Where the War on Poverty and Black Power Meet: A Right to the City Perspective on American Urban Politics in the 1960s

Aneta Dybska

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11251>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.11251

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Aneta Dybska, "Where the War on Poverty and Black Power Meet: A Right to the City Perspective on American Urban Politics in the 1960s", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 10-3 | 2015, document 1.2, Online since 31 December 2015, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11251> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11251>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Where the War on Poverty and Black Power Meet: A Right to the City Perspective on American Urban Politics in the 1960s

Aneta Dybska

- 1 This paper looks back to the 1960s Black Power Movement in the U.S. as one of the unacknowledged antecedents of today's right to the city movements. It draws on the right to the city both as an ideal of urban governance and a critical perspective through which urban histories can be re-told and diverse social practices investigated. I am particularly interested in two 1960s federal War on Poverty programs and how they were related to black grassroots movements. In that period, the federal government gave leeway to the local expression of collective grievances by encouraging the urban poor to become stakeholders in community-level politics. Incremental urban regeneration was the War on Poverty's professed goal. To achieve this the state would devolve some of its functions to the level of the local community, bypass the unresponsive and ossified state and municipal bureaucracies, and thus gradually dismantle the racial and power inequalities. This ideological shift towards space-based politics and a recognition of the poor as collective political actors happened almost synchronously with Henri Lefebvre's articulation of the right to the city idea in France. Yet, recourse to participatory politics during the Johnson era, a fundamental tenet of the right to the city activism today, turned into a fleeting political concern with fleeting rewards to local communities. As soon as grassroots mobilization inspired the urban poor to affect change, the federal government retreated from its unprecedented support for participatory politics. Its initial commitment to the recovery of direct democracy was followed by withdrawal from local political enfranchisement—a factor that triggered the piecemeal radicalization of urban Blacks. What citizen participation was to the anti-poverty programs, community control was to Black Power activism. Grounded in the philosophy of racial empowerment which had taken root in American cities during the Garvey movement of the 1920s, Black Power of the 1960s offered a

viable alternative to the War on Poverty's investment in participatory politics. While the latter ended up reinforcing the political and racial status quo, the former encouraged a nationalist and even a separatist agenda. The racial self-help programs run by such Black Power organizations as the Black Panther Party dethroned the state from its position as a sole redistributor of wealth and derailed its attempts at restoring national unity with policies bent on cultural conformity.

Due to modest scholarly interest in the political agenda of welfare programs of the Kennedy-Johnson era today, my discussion draws on critical analyses written in the 1960s and 1970s and is based on few case studies. But I would like to argue that it is the early scholarship on citizen participation published as the War on Poverty unfolded in the urban "battlefield" that foreshadowed the key preoccupations of the right to the city movements of today.

The right to the city is a political ideal that calls for a radical rearrangement of power relations in the capitalist city. Introduced into sociological parlance in the late 1960s by French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city stands for a right to "urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete *usage* of these moments and places, etc."¹ Highly critical of the post-World War II France as "a bureaucratized society of organized consumption," Lefebvre defied the primacy of capital and repressive state control in the production of urban space.² As a solution to the excessively segregated and spatially divided city, he proposed the democratic control of urban processes as a prominent feature of local urban politics. The new forms of urban governance rested on what he called *autogestion*, that is, self-management at the grassroots. Lefebvre assumed that the devolution of power to lower scales would obliterate the state hierarchies and allow the participatory democracy to flourish.³ Political enfranchisement of urban citizens would pave the way for their commitment to the planning and development of their cities, as well as challenge the primacy of the exchange value of land that served the interests of power elites and corporate businesses.

