

Chicago: A City on the Brink

Andrew J. DIAMOND

Originally scheduled to host the next G8 summit, Chicago has been bypassed in favor of Camp David. No wonder: the “the city that works” works no more. With a terrible youth unemployment rate and municipal governance that has consistently denied its African American residents the services and jobs they deserve, Chicago has fostered despair like no other city its size. Spring will be hot.

To behold the Chicago of today—a city mired in a draconian austerity program in the face of a nearly \$700 million budget deficit, where the homicide rate more than doubles those of New York and Los Angeles, and where the school board recently voted to close ten failing schools and overhaul another seven—it is hard to imagine that people once commonly referred to it as “the city that works.” In fact, this nickname, which was first evoked in a 1971 *Newsweek* article lauding Mayor Richard J. Daley’s ability to create an efficient infrastructure for business and everyday urban life during a moment when other cities were floundering, conveyed a double-meaning—that Chicagoans worked hard and that their mayor made the city work efficiently for them. “[I]t is a demonstrable fact,” *Newsweek* reported, “that Chicago is that most wondrous of exceptions—a major American city that actually works.”¹ The phrase began appearing in Chicago newspapers by 1972, and then in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* in 1974 and 1975. Chicago defined this brand so effectively, that by the time its beloved

¹ Frank Maier, “Chicago’s Daley: How to Run a City,” *Newsweek*, April 5, 1971.

Mayor Daley died of a heart attack in office in 1976, the phrase was run at the top of his obituary in newspapers nationwide.

Yet the nickname was not merely the result of some kind of brilliant public relations campaign. Chicago became “the city that works” in part because as other cities were dealing with crumbling infrastructures and deficient services in the midst of a generalized fiscal crisis, it had already managed to upgrade—often with the use of federal funds—its transportation and municipal infrastructures. By the early 1970s, as New York City was falling into a sorry state of fiscal collapse, Chicago’s skyline was filling up with majestic new skyscrapers, symbols of corporate power emblazoned with names like John Hancock, Sears, and Chase, and its future exchanges were generating more than \$200 billion in transactions annually. While Midwest neighbor Detroit was reeling from the fallout of the 1967 riot, which would tarnish the city’s image in the eyes of business interests and the white middle class for decades to come, Chicago was speeding ahead into the global era, largely unsoiled by the fiery black rage and sense of urban decline that spread through much of the metropolitan US in this era. This is not to say that the Windy City did not experience its own social tumult in the late 1960s. In 1968 alone, its mayor told Chicago police to “shoot to kill” rioters in its black ghetto neighborhoods, and then ordered them to mercilessly and indiscriminately bloody up student protestors at the Democratic National Convention.

These were, of course, also the “bad old days” that saw rampant corruption scandals, working-class African Americans and Latinos taking to the streets to demand their rightful share of the pie, and a fierce wave of state-sponsored political repression that included undercover surveillance, infiltration, and even political assassinations. To understand the extent of things, one need not go any further than the story of charismatic Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, who was shot in the head execution-style by Chicago police in a 1969 pre-dawn raid while he lay in his bed. Ballistic experts analyzing the scene found that only one of one hundred shots fired in the apartment came from the gun of a Black Panther. The idea that the police fired in self-defense was ludicrous. They were there at Black Panther headquarters that morning precisely because

Fred Hampton was working on two initiatives that made him the most dangerous man in Chicago in the eyes of the Daley Machine—a “rainbow coalition” that brought together blacks, Latinos, and poor whites around ideas of social justice, and an alliance of the city’s most feared black street gangs into a powerful political bloc.

But looking back on this era today, it is hard not to wax nostalgic. Despite the fact that Chicago remained one of the country’s most segregated cities, and that a startling proportion of its black population was massed in concrete slab housing projects cut off from the rest of the city, the future looked far brighter then than it does now. If it was a sign of the times that authorities could take out Fred Hampton with impunity, it was no less a sign of the times that a leader like Fred Hampton could grace the political stage in the first place. And the project he launched did not die with him. By 1983, African Americans, Latinos, and progressive whites had finally rallied to elect Chicago’s first black mayor, Harold Washington—a reformist who pledged to redistribute resources and power downward, and who just might have accomplished his aims had he not died of a heart attack at the start of his second term in office. This was the Chicago, after all, in which a young Barack Obama had found the audacity to hope.

