

MANAGING INEQUALITY

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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NORTHERN RACIAL
LIBERALISM IN
INTERWAR DETROIT

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Managing Inequality explores the paradox at the heart of contemporary racial politics: How is it that racism is generally regarded as politically, socially, and morally unacceptable in the United States at the same time that inequality is quite neatly organized along racial lines? Karen Miller demonstrates that white politicians in Detroit and Michigan adopted northern racial liberalism as a central tenet of their political platform by the 1920s. Promoters of northern racial liberalism embraced legal race neutrality – the notion that all Americans, regardless of race, should be equal under the law. However, they rejected the idea that the state could, or indeed should build new structures to enforce racial equality by challenging existing racially unequal social, economic, or political relations. Thus, white leaders generally accepted legal race neutrality, but simultaneously resisted the integration of African Americans into the state or society on an equal footing with whites.

Dr. Miller demonstrates that northern racial liberalism became popular among Detroit's white liberal leaders during and immediately after the First World War and came to be consistently embraced by the majority of mainstream white politicians by the end of the 1920s. At the same time, Detroit experienced a spectacular expansion of its population, economy, physical size, and municipal government. By the 1930s, northern racial liberalism had already come to shape their ideas, define their policies, and characterize their practices. The majority of Detroit's white politicians came to veil their support for racial inequality under the cover of race neutrality. *Managing Inequality* shows that our current racial system has a history that is deeply embedded in contemporary governmental systems and political economies.

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Introduction

SUMMARY

The Introduction to *Managing Inequality* opens with a portrait of a “demolition ceremony” held in Detroit in September 1935. The ceremony, led by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, initiated the city’s first federally funded slum clearance project, which would tear down houses deemed substandard and replace them with affordable, public, garden apartments. The area being cleared was 95 percent African American in a city that was just seven percent black. Miller demonstrates that white liberal leaders used the demolition ceremony to promote their vision of themselves as generous and magnanimous in relation to African Americans, whom they cast as vulnerable and passive recipients of state resources. When the low-income housing project opened three years later, a group of African American demonstrators conveyed a different message. They claimed that African American access to new city resources was a product of black political power, built over years of struggle against persistent, state-supported inequality. They critiqued white racial liberals for including them in the New Deal state as second-class citizens. Throughout the book, Miller uses the tension between these two visions as a springboard for examining the relationship between what she calls “northern racial liberalism,” the vision these white leaders espoused, and black struggles for resources, inclusion and political power. For the remainder of the introduction, Miller defines the terms and concepts that she develops in the rest of the book. For example, she demonstrates that northern racial liberalism was a double-edged sword for African Americans. Black activists capitalized on the fact that white leaders increasingly embraced the language of racial equality and as a consequence, they won new resources from city officials. At the same time, while some white city leaders worked to support black rights, others used racial liberal ideology to mask the enduring power of existing hierarchies, contain African Americans’ growing demands for citizenship, and cast their struggles for equality as irrelevant and disruptive. Miller shows that northern racial liberalism is the basis for what contemporary critics call “colorblind racism” — the idea that the United States is no longer racially unequal because overtly racist speech has become an unacceptable element of mainstream political and social discourse. Miller goes on to challenge the commonsense notion that racial inequalities are the direct legacy of southern slavery and will thus fade away as time passes. She shows instead that specifically northern racisms — ones that were more consistently veiled under the cover of race neutral language — emerged in the early twentieth century and into the 1940s. Northern white progressives saw segregation as a tool for suppressing social discord and reducing urban conflict. These racially paradoxical discourses and policies came to be codified alongside the expansion of municipal governments. Indeed, Miller shows that contemporary forms of urban racism are modern creations that emerged out of northern political economies. They survive because they continue to serve a purpose and are constantly being reinvented.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did white liberal leaders use the demolition ceremony that opens the chapter to make claims about their understanding of racial equality and urban development?
- Why did the African American Institute sponsor protests in front of the new public housing project? What was their critique of segregated public housing development in Detroit?
- How does this study historicize current debates about the persistence of racial inequality and white privilege in contemporary America?
- What is the relationship between “northern racial liberalism” and “colorblind racism”?
- How was the development of northern racial liberalism linked to the needs and ideas of corporate leaders in the urban North?
- Explain how Mayor Frank Couzens’s response to Herbert Russell’s “adequate plan for segregation” illustrate his embrace of northern racial liberalism.
- What were the consequences of the growing popularity of northern racial liberalism for black activists?
- Explain the myth of northern racial exceptionalism.
- Why is Detroit a uniquely useful location for this study?