That today urban activists and social justice advocates in all parts of the globe evoke the right to the city as an ideal of urban politics reveals the pervasiveness of the socio-spatial injustices brought on by the profit-oriented urban politics. Regardless of the state of affiliation, geographical location, or histories of urbanization, cities and metropolitan regions networked into a global system of local economies suffer the destructive effects of growth and capital accumulation. In this context, the right to the city articulates the ever pressing need for a re-orientation of political and socio-economic priorities. The contemporary urban justice movements insist on the revival of local democracies as a way of countervailing exclusionary urban geographies forged by the unconstrained market forces: poor schools, meager educational and employment opportunities, substandard housing, residential displacement, food deserts, lack of public transportation and health services, and paucity of recreational spaces. Thus etched into the fabric of the contemporary city, as into the French city of Lefebvre's time, are the oppressive power relationships brought by the workings of capital and the muting of the affected publics. A fight for a more equitable access to public spaces, facilities, and public infrastructure necessitates a recognition of diverse urban actors (racial or sexual minorities, the poor, immigrants or otherwise disadvantaged) as relevant participants in urban politics.

When in his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced his administration “declare[d] unconditional war on poverty in America,” one quarter of the U.S. population lived in poverty. Brought to national attention by liberal poverty scholars⁴ as well as the civil rights movement, poverty became the target of the largest federally-funded welfare program since F. D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. The quote from the President’s speech aptly illustrates the comprehensive nature of the program:

... this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts. . . . Our chief weapons in a more pinpointed attack will be better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities to help more Americans, especially young Americans, escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls where other citizens help to carry them. Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children. . . . We must help obtain more modern mass transit within our communities as well as low-cost transportation between them. . . . All of these increased opportunities -- in employment, in education, in housing, and in every field—must be open to Americans of every color. As far as the writ of Federal law will run, we must abolish not some, but all racial discrimination. For this is not merely an economic issue, or a social, political, or international issue. It is a moral issue All members of the public should have equal access to facilities open to the public. All members of the public should be equally eligible for Federal benefits that are financed by the public. All members of the public should have an equal chance to vote for public officials and to send their children to good public schools and to contribute their talents to the public good.⁵

- 6 The anti-poverty agenda that transpires from Johnson’s “declaration of war” does not essentially differ from the right to the city postulates. Both look up to an ideal of social justice that is achieved with public/urban policies bent on empowering the disadvantaged groups, and measured with greater equity. Redistributive at their core, equity-oriented programs aim to vest power in the hands of the socially invisible, economically disadvantaged and politically underrepresented. Such programs do not take away from the better off, but aim to eliminate a group’s disadvantage where it exists.⁶ But the War on Poverty programs did not set out to eliminate destitution by means of direct social aid alone; their understanding of equality was as social as it was political. In a manner that is reminiscent of the right to the city movement’s appeal to the civil and human rights, the War on Poverty was concerned with structural inequalities and institutional racism that the spatial segregation of the racialized poor clearly instantiates.

When looked at through the prism of the right to the city idea, the federal anti-poverty policies come across as a radical attempt at reorganizing the welfare model of urban governance. Weaving together political, economic, and cultural concerns, the Community Action Program and the Model Cities Program, at least at their inception, conceived of small urban geographies, neighborhood and block communities, as sites of participatory democracy rather than mere peripheries governed in a top-down authoritarian fashion by the state and municipal administrative machine.

The Johnson administration’s long overdue reaction to poverty was necessitated by the socio-political realities of the era: the civil rights activists’

disenchantment with the peaceful strategies of fighting racial inequalities; the failure of the government to address the African Americans' political and social demands, their continued racial oppression by the police and white-dominated institutions, and importantly, a simmering rage among the black youth in the North and the West who were excessively drawn to the separatist agenda of black nationalist organizations. The socio-political unrest in the nation's racial ghettos as well as the pervasiveness of poverty in the American society explain why the federal program embraced political enfranchisement as a conduit of change. But what may also account for the promotion of citizen participation in the 1960s is the broad scholarly and political appeal of anthropologist Oscar Lewis's concept of "the culture of poverty."

