

Declining Vigilance in Maintaining the Color Line

When one looks at today's labor market and housing situation in the US it is possible to credit the discrepancy between Caucasians and non-whites or males and females purely to economic reasons. I.e. African Americans dominate the urban downtowns, because it is cheaper there, or they (and women) get lower-paying jobs because they do not educate themselves. However if we consider the historical background we learn that this situation did not "just happen", there were structural reasons that prevented equality of non-whites and whites. I hope my paper will shed some light on these. There is an overall tendency-- I would like to emphasize that this is a general trend with plenty of exceptions--in the methods of enforcing the segregation along color lines becoming more subtle from 1919 to the 1960s. This can be seen from the mass scale violence of the 1919 Chicago race riots, through the indirect use of force and economic pressure in the 1950s zinc miner strike, to the intimidation in *A Raisin in the Sun* of the early 1960s. The methods became more subdued because the people of color became more conscious and stood up for their rights and gained some support from legislation as well.

1919 is just barely 54 years after 1865 when slavery was abolished with the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. From a legal point of view, everybody, regardless of skin color should have had the same opportunities to work with comparable wages. This was not the case even in the Northern city of Chicago. As we learned from Professor O'Connor's lecture a portion of the freed slaves and their descendants migrated to cities and to the North, like Chicago. There, in the tight labor market they faced tension with both African American and white people who already established their existence. The newly arrived were not interested in joining labor unions. They hoped to gain economic and social equality and freedom on their

own. This approach backfired on them. "Black resistance to unionization-and with it, interracial abuse and violence—mounted in the weeks before the riot."¹ Tuttle showed that the tense labor disputes contributed to the riots. Part of the problem was that "Organizers and black workers had difficulty communicating with each other..."² These and other factors led to the race riot of 1919 in Chicago, leavings scores of people dead.

The housing situation paralleled labor's segregation. In all-white neighborhoods blacks were not welcomed. This was an understatement: "26 bombs were exploded at isolated black residences in once all-white neighborhoods."³ Because of the large influx of people to the cities there was extreme pressure on them to find housing. The new people had to find a place to live. "Rents soared [...] since the demand for housing in the black belt far exceeded the supply"⁴ and that directed them occasionally to "prohibited" areas. These neighborhoods were prohibited mostly by customs and not by law. The "separate but equal" principle of the south was very much alive in the north, even if Jim Crow type of laws were not on the books.

The police in 1919's Chicago was clearly on the white population's side. This is another structural factor (besides the lack of legal support) in maintaining the color line. For example, when Mrs. Harrison, the wife of a respected black citizen, called the police for protection they did not do anything, laughed her off. The next day her house was bombed.⁵ Facing these atrocities and not being protected by the state African Americans resorted to their own means. "The "New Negro" was resolved to defend his family and home with militance."⁶ In 1919

¹ William M. Tuttle, Jr., Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919 (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 109.

² Ibid, p. 155.

³ Ibid, p. 159

⁴ Ibid, p. 163

⁵ Ibid, p. 158

⁶ Ibid, p. 159

African Americans were killed by mass violence. It was up to them to protect themselves with little legal or technical support from outside.

By 1954, when the movie *Salt of the Earth*⁷ was produced, the circumstances had somewhat changed. The film, based on a true story, is set in a poor rural mining community. Everybody is impoverished, but even under these dire circumstances there are differences. We learn through the words of Rosaura that the Anglo (i.e. Caucasian) families' houses, in a segregated area, include indoor plumbing, unlike her own. We, the viewers, are never shown the Anglo houses, instead we see the hard reality of how much work it was to do the laundry and cooking and keeping the house without this basic amenity. This, seemingly minor difference, caused a huge workload and significantly lower quality of life for the Mexican American community. The demand for it became a cornerstone issue between Mexican American men and women. When the women took over the picket line and men were forced to do the housework they also agreed to include the request for plumbing towards the mining corporation that provided the housing. Eventually, because of the Mexican American strikers' persistence this demand was accepted along with the others.

The legal background of the labor market was changed by two related legislations in the decades between the periods of the aforementioned sources. On one hand the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was supposed to provide a decent standard of living for workers, set minimum wage and maximum hours on the federal level. It also established the right to organize unions. However there were extensive exemptions, because the act did not cover farm workers and domestic workers, majority of who were people of color. On the other hand the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 made it more difficult to organize. This legislation set the context for the movie.

⁷ *Salt of the Earth*. Directed by Herbert J. Biberman. 94 min. 1954.

