

Race and Politics

New Challenges and Responses for
Black Activism



Edited by
JAMES JENNINGS



VERSO

London · New York

From Streets of Hope to Landscapes of Despair: The Case of Los Angeles

Cynthia Hamilton

Land-use planning and zoning are powerful tools for the manipulation of space, and thereby political and social behavior. Decisions about the use of land have retarded social justice and created racial, ethnic, and class conflict in American cities. These decisions have resulted in the deterioration of Black communities through displacement and redevelopment. Historically, Black communities have offered alternative sources of identity and meaning for life in America. These places, as suggested by some observers, were sources of support and assistance for residents and maintained control and order based on shared values. Order has disappeared along with community and the artificial replacement (through the use of police, courts, and prisons) is far too costly for the well-being of communities. This concern is raised by David Harvey in *Social Justice and the City*, even though the focus of his attention is eighteenth-century London:

If, in the short run, we simply pursue efficiency and ignore the social cost, then those individuals or groups who bear the brunt of that cost are likely to be a source of long run inefficiency either through decline in . . . those intangibles that motivate people to cooperate and participate in the social process of production . . . or through forms of anti-social behavior (crime and drug addiction) which will necessitate the diversion of productive investment towards their correction.¹

Sadly, this is the situation and dilemma faced by urban government today. Yet it seems that urban policies continue to ignore Harvey's warning.

The Loss of Space

While policymakers and developers speak of growth and redevelopment, we have actually witnessed the continual devastation of Black communities through deindustrialization and disinvestment used as mechanisms for growth. The few remaining enclaves of Black Americans suffer the crisis of underdevelopment, characterized by decay, abandonment, and poverty; simultaneously, large sectors of space that were part of these communities have been consumed by new growth strategies that have displaced residents and swallowed community and cultural institutions in the name of office towers, expansion of central business districts, parking lots, sports arenas – in short, anything that would increase land values for outsiders. A basic part of the history of Black people in the U.S. in the past forty years is how Black communities have been the victims of growth.

Globalization has exacerbated the social and economic problems confronting cities. Plant closures, corporate center development, expansion of the service economy, and corporate restructuring in suburban areas have given shape to economic restructuring that has changed the face of city life. Urban households have been restructured during this period and process, and thus we see the displacement of middle- and low-income households, and the rise of female-headed households. This is accompanied by the reshaping of urban space with its residents experiencing the loss of a meaningful sense of "place."

The space/place of community at one time provided a buffer from the abuse and neglect of a racist society. "Place" in this context is clearly more than location. Place is memory; it provides a location for identity and history. For Black people in the U.S., the "place" that we live in has always been a source of refuge and resistance against a consumer culture that either ignored us based on an affirmation of superiority or sought to exploit us in the barest ways. Place is both symbolic and real and has been central to Black culture despite pejorative labels, like slums, leveled by policymakers and social analysts. Place is that space that one can "claim," though not necessarily own (like Harlem or Chicago's Southside in the 1920s and 1930s). These places, once the homes of Black America, are increasingly being reshaped, redefined, consumed by corporate capital – be it by the construction of office towers, hospital expansion, or land clearance. The new use of place/space reflects not only competing philosophies of use and exchange value, but also the political intentions of the new owners to reverse the political unity that came to be centered around these places. Dispersal and displacement have been

central elements of reconstruction, redefinition, and control. Public space has increasingly been eliminated through privatization.² Those common areas where children could play and families congregate, where the elders could gather for talk, where women could feel safe from assault have become "private property" – the use to be determined by the one who owns.

Place is essential for social and cultural identity, particularly for the young – it provides their first sense of belonging, sense of community, and safety. The loss of place has robbed poor children of color, in particular, of moments of childhood security. Without an alternative community structure, young Black children have defined themselves in relation to "the other" – White society – as in the stereotyped, racialized notions that dominate urban discourse: crime, drugs, criminals, gangs, war. The alternative is, of course, defined as redevelopment, growth, gentrification – the re-creation of old communities that obliterates all semblance of the past and the historical memory of older residents.

