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Root Shock: The Consequences of African American Dispossession

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ABSTRACT *Urban renewal was one of several processes that contributed to deurbanization of American cities in the second half of the 20th century. Urban renewal was an important federal policy that affected thousands of communities in hundreds of cities. Urban renewal was to achieve "clearance" of "blight" and "slum" areas so that they could be rebuilt for new uses other than housing the poor. Urban renewal programs fell disproportionately on African American communities, leading to the slogan "Urban renewal is Negro removal." The short-term consequences were dire, including loss of money, loss of social organization, and psychological trauma. The long-term consequences flow from the social paralysis of dispossession, most important, a collapse of political action. This has important implications for the well-being of African Americans. It also raises important questions about the strength and quality of American democracy.*

KEYWORDS *African American, Dispossession, Social Disintegration, Urban Renewal.*

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of the 20th century, African Americans migrated to cities throughout the United States. Although confined to ghetto areas as a result of segregation, they were able to develop functioning communities remarkable for achievements in culture, recreation, and education. In the second part of the century, a process of deconstruction was set in motion by powers exterior to the ghetto communities. The deconstruction of ghetto communities took three principal forms: urban renewal, planned shrinkage, and contagious housing destruction secondary to disinvestment. The deconstruction of these communities resulted in the displacement of large numbers of African Americans and the late 20th century uneasy integration of the well-to-do and marginalization in degraded habitats of the poor. Previous work by Wallace described deurbanization due to planned shrinkage.[1] This paper extends Wallace's work and focuses on the related—and historically earlier—process of dispossession due to urban renewal. In addition to describing the process of urban renewal, this paper explores the ethical problems evoked by this program of community deconstruction.

THE GROWTH OF URBAN GHETTOS

African American urbanization unfolded throughout the 20th century.[2–4] Just as Jim Crow policies were being enacted into legislation, African Americans were lim-

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ited strictly by real estate practice and exclusionary clauses in their choices of settlement. Entry communities that had housed previous generations of migrants to the cities typically were open to African American settlement. These communities often were over-crowded; the housing was likely to be substandard and worn down. Despite the insalubrious conditions, people took up residence with gusto, using the new freedoms of the city to create a new way of life. The "new Negro" emerged in the new urban ghettos.

Within a very short time, and influenced by both the military experiences of World War I and the prosperity that followed, African American communities began to flower. While the Harlem Renaissance is the best-known example of this process, a similar kind of social and cultural awakening was evident in other cities as well. In addition to the outpouring of artistic expression, there was a growth in business, an expansion in organizations and associations of all kinds, and the development of an "urban village" style that provided care for the needy, socialization of children, and transmission of shared values.[5–7]

By the 1950s, residents, although not blind to problems, thought of their communities as vital, exciting places. My father, in a short story set in 1951, captured the kind of excitement that people felt in that era: They mingled in nightclubs, joined in the street life, debated the great issues of the day, and jostled each other in the crowded spaces of the ghetto.[8] By all accounts, it was challenging, but embracing, to live in such an environment.

THE URBAN RENEWAL PROGRAM

The Urban Renewal Act of 1949 set in motion urban renewal projects in cities across the United States.[9] Urban renewal, especially at the outset, was a program designed to clear large areas of "slum" housing to make way for modern developments. In general, the cleared land was sold to private developers for use in new developments designed to extend the central business district or to attract middle-income residents. In either case, the former residents of the area were relocated outside the renewal district. Such major projects as Lincoln Center in New York City, the Civic Arena in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark, New Jersey, are the result of urban renewal efforts.