African American Migration and the Emerging Discourse of Northern Racial Liberation

SUMMARY

In May 1918, at the height of the Great Migration of African Americans into northern cities, black migrants into Detroit began to be stopped at the train station and checked for smallpox vaccination scars. While the number of smallpox cases in the city was the same among its white and black residents, white travelers were allowed free entry into the city. This practice sent a clear message to African American arrivals: that their lives would be surveilled and circumscribed as they moved into and through the city. When activists complained to city officials, white leaders denied that these practices had a racial motivation. White city officials had embraced the northern political tradition of race neutrality and legal egalitarianism since the end of the Civil War. But, they saw Detroit's small black population as inferior to whites and as a potential threat to the smooth functioning of the city. Their simultaneous embrace of these two tenets produced the contradictions embedded in northern racial liberalism. This chapter examines the political tradition of race neutrality among white city leaders and considers their responses to early twentieth century events, like the race riots in Springfield, Illinois in 1908, and the release of the racist film *Birth of a Nation* in 1916. It also explains the material basis of these political ideas: in order to attract a large enough workforce, industrialists supported black migration and promoted its promise of racial freedom. At the same time, industrial leaders continued to use segregation as a tool to organize factory production, undermine workers' power, and garner consent. Thus, the language of racial equality and the practice of segregation were both key elements of the city's workplaces. This chapter also examines how Detroit's demography and geography shifted in response to the massive in-migration of both white and black newcomers, as well as the politics of urban and African American reform.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where did Michigan's tradition of race neutrality come from?
- What were the significance of the Springfield riots and the release of *The Birth of a Nation* in Detroit in the early twentieth century?
- How did migration during the First World War and immediately thereafter alter the racial geography of Detroit? How did African Americans describe their migration experiences?
- What were the material foundations of northern racial liberalism?
- How did urban reformers use coded language about culture and modern ideas about how to take care of urban populations in order to justify urban stratification based on race and class?

➡ How did the politics of African American reform change over time as more black migrants entered Detroit?

Protecting Urban Peace: Northern Racial Liberalism and the Limits of Racial Equality

SUMMARY

Under pressure from African Americans and in response to shifting northern racial ideologies, Detroit's white business and municipal leaders increasingly expressed disdain for acts of racial discrimination and support for a northern racial system that they saw as more just than the South's. However, as their actions in the 1920s illustrate, the maintenance of urban racial peace was a higher priority for them than enforcing racial equality. Instead of considering strategies for alleviating the discrepancies between the lives of black and white Detroiters, white liberal leaders sought a way to manage racial conflicts. Even though they saw themselves as allies of all urban residents, including African Americans, the ideological limits of liberalism gave them the tools to oversee rather than resolve structural inequalities. This chapter explores struggles over racial boundaries and debates about the rights of African Americans, both of which came to be more magnified in Detroit in the 1920s. It examines a heated exchange between Mayor Frank Couzens and NAACP official Walter White over increasing occupational segregation in the city, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Detroit, the high profile case of Dr. Ossian Sweet, who shot and killed a member of a white mob protesting against residential integration on Sweet's front lawn, and the Mayor's Interracial Commission, formed to address these issues. For African Americans, local conflicts between black and white men and women confirmed the importance of struggles for equality and full citizenship in the city. For white leaders, the crescendo of black-white racial conflict produced an urgent sense that they needed to create a language and a set of strategies that could help quell racially motivated violence and sustain urban peace.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did the debate between Detroit's mayor James Couzens and NAACP official Walter White illustrate Couzens's embrace of northern racial liberalism and White's critique of the emerging racial regime in northern cities?
- Why was Couzens so hostile to White's suggestion that a group of white industrial leaders were encouraging their peers to practice racial segregation?
- How and why did white leaders frame their opposition to black protest in terms of urban peace?
- Ossian Sweet used armed self-defense to protect his property. How did this decision emerge from changes that were already underway among African Americans in the city?
- How did white and black residents of Detroit respond to the Ossian Sweet incident? How did they respond to Dr. Sweet's acquittal?

- What were the aims of the Mayor's Interracial Commission and how did they reflect the priorities of Mayor John Smith?
- What were the findings of the Negro in Detroit and how did that report affect local political struggles over racial practices and ideologies?

