

My Take on James W. Loewen, Sociologist and Civil Rights Champion

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At my late stage of life, I find that the first thing I read every morning is the obituary section of *The New York Times*. I took particular notice of the [obituary of James W. Loewen](#) in the August 20, 2021 edition of the paper. Excerpts:

James W. Loewen, a sociologist and civil rights champion who took high school teachers and textbook publishers to task for distorting American history, particularly the struggle of Black people in the South, by oversimplifying their experience and omitting the ugly parts, died on Thursday in Bethesda, Md. He was 79. . . .

In 1995 he published “Lies My Teacher Told Me Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong,” his study of 12 history textbooks widely used in America. That book, which accused historians of propagating blind patriotism and sanitized optimism, was acclaimed by critics and won the American Book Award. Updated editions were issued in 2005, 2008 and 2018 by the New Press, which has called the book its all-time best seller, accounting for the bulk of almost two million Loewen books sold. . . .

“Jim Loewen’s great achievement was his ability to combine meticulous, dogged research with humor and messianic zeal to correct the way history is taught in textbooks—which is to say all too often with large doses of xenophobia, racism, sexism and outright lies,” Ms. Adler of the New Press said in an interview. . . .

His book “Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism” (2005) documented the stories of thousands of communities from 1890 to 1968 that systematically, and often forcibly, excluded Black people, Jews and others. The word “sundown” referred to signs at city limits that warned Black people not to “let the sun go down on you” there.

I’m not nearly as big a fan of Loewen’s as the *Times*’ obituary writer obviously is. Back in 2009, I wrote a review of a book mentioned in the obit, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: New Press, 2005). I’ve decided it is worth resurrecting that review to provide a bit of balance to all the fawning occasioned by Loewen’s death (it wasn’t just the *Times*). Here it is. 2009.

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A good way to get a handle on what author James W. Loewen is up to in *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* is to see where he ends up and then go back to the beginning of the book and trace how he got there.

A few paragraphs from the end of the book, Loewen declares, “America should not have white neighborhoods or black neighborhoods.” Note that he doesn’t say that America should not have sundown towns (defined in a bit); he says no white or black neighborhoods. Also in these last pages, he reveals that he is not satisfied with merely advocating that people do things his way. If white communities don’t have a requisite percentage of blacks by his standard, he’d have them cut off from funds for sewage facilities, police training, “and a 1001 other programs,” and the whites who live there would lose the tax deduction for their mortgage interest. James W. Loewen is not kidding around. Father knows best.

Who's Loewen? He is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Vermont, where he taught race relations for twenty years. He is currently [this is 2009, remember] a distinguished lecturer for the Organization of American Historians. His books include *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which according to his website is a “gripping retelling of American history as it should be told” that has sold 800,000 copies. Loewen's awards include the First Annual Spivak Award of the American Sociological Association for sociological research applied to the field of intergroup relations. The Gustavus Myers Foundation named *Sundown Towns* a Distinguished Book of 2005.

At this writing, Loewen is teaching a course entitled “Race Relations through Feature films” at the Catholic University of America. It appears he is in big demand. His website lists twelve speeches and workshops he has lined up in the next six weeks. “Have Jim Loewen Speak at Your Community, School or College,” his site proclaims, and lists as one of the workshop possibilities, “How History Keeps Us Racist—And What To Do About It.”

Let's go through *Sundown Towns* and see how Loewen makes his pitch—which is the way to look at this book, because while it is framed as a scholarly sociological and historical inquiry, it is a polemic pure and simple.

What are sundown towns? The term comes from signs posted in towns that said “Whites Only Within City Limits After Sundown” or something to that effect. Loewen begins the book with this definition:

Beginning in about 1890 and continuing until 1968, white Americans established thousands of towns across the United States for whites only. Many towns drove out their black populations, then posted sundown signs. Other towns passed ordinances barring African Americans after dark or prohibiting them from owning or renting property; still others

established such policies by informal means, harassing and even killing those who violated the rule. Some sundown towns similarly kept out Jews, Chinese, Mexicans, Native Americans, or other groups.

In *Sundown Towns*, Loewen concerns himself with whites' exclusion of blacks from their communities. He asserts that sundown towns were rare in the South but common in the North. In 1970, he informs us, Illinois had 475 towns and cities that were all-white (by "all-white" Loewen means very few blacks). Notice his use of the "all-white" descriptor. This begins the process of blurring the distinction between a sundown town and any all-white community. This is a pattern in the book: establish a pejorative concept—sundown towns in this case—and then include within it, or associate it with, or equate it with, a wider and wider range of phenomena.