A result of Lewis's study of the urban poor in Mexico, the concept of "culture of poverty" points to the mechanism behind the persistence of poverty, as "both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society." Although its foundations are both economic and cultural, it is transmitted across generations and leads to the perpetuation of poverty.⁷ One way of looking at the War on Poverty programs would be to recognize their far-reaching goals. If translated into action, the language of "equal opportunity" and "fair access" that permeated President Johnson's address would serve as an antidote to the "culture of poverty," and harbinger of the cultural mainstreaming of the poor. Equal educational and professional opportunities as well as equal access to public goods and services, accompanied by equal political rights, appeared as viable strategies of including the nation's poor into the cultural mainstream. In light of the "culture of poverty" thesis, putting authority in the hands of the impoverished local communities and encouraging them to take a pro-active stance carried the hope that they would slough off the cultural residue of deprivation.⁸ The 1967 Seattle Model Cities grant application concerning the Central area, the city's all black neighborhood,⁹ offers substantive evidence of the Seattle authorities' preoccupation with social dysfunction as a symptom of poverty: "single-parent families, lack of adequate child care facilities, school expulsions, disorganized homes, illegitimacy, mental illness, and poor use of leisure time."¹⁰ The description bears a striking resemblance to the notorious 1966 Moynihan Report's claim about the underclass black family as the source of persistent social problems and culprit in the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.¹¹

Community Action and Model Cities Programs

The Economic Opportunity Act of August 20, 1964, was the bedrock of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Established to administer the law's implementation, the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) brought to life, among others, the Community Action Program (CAP), which operated directly via local-based Community Action Agencies (CAAs). Usually run by private and public not-for-profit organizations, the CAAs were initially "exempt from direct political review or control at the local or state level."¹² Designed so that socially and economically disadvantaged citizens from blighted neighborhoods would partake in the planning and implementation of anti-poverty measures, the agencies offered literacy and skills training, health care, social and welfare services such as the pre-school Head Start program, food pantries, utility bill assistance, and drug rehabilitation. To increase local resident input, the OEO required that at least 1/3 of all the staff positions on

community action agency boards be allocated to nonwhite community residents. Though the War on Poverty was not race-specific in its origin, it acquired a more racial and urban character when the nation's black ghettos erupted in riots. What may not immediately transpire from the anti-poverty program's assumptions is a top-down legitimization of citizen participation, that is, granting political power to the poor (predominantly people of color confined to urban ghettos) who lacked adequate democratic representation in the official power structures. In their informative study, *Race and Authority in Urban Politics: Community Relations and the War on Poverty*, David Greenstone and Paul E. Petersen make a compelling claim about the long-term goals of the community action programs:

Although apparently addressed to the economic problems of the nation's poor, community action, the heart of the war on poverty was in its content, origins, and consequences a political response to a political problem. Its content addressed the relationship of poor people to the American regime, not the economic relationships of poor people to the marketplace; its origins were rooted in a civil rights movement that focused on altering the country's political, not its socioeconomic relationships; and its long-range impact has related to the political condition of black Americans, not their economic state. To judge the war on poverty as an economic failure is to misinterpret its character.¹³

- 11 Greenstone and Peterson are cautious to avoid any generalizations about the effectiveness of the community action program. Depending on place-based urban political traditions, the voice of the grassroots as a countervailing economic and political force met with varied responses from the local power structures. For example, unlike their counterparts in Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles, poor communities of color in New York and Detroit had a significant impact on the community-action programs.

The civil rights activists, neighborhood organizers, as well as black nationalists were drawn to black empowerment and community control as tools of change in a racially polarized society. They would not merely stop at securing the anti-poverty grants.¹⁴ Rather, encouraged by the government agenda of citizen participation in the urban rehabilitation process, the young generation of urban Blacks emerged as crucial players in local politics. The shared experience of racial oppression and spatial segregation became a potent force on the road to Blacks' political enfranchisement. They did not shy away from a confrontational rhetoric which had increasingly been gaining popularity in black urban ghettos across the nation. Seeing the black populations' successful community-level organizing, the local political elites attempted to recover some of their diminishing political influence, and demanded that the federal government take action.

