

**My Crystal Ball is Cloudy:  
The Historian as Public Intellectual**  
An interview with Thomas J. Sugrue

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**How is history relevant to current debates about race, economic inequality or the national narrative? A renowned historian of urban crises and segregation, Thomas Sugrue proposes an answer that emphasizes both the value of passion and that of careful scholarship. Historians can and should engage in public debate, but on their own terms.**

Thomas J. Sugrue is David Boies Professor of History and Sociology, and Director of the Penn Social Science and Policy Forum at the University of Pennsylvania. A specialist in twentieth-century American politics, urban history, civil rights, and race, he is the author of *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton University Press, 2010), *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (Random House, 2008), a Main Selection of the History Book Club and a finalist for the 2008 Los Angeles Times Book Prize. His first book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton University Press, 1996), won the Bancroft Prize in American History, the Philip Taft Prize in Labor History, the President's Book Award of the Social Science History Association, and the Urban History Association Award for Best Book in North American Urban History. A new edition of *Origins*, with Sugrue's analysis of the Detroit bankruptcy, has just been published<sup>1</sup>. In the following interview, he reflects on the challenges and rewards of writing recent history and being a historian in the public arena.

**Writing about social movements – the longue durée perspective**

**Books and Ideas:** You are part of a generation of historians that has not been directly involved in the civil rights movement. How did this influence the way you approached the history of the movement?

**Sugrue:** I am a child of 1980s America, more than 1960s America. I began college at Columbia University the year that Reagan was elected president. So the world of the struggle for racial equality seemed at once very remote and very present. I was at Columbia 12 years after 1968, but the political climate had changed profoundly. New York was a place that was devastated fiscally, and divided by very intense ethnic and racial struggles. You could see the traces, as in my hometown Detroit, of massive disinvestment and the collapse of public support for cities. Becoming a student at this moment led me to rethink the long process of the history of American cities and the history of liberalism, but also the history of modern conservatism, as these two histories had to be told together. Much of the work that had been published in the 1970s on these topics was internalist, especially focusing on the supposed “failure of liberalism” as if liberalism had experienced a crisis wholly because of endogenous

<sup>1</sup> <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10233.html>

rather than exogenous reasons. My research on race, political economy, metropolitan America-- all the questions I have been interested in for most of my career-- grew out of my experience on the ground, both as a kid living in Detroit and its suburbs and as a student living in New York in a very troubled time.

I came to the topic of my dissertation that eventually became my book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, because there was very little that I thought was good on the history of American cities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, in the 1980s, there was very little good historiography on the period after the New Deal. Most of the scholarship consisted of political biographies, or histories of war and diplomacy, and a small but growing body on the civil rights movement. Most histories of the 1960s were written by participants, by folks who wanted to celebrate or criticize the trajectory of left-wing movements. Many of them were shaped profoundly by their encounter with the civil rights movement or by their role in the New Left. There were some good books, such as *Making the Second Ghetto* by Arnold Hirsch published in 1983<sup>2</sup>, looking at Chicago. It was very much before its time. When you read it today, it still seems to be on the cutting edge. Many historians writing today are grappling with the same questions as Hirsch was.

The work that shaped my own larger historiographical framework was mainly by sociologists or certain economists, writing about the so-called “underclass”. Social scientists coming from the left, broadly defined, had started to explore the problem of concentrated, persistent urban poverty, but the history they brought to the task was not very good. I think of Barry Bluestone’s book on deindustrialization<sup>3</sup>; it begins in the 1970s as if deindustrialization only appeared as a result of the global economic crisis in that decade. That did not feel right to me. I also think of William Julius Wilson’s book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which came out in 1987 as I was beginning to lay the groundwork for my doctoral thesis<sup>4</sup>. The book was written on Chicago and assumed that the history of American cities only fundamentally changed around 1973. For Wilson, there were several forces that were at work at once: the rise of affirmative action and the emergence of a Black middle class that he saw as detaching itself from the inner city; the flight of industry from Chicago; and transformations in the nature of the African-American family. He put these three factors together in what many found a very compelling analysis of the fate of American cities. But again, as a historian, I knew that there had to be more. That pushed me to go further back in time. You have to put the events of the 1960s and 1970s in a longer context, with attention to American political institutions, the construction of race and identities and how they shaped politics, and the really significant reconfiguration of American industry and technology in the period directly following World War II.

