

Northern Complacency Punctured

THE NEGRO GHETTO. By Robert C. Weaver. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1948. 404 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by H. A. OVERSTREET

THIS book is itself a social phenomenon. It is the sort of thing that could only have happened in times like ours when old complacencies are passing away and a world of new convictions is a-coming. The book dares to hold up a mirror to the North. Mirrors held up to the South have been in fashion among liberal thinkers; but for the most part the North has been permitted to see itself as racially sound. The image of the Civil War days has lingered on—of the North as the friend and emancipator of the colored man.

“The Negro Ghetto” makes short shrift of that image. The North, that helped to free the slave, has, through its realtors and home-owners, proceeded to re-enslave him. The whole thing has been terrifyingly natural. White people who owned property, or who bought and sold property, came quickly to realize that having colored people as neighbors depreciated property values. After that, there was only one thing to do: property takes precedence over people; Negroes had to be kept out.

It is a simple, ugly, and apparently hopeless story, told with the passion of unimpassioned maps and figures. Indeed, it is so simple a story that it seems to leave us helpless to do anything. Here in plain array are the facts: kind-hearted and generous as Northern whites might wish to be to their Negro fellowmen, they had to protect their property values. However much they would have liked to open their neighborhoods to Negroes, they could not do this without losing money. Money must not be lost.

But Dr. Weaver, executive director of the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations in Chicago, and the man who prepared the notable socio-economic brief that helped to win the Supreme Court decision against racial covenants, does not leave the story in its simple hopelessness. He shows how it is not the coming of the Negro that depreciates property values but rather what property owners do to their property when they rent or sell to Negroes.

THE NEGRO GHETTO

The story of high sales prices and high rents that force Negroes to share occupancy; of houses divided and subdivided so that more tenants can be crowded in and more rents gathered for the owners; of urban densities so great that streets, parks, playgrounds, and houses are turned into slums—this is the story of ownership-venality. It is the story of white people creating sub-standard conditions and then blaming the sub-standardized victims. Time and again whites have used this device of face-saving: forcing the Negro into subhuman ways of life, then pointing the finger, and saying: "See, we told you so!"

Dr. Weaver makes short shrift of another Northern complacency. Many liberals in the North have welcomed city-planning projects that have made provisions for Negro public housing. But these projects, in many cases, have been simply a covering for the introduction of Negro segregation in the North and a displacing of Negroes from desirable sections of cities.

The most notable part of this book, however, is not so much the exposure of the evils of unacknowledged segregation in our Northern cities, as the development of a new concept of housing that promises to solve an interracial housing problem that has literally seemed to be insoluble. After more than 300 pages that leave us accurately informed but pretty hopeless, Dr. Weaver presents a chapter entitled "Occupancy Standards" I dare say it will be a revelation to most readers.

Occupancy standards specifically bar excessive roomers, commit owners and occupants to observe and assist in the enforcement of all ordinances and codes covering property in the community, pledge observance of neighborhood standards of maintenance, discourage departures from established architectural design, and provide for participation in neighborhood associations for the preservation of community standards. These agreements are equally applicable to new subdivisions as well as to established neighborhoods. They offer more real protection to owners than undemocratic restrictions based on race, at the same time that they afford a basis for real understanding and cooperation between white and colored residents.

I venture to say that the term "occupancy standards" will find its way increasingly into the language of interracial housing. It is Dr. Weaver's most significant contribution in an area where his contributions have already been many.

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