Cobo Democrats" were wrecking the New Deal order in Detroit.<sup>6</sup>

The UAW was powerless to stop this political movement. In mayoral elections in 1945 and 1949, pro-labor and pro-New Deal Democrats went down to defeat. After the 1949 elections, when its appeals to class loyalty had failed to dissuade union members from voting for the affluent Republican candidate, a bloodied UAW limped away from local politics to lick its wounds, effectively ceding control of the city to the segregationists. Sugrue's tale is as potent and grim as Hirsch's. There does not seem to have been as much raw violence in Detroit as in Trumbull Park (though Sugrue has found evidence of over two hundred separate incidents involving harassment, assault, vandalism, and arson), but the whites' determination to live separately from Blacks was every bit as intense.

Detroit was not identical to other northern metropolises such as Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Detroit, for example, had a much higher population of southern white migrants than those other cities, a characteristic that Sugrue does not sufficiently analyze. One wonders, too, about the long-term social effects of the Ford Motor Company's policy of hiring Black workers to weaken the labor market power and union strength of white auto workers. Nevertheless, the evidence from Detroit is so strong and Detroit's position as a major urban center so plain that Sugrue's extraordinary findings will compel others to look for similar patterns of racial hostility in other cities.

We need not wait for the results of that research to begin rethinking the history of race relations and liberalism in the post-1945 urban North. As a result of Hirsch's and Sugrue's work, we need to revisit the violent clashes between whites and Blacks in the 1960s and treat them not as sudden and inexplicable explosions of rage but as the continuation of a twenty-year-old pattern of racial violence. It should not shock us, as it did Martin Luther King Jr., that a peaceful, open housing protest march in Chicago in 1966 was greeted by a riotous white mob. ("I've never seen anything like it," an uncomprehending King commented afterward. "I have never seen—even in Mississippi or Alabama—mobs as hostile and hate-filled as I've seen in Chicago.") Nor should it surprise us that Blacks in the North increasingly turned to violence themselves. The terrible Detroit riot of 1967 occurred in a city known to its Black inhabitants, not for its civility and commitment to civil rights, but for the racial hatred that was a staple of local politics. What was new about the riot was not the turn to violence but the determination of Detroit Blacks to beat Detroit whites at their own savage game. We urgently need new studies of how the racial

<sup>6</sup> Sugrue agrees with Michael Kazin's identification of the 1940s as a critical moment in the emergence of a conservative populism. See his important book: Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York, 1995), 4, 165–94, 221–44.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Weisbrodt, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1991), 183.

attitudes of Blacks in Detroit, Chicago, and elsewhere evolved in response to the white hostility they encountered in politics, in neighborhoods, and on the street.<sup>8</sup>

In Hirsch's and Sugrue's works, liberals appear not as dominant political players who controlled an electoral coalition or orchestrated an ideological consensus, but as one of several vocal political groups. Liberals were dedicated to the cause of racial justice, well placed in powerful government institutions, but separated from a majority of Democratic voters by class background, residence, and ideology. They were a decided electoral and ideological minority, lacking both the political clout and the moral authority to fashion a broad Democratic consensus on racial matters. At certain times they seemed stronger—Sugrue and Hirsch both suggest that the late 1950s represented a moment of gathering liberal strength, reflecting in part the growing importance of Black voters in municipal elections—but liberals were never able to reconcile the conflicting claims of Black and white Democrats or to drive out the racial anger and suspicion that had taken hold of both constituencies. Hirsch's and Sugrue's findings force us to ask whether New Deal liberals and liberalism ever ruled the United States as liberals (and their critics on the left and right) have long thought they once did.<sup>9</sup>

Hirsch's and Sugrue's works, finally, compel us to give more thought to the roots of northern white antipathy toward Blacks. Hirsch barely comments on this difficult issue in his article, perhaps because he gave it such careful and insightful attention in his book, *Making the Second Ghetto*.<sup>10</sup> Sugrue, on the other hand, tackles it head on. To his credit, Sugrue does not attempt to find a single key to white rage. Instead, he argues for the influence of a multitude of factors, demographic, economic, political, and cultural. The great Black migration of the 1940s put acute pressure on Detroit's existing housing stock, requiring the expansion of Black areas of settlement beyond their old boundaries. Sharp declines in the number of manufacturing jobs in Detroit proper made working-class whites anxious about their economic well-being and the value of their largest economic investment—their real estate—in particular. Real estate agents exploited white homeowners' fears about the consequences of Blacks moving into their neighborhoods, hoping to create panic selling at bargain prices. Discriminatory federal housing policies had led white homeowners to believe that they had a right to live in racially exclusive neighborhoods. The many southern and eastern European ethnics in the ranks of white homeowners had only recently been accepted as "white" and were determined to preserve that skin privilege at all costs. And the political climate of the Cold War made the traditional style of UAW class politics difficult to sustain while allowing conservatives to impugn the campaign for integration as a Communist plot. That Sugrue is able to show the influence of all these factors (and others) on racial politics

<sup>8</sup> For an example of the kind of studies we need, see Heather Thompson, "The Politics of Labor, Race, and Liberalism in the Auto Plants and the Motor City: Detroit, 1940–1980" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Evidence is also beginning to emerge that liberal ideas did not fully rule capital-labor relations in the 1950s. See Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Urbana, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch's book should be read as a companion piece to his article. See Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, esp. 40–67, 171–211.

in Detroit is testimony to the breadth of his historical vision and the sharpness of his historical intelligence.<sup>11</sup> Still, after finishing his essay, I wished he had pondered more the intersections of class, ethnicity, and race and how they produced such virulent white anger and fear.

