

Homeowners' Associations:  
The Production of Apartheid in Postwar America

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Thomas Sugrue and Mike Davis independently reach agreement that the formation of and politics surrounding homeowners' associations are clearly pertinent to the academic field of Urban Studies. Each authors' analysis of the role of homeowners' associations in postwar urban development supports the idea that these groups strongly contributed to racial segregation and class animosities. Through a careful synthesis of this knowledge and principles of logic borrowed from Discrete Mathematics, the great question of whether or not these groups are democratic is answered with a definitive no: that is to say, within a global universe of discourse (or a classically liberal frame of thought), homeowners' associations are not democratic.

Sugrue and Davis present knowledge which can be synthesized to answer the question of whether or not homeowners' associations are democratic. However, to answer the question properly, principles of logic from Discrete Mathematics should be used: To begin to answer the question, it becomes necessary to first consider the question's universe of discourse, or frame of thought. One might say for example that the policies of homeowners' associations are not unlike the exclusivist immigration policies of the United States government: Since the United States is a democratic nation, it may also be said by implication that homeowners' associations are also democratic. However: since the implication is presented without a frame bounding the limits or scope of the question, the implication cannot be made logically (and is therefore pointless to express). Consider that within the United States itself, immigration policies were generally enacted by representative democratic processes (and therefore can be considered democratic) – but outside the United States on a more global scale, US immigration policies were not democratically enacted (because not everyone on Earth had a say in the development of the policies) and as a result, US immigration policies cannot be considered democratic. The same concept is true of homeowners' associations: depending on the frame in which the question is placed, the answer to the question of whether or not the groups are democratic changes accordingly. With this in mind, how might readers frame the question? One method of framing the question comes from Mike Davis.

Mike Davis frames his interpretation of the issues surrounding homeowners' associations by analyzing who constituted a member of these groups. The third chapter of Mike Davis' book *City of Quartz* (1990) clearly states that "The master discourse here – exemplified by the West Hills secessionists – is homestead exclusivism, whether the immediate issue is apartment construction, commercial encroachment, school busing, crime, taxes or simply community designation." (p. 159) Davis goes on to say that "Slow growth... ..is merely the latest incarnation of a middle-class political

subjectivity that fitfully constitutes and reconstitutes itself every few years around the defense of household equity and residential privilege.” (p. 159) One page later, Davis states that to analyze Southern California’s ‘growth wars’ “...the starting point is to reconstruct the white-supremacist genealogy of its essential infrastructure: the homeowners’ association.” (p. 160) In other words, the very purpose of slow growth policies (and the purpose of homeowners’ associations) is to build various barriers to protect, enforce, and perhaps even expand upon white middle class segregation and privilege. One shocking but certainly plausible interpretation of Davis’ third chapter may be that there exists a strong correlation between slow growth / homeowners’ association policies and the South African system of Apartheid.

The discussion of homeowners’ associations within the framework of protectionism is not limited to Davis’ work: in fact, Sugrue’s work provides strong agreement. Within the second part of chapter 8 of Sugrue’s (2005) book, people on all sides used “rights talk to express their political discontent and their political vision.” (pg. 219) White people would often speak of having a “right” to live in the kind of neighborhood that they chose to live in. According to Sugrue however, by defining the ghettos, the whites defined and reinforced the boundaries of race. This is significant because as argued by Sugrue, the divided metropolis experienced many consequences as a result of this social and physical division by skin color: apartheid perpetuated inequality in housing, access to jobs, but no less significantly “reinforced the ideology of race held by northern whites.” (pg. 229) We see here that Sugrue’s argument is that “rights talk” style protectionism had a strong contribution to racial segregation. This is reinforced when in chapter 9, Sugrue states that “countless whites retreated to suburbs or neighborhoods on the periphery of cities where they prevented black movement into their communities with federally sanctioned redlining practices, real estate steering, and restrictive zoning laws.”

Putting racial segregation aside for a moment, readers should know that Sugrue and Davis both agree that homeowners’ associations contributed to class animosities as well. A particularly good case in point comes from Davis’ fourth chapter, in which the Los Angeles Police Department is analyzed as a strong contributing factor to class animosities throughout Los Angeles’ history. The chapter discussed how homeowners’ associations would contract out to private security firms for neighborhood security, and how as a result, the city experienced the development of an interesting social division of labor in which the elitist and unionized LAPD as the official public security force became in charge of the relatively easy work (running the jails, etc.) and the non-unionized private security forces hired by the

homeowners' associations would have to do the "dirty work" such as intercepting retail theft, patrolling the streets, etc. According to Davis, with regard to the LAPD, "Technology helped insulate this paranoid esprit de corps" (pg. 251) and the LAPD later pioneered the use of helicopters to patrol from above. The development of the dichotomy between public and private security forces is then made extraordinarily clear when it is said on page 253 that good citizens were those who remained behind gates and bad citizens were the remaining people who were out on the streets.

Sugrue took class animosity to a whole new level: one section of chapter 9 is entitled "Violence and the Color Line." In this section, it was said that demonstrators vandalized new, substantial single-family homes. Making things worse, the fact that many of the new homes were "above the standards of existing structures" (p. 238) in the area enraged the whites. Possibly one of the most fascinating concepts that Sugrue presented however, was his example of a section of Detroit which was devalued due to the installation of a new freeway corridor rather than by the influx of large numbers of southern blacks. In this case, Sugrue says that there was far less racially-motivated violence. This is fascinating, because it can be used as contrapositive proof in a logical proposition (here I go with Discrete Math again) that the class animosities between blacks and whites in the postwar period were strongly motivated by neighborhood associations' attempts to protect real estate value. In other words, because we know that the violence was less existent in the areas with less influence of neighborhood associations, a link can be drawn and it can be shown that the policies of neighborhood associations were more-or-less the root cause of much of the class/race animosities. Sugrue detailed class and race animosities further in his conclusion, where it was said that "The combination of persistent discrimination in hiring, technological change, decentralized manufacturing, and urban economic decline had dramatic effects on the employment prospects of blacks in metropolitan Detroit." (pg. 261) In addition, "The deproletarianization of the city's black population had far-reaching consequences: it shaped a pattern of poverty in the postwar city that was disturbingly new." (pg. 262)

In summary, this paper marshaled direct evidence to draw a direct connection between Davis and Sugrue in their agreement over the idea that homeowners' associations had an enormous contribution to racial segregation and class animosities in the postwar period. I argued that the question of whether or not these groups were democratic was best answered through an analysis based on sound logical analysis via concepts borrowed from the field of Discrete Math: If the question is *framed* based on who is included and who is excluded from the groups, then there is no other option

but to say that since these groups were based on exclusion and protectionism, they simply cannot be regarded in an outsider's point-of-view as being democratic.