CHAPTER SEVEN

RACE, CLASS, AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF URBAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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OVERVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the structuring and restructuring of the field of community development (CD). To show how this occurs, I examine interventions of the local state and how CD, as a field, can understand this restructuring and overcome it successfully. The general working thesis is that: a) the local development policy process, like the politics that informs it, has two aspects—a mainstream of insiders and a fringe of outsider, marginalized agents and actors; these two forces both complement and contest with each other; b) racism and class dynamics are both causes and effects of community development; c) CD, as a field of collective practices, emerged in response to effects of adverse local development policies, which spilled over into urban communities; and d) once having significant energy and creativity, CD has now been restructured into irrelevance as a vehicle of social change in the social conditions of these communities.

PREMISES

Community development was used as an instrument of disadvantaged urban communities to gain equity and power in struggles over economic and political life and to gain access to decision making about the distribution of resources and benefits on behalf of disadvantaged and marginalized community constituents. From the mainstream perspective, if it is to be accommodated, community development has to be continually restructured in order to meet the requirements of political-economic reproduction of relations of exploitation. To do this, capitalists must have hegemony and, ultimately, control of urban communities. This includes maintaining relations of dominance/subordinance between a majority, mainstream (U.S.) society and its marginalized, urban communities.
Both exploitation and other oppressive relations (such as racism) must be made a part of the normal process of the working out of these contradictory social relations. Only liberals and academics seem not to understand the realities of this type of politics.

I revisit Giloth (1996), Mier (1993), and Betancur and Gills (1993). None of these works anticipated the changes in the CD environment that were taking place at the time. While aware of restructuring on the global and international comparative level, none of these writings prepared us for the crisis that has befallen CD during the past two decades. At the time of their writings, I describe the leading roles of Chicago communities in the Harold Washington’s regime in formation, which included the Eugene Sawyer administration. I show that Washington kept his promises. I will give some examples of where even this reform administration fell short of a standard of contributing to the improvement of community life for the poorest sections of the City. I will show how that role of a local reform administration under Washington has shifted to one of neoliberalism, resulting in cooptation under the leadership of the Richard M. Daley regime. Furthermore, I offer some reflections on the lessons gained over both periods, specifically as related to redevelopment and to CD. Finally, I make some recommendations on what we must do in the current period.

Some Definitions

By reference to structure, I mean the frame for the incorporation, formalization, and institutionalization of organizational forms and mechanisms setting limits on CD as a set of practices. Structure is the set of rules by which the CD game is to be played. When house elites note that the skill and adroitness in which players use the given mechanisms of the game cuts too deeply into the amount of profits or the rate of profits, they call for a change in the rules: a restructuring of the field of play or the hoops that must be negotiated by the players. It is an admission of a problem or a crisis.

By restructuring, I mean the rearranging of the terms of discourse and the matters open for negotiating who is winning and who is losing by the agreed-upon set of rules. From the standpoint of the mainstream policy makers, this restructuring must be done in conformity to local development interests, such that their agents profit from it. From the standpoint of constituents of urban communities, they have an interest in producing and maintaining counterstructures, which would be designed to capture as much value as possible for retention and for further redistribution to community members or to the community as a whole.