The Detroit working class of the 1940s and 1950s, in Sugrue's telling, was economically vulnerable. Black workers were hit hardest by recessions and the shutdown of manufacturing plants, but white workers were also hurt. The large numbers of eastern and southern European ethnics in the white working class also experienced cultural vulnerability. Because they had only recently been accepted into the ranks of white Americans, their memories of exclusion were sharp and their fear of expulsion from those ranks great. Those memories and fears made them determined to cling to their whiteness and to protect its privileges.

But did something in their working-class status make the appropriation of "whiteness" all the more important to these ethnic Americans? David R. Roediger has answered that question affirmatively in *The Wages of Whiteness*; his compelling study of class, ethnicity, and race in the antebellum urban North. The Irish immigrants of that era found themselves concentrated in the lowliest and most back-breaking manual occupations, occupations associated in the minds of most Americans with dirt and dark African skins. The Irish, according to Roediger, were quick to embrace a whiteness that would distinguish them from the African American laborers whose hard lot, in truth, they shared. But even as they sought to put distance between themselves and Blacks, the Irish were profoundly attracted to African American culture. In that culture's alleged simplicity, playfulness, and sensuality they discerned a naturalness and wholesomeness that reminded them of a culture they had lost: their own preindustrial culture that did not survive the regimentation demanded of Irish proletarians in industrializing America. The Irish could never acknowledge this attraction directly (although they did so indirectly through Blackface and minstrelsy), for that would drag them down to the level of the African American. The repressed longing expressed itself as loathing instead.<sup>12</sup>

At first glance this argument about the Irish in the 1840s seems to offer little purchase on eastern and southern European factory workers in the 1940s. The latter labored in jobs and under conditions that, however difficult, were significantly better than what the Irish had known in the 1840s. Moreover, these workers were as many as three generations removed from the peasant cultures of Europe; their ethnic identity in the 1940s was as much a product of the American industrial society in which they and their parents had long lived as a holdover from preindustrial Europe. Thus, they would not have experienced the same cultural alienation as the Irish immigrants of the 1840s.

Other evidence, however, suggests the relevance of Roediger's analysis. In virtually all the Detroit auto plants, for example, Blacks were disproportionately concentrated

<sup>11</sup> Sugrue's book will offer a more extensive discussion of the factors contributing to white racial hatred in Detroit. See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race, Industrial Decline, and Housing in Detroit, 1940–1960* (Princeton, forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991).

in the dirtiest and physically toughest jobs, an occupational pattern that invigorated the older association between dirt and dark skins.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, ethnic whites of the 1940s, like the Irish of the 1840s, seemed to view Blacks as less bound by the strict morals and discipline that they regarded as essential to their own ethnic communities.<sup>14</sup> As Sugrue shows, many white homeowners opposed integration because they believed that Blacks would bring to white neighborhoods the pornography, prostitution, gambling, partying, and "general riotous living" that whites associated with Paradise Valley, Detroit's principal ghetto. We would need to do research into the cultural lives of working-class whites in Detroit to learn whether the white loathing of Paradise Valley concealed a secret and repressed longing to partake of Black sensuality and "partying." Similarly, more work is needed to ascertain whether the fears of interracial sex that Sugrue and Hirsch have uncovered among white segregationists hint at hidden desires. But such projects seem worth doing, especially given what we know about white America's twentieth-century fascination with the music, dance, language, dress, and sexuality of African American culture.

A Roediger-style analysis generates other interesting questions about race relations in the postwar North. Did white groups less historically bound by wage labor and less worried about falling to the level of the African American feel freer to commit themselves to racial equality and to explore their interest in Black culture?<sup>15</sup> Sugrue's finding that support for racial segregation was significantly lower among middle- and upper-income Detroit whites suggests that this question is well worth pursuing. How much of the disproportionate involvement of American Jews in the civil rights movement can be explained by their relative freedom from the constraints of working-class life? Or, should Jewish commitment to racial equality be understood in more traditional terms — as an expression of a felt kinship with Blacks that resulted from the Jews' encounter with racial anti-Semitism?<sup>16</sup>

These questions admit no easy answers, and it is unfair to expect Hirsch and Sugrue to have pursued them in articles that are already rich in research and insight. It is a tribute to their superb work on massive resistance in Chicago and Detroit that we can begin to see the intersections of class, ethnicity, and race in new ways. They have given us all a great deal to think about and set forth a large agenda for future research in this vitally important field.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, "Politics of Labor," ch. 4.

<sup>14</sup> This Euro-American view of African Americans raises the question of whether the divergent historical experiences of these two groups in the United States led them to develop significantly different views of work and leisure, discipline and gratification. For intriguing speculations on this matter, see Robin D. G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993), 85–86, 101–2.

<sup>15</sup> See David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994), 190–91.

<sup>16</sup> This focus on Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement is not meant to ignore the antagonisms and antipathies in Black-Jewish relations or to suggest that "whiteness" was irrelevant to postwar Jewish identity. See Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); and Jerald E. Podair, "White Values, Black Values: The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Controversy and New York City Culture, 1965–1975," *Radical History Review*, 59 (Spring 1994), 36–59.