

Jerzy Sobieraj. *Collisions of Conflict. Studies in American History and Culture, 1820-1920.* Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main: 2014. pp. 149.

Jerzy Sobieraj's newest book *Collisions of Conflict* explores the turbulent decades of the second part of the 19th century and early 20th century, which saw an escalation of many national and social conflicts in the USA: between the North and the South, between the burgeoning West and the East, and between slave-owners and Abolitionists. The study's particular focus is on the Civil War and subsequent inter-racial tensions in the South of the United States. The monograph shows the history of that region from the run-up to the Civil War to the Reconstruction and segregation period. It looks back at these difficult years from the vantage point of our times when despite Barak Obama's first black presidency, race relations in the US are, to say the least, difficult.

In his introduction Prof. Sobieraj mentions some of these difficulties, such as the Supreme Court's controversial decision to strike down Section Four of the Voting Rights Act, giving federal protection to minority voters in states with a track record in discrimination. But this is just one of many challenges that African Americans (and other minorities) have to face today. These minorities are not only at a greater risk of being disenfranchised by their states as a result of declaring Section Four of VRA unconstitutional. Their voting rights are constantly being taken away from them in many other ways. For example, the US is one of few democratic states where a person's civic rights can be taken away for a lifetime if the person committed a crime. It is estimated that 8% of black population has lost the right to vote as a result of felony conviction, as compared to 2% on other racial groups.

The persistent racial inequality is more clearly seen in crime rates and prison rates. Blacks make up 13% of the population but

are more than half of America's homicide victims and culprits. Of 2.3 million people in American penitentiaries, 1 million are blacks. Every 1 in 3 black males is expected to go to prison in his lifetime, and the policing practices make it very easy for black people to find themselves at the receiving end of the law. One of them is "racial profiling" – the practice of drawing suspicion from the skin colour, which means that black teenagers and males are more often detained by the Police and searched. Though it is publically denied, this practice is quite widespread. To cap it all, Police brutality, which has, for some time now, made headlines all over the world, makes racial profiling particularly dangerous phenomenon, as many black individuals, not only men but also women and adolescents, are killed by the Police in the aftermath of intervention. Another source of concern for the black community are the so-called "stand your ground laws" that expand protections for citizens who kill strangers because they feel threatened. The most famous case when these laws were applied was when white George Zimmerman killed the 17-year-old, unarmed black boy Trayvon Martin and was acquitted. After many cases of black people being shot down by the Police during routine patrols, Martin's case was particularly shocking because the death-dealing person was an untrained civilian seeing danger where there was none.

The twin sister of racism is economic deprivation, the so-called opportunity gap and wealth gap. While the black middle class has been steadily growing since the times described in Prof. Sobieraj's book, financial stability still remains out of the reach of a large sector of black population. Since mid-1970s the employment rate for blacks has been roughly double the employment rate for whites. Also, to be wealthy and middle class means two different things for blacks and whites. According to the special issue of *Time* published in the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, the median wealth of black families in which the head of household graduated from a college is less than median wealth of a white family, in which the head of the household is a college drop-out. In consequence 85% of black and Latino households have a net worth that fall below the median wealth for white households. *Time* concludes: "closing that gap would require black and Latino households to save 100% of their incomes for 3 consecutive years." The minorities were the hardest struck by the economic crisis that coincided with the beginning of Obama's presidency. From 2007 to 2010, as the Urban Institute reported, black families' wealth fell by 31% whereas white families wealth fell by 11%. The unemployment

rates also grew twice as fast for blacks than for whites. This led Eddie Glaude Jr. the chair of center for African American Studies at Princeton University to comment wryly that the crisis was “a black great Depression.”

Prof. Sobieraj’s study also disputes the view that Barak Obama’s presidency is the “realization of colour blind America” and “the fulfillment of the dream of equality for all people, irrespective of their race.” In his contrary view, this presidency did not put an end to the civil-rights battles or racial conflicts. These conflicts, as he argues, cannot be properly understood without dissecting the history of the Civil War, Reconstruction and segregation.