Between Ossian Street and the Great Depression: Tolerance and Northern Racial Liberal Discourse in the Late 1920s

SUMMARY

By 1930, African American Detroiters had pushed the language of racial liberalism to the forefront of political discourse. They came to be more likely to approach the city government as a potential if not always willing ally. Black political candidates also won some electoral victories in the late 1920s, pointing to their growing importance in the electoral realm. White liberals used the languages of racial tolerance and African American inclusion in their political coalitions and campaigns in response to these changes. They embraced the idea that racially tolerant discourse, alongside the very gradual integration of African Americans into city institutions, could do the work of producing a more racially egalitarian urban terrain. However, as this chapter suggests, white liberals did not reshape the stark racial imbalances that characterized either the local government or city space, even when they controlled the state. Clearly, they were constrained by the racial hierarchies built into the structures they inherited, but their inability to develop significant alternatives to the racial status quo reflected their political priorities. Self-identified pragmatists, the majority of Detroit's white liberals embraced a belief in capitalist urban development centered on private property and industrial production. They worked to mitigate some of the inequalities this system helped produce by supporting workers' interests and developing a local welfare state, but they were uninterested in addressing racial inequality head-on. African American activists thus found themselves working in a context of paradox and contradiction. Their growing importance in local politics and the commitment to tolerance expressed by white liberal politicians suggested that the time was ripe to push for redress within existing structures. Yet, the state's refusal to aggressively remedy persistent racial inequities worked against this possibility. Because racial liberals persisted in their belief that racism was an individual characteristic, rather than a pervasive cultural and structural problem, they did not conceptualize or challenge the entrenched racism built into the institutions of Detroit's urban political sphere. Detroit's local welfare state, built before the advent of the New Deal, was seen as a laboratory for welfare programs that would come to be taken up by the Roosevelt administration. The racial ideologies embedded in these programs, which were spearheaded by white liberal advocates of racial tolerance, represented the politics of the urban North and came to shape federal New Deal programs.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ What did the 1927 survey conducted by the Mayor's Interracial Committee illustrate about racial attitudes among whites in Detroit?
- ➔ How did the language of racial tolerance, increasingly popular among the city's whites, work to undermine black struggles for equality and rights?

- Why did white liberals support a gradual move toward integration and African American inclusion?
- How did African Americans respond to the suggestion that they should be patient and not move too quickly in their demands for equal rights?
- How did the language of black criminality help justify white liberals' gradualist approach?
- Why did African Americans argue for racial recognition rather than colorblindness?
- How did white urban conservatives respond to the language of racial tolerance and gradualism?
- What was a racially liberal state and how did it both affirm some black demands for equality and dismiss others?

“Living Happily at the Taxpayer’s Expense”: City Managers, African American “Freeloaders,” and White Taxpayers

SUMMARY

By the early 1930s, white liberals and conservatives had embraced the language of northern racial liberalism. While implicitly agreeing that baldly racist state-ments were unacceptable, they still linked dependence and welfare to blackness and dismissed African Americans’ concerns about discrimination. Conservatives demonized African Americans, caricaturing them as dependents and chronic freeloaders and decrying their potential to undermine the city’s color line. They used this language to attack the expanding welfare state. Liberals were more committed to the principles of racial equality and to building a robust govern-ment apparatus. They were far less likely to use racist language in their public discourse, thus distancing themselves from the explicitly condescending lan-guage that figures like Alex Blain deployed. Blain, a welfare commissioner, had used minstrel caricatures to describe black newborn babies in 1931. Liberals believed in a more expansive welfare state that would better support the needs of indigent residents, a large portion of whom were African Americans. However, they made similar connections between African Americans, dependency, and fraud as their conservative counterparts. As relief administrators worked against the popular notion that all recipients of aid were leeching off of the system, they grafted this anxiety onto African Americans specifically. These links helped them define the limits of state largesse, defend themselves against demands for a more comprehensive welfare state, and dismiss African American accusations about discrimination. Ultimately, liberals helped produce a racially bifurcated definition of local citizenship that cast African Americans as culpable for their own poverty and thus less deserving of state resources than their white counter-parts.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ How and why did Alex Blain cast the interests of “white taxpayers” and Afri-can American mothers against each other in the debate over the Herman Keifer maternity ward?
- ➔ What did white racial liberals and white racial conservatives have in common politically in the early 1930s?
- ➔ How were white and black unemployed people cast differently in mainstream debates over welfare and corruption?
- ➔ How did Mayor Murphy’s management of the “Negro Advisory Committee” help expose some of the limits of northern racial liberalism?
- ➔ How did the language of residency and transience help to provide a race-neu-tral mask for policies that had a disproportionately negative effect on African Americans in Detroit?

