

Historical Perspectives on Race and Community Revitalization

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Historians have long been studying the formation and subsequent impoverishment of ghetto, barrio, and urban immigrant communities, but they have yet to come up with an overarching “theory of change,” let alone one that fully captures the significance of race. “Everything is contingent,” the historian is likely to say, on the particulars of local demography, migration, politics, labor and housing markets, and the difficult-to-measure nuances of race relations that characterize any given time and place. “Everything is important,” the historian might add, in reference to the changing mix of individual, institutional and structural forces shaping communities over time. But on one issue at least, historical research leaves little room for doubt: race does indeed “matter” in understanding the origins and in devising contemporary responses to the problems of low-income urban communities. If nothing else, the historical record suggests that the more important question for academics and policy makers is not *whether* “race matters” but *how*.

To this question historical research offers not a single-variable answer or an easily transferable theory of change, but three critical insights that have to do with the way we think about the “problem” of race in community formation and development. The first is a way of thinking about race as a matter not of demographic attributes and cultural identity, but as a set of

social relationships that is negotiated and institutionalized over time. Building on the idea long ago described by W.E.B. DuBois as the “color line,” historical research has given the “variable” of race a concreteness and, ultimately, malleability, that more individualized, essentialist definitions cannot convey. At the same time, it underscores the extent to which the rewards and punishments accorded to “white,” “black,” and shades “in between” have changed and been applied to different groups over time. The second insight from history is a way of thinking about historical agency that appreciates the role of collective action in community building while also recognizing the importance of political as well as large-scale structural forces in community decline. Thus history, with its central concern for human agency, shows unequivocally that there is nothing “natural” or inevitable about the racialized “pockets” of concentrated poverty that have become an accepted part of the urban—and rural—United States. Like the overwhelmingly white middle and upper-class suburbs associated with postwar prosperity, modern-day ghettos and barrios were created by race-conscious policies, institutional practices and popular action that date back to the early 20th century and that continue, albeit in different guises, to sustain extreme racial and economic segregation today. At the same time, history cautions against thinking about residents of poor neighborhoods as passive victims, as socially-isolated deviants, and especially not as homogeneously “poor.” History “from the ground-up” is replete with examples of resistance to, as well as political and economic exploitation of, the spatial restrictions of the color line. It also shows that, for all their internal divisions, residents of “poor” urban communities have organized themselves most consistently as members of a racially-conscious industrial, if not post-industrial, working class. The third insight from historical

research has to do with the legacy of the racial past in creating opportunities, impediments, but especially in establishing imperatives for organized action to promote social change.

In this essay I will briefly sketch out what historical research tells us about the color line as a way of thinking about race; about how color lines have been geographically constructed, challenged and re-constructed in a variety of historical circumstances; and about the historical legacy the color line holds for efforts to rebuild poor urban communities. I hope, along the way, to suggest how this research can be useful in constructing a race-*conscious* strategy against neighborhood poverty today.

To begin with, it is worth taking brief note of the way liberal social science has traditionally dealt with the problem of race in community impoverishment, if only by way of underscoring the potential of historical conceptualizations of the color line as an alternative framework for understanding and action. By far the most influential strain of thought on this issue, seen recently in the work of William J. Wilson but dating back to the early 20th-century Chicago school, has offered a series of racially “neutral” explanations for concentrated urban poverty. These explanations emphasize such presumably impersonal or inevitable forces as migration and deindustrialization as underlying structural causes, and characterize poor places according to the attributes of a culturally-deprived lower or under-*class*. Underlying these race-neutral explanations is an almost completely apolitical vision of urban “ecology” based on an idealized picture of the immigrant past. Poor inner-city neighborhoods are a natural part of the urban landscape, in this vision, the places where migrants from different, primarily rural cultures naturally gravitate and sort themselves into ethnic clusters upon first arrival. Moreover, these neighborhoods play a vital role in the organic life of the city, serving at once as a ready

source of cheap industrial labor and as “staging grounds” for immigrant upward mobility and assimilation into the American mainstream. And yet, as the initial port of entry for culturally “backwards,” unassimilated migrant groups, poor neighborhoods are also the sites for an equally inevitable process of cultural “disorganization,” reflected in high rates of crime, delinquency and family break-up. This, too, can be seen as a natural byproduct of the migration and assimilation process, according to Chicago school theory, a stage that will eventually give way to cultural “reorganization” once the migrants are exposed to the demands and rewards of urban industrial life.