Illinois with its large number of all-white (think sundown, bad) towns and cities isn't exceptional, writes Loewen: "There is reason to believe that more than half of all towns in Oregon, Indiana, Ohio, the Cumberlands, the Ozarks, and diverse other areas were also all-white on purpose. Sundown suburbs are found from Darien, Connecticut, to La Jolla, California, and are even more prevalent; indeed, most suburbs began life as sundown towns."

Note the term "on purpose" in the above quote. To the equation of the broader "all-white" for "sundown," it adds "on purpose" to the list of negative practices in the definition of sundown towns that led off the book. So now simply choosing to congregate in white areas is damned. You don't need ordinances or signs; just intentionally (as well as unintentionally) living around people like you is enough to get you on Jim Loewen's most-wanted poster.

Loewen's shift in tense from past to present in the quote—from "were" in the first sentence to "are" in the second, check out

the shift—serves to impart the impression without his having to make the case that once a sundown town always a sundown town and always bad, regardless of what may have occurred since 1968.

How can Loewen be certain about the genesis and maintenance of the racial residential patterns in so many places? I got to the end of the book and still couldn't figure out why I should accept his say-so that sundown towns were/are that ubiquitous.

How did whites establish and maintain all these sundown towns? The picture Loewen paints with a sopping-wet five-inch brush—nothing subtle or nuanced about Jim—is one of white perpetrators and black victims. The words he uses to depict whites' conduct include “racial exclusion,” “terror,” “fraud,” “steering,” “lying,” “stalling,” “gentlemen's agreements,” and (his scare quotes) “legal means.”

Loewen's favorite word to describe whites' actions is “mob”—lawless, violent, beastly, rampaging whites committing heinous acts against innocent and harmless blacks. I'll briefly list ten of the “mob stories” Loewen recounts in the book to give a sense of the cumulative affect these depictions are likely to have on readers, in most cases young white people reading it as a required text in a university course taught by someone like, well, James W. Loewen. Keep in mind I'm leaving out a lot of the gory details. Think about the perception of their ancestors that young whites are likely to form from these accounts. Also, see if you can think of any other race or ethnicity depicted as negatively in our schools or in the public discourse generally. Imagine a group of black university students being assigned to read comparable accounts of their racial kinsmen.

- A white mob looted the apartment of a black who tried to move into Cicero, Illinois, threw his furniture and belongings out the window and set them on fire while police stood by and watched.
- A white mob stoned members of the Congress of Racial Equality as they marched in support of open housing.

- A white mob of twenty or thirty men, armed with guns and clubs, tied black men to trees and whipped them, bound black men and women together and threw them in a four-foot hole, burned several homes, and warned all blacks to leave town that night.
- A white mob of fifty men drove out all the blacks living in Decator, Indiana.
- A mob of more than eight hundred whites marched from Spring Valley, Illinois to a settlement of African Americans two miles west of town, dragged the blacks from their homes, clubbed and trampled them and shot them, insulted and slapped the black women, and shot and killed two of them as they begged for mercy.
- A mob from Cairo and Anna, Illinois hanged accused murderer Will James while women in the mob sang and screamed in delight. The word “mob” was used twelve times in the description of this incident.
- A white mob rioted and forced Revenna, Kentucky’s blacks out of town.
- In Duluth, Minnesota, a mob of whites hanged three workers they suspected of raping a white woman. Loewen says whether she was raped by anyone is doubtful.
- A white mob in Eldorado, Illinois told the Reverend Peter Green of the African American Church to leave town in twenty-four hours under penalty of death.
- A white mob in Okemah, Oklahoma hanged a black woman and her son from a bridge because they became anxious about a neighboring black town.

Got it? Now, when I say “white,” what comes to your mind? What images, what words? What feelings come up? What do you feel in the pit of your stomach, throughout your body, when I say “white”? Like everything in this hefty tome, the mob stories contribute to demonizing, splintering, and domesticating white people and rationalizing the dictatorial management of their lives, within a nation conceived in liberty, by people like James W. Loewen.

According to Loewen, why did whites create these terrible sundown towns? Whatever justifications they offered for their conduct—black’s behavior prompted it, anything else—don’t hold water, that’s for sure. Loewen backhands any and all defenses of sundown towns and, what he really cares about, any community that isn’t multiracial. He dismisses whites’ attempts to explain a desire to live among their own as “nonsensical,” “tautological,” “erroneous,” “preposterous,” and “excuses.”