Chapter I of Prof. Sobieraj’s study: “The Seeds of War: from Missouri Compromise to Secession” presents divergent views on the true reason of the conflict. It focuses, among other things, on the contemporary debates on whether slavery was indeed the root cause of the war. It also sheds light of the growth of Southern separatism sometimes also described as Southern nationalism. It touches upon well known facts, such as Missouri Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Law, the Nebraska Bill and the “bleeding Kansas” episode, all of which were milestones irrevocably leading to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Chapter II – “Fighting Slavery: Various Shades of Abolitionism” – discusses the slave economy as a form of early capitalist enterprise, and presents the development of the Abolitionists movement, which alerted many Americans to the evil of this “peculiar institution.” This chapter deals mostly with white Abolitionists, radicals and gradualists, and various journals they brought out. Only one paragraph mentions black activists such as Frederic Douglass, an advisor to President Lincoln on black matters. Chapter III, “Lincoln and the Civil War,” narrates the history of the conflict and Lincoln’s leadership, which was crucial in bringing the war to conclusion.

This part of the history of the United States is rather well know, therefore I think that the remaining chapters dealing with the adverse consequences of the war, are far more engaging. Chapter V – “The Invisible Empire: the Short Career of the First Ku Klux Klan and its Rebirth,” and Chapter VI – “Years of Shame: Lynching in the United States from 1880s to the Great War,” describe the most tragic and shameful events in the history of racial relations in the South. The early history of the Klan, initially set up as a organization for white entertainment at the expense of superstitious black population, is not so well-known and therefore quite gripping. The same is true about Prof. Sobieraj’s discussion about gendered

character of Southern nationalism and racism, which put white women on the pedestal, exaggerated the sexual prowess of black men and often justified acts of lynching and terror committed on black men with the perpetrators' desire to "protect the honour" of their wives and sisters. The following chapter presents in detail horrendous impact of this pernicious ideology on the KKK terrorist campaign. It also describes the anti-lynching crusade. This chapter contains also some interesting information on the American eugenics movement and its political implementation by Southern politicians, who used it as a justification for limiting the rights of the newly freed black population.

The final chapter of the study titled "Wounded in the House of Friends': Segregation and in the Republic" continues the theme of pseudo-sciences and scientific racism as instrumental in introducing segregation, which as the author contends, was nothing less than "neo-slavery." He discusses segregationist laws and social practices and uses examples from Southern fiction of that period (Thomas Dixon) to illustrate attitudes of the Southern whites. He shows southern commitment to the idea of white supremacy and the fear of africanization through giving the same civic rights to freedmen, miscegenation (sexual relations between people from different races) and interracial marriage. This chapter contains a wonderfully revealing comment of a black woman who explained what Jim Crow laws meant for black people in the South: "Jim Crow was a terrible thing. It was a man making people work to build up a country and saying: 'Don't you dare touch what you've built!'"

This well written book would be even more interesting if it contained more black insights to these "collisions of conflict." The author very rarely mentions black contributions to military and social struggles. There were many black activists, Abolitionist, and intellectuals who deserve to be remembered in any narration about this most calamitous war in the American history, the horrific experience of the repression and continual violence in the Jim Crow era. Black people did not go gently into that good night and their resistance, in my opinion, is particularly worth chronicling, as, more often than not, it has been lost to the modern memory. As the black oppression fades from the view in this study, the reader gets the impression that black people were only passive recipients of violence wreaked by or help provided by the white population. Thus the study seems to bear out the truth encapsulated in one of its mottos (borrowed from J. Toynbee) – "history is something unpleasant that happens to other people." Since black agency and

struggles have been sidelined in this book, one may feel that the Civil War, Reconstruction and segregation were exclusively “unpleasant” things that “happened to” African Americans.

Another minor shortcoming of the book is its *Postscriptum*, which contains war biographies of canonical authors (again mostly white) and an overview of the fiction on the topic of the Civil War. While I appreciated earlier passages about fictional rendering of the war that illustrated the prevalent mood in the South and provided a more personal outlook on the war, Reconstruction and segregation than the official history, this final section of the study does not seem to be equally effective. The interesting thing about it is the synthesis of the recurrent character types and tropes in the war and post-war fiction. What does not really work well is the catalogue of biographies, which seem to be a bit irrelevant. This really compelling historical narrative would benefit greatly, I think, if Prof. Sobieraj finished it with a discussion of how these painful chapters have born upon the civil-rights struggles of the 20th century and on the contemporary situation of African Americans. We can only hope, that Prof. Sobieraj, who has excellent narrative skills, will address some of these issues in his next monograph, which as this study announces is under way.