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The significance of race in urban politics: The limitations of regime theory

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Abstract

Regime theory, the dominant paradigm in the study of urban politics, maintains that cities are governed by informal arrangements consisting of public and private sector elites. Because economic growth is the main policy objective of regimes, research has tended to focus on mayoral coalition building and development policy. Thus much less attention has been paid to policies that more directly impact residential neighborhoods and more fully illustrate the role of race, such as housing and education. This paper suggests that regime theory sharply limits the subjects for inquiry, and in the process, substantially understates the role of race and racism in urban political outcomes. Further, the lack of explicit discussion of race has prevented scholars of urban politics from participating in debates which have become central to the larger field of urban studies involving residential segregation and concentrated poverty. Thus, other explanations of concentrated poverty, emphasizing either economic or demographic trends, or the alleged failure of national social welfare policies, have become increasingly accepted. In this paper, I examine the politics of housing, education, urban renewal, and highway construction in Buffalo, New York, over the past several decades. This analysis is intended to illustrate the powerful influence of race in urban politics as well as the role that local policy making has played in the formation of residential segregation and concentrated poverty.

1. Introduction

The variable of race occupies an awkward position in the study of urban politics. At first glance, race appears to be central to the field. Because racial and ethnic minority populations have been steadily increasing for several decades in urban areas, and are a majority in

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numerous cities, all case studies of urban politics address race in one way or another. Yet when one closely scrutinizes the manner in which race is addressed in the literature, one is struck by the lack of attention to racism as a causal force in urban political outcomes.

Regime theory (Stone, 1989), the dominant paradigm in the field, reflects the assumptions of a political economy perspective, which maintains that class, not race, is the driving force of urban politics. The high concentration of poverty in predominantly minority neighborhoods could lead one to argue that the variables of race and class largely overlap in urban analysis. To fully conflate the variables of race and class, however, provides a misleading picture of urban political and social relations, and scholars have successfully disentangled the effects of race and class on urban residential development. For example, Massey and Denton have shown that even when controlling for variables which indicate socioeconomic class – education, income, and occupation – African American residential segregation remains strong (Massey & Denton, 1987, 1988, 1993).

But urban political theory, specifically the regime paradigm, has yet to fully address the independently powerful influence of race in local decision making. Within the regime framework, development policy takes center stage, thus most studies have "focused on public–private collaboration in pursuit of economic development objectives" (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux 1999, p. 16). Other major areas of local governance which more fully illustrate racial politics, such as housing and education, are often placed at the periphery of inquiry.

This line of investigation has several important implications. First, the academic study of urban politics has understated the impact of white racism in urban politics and development. Further, because of the lack of attention to racial politics and policies, the field has remained largely silent in debates involving the development of residentially segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. By focusing on mayoral coalition building and development policy, scholars have not addressed questions related to the impact of public policies on residential neighborhoods. As a result, regime theory has not provided scholars with ammunition to counter arguments that either liberal public policies (social welfare, affirmative action), social problems (crime, drugs, single-parent families), or what are thought to be inevitable economic and demographic trends (deindustrialization, suburbanization), have been the main causal factors in the production and reproduction of concentrated poverty.

This paper seeks to critically examine the state of research in the field of urban politics. I argue that the underlying assumptions of regime theory limit the possible subjects for examination and ultimately downplay the role of race in shaping local political outcomes. Research utilizing other approaches that more directly confront the role of white racism in urban politics will also be discussed. I then apply my approach in an analysis of the past several decades of the politics of Buffalo, New York, to illustrate the overwhelming influence of race in local political decision making and the role that local policy making has played in shaping concentrated poverty.

