

Introduction

On September 9, 1935, the Detroit Housing Commission began tearing down condemned buildings in the heart of the city's largest black neighborhood. The fifteen square blocks, which were 95 percent African American in a city that was only 7 percent black, had the highest proportion of black residents in Detroit. Before the clearance began, the city held a "Demolition Ceremony" and invited Eleanor Roosevelt to be the principal speaker. Between 10,000 and 20,000 spectators, a mix of white and black Detroiters, listened to the First Lady deliver a five-minute speech in front of the vacated home of Mrs. Rosella Jackson.¹ Roosevelt declared that the Depression had piqued Americans' interest in poverty and inspired magnanimous public efforts like this one. The crowd cheered and applauded for the First Lady. A group of African American children from the Brewster Community Center performed a dance. Five-year-old Geraldine Walker, whose home was going to be torn down in the slum clearance, presented Roosevelt with a marigold. At ceremony's end, Roosevelt waved her handkerchief, signaling the destruction of the first condemned house on the fifteen-block site.²

Three years later, after the condemned buildings had been cleared and the Brewster Homes, Detroit's first public housing project, stood in their place, a crowd of African Americans convened in front of the new buildings, this time as protesters. These demonstrators were pushing city officials to hire an all-black staff for the new, segregated facility. Brewster Homes would accept only black tenants, but the city had hired white staff to work at the complex and allowed white business owners to set up shops in its storefronts. Across town, the Parkside Homes, which would open the same day, were entirely white. Black staff would not be hired, and black proprietors would not be permitted to open businesses in its storefronts. The Afro-American Institute, a black protest



Geraldine Walker hands a marigold to Eleanor Roosevelt at the opening of the Detroit slum clearance project, September 9, 1935. Courtesy of Corbis Images.

organization, had attempted to negotiate with local authorities to hire only black workers and restrict businesses to black ownership. When negotiations reached a stalemate, the institute collected hundreds of signatures on a petition and called for daily protests. Facing considerable pressure from the African American activists, the city's mayor, Richard Reading, endorsed the plan to hire an all-black staff to work at Brewster. However, Detroit's city council vetoed the proposal. Black residents continued to fight for an all-black staff and guarantees that black merchants would have priority for Brewster's storefronts.³

Roosevelt's demolition ceremony promoted white liberal leaders' understanding of the promises of the New Deal for African Americans. The Afro-American Institute's protests three years later illustrate the limits of liberal sympathy and good intentions in the face of ingrained social structures and material inequality. The first illustrates that northern white liberals imagined themselves as generous and magnanimous

in relation to African Americans, who they saw as passive, if deserving. The widely circulated photograph of Geraldine Walker and Eleanor Roosevelt captures this well-intentioned but ultimately problematic dynamic. It portrayed a young, small Geraldine Walker holding Roosevelt's hands and listening intently to the First Lady. Roosevelt, who had bowed down to Walker's level, seemed to be imparting kind advice to the young girl. In this image, Walker was cast as defenseless, sweet, innocent, and inactive—someone who absolutely deserved help and would graciously accept support. Although she was handing Roosevelt a marigold, her gesture was lost in an image that emphasized Roosevelt's activity and generosity, and Walker's passive gratitude.

The implicit message in this staged photograph was that white liberal leaders and African Americans should sustain a clearly imbalanced relationship whereby white leaders provided vulnerable African Americans with the resources they needed and African Americans were grateful recipients. This image erased the protest that African Americans had been waging for years as they fought to get the city to address their needs. Black Detroiters were not receiving these resources simply because white liberals intuitively recognized and acted on social need. Instead, their victories were a product of black political power, built over years of struggle against persistent, state-supported inequality that pushed white liberals to these positions.

While the first of these two events portrayed white liberal leaders' perspective, the second showed how black activists interrupted that widely accepted narrative. By protesting the inequities at Brewster Homes, black activists exposed the limitations of liberal policies that were ostensibly guided by the logic of magnanimity. Instead of accepting resources as passive recipients, they recast themselves as political participants with a self-conscious project aimed at building a racially egalitarian city. Black activists presented this alternate image to passersby by holding picket signs and petitions as they fought to reconfigure their relationship to white liberals and their place within the urban political sphere. These African American protesters were challenging the unequal distribution of resources at the same time that they were calling into question the basic assumptions upon which that allocation was premised—northern racial liberalism.

Northern Racial Liberalism and “Colorblind” Racism

Managing Inequality examines the formulation, uses, and growing political importance of northern racial liberalism. Northern racial liberalism is the notion that all Americans, regardless of race, should be politically equal, but that the state cannot and indeed should not enforce racial equality by interfering with existing social or economic relations. This idea 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. This occurred alongside the spectacular expansion of the city’s population, economy, physical size, and municipal government. By the 1930s, as city leaders responded to the Great Depression and began to build the local New Deal infrastructure, northern racial liberalism had already come to shape their ideas, define their policies, and characterize their practices.

