

Back to the Future: *Reflections on Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970*

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The purpose of my presentation is to provide you with an overview of **Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970**. More than a decade has passed since a team of scholars and I wrote this book. Time, however, does not erode the value, importance, and opportuneness of scholarship. Indeed, once written, books should be continuously studied so they can be constantly mined for new nuggets of knowledge, understanding, and insight. **Race and the City** is no exception. So, this occasion gives me the opportunity to reexamine this work and share with you my reflections. In this presentation, I will outline the book's conceptual scaffolding and then discuss its key findings and insights.

The Conceptual Framework

History books do not predict the future, but they can provide insight into the past, understanding of the present, and perspectives for the future. Knowledge of the past, then, can help scholars, planners, and policy makers understand contemporary society and provide them with the insight needed to

craft policies to attack current problems. This idea informed the research and writing of **Race and the City**.

Cincinnati holds a distinctive place in the history of race relations and African Americans in the United States. It is a border city sitting on the boundary separating the North and South. This marginality was most apparent during the antebellum era when Cincinnati was a dividing line between slavery and freedom: a city with a population consisting of numerous southerners, aggressive abolitionists, and African Americans.

Thus, the racist ideals and practices of conservative white southerners and the liberalism and antiracism of progressive white northerners informed the city's culture. Also, African Americans participated in the social processes that informed Cincinnati's culture. In this liberal borderland setting, they took advantage of their greater freedom to build their community and to fight against racism, slavery, and social injustice.

The blending of the ideas and practices of southern whites, northern whites, and African Americans caused Cincinnati to develop a multiple personality—a white southern, a white northern, and an African American personality in the same urban body; three cultures, three unreconciled strivings; three warring ideals driving the development of the same city. This tripartite, this dialectic, this contradiction, is central to understanding the history of Cincinnati and its African American population.

In this context, **Race and the City** locates Cincinnati in the city building process and examines how this process of continuously building and rebuilding

the city affected the experiences of African Americans over time. So, then, at one level, the history of Black Cincinnati is tied to the development of the city and the vision, theoretical constructs, definitions, and policy formulations of urban leaders. At another, it is tied to the vision, theoretical constructs, definitions, and struggles waged by African Americans themselves. The history of black Cincinnati from 1820 to 1970, then, is a narrative about the interplay of forces operating inside and outside the African American Community; it is a tale about the efforts of blacks over time to secure for themselves a place in the city. It is a saga that chronicles a protracted struggle in which some things changed in dramatic ways, while other things remained essentially the same.

Blacks and the City Building Process

Cincinnati, at each stage of its development, was characterized by a specific type of built form and by an urban leadership who sought to build the city in a specific way. For example, in 1850, during the walking city era, blacks and whites shared residential space. Blacks were clustered and over represented in certain parts of the city, but they did not live in a segregated residential environment. Rather, they resided in a multiracial residential setting where people from across the race and class spectrum lived within a stone's throw of each other. Physical proximity, however, did not mean social interaction. Although blacks and whites lived in the same neighborhoods, they resided in separate social worlds.

Tensions did exist and sometimes erupted into violence. But in that epoch, the issues whites had with blacks were not related to the residential

environment. Indeed, in a certain sense, because blacks and whites were affected by the same neighborhood problems, the sharing of neighborhood space created a shared residential experience that helped African Americans. For example, during this period urban leaders placed the housing problem of ordinary workers and poor people at the top of their urban reform agenda. This happened because these leaders felt that solving this problem was central to building a great city. For example, as early as 1865, the Cincinnati Relief Union (CRU), an association founded to aid the poor, argued that the *curse of the tenement house* not only caused unsanitary, unsafe, and deplorable living conditions among the poor, but also threatened the city's growth and development. Tenement reform became the top urban priority. To solve this problem, urban leaders fought for passage of building codes, which mandated improvements of dwellings deemed unsafe for habitation and for the construction of model tenements.

During the opening decades of the 20th century this viewpoint changed and Cincinnati's leaders redefined the urban problem and formulated a new set of city building priorities. The emergence of Cincinnati's industrial economy combined with the dramatic increase in the City's population and the unprecedented growth of congestion caused urban leaders to formulate a new vision to guide the city building process. During these chaotic transitional years, a group consisting of business, political, and civil, as well as housing reformers emerged to plan and guide the city building process.