**Books and Ideas:** What did social scientists miss exactly?

**Thomas Sugrue:** The work of social scientists and legal historians on race rests on a binary assumption about civil rights as a choice between segregation and integration, between *de jure* and *de facto*, between North and South. This is too a simplistic a framework. The history of civil rights is not only a Southern story. When you look at the North, you see similarities

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto. Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison. *The Deindustrialization of America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged. The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987).

between the regions, and you see the *longue durée* of racial inequality and struggle against it. This is a history that started much further in the past than the 1950s and that went forward much later than the 1960s.

My most significant challenge was criticizing the binary between Black Power and nonviolent civil rights movements. It is a widespread assumption that the nonviolent movement was *the* movement, but as a historian, I am uncomfortable with that. The black freedom struggle was a complex phenomenon. The struggle for racial equality took many different forms. Nearly everyone who was involved in the civil rights movement was improvisational when it came to the tactics they were using. Nonviolence was a tactic, but if it did not work, activists would turn to other tactics, including more disruptive forms of protest. Integration was a goal, but for most activists, it was not an end in itself. That was very clear in the North, but also in the South --as new scholarship shows. Activists were willing to try different things at different times. When I was doing research on the North, I found that many civil rights activists who were called for racially integrated education, but who turned, within a year or two of it not happening, to other strategies. They began demanding community control of schools, because their goal was not integration as such, but getting better schools for their children. All the binary distinctions in the social sciences and in other domains can't explain the experiences of those who were involved in the civil rights struggle.

### **Beyond heroism and triumphalism**

**Books and Ideas:** You grew up in multicultural America, in a politically correct academia in the 1980s, you are white, a man..., all these characteristics make you part of a dominant group. How does being a white scholar impact your approach to the historiography?

**Thomas Sugrue:** I knew when I started writing about the history of race in America that there would be people who would not be receptive to my ideas because of their racial politics. Some of the harshest critics of my work on civil rights has come from white activists --mostly from the 1960s generation-- who feel alienated by black power and who believe that the US was on a march toward progress because of the moral power of the nonviolent struggle for freedom and its ability to win over the hearts and minds of white Americans. They argue that the US would have been a truly integrated place had not these troublesome black power activists come onto the scene in the late 1960s. They are wrong. They misunderstand what black power is and was, they misunderstand the multiplicity of the currents that shaped the African American freedom struggle.

The fear of disorder was crucial in the way officials, from the local level up to the federal level, responded to the demands of civil rights. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson did not move on the question of racial policy because they were inspired by nonviolent protesters; they made changes because they were worried by the decline of America's image internationally. They were moved to action because they believed that the US was about to erupt in a race war. Urban unrest and riots, beginning in 1963, were evidence to them that America was about to blow up. They were worried about disruption and the threat to order. So the nonviolent movement/black power distinction is not useful as an analytical tool. But many people won't let go of this interpretation.

The flip side is there are a lot of young scholars of Black Power who are very romantic about it. Black Power got the traction it did because it threatened the existing social order in the United States. But the black power movement was fragmented, it was decentralized, it was

not particularly well organized. It often grew out of narrow political frameworks, which romanticized local control and rested on an individualistic understanding of race and inequality. In many ways, black power was a distinctively American movement. In the late 1960s, black power activists found surprising political allies, even on the political right. Nixon supported black economic self-determination and brought in current and former civil rights activists to his administration. Many local white business leaders made their own peace with black power leaders; they thought that doing business with blacks would buy off discontent and protect their investments. Black power activists wanted money to support their local social programs. There were tremendous tensions and contradictions inside the black power movement. Black activists were divided – there were Marxists, there were Trotskyites, there were Maoists, there were economic conservatives, there were gender conservatives. To lump them into one single formation is to overlook this diversity.

My biggest challenge as a civil rights historian has not been my own identity, but rather the ways that my scholarship challenges ways that both white and black Americans have appropriated the history of civil rights for their own purposes. There are two reasons why the civil rights story gets told the way it does: one has to do with the way white America sees itself from the 1960s beyond (the triumphalist framework), and the other one with the way it is seen as a resource for black America (the heroic framework). Today, white America broadly perceives itself as colorblind, as lacking a racial consciousness or identity, as having completely embraced the objectives of the civil rights movement. For these white Americans, the story of America is a story of progress from the original sin of slavery and racial injustice to the new day of colorblindness and equal opportunity. That story touches upon another fundamental narrative in America -- a deeply religious understanding of American history -- that the civil rights movement follows almost perfectly: one of redemptive suffering, of martyrdom and of triumph over sin.

For African Americans, the story takes on a heroic dimension, which is that of a group struggling against centuries of oppression led by charismatic leaders willing to create a common sense of identity to gather people together, fight the struggle and ultimately prevail. When I began writing my own history of civil rights, I knew that if it did not have heroes in it, the book would not attract a wider readership so I singled out well-known and often unknown civil rights activists and moved their stories in the middle of my narrative. But my story is much more pessimistic than the heroic narrative. Change happens very slowly and racial injustice is deeply entrenched in the US.