Indeed, as depressing as things sometimes looked to young Barack as he attempted to organize tenants in one of Chicago’s most lowly South Side ghetto housing projects, by the early 1990s the city’s investment in the new economy of tourism seemed to be paying dividends. According to one study, travel-generated spending increased the city’s sales tax revenues from \$54 million in 1989 to \$145 million in 1999. And, by 2007 domestic and international visitors to Chicago were spending more than \$11 billion annually, a sum that contributed over \$217 million in local tax revenues and generated some 130,000 jobs.² This infusion of capital helped to offset the loss of about 100,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector between 1986 and 2000, and a good number of these positions went to the residents of the working-class black and Latino communities most

² Travel Industry Association of America, “Direct Impact of Travel to Chicago.”

affected by the forces of deindustrialization.³ As Chicago entered the first years of the twenty-first century, its real estate market was booming, its high school graduation rate was climbing, its homicide rate was falling, and the city was running modest budget deficits. So how did things get so bad so fast?

The Audacity of Hope Indeed

It would be all too easy to attribute Chicago's current troubles to the financial crisis that struck the entire world in 2008, but this is an inadequate way of viewing the situation. The fact is that the bursting of the financial bubble has been much more dramatic for Chicago. There are some highly disquieting things occurring in Chicago that clearly distinguish it from most of its global city peers. Chicago's budget woes, even if particularly acute in comparison with most other major urban centers, are certainly not exceptional. What truly separates the city from its global city peers is the level of pain and desperation on the streets of its working-class black and Latino neighborhoods—a situation that strikes the youths of these areas most directly. If one were to create a kind of “youth misery index” that measured the combined effect of brutal gang recruitment tactics, drive-by shootings, startlingly high drop-out and youth unemployment rates, and the spiritual malaise associated with the absence of hope for a better future, Chicago would certainly rank high above any of the other US cities with anywhere near comparable economic resources. Indeed, while Chicago usually makes the top ten of most indexes measuring the global economic power of urban centers, its symptoms of inequality, racism, and distress appear more like those of many second- and third-tier US cities.⁴ This was something scholar Janet Abu-Lughod had concluded in her comparative analysis of New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles over a decade ago, when she noted “neither New York nor Los Angeles has the same degree of cleavage as Chicago between the central city and its politically powerful ‘white’ collar counties.”⁵ But this was also a view commonly voiced by people on the ground as well, even during the days when the

³ This estimate of manufacturing jobs lost comes from a study financed by the United States Department of Labor: Chicago Federation of Labor and Center for Labor and Community Research, “Creating a Manufacturing Career Path System in Cook County (December 2001),” archived at: <http://www.clcr.org/>.

⁴ Chicago, for example, ranks fourth on Richard Florida's Global Economic Power Index, just ahead of Paris.

⁵ Janet Abu-Lughod, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 12.

future seemed to look so bright. During Congressman Bobby Rush's highly ineffective 1999 mayoral primary run, which culminated in his crushing defeat to Daley by a 73-27 margin, the former Black Panther had tried to arouse the ire of blacks and liberals alike by evoking the idea that there were, in fact, "two Chicagos." "One Chicago is symbolized by flower pots and Ferris wheels and good jobs and communities where police respect the citizens," Rush had claimed, making reference to Daley's massive program to beautify the city's touristic areas and his \$250 million renovation of the lakefront recreation and entertainment area on Navy Pier, with its 150 foot-high Ferris wheel. "The second Chicago is still plagued by a lack of jobs, poor schools and police less tolerant of youths who dress and talk differently than they do."⁶

When the figures from the 2000 census appeared, few could take issue with the veracity of Rush's claim. According to the new census data, Chicago had managed to retain its middle class during the 1990s, its median household income had grown at a rate that was twice the national average, and overall poverty had modestly declined—all of which seemed to confirm the triumphant image of Chicago as a leading global city and tourist destination, up there in the top tier with the likes of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Boston. But the data from the "second Chicago" offered a very different vision. Focusing on the census readings related to black Chicago and to its astonishing disparity from white Chicago, the city appeared more statistically akin to the nation's most distressed urban centers—Baltimore, Newark, St. Louis, New Orleans, and Detroit. While median household income for whites and Latinos in Chicago was \$49,000 and \$37,000, respectively, it was just \$29,000 for blacks, and only 13 percent of black adults held bachelor's degrees, compared to 42 percent of whites.⁷ These disparities help to explain why Chicago ranked just barely above New Orleans and St. Louis and well behind Baltimore (54.4) and Newark (54.2) with its 50.2 percent employment rate for black males over the age of sixteen. Moreover, Chicago topped all other major metropolitan areas for its percentage of black residents having no access to telephone service (7.2), with Detroit a somewhat distant second. Perhaps most tellingly, African

⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, February 7, 1999.