At the outset, urban renewal inspired the imagination of the country, and a broad coalition of industry, labor, and community groups supported the program. As urban renewal unfurled, however, community opposition grew. Jacobs's landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,[10] was the manifesto of the antiurban renewal movement; it lambasted the social and esthetic damage the program was causing and called for alternative, more organic approaches to the modernization of cities. In contrast to the obliterative approach of urban renewal, Jacobs and colleagues proposed a "sparrow principle," arguing that

> Not a sparrow should fall. That meant that no planning that the neighborhood did should hurt anyone in the neighborhood. Not a person, not a household, not a business, nothing should be at the expense of others. We would not turn into predatory animals for the purpose of some grand planning or somebody's favor.[11(p18)]

Unexamined in Jacobs's work, but of great concern to many other observers of the urban renewal story, was the fact that urban renewal was a program that descended disproportionately on African-Americans. In 1961, for example, African

Americans were 10% of the US population, but 66% of residents of areas slated for urban renewal.[12] A particular hardship of urban renewal was that it strengthened segregation. African Americans were forced out of the renewal areas, but only were able to move to other ghetto areas. In some places, these ghetto areas had no vacant housing. This meant that families were forced to share accommodations, creating severe overcrowding. Public housing was a partial solution to the problem of overcrowding, but not to the problem of segregation. Rather, projects were built to confine blacks to ghetto areas. Indeed, urban renewal intensified segregation by destroying integrated communities and creating segregated ones.[13]

That urban renewal did harm to vulnerable people is not disputed (although some would argue that the harm done was acceptable because it created a greater good for society). The issue that interests us here is the following: Given that harm was done, what have been the long-term consequences of that harm for African Americans? I postulate three ways in which urban renewal might affect health.

First, urban renewal can be a direct cause of ill health. Urban renewal caused a great deal of stress, which has been implicated, at least anecdotally, in deaths among the elderly and aggravation of some kinds of existing illness. The process was also traumatic for some, leading to trauma-related mental disorders, such as prolonged grief, which are the best-documented of the negative health outcomes.[14]

Second, urban renewal can be an indirect cause of illness. Many people displaced by urban renewal were forced to live in substandard housing or in concentrated areas of poverty. Therefore, they were exposed to conditions associated with higher rates of illness.

Third, urban renewal also acts as a "fundamental cause" of disease in the sense proposed in 1994 by Link and Phelan.[15] Fundamental causes of disease are those factors in the environment that influence the distribution of and access to resources. Urban renewal forced a small number of people to expend economic, social, and political capital on resettlement, thus placing them at a disadvantage relative to the rest of society. Put another way, the resources that were "spent" on resettlement could not be spent to buy advantages, such as the creation of new enterprises or the acquisition of education, choices that those who had not been displaced were free to make.

To illustrate the process of urban renewal and the consequences for health and disease, I describe the experiences of one place—Roanoke, Virginia—and one person—David Jenkins.

URBAN RENEWAL IN ROANOKE, VIRGINIA

African Americans in Roanoke, Virginia, were concentrated in two communities adjacent to downtown, Gainsborough and Northeast. These two communities were designated for urban renewal under the federal urban renewal program. In reviewing documents and maps and conducting extensive interviews with citizens of Roanoke, journalist Mary Bishop was able to document the story of urban renewal in that city.[16] Prior to urban renewal, the African American citizens of Roanoke had lived together, often for generations, and had strong ties to one another. Neighbors depended on each other in times of need and in times of joy. They developed a coterie of social, religious, and political organizations. They had an array of businesses, including a pharmacy, corner grocery stores, and an undertaker. The importance of the community to its members was heightened by the second-class citizenship its members endured in the rest of the city. At least within their own

communities, people had a sense of pride and accomplishment. They invested in their homes and their businesses and accumulated a significant amount of financial capital.

Because of the structure of segregation, white people rarely visited the ghetto community. Their knowledge of it was based on superficial inspection and rumor. In general, the white community viewed the African American community as a "slum" and greeted the prospect of slum "clearance" with enthusiasm. For example, some of the houses in the African American community had outhouses; these were seen as a blight on the image of Roanoke. Because of the proximity to downtown, visitors to the center of the city drove through this landscape, much to the embarrassment of the white city leaders. That this needed to be "cleaned up" was a foregone conclusion to them, and urban renewal was put into place with alacrity. Roanoke was early among US cities in its execution of urban renewal efforts.