One of the most common quotations that appears in civil rights history is “the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.” This is how journalists write about the civil rights movement, also how historians and the public commemorate it. That’s why the story of the civil rights movement is so compelling to so many Americans. It is a beautiful narrative, but it doesn’t capture the tragedies, the losses, the failures of America’s racial history. The arc of the moral universe often veers off course -- and when it comes to race in the United States, it often bends towards injustice.

### **History as synthesis**

**Books and Ideas:** When you framed your next book, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, and decided to see that narrative from the North, did you see yourself as part of the new history of the civil rights and the new history of conservatism that emerged at that time?

**Thomas Sugrue:** I could not have written my book without some monographic studies of the civil rights movement in Philadelphia by Matthew Countryman<sup>5</sup>, in post WWII-New York by Martha Biondi<sup>6</sup>, in Milwaukee by Patrick Jones<sup>7</sup>. Their work reoriented the field and shaped my own place within it. But I have always tried to write books that bridge different subfields. I write about liberalism, conservatism, urban history, political economy, and labor. I am deeply informed by the work of specialists in all these subfields. In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, I write simultaneously about federal housing policy, local party politics, the United Automobile Workers, corporate policies that led to technological changes and deindustrialization, and the reshaping of liberalism on the national level around the question of race. My approach is to bring all these together in a synthetic framework, to see them as mutually constitutive of each other. Similarly, in my second book, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, one strain that runs through it is my interest in American Political Development (APD) and institutional politics. My story is not just a story of grassroots movements in the streets, but of state legislatures, of Congress, of the Presidency, and the ways in which federal policies shaped and constrained the options available to state and local activists, and the ways these activists were able to put pressure on policy-makers at all levels. To me, it is a feedback loop; it is not a top-down, or a bottom-up story. That reflects my engagement with important works of scholars studying APD, history and political science, and sociology.

Trying to integrate all these different aspects means feeling sometimes that one's work needs an extra chapter or two. If I were to write *Origins of the Urban Crisis* again, I would spend more time talking about public education. I would focus more on the history of the suburbs. One good example of the rewards of doing so is Robert Self's book on Oakland and the East Bay in California<sup>8</sup> which is, as *Origins* was, interested in race and the political economy, but expands the analysis to include the entire Oakland region, as opposed to just the city itself. On the other hand, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, where I do spend a lot of time talking about public education, is too long. At the time I wrote it, I felt a responsibility to get the story out in a comprehensive manner; now I think a shorter, more analytical distillation of the book might be in order.

My book on Barack Obama and race is more recent, but I've still had time to reflect on aspects that I could have better developed. It is a biography of America's first black president. It also tells the story of the transformation of ideas and practices of race in Obama's lifetime, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, and the story of social scientific and political responses to the collapse of political economies and racial inequalities. It's a way for me to tie together the interests of my first two books and to show how in the ostensibly post-racial era of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, some of the deeply entrenched structures of race I described continue to shape Americans' lived experiences. Obama is a figure who can't be understood outside of the history of civil rights in the United States, but, as much as we like to compare him to Martin Luther King, this is a man who spent hardly any time in the South before running for political office, who came of age in Hawaii and spent most of his formative years in New

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South. Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*. Harvard University Press, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, Princeton University Press, 2005

York and especially in Chicago. Obama became an activist and a politician in the urban North. We can't understand him outside that context.

But now I would push my argument about Obama even further. As Andrew Diamond remarked in his review of the book<sup>9</sup>, I did not talk enough about Obama and neoliberalism. Chicago is the perfect site to explore that relationship. Obama rose to the national stage because of the financial backing and support of Chicago's financial and real estate elite. Without them, he would have remained an obscure state senator or local elected official from Illinois. To understand Obama's politics and his response to the economic crisis also requires understanding his engagement with the more liberal side of Chicago's school of economics. I already had a strong suspicion, when I was writing the book, that he was a centrist, Clinton-like Democrat, but I did not make the argument as fully as I might if I were to rewrite the book now.

### **Not losing track of the big picture**

**Books and Ideas:** Your remark on Obama's geographical trajectory is, in a way, typical of your take on US national history: the idea that one should, especially when discussing race, instead of being obsessed with the South, that one should always remember the big -- the national-picture. Would you agree that it's probably your major contribution as a scholarly historian?

