

## **Citizen Brown: Race, Democracy, and Inequality in the St. Louis Suburbs**

**Colin Gordon**

PRA663A – Leadership in Cross-Cultural: Foundations

Martin Edward Lee, December 29, 2019

“In the American context, full citizenship has always rested on independence and gainful employment, a fact reflected in the terms and conditions of labor-market policies, social policies, social insurance, and private benefits. For those who do not meet the standard of the upright citizen – worker, taxpayer, consumer, homeowner – the state is a very different beast,” Gordon explains. “It does not just discipline or regulate them; it punishes and preys on them.”<sup>1</sup> Gordon describes how African American citizens have been punished and preyed on in the St. Louis suburbs. Government and local policy eroded the already fragile citizenry status of African Americans through the punitive use of public goods and services (including “the protection of life [firefighters and police], liberty [courts], property [zoning], health [water and sewers], and equal opportunity [schools]”<sup>2</sup>); through annexation; and through segregated renewal and redevelopment efforts.

“Although spared the full brunt of ‘Jim Crow’ that emerged elsewhere in the former Confederacy, the free blacks of St. Louis faced a sustained battle over the terms of their political incorporation, and an increasingly formalized system of residential segregation – the latter sustained by urban planning (including development of exclusive “private streets”), legal instruments (including race-restrictive deed covenants), and the tactics of private developers and realtors,”<sup>3</sup> Gordon says. “The fact that this confiscation was complete and successful erased their standing as citizens ... .”<sup>4</sup>

Conditions in St. Louis came to a head in the case of \_\_\_\_\_Thornton. Being “driven to violence from frustrations that many black residents in Meacham Park describe: ‘Being disrespected by city officials. Being hassled by the police. Being treated like second-class citizens.’”<sup>5</sup> “A half century later,”

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon, Colin, “Citizen Brown: Race, Democracy, and Inequality in the St. Louis Suburbs,” (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 60637, 2019.), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>4</sup> 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 7.

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with the shooting of 18-year old Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, August 9, 2014, “the Justice

Department’s scathing dissection of policing in Ferguson made essentially the same point: the police see ‘residents, especially those who live in Ferguson’s predominantly African-American neighborhoods, less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue.’<sup>6</sup> The tax base of the white (upright) citizens – worker, taxpayer, consumer, homeowner – moved out of the St. Louis suburbs and tax revenue was replaced by fees and penalties against African American “offenders.”

I was shocked by *Citizen Brown*, but found it entirely convincing due to Gordon’s thorough research and clear presentation of data. The data makes an obvious case against city planners and their apparent discriminatory policy making. Gordon presents overwhelming evidence of policies diminishing African American citizens’ rights. One would think more could be done to repair poorly devised policies and their impending consequences, given the clarity of hindsight. Maybe there is no incentive to implement repair policies, since the “inclusion and exclusion of citizens from public services, public goods and public protection”<sup>7</sup> may tip finite resources less in favor those with political power.

Gordon adds, “Those singled out as especially worthy or deserving (say homeowners or veterans) find their citizenship enhanced; their claims on state attention are seen as both noble and expansive. Those singled out as dependent or undeserving are treated (and come to see themselves) as objects of state attention rather than democratic citizens.”<sup>8</sup> Changing this dynamic would require a culture change as well as a change in resource allocation. Gordon makes it clear that in St. Louis, citizenship rights are not expansive for African Americans, nor “any semblance of equal protection.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 81.