⁷ The Brookings Institution, [*Chicago in Focus: A Profile from Census 2000*](#).

Americans composed just 19 percent of the overall population of the Chicago metropolitan area but 43 percent of the population living below the poverty line, figures that placed the city ahead of every one of the fifteen largest metropolitan areas except for St. Louis in this statistical measure.⁸

Such circumstances go a long way in explaining why Chicago is now making a bid to compete with these same second- and third-tier cities in perhaps the most telling category of youth misery—the murder rate. In terms of total homicides, Chicago is the undisputed murder capital of the United States. While, from a statistical standpoint, it is highly improbable for a global city like Chicago, with a population of some 3 million, to record a murder rate comparable with much smaller cities like Baltimore, New Orleans, and St. Louis (historically, small cities with large minority populations have the highest murder rates by far), the Windy City appears to be heading towards such a statistical anomaly. In the first three months of 2012, homicides in Chicago jumped some 60 percent from the same period during the previous year. At this pace, Chicago’s murder rate could reach 25 per 100,000 residents, still significantly lower than the rates of Baltimore (35), New Orleans (50), and St. Louis (40) but more than five times New York City’s projected rate.⁹ Indeed, with the exception of Philadelphia, a city with roughly half of Chicago’s population and a fraction of its economic resources, Chicago remains unrivaled as a place where people, and especially youths, die on the streets from homicidal violence. In Chicago, more than 530 people under the age of 21 have been killed since 2008. Moreover, nearly 80 percent of youth homicides have occurred in 22 black or Latino communities on the city’s South, Southwest and West sides—even though just one-third of the city’s overall population resides in these areas.

What community activists and residents in such communities know all too well is that Chicago’s youth violence problem stems, on some level, from a near complete loss of hope among much of its younger generation. “Historically, every generation has had the promise and hope of the future out there,” long-time community activist and former

⁸ United States Bureau of the Census, Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime in the United States by Metropolitan Statistical Area, 2010 (Table 6). I have rounded off these figures.

social worker Wiley Rogers recently told journalists at *The Chicago Reporter*. “These kids don’t have that. What matters is today. It leads to this horrible fatalism, where life ain’t worth living anymore.”¹⁰ President Obama has articulated a similar view. Commenting on the human disaster that struck New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Obama referred to a “hope gap that still pervades too many communities all across the country.” If such talk is politically prudent in a country in deep denial about its lingering problem of race, it is dangerous and ultimately ineffectual when it is not accompanied by a structural analysis of the ways in which the so-called “hope gap” came to be. Without consideration of how hope was stripped away from young working-class African Americans and Latinos, such reasoning gravitates ineluctably towards time-worn ideas about morally and culturally dysfunctional ghetto culture. In the same speech in which Obama evoked the notion of a “hope gap,” for example, he also conjured up a litany of stereotypes related to the pathologies of black ghetto culture—black parents allowing their children to watch television instead of doing their homework, an imaginary “Cousin Pookie” who won’t “get off the couch,” black women who need to “take off [their] bedroom slippers,” and black “daddies not acting like daddies.”¹¹ Implicit in this sort of discussion is the notion that poor African Americans can improve their situation if only they changed their attitudes. Excluded from this sort of discussion are the structural conditions that make such changes highly improbable.

Hope for Sale

Facing the task of explaining why hope has become such a scarce commodity in working-class Chicago, one is confronted with the difficult question of where to begin. As historians like Thomas Sugrue have shown, the roots of the “urban crisis” that struck the old industrial cities of the Midwest—Detroit, Gary, and, to some extent, Chicago—can be found way back in the 1940s.¹² As African Americans in the rural South began migrating to the North in search of the higher wages offered by the war industries,

¹⁰ Kari Lydersen and Carlos Javier Ortiz, “More Young People Are Killed in Chicago than Any Other American City,” *The Chicago Reporter*, January 25, 2012.

