



Thomas Sugrue is the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Endowed Term Professor of History.

FORGOTTEN STRUGGLE

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE NORTHERN FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

BY PRIYA RATNESHWAR

PHOTO BY GREGORY BENSON

Conventional narratives of the civil rights movement focus on the epic struggles against Jim Crow in Southern battlegrounds such as Selma, Alabama and Memphis, Tennessee. But historian Tom Sugrue recalls stark examples of racial inequality and conflict punctuating his childhood far north of the Mason-Dixon Line in Detroit, Michigan. The city, Sugrue says, “was intensely racially divided during a period of enormous contestation over race and politics, from urban riots and uprisings to the furious debates surrounding the election of Coleman Young, the city’s first black mayor, in 1973.”

At five years old, Sugrue remembers watching National Guard vehicles roll past his street during the 1967 riots, which lasted five days and left 43 dead. He recalls his neighborhood changing from being all white to almost all black over a period of three years in the early '70s. And he remembers leaving Detroit at age 10, when his parents followed the migration of whites out of the city to the suburbs.

As a child, Sugrue did not fully understand these formative experiences, but their impact is evident in his influential body of research on 20th-century American politics, urban history, civil rights and race. His 1996 book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, won numerous awards for its exploration of the economic decline that has plagued Detroit and other industrial cities since World War II. Most

recently, Random House published *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, which was a finalist for a Los Angeles Times Book Prize. The book challenges traditional histories of the civil rights movement with its high-resolution account of the struggle for racial equality in the North.

“The story of civil rights in the North has been ignored, in part, because the Southern story we tell is a very compelling one,” Sugrue says. “The Southern story follows a narrative framework that is easy to tell and retell—of immorality, nonviolent struggle, suffering and redemption.”

Many of these conventional histories begin with the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* and end with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, all of which

FORGOTTEN STRUGGLE

helped dismantle Southern-style racial segregation.

“The North shows up as a spoiler in these histories,” Sugrue says. “The argument goes that when the movement went to the North—that is, when Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began to organize in Northern cities like Chicago—they faced resistance, the skepticism of a rising Black Power movement, the urban riots of the late 1960s and the tumultuous politics that followed. The problem with this story is that it ignores or downplays the long roots of civil rights activism, both in the South and in the North. They

ALMOST ALL OF THE 25 MOST SEGREGATED METROPOLITAN AREAS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE IN THE NORTHEAST AND MIDWEST. THAT OBSERVATION SERVES AS A SOBERING REMINDER THAT MANY OF THE ISSUES SURROUNDING THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY REMAIN UNRESOLVED.

go back much further than the mid-1950s and involved all sorts of activists whose stories were more prosaic and who were dealing with issues that couldn't always be defined in moral binaries.”

Sugrue explains, for example, that many scholars of the Black Power movement offer a simplistic dichotomy between “good” Black Power and “bad” Black Power. They claim either that the movement offered a radical challenge to the status quo or that its strident rhetoric led to the rise of white backlash politics and a new conservatism.

The unexpected twists and turns in Sugrue's research on the history of Black Power led him to disagree with both of these interpretations. He found that the movement was not something new that emerged in the '60s when civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael coined the phrase “Black Power.” Black nationalism and self-determination, Sugrue says, have had an important place in African American politics since the periods of slavery and Reconstruction. Sugrue also found that Black Power advocates formed surprising alliances in order to advance their goals, working

with groups ranging from business leaders in riot-torn communities to members of the Nixon administration.

Sweet Land of Liberty expands the chronology of the civil rights struggle to cover more than 80 years—from the 1920s to the present—and reveals battles not generally associated with the North. For example, Sugrue uncovers forgotten boycotts against segregated restaurants, movie theaters and swimming pools in the North that predated and inspired some of the famous sit-ins in the South during the '60s. He also found that the North was critical in combating segregated education.

“I found dozens of cases of grassroots activists, of black women mostly, taking their children out of inferior schools, picketing and marching, and often supporting lawsuits to try to change the patterns of education in the North,” he says. “This is especially prevalent in the 1940s and in the years right after *Brown*. By the late 1950s, Northern activists are taking the *Brown* decision—which really was viewed by the lawyers who argued it in the Supreme Court as applying mostly to the South—and they begin to argue that it has application for education in the North.”

