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# URBAN POLICY WITHOUT BROACHING THE TOPIC OF RACE, REALLY? RESPONSE TO DAVID IMBROSCIO'S "URBAN POLICY AS MERITOCRACY: A CRITIQUE"

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David Imbroscio's article "Urban Policy as Meritocracy" (2015) appears to offer an important critique of the meritocratic paradigm that frames urban policy. However, his analysis has a glaring omission. It skirts over how race undergirds virtually every aspect of U.S. urban policy. The focus of Imbroscio's article is undeniable; he is interested in urban policy as it applies to distressed, inner-city neighborhoods in the United States. His inquiry is specifically focused on a discrete set of policies designed to address the plight of "disadvantaged" groups in cities, namely the "urban poor." Yet, the weight of his analysis is indifferent to the concrete reality of public discourse about urban poverty in the United States, which is imbued with racial stereotypes and metaphors. In fact, even the word *urban* functions as a racial code word in this discourse, serving as a euphemism for the black community and black culture. This motif is reflected in Dreier's (2005) examination of media bias in relation to urban issues. Leonardo (2009) offers an equally poignant discussion of this topic in relation to U.S. education policy. For example, he describes how urban issues are framed in the media and policy discourse by evoking images of the "jungle":

> In the "urban jungle" people imagine their city centers as teaming with black, brown and yellow bodies, which are poor and dirty, criminal and dangerous. Gangs, violence, and drugs are closely tied to any image of the urban for most people. . . . Because so many people subscribe to the racist notion that urban areas are "jungles," many Americans believe that spending money on urban schooling [or urban policy writ large] is a "waste." (Leonardo, 2009, p. 154).

It is important to read Imbroscio's article against this backdrop, since it places U.S. urban policy in a racialized and contested context. This is not simply a phenomenon that plays out among individual actors, but it is expressed through institutions and the policies they implement.

Imbroscio's discussion of meritocracy alludes to the role of large social institutions in the implementation of U.S. urban policy. However, he fails to fully recognize the degree to which the mobilization of racial stereotypes and discrimination within institutions undermines policy itself. In short, the problem with U.S. urban policy is not, as Imbroscio suggests, its focus on removing barriers to upward mobility. The problem is that urban policy is implemented in an institutional context wrought by racism and discrimination. Meritocracy cannot flourish in a context where prejudice is ubiquitous and entrenched in institutions.

## INSTITUTIONAL RACISM TRUMPS MERITOCRACY

It is important to view the institutions that are at the core of Imbroscio's critique of meritocracy through a racial lens. He focuses on failed urban policies implemented through the education and social welfare systems, as well as a web of housing and community development agencies. Ironically,

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these are among the institutions that scholars have identified as central to the reproduction of racial inequality in society. In addition to schools, social welfare organizations and housing agencies, scholars like Blauner (1969) and Pinderhughes (2011) have identified private businesses and the police as linchpins in the perpetuation of internal colonialism in black and Latino communities.

Increasingly, the institutional context that black and Latino communities are embedded in is subsumed in race-neutral language. These places are labeled as *urban* neighborhoods in popular discourse. In some instances this lexicon has been adopted by academics, particularly those who subscribe to a colorblind view of the world. In its most extreme expression, color-blind scholarship becomes a caricature, akin to skits by the comedian Stephen Colbert who parodies race-neutral discourse exclaiming, "I don't see color, not even my own." However, the racial subtext of these communities is stripped away when institutional discrimination is expressed in its rawest forms. Some obvious examples come from recent history when patterns of police brutality against blacks have sparked civil unrest in places like Ferguson and Baltimore. Discussions of the institutional foundations of recent instances of civil unrest echo analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles riots (Farrell & Johnson, 2001; Johnson, Farrell, & Oliver, 1993). These critiques embed race in the context of school reforms, social welfare policies, and housing systems.