¹¹ I develop this argument more fully in: [“Color Blindness and Racial Politics in the Era of Obama,”](#) *Books & Ideas*, 8 December 2010.

¹² Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

working-class whites began mobilizing at the grassroots to exclude them from their neighborhoods. In the late 1940s and 1950s, mobs of angry whites commonly took to the streets—at times in crowds numbering several thousand—to vent their anger at black families seeking to cross the color line. Of course, elected politicians, from the neighborhood level up to the mayor’s office, took notice.

There were some liberals and activists along the way to raise their voices against the apartheid order in the making: Chicago Housing Authority head Elizabeth Wood, for instance, sought to use integrated public housing projects as a tool for desegregating white neighborhoods in the 1950s, and Martin Luther King made Chicago into a civil rights battleground in the fight against northern-style segregation. In the end, these challenges were merely bumps in the road to hyper-ghettoization. Liberals were no match against the downtown business crowd, which rallied to protect the city’s central business district from the ghetto spilling into it. Even supposedly liberal institutions joined in the effort. As Arnold Hirsch’s aptly named classic *Making the Second Ghetto* demonstrates, the illustrious University of Chicago moved swiftly to hatch a plan that would displace thousands of working-class African Americans and shore up the walls of the ghetto surrounding it.¹³ In fact, so many of the infrastructural improvements made around the city’s central “Loop” district in the 1950s and 1960s—the development of a new University of Illinois campus, the construction of numerous middle-class housing developments, the expansion of the city’s highway infrastructure, and of course the building of enormous black-occupied housing projects within the already existing ghetto—were intended to reinforce the city’s segregated racial order. Commenting on the placement of the fourteen-lane Dan Ryan Expressway along the boundary between Mayor Daley’s own lily-white Bridgeport neighborhood and the poor black families in the Robert Taylor Homes projects, Chicago journalists Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor claimed, “It was the most formidable impediment short of an actual wall that the city could have built to separate the white South Side from the Black Belt.”¹⁴

¹³ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, *American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley – His Battle for Chicago and the Nation* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), p. 189.

Against the backdrop of this long history of ghettoization, the young African Americans dying in the epidemic of gang violence today seem more like cases of what Eric Klinenberg has referred to as “murder by public policy.”¹⁵ This is a history that is fairly well known, even if the knowledge of it has done little to alter the tendency of Americans today to “culturize” the problem of black ghetto poverty—to attribute it to cultural rather than structural and historical causes.¹⁶ Indeed, inner city ghettos in the United States have become so naturalized that even African Americans themselves show signs of overlooking how their existence is indicative of prevailing forces of racial discrimination. A 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center, for example, revealed that a clear majority of African Americans (53 %) “believe that blacks who have not gotten ahead in life are mainly responsible for their own situation.”¹⁷ Such evidence indicates how much the strain of black conservative self-help ideology that rose to prominence during the Reagan Revolution has penetrated into the fabric of ghetto life. To be sure, self-help reasoning has commingled with critiques of racism within the black public sphere over the past few decades, but, as the Obama era has so powerfully revealed, an antiracist stance has been difficult to sustain in a country so deeply invested in a colorblind vision of the world.¹⁸ Such circumstances explain, in part, why the African American community in Chicago remained so quiescent in the face of an aggressive neoliberal program that effectively sold off the hope of its younger generation to corporate bidders. Astoundingly, the man who engineered this program, Mayor Richard M. Daley, garnered 70 % of the black vote and 80 % of the Latino vote in his last election run of 2007.

How African Americans and Latinos came to support Mayor Richard M. Daley as he was selling them out is a complicated story. An important dimension of it has to do

¹⁵ Klinenberg develops this line of argument in relation to the low-income black Chicagoans who died during the city’s heat wave of 1995: see, Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁶ I borrow this term from Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

¹⁷ <http://pewresearch.org/databank/dailynumber/?NumberID=426>.