White proponents of northern racial liberalism did not always embrace the discourse of racial equality for the same reasons. Indeed, their understanding of its implications and their motivations for accepting its tenets were manifold and changed over time. In the early twentieth century through the First World War, white northern racial liberals were likely to define political racial equality narrowly. A legacy of northern sectional politics from the Civil War and postbellum eras, northern racial liberalism helped white urban leaders explain why they opposed racist violence in favor of urban order. But few of them saw social, economic, or residential integration as desirable goals. Fewer still believed that African Americans’ critiques of the prevailing racial and economic order were valid or required their attention. Indeed, northern racial liberals in this period rarely believed in racial justice. These men and women used the rhetoric of northern racial liberalism to conceal their support for existing forms of subordination.

By the 1930s, though still a minority, a far larger proportion of white liberals believed in the tenets of urban racial equality and saw it as inherently socially, politically, and morally good. For them, a more racially equal city would be a better city, one in which everyone would benefit from a commitment to justice and racial equality. Members of this group worked most closely with African Americans, were most

inclined to link racial inequality to economic stratification, and were most likely to work in coalition with the Left. They disagreed about how far they could push established political institutions to respond to the dictates of racial equality. Many believed that a conservative backlash would undermine their political power if their commitment to racial equality was too explicit or if their policies directly challenged social, residential, or occupational segregation. They were also constrained by their belief that racism was a moral problem of individual sentiment and did not need to be addressed institutionally.

These positions sat on two ends of a spectrum. They represent white leaders' main motivations for embracing northern racial liberalism and political racial equality, but they were rarely distinct from each other. The majority of Detroit's white liberals believed in some aspects of each of these tenets. Some were far more committed to the expansion of racial equality, while others saw the maintenance of urban order as their principle interest and maintained a scant degree of concern about racial injustice. This tension among white proponents of northern racial liberalism also represented the paradox that stood at its heart. White northern leaders came to embrace racial equality in the political realm. They saw the North as a place where modern forms of racial democracy could be and were already being practiced, in contrast to the backward and violent application of segregation in the Jim Crow South.⁴ At the same time, they supported and implemented policies that promoted racial inequality. Although this may seem like an internal contradiction, it was not. Northern racial liberals certainly wanted to ease the political and economic consequences of racial stratification, but for many, their higher priority was to manage racial discord with an eye toward sustaining urban peace.

This made northern racial liberalism a double-edged sword for African Americans. A range of black activists, from middle-class reformers to supporters of mass action, capitalized on the language of equality that white leaders increasingly embraced and as a consequence won new resources and concessions from city officials. At the same time, though, many white city leaders who embraced northern racial liberalism were not interested in acknowledging or confronting the underlying racism that already structured urban life. Instead, their racial liberal ideology helped to reinforce and mask the enduring power of existing

hierarchies and to contain African Americans' growing demands for citizenship and equality. At its worst, rather than undermining racial inequalities, northern racial liberalism could and did function as an instrument for subduing the aspirations of the growing African American population and for casting their demands for equality as irrelevant and disruptive.

This paradox should sound familiar because it sits at the heart of early twenty-first-century American racial politics. Indeed, 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 is no longer an acceptable element of mainstream political or social discourse.⁵ This study shows that our current racial system—where race-neutral language coincides with extreme racial inequalities that appear natural rather than political—has a history that is deeply embedded in contemporary governmental systems and political economies. It challenges the commonsense notion that these inequalities are the direct legacy of southern slavery and will fade away with time as we move further away from slavery. It shows instead that racism survives because it is also a modern creation, emerging out of discourses and policies that came to be codified alongside the expansion of municipal governance and the welfare state in the early twentieth century. As such, understanding this history continues to have contemporary relevance in a broad array of local and regional political economies, including the urban North.

Contemporary proponents of colorblind racism maintain that the successes of the civil rights movement—the dismantling of Jim Crow, alongside the antidiscrimination legislation and judicial decisions of the 1950s and 1960s—effectively eliminated racism in American institutions and marginalized the shrinking minority of whites who continued to articulate racist ideas. Racism, they assert, is dead. It no longer shapes American institutions, government practices, or social behaviors. Accordingly, colorblind racists castigate civil rights leaders, whom they characterize as opportunistic and self-serving, for producing racial divisiveness by inventing false specters of inequality. They see these claims as misplaced resentment on the part of people of color toward whites. Rather than a measure of the durability of discrimination, colorblind racists see persistent racial inequality as evidence that

communities of color foster negative, dysfunctional, and defeatist “cultures of poverty” that hold their members back from success. This idea is widely accepted in popular cultural discourse about race and used as a tool to argue against affirmative action and other policies oriented toward remedying racial inequality.⁶ Even critics of colorblind racism accept the idea that it developed as a reaction against the civil rights movement. They rarely see its much longer history back into the early twentieth century or examine the suppleness of urban governing ideology in thwarting African American claims that racial hierarchies shaped northern cities.⁷ Northern racial liberalism married the same two components that colorblind racism does today: an extension and affirmation of racial inequality alongside a commitment to the language of interracial understanding and race neutrality.