**Thomas Sugrue:** For much of the last century, scholars have written as if the North *was* the United States and the South was an exception. I'm not one of these scholars who argue that the distinctions between the regions are entirely blurry. I respect case-studies that highlight local and regional differences. But to understand race and inequality in America requires a national approach. One should refrain from presenting racial problems as only a result of the peculiar institution or the rise of formal, systematic Jim Crow South of the Mason-Dixon Line. Of course, the North and the South were different. There was greater lethal violence against African Americans during the height of Jim Crow in the South in the first decades of the twentieth century than there was in the North. African Americans did not have similar access to the vote in the North and the South, and as a result their political trajectories were quite different until the Voting Rights Act of the 1965. But there are also many, many commonalities between North and South: systematic discrimination and segregation in nearly every arena of public life, including in public education, housing, and public accommodations, movie theaters, restaurants and hotels. There was only a ten to fifteen year time lag between the time when the North broke down segregation in these arenas and the South did.

After the 1960s, many patterns of racial segregation in the North become commonplace in the South. When the South got rid of officially segregated schools, Southerners adopted the Northern system of so-called neighborhood schools. As long as people lived in racially separate neighborhoods, their children attended racially homogeneous schools. These convergences mean that we need to bring a national framework to our analyses of race and political economy.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.booksandideas.net/Color-Blindness-and-Racial.html>

Likewise, urban histories are local, regional, national and global all at once. The racial transformation of Detroit's housing market and the collapse of auto industry employment are national, even international stories. The history of the auto industry moving to the South and to the West --in search of less regulation, lower taxes and lower wages-- is a history that shaped Memphis, Phoenix and Los Angeles as much as Detroit. The so-called Rust Belt and Sun Belt cannot be understood separately from each other. They were shaped by the same macroeconomic evolution.

### **Being a public intellectual or the art of knowing one's limits**

**Books and Ideas:** You like to emphasize the fact that you consider yourself a public intellectual. Your speaking style is often passionate in the way it engages its subject and your audience, almost as if you were turning into one of the Civil Rights preachers who are characters of your books. Is there a link between these two ways of "going public" as a historian?

**Thomas Sugrue:** As far as my speaking style goes, I come from an Irish-American family, and I inherited from my grandparents and my father in particular a tradition of storytelling with panache. But putting aside my family history, I speak, often passionately, about those topics because I think they are important. I have also learned as a teacher that conveying passion to your students is a good way to get them to listen. Sometimes it might even get people who need to listen to listen a little bit more. It's not a religious tradition that influenced me. I grew up as a Roman Catholic, in a church that doesn't hold oratory to a high standard, even in the form of homilies. Good sermons are very uncommon in Catholic churches in the United States. Maybe on some subconscious level I was influenced by black preachers. I have attended services in various African American denominations and, as a scholar, I read the transcripts and listened to recordings of sermons by Martin Luther King, Jr, the Reverend C.L. Franklin, a Detroit-based, very influential African American preacher and father of singer Aretha Franklin, and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's pastor -- and lesser known figures as well. Perhaps I learned some of the elements of style from reading their work or listening to recorded speeches and sermons.

But my passion mostly comes from the fact that I am not afraid of being politically relevant or engaging in essential debates in America today. I write history with an eye toward the present. Drawing an imaginary bright line between the past and the present is a very problematic way to write history, especially recent history. There's so much misuse and misunderstanding of history that as a scholar, I have a responsibility to try to get the story straight, particularly when addressing audiences beyond a small group of specialists in the academy. Historians at their best write in ways that are engaging to the educated public. In the era of hyper-specialization in the academy, fewer and fewer scholars have that capacity. But if you are able to do so, you should try to influence the public debate.

I have also engaged the public in other ways. I have written for non-academic publications, not necessarily to enhance my academic reputation and career, but to distill some of the findings of scholarly research for a wider audience. I regularly do radio and television interviews. Last year, when Detroit declared bankruptcy, a lot of journalists writing under the pressure of deadlines fell back on clichés about the city's history that I have systematically debunked in my work. So many journalistic accounts were based on a simplistic understanding of Detroit being great until it collapsed because of the urban riots or went bankrupt because of corruption. I spoke to every journalist who called me because I wanted

them to get the story right. I think it helped improve the news coverage of Detroit at a critical time.