¹⁸ This is an argument persuasively made in: Tim Wise, *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2010).

with the fact that many of the key policy decisions that steered the city towards this outcome were made largely outside of public scrutiny. This is symptomatic of the broader neoliberal turn that has shaped modes of governance in the urban United States over the past few decades. As Wendy Brown has argued, the past decade has witnessed a “business approach to governing” eroding public life, diminishing the accountability of elected politicians, and transforming social problems into private ones.¹⁹ Within the context of the urban scene, where public policies have been increasingly geared towards maximizing revenue from real estate development and the so-called “new economy of tourism,” this approach has involved a dramatic increase in public-private partnerships and in the linkages between public officials and economic elites. While municipal budgetary and planning decisions have historically not been subjected very much to democratic pressures, the autocratic style of governance in Chicago under Richard J. and Richard M. Daley allowed the city to take the neoliberal approach to a whole other level. A perfect example was the Daley Administration’s rather extraordinary idea of selling off all of its parking meters and four massive downtown city-owned parking garages, including the highly profitable 9,100-space garage beneath Millennium Park, to subsidiaries of Wall Street giant Morgan Stanley. As Daley was brokering these transactions, not only was the public left out of the loop, but so was the City Council, which nonetheless ended up swiftly approving (by votes of 40-5 and 38-7) the two deals that sold off valuable public assets at fire-sale prices. According to the most conservative estimates, the city lost nearly one billion dollars on the parking meter deal alone. But one must also add to this the cost to the local economy of the money extracted from it as a result of the sharply rising parking fees paid out of the pockets of Chicago residents. Moreover, to make matters worse, the private investors who took control of the city-owned parking garages are now suing Chicago for hundreds of millions of dollars for allegedly breaking its contract with them by allowing the development of a competing garage. All this in a time when the current Mayor Rahm Emanuel is laying off teachers, closing schools, cutting library hours, and declining to fund programs like CeaseFire,

¹⁹ Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34 (2006), p. 695.

which has demonstrated remarkable success in reducing violence in some of the city's highest crime areas.

Yet as financially devastating as Chicago's privatization schemes have proven, their effects pale in comparison to those wrought by the city's tax increment financing program (TIF), a labyrinthine public financing method that Mayor Daley used to create a virtual "shadow budget" of over \$500 million—about one-sixth of the city's overall budget—to fund large development projects, infrastructural improvements, and beautification efforts.²⁰ The original idea behind TIFs, which began to be used in municipalities across the nation in the 1980s to offset sharp reductions in federal development grants during the Reagan years, was to create a mechanism that would channel capital towards improvements in distressed or blighted areas where development might not otherwise occur. In a typical TIF program, property tax revenues in excess of a fixed level within a certain geographical area are allocated to a special discretionary fund for "public" projects. The thinking is that these projects, in turn, will theoretically improve the area and thus lead to increased tax revenues that will replenish the TIF fund and likely add to it in the years to follow. Yet, like so many other progressive-minded policy approaches that arrived in Chicago in the postwar decades, the problem with Chicago's TIF program was that City Hall took the money and ran away from the progressive goals attached to it, and it did so behind closed doors. While TIF projects involving private companies must be approved by a City Council vote and thereby made public, the large portion of funds used for neighborhood improvements—new schools, sidewalk and street repaving, and the upgrading of park and recreation facilities, for example—are not subject to public scrutiny, allowing them to be used as patronage rewards to distribute among aldermen. This explains why the City Council, which should have acted as a democratic brake on Daley's privatization fiasco, issued its stamp of approval with little discussion. Members of the City Council faced losing their precious political capital if they dared to oppose the mayor.²¹

²⁰ Cook County Clerk's Office, "City of Chicago TIF Revenue Totals by Year, 1986-2006."

²¹ Amazingly, the City Council used its veto power just once in twenty-two years of Daley's rule.

This lack of transparency enabled the creation of a public funding system that worked to reinforce inequalities rather than to ameliorate them, a situation that remained largely obscured until Ben Joravsky, a journalist for Chicago's leading alternative newspaper, *The Chicago Reader*, managed to get his hands on some internal TIF documents. According to Joravsky's investigative work, TIFs skimmed \$1 billion in property taxes off the city's revenues between 2003 and 2006.²² Indicative of how unevenly this money was spread across the city, in 2007 the downtown LaSalle Central TIF district added some \$19 million in revenues while the Roseland/Michigan TIF district—a violence-riddled area of urban decay and joblessness often referred to as “the hundreds”—brought in a mere \$707,000. Moreover, in 2009, a year in which Daley announced the need to eliminate jobs and cut back services because of a \$500 million budget deficit linked to the country's financial crisis, the City Council voted in favor of allocating \$35 million from the LaSalle Central TIF district to subsidize the move of United Airlines into seven floors of the Willis Tower.²³ City officials justified the offer by arguing that United's presence in the Willis Tower, in addition to solving the embarrassing problem posed by the existence of vacant floors in Chicago's tallest and most prestigious skyscraper, would bring some 2,500 jobs to the city. This kind of corporate subsidy was hardly unprecedented. Several years earlier, in 2001, Chicago had paid out \$56 million in public subsidies to Boeing to encourage the company to move its headquarters from Seattle to Chicago, bringing a mere 450 jobs with it.²⁴