Loewen refers in passing to white solidarity in the book, which he defines as “whites sticking together in order to stick it to minorities.” Nowhere to be found is the term white separatism, the desire of whites to live with others of their race, who share their culture, their ways, their heritage, absent the desire to dominate or exploit other people. Loewen’s not going to bring up the possibility of thinking that way about racial matters. He gives a lot of play to white supremacy, which he links to guess who: the Nazis. White attitudes, Loewen informs us, are “eerily reminiscent of Germans’,” and “it is sobering to realize that many jurisdictions in America had accomplished by 1934–36 what Nazis could only envy.”

What accounts for whites’ exclusion of blacks? What else? Racism. Loewen gives no energy to defining what he means by racism. Keeping things vague allows him to expand the concept of racism so that eventually he can include even a hint of criticism or disrespect of blacks’ collective behavior. Don’t let Jim Loewen catch you saying anything bad about blacks. He’ll call you up to the front of the room and slap your fingers.

What does Loewen hold to be the cause of malevolent white racism? White ignorance of blacks. And what accounts for this ignorance? Whites' limited experience with blacks, as Loewen calls it, "whites' lack of an experience foundation." "I have found that white Americans expound about the alleged characteristics of African Americans in inverse proportion to their contact and experiences with them." For their own good, whites in America should be denied freedom of association and forced to live among blacks. Jim Loewen is doing them a favor.

My own research contradicts Loewen's "lack of experience foundation" explanation for whites' negative perceptions of blacks. I wrote a book [which I suspect won't make it into a *New York Times* obituary] in which seventeen average white people report their experiences and outlooks regarding race.¹ They told me that it wasn't their *lack* of contact with blacks but rather their *close* contact with them that led to their negative view of blacks and desire to get themselves and their families away from them.

Loewen says he believes in the value of oral history: "We must talk to long-time residents." He may have talked to long-time residents, but I saw no indication that he heard them or anybody else who didn't tell him what he wanted to hear.

There was the "pleasant conversation" he had with a woman "fifty years behind the times." There was the friend who made the mistake of saying in his presence, "I just don't understand why blacks would *want* to live where they aren't wanted." Loewen points out that her question "presumes that African Americans can be expected to assess whether whites want them and should comport themselves accordingly"—which it didn't, it just asked the factual question, why do blacks want to live where they aren't wanted? "When we buy a house," lectures Loewen, "we do not assess whether our neighbors will like us. We presume we will be accepted or at least tolerated." Wrong again. The parallel to his

¹ Robert S. Griffin, *One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk About Race* (1stBooks Library, 2004).

friend's question is white people moving into an all-black area. Indeed, they *would* assess whether their neighbors would like them and *would not* presume they would be accepted or tolerated in the all-black neighborhood.

Here is an excerpt from the oral history of a forty-year-old man I talked to from the northeastern part of the United States of the sort that didn't make it into Loewen's book:

People who think of themselves as enlightened and on the moral high ground in matters of race write off people like me as ignorant racists. Unlike them, so it goes, we pre-judge people. If only we were exposed to racial and ethnic diversity we would learn to value different kinds of people—etcetera, etcetera, you've heard the line. You'll notice that most of these people doing the pontificating and finger pointing about racial equality and harmony and the virtues of integration and multi-racialism do it from the far distance of the leafy suburbs or a university campus somewhere. The fact of the matter is that, unlike practically all of them, I have lived up close with the reality of race in America. And regardless of what they might like to think, I am not stupid or unenlightened or their moral inferior. The people who look down their noses at people like me should come live for a year or two or three where my family and millions of other white families live. Let their children grow up and go to school in this pigsty and be threatened and attacked and robbed and raped. Then they can talk.²

In *Sundown Towns*, Loewen refers to whites' "amazing

² Griffin, *One Sheaf, One Vine*, 154–55.

stereotypes” about blacks—and of course he means amazingly off-base. He doesn’t cite data related to black crime statistics, illegitimacy rates, welfare dependency, and educational and work performance to show how amazingly wrong whites are in their negative perceptions of blacks. He doesn’t refer to what has happened in America’s cities when blacks displaced whites. He doesn’t describe the quality of life in sundown towns and what happened when they integrated to the point that they included a critical mass of blacks, say 30%. As a sociologist or historian, however Loewen defines himself these days, I would have expected him to do this. He doesn’t bother. Today’s university academics in the social sciences see no need for this kind of thing. They see what they do as akin to preaching the gospel.

Loewen negatively stereotypes whites left and right in *Sundown Towns*. What particularly stuck in my craw was his characterization of young whites from the suburbs. “These young people have grown up with a sense of entitlement,” Loewen declares. “The world is their oyster, and they intend to harvest its pearls. Families like these can go to Bali and never meet a Balinese family, because they stay at the Sanur Beach Hyatt.”