Political Economy, Northern Racial Stratification, and Urban Peace

Northern racial liberalism had its roots in progressivism and the political and economic relations that shaped the First Great Migration. Northerners developed and intensified their own systems of segregation between the 1890s and the beginning of the First World War at the same time that they drew on Michigan’s Reconstruction-era tradition of legal race neutrality. Northern white progressives, like their southern counterparts, saw segregation as a tool for suppressing social discord and reducing urban conflict. Unlike southerners, however, they held fast to the idea that their practices would lead to fuller racial equality, even though they also easily accepted the racial inequities that segregation amplified.⁸

During the First Great Migration, white progressives in northern cities drew a sharp distinction between their strategies for managing race relations and white southerners’ racial practices. They cast their relationships to African Americans as fundamentally better than southern whites’—more modern, more progressive, and more just. Even as they built racially segregated institutions that separated European immigrants from African Americans, most white progressives downplayed the idea that white supremacy or discrimination shaped systems of power in northern cities. Instead, they blamed African Americans’

exceptional difficulties on black deficiencies.⁹ Thus, white progressives cast their racial practices in opposition to their flattened understanding of southern culture at the same time that they sustained condescending assumptions about African Americans.

Understanding that southern racial practices depended on Jim Crow's continuing utility, rather than southern whites' sentimental attachment to slavery, helps provide a model for seeing how racism in the urban North was linked to its own regional political economy. The culture of southern segregation was a distinctly modern response to rapid economic and cultural changes, including emancipation, the introduction of consumer culture, and the need to sustain a large-scale, agriculturally based political economy.¹⁰ Similarly, northern racial ideologies should be understood as linked to the political economy of the North and understood in relation to shifting ideas about the productive economy and about the role of workers within that economy. Detroit was an important location for the production of this ideology. The introduction of the automated assembly line and its counterpart, an aggressive Americanization program among workers by the beginning of World War I, assumed that the infinite replaceability of workers was their most important asset. The economic and political elite thought of workers as interchangeable cogs—indistinguishable pieces of a modern machine. This ideology, informed by the needs of capital, helped support the rhetoric of racial equality, since it assumed that individual workers should not be differentiated from each other based on their non-work-related identities.¹¹ However, while corporate leaders aggressively integrated their workforces by ethnicity in the 1910s as a strategy for undermining ethnic alliances and disrupting workers' potential for union organizing, most sustained an equally passionate commitment to racial segregation, excluding black workers and pushing them into the worst jobs and into segregated areas of factories.

Racial stratification in the urban North was considerably more elastic than southern practices and policies. African Americans represented a far smaller portion of the population in the North and were permitted more social and cultural latitude as they moved through northern cities. Nonetheless, significant formal and informal dictates upheld occupational and residential segregation, shutting black residents out of the vast majority of well-paying jobs and white neighborhoods. African

Americans were not always denied access to city resources, and most public spaces, such as schools, sidewalks, and streetcars, were officially integrated. However, informal segregation was regularly practiced. For example, city parks frequented by both black and white residents were seldom marked with placards announcing segregation, but they usually maintained separate areas for black and white patrons, and African Americans could face significant consequences if they crossed over these invisible boundaries.¹²

This study returns the city government to debates about urban racial geographies. It demonstrates that local politicians and city managers sustained a common interest in upholding order and maintaining the racial status quo even when they made an explicit claim that they were committed to racial justice. Elected and nonelected city officials often shared the belief that challenges to the racial status quo would disrupt their ability to manage an orderly city and support its continued growth. A chief function of interwar urban government was thus to regulate race relations and avoid racial conflicts in the name of urban peace. This priority came into direct conflict with activists' struggles to promote racial justice in cities like Detroit, whose administrations positioned themselves as racially progressive, but worked to uphold existing racial relations of power as part of their effort to keep the city operating as smoothly as possible.¹³

“The Value of Some Adequate Plan of Segregation”

A private communication from March 1935 between Detroit's mayor Frank Couzens and the secretary of the city's planning commission, Herbert Russell, baldly outlined the central ideological components of northern racial liberalism as well as its regional biases. Carl Storm, a local white attorney, had written to the mayor suggesting that the municipal government should take full advantage of the federal money that had become available for “useful projects” by implementing a citywide program of residential segregation. This program, he argued, would “add stability to real Estate values . . . and give more desirability to the City generally.” Storm believed the city should use zoning ordinances, condemnation proceedings, and the sale or exchange of properties to eject all African Americans from predominantly white areas

and encourage whites to leave majority-black districts. The plan, Storm projected, would cost the city less than \$5 million, and he was confident it would succeed. “Almost without exception,” he explained, “segregation [has been] effective in the South.” Finally, Storm closed his letter with a request: “Please do not assume that I have any prejudice against the people of the negro race, for that is not the case. I have the greatest of sympathy for them.”¹⁴

