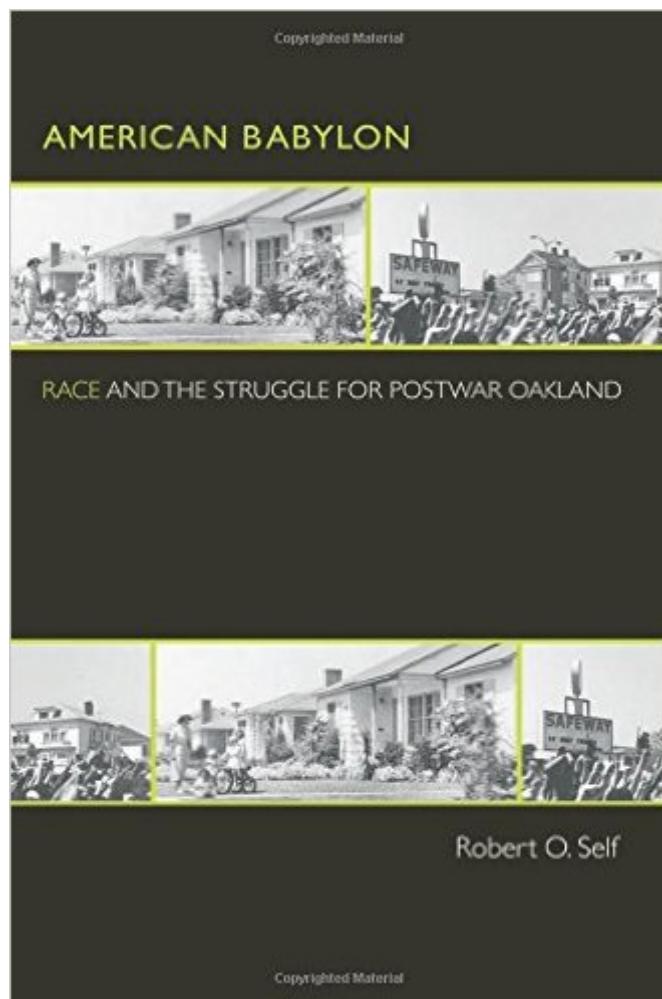


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# American Babylon: Race And The Struggle For Postwar Oakland (Politics And Society In Modern America)



## Synopsis

As the birthplace of the Black Panthers and a nationwide tax revolt, California embodied a crucial motif of the postwar United States: the rise of suburbs and the decline of cities, a process in which black and white histories inextricably joined. *American Babylon* tells this story through Oakland and its nearby suburbs, tracing both the history of civil rights and black power politics as well as the history of suburbanization and home-owner politics. Robert Self shows that racial inequities in both New Deal and Great Society liberalism precipitated local struggles over land, jobs, taxes, and race within postwar metropolitan development. Black power and the tax revolt evolved together, in tension. *American Babylon* demonstrates that the history of civil rights and black liberation politics in California did not follow a southern model, but represented a long-term struggle for economic rights that began during the World War II years and continued through the rise of the Black Panthers in the late 1960s. This struggle yielded a wide-ranging and profound critique of postwar metropolitan development and its foundation of class and racial segregation. Self traces the roots of the 1978 tax revolt to the 1940s, when home owners, real estate brokers, and the federal government used racial segregation and industrial property taxes to forge a middle-class lifestyle centered on property ownership. Using the East Bay as a starting point, Robert Self gives us a richly detailed, engaging narrative that uniquely integrates the most important racial liberation struggles and class politics of postwar America.

## Book Information

Series: Politics and Society in Modern America

Paperback: 408 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press (August 28, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691124868

ISBN-13: 978-0691124865

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 1 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ  See all reviewsÂ  (12 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #329,177 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #60 inÂ  Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Mesopotamia #177 inÂ  Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Civil Rights #567 inÂ  Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Minority Studies

## Customer Reviews

I read American Babylon after hearing about it on the radio, and came away impressed with the author's ability to make a remarkably complex process - the interplay of suburban development, urban decline, racial politics, and civil rights - accessible to an amateur such as myself. The book lays out a persuasive explanation of why things are they way they are in Oakland, and by (my) extension in many urban areas around the country, including my own hometown of Brooklyn. In doing so it seems to me to be the best sort of historical analysis: rigorous, remarkably detailed, and carefully documented, but useful to the public at large. Highly recommended.

Robert Self's "American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland" deserves the attention of grassroots political activists as much as academics. It is a brilliant analysis of the post-World War Two business strategy for Oakland, California and the boom (and boomerang to Oakland) in housing and jobs elsewhere in Alameda County that resulted. Self shows how the decline of Oakland was the other side of the coin in the creation of new communities in the open spaces nearby. He lays out the class and race contexts of the suburbanization process and shows the consequences for and responses by the labor movement and African Americans to the changes that were wrought. "American Babylon" thus provides, for example, an interesting account of the Black Panther Party. Finally, using this region in northern California as a case study, the book examines the origins of the anti-property tax movement, when the suburbs regime went sour. Since California is still embroiled over the same issues this book addresses -- taxes, urban revitalization, de-industrialization, racial equality, and the political and environmental impacts of suburban growth -- Robert Self's "American Babylon" could not be more timely.

Oakland is frequently in the news. Our school board passes a resolution asserting the language rights of African-Americans, and the country explodes in controversy. Our citizens elect a celebrity mayor, and the Wall Street Journal speculates on the reasons. None of these events are understandable without understanding Oakland's history, and Robert Self has done a terrific job of capturing its contours. He lays waste to the common myth that the Civil Rights movement was exclusively a Southern phenomenon, and reports in fascinating detail on Oakland's own Civil Rights movement. Although he reports on its most famous organization, the Black Panthers, he also describes in detail the tenacity and success of other organizations, like the Oakland Black Caucus and the East Bay Democratic Club, which produced changes in the employment and electoral rights of American-Americans. People who want to change cities should read this book. An Oakland

## College Professor

Robert Self's book should interest readers interested in understanding the aftermath of urban renewal and development in US cities and the politics of race and class in the post-WWII to 1975 period. Self's work makes a contribution to studies of urban politics and the histories of cities and of the Civil Rights era by pointing to what has often been ignored or left invisible: that the so-called problems of people living in cities are often directly related to the overdevelopment of their surrounding suburbs (the noose), and that the problems of people of color in this country are directly related to the privileges of white people, structurally and historically. Thus, Self's book shows intimately and concretely how one might explore the dynamics of structural, institutionalized racism, in the post-Civil Rights era, when we all thought that the problem of blatant individualized racism had been solved. In addition, the book will be useful for those of us living and working or traveling through the Bay Area: It adds another part of the story, and links the decline of Oakland with the rise of Silicon Valley, and with shifting terrains of race and class politics. It also provides important historical perspective on the forces that started the long trajectory that we now live, the decisions that sowed the seeds for the so-called ghettos, but also for the gentrification and displacement that threatens to displace our communities today.

This book is a fascinating looking at the growth of Oakland's suburbs, the problems that brought to Oakland proper, and how everybody responded. It has a wealth of detail, is extremely well-researched, and is an easy read.

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