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In the Jungle of Cities [Review of the Book *Harold Washington and the Neighborhoods: Progressive City Reform in Chicago, 1983-1987*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] At first glance such a spatial transformation of work may seem positive, as indeed it was for the largely white work force that left the city and staffed these new positions. But left behind geographically, economically, and socially were the largely black (and to a lesser extent, Mexican) working-class residents. It was at this juncture, with jobs disappearing and the urban social structure fragmented, that black Chicago, symbolized in the person of Harold Washington, finally assumed political power. In *Harold Washington and the Neighborhoods*, editors Pierre Clavel and Wim Wiewel have collected a group of essays that examine the fate of this latest effort at urban reform. The essayists were either members of Washington's administration, neighborhood leaders actively seeking to affect policy, or both. This immediacy gives the book its particular insight and its occasional poignant moment.

Keywords

Chicago, politics, Harold Washington, race, urban reform

Disciplines

Labor Relations | Politics | Social History | Social Policy

Comments

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Harold Washington's Chicago

In the Jungle of Cities

Nick Salvatore

HAROLD WASHINGTON AND THE NEIGHBORHOODS:

Progressive City Government in Chicago, 1983-1987

Edited by Pierre Clavel and Wim Wiewel

Rutgers University Press, 375 pp., \$15.00 paper

Early in this century, riding a wave of progressive hopes that now strikes one as rather innocent, reformers of various political hues tackled the problems of the city with great optimism. In Cleveland, Samuel "Golden Rule" Johnson espoused radical reform; in other communities, the adoption of the city-manager form of government promised change; and there were widespread efforts to end corruption and establish efficient and honest urban administrations. Self-professed socialists ran for office on platforms advocating municipal ownership of streetcars, utilities, and other essentials of urban life, and in more than 70 cities they won, as political coalitions involving the working and middle classes sought to transform urban government.

The most influential socialist victory occurred in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a multi-ethnic industrial community, where socialist mayors held office for almost four decades following Emil Seidel's election in 1910. In an era when police were regularly used to break strikes, socialist insistence on police neutrality in labor disputes constituted an enormous change in working people's lives. Similarly, the rigorous enforcement of industrial and residential health codes, consistent prosecution of child labor law violators, and the extension of electricity, water and sewer mains, and paved roads into the wards of the immigrant working classes dramatically improved conditions of most Milwaukee residents. Precisely what socialism meant in this context, however, remained unclear as college-educated progressive reformers increasingly staffed the agencies and departments of the expanding socialist administration. Graduate students from the economics department at the University of Wis-

consin, under the prodding direction of John R. Commons, flocked to Milwaukee to partake in the great experiment.

Socialism in one city, even over many decades, proved equivocal. As the young Walter Lippmann observed in 1913 — after a term as secretary to the socialist mayor of Schenectady, New York — socialism in the cities crumbled because its own adherents would not allow tax policy to redistribute their rather limited wealth. From a historical perspective, moreover, it is quite clear that the ebbing of reform hopes was caused by bigger problems than the limited appeal of socialism. Progressive urban reform itself faltered, unable to develop a consistent vision or sustained support. By 1940, one Cleveland city planner believed his city was engaged in a fierce race for survival with competing urban centers; two years later, the St. Louis City Planning Commission described their city as "fast becoming decadent." So pervasive were these problems, *Business Week* thought in 1940, that the federal government "seemed resigned to the internal decay of the cities."

Chicago offers a case in point. Early in this century the process of migration out of the central city — the core of 19th-century economic and political life — was already evident here. Middle- and upper-class Chicagoans settled the North Shore suburbs after World War I; working people of the city migrated out as well, following the movement of jobs. Arguably, industrial decentralization began in 1903, when Western Electric established its massive plant in the Chicago suburb of Cicero. In any event, between 1929 and 1939, central Chicago lost over 11 percent of its blue-collar manufacturing positions while the surrounding suburbs gained. The results of this process were evident in the 1940s: property values — and thus the tax base — in the central city plummeted, neighborhoods visibly deteriorated, social services proved inadequate, and the pattern of urban dislocation intensified.

For a period after World War II, an extensive public works program, funded by all levels of government, constructed highways, ur-

ban housing, and bridges, promising to repair the image of decay and blight that dominated discussions of urban life. And for some residents, it did. In Mayor Richard J. Daley's Chicago, such works programs provided much-needed employment for white ethnics in the growing municipal work force and in the heavily unionized construction trades. Yet the decentralization of the city continued unchecked. Population declined by small percentages in



Photo: Timothy Porges, from "The Language of Cities"

absolute terms, but by far larger proportions relative to the expanding suburbs. Most disturbing — despite Daley's pro-business policy and his political machine's largesse to those it favored — manufacturing jobs continued to escape Chicago. Between 1967 and 1982, the city lost an astounding 49.3 percent of its manufacturing base, a loss that eliminated the jobs of almost 270,000 men and women. During this same period in the suburbs surrounding Chicago, 316,000 new manufacturing jobs developed.