As the enormous subsidies offered to Boeing and United reveal, the maintenance of Chicago's image as a high-flying global city was a much higher priority for the Daley administration than creating jobs for residents in Chicago's most economically depressed area.²⁵ The mostly white-collar jobs brought to the Windy City by these companies were surely out of reach for the vast majority of working-class blacks and Latinos most in need

²² Ben Joravsky, “Million Dollar Lies,” *Chicago Reader*, August 11, 2006.

²³ Ben Joravsky, “The Shadow Budget,” *Chicago Reader*, October 22, 2009.

²⁴ David Moberg, “Economic Restructuring: Chicago's Precarious Balance,” in John P. Koval (ed.), et. al., *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p. 31.

²⁵ In this sense, it should be pointed out, Daley was no different from his homologue in New York City, Rudolph Giuliani, who in December of 1998 offered the New York Stock Exchange a historically unprecedented \$900 million in cash along with a suite of tax breaks and other subsidies to prevent its move across the river to New Jersey.

of them, but officials justified the subsidies by referring to the rosy estimates of certain economists about the “multiplier effects” of having all these highly paid white-collar workers around the downtown area. During the United affair, for example, Second Ward Alderman Robert Fioretti, whose jurisdiction stretches from the bustling Loop westward into the depressed area around East Garfield Park, argued that the airline’s employees would spend an average of \$6,700 annually in the downtown area—on, presumably, martinis, steaks, athletic club memberships, and a range of elite services. But the multiplier effects of this consumption stopped well short of Fioretti’s “other” constituents on the black West Side, where the challenge was to lure in low-cost food retailers in order to combat the problem of so-called “food deserts”—large areas in which residents have little or no access to healthy food sources.²⁶ This area of the city, in fact, had been devastated in 2003, when just to the west of it, in West Garfield Park, candy maker Brach’s Confections, Inc. closed a factory that provided more than 1,000 blue-collar jobs. With one of its signature items the “Candy Corn,” a nauseatingly sweet, waxy-textured corn kernel facsimile commonly eaten by children around Halloween, Brach’s did little to boost Chicago’s global city credentials, and Daley was thus unwilling to offer more than \$10 million to try to retain its one thousand jobs—not nearly enough to dissuade the company from moving its operations south of the border into Mexico. Ironically, this was about the same amount City Hall would draw from the Northwest Industrial Corridor TIF five years later at the request of a developer seeking to convert the abandoned Brach’s factory into a warehouse and distribution center, which, according to the developer’s own estimate, would provide just 75 permanent jobs.²⁷

Blowback

That the White House abruptly switched this year’s annual G8 meeting from Chicago to the safe zone of the Camp David compound is highly suggestive to say the least. There were many reasons for the decision, which came with little explanation and

²⁶ According to a recent study on “food deserts” sponsored by the Environmental Justice Resource Center, Chicago ranks second to New Orleans as the city with the highest percentage of residents living in such areas.

²⁷ City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, “Staff Report to the Community Development Commission Requesting Developer Designation: Brachs Redevelopment,” January 8, 2008, archived at: <http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd.html>.

surprisingly little commentary from the media. With the recent Occupy movement aiming to use the event as an opportunity to come out of winter hibernation, it is quite possible that Chicago was once again going to become the place “the whole world [was] watching,” as it was during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. And this would have been a political nightmare for both the Obama administration and Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chicago would have made a symbolically potent backdrop for a protest about the savage inequalities wrought by global capitalism and the neoliberal approach to municipal governance. With Rahm Emanuel struggling to impose a painful set of austerity measures on working-class Chicagoans while proposing a downtown casino as the best way to fill the city’s gaping budget gap, the stage was set for high political theater. Moreover, as President Obama gears up for re-election, the idea of Chicago blood on his hands was hardly comforting. The fact is that Obama already represents the elevation of the Chicago story on to the political stage. Many of his closest advisors and cabinet members—David Axelrod, Rahm Emanuel, Valerie Jarrett, and Arne Duncan, not to mention the former mayor’s brother, William Daley—were also close advisors and appointees of Richard M. Daley. This association was a benefit when Chicago was still being talked about as a national success story, but now it is a potentially explosive liability. The chances are strong, for example, that a nationally visible protest in Chicago will draw attention to the catastrophic state of Chicago’s public school system—a situation that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan played a key role in creating when he was Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools between 2001 and 2009.

