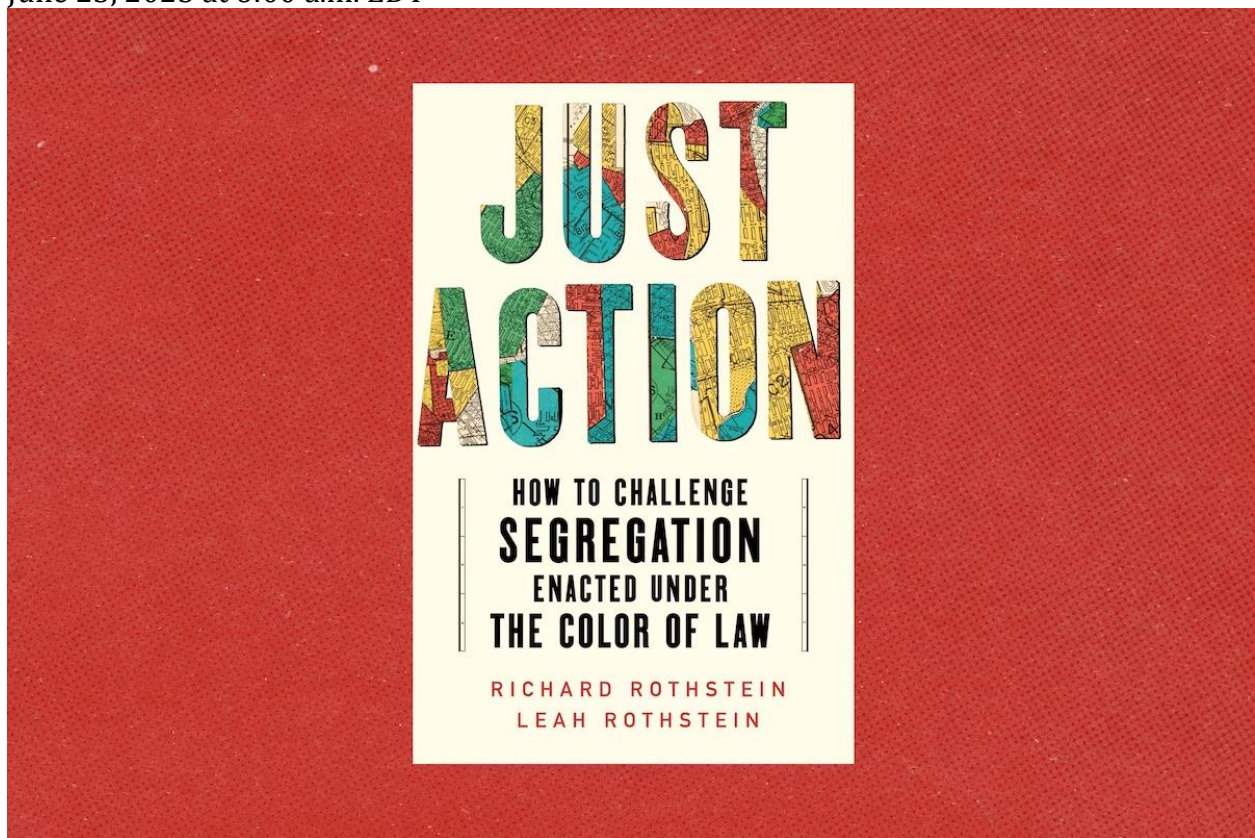


The Washington Post

[‘Just Action’ offers humble prescriptions to fight housing segregation](#)

Richard Rothstein and Leah Rothstein advocate for racial housing reforms on a national scale

Review by Mark Whitaker
June 23, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



(Liveright)

Three years ago, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, books on racial injustice became all the rage. One of them was “The Color of Law,” by housing expert Richard Rothstein, which had been published in 2017 to critical acclaim and brief bestseller status. In that sweeping history of racial segregation in the United States, Rothstein argued that most Americans continue to live separated by race not out of personal preference but as a result of decades of pernicious legal and government action and inaction.

In addition to documenting easy-to-condemn evils such as bank redlining and restrictive real estate covenants, Rothstein dared to discomfit White liberals by faulting such factors as the discriminatory terms on which suburbs were built and the “not in my backyard” zoning policies of liberal cities such as San Francisco. During that year of national self-reflection in 2020, “The Color of Law” struck a nerve: It leaped back onto the bestseller lists for several months and has sold nearly 1 million copies to date.