The exercise of political power through citizen participation suggested that, as John H. Strange notes, "if control of a publicly financed organization could be acquired, a significant redistribution of the rewards and benefits (jobs, prestige, security) of the political and social welfare systems could be attained. Participation here was equated with control."¹⁵ This view substantiates Greenstone and Peterson's claim about the political nature of the War on Poverty.

The residents' take on the pending problems of day-by-day life in the ghetto stood at odds with the city authorities' rendition of the problem in terms of the "culture of poverty." The Model Cities Law and Justice Task Force (LJTF) articulated the residents' grievances most forcefully.²³ Though they saw a need for a better quality of

social services, their main complaint pertained to mistreatment by the police, particularly brutality and unfair arrests. Improving neighborhood security and curtailing racial discrimination and legal injustice were the key demands that urban Blacks univocally agreed on. Framing the community-police relationship in terms of colonial-like occupation and oppression, the residents revealed a commitment to the politics of community empowerment.²⁴

Rather than regain the urban poor's trust in the federal government by way of the politics of inclusion, administrators of Community Action and Model Cities programs perpetuated the former's racial disenfranchisement and their ultimate disenchantment with the state's professed agenda of fighting poverty with citizen participation.²⁶ Writing on the failure of the bureaucratic ideology of citizen participation in 1968, Krause perceptively noted that "this loss of hope in the efficacy of the community action program and the rejection of the ideology may very well have added to the frustration which explodes in riots."²⁷ The War on Poverty discourse of citizen participation appealed to young community organizers and activists precisely because it carried a promise of solving ground-level problems with governmental action.²⁸ As long as the federal programs yielded palpable results such as effective neighborhood revitalization and increased employment, the community activists remained cooperative. Yet since the grassroots endeavors were torpedoed as soon as they proved effective, Black Power gained ground as an ideology of racial and political empowerment in segregated black neighborhoods.

"All Power to the People"

The timing of the centerpiece legislation of Johnson's War on Poverty was not coincidental. As the Economic Opportunity Act was written into law, the news of race riots on the East Coast circulated in the media. The Harlem Race Riot and Rochester Race Riots of July, 1964, and the Philadelphia Race Riot of late August, 1964, set off alarm bells about the gravity of interracial tensions in the country's urban ghettos. Those outbursts of spontaneous violence were all triggered by a rumor of a brutal police assault on a member of the black community.

Yet, contrary to popular opinion, such violence did not have the endorsement of black radical groups. For instance, the clenched fist of Black Power activists, often shown as a symbol of racialized violence, was a call for armed self-defense inspired with Malcolm X's political philosophy. Disappointed with the civil rights struggle for dignity, equality, and basic political rights, young urban Blacks found Malcolm X's notion of black nationalism a feasible alternative to the peaceful protests of the Civil Rights era. In April, 1964, a few months prior to the passage of the EOA and the race riots, Malcolm gave the famous speech "A Ballot or a Bullet" to a black audience in Cleveland. His words vividly captured the political mood of young urban America at the time: "No, I'm not an American. I'm one of 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the ... victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver – no, not I! I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare!"²⁹ The African Americans' "political maturity," Malcolm X believed, would show in the way they used their collective voting power to bring about social change. He put forward a new understanding of the civil

rights struggle as a black nationalist project that would empower black communities politically and economically, on condition that their political targets were articulated and strategies of empowerment well-crafted. The “ballot”—the black citizens’ use of political rights—would challenge the political hegemony of the white power structure. “A ballot is like a bullet,” he urged his audiences to fight for political rights granted them as U.S. citizens and to hold the black political leaders accountable for their actions.³⁰ Efforts to bring justice and equality in social and economic life rested on the Blacks’ collective “unity and harmony,” moral betterment and self-work. In words that foreshadowed the War on Poverty’s investment in national cohesion, Malcolm X made a realistic assessment of white power structure’s response to black nationalism: “The white man is more afraid of separation than he is of integration. And the white man will integrate faster than he’ll let you separate.”³¹