In fact, both Obama and Emanuel are hardly out of danger, since the protest that had been planned for the G8 will now merely shift over to the NATO summit in Chicago on May 20-21. To be sure, the loaded symbolism of the G8 will be lacking, and the resources of the Chicago Police Department (CPD) will not be stretched so thin by the daunting task of providing security for both the G8 and NATO meetings. But many observers have predicted that things will get hot in Chicago. While Occupy Chicago organizers are hoping for a massive but lawful mobilization, it is somewhat doubtful such an objective can be achieved under the present circumstances. More likely, the protest will be disappointingly small and unruly.

For one thing, morale within the CPD is dangerously low, a situation that could lead to some volatile confrontations between police and protestors. Like most other public service agencies in Chicago, the CPD is in the red and facing a number of cutbacks. Overtime pay has been sharply reduced, and the Department no longer possesses a sufficient number of “tac teams” specializing in crowd control situations. Indicative of the rancor circulating through the CPD these days was a recent post that appeared on the popular and now highly controversial CPD blog, Second City Cop (secondcitycop.blogspot.com), urging fellow officers to use black tape to cover their badge numbers during the upcoming protests. The tone within the lively forums of this blog is mutinous, with contributors frequently attacking both Mayor Emanuel and Police Chief Garry McCarthy. The precarious state of the CPD no doubt weighed heavily upon the decision to move the G8 meeting, but the potential for disaster has hardly been eliminated.

On the other side of the barricades, the protest movement that will be steering down the CPD is far from a model of unity. This is, in part, the logical outgrowth of Chicago’s highly segregated racial geography, which has made any significant political cooperation across racial lines virtually impossible. Unlike in most cities, the Occupy movement in Chicago almost immediately took the form of two organizations—a predominantly white North Side branch based in Rogers Park and a largely black branch based on the South Side. From the beginning, paltry black and Latino participation in Occupy Chicago has been a disquieting issue for organizers, a good many of whom are white middle-class graduate student types out of touch with ghetto problems. For their part, African American activists have been mostly engaged in dealing with pressing everyday issues like school closings, the increasing number of housing evictions, and the lack of emergency medical centers equipped to treat the casualties of the gang wars raging in their neighborhoods. While many of them welcome the media attention Occupy has brought to their causes, they also resent the fact that it has come only as a result of this largely white middle-class mobilization, and they have been reluctant to put their

bodies on the line for the more “big picture” critique of capitalism that is driving the broader Occupy movement.

For all these reasons, the ranks of protestors that turn out for the demonstrations around the NATO Summit will most likely seem rather depleted. One can be sure that there will be a significant buzz about the potential for violence and mass arrests, and many African American activists will likely choose to stay away from a protest that they do not recognize as truly representing them. Working-class blacks in Chicago, it should be remembered, are much more wary about dealing with the criminal justice system than educated middle-class whites, and for good reason. Quite similar circumstances prevailed in 1968, when the CPD put the word out on the streets of the South Side and West Side ghettos that blacks should keep away from the Loop during the DNC protests. Back then, much like today, working-class blacks had little faith in the organizing activities of middle-class whites. Oakland Black Panther Bobby Seale made the trip to Chicago, where he would be arrested for conspiracy to incite a riot, but very few local activists chose to make the short trip uptown or across town to join him. In the end, only some 10,000 protestors heeded the call to join the antiwar demonstration, and the “whole world” was treated to the spectacle of the puny US left getting its faced shoved into the pavement by Chicago’s finest. There is a decent chance that a similar scenario will characterize events in Chicago in the coming weeks. Mayor Emanuel has already rammed ordinances through the City Council placing sharper limitations on demonstrations and doubling the fines for infractions of these new rules, and has sent some strong indications to protest organizers of where he stands on the question of freedom of speech and assembly. Last October, Emanuel ordered police to arrest 300 Occupy protesters after they marched from their base in the financial district to Grant Park and refused to leave after the park closed at 11 p.m.