➡ Why did white opponents of welfare organize themselves around the identity of the “white taxpayer”?

“Let Us Act Funny”: Snow Flake Grigsby and Civil Rights Liberalism in the 1930s

SUMMARY

This chapter provides a close examination of black protest, how it developed over the decade of the 1930s, what kinds of strategies black activists deployed, and how African Americans understood their relationships with white city leaders. By the end of the 1920s, uplift ideology, patronage politics, and the reform institutions that had shaped the ideological and institutional centers of black political life had already begun to lose their political authority among black Detroiters. Economically based arguments about how to improve the fortunes of African Americans and change the racially defined relations of power in the city took on new political importance and informed the outlook of new organizations while reshaping the approach of established groups. Rather than self-help and philanthropy as models for attaining equality, the language of civil rights and demands on the state began to be articulated more clearly and consistently during the Great Depression. Black activists involved in liberal civil rights coalitions argued that African Americans should push the city, state, and federal governments to become dependable allies and that public sector leaders needed to pay attention to black voters. These ideas helped promote a turn among African Americans toward civil rights coalition politics because they contributed to the reduction in importance of private patronage and cultivated the sense that mobilizing African Americans as an electorate could be a viable political strategy. The labor movement gave a significant number of African American activists organizational training, which they also used to mobilize support and build movements outside of labor unions. African Americans active in their own unions or involved in labor politics, like Snow Flake Grigsby, frequently stood at the forefront of struggles against segregation and discrimination. The dynamic presence of the labor movement in Detroit, in a more general sense, helped to produce a culture of protest that supported the work of black activists. Finally, as African Americans became more assertive and confrontational in their fight for racial equality, white leaders responded by taking black concerns more seriously and addressing black demands more readily. Thus, struggles for equality and survival during the 1930s reshaped African Americans’ orientation toward white city leaders and changed how those white leaders managed their relationships with African Americans. White leaders’ increasing embrace of racial liberalism thus emerged from pressure to respond to black residents’ demands.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ Why did Detroit Tribune editors call on African Americans to “act funny”?
- ➔ Why did Snow Flake Grigsby write *An X-Ray Picture of Detroit*? What were his findings and how did he use them to push for a new kind of black protest?
- ➔ What was African American civil rights liberalism?

- While the shift from patronage politics to confrontation was uneven in Detroit, how did this change in orientation reshape the meanings of protest?
- How did shifts in Detroit's NAACP reflect the changing priorities of African Americans in the city in the 1930s?
- Why did Snow Flake Grigsby start the Civic Rights Committee and what were the aims of the group?
- Why did police brutality become such an important issue for African American activists?

Northern Racial Liberalism and Detroit's Labor Movement

SUMMARY

This chapter turns from the urban political sphere to a discussion of how race and black activism shaped debates about labor and interracial unionism. African Americans active in labor struggles in Detroit during the 1930s promoted racial justice, interracial cooperation, and a robust form of social, economic, and political equality. They also promoted a class-based analysis of racial inequality that considered how bosses used racism as a tool to advance their class interests over the interests of workers. The commitment of the industrial union movement to interracial organizing was one of the dynamics that contributed to and reinforced the importance of racial liberalism in the labor movement and in the city at large. African American and white organizers believed in the need for cooperation between black and white workers. The predominantly white labor movement in Detroit provided models for understanding interracial engagement that were profoundly ambivalent. Its leaders celebrated the idea of racial inclusion at the same time that, in practice, most unions sustained racial hierarchies and contributed to the maintenance of white privilege. Indeed, black activists involved in the union movement frequently criticized their leaders for sustaining a weak commitment to black concerns. The popularity of northern racial liberal discourse among the city's white leaders meant that the industrial labor movement's explicit commitment to interracial union organizing was a superficial beginning from the perspective of African Americans. By the end of the 1930s, black workers and residents sustained the expectation that white leaders interested in their support would use language about racial equality when they addressed a black audience. They were looking for something more: white allies committed to the fight for racial justice who used clearly and consistently inclusive practices in their own work. African Americans had extensive experience, by the end of the 1930s, with groups and individuals that touted their commitment to black rights without upholding these promises. Thus, they were skeptical of rhetoric that seemed to speak to their interests but that left racial hierarchies in place.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Explain the dynamics of Detroit's 1937 mayoral election. Why did the majority of African American voters throw their support behind a Republican-aligned candidate rather than voting for the candidate identified with unions and organized labor?
- Why did occupational segregation increase during the Depression years and how did African American activists struggle against occupational segregation?
- What were the aims of the National Alliance of Postal Employees? How did Alliance activists understand the relationship between workplace discrimination and the labor movement?