I have also written reports as an expert witness in civil rights litigation, one for the University of Michigan affirmative action case that went before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003, and another for a voting rights case in Euclid, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. This last case was interesting: most voting rights cases concern the South. African Americans in Euclid, Ohio, comprised a third of the population but had no representation in any of the local governing bodies. In some ways, because of the adversarial process, these reports are the most rigorous scholarship I have ever done. But there are limits. I was recently approached to become an expert witness in a case that could have been lucrative but would have required compromising some of my principles. I turned the offer down. Ten years ago, I was similarly approached by a tobacco company to serve as a historical expert in a lawsuit. Very reputable historians have agreed to do this kind of work but it's really a form of intellectual prostitution: selling your scholarly reputation at the price of distorting or misusing your scholarship.

I have also served on the boards of non-profits in Philadelphia and on the boards of scholarly associations, because my expertise as an academic historian and urbanist could be helpful, especially around questions of racial inequality. Here again, this was a natural outgrowth of the concerns I have spent most of my career focusing on.

All aspects of my career seemed to come together in 2012-2013 when civil rights issues around the Trayvon Martin shooting were in the air, Detroit was declaring bankruptcy, and President Obama was speaking on questions of race more than he had in his first term as president. When I published *Origins of the Urban Crisis* in 1996, I didn't expect that I would still be invited to speak about Detroit more than 15 years later -- at least not nationally. I couldn't have predicted Detroit's bankruptcy, although, in some ways, it did seem overdetermined. I felt like it was my responsibility to use my scholarship to illuminate all of these issues.

That does not mean that I believe that there aren't many ways to be a public intellectual. There's not a one-size-fits all model. More importantly, I don't think that everyone should be a public intellectual, because of their dispositions or because of the nature of their work. Another limit is historians' inability --in fact wariness-- about making predictions about the future. Historians ought to be humble about projecting forward things we have learned from the past because history is littered with wrong predictions. History is contingent. Here is an example of the type of contingency I'm talking about: in 1971, the Brookings Institution, a leading think tank in the United States, predicted which American cities would face trouble in the future. They were half right and half wrong. Their top "most distressed" cities were Detroit and Boston. Boston in some ways had been in worse shape than Detroit for a longer period of time. It was a second-tier industrial city that had been losing jobs and status since the 1920s, when Detroit was on the rise. Who would have predicted that Boston would become the high-tech center of the Northeast, one of the wealthiest cities in the United States, a magnet for immigrants from around the world? Economists are particularly notorious for making self-assured predictions about what's going to happen next year or next month. Most of the time, when they are wrong their mistakes are forgotten. As historians, we don't forget bad predictions.

While I am reluctant to predict the future, I'm fine with talking about the present and how history has shaped it. I'm happy to talk about the ways that Americans in our time profess



color-blindness while living in a world that's still profoundly structured by race and to criticize how Americans favor individualistic rather than systemic or structural explanations of racial inequality. I'm also happy to bring a historian's skepticism to predictions about America's future. Some demographers predict that in 2040, the United States will no longer be a majority white nation. If we look at the trajectory of population growth by race and ethnicity in the last thirty years, that's not an improbable prediction. But if we look at the ways that race has been constructed in the American past, where the category of whiteness is a malleable, flexible one, who knows whom we will be calling white in 2040? Mexican immigrants of the second and third generations are rapidly intermarrying with descendants of Europeans. "White" is becoming something a little different. So, as a historian, the only thing I can say is: my crystal ball is cloudy.

**Books and Ideas:** So to go back to your work as historian, what are you working on at the moment?

**Thomas Sugrue:** I'm finishing a history of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, that I'm co-authoring with Glenda Gilmore, who teaches at Yale. It's a long history of the 20th century from 1890 to 2008, that looks at the past from both the top-down and the bottom-up, high politics and the grassroots. I started off as a social historian but have become increasingly interested in politics. I see the two as fundamentally inseparable from each other. We need to understand how people lived and experienced and gave meaning to their lives, but also how their experiences were shaped by national politics and an international economic order. I'm also working at a history of real estate -- one of the most important industries in the United States in the twentieth century. Yet there are hardly any books, other than local case studies, on the topic. I'm interested in the history of real estate as part of the history of capitalism in the US. I analyze the real estate industry as a political actor, particularly in the New Deal. I examine the way that real estate appraisers made use of social scientific systems of classification and evaluation. And I explore the real estate industry's impact on everyday life in the United States. Most Americans' primary source of wealth is their real estate. I'm going to take that history from the late nineteenth century all the way to the mortgage and home finance crisis that brought about the current economic disaster, which brings all of these subthemes together in one critical moment. The sources that I'm using should help me get into the black box: the minds of the people involved in real estate from those who buy and sell houses to those at the top who are involved in putting together mega-deals for the construction of skyscrapers or vast residential developments. It's difficult: many corporate archives are closed, unless you write an official history of these firms. But that would be even more problematic than working for the tobacco companies!

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