Although initially devised to explain the settlement patterns of European immigrants, the Chicago-school framework has subsequently been applied to African American, Mexican and, to a lesser extent, to Asian migrants as well. Progressive in its insistence that the urban newcomers could become integrated into American culture, the Chicago school was also used as a justification for stepped-up Americanization efforts and, more pertinent to this inquiry, as a way of avoiding or explaining away the barriers of race. Blacks, seen as one of a long stream of ethnic groups in this conceptual scheme, are said to be disadvantaged not by the systemic barriers of racial discrimination but by the vicissitudes of timing—the “last of the migrants” when they first started arriving in large numbers in the 1910s and 20s, they naturally “inherited” the slums, where they remained confined when the industrial jobs started to go away. Kept outside or marginalized in the industrial economy, they were unable to overcome the cultural inheritance first of slavery and then of chronic unemployment, symbolized most powerfully in the “disorganized” or matriarchal black family. The color line, to the extent that it is recognized at all in this conceptual scheme, is temporary and spontaneous; a momentary expression of the

inevitable conflict between newcomers and more established immigrants when they compete for jobs and residential space. Similarly, institutionalized racism is a thing of the past—of the days of slavery and Southern Jim Crow for the Chicago school, of the pre-Civil rights era for William J. Wilson and others. The ghetto is sustained not by racism but by the “non-racial” forces of deindustrialization and job loss, and by the self-perpetuating pathologies of social disorganization that result from economic and cultural isolation from the mainstream. Social interventions, accordingly, need not confront the issue of race. Instead, they should aim to restore the urban “system” to its once-vaunted role as an engine of assimilation and opportunity—either by bringing jobs to the people, or people to the jobs—and they should aim to re-“organize” communities from the inside so that neighborhood residents can connect once again to the economic and social mainstream.

A contrasting stream of interpretation in liberal social science puts race at the center of its explanation for concentrated “place-based” poverty, as can be seen in work ranging from the “caste and class” analysis of the 1930s and 40s to the concept of “American apartheid” put forward by Massey and Denton not long ago. Borrowing their leading metaphors from other, less democratic cultures, analysts in this tradition write about a complex of systemic and institutional barriers, public and private practices, and individual attitudes devoted to keeping blacks “in their place,” and call for aggressive government action to eliminate racial segregation as a necessary, if not itself sufficient, response to the problem of ghetto poverty. The color line is rigid, mostly unchanging, and applied primarily to blacks in these analyses. While partly rooted in the social and economic “gains” associated with white supremacy, it is primarily attributable to a deep-seated psychological aversion to racial assimilation, and an

accompanying need to keep blacks separate and subordinate by all possible means. Thus, the color line is not only undemocratic but irrational and aberrant: attacking it through aggressive anti-discrimination measures will restore labor and housing markets to their otherwise color-blind norm. For Massey and others this makes dismantling, rather than rehabilitating the ghetto the most appropriate policy response. Meanwhile, there remains the task of repairing the deep-seated “damage” that segregation has caused for African Americans, and particularly for the spatially segregated African American poor. The poor, after all, were unable to benefit from exposure to white culture as their middle-class counterparts had. The poor became “concentrated” in the worst, most isolated neighborhoods when the black middle class finally escaped the ghetto. Here, then, is a central point on which “race-centered” and “race-neutral” explanations agree: the contemporary ghetto is beset by a self-perpetuating cultural pathology bred by the extreme concentration of an unassimilated, socially isolated lower or under-class. Battling segregation, breaking up the ghetto, is part and parcel of rehabilitating this underclass.

For many years historians did not stray much beyond these alternate schools of interpretation, but the past 20 years of scholarship has departed from the dominant sociological explanations in significant ways. Thus, while confirming the importance of migration and deindustrialization in shaping urban communities, historians have questioned whether either of these can be thought of as somehow natural or race-neutral processes, and have done a great deal to restore a sense of agency to both. Succeeding waves of black migration set off an unprecedented degree of racial residential segregation in northern and western industrial cities, but it had less to do with spontaneous competition between rival ethnic groups than with the conscious efforts of neighborhood residents, the real estate industry, and local policy makers to

contain African Americans within an expanding but still defined residential space. Organized violence, zoning regulations, racial covenants, mortgage lending practices, and block-busting were the most overt and direct of the practices devoted to creating and maintaining the residential color line. Equally important have been a whole series of race-conscious decisions about urban development and infrastructure-building over the years, whether seen in public housing, urban “renewal,” public transportation, highway and road-building and, in most major cities, the construction of stadiums, urban shopping malls and other major “public” spaces. The color line has also been maintained by racially-skewed distributions of social services-- ranging from health care and education to sanitation and recreational facilities—which both reinforced the “undesirable” designation of minority neighborhoods and symbolized the relative absence of minority political clout. Even private and public social interventions aimed at helping poor communities have historically respected, and in their own way upheld, the residential color line. But nowhere has the racial differentiation of city services been more visible and explosive than in local law enforcement, whether reflected in ongoing struggles over hiring and promotion practices, in the absence or inadequacy of police protection in many minority neighborhoods, or, especially, in the long history of selectively brutalizing police practices in minority neighborhoods—practices that have sparked well-known episodes of mass rebellion, but that more devastatingly have left a seemingly permanent legacy of anger and distrust.

