

Ferguson: A History

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I saw *Selma* last Sunday, a powerful movie about people rising up against outright discrimination and devaluation of their humanity. Racism today doesn't always look like it did in Selma, Alabama, and so it's tempting to deny that racism exists. We know we have good intentions. But our good intentions don't change the existence and structure of racism today. For example, Michael Brown's shooting exists in a historical context, and the protests were about a lot more than a single shooting. Here's an introduction to that history, in Ferguson and across the country, a discussion of some of the policies and practices that made Ferguson what it is today, a majority-black and substantially poor inner-ring suburb.

For over a century St. Louis has had mutually reinforcing federal, state, and local policies that devalued blacks and limited their life chances. We start with racially explicit zoning decisions that designated specific ghetto boundaries within the city of St. Louis and that prevented black homeowners from moving into more desirable neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods were also zoned to permit industry, including industries that polluted, taverns, liquor stores, nightclubs and brothels; none of these were permitted in white neighborhoods. Needless to say, this zoning led to increased crime, violence, and ill-health in black neighborhoods.

Then, during the New Deal, the federal government began legally allowing total segregation in areas where such was the local custom. Public housing had earlier been integrated; during this period it became completely segregated and suddenly, municipal services that had existed for integrated public housing mostly disappeared. Curbs were not maintained, garbage was not removed, and housing stock decayed. The upshot of all this was that conditions deteriorated in black neighborhoods such that blacks became increasingly associated with slums in white minds, despite the fact that the deterioration was largely a result of white policies and practices. After all, white housing projects continued to receive decent municipal services. What other than prejudice could have explained the difference?

Back in 1910, St. Louis began using restrictive covenants, meaning that white homeowners were legally forbidden to sell to black customers and real estate agents could lose their licenses for doing so. Restrictive covenants began as private agreements but later were adopted as public policy and remained in place for decades. Thus, blacks who wanted to get out of the slums, meaning pretty much everyone, were unable to do so.

Following World War II, the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans' Administration provided government subsidies for suburban developments that explicitly and legally excluded blacks; bank loans for builders were only available to whites. Thus, whites were able to flee the cities for the suburbs and begin developing equity in their new homes that eventually led to substantial wealth in many cases, both opportunities denied blacks. As I'll remind us shortly, policies and practices from the 1950s have long-lasting effects, and both the enforcement of segregation and the inability of blacks to build up superb home equity impact their lives today.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many cities engaged in urban renewal and redevelopment practices to “clean up” the slums, and St. Louis was no different. When it decided to reclaim central St. Louis for university and related uses it developed several inner-ring suburban black and racially mixed poor towns. It’s worth noting here that the problems with the ghettos were overwhelmingly problems of systematic poverty, which were not addressed in any systematic way. The poverty simply moved from central St. Louis to Ferguson and some other suburbs, and we know well that poverty generally is a major predictor of human suffering in general and certain kinds of crime in particular.

During much of the century, other types of real estate and financial sector policies and practices explicitly promoted residential segregation, always with government regulators’ tacit support and sometimes with open support. These included land annexation, spot zoning, municipal incorporation, blockbusting, and redlining. You may have heard of redlining in particular. It involves discriminating on mortgage applications and got its name because in more blatant days, banks simply drew red lines in pen around neighborhoods for which they would not finance mortgages. To this day, according to Housing and Urban Development research, blacks are not shown apartments to rent and houses to buy in certain neighborhoods at the same rates as whites. And, ironically, once white policies zoned industry and problematic commercial enterprises into black neighborhoods as described above, this zoning rendered homes in such neighborhoods ineligible for mortgage guarantees by the Federal Housing Administration. So, to be clear, white lawmakers zoned black neighborhoods to house problematic industry and commerce, white federal administrators wrote laws that denied mortgages in neighborhoods with such industry and commerce, and black people suffered.

Finally, until the 1970s, job discrimination against African Americans was perfectly legal and widely practiced, not least in St. Louis and its suburbs. Two large industries in this area, construction and arms manufacturers excluded blacks, the construction industry through its unions and arms manufacturers through management. Thus, even beyond the lack of access to decent housing in valued neighborhoods, blacks could not accumulate the wealth needed to afford quality suburban housing.

The effects continue today. Poor neighborhoods cannot afford decent schools because property taxes fund primary education. People in segregated neighborhoods rarely hear about good jobs, of which 80 to 90 percent are never advertised publicly. Recent research shows that whites are still more desirable to employers than blacks based on identical resumes submitted with stereotypically black and white names. And in 2013, in the zip code encompassing Ferguson, 49 percent of homes had a market value lower than the mortgage’s outstanding balance due to mortgage lenders continuing to target black areas for the highest-risk, highest-cost types of mortgage loans.

As long as we treat racism as the work of a few haters, nothing will change. Our task is to refuse individualist analyses and understand the larger social context of racism. Only then can we be part of the solution.