Mayor Couzens appealed to Herbert Russell for guidance about how to reply to Storm.¹⁵ In response, Russell lamented the city’s inability to implement the kind of segregation plan Storm had outlined. Legal restrictions made laws and zoning ordinances ineffective. Furthermore, the southern model, which Storm found so compelling, was unlikely to work in Detroit. “Almost without exception,” Russell explained, “the so-called effective colored segregation in the South is accomplished by means of arbitrary domination, rather than by legal procedure.” Russell argued instead that there was a “real need of an intensive educational program, which will prove to our colored people the value of some adequate plan of segregation.” Indeed, he claimed, some of the “leaders of the race” already agreed that segregation was beneficial to African Americans, even though they disagreed about “how [it] might be accomplished.” To be most constructive, he explained, “any proposed plan should be prompted by an earnest desire to aid and assist our colored race to something better for them, rather than simply ejecting them from their chosen home sites.”¹⁶ By positioning himself against southern forms of racial domination, Russell cast himself as both modern and rational—an urban leader who would resist prejudice in favor of sound governance.

Russell opened his letter to Mayor Couzens with a reference to Abraham Lincoln, who had devised a plan for segregation at the end of the Civil War that would have been implemented had he not been tragically assassinated. Russell used Lincoln as well as his connections with African American elites to justify his support for segregation as morally and politically appropriate. At the same time, he rejected southern strategies designed to achieve this goal as inappropriate and inapplicable for the urban North. Rather than implementing a version of the South’s extra-legal and “arbitrary” domination of African Americans, he claimed an “earnest desire” to help black Detroiters. His plan was to educate

African Americans to accept their appropriate roles in northern cities—as members of a segregated minority.

Northern racial liberalism was thus marked by a desire to maintain racial hierarchies while rejecting the arbitrary dominance of African Americans characteristic of the South. Russell used social science discourse to cast himself as an objective proponent of modern urban management and rational, unbiased efficiency. He claimed that segregation was not always linked to discrimination, denying its connection to white supremacy or to the sustenance of racial hierarchy. For him, segregation was a natural outgrowth of difference, and he cited “sociological studies” that had indicated that African Americans “show a definite tendency to centralize and colonize in their own race districts” in order to justify this claim.¹⁷ Ultimately, Russell used the language of northern racial liberalism to disguise the second-class quality of the citizenship he imagined for Detroit’s black residents and to deny the white supremacy inherent in his vision of how race should work in the urban North. Russell described himself as someone who was committed to producing the greatest good for the greatest number. If African Americans were left out of that aggregate calculation, it was not the result of anything so primitive, backward, or southern as racism.

The slum clearance and low-cost housing projects that Eleanor Roosevelt helped celebrate are also excellent examples of this dynamic. Brewster Homes, developed by liberal white city planners and housing commissioners, upheld and formalized residential segregation in Detroit. Black residents from the cleared neighborhood would only be relocated to other majority-black areas, and the Brewster Homes—with 100 percent African American occupancy—would be even more segregated than the neighborhood it replaced. In the face of African Americans’ clearly articulated complaints that segregation promoted inequality, white liberal leaders provided two responses. First, they claimed, the maintenance of segregation was a concession to conservatives who would otherwise block the projects. Second, they argued that the resources African Americans were receiving, and the community benefit those resources conferred, far outweighed any potentially negative effects of segregation. African Americans fought for and won unprecedented benefits from the state during the New Deal. They consistently claimed that they should sustain equal and unfettered access to the city’s

resources as well as full urban citizenship. However, the northern architects of the welfare state designed programs that helped codify, rather than undermine, social and geographic stratification based on race.¹⁸

Tolerance

During the interwar years, the liberal political idea that the state should use its resources to promote social welfare became increasingly popular in Detroit. Self-identified liberals, like Detroit's mayor Frank Murphy, were the architects and most enthusiastic proponents of these kinds of governmental systems. In the mayoral race of 1930, for example, Murphy promised to use city resources to address massive unemployment, while other candidates attempted to convince voters that it was inappropriate to dip into city coffers to support the "downtrodden."¹⁹ However, Detroit's white liberals did not believe they should use the state in a similar manner to address racial inequality. By the interwar years, they generally accepted the notion that racial differentiation was limited to physical characteristics. Following prominent social scientists like Franz Boas, they believed that variations between racial and ethnic groups were cultural rather than biological.²⁰ Thus, white liberals promoted what Murphy called "tolerance and good temper" in response to the "races question." They argued that governments should function in a race-neutral manner and that racial difference should not matter in the administration of justice or state resources. But they rejected the idea that racism was lodged in social, political, or economic structures and shied away from state policies designed to reduce racial stratification. Racist practices, they claimed, were neither rooted in the productive economy, nor did they benefit whites as a group. It was individual hearts, rather than municipal institutions, that needed to be changed. City residents should try their best to get along with each other across racial and ethnic lines.²¹ Despite these professions, Detroit's northern liberal leaders were more likely to accept the racial hierarchies of Detroit's workplaces, neighborhoods, sites of leisure, public institutions, and private settings than to challenge segregation or the unequal distribution of resources that ran through the city's schools, housing stock, political institutions, and job market.

