

Title: American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland

Author: Robert Self

Year: 2003

Categories: Race, Suburbanization, Spatial History, Conservatism, Homeownership, Liberalism, Welfare State, Civil Rights, Urban History

Place: Oakland, California

Time Period: 1945-1978

Argument Synopsis

Robert Self charts the metropolitan growth of post-World War II Oakland and the intertwined relationship between its urban and suburban areas. Self describes the dual rise of **two political movements** during the decades after the war: **urban black power politics and white homeowner conservatism**. Each of these political cultures responded to a shift from debates over how to distribute the **benefits** of metropolitan development in the 1940s and 1950s to how to distribute its **costs** in the 1960s and 1970s. In the end, Self tells a story of how struggles over the "**growth liberalism**" paradigm of the postwar years and later the role of the American welfare state both constituted and were shaped by **spatial processes** of segregation and unequal growth that benefited the suburbs at the expense of the city. Policies enacted at a range of spatial scales (from local to federal) championed white property ownership in the suburbs while creating a **patchwork pattern** of inequality and segregation.

Beginning after World War II, Oakland leaders strove to develop an "**industrial garden**" in the East Bay, one that envisioned a place for the city as well as the suburb. However, in attempting to attract businesses to the area, Oakland suburbs lowered taxes, enforced racial restrictions, and facilitated the growth of a model in which suburban areas benefited while the costs of the "industrial garden" were increasingly born by the city of Oakland. In this system, **property-owners** often held disproportionate power and frequently used it whenever they felt the value of their property was threatened, which restricted the scope for progressive policies and coalitions. As such, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a program of "urban renewal" that broke apart working-class communities in the city in the name of development - far from white homeowners fleeing the city's "urban crisis," Self argues that they were, in fact, **complicit** in causing and exacerbating the crisis itself.

Self also takes on the prevailing historiography of the Civil Rights narrative. Instead of charting a standard Southern-centric story that begins in 1954 and ends in 1965, he argues for a **much longer history** and a much more complex one in the **West**. In Oakland, **black power** politics rose as an outgrowth of much earlier efforts and encompassed a wide spectrum of responses rather than its oft-caricatured radicalism. The Black Panther party did have its roots in Oakland, but it was also balanced by less extremist black power advocates who worked within the War on Poverty for community action and local

politics. Even as black power developed, it was mirrored by the rise of white homeowner conservatism in Oakland's suburbs. Self argues that **white homeowners** came to expect continued racial segregation, rising property values, and low taxation in postwar Oakland. When taxes rose, they cast themselves as **victims** despite being one of the most heavily government-subsidized groups (federal, municipal, etc.) in the twentieth century. Self extends this political movement to much **older origins** stretching back to the racialized city-building policies of the 1940s and 1950s, and argues that the movement built and finally culminated in the late 1970s tax revolt that passed Proposition 13, which capped property taxes and devastated social services for urban Oakland.

Key Themes and Concepts

- Struggle between city and suburbs over vision of metropolitan development - suburbs win out by transferring costs of development to city
- Twin rise of black power movement and white homeowner conservatism
- "Growth liberalism" paradigm: economic expansion, modest social welfare, and increased wages
- Space - how capital, policies, and race actively build spatial segregation that creates ripple effects (rather than passive "white flight")
- PROPERTY at the center of power - property-holders pull levers of power
- Shift from how to distribute *benefits* of development during 1940s/1950s to how to distribute *costs* of development during 1960s/1970s



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