This urban planning group conceptualized the central city and its surrounding suburban hinterland, including Newport and Covington, Kentucky as

one big city and made solving the housing problem of higher paid workers and the middle and upper classes their top priority. The urban planning group thought and acted in metropolitan terms, and they called for the construction of a new model of residential development anchored by homeownership and the single-family dwelling unit. Moreover, they said the city building process should be guided by *official* city planning and that the new residential environment should be constructed at the metropolitan level.

The first hint of this shift in thinking came in 1912, when Mayor Henry T. Hunt called for an active housing movement that would “secure a real home throughout the metropolitan region for every man, woman, and child in Cincinnati” and predicted that the proposed rapid transit system would allow wage earners more freedom in choosing their housing locations. Hunt seemed to be focusing on the growing significance of the single-family, owner-occupied house and the development of new neighborhoods on the city’s periphery and in the suburban region.

Then in its 1921 report, the Better Housing League (BHL) called for a new direction in the city building process when they said, “Any city’s greatest asset is its homes....” Tenement houses do not provide real homes, no matter how well constructed. They are not the best places for children to live in... We must see to it that the single-family habit is continued.” The report stressed, “It would be a short-sighted policy to encourage the construction of small homes and to foster home ownership and at the same time fail to take every precaution to see to it that the residential areas are not properly protected.”

The quest to build a residential environment anchored by mass homeownership had a profound impact on race relations and the experience of African Americans. Operating in the context of a market economy, building an economically rational residential environment meant that neighborhoods had to be segregated on the basis of housing type and cost. As a result, the BHL and other reform groups developed a land use regulatory system based on building codes, zoning laws, and subdivision regulations.

Zoning codes proved to be the most powerful of these regulatory mechanisms. Enacted in 1924, Cincinnati's comprehensive zoning laws created three different types of residential areas. Class A reserved land exclusively for single-family homes, while Class B permitted both two- and four-family dwelling units. Class C allowed for neighborhoods where any type of housing could be built. The zoning laws codified the city's emerging class stratified residential environment and legally reinforced the economic walls partitioning the various residential districts.

Large numbers of African Americans arrived in Cincinnati when neighborhoods stratified on the basis of housing tenure, cost, and type were developing. The emergence of this type of residential environment, combined with the low incomes of African Americans, produced Cincinnati's first ghetto slum in the West End of the Basin. The residential options of African Americans were limited by their low incomes. Much of the new owner-occupied housing and upscale rental units were beyond their economic reach. The residential land-use structure, then, forced the majority of blacks to find housing in the low-rent

district, located in the West End. By 1930 more than 30,000 blacks, comprising 67% of the black population lived here.

The West End was not simply a ghetto. It was also a slum. It contained the oldest and most dilapidated housing in the city. Also, it was a turbulent region that was being transformed into the economic and political center of the metropolis. Between 1900 and 1940 it became a land use conversion zone where hundreds of tenements were destroyed to make way for new development. Almost 50 percent of the buildings demolished in Cincinnati were found there, while one-third of the city's new factories, offices, and service shops had basin locations. The blending of omnipresent destruction and construction with a concentration of social problems caused the basin to become a very undesirable place to live.

Many blacks wanted to move out of the declining residential district to a better place to live and raise their families, but the housing reformers and urban planning group wanted to restrict them to cheap housing zones. Urban leaders felt the movement of low-income groups into high-income residential areas would destabilize the housing market by negatively affecting housing values. In this sense, housing reformers and white homeowners considered African Americans a *menace to the city* and sought to keep them out of higher income neighborhoods.

The rise of homeownership and class-stratified neighborhood gave birth to a new urban culture that mirrored, supported, and reinforced Cincinnati's evolving land rent structure and social geography. In the 1920s home buying

was a risky business, and homebuyers could lose their investment if the house lost value or if the mortgage was not renewed. This commodification of housing transformed neighborhoods into *defended territories* where residents sought to keep out people or establishments that might threaten the home investment. In this new economic environment, “protecting the home investment,” meant keep blacks out of white working and middle-class neighborhoods. Racism was extended to the living place in Cincinnati.

Concurrently, the emergence of the ghetto-slum led to new ways of thinking about the relationship between place, culture, and behavior. Before the ghetto-slum, people did not believe that such a relationship existed. However, after its emergence and commodification of the living place, the urban planning group argued that the ghetto-slum not only identified the place where African Americans lived, but it was also a material reflection of their attitudes, values, and beliefs. This interweaving of place, behavior, and culture made it appear that African Americans were responsible for the blight and social problems found in their community. This is what the newspaper editor and black chronicler, Wendell P. Dabney, had in mind when he said; “the whites claim that the property of a locality depreciates in value when Negroes become residents.” In essence, whites believed that blacks would reproduce the ghetto-slum anywhere they lived in the metropolis.