2. Race and urban regimes

Two basic tenants of regime theory are widely agreed upon by scholars in the field: informal arrangements (regimes) consisting of private economic interests and local public

officials form to create a city's governing coalition; and these coalitions are mainly concerned with pursuing economic growth through mainstream development strategies (Imbroscio, 1997). Since economic growth is the main policy objective of regimes, case studies have tended to focus on the interrelationships among regime formation and maintenance, large development projects, and mayoral elections. One could further delineate the basic propositions of regime theory in the following manner. As a result of the structural constraints of capitalist democracy, elected officials make economic growth and development their priorities in urban politics; mayoral campaigns (either implicitly or explicitly) reflect these pro-growth priorities; private sector elites are the driving force in the formulation and implementation of major development policies and tend to gain the most from such policies; and working- and lower-class urban residents receive meager, if any, benefits from a policy program which places disproportionate emphasis on larger development projects.

This assessment of the politics of downtown in urban America is not in dispute. But the assumptions of this approach do not give much explanatory weight to how race influences a variety of other policy making processes at the local level. Moreover, to argue that lower-income urban residents fail to benefit from major redevelopment projects implicitly assumes that all lower-income residents, regardless of race, are essentially in the same predicament. Yet poverty in the U.S. is significantly greater among African Americans and Latinos than whites,[1] poverty is disproportionately concentrated in predominantly minority neighborhoods (Jargowsky, 1997; W.J. Wilson, 1987; W.J. Wilson, 1996), the vast majority (roughly 76%) of persons living in the poorest neighborhoods are members of minority groups (Jargowsky, 2003), and, as discussed above, African Americans are residentially segregated (Massey & Denton, 1993). The circumstances of poverty for Latinos and African Americans therefore differ significantly from those of the urban white poor.

Regime theory, however, defines governance narrowly, and therefore has not fully considered how local politics has both reflected and reinforced racial inequality. Close examination of public policies that have affected residential neighborhoods, particularly in housing and education, reveals that these issues have been heavily influenced by race. A more detailed discussion of regime analysis can better illustrate my arguments.

The most systematic and influential application of regime theory is Stone's *Regime Politics* (1989). This work clearly has a concern with inequality, and contains many references to racial conflict. But the story of Atlanta politics is ultimately a story of racial cooperation between the white business community and African American political leaders. Analysis of the impact of racism on city politics is, for the most part, confined to the pre-World War II period (pp. 13–21). For example, the discussion of school desegregation focuses on the peaceful desegregation of schools, not on the causes and effects of many years of a deliberately segregated school system (pp. 46–50). The apparently smooth implementation of desegregation maintained the city's reputation as a racially progressive southern city, which the business community had a tremendous stake in upholding. The discussion of Mayor Maynard Jackson's regime adopts a similar perspective. Although coming to power in 1973 with solid African American support, pursuing an agenda which gave more attention to neighborhoods, and adopting an aggressive affirmative policy, Stone concludes that white

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[1] In 1999, poverty rates for whites, African Americans, and Latinos were 7.7%, 23.6%, and 22.8%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

elites did not oppose Jackson for racial reasons: "When all of these events are considered together, it seems likely that race per se was less troubling to the white business elite than the more particular point that Jackson was electorally independent and had little background in Atlanta-style negotiation" (p. 106).

Further, there is no sustained discussion of the political origins of the segregation and concentrated poverty in Atlanta, which Massey and Denton rank as 1 of 16 hypersegregated urban areas (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 76). In his analysis of several major redevelopment projects, Stone focuses on the influence of business elites, and the impact of redevelopment on lower-income African Americans. While this approach shows how many redevelopment projects disrupted black residential life, the emphasis on the business community deflects attention away from the broader white population's racist beliefs and actions, and how these actions influenced local politics and shaped development.

Looking at the same city, however, other scholars have utilized different approaches and argued persuasively that race has been the driving force in Atlanta's physical and institutional development. In an exhaustive study, the historian Bayor (1996) maintains that the influence of race has been "wide ranging and touched all aspects of life—politics, housing, street and highway patterns, neighborhood formation, annexation, employment, basic city services, park and recreational space, health care, mass transit development, and schooling" (p. 255). Rather than looking only at a snapshot of school desegregation, Bayor examines the effects of several decades of segregated schools, from the late 19th century through the middle 1950s, and also addresses desegregation and the recent resegregation of Atlanta's schools (pp. 197–251). He contrasts the appearance of racial harmony, perpetuated by the white business community, with the underlying feelings of racial hostility among the white population that were widespread at the time of the original implementation of desegregation in 1961 (p. 255).