In their 1967 political manifesto *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton professed “strategic separatism” as a temporary measure, a transient yet inevitable stage in the process of group empowerment leading towards future integration. To them, Black Power was about “proper representation and sharing of control.”³² Working within the ethnic paradigm, Carmichael and Hamilton called on African Americans to develop a political and institutional base—“a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society”—so that, like immigrant groups, they would gain “an effective share in the total of the society.”³³ To this end, they gave priority to cooperative forms of economic activity, but insisted on the uniqueness of the black experience and cultural heritage.

A powerful response to institutional racism, with slum clearance programs as the most devastating instances of the technocratic approach to urban renewal, the Black Power ideology appealed to Blacks confined by zoning regulations to segregated inner-city neighborhoods. They wanted to eradicate the social and spatial injustices that race and class oppression perpetuated: destruction of long-standing ethnic neighborhoods, as well as the territorial dispersal of the poor to new areas, which created more congestion and segregation.³⁴ Black Power advocates recognized that community control was crucial to African Americans’ political and social empowerment. Substandard and segregated schools, lack of municipal health clinics or public transportation were on their agenda, as were substandard, unhealthy housing, lack of sewage, or exploitative practices of white landlords. Although the governmental officials’ and grassroots activists’ political diagnoses overlapped significantly, only the latter considered building institutional alternatives in the event the extant political processes failed to bring about substantial change: black-controlled bodies such as school boards, law enforcement, municipal planning, and housing commissions should wield power in the black communities, Carmichael and Hamilton argued.³⁵

In his 1968 political autobiography, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party*, Bobby Seale gives a detailed account of how Huey P. Newton’s and his own participation in the anti-poverty programs in Oakland, CA, led them to establish a revolutionary black nationalist party that would operate in the streets and address the needs of the black community.³⁶ Working in summer youth work program supervised by the North Oakland Neighborhood Anti-Poverty Center, Seale acted as a foreman to a group of 100 young unemployed men and women, many of whom would later become members of the Black Panther Party.³⁷ His duty was to offer basic literacy training as well as act as an instructor showing his students how to perform small jobs such as

cutting lawns or fixing broken fences. It seems that Seale was given the job to act as a role model and a leader: a college student, yet an insider to black youth culture, he would teach the black youth to emulate the mainstream culture's norms and behaviors: "In the poverty program the young brothers many times would try to be slick and think they were pimps, or think they could out-gamble or out-talk or out-rap anybody. . . . They drank wine, shot dice, and things like that. I knew here was a way to reach these brothers because I wasn't too much different from them. I knew how to drink wine, how to shoot dice, play cards and chase women."³⁸ Using his position he developed in his team members an awareness of black history and racial oppression and a need for collective action.³⁹ What seems to have been the biggest irony of the federal program is that it was at the poverty center's offices that Seale and Newton founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), wrote down, copied and distributed the party's ten-point program. More, Seale and Newton opened the first BPP office with the money earned in the anti-poverty program. It was also at the center's law service section that Newton studied the gun law which he would later recite to the white police officers if they attempted to violate his or anyone else's constitutional rights to carry guns. Clad in black leather jackets and black berets, as well as ostentatiously flaunting their weapons, the Panthers embodied a challenge to the political and institutional status quo. They patrolled the police in the neighborhood and, if necessary, intervened to stop a brutal assault and demanded equal treatment under law.

