

Left Behind in Rosedale: Race Relations and the Collapse of Community Institutions, by Scott Cummings

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Beginning with the Chicago school of sociology in the 1920s, scholarly works on inner-city decline have tended to adopt an almost antiseptic scientific approach to the study of "neighborhood invasion and succession," often neglecting in the process to describe the actual experiences of inner-city residents. *In Left Behind in Rosedale*, Professor Scott Cummings of the University of Louisville promises to add a human element to the analysis of social and economic decay in an inner-city section of Fort Worth, Texas. Guided by the ethnographic principle that a researcher "should allow the subjects to speak for themselves," Cummings employs the techniques of participant observation and in-depth interviewing to portray the full complexity of institutional and cultural change in Rosedale.

Where *Left Behind in Rosedale* succeeds magnificently is in giving a voice to people whose histories are usually ignored or distorted in academic descriptions of poor urban neighborhoods. The book presents dozens of interviews collected over the course of a decade which provide a rich source of information on the attitudes and concerns of Rosedale's residents. At his best, Cummings is able to weave these interviews into a broader discussion of crime, race relations and social fragmentation that offers the reader a strikingly nuanced understanding of the problems faced by Rosedale's residents.

For all of its promise, however, *Left Behind in Rosedale* often veers wildly off track into the realm of amateur social psychology while failing to place Rosedale and its residents in their appropriate social and political contexts. For instance, in describing the grief of Rosedale's few remaining white residents on having lost their sense of community, Cummings compares them to flood victims who suffer a perceived "black invasion." Though emotionally evocative, this comparison is hardly apt. Unlike flood victims, the remaining white residents of Rosedale were caught in a crisis partially of their own making. As the former beneficiaries of economic and political policies enforcing white supremacy, most of Rosedale's white residents were unprepared to live as neighbors with their former subordinates. Their intransigence in this regard,

in conjunction with massive white flight to the suburbs, laid the groundwork for the collapse of the community's institutions. In the case of this flood victim analogy, as in many other instances, Cummings seems to gloss over the fact that what he describes as "southern racial etiquette" was in reality an American version of apartheid. In this respect, he misrepresents the impact of state-sponsored oppression on its African-American victims, and on the prospects for community cohesion in places like Rosedale.

Although Cummings presents a variety of perspectives from all segments of the community, throughout *Left Behind in Rosedale* the voices that receive the most attention are those of elderly whites, almost all of whom have harrowing stories to relate about their experiences with crime and violence. The most terrifying portions of the book deal with incidents of indiscriminate violence that bring the reader directly into the experience of living in constant fear. At its most lurid point, the book begins to take on the tone of a sensationalist television documentary. Worse still, Cummings almost entirely ignores police violence and black-on-black crime, leaving the impression that violence in Rosedale only involves white victims and black perpetrators. In this respect, the experiences of Rosedale's African-American residents take second place to the somewhat morbid enumeration of crime after crime committed against whites.

Following a graphic and disturbing account of crime and violence, the last three chapters of *Left Behind in Rosedale* are devoted to a critical assessment of government policy and the failure of Rosedale's residents to manage the process of institutional and cultural change. Writing on the subject of failed efforts at commercial and housing revitalization, Cummings is particularly insightful, relying on a broad range of primary sources for his analysis. He makes a persuasive case that government investments in the area were ultimately wasted on bureaucratic wranglings while opportunities to create lasting economic institutions and new jobs were squandered.

On the subject of social policy, Cummings is less interesting. While acknowledging that the story of Rosedale is fundamentally "rooted in racial oppression and inequality," he seems to take a dim view of almost every major government effort to bring about racial equality, including school desegregation, federal civil rights laws and myriad social programs. All of these, according to his analysis, contributed in one way or another to the fall of Rosedale despite the best intentions of their proponents. In the end, he concludes, the only real solution to Rosedale's problems is for African-American

men to take responsibility for their families and communities and to “get their sons off the streets.” Beyond the obvious paternalism of this solution, it also ignores a whole host of problems besetting inner-city communities that Cummings himself documents. Lack of educational opportunity, police harassment, the continuing effects of racism, lack of access to jobs, and many other problems call for innovative policy proposals, not outdated rhetoric borrowed from Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Ultimately, *Left Behind in Rosedale* is in equal measures a fascinating and frustrating account of the struggles of one inner-city community to survive the devastation wrought by middle class flight and disinvestment. At its best, the book provides the residents of Rosedale a forum for describing their experiences in a way that enriches our understanding of race relations and community change. Planners, policymakers and others approaching *Left Behind in Rosedale*, nevertheless, should be warned that despite such a rich source of ethnographic documentation, Cummings develops few truly original ideas on public policy, urban revitalization or community development.

References

- Cummings, Scott. 1998. *Left Behind in Rosedale: Race Relations and The Collapse of Community Institutions*. Boulder: Westview Press.