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Globalization, the Global Trope, and Poor Black Communities: The Recent American Experience

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Today, in the shadows of shiny gentrified blocks and gleaming downtown skyscrapers, many poor African American neighborhoods in America continue to

suffer. Globalization continues to afflict these already punished terrains in ways that are now well chronicled. Most conspicuously, globalization engulfs these terrains and eradicates decent paying jobs and lowers pay rates. Hyper-frenetic, globally coordinated businesses and corporations, increasingly dominating urban economies, potently order and re-order locations of jobs, investment, and physical infrastructure (notably plant and store locations). In a process described by David Harvey (2000, 2005), capital's continuous search for profitability takes the form of a restless and relentless re-making of the spaces of production. In its wake, these communities experience intensified poverty, underemployment, and unemployment.

But the impact of globalization on these communities has another dimension. Less recognized is that globalization, as a kind of cultivated imagining that is aggressively spoken, is widely put in the service of neoliberal urban politics (via diverse kinds of communicating) that deepens the production of these disadvantaged communities. Here, what globalization is thought to be by people is seized and wielded like a cudgel to punish and discipline planning measures, social welfare programs, and urban policy. Planning, political expediency, and opportunistic pronouncements of a new ominous reality meld into one potent political force. In the process, the public often comes to casually accept an "entrepreneurializing" of cities that afflicts these racialized communities. Let me provide specifics about this profoundly influential but only dimly recognized process (see also Wilson, 2007).

These poor African American communities today continue to suffer with a strengthened functional logic assigned to them: to warehouse "contaminants" in the new competitive, global reality. These communities across Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Los Angeles, and the like have, for decades, warehoused the racial poor as the real-estate sectors in these cities have used planning and policy to keep key housing markets healthy and profitable. But in the latest twist on this, ghetto maintenance has increasingly involved wielding the recent fear and obsession within a supposed new era: globalization. This elaborate rhetoric, now served up heavily in newspapers, planning documents, and politician oratory, has been a key trigger to mobilize and put into play crucial ghetto-afflicting forces (targeting of government resources to cultivate a robust entrepreneurial city, retrenching the local welfare state, rhetorically attacking these populations and spaces). This rhetoric, which I term "the global trope," typically extends neoliberal principles and designs into common thought and city planning measures (particularly the notion of the private-market as best determinant of social and land-use outcomes). The global trope, in

this frame, is served up as a frank and blunt package of truths about city realities and needs that can no longer be suppressed. In assertion, its pleas correspond to core truths; deft interpreters read and respond to clear truths as a policy prescriptive, progressive human intervention onto a turbulent and fragile city.

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The rhetoric of the global trope has thus been a perceptual apparatus with profound material effects. It has served up a digestible reality that, following Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1994), guides construction of programs and policies by making certain actions thinkable and rational and others not. Imposed webs of meanings, like symbolic cages, build bars around senses of reality that place gazes within discrete and confining visions. One reality is ultimately advanced while alternatives are purged. Here is Mikhael Bakhtin's (1981) implicit dialogue with other points of view, the simultaneity of asserting one vision and annihilating others. This strategic affirmation and rebuke, forwarding what exists and what does not, continues to make this rhetorical formation a fundamental instrument of power. As this apparatus has resisted and beaten back competitive visions of city and societal realities, even as it is contested and struggled against, it grows stronger in many U.S. cities.

At this rhetoric's core, a supposed new hyper-competitive reality ("globalization") makes these cities easily discardable as places of investment, production, and business. These once robust economic landscapes, in the rhetoric, have recently become porous and leaky landscapes which could economically hemorrhage. In this new era of competitive globalization, cities are portrayed as beset by a kind of accumulation disorder and uncertainty that now haunts them. The city, as a place of becoming, is a threatened but historically resilient locale that once again must act ingenuously to survive. The offered signs of this new ominousness – municipal fiscal depletion, an aging physical infrastructure, the "reality" of decayed residential, commercial, and production spaces dotting the city – are deployed as disciplining indicators of what the future can bring. Through this rhetoric, a proposed shock treatment of re-regulation and privatization is grounded and rationalized.

In a second part of the rhetoric, city survival supposedly depends upon following two imperatives: strengthening the city as a taut entrepreneurial space and meticulously containing poor black communities and their populations. In the first imperative, the assertion is forceful: Now cities must push to build attractive consumptive complexes, upper-income aesthetic residential spaces, efficient labor pools, and healthy business climates. This post-1990 rhetoric has been at the heart of what Kevin Cox (1993) earlier identified as the supplanting of a “politics of redistribution” by a “politics of resource attraction.” Entertainment, culture, sports, and leisure now become civic business. To fail to commodify these, borrowing from Milwaukee Mayor J. Norquist (1998), is to miss the reality of the new stepped-up inter-city competition. An intensified fragmenting and balkanizing of city space by class and race is not merely normalized, it becomes celebrated as utilitarian and in the service of city survivability.

In the second imperative, the assertion is sometimes explicit but often implicit: that poor black neighborhoods and populations need to be systematically isolated and managed as tainted and civic-damaging outcasts. These are cast as not merely culturally problematic but things to be feared, reviled, and cordoned off. At work is William Wimsatt’s (1998) notion of the mobilized fear economy, a general trepidation that now expands to more deeply include black ghettos. As Wimsatt notes, since 1980 we have increasingly had government by fear, foreign policy by fear, and landscapes of fear, all of which are expediently peddled by all scales of media. Now, we also have a heightened fear of the sinister black-ghetto in these cities that is manifested in a discursive fright about crime, black men, black youth, streets, and ghettos. A spiral of fear, peddled through rich images, now sells black bodies and spaces as potential violators of the collectivity’s socio-moral and economic integrity.

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The global trope is in this sense two-pronged. It offers the complementary “truths” of what circumstances these cities now face and also what they must do to survive. These two supportive formations seamlessly connect to form a coherent and resilient rhetoric which is aggressively spoken in all U.S. cities. This whole, borrowing

from Wendy Hollway (1984), offers purportedly progressive positions for subjects to adopt that legitimates potentially contentious actions (e.g. requiring poor people to work at sub-minimum wages, cutting food stamps to the needy, using public funds to subsidize gentrification). Yet use of such discourse by growth elites is anything but surprising. These formations, following Norman Fairclaugh (1992), are the modern alternative to flagrant violence and oppression. The now established rule in complex societies, to Fairclaugh, is to make and manage rather than to nakedly repress. To Fairclaugh, politics today is increasingly practiced in the domain of producing knowledge, i.e, defining what is normal, non-normal, ethical, and rational.

The end result, I suggest, has been the production of a more impoverished African American poor community as the now stepped-up zone of human discard in “the global era.” These communities, simply put, have become one-dimensional apparatuses for the naked isolating and warehousing of the black poor which help drive downtown transformation and gentrification. In the process, dominant, widely chronicled changes in these ghettos (deepened deprivation, more health fatalities, more poverty) reflect this newest rhetorical-planning process put into play in our cities. The facilitating rhetoric, the global trope, proves functional by communicating the need to re-entrepreneurialize city form and life. At the moment, even with the ascendancy of Obama and with possibilities for progressive change, this rhetoric and its afflicting continue unabated.

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