Now Rothstein and his daughter Leah Rothstein, an affordable-housing consultant, have produced a prescriptive sequel, “Just Action: How to Challenge Segregation Enacted Under the Color of Law.” Since 2020, however, the national mood on matters of race has shifted. Talk of “racial reckoning” has given way to growing liberal fatigue and conservative attacks on any public acknowledgment of our tortured racial history.

To their credit, the Rothsteins have noted this change, and their guide is admirably light on self-righteous political bromides and heavy on practicality. They avoid loaded phrases such as “racist” and “White privilege” and decline to capitalize “black,” so as not to confuse anyone unfamiliar with that recent convention. On the Black studies debate, they go so far as to defend new state laws that allow teaching the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow but prohibit telling White students that they are personally culpable by dint of their skin color or their families’ economic advantages.

When advocating racial housing reforms on a national scale, the Rothsteins are realistic about how much can be accomplished in today’s circumstances. Noting the hostility of Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and the new Supreme Court supermajority to race-conscious remedies of any kind, they urge legal activists to pursue court challenges aimed at eliciting minority dissents that might someday “form the basis of a new consensus.” In the meantime, they recommend focusing on the promotion of targeted programs like down payment and credit report assistance, to bolster a “missing middle” of prospective Black home buyers who don’t qualify for existing low-income federal programs.

More than half of the book is devoted to supporting integration in two types of communities. The first are once-predominantly Black neighborhoods now attracting a significant number of White residents. Unlike many liberals, the Rothsteins don’t automatically consider gentrification a dirty word. They bluntly dismiss as “impossible” the idea that many of these areas can be meaningfully rebuilt “while preserving their racially exclusive character” and note that knee-jerk opposition to gentrification can deprive Black homeowners of a chance to sell appreciated properties to fund downsizing or retirement. At the same time, the Rothsteins spell out various “place-based” approaches to preserving as much racial diversity in these communities as possible and urge subsidizing nearby housing and transportation for Black residents who are priced out.

The authors also identify new nemeses that Black and White residents of these gentrifying neighborhoods can protest together. Since the financial crash of 2008, private-equity firms and other speculators have scooped up homes under default in urban Black communities and sold them at outrageous markups. Some vultures have even reintroduced “contract selling”: the noxious practice, especially rampant in Chicago half a century ago, of luring Black people who have trouble qualifying for conventional mortgages to “purchase” homes with contracts that come with no deed of ownership, no equity accumulation and no legal protection against immediate eviction for missed payments.

The other neighborhoods highlighted by the Rothsteins were once all-White but have grown racially mixed over time. As examples, they cite West Mount Airy, Pa.; Oak Park, Ill.; and Cleveland Heights, Ohio. In each case, idealistic White residents went out of their way to market their communities to upwardly mobile Black people and make them feel welcome when they moved in. All three were attractive to Black people relocating from the city because they were “inner ring” suburbs, with convenient transportation to downtown jobs and social life. Nonetheless, the Rothsteins point out, the process has required hard work and compromise on everyone’s part — and in all three communities, there are still fears of economic, political or public safety jolts that could tip the current racial balance decisively in one direction or another.

As heartening as some of these stories are, it’s notable that most of the integration warriors cited by the Rothsteins fit into a few familiar categories. The White people are largely adventurous gentrifiers or earnest members of faith groups. The Black people are often young parents, many of them single mothers, looking to improve educational opportunities for their children. Meanwhile, most of the rest of the country remains stuck in a landscape of racial distance that can’t be explained merely by bad laws and policies. It also reflects the cycle of mutual discomfort, if not outright distrust, that prevailed until the 1960s and that was reignited in the second half of that decade by urban race riots, fights over busing and affirmative action, and the law-and-order backlash that lifted a resurgent Richard M. Nixon and a rising Ronald Reagan.

That’s when Black and White people who had marched side by side in the early civil rights movement started drifting toward the worldview of Black Power on the one hand and the more hardhearted politics of neoliberalism and neoconservatism on the other. The Rothsteins and the protagonists of “Just Action” are reminders that not everyone in that generation or their offspring gave up on the dream of integration. But while their guide can offer valuable history and perspective, the future of that dream will depend on a new generation of Black and White Americans and whatever lessons they drew from that brief moment of interracial solidarity in 2020 — and from the latest backlash against it.

Mark Whitaker is the author of "Saying It Loud: 1966 — The Year Black Power Challenged the Civil Rights Movement." Previously, he was managing editor of CNN and editor of Newsweek.

Just Action

How to Challenge Segregation Enacted Under the Color of Law

By Richard Rothstein and Leah Rothstein

Norton. 334 pp. \$25