Urban renewal was directed first at Northeast. When first told about the program, residents of the area were led to believe that it was intended for their benefit: Better housing would be built, and they would return to a renewed community. They accepted the small payments they were given for their homes in hopes that this would lead to improvement for all. Instead, the tight-knit community of Northeast was scattered, never to be reunited. As one elderly man, who had lived in Northeast for many years, said, "I've lost touch with most of my friends. We only see each other at funerals." The land was used for such purposes as a post office, a civic center, and a Ford dealership. While driving me through the area, a former resident said bitterly, "We used to have a community there. Now it's just buildings."

Urban renewal of Gainsborough followed a much more convoluted path, in large measure because the experience of Northeast belied the promises of improvement. This led to the growth of enough community opposition to slow urban renewal, although not enough to stop it. Urban renewal took large chunks of the community. Of those homes and businesses that remained, some were lost because of disinvestment in the area triggered by the prospect of urban renewal. People stopped investing in their homes because they thought the government would soon take them. Road building also took a substantial toll on the area. What has been done with the land—such as the building of a Coca-Cola bottling plant—in no way replaced the community that had been there.

Through many interviews, Bishop created a detailed picture of what the loss was like for the displaced people. In all, urban renewal forced the migration of thousands of African Americans, took 1,600 of their homes, and leveled more than 200 of their businesses and 24 of their churches. There were several kinds of losses.

First, there were enormous financial costs for the displaced people. Those who were home owners got very little for their property, rarely enough to pay for the more expensive homes that were the only housing available for them to buy. People who had paid off their homes and had made substantial investments in renovations incurred new debt as a result of the displacement, often requiring many years of additional payments. People who were renters moved into public housing, which was a social situation inferior to the one they had left. Whereas in the old community poor people had access to the well-to-do, who lived in the same neighborhoods, only the poor moved to the projects. Thus, a substantial source of financial, social, and moral support was removed. Businesses had great difficulty relocating, and many closed. Churches also fared badly in the transition.

Second, there were enormous social costs of the displacement. The tight-knit

community was scattered, and networks were ruptured. Even 40 years later, people reported that their networks remained much smaller than they had been prior to urban renewal. Further, because of the rupture by class, people's social networks tended to become less diverse, which was a loss for well-to-do and poor alike.

Third, there were political costs of displacement, both in the loss of a concentrated voting block and in the growth of both intra- and intercommunity tension. Urban renewal was a difficult process. Within the African American community, those who wanted to hang on resented those who sold their homes early, and those who spoke out resented those who remained quiet. On the whole, it was a terrible political test for a community not yet politically strong enough for such a challenge. Urban renewal also left lingering hostility and suspicion toward the white establishment. One man said, "I don't own anything any more. I just lease it until the government comes to take it from me."

ONE MAN'S STORY: DAVID JENKINS AND ELMWOOD

I first met David Jenkins in 1994 at Housing Works, an agency in New York City that provided services for homeless people living with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). "How long have you been homeless?" I asked him. "All my life," was his response. He immediately plunged into the story of Elmwood, an African-American community that was bulldozed as part of urban renewal in Philadelphia. Although his earliest sense of homelessness was rooted in his family dysfunction, the abrupt displacement from his neighborhood was catastrophic. In that move, he lost the neighbors, church people, teachers, friends, and—perhaps most important—the nature center that had helped him make sense of his troubled life.

Finding himself alone in midst of the insanity of his family, David struggled on many fronts, especially in making use of rather awesome musical talent. His main strategy was to out-talk his insecurity; failing that, he used the standard concoction of drugs and sex to make it from day to day. When I first met him, he was using crack fairly heavily. Between a natural hypomania and the crack high, he was constantly in motion, his thoughts, ideas, and body darting about. He had been positive for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) for 13 years. He lived in a single-room-occupancy hotel in a building that had once been a monastery. Like many such living quarters, David's hotel was occupied by drug users and dealers. The crises and violence of the crack trade dominated life in the building.

