

Mr. O: The first urban American President?

By Roger Keil and David Wilson

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When in 1973 President Richard Nixon declared the urban crisis in America over, it clearly wasn't. What had run out was the patience of a Republican administration hell bent on eradicating not poverty but the War on Poverty. A war which had been associated with the Democratic administration of Lyndon B. Johnson but had its immediate origins during the Kennedy years, and its longer roots in 1930s Keynesian demand side stimulation programs. Future Republican administrations, most prominently that of Ronald Reagan, used their loathing for inner cities, their "problems" and their populations as an ideological wedge issue to protect "tax payers" from undue obligations.

The sense of city as dumping ground, of course, was unmistakably racialized, if not racist. Linking "urban" to color and poverty has a long genealogy in American history which a decade earlier had been called "the Negro problem." In a post-1980s persistence of this, the public engaged in a corrosive debate on the urban underclass, read African American (but also increasingly Latino) "underclass," from which a litany of social ills -- single motherhood and violent crime in particular -- supposedly sprang. The systematic neglect of cities, not surprisingly, has exacerbated the intensity and magnitude of segregation and ghettoization in these places since 1980.

OBAMA -- WHAT TO DO?

Obama is now committed to assisting U.S. cities, a major change from the recent past. Most directly, the new president has declared the necessity of establishing a White House Office of Urban Policy. Its centerpiece is to be a massive physical infrastructure package designed to shore up eroding roads, sewer lines, bridges, and housing. A key part of this will be the creation of a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank to enhance federal transportation investments. Obama also proposes a national urban network of public-private business incubators, enhanced workforce training, support and establishment of business “innovation clusters,” and the strengthening of Small Business Administration programs. Obama identifies via these initiatives three pieces in the urban revitalization puzzle: jobs, businesses, and city infrastructure.

Moreover, this self proclaimed ex-community rabble rouser in South Chicago routinely speaks of cities and their reality of fiscal struggle and declining living conditions. Rescuing cities from the massive erasure of previous presidential administrations, Obama frequently speaks of cities as forgotten and neglected places on the national scene. Finally, his selection of New York City Housing leader Shaun Donovan to head HUD (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), a youthful hyper-energetic policy wonk, signals an activist urban agenda. Unlike previous HUD Secretaries, Donovan has a vast knowledge of housing issues going into the job, having spearheaded New York’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development to build and preserve 165,000 units of affordable housing.

But difficult questions persist – cities for whom? Who is to be helped in the drive to revitalize these cities? And what does urban upgrade precisely mean? For all their fanfare, his array of programs still fail to specify the classes, populations, or groups that will be privileged to live, flourish, and propel politics in the new renewed U.S. city.

At the core of Obama's dilemma is that cities are profoundly ambiguous in the public imagining. They are paradoxically seen as places of virile capitalist might but also of culturally dubious coloured and poor populations (blacks and Latinos now make up 55 percent of the population in America's largest cities). Across the political spectrum, cities are still conceived as bold instruments of economic power and entrepreneurial acumen. But, to many, these places are also imagined as scarred by economically failed, failing, and insufficiently contributive populations.

A NEW STRATEGY OF URBAN RENEWAL

A strategy of political expediency would dictate a series of overtures to restore a more just, egalitarian city amid a full-fledged effort to upgrade the opportunities for and vibrancy of real-estate and industrial capital. There is continued commitment to the established policy tools of past conservative (Bush I, Bush II, Reagan, Nixon) administrations -- block grants, public-private partnerships, enterprise zones, incubator districts. As Obama speaks of a new vision and future for cities, he offers us a new sensitivity to the plight of cities, but struggles to fashion a distinctively new way to see and help them.

Perhaps, following the rhetoric and ideals of Richard Florida's highly resonant creative class paradigm would be the expedient rhetorical cover to pursue a new strategy. Florida's privileging

of middle class and upper middle class people and institutions as the engine of city solvency and growth has widespread support in the planning, policy, and government realms. Obama, who in the words of columnist Josh Leon, “represents modernity and tolerance,” important markers in Florida’s world, may well follow this strategy. The new ‘creative’ middle classes have emerged as decisive voters in current American society as they swell in numbers and increasingly occupy the public and political spaces that matter. They do so, in particular, in the newly gentrified central cities.

The alternative is to focus on the core issues that plague the majority population (disproportionately racialized poor people) in these cities: scant decent paying jobs, underfunded public schools, dwindling ability to secure affordable housing, racism and exploitation in the new low-wage service and day labour economies. In the Bush years, as programs and policies aided the goals and ideals of the real estate and business communities, this majority population suffered.

Yet, many mayors across America, still aligned with real-estate capital and growth machines as city revenues continue to plunge, now also aggressively call for help in alleviating poverty, hunger, and hopelessness that visibly deepens. But the incentive to pursue this strategy may not be sufficient. The disincentives are profound. The pendulum is now swinging back to inner city politics but perversely to the new liberal elites of the gentrified inner cities (Neil Smith’s inner city “revanchists”) at the expense of the poor who have been or are being displaced through catastrophic events like Katrina, the subprime mortgage crisis, and gentrification.

DOING THE RIGHT THING: THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Are there alternative forces that seek to put Obama on the other path? At the expense of singling out one over possibly hundreds of similar critical initiatives that have recently shaped the U.S. urban scene, let's mention the Right to the City Alliance of longstanding radical urban community and labour groups which have now created a nationwide coalition to coordinate urban struggles for progressive policies. These are critical core constituencies of Obama's urban popular support. They claim: "The hollowing out of the cities, the destruction of public participation, privatization, job loss, structural racism, and the loss of the very soul of the city has affected many sectors and constituencies. The Right to the City isn't a set of policies for one or another group of people: it is a fundamental approach to reorganizing our cities, to the leadership of the city, and to the future of the city."

Infrastructure investment is key to Obama's urban policy program. Yet, as David Harvey reminded us recently, such economic stimulus can be treacherous. While it is likely that the disaster capitalists of Halliburton and Co., who filled their coffers under Bush and Cheney with massive civic and military infrastructure investments at home and abroad, will lose their spot in the sun, Obama still has basically two options: will he tread in the footsteps of Baron Haussmann, who rebuilt nineteenth century Paris, and New York technocrat Robert Moses and build roads for a 'splintered city'? Or will his infrastructure package create transit lines leading towards a more democratic and redistributive metropolis?

A VISION IN THE MAKING?

Whatever Obama will decide to do, it is unclear at this moment if he will marginalize the people of inner city America who danced in the streets on the night of his election. Obama here faces a choice of political expediency versus apparently heart-felt personal conviction, a decision which he believes will affect his political standing, base of support, pool of capital donations, and political legacy. On “the city question,” then, Obama’s choice of planning and policy tools to revitalize cities suggests a preliminary commitment to bolstering the needs and desires of real-estate, finance, and business capital as the key. But, it is not too late to modify this: decades of festering unemployment, underemployment, class and race segregation, and hopelessness among many deepen and need to be directly addressed. In this time of political change in America, with Republican politics discredited, the time to strike here has never been better.