Viewed from one perspective, these race-conscious policies and practices can be seen as strategies of racial “containment,” devoted to drawing—and, it is important to remember, continuously re-drawing—racial boundaries in response to economic and demographic change. Once created, that is, the ghetto is not self-perpetuating; it takes constant reinforcement and

reinvention to keep racial restrictions in place. Historians thus talk about the establishment of “second” ghettos in post World War II cities, when a new, larger wave of black migrants threatened tightly-drawn racial boundaries and a new set of restrictive actions and policy decisions—with ever-growing participation from the federal government—drew new, geographically expanded boundaries that made the black ghetto even more racially concentrated than before. Moreover, these practices have not been confined to the “making” of the black ghetto; historically, they have been applied to establishing racialized barrios and “Chinatowns” as well. As Robert C. Weaver pointed out in his pathbreaking 1946 analysis The Black Ghetto, the San Francisco Bay Area had a well-established tradition of Asian residential confinement to draw on when encountering the postwar migration of blacks. Barrioization confined Mexicans in the newly-Anglicized city of Los Angeles in the late 19th century, but the more highly segregated barrio of East Los Angeles was largely a creation of the period following 1940, when the European ethnics who once shared the neighborhood began to move out. In Los Angeles, as in other large U.S. cities, postwar settlement patterns made the fundamental difference between white and non-white residents especially stark: European ethnic immigrants, themselves just recently accepted as “white,” had an expanding range of residential choices before them, even as the racialized urban color line was being more rigidly drawn. Even so, comparing racial and ethnic options tends to obscure a larger point: what unifies the experience of the urban ethnic working class is the persistent effort of native-born white and Anglo Americans to maintain the privileges of whiteness as well as of social class, and hence to establish social and spatial distances from those designated non-white. Whites, from this point of view, are a highly segregated, if not racially restricted group. To the historical varieties of racial

containment, then, must be added the wide array of federal and local policies that built the suburbs and made them, at first, almost exclusively accessible to whites. The more recent turn away from “public” services, spaces and education and the emergence of privatized “gated” communities can also be seen in this light

Historical research also warns us against thinking about the economic decline of inner-city neighborhoods as a race-neutral process, highlighting not the concentration of low skills and deficient “social capital” of neighborhood residents but the policies and institutional practices upholding the economic color line. Historically relegated to the lowest-paying, least secure jobs in the urban industrial economy, non-white urban migrants also faced the prospect of being “first fired” in economic downturn and, in the case of Mexicans in particular, the threat of deportation or repatriation as well. Although significantly improved by the 1930s, racist practices in industrial trade unions created suspicion among minority workers—a situation employers readily exploited by hiring blacks and Mexicans as strikebreakers and otherwise fueling inter-ethnic tensions. Unequally integrated into the urban industrial economy in the first place, non-whites suffered the earliest and most devastating losses when urban deindustrialization set in. Here again race shaped a seemingly neutral process, as recent historical research has shown, by influencing the public and private policy decisions that sent manufacturing employers to the suburbs beginning in the 1950s and, eventually, beyond metropolitan borders altogether in search of lower labor costs. A historical understanding of deindustrialization also makes plain that such contemporary, mechanistic-sounding concepts as spatial and skills “mismatch” cannot be understood outside the context of ongoing residential and labor market segregation.

While thus restoring agency to otherwise naturalistic concepts of racial segregation, historical research has also moved inside ghetto “walls” to understand community-formation from the ground up. These studies offer an alternative to the prevailing imagery of inner-city neighborhood residents as unskilled, culturally backward, socially isolated and otherwise unsuited for participation in the urban “mainstream”—reminding us, along the way, that *every* generation has been depicted this way. So, for example, early 20th-century black migrants were not a uniformly unskilled rural peasantry, as Chicago-school imagery suggests; many had already made their way “from farm to factory” via the industrializing urban South.