White northern liberals embraced a model of racial equality in the interwar years that presumed equality of opportunity, but it was neither politically nor economically redistributive. White liberals believed that society and the marketplace were imperfect institutions that needed to be regulated. However, they did not imagine that political power or economic resources should be fundamentally reallocated, or that the capitalist system that created these inequalities should be overturned or significantly challenged. Instead, northern urban liberals embraced a modern form of regulatory liberalism, inviting the affluent and privileged to share their expertise with those social actors who had failed, as yet, to achieve economic success. Their early twentieth-century liberalism was tied to the growing power of corporate capitalism. They saw themselves as defenders of just and fair municipal systems at the same time that they believed that the economic dominance of corporations was a public good that produced and spread wealth. Detroit's liberals reconciled this contradiction by casting the capitalist asymmetries of power and limits to democracy as natural. Their tolerance and even support for the structures upon which economic inequalities were built allowed for and encouraged their acceptance of racial inequality and their sense that it was natural.²² Ultimately, Detroit's white political leaders helped protect existing racial hierarchies without boldly denigrating African Americans. In other words, they contributed to the production of a system whose discourse was racially neutral, but whose effect was to protect segregation and ensure African American inequality.

African American Political Engagement

Managing Inequality uses a political economic approach to demonstrate that the changing position of African Americans in the labor force in the urban North during the First Great Migration was a crucial moment of racial formation out of which northern racial liberalism emerged. It examines how black civil rights liberalism and urban policy informed each other by placing an analysis of black political engagement into close dialogue with white city residents' changing ideas about race and African Americans.

During the interwar years, as Detroit's black population grew, African Americans fought to build an ideal city within which they could sustain full access to space and resources, as well as occupational, social, cultural, and economic equality. They imagined a future where blackness would not limit their opportunities. This ideal—an urban terrain, within which racial discrimination, segregation, and animosity would be eradicated—provided black Detroiters with a vision toward which they could work together in spite of class and ideological differences. Between the beginning of the First Great Migration and the end of the 1930s, African Americans' ideas about how to best work toward a more just world changed. Early in this period, the most prominent political tactics for addressing this goal were black leaders' appeals to white paternalism for jobs and aid. By the end, the most high-profile black activists were building more mass-based organizations and appealing to white leaders' sense of justice about the enormous gaps between liberal promises—that all urban residents were equal—and the realities of living in Detroit. African American activists, across a range of political orientations, used civil rights liberalism as a strategy to push for more robust access to full local citizenship. They fought to expose the gap between the promises of northern racial liberal ideology and the realities of black urban experiences. Because these activists were most involved in negotiations with white leaders about the meanings of racial equality in the interwar years, this study focuses on their work rather than offering a comprehensive look at black urban life.²³

Even though activists' victories were partial, and sometimes frustratingly small, the demands that black residents placed on white leaders and the state shaped the resources they received, shaped the meanings of race in the city, and helped push questions about racial justice into the political sphere. Furthermore, African Americans accepted all of the concessions that they won, but they never agreed to settle for second-class citizenship in exchange for resources. Rather than inducing complacency, partial victories inspired activists with a range of political commitments to continue fighting for full access to material goods as well as equality and citizenship. This second goal remained important, even when resources were difficult to win.

Black activists pushed liberals toward a facial commitment to racial equality in the interwar years and thereby helped shape the meanings

of urban liberalism. Indeed, white northern liberals borrowed language about formal racial equality from black activists and scholars. They embraced the notion that in an ideal society, race would become politically irrelevant. However, they did not include black activists' commitment to disrupting the balance of power between white "haves" and black "have-nots." Instead, they developed strategies to manage and contain African Americans' demands for equal access to city resources. They helped support rather than overturn black political and economic subordination. The discourse that African Americans used as a rallying call for freedom and a critique of structural discrimination was taken up by some white racial liberals to obscure the existence of racism and segregation and justify their continuation. Struggles over public as well as private housing, residential geography, leisure, segregation, work, welfare, and political representation were all venues within which these questions were debated and within which ideas about race and racial difference were formulated.

In spite of its severe limitations, the growing popularity of northern racial liberalism among white city leaders had important consequences for black activism. White liberal leaders' embrace of the languages of racial equality and neutrality helped foster an emerging civil rights community.²⁴ Beginning in the 1920s, black activists used these promises to expose the gap between the ideology of northern racial liberalism and the realities that black Detroiters faced. This new generation of activists was less concerned about alienating white leaders than their predecessors had been, more closely aligned with labor activists and unions in the city, and more interested in using black electoral strength to disrupt the balance of power between whites and blacks. Many of them sustained a fundamental faith that change within the system was both possible and desirable, even if that change needed to be quite dramatic.