David took me to Elmwood, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, so that I could see for myself the paradise that had been his. While many places were rebuilt after the bulldozers left, Elmwood had returned to nature. As we neared the neighborhood, the sweet smell of woodlands engulfed us. It was, indeed, a kind and beautiful place. One of the first sights to draw our attention was a communal garden. On one of the lots in the garden, an older man and his wife were working. The garden was enticing, filled with beautiful vegetables, including some exquisite ripe, red tomatoes. A grape arbor had been constructed to provide shelter on hot days, and its floor was carpeted happily with a rather threadbare rug. As I turned to comment to David on how idyllic the scene was, I realized that his reactions were quite different from mine. He was really angry.

"David, what's the matter?" I asked.

"They don't belong here," he told me in a furious, loud voice. "That's my father's land."

David's father had died even before the upheaval of urban renewal. The double loss of his father and his father's land clearly was hitting him hard at that moment. Other impressions of the past flooded him with emotions as we walked along. Small traces of what Elmwood had been were everywhere. In the middle of a field, David twirled and gestured with his arms: "Here's where the church was. Patti LaBelle used to sing in the choir. Here." Where I saw grass and flies, he saw a landscape of friends and happiness. The bleak hotel room he occupied in New York seemed even more tragic by comparison.

But perhaps the worst moment for David was meeting Delores Rubillo. As we walked along one of the back streets, we came to a house tucked quietly in the woods. A woman came out and demanded to know what we were doing there. We explained the purpose of our trip. "I'm David," my friend said. "I used to live here." She said she had always lived there. In a short time, they established that they had been neighbors in the old days. "But how come you're still here?" he asked her. "I refused to move," she told us. David was almost overwhelmed with grief at the thought that his family, too, might have stayed if they had had the tenacity of Ms. Rubillo.

David, when asked, is very clear about the consequences of urban renewal on his life. He believes that it made it difficult to trust and to feel settled. Relationships with places, as well as relationships with people, seem unreliable. He credits his frequent moves and sense of disconnection from politics to the overwhelming helplessness that accompanied being put out of his home. "It seems like they can just take things away from you at any time," he told me. In addition to the helplessness, David has an abiding sense of paranoia. He believes that the government told lies about urban renewal; therefore, it is possible that the government will lie, manipulate, or cheat in many other ways. His unsettledness and insecurity is chronic.

David often chats with street people who populate the Times Square area where he lives. Many relate to his story because they, too, lost their homes. "People on the street, in prison, you see it's related because when you lose your home you end up on the streets. The street life. Drugs, prostitution, prison, those kinds of things. All of that happens when you lose your home."

THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF URBAN RENEWAL

Viewed through the experiences in one place and of one person, we can begin to delineate the kinds of problems caused by the massive structural intervention of urban renewal of American cities. We can identify some of the costs for the community and some of the pain experienced by individuals. It is not possible, from this small glimpse, to calculate the full weight of the urban renewal experience for African Americans. To do that, we need a much more detailed description of the direct experience of urban renewal. Emerging literature (including studies of this process as it unfolded in Charlottesville, NC; Roanoke, VA; Pittsburgh, PA; Detroit, MI; New Haven, CT; San Francisco, CA; and Newark, NJ) is beginning to shed light on the larger process within which the stories of Roanoke and David Jenkins occurred.[13,16–21] But, we also need something that does not yet exist: Needed is an exploration of the indirect costs, the costs borne not by the communities directly affected, but rather by those indirectly implicated in the upheaval—the neighboring communities that received those displaced, as well as those rural communities the urban settlers left when they went to make a new life in the city.

Despite the gaps in our knowledge, we know enough to recognize that urban renewal introduced drastic changes in the US urban landscape, and affected a significant part of the African American population of the United States. By 1962, it already had displaced upward of 800 African American communities by scattering the members into circumjacent neighborhoods. In the short term, people were aware of the trauma of moving and of the loss of "home." The financial costs were high and drained many families, some for years to come. The overall drain on the financial capital of the community was severe, especially in the devastation to the entrepreneurial class. Furthermore, urban renewal initiated a crisis in the urban housing system that led to contagious housing destruction that rippled out from the bulldozing zone.

