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Review: Displacing Democracy: Economic Segregation in America. By Amy Widestrom

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Abstract

In the growing catalog of books about the decline of the postwar American city, race dominates the narrative. A significant portion of this literature takes the form of what might be called urban political biography. A single city is examined with an eye toward understanding how conflicts, usually centered on race and residence, have shaped its political culture and the broad outlines of its physical form. This literature has provided valuable insights, helping explain some of the distinctive development patterns that came to characterize U.S. cities in the second half of the twentieth century.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Cultural Resource Management and Policy Analysis | Historic Preservation and Conservation | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments

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of residents spurred civic mobilization led by veterans of the civil rights movement. The dramatic highpoint of *Baptized in PCBs* is a 2003 settlement that obligated Monsanto and Solutia to pay about \$600 million to Anniston's more than 21,000 residents, to build a health clinic, and to sponsor an educational foundation for area youth. However, payment of the settlement money was delayed and, once distributed, amounted to very little per resident.

Spears's book is rich in detail, but at times its density threatens to overwhelm the narration. I wanted to read more about Anniston's weapons stockpile, which was so crucial to the region's military-led development and to its legacy as "Toxic Town, U.S.A." (p. xiv). But these are small quibbles for such an important book—one that belongs on graduate reading lists for a variety of subfields. As the hidden costs of industrialization, convenience, and modernity reveal themselves on our bodies and in our landscapes, scholars will be metabolizing Spears's observations for years to come.

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SARAH MILOV

Displacing Democracy: Economic Segregation in America. By Amy Widestrom. American Governance: Politics, Policy, and Public Law. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. viii, 255. \$59.95, ISBN 978-0-8122-4659-9.)

In the growing catalog of books about the decline of the postwar American city, race dominates the narrative. A significant portion of this literature takes the form of what might be called urban political biography. A single city is examined with an eye toward understanding how conflicts, usually centered on race and residence, have shaped its political culture and the broad outlines of its physical form. This literature has provided valuable insights, helping explain some of the distinctive development patterns that came to characterize U.S. cities in the second half of the twentieth century.

Amy Widestrom's *Displacing Democracy: Economic Segregation in America* wades into this pool but proceeds with a somewhat different reading of the postwar city, even as she addresses many of the same problems. Attempting to shift the discussion away from a race-centric narrative, Widestrom instead seeks to highlight how the issue of class, more specifically the role of economic segregation, imprints residential geography, with an emphasis on neighborhood conditions. To accomplish this goal she develops multiple small cases—two neighborhoods from four different cities—to ground her argument. She contends that small city neighborhoods are critical spaces for understanding how urban politics functions and whose voice is actually heard, because they "provide the context in which people learn and practice the skills and attitudes that ultimately determine their level of civic engagement" (p. 13). By comparing one distressed neighborhood with one prosperous neighborhood in the context of very racially segregated urban counties in Atlanta, Georgia, Rochester, New York, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Kansas City, Missouri, Widestrom sets up her study to try to control for the influence of race so that the effect of economic segregation on political participation can be more clearly seen.

Two factors mark this book's contribution to the literature. First is Widestrom's argument that economic segregation is an understudied measure

of inequality within cities but is equal in importance to race. By carefully disentangling the effect of income from race, Widstrom adds nuance to the well-known story about the politics of segregation. As she notes, “the stories of how cities . . . became more spatially divided along economic lines in the late twentieth century demonstrate the important civic and political consequences that emerge as a result of . . . residential economic segregation” (p. 4). Though the effort to separate race and economic class is not a new contribution, the geographic detail and rigor of the analysis presented here are original.

Thus the second contribution of the book is Widstrom’s focus on what happens at the neighborhood level. She argues that economic segregation has shaped “civic environments” and affects “civic engagement” in ways that either permit or restrict the ability of residents to access the political system to benefit their neighborhoods (p. 4). She finds that the effect of economic segregation changes “the political calculation of elected representatives and candidates” in ways that benefit wealthy neighborhoods at the expense of low-income neighborhoods (p. 151).

How economic segregation has become entrenched is a critical part of the story of an urban political culture that has long privileged access over equity. As Widstrom notes, “residential segregation along economic lines, created by housing, transportation, and urban redevelopment policies, set in motion a chain reaction of developments that have harmed the civic environment in poor neighborhoods while nurturing the civic environment in rich ones” (p. 166). By highlighting the role of economic segregation in political participation, *Displacing Democracy* makes a valuable contribution to the literature on urban politics and helps further unravel the complicated factors that shaped American cities during the second half of the twentieth century.

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Guatemala-U.S. Migration: Transforming Regions. By Susanne Jonas and Nestor Rodríguez. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. Pp. [xii], 276. Paper, \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-292-76826-0; cloth, \$55.00, ISBN 978-0-292-76060-8.)

Susanne Jonas and Nestor Rodríguez introduce readers to an understudied population of Latino and Mayan migrants who navigate perilous spaces spanning multiple national borders in their attempts to reach the United States. The authors draw on a rich body of qualitative and quantitative data, including time serial statistics, participant observation, surveys, and interviews, that reflect the relationships the researchers have cultivated for well over a decade. *Guatemala-U.S. Migration: Transforming Regions* challenges our current understandings of globalization and transnational migration by introducing the reader to what the authors term “the migration region,” a transregional politicized space where different social actors and institutions either support or restrict migrants (p. x). Drawing on sociospatial theories, Jonas and Rodríguez identify the different phases of Guatemalan migration, introduce the transnational advocates that migrants encounter, and provide two comparative case studies in Houston, Texas, and San Francisco, California.