More broadly, historians have completely reconceptualized the processes of migration and community-formation, viewing neighborhood residents as active rather than passive players in shaping their destinies, even while they operated within considerable institutional and structural constraints. Behind the “push and pull” factors normally associated with migration were a series of individual and family decisions, economic strategies, and strong cross-site social networks that smoothed the newcomers’ passage—while often maintaining their ties to “home.” Communal ties and social networks not only determined the migrants’ choice of destination; they helped shape the struggle against poverty and economic uncertainty that nearly all early 20th-century industrial workers faced. For the most part, non-white minorities worked within the ever-mounting boundaries of racial restriction, relying on mutual aid societies, fraternal insurance and social protection organizations, credit unions, business associations, and, especially, neighborhood churches for social welfare protections in the absence of alternative aid. Of course, these many and varied institutions were by no means exclusively devoted to assisting the needy; they were part of the fabric of neighborhood life and, for many, a vehicle for

getting ahead. And though often based on cross-class coalitions, they did not prevent intra-racial class and ideological tensions from arising, tensions expressed less often in direct conflict than in the patterns of class stratification—seen in church membership, in neighborhood or block composition, in inter-class attitudes—that were built into everyday life.

The combination of racial *and* class stratification by no means prevented organized community action, but it did affect the forms of urban minority protest in significant ways. Blocked, for the most part, from exercising much clout in the political arena, the “new” urban migrants of the first half of the 20th century turned increasingly to culture as an arena for asserting identity and for contesting the terms of their (non)incorporation, using music, art, fashion and leisure as subtle and not-so-subtle expressions of dissent. In the 1960s, these forms of cultural contestation became more overtly political, as African Americans and Chicanos in particular embraced “identity politics” and organized locally to demand recognition not just in electoral politics but to gain community control in such areas as the content of school curricula as well. While often embraced by elites, these various expressions of a distinctively “minority” urban culture have historically drawn their energy and inventiveness from the far more numerous working classes—themselves eager to tweak middle-class standards of respectability regardless of race. Nor was working-class protest confined to culture. Well aware of their marginal opportunities in the mainstream labor force, working people throughout the 20th century have turned to “underground” or illegal activities to supplement or as a replacement for low earnings in the “legitimate” workforce. As government benefits became available on a more equal basis, urban minorities turned to public welfare as a partial means of support. Thus, without ignoring the degree to which the illegal has become more lethal or welfare more pervasive (for the

moment) as a source of support in urban neighborhoods, it is important to recognize the historical roots of what is now seen as the “alienated,” “welfare-dependent” culture of the so-called “underclass”—not in “pathology,” bad behavior or “social isolation” but in a long history of opposition and survival amidst changing conditions of economic marginalization and racial restriction.

At the same time, the historical record reminds us that working class minorities have historically engaged in what might be considered more conventional forms of protest and political organizing—seeking, in many instances, to use the restrictions of race and class to their advantage even while protesting against them. Periodic movements to promote distinctively “black” capitalism, economic development, or separatism have relied on the ghetto for strength. So, too, have numerous efforts to organize tenants’, bus riders and other neighborhood-oriented movements. Consumer boycotts have also figured prominently in race-based organizing history, as illustrated by the largely successful “don’t buy where you can’t work (or, later, eat)” campaigns of the 1930s and 40s, the famous bus and consumer boycotts of the civil rights movement, and the nation-wide grape and lettuce boycotts that helped to bring the United Farm Workers movement to national prominence in the 1960s and 70s. All of these movements used what is otherwise seen as the problematic “concentration” of low-income minorities to their advantage, using neighborhood-based institutions and networks as key means of communicating, organizing and sustaining momentum while also relying on the power of geographically concentrated numbers to make their impact felt. Similarly, the relative racial and ethnic homogeneity of urban neighborhoods has historically been a source of strength to a wide variety of grass-roots community-based organizations in 20th century urban history, some of

which are now grappling explicitly with the demographic changes brought by the “new immigration” of recent decades. In contrast, the settlement house, one neighborhood-based organization specifically geared toward a multi-cultural immigrant population, has yet to overcome the legacy of its unwillingness to extend its services to blacks.