The Panthers' community activism grew out of Seale's and Newton's engagement in the government program. Their agenda was not at odds with the anti-poverty program: it prioritized community work as well as armed self-defense. For instance, in a 1967 struggle over a traffic light, the Panthers used the administrative and legal framework of the anti-poverty program to urgently demand the installation of traffic lights at a dangerous intersection. They cooperated with the poverty center's staff and advisory council, all of which were equally committed to the cause. Only when the Oakland City authorities postponed the installation until the end of 1968, apparently for technical reasons, did the Panthers make a public performance of their determination to make change happen. They announced that armed party members would direct traffic as long as necessary to ensure that no black resident, especially no child from the nearby school, would be hurt. It transpires from Seale's account that the very threat of the gun-toting Panthers pushed the city to change tack and the traffic lights were erected by October, 1967.⁴⁰

The Panthers set out to address the spatial injustices of class and race via recourse to the philosophy of Black Power, which in their case evolved from the embrace of revolutionary nationalism, linking nationalism and socialism, to the gradual acceptance of capitalist economics as a means of building self-determining and self-governing black communities.⁴¹ Their ten-point platform articulated the most severe problems ailing ghettoized African Americans: an ineffective segregated school system, poor access to medical services, undernourishment and sickness that came from destitution, hazardous housing conditions, a discriminatory criminal justice system, and excessive police surveillance. Between 1966 and 1982, the Panthers' local affiliates across the nation ran an impressive list of community-based survival programs, with the collective input of the party's members: the free breakfast program for schoolchildren, the free clothing program, free busing to prison program, free shoe program, free health clinics, free plumbing and maintenance program, free pest

control program, as well as free black liberation schools.⁴² Newton's speeches from the early 1970s, published in the volume *To Die for the People*, reveal his persistent belief in the empowerment of black communities through survival programs and a retreat from the earlier confrontational rhetoric and armed self-defense. He insisted that the survival programs would be "a political revolutionary vehicle . . . in [blacks'] quest for freedom," while "any action which [did] not mobilize the community toward the goal [of raising Blacks' political consciousness would] not [be] a revolutionary action."⁴³ The immense popularity of the survival programs indicates that they were desperately needed and testifies to the Panthers' efficacy in engaging the black community in practical reforms that the citizen-participation oriented anti-poverty programs fell short of approximating.⁴⁴

When after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 many black urban communities went up in flames, Oakland's Blacks did not riot, loot, or burn their neighborhoods. Urged by Seale, they abstained from the use of violence. Government reports on the causes and prevention of violence pointed to the Panthers' official distancing from spontaneous outbreaks of violence as a powerful anti-riot measure. Indeed, as Jones and Jeffries note, the Panthers' official stance on riots was that they would impair progress and make the group prone to state-led surveillance.⁴⁵ But whether the Panthers' chapters advocated armed self-defense or focused their energies on free breakfast and free clinic programs was of little importance to the state. In 1967 the federal agency launched a counterintelligence program known as COINTELPRO (discontinued in 1971) to target "Black Nationalist Hate Groups." The clandestine FBI operations included such techniques as surveillance, harassment, arrest and detention, provocations, infiltration, and misinformation. Infrequently helped by the local police, the FBI managed to divide the party's political leadership, incarcerate the most prominent members, disrupt their community work, deplete their financial resources, as well as undermined the Panthers' credibility among the public at large.⁴⁶ To make matters worse, when COINTELPRO activities were discontinued, intra-party conflict weakened the political and social capital it had accumulated. Starting from 1973, Newton resorted to the authoritarian concentration of power. He centralized finance management, assaulted and expelled established party members, and used extortion to run the party's operations.⁴⁷

Conclusions

With the rising prominence of the right to the city ideal worldwide as a paragon of new urban governance, many tend to be drawn to the idea of political participation as a panacea for the long discredited authoritarian mode of urban management. They find participation in local political processes fundamental to achieving social justice, which they render in terms of equality of opportunities, equitable access to affordable housing, quality education, healthy food, recreational facilities, and open public spaces. One key aspect of urban power struggles that needs attention, however, is the policy of the state towards the right to the city movements. Are they perceived as legitimate players in local politics, or as potential contenders for power, or else, as anti-statist elements that threaten to dismantle the state?