This linking together of place, behavior, and behavior created a new white consciousness and urban culture based on the belief that African Americans blighted neighborhoods. Within this context, the idea that blacks and whites

should be separated in physical, as well as social space emerged. This way of thinking gave rise to the notion of “homogenous neighborhoods.” The urban planning group, for example, said that good housing practices demanded that people with differing backgrounds and social mores be separated in geographic space. They said that both blacks and poor whites lacked the appropriate skills to function well in an urban setting. If they scattered into better neighborhoods, they would carry blight with them. Thus, they had to be kept out.

This way of thinking about neighborhoods placed blacks in an unenviable position. Racism and the color-caste occupational system confined blacks to the bottom of the occupational structure. Their resulting low-incomes forced them to live in the city’s worse neighborhoods, and whites believed these locales were blighted because African Americans lived in them. To make the situation even more complex, the urban planning group divided the low-income population into the deserving and undeserving poor. This concept states that the undeserving poor lived in the worst housing and neighborhoods and that these conditions reflected their values and beliefs. The urban planning group said that nothing could be done to improve the plight of the undeserving poor. They were best left to the social worker, the police, and the courts. In contrast, the deserving poor, the urban planning group believed, were either newcomers to the city or workers temporarily down on their luck. They could be helped. Consistent with the idea of homogenous neighborhoods, the urban planning group felt that the deserving and undeserving poor should be separated in physical space, lest the former adversely affect the latter.

One problem with this perspective is that most of the undeserving poor were African Americans. Thus, wittingly or unwittingly, the urban planning group called for the segregation of poor blacks and whites and suggested that many blacks were undeserving poor people who should be left to the social worker, the police, and the courts. This way of thinking about neighborhoods and African Americans was reinforced by the idea of cultural pluralism.

This viewpoint conceptualized the United States as having one culture that was composed of a series of equal, or potentially equal, racial and ethnic groups, each with its own subcultures. This way of thinking justified racially segregated communities that should be institutionally separate and gave efforts to keep African Americans separated from whites in physical space a positive tone. This new model of residential development and the racist urban culture and the urban culture it spawned guided, and continues to guide, the growth and development of metropolitan Cincinnati.

The urban planning group did not ignore the housing and social problems of blacks. They truly believed that good housing and neighborhood conditions produced good citizens with middle-class values and beliefs. However, they pursued their solutions to the problems facing blacks within the framework of a racist urban culture and economically rational housing market. So, then, good intentions notwithstanding, racism, the business creed, and the economic goal of transforming the basin into the economic and political center of the metropolis *cancelled* their goal of creating good housing and neighborhood conditions for African Americans. Put another way, a structural mismatch existed between the

problems of African Americans and the solutions proposed by the urban planning group.

Chasing their own Dreams: Building Neighborhoods and Communities

African Americans did not passively accept this new urban reality. They had their own vision, theories, and concepts about Cincinnati and their place in it. So, throughout this volatile period of change, blacks tried to operationalize their own vision of the city and region. For example, not all blacks lived in the ghetto-slum. Regardless of the goals of housing reformers and the city-planning group, operating in their own interests, blacks scattered across the face of the metropolis, finding places to live in virtually every part of Cincinnati.

Low-income African Americans even moved into the suburban region, where they built crudely constructed shacks. Housing reformers and the city-planning group viewed these residential clusters as *bad spots* that threatened homeownership and residential development, but to the African Americans living there, these dwellings, no matter how crude, were *home sweet home*.

African Americans also attacked their complex socioeconomic problems. The black social welfare movement emerged as a response to the problems caused by ghetto-slum formation, poor housing, low-wage jobs, and persistent racism. Within this context, the black sociologist and social worker emerged as a new type of black leader. Coming out of the Progressive Era's social justice movement, these leaders sought to apply the new methods of social sciences to the analysis and resolution of social and economic problems facing African

Americans. They became frontline workers grappling with the interactive social and economic problems confronting African Americans.

In Cincinnati, the black sociologist James Hathaway Robinson and the Negro Civic Welfare Committee became the driving force behind the black social welfare movement during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Operating within a black notion of cultural pluralism, Robinson called for a strategy focusing on strengthening the black community internally while simultaneously making African Americans an equal participant in the larger metropolis. Significantly, he believed that the delivery social services in the black community should be carried out in a holistic fashion with all activities centrally directed. Robinson even tried to bring the social welfare activities of churches and other black institutions under the umbrella of the Negro Civil Welfare Committee. This centralization of work, he believed, was key to addressing successfully the myriad problems facing the African American community.