Yet, Imbroscio does not broach the topic of race or pursue a systematic analysis of how the mobilization of stereotypes and discrimination through institutions shapes opportunity structures for black and brown people in urban American. Instead, his analysis of policies aimed at removing barriers to social mobility is divorced from the racial context in which the policies are embedded. Using a narrower, race-neutral construct, Imbroscio argues that liberal urban policies[1] designed to remove barriers to upward mobility are inherently flawed because a meritocracy is unobtainable. He attempts to demonstrate this thesis through an analysis of what he labels an "unholy trinity" of urban policies focusing on schools, families, and neighborhoods. Ironically, the institutions that deliver urban programs within the context of Imbroscio's unholy trinity are hampered by the racialization of urban policy from within and through ongoing public debates.

## What's Unholy About Imbroscio's Trinity

### *Education and School Reform*

Imbroscio argues that education policy and school reform have repeatedly failed to create a pathway to upward mobility. To him, this is confirmation that liberal urban policies are ineffective. However, his analysis is divorced from the racial context of urban education. At the micro-level, black and brown students in inner-city schools are hampered by stereotyping, culturally inappropriate and alienating curricula, and low expectation by teachers and the broader society. At the macro-level, they attend schools that are fiscally, technologically, and physically substandard. Leonardo and Grubb (2014, p. xi) highlight this point, arguing that "students of color are victims of resource inequalities as well as ideological forms of racism." In contrast to schools outside of urban neighborhoods, with predominantly non-minority student populations, they stress that:

> Facilitated by laws and funding policies, and supported by ideological understandings of "deserving or not deserving," the resource deprivation in [urban] schools mimics the actual conditions of their neighborhoods: ghettoized, dilapidated, and abandoned. Although Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and other such attempts to raise the social status of people of color may go a long way, it cannot be accomplished without a simultaneous redistribution of resources. In short, students of color suffer both dispossession, a resource form of racism, and dishonor—its ideological form—in schools. (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014, pp. xi-xii)

In part, the inadequacy of school policies is an outgrowth of the manner in which their structure and implementation is imbued by pejorative racial stereotypes and perceptions. In addition, reforms are hindered by social and cultural resistance to spending money on urban schools. As a result, the schools that students of color attend are perpetually stigmatized and underfunded. In essence, they are set up to fail. This is due to racial prerogatives in society, not a calculation based on meritocratic considerations.

### *Social Welfare Programs*

Imbroscio builds on his critique of liberal urban policies related to school reform by citing serval studies that find marginal impacts from social welfare programs designed to assist families, particularly programs like Head Start that target young parents and pre–school age children. Many of the programs cited were small demonstration projects, and Imbroscio concludes that they were not comprehensive enough to have lasting effects on the life chances of the urban poor. Imbroscio concludes that this is the paradox of social welfare policies. On one hand, small-scale interventions do not bridge enough of a gap to enable poor people to obtain upward mobility. On the other hand, he argues that large-scale interventions are inherently disempowering, alienating and stigmatizing to the poor since they impose "white-middle class norms upon them." Later in the article, Imbroscio elaborates on the incompatibility of social welfare policies and the safety net with meritocracy.

Although these conclusions are provocative, they highlight the need for racial oppression to be a more central component of Imbroscio's analysis of U.S. social welfare policies. It is not enough to dismiss comprehensive social welfare policies as normatively flawed and incompatible with meritocracy. A critical race perspective along the lines articulated by Neubeck and Cazenave (2001) is needed for social welfare policies to be reimagined in ways that are devoid of racial bias.

