BOOK REVIEW
Cities Under Siege

Peter Dreier

The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions by Hilary B. Lipton. New York: Mac-

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "long hot summer," the summer of 1966, when Detroit, Newark, and other cities exploded in rioting. The summer of 1966 was a pivotal moment in American history, and its implications continue to shape our understanding of race, class, and politics in the United States.

CITIES UNDER SIEGE

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America's cities are once again ticking time bombs waiting to explode. Economically, socially, and politically, our country is as divided as it has been since the Civil War. The issues that plagued our cities in 1966—poverty, homelessness, hunger, and crumbling infrastructure—are still with us today. And the solutions that were proposed then—such as the creation of new public housing projects—have not been successful in addressing the root causes of urban decay.

As a result of these policies, America's cities have faced a shrinking tax base and recurrent fiscal crises. In 1969, the per capita income of cities was 5 percent greater than in surrounding suburbs; by 1987, per capita incomes in cities had fallen to 59 percent of suburban incomes. A new wave of urban flight has left two MIT economists, Bernard Frieden and Lynne Sykag, Davenport, Inc., demonstrates that even cities that have worked successfully to revitalized their downtown commercial districts and business districts—to expand the tax base and jobs—still lack the revenue to meet the needs of their residents. The cities are repressed by rising costs, shrinking resources, and borders they cannot expand. To ward off fiscal collapse, many cities have been closing schools, hospitals, police and fire stations, laying off essential employees, reducing basic services such as maintenance of parks and streets, and postponing or canceling capital improvements.

As local governments downsize their operations, the poor and working class residents of America's cities are pitted against each other for these shrinking resources, turf, and symbols. The conflicts between Jews and blacks in New York City, between Hispanics and blacks in Washington and Miami, and between the Irish and blacks during Boston's burning crisis are examples of the shifting urban landscape.

Fights over municipal taxes, public sector jobs, housing subsidies, hospitals and health clinics, and school funding often take the form of class war, economic self-interest, and social conflict. But they are also rooted in America's widening class inequalities. A recent Congressional Budget Office report reveals that the richest 1 percent of the American population grabbed two-thirds of the economic growth during the 1980s. Their after-tax incomes more than doubled, while the bottom 60 percent of the population experienced a decline in income. This concentration of wealth—which is the widening disparity of all the major industrial nations—reflects one of the trends of the decade of misguided national policies.

The White House and Congress looked the other way while junk bonds, junk bonds, merger manias, and Savings and Loan debacles rode roughshod over the American economy. Greedy corporate CEOs paid themselves and shareowners salaries and bonuses while laying off workers and cutting union benefits. At the same time, real wages for most Americans declined, forcing families to work harder just to stay afloat. Even so, a growing number of Americans—the working poor—earned their poverty on the job. The struggles between wealthy suburbs and floundering cities
strapped cities are merely symptoms of these widening inequities.

More than any other white eth-

nition, the city's racial hierarchy was par-

ticipated in the exodus to the suburbs.

Not only the Jewish population, but also the black, Hispanic, and Asian communities, felt the pull of the suburbs. The city's social structure, with its rigidly defined racial and economic categories, was crumbling.

A new book about black Jewish rel-

ations in Boston offers a fresh per-

spective on this historic tension.

One real-estate broker later recounted his experience in an article called "Confessions of a Blockbuster." He was told: "Just scare the hell out of them."

Most newcomers to Boston do not realize that the city is home to a vibrant Jewish community existed in these neighborhoods. One of the first to about ninety thousand Jews, by the late 1960s about forty thousand Jews still lived in this compact area, served by many synagogues, settlement houses, social clubs, shops, credit unions, and Jewish welfare organizations. The blue-green neighborhood, often called "Jew Hill" or "Jew Hill Avenue" by semi-Semites who thrived in commercial center catering to Jewish customers. Today, a former black-owned market is a Caribbean restaurant (the "American Kenner Products" sign is still there). Former black-owned market is a Caribbean restaurant (the "American Kenner Products" sign is still there).

The book describes a frenzy of racist blockbusting. Soon after


er book was announced, new real

estate developments in the city's black

neighborhoods—on Blue Hill Avenue and

dom House, a black community cen-

ter; while the former black-owned

Jewish settlement house] now houses

the black-renovated Park Community

Development Corporation.

Levine and Hazen focus on a pro-

gram called the Boston Bar Association (BBA), through which bankers, brokers, and appraisers colluded to create panic among working-class and elderly resi-

dents. The book's main thesis is that the real estate market was a major force in driving the city's black residents out of their homes.