Resisting corporate incursions and accompanying consumer culture is difficult in the current physical environment. Since 1965 the areas in major cities that were the traditional places of the Black community have been redefined and reshaped to fit dominant corporate and civic definitions and uses of urban space. The new use of space has been intentional, designed to reverse the political unity resulting from proximity and density and the shared experience of racism. As Black communities lost their center and residents lost the ability to interact spontaneously and informally in ways that have reinforced alternative cultural style and values, individuals have become unwriting victims of the dominant consumer culture.

In earlier periods, Black communities within major American cities have provided the space in which counteridentities were forged and nurtured, but also places of resistance to hegemonic cultural forces and structures imposed as a result of institutional racism. This was especially evident in the 1960s and during the Civil Rights and Black Panther Movements. But the struggles of the 1960s, both cultural and legal, had ironic consequences. Along with open housing and other civil rights legislation which provided access to spaces that previously excluded Blacks, there were also special programs, like the earlier urban renewal, designed to transform "ghettos," precisely the places that had offered alternative meaning. By 1975 the places that had been home for many Black Americans began to disappear. Judged solely by standards that measure access, initially some of this change may have been seen as positive. Indeed, much of the redevelopment

experienced in major cities like Los Angeles, Birmingham, Detroit, Washington, D.C., was completed during the terms of Black mayors.¹ The results of redevelopment have been disastrous for the poor Black community, however. Black Americans have lost a sense of place and with it, a sense of history. Much like the Black towns of the frontier that were lost without a marker for posterity, urban Black communities have been reduced to rubble or, more accurately, slated for redevelopment and thereby replacement without a trace.

The long-term processes associated with redevelopment and resulting in the loss of place for Blacks have had profound implications for residents and intellectuals alike. For residents the loss of space and place has created a rootlessness exacerbated by the separation of families. For intellectuals it has meant a separation of the discussion of identity, difference, and culture from material circumstances and a retreat to abstraction. It has contributed to the fragmentation of progressive politics and helped to obscure class alliances crossing race and ethnicity. Our loss of the battle for control of the street has been largely responsible for the absence or weakness of theoretical responses and frameworks aimed at aggrandizing political and economic power.

"Slum" Clearance for Profit

The restructuring of the American economy has reordered cities. As old neighborhoods disappear, new downtown financial districts are being built to house banks, insurance companies, and the headquarters of corporations on a scale representing the power of their occupants and clients. These changes have drastic consequences for industrial and social relations; they have forced us away from geographic communities and into what some call occupational groupings that reinforce inequality. More striking than any notion of a new basis for unity, therefore, is the new basis of disunity — inequality has been magnified by this restructuring of space to correspond to changes in the economy. The new cities of America have moved to eliminate their working-class constituents, in some instances replacing them with White and even Black professionals who are employed downtown; in other instances the working class is simply dispersed. A geographic inequality appears integral to the growth process.

There can be little doubt that race has been an important element of social policy in the urban landscape. Restrictive covenants, excluding, and other legal tools were used for the creation and

maintenance of racially homogeneous communities. These kinds of policies were hindrances to government's role in generating and ensuring profits and economic health for the corporate sector. During the Depression corporations watched government become a major provider of jobs, housing, and services. There was little objection to this role as long as government did not *compete* with the private sector or disrupt corporate agendas for urban America. Corporations, developers, and financiers did identify limits for government. They wanted to continue to reap the benefits of government subsidies and insurance while eliminating government controls and guidelines. This became increasingly clear in the area of housing.

Responding to the needs of a population in economic crisis and attempting to preclude more violent disruption, the federal government made the decision to build public housing in 1937. What the private sector demanded as a concession as government built inexpensive, quality houses and made them available to the working class was "slum clearance." To avoid oversupply or even adequate supply of affordable housing, private sector lobbyists forced the Congress to agree to the demolition of housing in areas designated as "slums." Similar policies with the same intended outcome of maintaining profits continued throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Slum clearance and urban renewal still remain as contemporary instruments for this purpose, but now "growth" and "redevelopment" are metaphors for the removal of poor people and people of color. The renovations, renewal, and reinvestment that have eliminated or moved inner city communities, however, have not solved the social and economic problems of cities.