The Origins of Colorblind Racism and the Myth of Regional Exceptionalism

This study illustrates that, since the beginning of twentieth century, architects of modern urban governance promoted the language of race neutrality at the same time that they built racially unequal urban geographies. It shows that the bureaucratic, legalistic, institutional mode of

governance that characterized early twentieth-century cities had as its conceit that the state's project was to make urban life possible by managing residents' conflicting needs, preventing gross abuses of power, and functioning as if each legitimate resident was equal, regardless of her identity. This ideal helped mask the state's other goal, which was to conform the city to the needs of corporate capitalism and the rule of law, each of which was built on clear hierarchies—including racial hierarchies—between different kinds of city residents.²⁵

Urban historians interested in the historical origins of colorblind discourse, such as David Freund, Thomas Sugrue, and Daniel Martinez HoSang, tend to focus on the post-World War II world when they explore the production of these modern ideas about race, consider the historical antecedents of today's racial geographies, and examine colorblind practices.²⁶ This choice implies that racial hierarchies came to shape the urban North from the start of the Second Great Migration in the 1940s. This study, conversely, shows that prewar northern white leaders helped produce seemingly nonracial narratives about clearly racial projects, including residential and occupational segregation and the unequal distribution of public and private resources. It thus illustrates that modern urban governance, from its inception, extended the racial and economic hierarchies that already shaped modern cities. It shows that African Americans moving into postwar northern cities confronted a complex racial system, rooted in the contradictions of northern racial liberalism, which preceded their arrival.²⁷ Some scholars who are critical of liberals' use of colorblind discourse in the postwar world leave unexamined northern white leaders' representations of themselves in the prewar period as architects of urban systems designed to promote some forms of racial equality. This lack of interest in the complexity of prewar racial systems helps reproduce the idea that the modern urban state was race neutral at its inception and then corrupted by backlash against the high volume of black migrants who arrived during and after the Second World War.²⁸

This study also challenges the notion that contemporary racism is an outdated legacy of southern slavery. It illustrates instead that the origins of colorblind racist discourse are northern, urban, and modern. It thus fits within a growing literature that debunks the myth of northern racial exceptionalism—the misplaced belief that white supremacy

and racism structured institutions and social relations in the American South but not the North. This idea, that the South is uniquely racist and conservative, has distorted Americans' historical imagination and limited their ability to understand racial politics. It has thus obscured the link between racism and contemporaneous regional systems of political and economic power.²⁹ This study illustrates that northern racial liberals rejected the idea that discrimination was embedded in the fabric of modern economic, political, and social institutions in the North before the Second World War began. They identified the North as a place where modern forms of racial democracy could be and were being practiced, in contrast to the backward and violent application of segregation in the Jim Crow South, even when, as in the case of Herbert Russell, they sympathized with white southerners' approach.³⁰ They used this regional comparison to justify their racial practices and to undermine black claims to equality. This study demonstrates that northern racial liberals promoted the idea that racism was illogical, backward, and southern since the beginning of the twentieth century. It illustrates that white northern elites and political leaders constructed a regional identity rooted in the belief that their flexible racial system was both distinct from and superior to southern practices before mass suburbanization, the Cold War, or the mainstream southern civil rights movement got under way.

A corollary to the myth of northern racial exceptionalism is the idea that southern legislators pushed racism into northern states by insisting that New Deal policies include racial stratification. Jill Quadagno has argued that southern Democrats used their disproportionate power in Congress during the 1930s to ensure that seemingly race-blind federal programs would have racially unequal effects. Scholars such as Ira Katznelson and Robert Lieberman, interested in how the New Deal helped extend racial inequalities, have accepted Quadagno's claim.³¹ Historian Mary Poole, however, has demonstrated that this claim is empirically incorrect. She shows that white policy makers from Wisconsin, the architects of the Social Security Act, spearheaded and subsequently insisted upon the exclusion of black workers from social insurance coverage because they wanted to protect "the political and economic value of whiteness."³² *Managing Inequality* takes on this idea from another angle. By examining the local germination and urban

origins of northern white liberals' participation in the building of a racially inegalitarian state, it shows how the progenitors of New Deal inequality got their start at the local level. It helps expose how white liberals' representations of themselves as hindered by southerners' and conservatives' racism, rather than their own prejudices and ideologies, masked a lack of political will.

Finally, understanding race-blind language as a primarily postwar project leaves intact one of its central myths—the myth of racial progress. This myth is the popular cultural idea that racism is becoming less potent as we move further away from slavery, that “race relations” are improving, and that the nation is moving toward more, not less, racial equality. It flattens our understanding of past unequal racial systems, suggesting that past racisms were consistently overt, uncontested, and accepted by whites without ambivalence. Indeed, contemporary proponents of colorblindness, from its theorists to white defenders of segregation who used market-based language to explain their decision making, implicitly cast themselves in opposition to a more racist and less enlightened prewar period. Understanding that expressions of racism before the civil rights movement took more subtle forms than contemporary critics would have us believe illustrates that racial systems have, like northern racial liberalism and colorblind racism, always been laden with contradictions.³³ Indeed, this study helps debunk the idea that racism used to be obvious and straightforward, not the slippery, confusing, coded, and elusive animal that it has become today. Furthermore, it illustrates that different systems of racial inequality and disfranchisement are born out of different economic needs and political realities and thus require different ideological frames.