As the foregoing discussion has shown, both the War on Poverty and Black Power politics made an investment in restoring local democracies via citizen

participation. The trust deposited in the state by the urban poor waned as soon as their grievances became secondary to the public officials' contest for political influence. Indeed, when the time was ripe for making concessions to the demands of urban Blacks, the state enhanced its position as "a bordered power container"⁴⁸ unwilling to relinquish its administrative, political, and military power over the nation's segregated neighborhoods.

Black Power activism stands as a compelling example of *autogestion* as elaborated on by Lefebvre: "*autogestion* tends to reorganize the State as a function of its development, which is to say it tends to engender the State's withering away. *Autogestion* revives all the contradictions at the heart of the State, and notably the supreme contradiction, which can be expressed only in general, philosophical, terms, between the reason of the State and human reason, which is to say, liberty."⁴⁹ In the case of the 1960s Black Power movement, seeking independent statehood was, in some instances, a natural consequence of community control.⁵⁰

NOTES

1. Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City" in *Writings on Cities*, eds. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000 [1968]), 179.
2. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003[1970]), 178, 92.
3. *Ibid.*, 150.
4. For example, Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) is reported to have influenced the federal anti-poverty policies of the era.
5. President Lyndon B. Johnson, *State of the Union Speech*, 8 January 1964. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbj1964stateoftheunion.htm>
6. Susan S. Fainstein, *The Just City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 36.
7. Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American* 215, no. 4 (October 1966): 21.
8. In the conservative 1980s "culture of poverty" became a mere code word for the cultural shortcomings of poor individuals, and bereft of structural considerations. For a detailed discussion, go to Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1981) and William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
9. Seattle was awarded the first Model Cities grant and the program continued between 1967 and 1974.
10. James Braman quoted in Elizabeth Brown, "Race, Urban Governance, and Crime Control: Creating Model Cities," *Law & Society Review* 44, no. 3/4 (September/December 2010): 780.
11. For more go to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, eds. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967 [1965]), 39-102.
12. John H. Strange, "Citizen Participation in Community Action and Model Cities Programs," *Public Administration Review* 32, Special Issue: Curriculum Essays on Citizens, Politics, and Administration in Urban Neighborhoods (Oct., 1972): 655.

13. David Greenstone and Paul E. Peterson, *Race and Authority in Urban Politics: Community Relations and the War on Poverty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), xiv.
14. Ibid., xi, xiv.
15. Strange, "Citizen Participation," 660.
16. Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33.
17. Elliott A. Krause, "Functions of a Bureaucratic Ideology: 'Citizen Participation,'" *Social Problems* 16, no. 2 (Autumn, 1968):139. Krause observes that: "In community action programs, in precisely those cases where both the action bureaucracy and the poor accepted, believed in, and acted upon their own stated ideology, they have been slapped down by the central OEO bureaucracy in Washington. Because the overall political climate grew increasingly conservative as more radical activity took place in action programs (in part as a reaction to this activity), local politicians put pressure on state and congressional leaders to pressure the federal OEO, which in turn had to tell its own local action agencies to "go easier" or to "cool it."
18. Strange, "Citizen Participation," 655.
19. The Model Cities program was authorized by the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966.
20. H. Ralph Taylor and George A. Williams, Jr., "Housing in Model Cities," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 32, no. 3 (Summer, 1967): 397-401, 408.
21. Ibid., 398.
22. Brown, "Race," 781-782.
23. The right to vote on a proposal was given to residents only.
24. Brown, "Race," 782-785.
25. Ibid., 784-788.
26. The city did, however, accept the residents' proposal of establishing an "observer program," which would involve placing a young black person in every police car patrol an objective observer to witness any abuse of power during the police-resident interaction and testify when needed.
27. Krause, "Functions," 140-141.
28. Strange, "Citizen Participation," 659.
29. Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet" in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 26.
30. At the time of the speech, Malcolm disapproved of the black leaders' support for mainstream party politics and the Democrats' ineffectiveness in pushing through the Civil Rights legislation. The Civil Rights Act would be passed a few months later, in July, 1964, and the Voting Rights Act a year later, in August, 1965.
31. Malcolm X, "The Ballot," 38, 40, 42.
32. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 120, 46.
33. Ibid., 44, 47.
34. Ibid., 156.
35. Ibid., 71, 41-42.
36. According to Robert O. Self, Oakland had a long tradition of black political organizing and coalition building with the labor organizations. One of the main destinations for black sharecroppers from the South in the 1940s and 1950s, Oakland was a typical industrial center of the WWII era. It was the site of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the Pullman Company, shipyards and the military industry (the Oakland Army Base and the U.S. Naval Supply Station developed around the city's port and recruited blacks in large numbers). By the late 1950s Oakland had been severely affected by suburban flight, disinvestment and urban decay; urban renewal, which