Place and Resistance

Forms of resistance can be located in the shape and character of community. In *City and the Grassroots*, Manuel Castells asserts that "cultural identity is associated with and organized around a specific territory."² He concludes that the urban revolts of the 1960s emerged because "the ghetto territory became a significant space for the Black community as the material basis of social organization, cultural identity and political power."³ It should not be surprising that the dismantling of community has been simultaneous with a decline in organized political action. The consequences of the new restructuring are dramatically demonstrated in the aftermath of the Los Angeles uprising of 1992. The mass unrest has been insufficient in providing

new political leadership; existing political and physical structures threaten the fragile bonds of unity both within the Black community and between Blacks and Chicanos. In Los Angeles the social and economic conditions of the city stroked the flames of April and May 1992 as they did in 1965.

The conditions of unemployment, inadequate housing, and poverty in a city of glamour and fortune are the real causes of unrest, although police abuse and the miscarriage of justice are constants as well. Los Angeles has a poverty rate higher than the rest of the nation: 15.6 percent of residents live in poverty. Black unemployment for those between the ages of 25 and 54 is 19.5 percent; 14 percent of Los Angeles residents with full-time jobs live in poverty because of low-wage jobs. Los Angeles has more than its share of low-wage jobs: 17.5 percent of the jobs pay employees \$11,000 or less per year; yet 75 percent of families living in poverty must pay half of their income for rent.⁶ Los Angeles remains one of the most segregated cities in the country. As residents lose access to political organizations, they lose their voice. In the wake of the current urban redevelopment all inherent organizations are destroyed.

These economic conditions have been exacerbated by urban government debt and the call for austerity. As states and the nation move to balance the budget at the expense of the poor, we witness budget cuts in health, welfare, public housing, education, and other services. California's deficit stood at 25 percent of the state budget one month after the uprising and has been used to justify a wide range of cuts. Calls to eliminate deficits have become a political tool for the wealthy to maintain positions of power and influence. The exaggerated conditions of poverty that have resulted from such calls contribute to the deterioration in race relations. The popular response to these conditions has been protest and revolt. Los Angeles joined the ranks of these austerity protests on April 29, 1992.

The vast majority of Black residents in major American cities has been forced to succumb to new history carved by the bulldozers of redevelopment; they are the products of a new culture created by redevelopment. The old places in the community, the social clubs, churches, movie theaters, public spaces around which memories revolved have been displaced. In their place we find new structures and "restoration"/gentrification evoking nostalgia for a past that no one seems to know. Ironically, places that were so important to the Black community have been dismissed as meaningless by urban planners and designers, while new "places" are erected in the name of universal civic values.

There is a new private use of public space that not only destroys the territoriality of Blacks but is the essence of the new redevelopment. Under the guise of "urban renewal" emergent places and organizations are disrupted and destroyed. Because place is a historical as well as geographic reference, its elimination causes the disappearance of everything that makes life livable. Redevelopment manifests itself as a besieging of non-White cultures. Land-use decisions and planning have become tools of governmental violence. The displacement and removal of poor people are international issues. The elimination of the freedom to build a community, a place in one's own image, is a powerful way to break social forces as they emerge. Is there any wonder, then, that we have experienced a collapse of values, a surge of anarchy and anomie in modern society?

Re-Creating Social Justice

It is clear that growth and development can be sources of wealth, but also of death, destruction, and inequality simultaneously. As pointed out by Hazel Henderson, it is never a matter of growth versus no growth; rather, it is what is growing, what is declining, and what must be maintained.⁷ If growth reproduces inequality, is it possible to limit growth and distribute goods more equitably? Henderson's statement helps us to see that the costs of growth may outweigh the advantages. It is most apparent in communities of color where we find the debris created on the road to perfection. The litany of problems should cause us to rethink economic development from the bottom up. Communities must develop solutions for themselves, solutions that are not only independent but may be antithetical to free-market approaches. We see, therefore, the possibility of developing economic institutions in the community that will parallel those in the larger society but that will also respond to local problems and needs—a type of economic "liberated zone."