Rethinking Urban Liberalism and Urban Conservatism

Scholars of racial formation in postwar northern cities, such as Arnold Hirsh, June Manning Thomas, and Robert Self, have shown that local governments and business elites used aggressive measures to implement segregation, excluding African Americans from downtown and all-white residential areas since at least the 1940s.³⁴ Historians have also demonstrated that working- and middle-class white residents, especially homeowners, fought to hold onto racial privilege in their work-

places and residential exclusivity in their neighborhoods. These white women and men came to equate liberalism with blind allegiance to racial equality and indifference to whites' concerns. As Thomas Sugrue illustrates, economically stable white Detroit homeowners "defended" their neighborhoods against black homebuyers and through these struggles came to ally themselves with the city's conservatives and Republicans, rejecting the interracial vision and political priorities of their unions.³⁵ Republican leaders successfully capitalized on these racial divisions as they built political power in northern metropolitan areas, especially majority-white suburbs.³⁶

Managing Inequality challenges the clarity of the political divide these scholars describe. It shows that metropolitan segregation was not the exclusive province of political conservatives. Liberals were ambivalent defenders of racial integration, and clear lines did not exist between the actions and attitudes of racists and the intentions of northern liberals. Overly clear political distinctions obfuscate rather than clarify our understanding of northern racial geographies. Conservatives cast liberals as dyed-in-the-wool defenders of racial equality, radical integrationists, and promoters of mongrelization in order to undermine their opponents' popularity and promote their own agendas. This representation, while politically effective, was grossly inaccurate. White liberals often consciously rejected models for instituting racial equality that they believed would redistribute resources away from whites. They also upheld segregation as part of their gradualist vision for change—African Americans, they suggested, were not ready for integration. Integrationist and inclusive models, developed by African American thinkers, were available to white liberals and policy makers who often worked in coalition with African Americans and even belonged to moderate civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. But white liberals publicly rejected ideas as politically implausible that they privately deemed undesirable. Looking closely at liberals' practices rather than focusing on their policies and pronouncements helps expose these dynamics.

Studies of grassroots mobilizations against integration have implicitly cast white workers as the upholders of segregation and let the local liberal state officials off the hook for promulgating racial inequality. White working-class Detroiters, these studies show, fought openly to

exclude African Americans from their neighborhoods and institutions, joining conservative political coalitions to protect their whiteness and their interests. Municipal administrators and liberal as well as conservative elected officials, however, oversaw the organization and development of urban geography on the scale of the city itself. While their political commitments ranged across the mainstream spectrum, their ideas about how and whether to integrate the growing African American population into the fabric of daily life were remarkably consistent: almost all of them believed that segregation helped secure interracial urban peace. Conservatives used racist language to explain their commitments. Liberals, conversely, promoted racial tolerance but simultaneously embraced the language of gradualism. They argued that the city's white population was not ready for integration. They suggested that African Americans needed to evolve culturally, socially, and politically in order to take on full citizenship and become integrated into the life of the city. And they asserted that black migrants needed state assistance and self-help to accustom themselves to the practices of the modern city, and equality would flow from there. This language of gradualism, tolerance, and peace developed into the northern explanation for segregation as a necessary tool for managing un-conflicted interracial urban spaces. It was developed by liberals but became commonsense knowledge about the urban north.

Why Detroit?

Detroit occupies an important place in the political imagination of the United States as an extreme example of the fortunes and failures of northern industrial cities.³⁷ This portrait has always had a racial cast. When the city was largely white, its working class was celebrated for its affluence; now that Detroit is majority-black, its population is maligned for its impoverishment. In the 1910s, when this story starts, Detroit boasted an extremely powerful and well-organized class of industrialists and property owners. This elite, almost all of whom were connected to automobile manufacturing, ran what many have identified as the world's largest antiunion "open shop" town. Because Detroit was dominated by a single industry, its corporate elite were remarkably unified. Their economic and political visions overlapped more con-

sistently than the interests of other large cities' diverse merchant and industrial classes would allow. The local bourgeoisie were thus comparatively successful in both shaping and sustaining control over Detroit's political agenda. They aligned themselves with progressive reform, an ideological and political program that complemented their dedication to robust antiunion welfare capitalism. Detroit's ethnic working-class political institutions, both unions and party machines, remained relatively weak in the face of this corporate unity. Furthermore, the northern industrial labor regime relied on the illusion that all workers, even black workers, were essentially free agents. Overt southern segregation, as the clear legacy of slavery in the eyes of Americans, was a poor fit in the urban North because it undermined the underpinnings of free labor ideology.