At first glance such a spatial transformation of work may seem positive, as indeed it was for the largely white work force that left the city and staffed these new positions. But left behind geographically, economically, and socially were the largely black (and to a lesser extent, Mexican) working-class residents. It was at this juncture, with jobs disappearing and the urban social structure fragmented, that black Chicago, symbolized in the person of Harold Washington, finally assumed political power. In *Harold Washington and the Neighborhoods*, editors Pierre Clavel and Wim Wiewel have collected a group of essays that examine

the fate of this latest effort at urban reform. The essayists were either members of Washington's administration, neighborhood leaders actively seeking to affect policy, or both. This immediacy gives the book its particular insight and its occasional poignant moment.

A central theme of the book is the Washington administration's effort to develop a redistributive economic agenda. While the mayor arrived in office sympathetic to such

suggest, DED officials tried to revalue the department's key organizational culture from one focused on the needs of the machine to one that gave primacy to community empowerment. The key to development policy, according to Elizabeth Hollander, Washington's Director of Planning, was to judge a proposal not simply by its effect on real estate development but also by its ability to retain and expand the available pool of jobs.

The culmination of these efforts resulted in the creation of Planned Manufacturing District (PMD), a direct attempt to stem both gentrification and the continued hemorrhaging of jobs to the suburb "I used to have a \$75 apartment. And I walked 1 1/2 blocks to my job," one pained and angry worker testified. "That apartment is now \$1700 and the job where I had good union wage is now a condemnation." In one of the more insightful essays in the collection Donna Ducharme, a professional planner and neighborhood organizer who remained outside Washington administration, details the efforts to retain manufacturing jobs by opposing zoning changes that would undermine industry by supporting funding of the needed infrastructure and by building a broad political coalition among business unions, a community groups to overcome the opposition of the still-entrenched machine.

Washington himself did not embrace PMDs until just short before his death but, as Ducharme makes clear, the ideas originally proposed by community groups were nurtured by his administration. "Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the Washington administration's development policy, Ducharme argues (echoing other contributors as well), "was that made acceptable at the policy level such questions as 'Who benefits from this development choice?' ... It also recognized that all development decisions are essentially political because they are decisions about who will benefit and how the benefits will be distributed."

How to evaluate the meaning of these efforts? Although Washington, p. 17

To counter this debilitating inertia, the planning strategy of Washington's administration sought to include neighborhood organizations and a more diverse business community, along with the progressive planners. Most important, as the essays by Robert Mier and Kari I. Moe, and by Robert Giloth,

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continued from p. 8

ington's sudden death in 1987 certainly complicated such an analysis, a number of themes nonetheless emerge from this and earlier attempts to assess his administration's influence. First, the Daley machine neither died with Richard J. Daley nor relinquished the field upon Harold Washington's inauguration. Indeed, an anti-Washington coalition held power in the City Council throughout Washington's first term. That electoral power, coupled with the numerous machine loyalists laced throughout the bureaucracy, checked the new administration's initiatives at every turn.

Second, however innovative Washington's policies may have been, by definition their effect stopped at the city limits. As Timothy Wright, a former administration official, notes in a fine essay, the problems confronting Chicago have a critical regional dimension. In the absence of supportive state and federal policies, these limits to municipal power hampered the Washington administration's efforts. Then, too, there were the inevitable political compromises — choices between the only available, inadequate options — that could undermine morale, especially among the more insistent progressive planners. Finally, there was the sheer intractability of the problems themselves. Mier and Moe, in an essay that intelligently affirms their basic commitment to the principles Washington stood for, nonetheless capture this near-numbing dimension:

We came away with a humbling sense of the enormity of the issues of poverty and race. Poverty seems an overwhelming issue. Partially, we feel this because we had little chance to address it without control of vital service institutions like the schools and the Housing Authority. In Chicago, the racial issue is possibly even more intractable. Because poverty and race are so intertwined in this society, the inability to deal with race is a major cause of the inability to deal with

poverty.

Harold Washington and the Neighborhoods is not a political or even an economic history. It is a planners' book, written by participants that reflects one important aspect of an enormously complex situation. Yet it also aspires to be more than that, especially in its effort to find in the Washington experience something of a model for contemporary urban problems. A social movement rooted in the neighborhoods, building cross-class and multi-racial alliances, internally bonded together and externally affixed to a progressive administration professionally intent on transforming traditional institutional politics — this is quite a prophetic olio. Given this, however, it is odd that none of the essays offers more than a sporadic discussion of the fate of Washington's electoral coalition after his death. The fragmentation within the black political community, the apparent longevity of aspects of the old machine, and the effects of the deep recession on efforts such as those advocated here all demand, but do not receive, sustained attention. Indeed it is hard to avoid the conclusion, as Robert Giloth suggests, that it was Washington the long-time political leader, and not primarily the neighborhood activists in a progressive movement, who "momentarily healed the animosities and unified the fiefdoms" in Chicago's political jungle. This is not insignificant in itself. But as reflection on an earlier set of progressive hopes might suggest, the peculiarities of these circumstances and the impenetrable obstacles to reform still in place should give us pause in assessing both the Washington administration's meaning and its applicability for the rest of urban America. *Harold Washington and the Neighborhoods* is a useful book that provides us with initial reflections on some of these critical issues.

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