claimed black property under eminent domain laws, destroyed thousands of housing units and led to community displacement and concentration of racialized poverty. The federal and state governments as well as private-not-for profits offered programs to stop the expansion of poverty among the working-class blacks. Via the introduction of civic councils and a range of community-based services, those early efforts, as Self informs us, “dramatically reengaged” black urban communities. The War on Poverty, with its ever-present stress on citizen participation, drew on the rich tradition of labor and community organizing. Robert O. Self, “‘Negro Leadership and Negro Money’: African American Political Organizing in Oakland before the Panthers” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940-1980*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 108-111.

37. Although an average Panther was a high school or college student, the Panthers’ backgrounds were diverse. For more, see Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries, “‘Don’t Believe the Hype’: Debunking the Panther Mythology” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998), 46.

38. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1970), 53.

39. *Ibid.*, 61-63.

40. *Ibid.*, 123-126.

41. See for example Newton’s 1971 speeches “Black Capitalism Re-Analyzed I” and “Black Capitalism Re-Analyzed II (Practical Application)” in Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1999), 101-108, 109-111.

42. Jones and Jeffries, “‘Don’t Believe the Hype,’” 30. See also Newton, *To Die*, 66-68.

43. Newton, *To Die*, 47, 53.

44. As regards the financial side of the operation, the party relied on donations from white philanthropists and corporations, church and community organizations, but black businesses were also expected to pay contributions to support the community programs, the logic being that those businesses prospered thanks to the black clientele.

45. Jones and Jeffries, “‘Don’t Believe the Hype,’” 40.

46. Winston A. Grady-Willis, “The Black Panther Party: State Repression and Political Prisoners” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998), 363-389.

47. Ollie A. Johnson, III, “Explaining the Demise of the Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998), 391-409.

48. Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 120.

49. Henri Lefebvre, “Theoretical Problems of Autogestion” in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, eds. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 147.

50. While the Panthers did not advocate territorial separatism, other radical black nationalist organizations did. The most pronounced claims to a sovereign territory were made by the Nation of Islam and the Republic of New Africa. For a detailed discussion of territorial nationalism, see William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 132-152.

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at the U.S. American federal War on Poverty programs as a progressive attempt at rejuvenating local communities with citizen participation in the post-Civil Rights era. The anti-poverty measures set out to enhance the political empowerment of impoverished communities of color that by the late 1960s had become increasingly segregated and socially polarized. The federal programs did so by encouraging participatory democracy at the grassroots level and with recourse to the rights discourse. Both these aspects of the War on Poverty mobilized the targeted communities to fight for greater social justice and, eventually but unintentionally, to self-organize under the slogan of Black Power. As will be shown in this paper, both the federally-sponsored War on Poverty and Black Power activism, as dialectically related to each other, can be regarded as natural antecedents of the right to the city movements in the contemporary U.S.

INDEX

Keywords: autogestion, Black Power, citizen participation, community action programs, model cities program, War on Poverty, “culture of poverty” thesis

AUTHOR

ANETA DYBSKA

Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw