



Building a better Chicago: Race and community resistance to urban redevelopment, by Teresa Irene Gonzales

New York, NYU Press, 2021

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BOOK REVIEW

Building a better Chicago: Race and community resistance to urban redevelopment, by Teresa Irene Gonzales, New York, NYU Press, 2021

There is a growing body of literature examining the role of nonprofit intermediaries in the urban redevelopment process. This literature has explored the role that intermediaries play in leveraging public-private partnerships, the degree to which they professionalize local community development organizations, their influence on processes like gentrification, and a litany of other activities they engage in related to urban revitalization. Much of this literature has identified nonprofit intermediaries as conduits that channel resources and build capacity of grassroots organizations. Less attention has been given to tensions that arise between nonprofit intermediaries and grassroots interests. In *Building a Better Chicago: Race and Community Resistance to Urban Redevelopment*, Gonzales sheds light on this dimension of the urban revitalization process.

This book makes an important contribution to the literature highlighting how distrust of nonprofit intermediaries, local governmental actors, and other institutional stakeholders can be mobilized by grassroots groups to recapture the urban redevelopment agenda and enhance neighborhood conditions for inner city residents.

Gonzales' analysis is based on extensive field research and a series of semi-structured interviews with grassroots leaders and institutional stakeholders in two of the most distressed neighborhoods in Chicago, Greater Englewood and Little Village. The selection of these two neighborhoods, the former an African American community and the latter a Latin/o/x community, allows for the contextualization of power relationships in the urban development process. This focus highlights the nuances of how race is infused in historic patterns of neighborhood disinvestment and disenfranchisement which frame negotiations between institutional stakeholders and grassroots advocacy groups.

Gonzales initiated her research by doing extensive field research at the neighborhood level and with grassroots organizations, before examining the perspectives of institutional stakeholders. This was a critical decision in the development of her analysis and the theoretical insights that emerged from it. This approach allowed the perspectives of residents and neighborhood-based advocacy groups to form the foundation for grounded theory building. By anchoring her initial research to the perspectives of groups at the neighborhood level who have been historically disenfranchised from local planning processes, Gonzales is able to tease out a fresh perspective on urban revitalization in low-income communities of color. The selection of this starting point for her research also helped to establish her legitimacy among residents who contend with powerful institutional stakeholders. This contributed to more in-depth knowledge of their experiences and authenticity in the analysis than would have otherwise been possible.

Throughout the text, Gonzales discusses how her engagement in participant observation and other methodological decisions were informed by her gender, ethnic identity, personal biography, and her stance as a qualitative researcher. The text is enriched by reflexive discussions of her insider-outsider status in the neighborhoods she studied and how these insights informed her subsequent analysis. The manner in which Gonzales documents her positionality as a qualitative researcher adds to the value of the book, and provides future researchers with a blueprint for how to document the natural history of a qualitative study and integrate methodological notes into their analysis.

Building a Better Chicago provides two important insights about the urban revitalization process. First, the book examines the schism between institutional and grassroots interests in the urban redevelopment process. In particular, it focuses on the precarious role that nonprofit intermediaries fill in neighborhood revitalization. Gonzales describes how intermediaries like the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) are embedded in a coalition of institutional stakeholders that reinforces top-down community development strategies which have historically reproduced systems of

inequality across urban neighborhoods. Despite LISC's stated goals of facilitating capacity building and collaborating with neighborhoods, Gonzales argues that LISC fell short of promoting grassroots empowerment in Chicago's most distressed neighborhoods. Public engagement activities incorporated into neighborhood revitalization planning were heavily influenced by institutional stakeholders, while residents and neighborhood-based advocacy organizations had less access to agenda setting and decision-making. Gonzales argues that LISC was constrained by the network of institutional stakeholders it was embedded in, which was heavily influenced by Chicago's patronage politics and by the priorities of private developers.

Instead of concentrating on the empowerment of grassroots organizations and support their efforts to challenge local growth machines, LISC aligned itself with the latter. These relationships were institutionalized through lead community agencies that aligned with LISC's goals, implemented LISC's initiatives, received and distributed funding for projects at the neighborhood level, and, in turn, received accolades for their work. LISC and its lead agencies focused on shepherding projects that aligned with the interests of institutional stakeholders, rather than supporting the advocacy work of other grassroots organizations. The end result was that urban revitalization unfolded in a manner that reproduced top-down decision-making and patterns of inequality in planning and policy implementation.

Gonzales contrasts the top-down approach adopted by LISC with bottom-up strategies used to identify neighborhood revitalization projects which were advocated for by grassroots groups. She argues that the approach adopted by intermediaries was relatively top-down, involving a focus on commercial and economic development projects that paired with the development interests of partners in the public and private sectors. Following this approach, institutional stakeholders identified urban revitalization projects to pursue, then LISC and its lead agencies organized community workshops and other planning meetings to review proposals, received circumscribed feedback from residents, and solicited community buy-in. Alternative projects identified by residents and grassroots groups rarely survived this process, leaving residents with a sense of cooptation, alienation, and distrust. Consequently, grassroots campaigns for alternative projects had to take place outside of the process set up by institutional stakeholders, and without the resources and technical support of intermediaries like LISC.

Gonzales contrasts LISC planning processes with grassroots campaigns for alternative revitalization projects in the two neighborhoods she examined. In the Greater Englewood neighborhood, she discusses how institutional stakeholders forwarded a proposal for a major infrastructure project, a railroad and freight yard expansion project. The project involved publicly subsidizing private development in order to create new jobs in the area. Grassroots groups opposed the project due to concerns about residential displacement and the lack of consideration for environmental impacts. These groups preferred an alternative plan for the area that focuses on remediating existing contamination on the proposed site and revitalizing the area with green amenities.

In the Little Village neighborhood, Gonzales discusses how LISC and its lead agencies planned a number of vocational training, social service, and land use planning workshops that complemented a large scale development initiative favored by other institutional stakeholders. She describes how these initiatives grew out of top-down planning, while alternative initiatives favored by grassroots groups, like the creations of new bus routes to provide neighborhood residents with improved transit were kept off the agenda by institutional stakeholders. In both neighborhoods, Gonzales argued that blocked access to full participation in the urban revitalization process forced grassroots groups to organize separate campaigns and forge alliances with exogenous organizations to pursue alternative development strategies. Grassroots groups navigated this alternative path without assistance from LISC, its lead agencies, and other local institutional stakeholders.

The tension between the top-down approach adopted by institutional intermediaries and demands for bottom-up agenda setting from grassroots groups informed the second important insight that emerged from Gonzales's analysis. She describes how grassroots organizations mobilized "collective skepticism" in response to LISC's and other institutional stakeholders' approaches to urban revitalization. Gonzales argues that the mobilization of collective skepticism allowed grassroots groups to launch campaigns outside of networks controlled by institutional stakeholders, and put local interests back on the urban

development agenda. She describes how grassroots groups successfully mobilized collective skepticism to change the trajectory of urban revitalization in relation to environmental remediation in the Greater Englewood neighborhood and the establishment of new bus routes in the Little Village neighborhoods. These were not isolated instances, but examples of a broader modality of grassroots organizing to engage with and influence institutional stakeholders.

Through her analysis, Gonzales highlights the fact that collective skepticism grows out of the historical and ongoing experiences of residents in low-income neighborhoods when interacting with institutional stakeholders. This experience has been imprinted by decades of disinvestment, disenfranchisement, displacement, and neglect. The result is that there are reservoirs of distrust between residents and local institutional actors. Rather than viewing these reservoirs of distrust in local institutions as an impediment, Gonzales identifies them as an asset that grassroots organizations can mobilize in their efforts to influence agenda setting and the selection of urban revitalization projects to be implemented at the neighborhood level. In essence, the mobilization of collective skepticism allows grassroots organizations to call out institutional actors and demand that they reconcile with their track record on past urban revitalization initiatives. In this way, the mobilization of collective skepticism is used to expand grassroots organizations' access to agenda setting, decision-making, resources, and other aspects of planning and implementation processes.

In sum, Gonzales makes an important contribution to the literature on the role of institutional stakeholders in the urban redevelopment process. She offers a critique of dominant approaches to neighborhood revitalization that rely on planning strategies that are perceived as top-down by residents and grassroots groups. This critique amends existing scholarship on urban revitalization that has focused on the role and perspective of intermediary organizations. Gonzales's analysis adds the perspectives of residents and grassroots groups that are engaged at the neighborhood level, although less integrated into networks of local stakeholders that impact their neighborhoods, to the analysis of urban revitalization processes. Through the consideration of these relatively overlooked perspectives in prior research, Gonzales is able to caution readers against viewing nonprofit intermediaries like LISC through rose-colored glasses. As a result, she highlights the need to develop a deeper understanding of how intermediaries are embedded in traditional urban growth coalitions. From this critique, alternative paths for urban development can be identified which are built on the mobilization of collective skepticism by grassroots organizations.

Gonzales' analysis also makes an important contribution to grassroots groups engaged in community development practice and academics who train practitioners. Her research reminds grassroots groups to keep their guard up when dealing with intermediaries like LISC and local political actors. In essence, grassroots organizations should "trust, but verify" when dealing with institutional stakeholders. In turn, her research reminds academics who teach courses related to urban revitalization and community development to maintain a healthy dose of skepticism in their treatment of nonprofit intermediaries. Gonzales's insights add a critical lens to this topic which can be drawn from to prepare students to work more effectively with, and advocate for grassroots groups.

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