But there is another possible scenario that could materialize in the coming weeks, with the spike in temperatures, the longer spring days, and the carnival atmosphere that comes with the last weeks of the school year. In view of the highly unsettling racially-charged “wilding” and “flash mob” incidents that transpired in Chicago last spring, it is

not unlikely that the NATO protests could witness the outbreak of racial conflict in the streets. Chicago's bout with black flash mobs—mobs of teenagers who use text messaging and social media networks to plan collective attacks and muggings of white shoppers in retail and tourist hot spots—represents yet another example of how Chicago continues to be a large global city with small city problems. The only other city anywhere near the size of Chicago that has encountered similar problems is Philadelphia. In fact, the flash mob incidents that have recently occurred in Chicago resemble the notorious affair witnessed at last summer's Wisconsin State Fair in Milwaukee, when, according to many eyewitnesses, hundreds of African American teens went on a rampage of violence against white fairgoers, in some cases inflicting serious injuries. Just a few months earlier, during an unusually warm weekend at the end of May, the same kind of situation was barely averted along the city's lakefront, at the popular North Avenue Beach. While city officials would claim that several cases of heat exhaustion prompted the extraordinary decision to close the crowded beach, numerous eyewitnesses and police bloggers on Second City Cop reported that the move was made because black "gangbangers" were targeting, attacking and robbing white beachgoers—a version that eventually received further confirmation from both the *Chicago Sun-Times* and local radio station WLS-AM. In the weeks before and after the North Avenue Beach affair, moreover, police responded to flash mob robberies along the city's famed Magnificent Mile shopping district—an area that has symbolized the Chicago success story for any visitor to the city. Since the vast majority of shoppers here are white, the racial intent of these acts is impossible to determine; in some sense, these were more like small-scale "commodity" disturbances, which mostly involved groups of teens mobbing retail outlets in order to overwhelm store security and make off with valued products. And yet, these incidents nonetheless reveal how much race and class remain intertwined in the city that gave birth to the term "hyper-ghetto."

One must use care in analyzing the meaning of these incidents. Suggestive of the dangers involved in such an exercise is the zeal with which the right-wing media has sensationalized the racist dimension of the flash mob phenomenon. In an ideological context within which right-wing radio hosts and Tea Party activists commonly accuse the

relentlessly colorblind President Obama of being “racist,” the idea of roaming hordes of black teens beating on innocent white middle-class folks has been employed to justify a range of conservative causes, from loosening restrictions on carrying concealed weapons to eliminating the last vestiges of the country’s welfare system. And yet, it is nonetheless hard to deny the racial implications of this phenomenon. The political and social meanings, on the other hand, are much more difficult to process.

The flash mobs that have recently appeared in Chicago could represent the first signs of a new wave of civil violence carried out by young African Americans in the urban United States.²⁸ What seems to have changed from the civil violence of the past is that this new civil violence has dared to cross outside the ghetto into middle-class and even affluent white areas. If political scientists Dennis Judd and Susan Fainstein once spoke of US cities being characterized by “tourist bubbles” sealed off from poverty and other social ills, the flash mob phenomenon seems to indicate that such concepts do not hold water any longer.²⁹ Indeed, what is perhaps most politically significant about flash mobs of black teenagers is their ability to bring the misery and pain of the ghetto into spaces of white affluence. In the 1960s, members of the Weather Underground used a strategy of “bringing the war home” by committing terrorist acts against domestic targets; this is, unwittingly (or not), what black flash mobs are, in effect, doing. And so we should not be surprised if the marginalized youths of Chicago’s ghettos use the confusion and disorder of the NATO demonstrations to engage in the only activities they know that will give them, at least temporarily, a sense of empowerment over the power structure that has made them into third-class citizens.

Publié dans laviedesidees.fr, le 20 date

© laviedesidees.fr

²⁸ I borrow the term “civil violence” from historian Michael Katz, who uses it to describe “actions aimed largely at symbols and agents of exclusion and exploitation”: see Michael B. Katz, “Why Don’t American Cities Burn Very Often,” *Journal of Urban History* 34 (2008), p. 186.

²⁹ Dennis R. Judd, “Constructing the Tourist Bubble,” in Dennis R. Judd and Susan S. Fainstein, eds., *The Tourist City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 35-53.