Finally, neighborhood has played an important role in labor organizing in minority communities, whether as semi-protected space for organizing union drives, or as an alternative source of assistance during strikes. Here again, however, the legacy of inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflict has continually threatened to intrude. Historically excluded and demonized as strikebreakers, African American, Mexican and Asian workers were naturally suspicious of traditional trade unions through at least the 1930s, turning more often to their own or to more radical unionizing efforts instead. Nor were these groups in much of a position to benefit from the early trade union movement since, relegated as they were to residential areas distant from the plant, they were effectively shut out of the neighborhood-based union locals and organizing drives that targeted the white ethnic industrial workforce. Immigrant workers, like corporate employers, were operating in a world in which their own still-tenuous whiteness brought benefits in the form of better wages, the chance at promotion, and a distinct edge in status. Mainstream trade unions, for their part, only haltingly recognized race as a dimension of “the labor question” beginning in the 1930s, and then only partially and sporadically. The post 1960s break-up of the New Deal/Great Society political coalition continues to cast a pall over labor/minority relations. Moreover, as recent research confirms, cooperation on the factory floor and in union halls has *not* carried over into neighborhoods: “I’ll work with them but I don’t have to live with them” is a historic and chillingly familiar refrain to those hopeful of building inter-ethnic, inter-racial

coalitions on the basis of class. At least since the first Great Migration, it has been efforts to enforce integration in housing and local school that have sparked the most vicious, often violent, reactions from whites—whether in the form of physical protest and resistance or, more recently, in the “flight” from the city and its schools altogether.

Where, then, does this history lead us in the effort to revitalize communities today? First, to the recognition that the significance of race must be measured not by evidence of discrimination alone, but by the institutions, formal and informal practices, and public and private policies that continue to uphold the color line in urban jobs, neighborhoods, services, and opportunities. At the same time, history suggests that we look at how the color line differs from place to place, and how it has shifted in the wake of recent social and demographic change—to accord the privileges of whiteness to some groups while denying them to others. We need, as well, to conceptualize the color line not just as a mechanism for racial containment and *disadvantage*, but as a way of defining and upholding the advantages of being accepted as *white*. Of course, reconceptualizing the color line means coming to grips with the power of the “color blind” or “race neutral” ideology that pervades social science and social policy. It also means challenging the underlying and increasingly pervasive conviction that the market operates in a neutral or universally beneficent way. Recognizing the “structural,” institutionalized nature of the color line may seem ambitious, but it does not make it immutable; indeed, taking the “race problem” beyond the somewhat mystifying realm of historic antipathies and individual acts of discrimination can only make the solutions more concrete.

Second, history leads us to think differently about the agents and the objectives of neighborhood change on both sides of the urban color line. Segregation is not natural or self-

sustaining, neither is it simply rooted in individual preferences or unmediated patterns of ethnic “succession,” as much current research suggests. Urban deindustrialization was not historically fated, but was rooted in policies and political decisions that encouraged and allowed employers to relocate according to “market” demands—and without much attempt to exercise claims on corporate community responsibility. On the one hand, then, what we know about historical agency calls for broadening and politicizing the traditional community development agenda, to include action to identify and change the metropolitan and federal-level policies and politics sustaining the low wage structures, job insecurities, racial discrimination and political disfranchisement that undermine urban working-class neighborhoods. On the other hand, historical research opens up the agenda *inside* low-income communities, first and foremost by reminding us that most residents have not generally looked to a (now absent) middle class for leadership and role models and should not now be lumpenly categorized as a kind of passive, immoral, unskilled, “disorganized” underclass. For all their diversity and internal fragmentation low-income neighborhood residents do share common cause as part of a post-industrial urban working class (and, under the new rules of the “welfare” system, this will be even more the case). In the long list of “neighborhood” issues community revitalizers have identified for local organizing—social services, housing, environmental waste, youth opportunities—must be included the issues of work, better wages, job security, and workers’ rights. And here community revitalization needs to face the individualized thinking that has tended to prevail on the question of jobs for some time: the idea that dispersing, rather than organizing, the ghetto is the most efficient, indeed the only, way to go.

Finally, and most fundamentally, history leads us to the recognition that the current generation of neighborhood revitalization efforts simply cannot afford the strategy that has characterized so much of the community development movement since settlement house days: the strategy of ignoring, whether through avoidance or obfuscation, the issue of race. In all of the ways cited above, race has been centrally implicated in creating the problems in communities that revitalizers have long been trying to “save.” Given the political racialization of past efforts to deal with race without acknowledging it directly (“Gray Areas,” Community Action, and Model Cities are good examples), there is little reason to believe that “race-neutral” approaches will be any less racialized today. In fact, one could argue that it is better for organizers to acknowledge race explicitly and from the beginning, rather than to allow events or political opponents to make race a divisive issue from without. But on the most basic level, the reason for a race-conscious agenda in urban communities is credibility. Unless, that is, community revitalization efforts show a willingness to acknowledge and confront race directly, neighborhood residents have little reason to believe that they are serious about an agenda that genuinely addresses community interests and needs.

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