I believe it is an accurate reading of the available data to say that community dispossession—and its accompanying psychological trauma, financial loss, and rippling instability—produced a rupture in the historical trajectory of African American urban communities. By the 1950s, communities like Elmwood, Northeast, and Gainsborough were beginning to accumulate sufficient capital to enable their members to move on to the broader American scene. In this, they followed patterns established by earlier waves of immigrants to the city, indeed, immigrants who, years earlier, had settled in the same urban neighborhoods that became African American enclaves early in the 20th century. That road to the melting pot was closed by urban renewal.

In a related manner, urban renewal also caused a profound shift in the political and social engagement of the African American community. Prior to urban renewal, urban African American communities were improving steadily in the number and effectiveness of their social and political institutions. After the displacement, the style of engagement was angrier and more individualistic. Instead of becoming stronger and more competent in politics, the communities became weaker and more heavily affected by negative forces, such as substance abuse and crime. The ethos of neighborliness faded. People remained helpful to their friends, fellow church members, and family, but withdrew from extending support to people whose only connection was that of geographic proximity, that is, they were neighbors.

Wallace, in studies of Native American communities, developed a thesis about community collapse that he called "mazeway disintegration."[22] He thought of the *mazeway* as the sum of the lifeways in a community, a collective construct that depended on a shared history of life in a given place. Rupture of the mazeway, he thought, led to paralysis of the social group that arose from the loss of guidance about the "next steps" that the mazeway provided. McKenzie, also a student of human communities, discussed the same issues in a slightly different manner, but reached the same conclusion:

> Human ecology is fundamentally interested in the effect of position, in both time and space, upon human institutions and human behavior. Society is made up of individuals spatially separated, territorially distributed, and capable of independent locomotion. These spatial relationships of human beings are the products of competition and selection, and are continuously in process of change as new factors enter to disturb the competitive relations or to facilitate mobility. Human institutions and human nature itself become accommodated to certain spatial relationships of human beings. As these spatial relationships change, the physical basis of social relations is altered, thereby producing social and political problems.[23(p18)]

THE ETHICAL ISSUES RAISED BY URBAN RENEWAL

Mazeway disintegration, triggered by dispossession, is an unintended consequence of urban renewal, one justified in the name of "progress." This argument of social disruption for progress has been used before in American history. It was for purposes of progress that white Americans justified taking the land previously home to Native Americans and confining them to life on reservations. This destroyed the Native American way of life and led to a long period of severe dysfunction among native peoples.[24] Native American communities still have not recovered. The question, "Progress for whom?" must be addressed in such situations. If progress for one group is achieved at the expense of another—weaker—group, then the problem of favoritism by government is raised. Is it ethical for government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" to favor one group of the people over another?

Furthermore, if government presents the "improvement" as "improvement for all" when in fact it is not, then issues of government deceit must be added to the concern of favoritism. Urban renewal is not the only example of government deceit in the 1950s. The Tuskegee syphilis experiment, which spanned many decades including the 1950s, is the most notorious example, but by no means the only one. Secret experiments of many kinds have come to light recently. This creates an aura of suspicion that undermines the trust and participation in government. Such deceitful actions leave the whole electorate—not just the African American portion—disenchanted with our democracy.

The history of urban renewal raises the following issues: How should we manage progress in the context of democracy? How are conflicts of interest to be managed? Is the government simply to be the tool of powerful interests? How are the weaker portions of the population to be represented? If government policies actually enfeeble the political strength of the weak, is this not a violation of the principles of democracy?

Further scholarship will deepen our understanding of the long-term consequences of urban renewal. In the process of that work, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the ethical issues will emerge as well. Such scholarship will enhance our ability to act in the future as we choose among possible solutions to our urban problems.

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