The Second World War ushered in another epoch in the development of Cincinnati and the African American community. In this period, black population growth, slum clearance, superhighway construction, and the rise of the metropolis led to the formation of a second ghetto in the once-exclusive hilltop section of Cincinnati. These changes generated racial tensions as African Americans intensified their search for good housing and their fight against racism and social injustice.

During this period housing reformers ended their support for residential segregation and suggested that the creation of integrated neighborhoods was the

best way to solve the housing crisis and build a great city. The fight for open housing and integrated neighborhoods became a new tactic for improving housing and neighborhood conditions among blacks. However, this call for integrated neighborhoods did not consider the relationship between classism, race, and the housing market. Consequently, Except for few locales, the integrated neighborhood ideal would not take hold in Cincinnati, and the overarching trend continued to be the segregation of neighborhoods on the basis of race and class.

Even so, during this period, blacks became even more aggressive in their fight for social equality. African Americans and their white allies built new organizations to respond to the conflicts and tensions produced by the social and physical changes taking place in the city and region. Blacks not only formed their own organizations, but also worked closely with other groups. However, even when working with multiracial organizations, African Americans pursued their own interests.

In 1943 blacks worked closely with whites to establish the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee in the aftermath of the Detroit Riot, which left 25 blacks and nine whites dead. While the success of the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee in combating prejudice and discrimination might be debatable, its contribution in easing racial tensions and promoting cultural diversity is not. They helped to keep a lid on violence during a very tense period in Cincinnati's history.

The willingness of African Americans to work with the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee also suggest that blacks recognized the need for **different types of organizations** and **for different approaches** to their struggle for social, economic, and racial justice. Although tensions sometimes existed among the different groups working with blacks, and although organizations often had varying ideologies and agendas, their activities nevertheless were complementary. Some marched, demonstrated, picketed, and litigated, while still others worked quietly behind the scenes, educating, negotiating, and pleading the case for change.

The Cincinnati Urban League, for example, was one of those organizations that believed in working behind the scenes. After its founding in 1948, it quietly worked to end hiring discrimination and to weaken the color-caste occupational system that kept blacks tied to the bottom rung of the economic ladder. Ironically, the effectiveness of the Urban League and other organizations that worked behind the scenes seemed to be dependent on the presence of a broader militant movement. Demonstrating, picketing, petitioning, and haranguing appeared to convince power brokers that it was to their interest to negotiate with more "responsible" leaders. The point is that only by viewing the full range of organizational activity inside and outside the black community can the role of any one organization working of on behalf of the race can be fully understood.

Conclusion

On June 13, 1967, black Cincinnati exploded. Riots took place in the communities of Avondale, Walnut Hills, Evanston, Corryville, Mt. Auburn, Clifton, Millville, and the West End. The anger and deep frustration that led to the “fires, acts of hoodlumism, looting, and anarchy” are best captured in Langston Hughes’s poem, “Harlem”—What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun...or does it explode?

Back in 1967, more than 140 years had passed since blacks first settled in Cincinnati. As the city moved through time some problems had been resolved, while others remained. Without a doubt black Cincinnatians had made progress. Yet, in some respect, everything had changed and everything had remained the same.

Race and class defined the position of blacks in Cincinnati’s plural but unequal society. Blacks continued to be locked in the city’s economic basement, unemployment and declining labor force participation, along with family instability, were emerging problems, and many blacks were still living in dilapidated housing. Thus, in retrospect, the riot was both an epilogue and prologue of the black experience in Cincinnati. It summarized decades of having dreams deferred, while simultaneously introducing the dawning of a new era when unemployment, underemployment, poverty and social problems would replace civil rights as the dominant issue on the black agenda for advancement.

It should be stressed that **Race and the City** is more than a story about failure and disappointment, it is also a narrative about triumph and hope, about

blacks and whites working together to build a great city, while simultaneously battling to end racial, economic, and social injustice. Lastly, it is important to remember that history books do not predict the future, but they can provide knowledge of the past, insight into the present, and perspectives for the future, which all can be used to facilitate the resolution of contemporary problems. Hopefully, policy makers and other concerned about building a more just Cincinnati will find the knowledge, insight, and perspective provide by this history book useful.

