

Boston forced busing

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



" Boston Against Busing: Race, Class and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s"

By: Ronald P. Formisano The book " Boston Against Busing: Race, Class and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s" written by Ronald P. Formisano examines the opposition of court-ordered desegregation through forced busing. The author comes to the conclusion that the issue surrounding integration is a far more complex issue than just racism that enveloped the southern half of the country during this time period. Formisano argues that there were broader elements including a class struggle, white backlash and " reactionary populism" that contributed to the emotions of those involved. Formisano is persuasive in his arguments that the Boston anti-busing movement was a led by " grass-root insurgents" from the dominate Irish-Catholic working-class neighborhoods in South Boston. These protesters felt that their tight knit existence was being threatened by the rich, suburban liberals whose children were not effected by the enforcement of the busing. The author points out that it was an issue of " white resistance" rather than racism that played a role in the violence of the protests. I believe that this is a contradictory statement. What Formisano calls " white resistance" is the violent reaction to the Page 2 movement of African American students into predominantly white neighborhood schools and the mixing of two separate but legally equal peoples. Is the rock throwing at buses carrying elementary age children, stabbings at South Boston High School and riots on the streets outside the schools affected by the integration any different from the U. S. Army escorting nine African American students into school in Little Rock, Arkansas? The author skirts around the central issue of racism by calling it a " class struggle" within the white population of Boston during the 1960s and

1970s. Formisano discusses the phenomenon known as "white flight", where great numbers of white families left the cities for the suburbs. This was not only for a better lifestyle, but a way to distance themselves from the African Americans, who settled in northern urban areas following the second Great Migration. Throughout the text Formisano ignores the voices of who I believe play a key role in the forced busing era: the students involved and the African Americans from West Roxbury. His primary focus is on the Irish of South Boston, the school committee members including the most vocal opponent Louise Day Hicks and the white politicians and judges who enforced the busing. This leaves the work a bit unbalanced and does not give first hand accounts of what the students felt. The African American point of view suffers in order to promote the sentiments of the Irish working class. His argument was strongest in pointing out the practice of "de facto segregation", but this was one of the most obvious facts. It was defined as the Boston schools were segregated not by an institution of racism in the South, but by the structure of the Page 3 neighborhoods and residential patterns within the City. Where the population was predominantly white the schools were close to 95 percent white and vice versa. Formisano states that the infrastructure of segregation was not due to the actions of the Boston School Committee, but of the inactions to blend the school districts. U. S. District Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. agreed concluding that "There was a deliberate discriminatory operation in place," and ordered the desegregation of Boston schools. This ruling led to the white backlash Formisano explores in his book. The author explains that this was not a race war, but rather a class struggle. "The role of class was connected to broad changes that took place

in the distribution of blacks within the United States during the twentieth century." He points out that Boston suburbs grew from two to three million in the 1950s due to the era of "white flight." This led to highly concentrated areas of African Americans and poor whites in Boston, who took pride in their culture and neighborhoods. The busing battleground did not take place in the affluent areas where the enforcers resided. It was on the "turf" of the Irish, who Formisano explains highly resented African Americans as early as the pre-Civil War. This sentiment was born "in part by Yankee reformers tending to be sympathetic to black slaves and freed persons but hostile to Irish Catholic immigrants." Formisano explains that the anger and resentment was not only from the attitudes of the Irish towards the African Americans but directed towards the "limousine liberals." These were the suburbanites and Beacon Hill cronies whose children did not attend the Page 4 schools affected by the busing. This led the Irish of South Boston to angrily lash out and protect their neighborhoods from the social experimentation implemented by "outsiders." As Formisano discusses the elements and reasons for "white resistance" it seems to be similar to racism. The NAACP claims of inferior schools and degrading teaching presented to the Boston School Committee in the 1960s fell on deaf ears. As Formisano explains "Yankees and Jews might have been susceptible to such an appeal-most Irish were not." The Irish were the predominant force within the political sphere of Boston during this time. Some of the author's theories seem to be unfounded and have no evidence in the text to support them. Formisano makes statements such as "The Boston Irish did not feel responsible for slavery or the long history of black oppression. They believe the blacks should raise

themselves up as other immigrant groups had done before them." After making such a strong proclamation he skips to another totally different subject. This seems to be a constant within the book making it difficult to follow at times. Although Formisano does not admit that racism was a factor in the busing riots, he does compare the tactics of the anti-busers to the Civil Rights Movement in the South. The leaders of the Civil Rights Movement used non-violent means to achieve their goals and were met with aggression from the opposition. The opposite is true for the anti-busers, who throwing rocks and maltove cocktails at buses carrying black children and beat to death " outsiders" who entered their " turf." To obtain their goal of letting the schools remain the way they were the South Boston residents used aggressive violence. Page 5 Some of the contradictions the author points out are that the anti-busers believed they were in a battle for the law and order of their people, but acted as criminals in their tactics. Also, clashes with the police and National Guard took on an " us against them" mentality similar to the Black Nationalist the Irish so resented. The forced busing took place during a time when the United States was facing extremely tense race relations. Formisano writes that the anti-busing movement was due social and economic roots sprinkled with class resentment. He explains in depth that " reactionary populism" was responsible for the strong motivation needed for the movement to be successful in ceasing the busing. The author explains that the struggle between classes is limited for the Irish working class and African Americans due to the fact they have little if any economic power. Formisano does not only focus on the violence surrounding the forced busing, he also examines the efforts of the " reasonable" whites and African

Americans who were lumped into the category of the vehement opposers by the media across the U. S. These groups suffered not only in the eye of the public, but also by the terrorism practiced within their community. This most significantly reflects what Formisano terms the " war that nobody won."

Overall the author makes bold statements and arguments and tries to convincingly back them up. In reading the text I found many of what Formisano was trying to explain confusing because of the way it was presented. He skips from one subject to another and then comes back again making the read jumbled and not enjoyable. The lack of another voice from the students who were directly involved makes for a weak argument.