- What impact did African American and white Communist Party activists have on the wider labor movement?
- Why did African Americans remain suspicious of predominantly white unions when those organizations largely embraced the language of interracial organizing?
- What roles did African Americans play in unionization in the auto industry at the end of the 1930s?
- How did black and white members of the citywide civil rights coalition contribute to debates about the meanings of race, about the roles that African Americans should play in Detroit, and about the dynamics of interracial spaces and interactions?
- The union movement in Detroit provided a site where interracial cooperation and inclusion were visible, but the limits of that cooperation were also always apparent. How does this paradox relate to northern racial liberalism among other city leaders?

“Better Housing Makes Better Citizens”: Slum Clearance and Low-Cost Housing

SUMMARY

This chapter examines struggles over a slum-clearance program and state subsidized housing project sited in a portion of Detroit's most densely populated, majority black neighborhood. White administrators of this program were liberals who used federal aid to build a new kind of city, one they envisioned as more democratic and egalitarian than previous urban forms. While they saw themselves as allies of African Americans, their vision meant the forced removal of the poorest black residents from the city's downtown, as well as the expansion and formalization of residential segregation. White liberals thus worked to build a New Deal coalition that included African Americans as recipients of resources but upheld both segregation and discriminatory ideas about black people. African American Detroiters, conversely, emphasized the universality of the claims being made by the New Deal state and pushed city leaders to live up to those promises. Indeed, black leaders and residents refused to settle for resources alone and insisted on fighting for access to the noneconomic elements of citizenship reflected in the public housing slogan, “better housing makes better citizens.” They fought for political autonomy and the right to live, eat, and work anywhere in the city on equal ground with whites and imagined a vision of urban America that transcended the promises of the New Deal.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How were new residents of Brewster and Parkside homes represented differently as they moved into their apartments? What do these representations say about the meanings of race in Detroit at the time?
- How did race play a part in housing commissioners' plans for Detroit's first public housing project?
- Why did white liberals who saw themselves as allies of African Americans work so hard to uphold segregation as they managed the slum clearance project?
- What reasons did self-identified “white taxpayers” give for their opposition to Detroit's first public housing projects?
- How did African Americans respond to the slum clearance and low-cost housing projects?

Conclusion

SUMMARY

This chapter describes a 1941 struggle, led by black Detroiters, to push the Civilian Conservation Corps to open an additional African American camp in Michigan. This anecdote is a springboard for summarizing the main aims of the study and their contemporary consequences. Ultimately, Miller argues, understanding the dynamics of northern racial liberalism in Detroit in the interwar years — as well as its postwar extension, race relations management — helps to explain the racial contradictions embedded in mainstream political discourse today. Even as conservatives position themselves against liberals, both use liberal ideas about liberty, democracy, and equality to promote their projects and describe their governing sensibilities. Both of them take on positions that have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income people of color, even as they use the language of equality to justify their actions. Politicians across the political spectrum are participating in a political economic system that is draining welfare institutions of state support and privatizing public-owned resources. Liberals have historically claimed that part of their project is to remedy capitalism's most grotesque manifestations of inequality. However, they are simultaneously interested in using the state to promote urban growth and expansion. Their efforts to resolve the contradictions that emerge out of these conflicted commitments have allowed them to pioneer many of the strategies that conservatives use today — casting themselves as allied with “the downtrodden,” to use a term from the 1930s, but simultaneously working to sustain and extend deep inequalities. Liberals' persistent rejection of leftist ideas about the reorganization of power and wealth shapes how they resolve these contradictions. Even as the political center moves to the right, these logics of northern racial liberalism still hold.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the debate over the opening of an additional Civilian Conservation Corps camp for black youths help expose the contradictory racial commitments of Detroit's liberal white leaders?
- How did Detroit's Commission on Community Relations help extend the practices of northern racial liberalism into the post-New Deal era?
- How are the contradictions embedded in northern racial liberalism relevant to contemporary racial politics?