These possibilities include alternative ownership arrangements, cooperatives, recycling, all sustainable production techniques, and nonmarket approaches to basic needs like housing. For example, we (the Twenty First Century Institute) believe that it may be necessary to ensure that some housing is removed from the commodity market and spared the pricing cycle produced by speculation. Pricing could be based on the income structure of communities. The objective must be to prevent displacement and maintain community stability. These alternatives are based on the establishment of new rules for economic

enterprises that spring from some basic philosophical concerns and differences. These new rules flow from our efforts to establish a new and alternative philosophical base. Alternatives will develop as we reject the theory of markets as the basis for distribution, and by rejecting the philosophy of liberalism and its emphasis on individualism and property rights. As we embrace group rights and come to understand the threat that individualism poses to resources we hold in common (air, water, land), there may be a call for a new social contract.

The challenge feared most by the corporate sector is one that substitutes the collective good for the much-touted philosophy of individualism. When groups previously left out of formal parliamentary and electoral processes demand access or develop new methods of political action, capitalists feel threatened. For African Americans in this legally segregated, "separate but equal" society, the personal commitment to change was reflective of social concerns. Demanding broad social change was a prerequisite for expanded personal rights and freedoms. Unfortunately, industrial society has forced the separation of private and social concerns. As a result, individuals are locked into selfishly considering individual rights rather than cooperating to meet community needs.

The essence of a new social contract must be the reaffirmation of common good. Livable cities will only be possible when the collective good is understood to have meaning for each individual. A community agenda must replace the current corporate agenda for American cities so that we may consider issues of sustainability: full employment, livable space, resource management that avoids excessive waste, and pollution control as a health measure. But this community agenda would also revive a notion of the collective good; social concerns would become more central than private good. Individual and collective good can no longer remain separate. The false contradiction between social good and individual rights and needs has produced the current problems and crises. Individual property rights must no longer be permitted to infringe on the quality of life affecting everyone.

An alternative philosophical beginning can provide the basis for a progressive agenda. The new rules for economic enterprises must include, first, an equitable distribution of wealth, one based on a recognition of workers' real contributions, education, and experience as well as production; second, acceptance of workplace democracy as an alternative to current work processes; third, cooperative relations between enterprises and the surrounding community; and finally, environmentally sound production.

The Labor Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles produced a document in 1992, *Reconstructing Los Angeles from the Bottom Up*, calling for approaches to economic development different from corporate-approved ones proposed by the Ueberroth Commission in the wake of the urban insurrection following the first Rodney King trial.⁸ The Strategy Center sees the need to set standards of social responsibility for corporations, particularly those that must locate in a particular area or market for resource considerations. As corporations abandon communities, citizens and residents must begin to look within for solutions and organize regionally to identify problems and solutions as well as a means of creating new economic alternatives. Inner-city communities, by identifying their basic needs, can begin the process of sustainable development. Embracing integrated regional approaches can make communities the center for the environmentally sound production technologies of the future.

The policies of redevelopment have caused urban residents to lose many of their rights as citizens. Minorities of varying income brackets lose political access and electoral strength as communities are dismantled and reassembled with new residents. Churches, schools, small businesses, neighborhood and civic groups, social clubs, and countless other associations are lost as communities disappear. While citizens are chided by political parties and media alike to participate, to be involved, government itself has facilitated the destruction of the very mechanism by which minorities, women, and poor people are able to organize and claim their own social justice — namely, through their communities and neighborhoods. Urban redevelopment has claimed millions of victims over the past decades. The process is not complete, however, and beyond the dismantling of communities and the complete transformation of cities into corporate entities we may all have been quietly socialized to believe that this process is both natural and necessary for human progress. But this is not always the case.

Notes

1. David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 97.
2. Luis Aponic-Parés, "What's Yellow and White and Has Land All around It: Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios," *Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1995), p. 10.
3. Cynthia Hamilton, *Apartheid in an American City: The Case of the Black Community in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Labor Community Strategy Center, 1988).

4. Manuel Castells, *City and the Grassroots* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. xvii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
6. Cynthia Hamilton, "The Belly of the Beast: Linking Militarization and Urban Plight in Los Angeles," *Positive Alternatives*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Summer 1992).
7. Hazel Henderson, *Politics of the Solar Age* (Indianapolis: Knowledge Systems, 1983).
8. *Reconstructing Los Angeles from the Bottom Up* (Los Angeles: Labor Community Strategy Center, 1992).