Black and white neighbors asserted that blacks and Jews could coexist if they lived in separate communities. By the mid-1970s, the city's black residents were being forced out of their homes by the aggressive tactics of white real estate agents. The black community was divided on how to respond. Some advocated legal action, while others preferred the use of pressure tactics. The black community was also divided on how to respond to the redlining practices of banks and real estate agents.

The authors recognize that, even before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, life wasn't easy for the Jewish and black working class. And while the book does not delve into the under.

number of prominent Jews—real estate developers, businesses, and civic leaders—emerged to prop up the city's corporate power structure. They had helped to build the city's infrastructure, including the many new office buildings in the 1960s and 1970s, and their influence was felt throughout the city.

But Levine and Hazen show that both blacks and whites were unwitting victims of the BBA bankers and brokers, who greedily made quick profits. The black community was divided on how to respond. Some advocated legal action, while others preferred the use of pressure tactics. The black community was also divided on how to respond to the redlining practices of banks and real estate agents.

The book describes the thwarted efforts of the Massachusetts Historical Society to promote strong integrated neighborhoods.

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believe that if the Jewish establishment hadn't supported the working-class Jews and helped fight the blockading rather than ignoring it, it would have continued to have a strong presence in the working-class neighborhoods. That bit of counterfactual is unwarrented. More likely, even without BURBG,
the working-class forces that pushed whites out of cities and pulled them into suburbia were too great for Boston, and for most of the other cities, most Jews would have moved out eventually, as the next gen-
eration pursued the American Dream of upward mobility and suburbia. But BURBG compressed this transforma-
tion, so that instead of taking decades it occurred within a few years. This must have created great stress and anger and a new kind of self-help, inward-turning, and even explosive than it would have been, creating a great deal of finger-pointing and bitterness among blacks and Jews.

In their case, Levine and Hamerski downplay the efforts of some Jewish groups that worked to stabilize neighborhoods and promote peaceful integration. The book's chronology is somewhat disjointed, the narrative is repetitive, and they get some basic facts wrong. And the subtitle is misleading: The bankers, brokers, and bu-
reaucrats, the attempt to hold on to power, not social reform; greedy, not good intentions.

Also, the book fails to point out how Boston's latter struggle over school housing was a direct descendant of the BURBG experience. The racial po-
isons unleashed by BURBG spilled over into the issue of school desegregation.

In the mid-1970s, the court-ordered busing plan left the light-white suburbia alone. In 1974, the city had to admit that some black American who lived in suburban West Roxbury or the Back Bay couldn't get into the city's public schools. BURBG, the crusade for school integration
in the 1970s, was a nationwide battle over busing, redlining. During the 1970s and 1980s, the same banks and real estate industry that had already steered un-
inspecting black home buyers into segregated neighborhoods they went on to use the neighborhoods' decline as an excuse to withhold conventional mortgages. A recent study found that during those years, Boston banks held off appraisals three times more of black neighborhoods than in eco-
nomically comparable white areas. By denying home-owners the funds to

Book Review

Family Ties

Richard Kaye


The family generational novel, once one of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century and early modern fiction, has been almost completely abandoned by serious writers today. However, there is now a chance that we may see the dead hand of minimalist American fiction, it has to be said that there is still a thread of modernism, a private green of that remains, and there's a whole new wave of that, novels that are very much in concert with the modernist novel of the 1920s and 1930s.

It's not exactly that intelligent read-
ers don't seem to believe in families as compelling subjects for fiction, but that a key premise of the nineteenth-
century novel—family is destiny—has fallen into disuse. Americans, most especially, have a bigger stake in wishing to view a given character's progress in high, individualistic terms. And so our better novelists have given up on books written for the general market. Recently, for instance, Gabriel Garcia Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude was taken seriously, but (like the four-hour movie) it's the exception that proves the rule. With its family tree included in the book's front for easy reference, its sprawling interconnected plots, and its vast time-span that cov-
er decades in a few pages, the family

New York Times Book Review

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as well as divide it more fairly. The key to improving our cities is finding com-

munity involvement across the urban-suburban boundaries. Whether they recognize it or not, suburbs have a stake in rebuilding our cities. Whether suburbs commit to work in the cities or other suburbs, whether or not they utilize the cultural, medical, and educational resources of the central cities, the inter-

suburbs is still tied to the vitality of the city.

Suburbanites who ignore the plight of the cities are like a fisherman who claims he doesn't care that his net is breaking at the last end. As Levine and Hamerski remind us, we may have come here on different ships, but we're all in the same boat now.

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