Housing was another crucial civil rights issue in the North. Activists fought this battle on a number of fronts, from attempting to open suburban housing markets to African Americans to building self-consciously integrated neighborhoods to improving conditions in inner-city tenements and apartment buildings. However, for much of the 20th century many whites fought the movement of African Americans into their communities. And even some of the best attempts to diversify housing in the suburbs failed because of local opposition to the construction of low-income or high-density housing. “It's the area where there have been the fewest victories in the North,” Sugrue says, “and where the obstacles to change are the greatest.”

Sugrue begins *Sweet Land of Liberty* by noting that almost all of the 25 most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States are in the Northeast and Midwest. That observation serves as a sobering reminder that many of the issues surrounding the struggle for racial equality remain unresolved. The book was published on November 4, 2008, the same day the United States took the historic step of electing its first black president. But Sugrue dissents from claims that Barack Obama's election represents a “post-racial” era. Indeed, he believes that the Northern history of civil rights provides the back story needed to understand the political and cultural forces from which the Obama presidency rose.

“Obama himself publicly identifies with the Southern freedom struggle—with Martin Luther King, Jr., and

John Lewis—but he’s really the product of the Northern struggle,” Sugrue says. “Obama moves to Chicago just as the city elects its first African American mayor, and he cuts his teeth as a grassroots community organizer there. He’s involved in the kind of economic development and empowerment projects that are very much an outgrowth of the 1960s. And Obama is in many respects the heir to Northern black politicians, such as Jesse Jackson and former Philadelphia mayor Wilson Goode, who forged interracial coalitions as a way of getting elected to office.”

Sugrue thinks that coalitions—those which crossed not only racial boundaries, but also political, economic and cultural ones—are key to some of the greatest victories in the history of civil rights. The epilogue of *Sweet Land of Liberty* describes the 40th anniversary meeting of one such coalition—West Mount Airy Neighbors (WMAN). Founded in the late ’50s by a group of religious and secular civil rights activists, WMAN aimed to create, in the Philadelphia neighborhood of West Mount Airy, a deliberately integrated community. After four decades of the group’s work, West Mount Airy was designated by a Department of Housing and Urban Development study as one of the most successfully racially integrated neighborhoods in America.

Sugrue has called West Mount Airy his home for nearly two decades and has himself served as president of WMAN. His neighborhood’s demographics give him grounds for optimism, but he believes there is still much to overcome. “Economic development and self-determination, the issue of relationships with the police and police brutality, questions of workplace discrimination and effects of the economy on African Americans, and inequality in education—these are all issues we grapple with today,” Sugrue says. He feels the time may be ripe for achieving greater racial equality by taking advantage of a new administration that is open to anti-discrimination regulations and seems compelled to reevaluate how the nation deals with issues ranging from employment to housing to infrastructure.

“Ultimately the struggle for civil rights in the North was a political one,” Sugrue says. “One thing I learned in writing *Sweet Land of Liberty* was that at key moments in the past—the New Deal, World War II, the early 1960s—activists looked at government and saw the potential for greater responsiveness. I think there are possibilities at this particular junction in our history. But that said, it’s incumbent upon those who want to address the persistent problems of inequality to keep pushing.” ♦



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Sweet Land of Liberty is just one in a crop of recent books by Department of History faculty that bring new and more nuanced perspectives to African American history.

In *Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine*, Bruce Kuklick, Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History, explores the little-known career of William Fontaine, who was the only black member of Penn’s faculty in the 1950s and ’60s. Kuklick’s book offers a biographical sketch of a pioneering African American intellectual caught up in mid-20th-century issues of race, as well as an intellectual history of African American life and letters at that time.

Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion by Barbara Savage, the Geraldine R. Segal Professor in American Social Thought, counters the assumption that African American religion and progressive politics are inextricably intertwined. Savage tells the story of a highly diversified African American religious community and of nearly a century of contention—as well as cooperation—between black churches and political activists.

Steven Hahn, also a Nichols Professor of American History, takes to task the traditional slavery-to-freedom narrative in *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* by uncovering hidden stories of African American political organization and activism. “I try to interrogate that narrative and suggest it is more complicated than we make it out to be,” Hahn says, “and that we ought to take the aspirations that don’t fit neatly into this narrative more seriously.”

Watch video of Sugrue, Savage and Hahn discussing their books as part of the public lecture series, Not Even Past: New Perspectives on American History, at www.sas.upenn.edu/notevenpast.