Detroit is also famous for becoming the heart of the industrial union movement in the 1930s, which proclaimed its commitment to interracial organizing. Furthermore, Detroit produced a number of prominent white and black liberal leaders, many of whom went on to become important national figures. Frank Murphy, for example, served as the mayor of Detroit in the early 1930s, accepted an appointment from Franklin D. Roosevelt to be the governor-general of the Philippines in the middle of the decade, became the governor of Michigan in the late 1930s, went on to serve as attorney general under FDR, and finally was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Murphy was perhaps most famous for his dissent in the *Korematsu* case, where he harshly criticized the majority for upholding Japanese internment during the Second World War, arguing that internment was based on "disinformation" and "racial and economic prejudices" and "falls into the ugly abyss of racism."³⁸ This decision reflected the ideological commitment to racial equality Murphy had sustained for decades. Murphy sincerely criticized the racially unequal status quo, even though he had neither devised nor implemented state policies to undermine it. He thus represents the central paradox of northern racial liberalism—his strident ethical rejection of explicitly racist practices coexisted alongside his role as an upholder of elements of racial stratification. African Americans active in Detroit's struggles for racial equality also moved on to national prominence. Gloster Current, for example, a leader of Detroit's youth branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, went

on to become the director of branches for the national organization in 1946, a position he held for decades.³⁹

If Detroit's destiny represents the fate of northern industrial cities, those cities have come to represent the fate of liberalism itself. In the popular historical imagination, the postwar growth of American cities overlapped with an era of liberal ascendancy. Liberalism prospered, this narrative goes, as these cities prospered. As these cities lost jobs, were abandoned by their white, prosperous, and middle-class populations, and turned into majority-black enclaves, political power shifted to the ever-expanding, lily-white, and conservative suburbs. In this popular story, the destruction of the New Deal liberal alliance was a product of racial tensions that emerged in the 1960s and the limits of liberal social welfare for addressing cultural and structural divides. This popular narrative is seductive in its simplicity.⁴⁰

In reality, black and white city residents and politicians fought over how to understand racial difference and define its political consequences in the urban North between 1916 and 1940. Struggles between African American and white residents over access to resources and over the relationship between race and citizenship had been shaping northern cities since well before the Second World War. By 1940, race and racial conflict were already central components of northern, urban, social and political culture.⁴¹

This study is arranged both chronologically and thematically. The first three chapters focus on the years between the beginning of the First Great Migration and the end of the 1920s. They show how struggles over African American access to local resources framed public discussions about identity, entitlement, and city politics among both white and black residents in diverse class settings. They examine the increasing assertiveness of black protest alongside the emergence of the discourse and practice of northern racial liberalism. These chapters demonstrate that colorblind political language came to be adopted and used by politicians and activists who sustained a broad range of ideas about black equality, segregation, and racial stratification. Finally, these chapters explore the evolution and ascendancy of the seemingly neutral but ultimately racially differential assumptions of northern racial liberalism.

The four remaining chapters consider how these dynamics helped shape politics in Depression-era Detroit and how they helped define

the local management of New Deal programs. These chapters explore how discourses about welfare, dependency, and state resources, produced by local government officials, as well as by members of the city's white and black elite, helped shape ideas about citizenship in Detroit and helped link those ideas to race. Two figures emerged out of this debate: the "freeloader," understood to be black, who was stuck in a state of chronic dependence, and the "taxpayer," understood to be white, who represented the entitled and deserving recipient of city resources. Indeed, northern racial liberals contributed to the evolution of a popular discourse that linked African Americans to indigence and transience, and whites to full, taxpaying citizenship. Among African Americans, the Great Depression contributed to a shift in the reigning political discourse that was already under way—from a voluntarist politics of patronage and uplift to a more confrontational politics informed by liberalism. These dynamics developed along similar lines in the city's labor unions, where white and black activists adopted interracial organizing as a strategy to mobilize power. Finally, northern racial liberal supporters of New Deal housing programs connected urban "improvement" to the removal of African Americans from the city's downtown district. White liberals attempted to build a New Deal city and a New Deal coalition that included blacks as recipients of resources, but in actuality, their plans created perpetually second-class citizens. Meanwhile, black leaders and most black residents embraced the federal government's claim that "better housing makes better citizens" and fought for full access to both of these promises.

This study historicizes current debates about the persistence of racial inequality and white privilege in contemporary America. In other words, it uses a historical lens to examine a contemporary paradox: if explicit expressions of racism are no longer acceptable within the public sphere, and if civil rights legislation prevents conscious acts of discrimination, then why have racial stratification and segregation proved so durable? As African Americans struggling for social, economic, and political equality in Detroit during the interwar years made clear, liberal promises that racial equality would emerge as a result of good intentions were insufficient. Ultimately, white liberal leaders failed to remedy or even significantly tackle the problems that their new ideology was ostensibly designed to address.