For many years, I have taught young whites from this background at the same university Loewen did, the University of Vermont. (I didn’t know Loewen. I had just one brief long-range exchange with him. In response to an article in a national publication disparaging my racial views, he emailed me suggesting I read *Sundown Towns* to help straighten out my thinking. I replied that I had read it, and that it had actually reinforced my thinking.) Loewen’s portrayal of the decent, hardworking young people I came to know well is cruel and hurtful. I presume their parents have no sense of the class resentment university faculty like Loewen—he is far from alone—harbor toward their children, who, at significant financial sacrifice, they turn over to them. Imagine what it is like to be a nineteen- or twenty-year-old white student from a suburban background—or a graduate student—and be in a classroom with a professor who has thinly veiled animus

toward you.

Loewen has a section on the “social pathology of the white ghetto” in which he goes on about how it limits white children’s horizons and provides “fertile recruiting fields for the KKK.” (Have you come across any KKK members lately?) He calls white flight “a pestilence.” Loewen dumps on the multitudes of white people—including those being driven out of southern California by the Hispanic presence, I think of a woman I interviewed for my book—heartlessly discounting the reality of their lives.

Here’s someone else of the sort that Loewen kept us from hearing, a fifty-year-old man from the Philadelphia area who described to me what had happened to his childhood neighborhood. He was confronting the same situation in the neighborhood he and his wife and daughter had moved into fifteen years previously:

Before it became illegal, local realtors would show houses only to white families. Although it has been painted as an unfair arrangement, it really reflected the point of view of the town. The people there wanted to live among their own people. They wanted to live in a white community. Now, I see that as the highest form of self-determination: people defining their own community, people deciding what comes into their collective lives, people determining their own standards. It doesn’t matter if their standards are rational or moral by someone else’s measure. People have a right to decide whom they are comfortable living next to and not comfortable living next to. This is fundamental and it not a matter of rationality or morality. It is simply human. It is not that they have ill will toward anyone. It is just that they know the atmosphere that they like.

The neighborhood where I grew up has turned

into a wasteland. Whites still make up a majority of the community—55%—but nevertheless the neighborhood has gone in the same direction of a typical urban black area. When I was living there, when a tree died an Irish guy named Fred Fagan would plant a new one. Now those saplings are mighty trees. When a tree dies these days, no one plants a new one. There is broken glass all over the place, and things like busted up shopping carts lying on their side blocking the alleys. Many of the old brick houses are covered over with some kind of god-awful siding. When I was a kid, repairs and restorations were done in the mode of the existing architecture of the town. Now, from one house to the next, they are all different. There is no common thread to the look of the houses now. There used to be hedges and white picket fences that lent a common feel to the area—no more.

My mother still lives there. Recently, a black teenager knocked my mother to the ground, injuring her, and took her purse. This sort of thing was unheard of in my old neighborhood, but it is commonplace now. The black woman across the street was just arrested for robbing 7-Eleven stores. When I was growing up, kids could go anywhere in town on their bicycles. We could go in the woods and explore down by the creek and there would be no danger at all. Now, there is no way you would allow your child to even take a walk around the neighborhood. Just this year, a young white woman was abducted by two black men and taken to a place where we used to play ball and raped and murdered. These heinous crimes are happening regularly there. My mother's house, when she dies, would have sold for a pretty penny, but it is worth

very little on the market now.

The place I live in now, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, was a clean and safe place when my wife and I moved here fifteen years ago. But the pattern of my childhood home has been repeated. Nonwhites have moved in and the neighborhood has deteriorated drastically. More and more, I find that this isn't a suitable place for my family. It doesn't reflect our heritage and values.³

As it turned out, this man was “saved” from this circumstance; he died several months after telling me this.

In *Sundown Towns* Loewen comes down particularly hard on the town of Edina, a largely white suburb of Minneapolis. I grew up in Minneapolis. When I was a kid, Minneapolis was just about all white. You could walk anyplace at any time in that beautiful city of lakes. But Minneapolis has gone the demographic route of other urban centers in this country and you can't walk just anywhere in “Murderapolis,” as it is now called. A few years ago, my brother moved from Minneapolis—call it escaped—to Edina. Indeed, Edina is a sundown town, but not in the way Loewen thinks about it. Edina is a sundown town because it is a town where white people feel safe after sundown.

³ Robert S. Griffin, *Living White: Writings on Race, 2000–2005* (AuthorHouse, 2006), 65–66, 70.