### *Impacted Neighborhoods*

The final component of Imbroscio's unholy trinity focuses on housing and community development policies designed to reduce the effects of poverty and social isolation in urban neighborhoods. He focuses on two types of housing policies: mobility programs like Move to Opportunity (MTO) that are designed to deconcentrate poverty and suburbanize the poor, and place-based programs focused on creating mixed-income communities in revitalized inner-city neighborhoods. Again, Imbroscio examines evaluation research of both types of demonstration program and concludes that they fall short of their goals to promote upward mobility. However, the centrality of race remains absent from his assessment of why these policies were limited in scope and severely underfunded in the first place. For example, demonstration programs like MTO were not adopted nationally and they were criticized because mobility counseling and other components were unevenly implemented, limiting housing options for many minority households. Likewise, the implementation of programs like HOPE VI was criticized for not replacing affordable units as new development occurred and displacing many low-income, black and Latino residents. Imbroscio does not fully examine how the underfunding and inconsistent implementation of fair and affordable housing policy is heavily influenced by resistance to policy goals like integration due to entrenched racism in society. In some ways, this topic has been introduced in recent works (Patterson & Silverman, 2011; Silverman & Patterson, 2012), although there is a need to build on this empirical analysis.

## The Prospect of Teaching Old Dogs (a.k.a Anchor Institutions) New Tricks

After deconstructing meritocracy and the unholy trinity of liberal urban policies designed to facilitate upward mobility for the poor, Imbroscio proposes a Community Paradigm as a remedy for urban problems. His alternative model for urban policy is built on the premise that anchor institutions, like hospitals and universities, are uniquely situated to promote urban revitalization that is equitable. Aside from anecdotes, there is little empirical support for redistributive outcomes from anchor-based development strategies. For instance, Adams (2014) provides a detailed analysis of anchor-based revitalization in Philadelphia. She highlights how this model for urban revitalization followed regional development patterns that were established during *urban renewal* and operated though governance systems heavily biased by the interests of philanthropic, corporate, and suburban elites. She concludes that Philadelphia's anchor-based model has contributed to the disempowerment and isolation of inner-city neighborhoods, and a continuation of geographically based inequality.

When race is considered within the context of institutions, the equitable benefits of anchor-based strategies become more dubious. Imbroscio fails to acknowledge that large anchor institutions like

hospitals and universities have been in the business of pursuing neighborhood revitalization for decades, often to the detriment of minority communities. Worthy (1977) described the processes by which hospitals, universities, and other large institutions expanded their campuses and displaced minority residents in the 1970s as a form of "institutional rape." These processes were heavily insulated from public scrutiny and unaccountable to poor, minority residents. In the contemporary period, some of the same shortcomings identified by Worthy were attributed to hospital and university expansion in Buffalo's inner city (Silverman, Lewis, & Patterson, 2014). Moreover, governance structures in anchor institutions continue to be hierarchical in nature, and historically underrepresented minorities and residents from communities impacted by *eds and meds* revitalization strategies remain absent from their governing boards and leadership structures.[2] Despite new-found faith in the capacity of anchor institutions to promote equitable urban revitalization, the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequality through them remain in place.

## The Merits of Keeping Race Center Stage in U.S. Urban Policy

Imbroscio's discussion of meritocracy is interesting from a theoretical perspective and it complements the larger critique of growing neoliberalisms and market-based approaches to solving urban problems. Yet, his analysis neglects a critical point; the invisible hand of the market cannot conceal color. Race is a core dimension of urban policy. Understanding how racial bias operates through institutions contextualizes the meritocratic paradigm, Imbroscio's critique of the holy trinity of liberal urban policy, and his Community Paradigm. In short, we cannot design transformative urban policy without considering how race is mobilized through social institutions.

## ENDNOTES

1 Imbroscio uses this term to refer to policies adopted by political liberals in the contemporary American sense. However, this label is applied inconsistently in the article. For example, the No Child Left Behind policies that were championed by George W. Bush during his governorship in Texas and while he was president became the centerpiece of Republican Party education reforms that linked standardized testing with other initiatives aimed at expanding charter schools and school choice. These policies were continued by the Obama administration (Lipman, 2015), but it is an obfuscation to define them as liberal urban policies.

2 Critiques of governance models adopted by anchor institutions extend to the cooperatives that form the basis of the Cleveland Model discussed by Imbroscio. For instance, Cleveland's Evergreen Cooperatives have been criticized for having management and leadership structures superimposed on them by local foundations, paying substandard wages, offering no union protections to workers, and placing whites rather than minorities in leadership and decision-making positions (Schepartz, 2010; Grevatt, 2015)

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