The film visually depicted the houses and the people's lives with minute details. Verbally and plot wise the focus was on labor disputes though. Mexican Americans had three grievances: lack of paying attention to their physical security from management, unfair practice of blaming accidents on them, and differences in wages. The Anglos earned more for doing the same work. To this explosive mix came the lack of job security. The managers and owners of the mine used every tool in their arsenal to break their strike. They use the police to intimidate arrest, harass, provoke and evict the workers on strike. Intimidation came in the form of their continued presence and occasional shooting. But by this time they did not shoot the crowd directly. The men in uniform harassed and arrested those who they could on drummed-up charges. They supported the management's effort to provoke the leaders—utilizing the services of an agent provocateur--so they could be arrested. In the—ultimately failed--hope that this would break the strikers' spirit. They even tried to evict the workers from the company owned housing. These proceedings are the local actions of the "military-industrial complex" that by de facto (not by de jure) became a major governing force in the 1950s.

There are telling differences between 1919 and 1954. By this time when minorities stood up for their rights and organized themselves they could accomplish more. The level of physical violence against them got reduced from the mass scale to the individual. They were still far from being equal, but at least the playing--more precisely fighting--field started to level out. Whites' violence was restricted. While they became less confident, the people on the other side of the color line got more confident and organized with growing legal support.

Race Riot, the book, is a secondary resource containing primary sources, like interview and newspaper excerpts and official records. As such it provides a reliable and scientific overview of an era and place even if criticism of the analysis is legitimate. *Salt of the Earth*, the

movie, is a reenactment of an affair. It can be considered as a fact based depiction of the events, even if some changes were surely made for dramatizing effect. *A Raisin in the Sun*⁸ on the other hand is a fictional account, originally a theatre play. Nevertheless for the sake of my argument I will consider it as an accurate measure of the atmosphere of 1961, when it was turned into a motion picture. I believe that this fictional story is the generalization of the experience of many families.

The African American Younger family had a chance to move into a more spacious house from their overcrowded apartment. They purchased their new abode not knowing or being aware that it is in an all-white neighborhood. The representative of the house owners' association in their new district tried to talk the Youngers out of moving to their new house. He was even authorized to offer money to them not to move in. This is a major shift in whites' attitude. Instead of unabashedly using violence their first chosen method to maintain the color line was peaceful. It signals the slight change of time.

Furthermore the white lawyer was a comic figure juxtaposed to the powerful figure of Walter Lee Younger (Sidney Poitier). Physically the Caucasian intruder to the set/apartment was subservient compared to the African American family in power. While he was depicted as a meek person, he and the organization, social conventions behind him still represented danger to the family's future. Nevertheless the Youngers had a choice in the matter and they used their discretion. The movie ends before we could follow their lives in the new setting, but it shows how they were brave enough to resist and move there.

There is no time and space here to go into the details of the family dynamics. It would be interesting to dissect who enabled whom, after what kind of twists, to be the family's decision maker. Instead, I would like to point out that an important aspect of refusing to succumb to

⁸ *A Raisin in the Sun*. Directed by Daniel Petrie. 128 min. 1961.

despair was their newfound pride. The younger sister continually searched for ways to embrace her heritage. In the process she helped her brother to gain it too: he danced like an original African on the table. Admittedly he was drunk at the time, but I believe this episode contributed to his decision of standing firm. This feeling, along with the knowledge that they have the right to move in, enabled him to say no to the slimy and somewhat veiled threat he received. This time, as opposed to the examples from my other two sources, there was no police or state involvement. The structural assistance in reinforcing the color line has diminished.

The movie didn't show much of the labor market in general. Instead we saw and heard of the specifics of how hard the women of the family worked in subservient and unprotected positions. Even the powerful and manly Walter was subjugated to serve whites, being a chauffeur. These statuses and the fact that none of them was in any kind of leadership or management rank intended to show that African Americans were still second class citizens. The "glass ceiling" was rather low.

These three examples showed how the nature of whites' resistance to eliminating the color line shifted: from large scale open violence (Race Riot), through smaller scale mostly psychological attacks (Salt of the Earth) to disguised, hesitant intimidation (A Raisin in the Sun.) At the same time we could follow how the oppressed "races" developed their battle strategies: hoping and getting police support and resorting to individualistic actions (Race Riot), using unions, communal power and their own ingenuity to ensure they get what is legally their right (Salt of the Earth), and finally standing solidly and self-confidently that they are equal (A Raisin in the Sun.) A tendency towards fairer outcome can be discovered from the 1920s to the 1960s. But there is still a long way to go, even today in 2005.