Other research on Atlanta also gives much more attention to race. In their study of Atlanta, Memphis, and Richmond, while conceding that race relations in Atlanta have historically been better than most Southern cities, Silver and Moeser (1995, p. 6) argue that "black community development in Southern cities involved a purer form of apartheid that constituted nothing less than the formation of a 'separate' city within the context of the rapidly expanding southern metropolis." Keiser (1997, p. 131) maintains that Atlanta's economic elites were not "innately more ambitious or less racist than elsewhere," and that political and economic leaders only conceded power because African Americans became a majority. Rutheiser (1996) argues that the city's positive image has been both carefully constructed and manipulated in order to preserve its reputation as a place distinct from the rest of the south. Sjoquist (2000) labels the stark contrast between the intense segregation and concentrated poverty in black neighborhoods with an economically booming downtown and suburbs the "Atlanta paradox." And Keating (2001) shows the support for residential segregation among a significant percentage of the white citizens of metropolitan Atlanta. These works place racial conflict and its effects at the center of inquiry, and more closely consider the pervasive impact of race on the city's development.

Research on northern cities, grounded in the regime approach, also understates how race has impacted local political outcomes. For example, Ferman's (1996) account of Chicago, although admitting that racism has been an important component in city politics, ultimately downplays its influence on shaping residential neighborhoods. The author assumes that

elite disinvestment has been the main cause of the deterioration of many of Chicago's neighborhoods (pp. 28, 29), which minimizes the extent of discrimination faced by African Americans in housing, employment, and education. Moreover, an emphasis on elite disinvestment inadvertently makes the history of neighborhood politics in Chicago seem almost racially neutral in that it implies that structural economic change hit black neighborhoods harder than white neighborhoods.

Several other analyses of Chicago, however, paint a picture of the tremendous influence of racial conflict in local political history. Hirsch (1983) describes the extreme measures taken by white neighborhoods and institutions to maintain segregation. Keiser (1997) argues that African Americans lacked the power to address two problems of particular concern to the black community-segregated neighborhoods and schools. Pinderhughes (1987) provides extensive documentation of the racism and institutional discrimination that African Americans faced in law enforcement and education beginning early in the 20th century. And this discrimination has had significant effects: the city was found to be one of the country's 16 "hypersegregated" urban areas (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 76).

Other accounts of northern cities in urban planning and history such as Philadelphia, Gary, and Detroit – each of which is "hypersegregated" (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 76) – also illustrate the critical role that race has played in urban politics and development. Bauman's (1987) work on public housing in Philadelphia clearly shows the extent to which white racism affected residential neighborhood development there. Catlin's (1993) account of Gary, Indiana, which had become a black majority city by 1970, reveals the white business elite's thorough lack of interest in cooperating with the city's first African American Mayor, Richard Hatcher, after his reelection in 1971: "The desertion of downtown Gary by the white business and professional class after Hatcher's 1971 reelection was expensive, divisive, and ultimately hurt the regional economy" (p. 207). Research on Detroit clearly shows the prevalence of racial conflict there, beginning before World War II (Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2000; Sugrue, 1996; Thomas, 1997). Thomas and Ritzdorf (1997) examine the role of race in urban planning in several cities, and plainly demonstrate the close link between the history of urban planning and contemporary racial living patterns.

Scholars of urban politics have confronted regime theory's application to the problem of urban inequality. The authors in Lauria (1997) give attention to other factors that shape urban political outcomes by attempting to merge regulation theory with regime theory. Several of the authors express concern with the problem of uneven development, which presumably means downtown growth and ghettoization taking place simultaneously. Yet there is only one significant discussion of race in the Lauria volume, which is offered by Cynthia Horan. Horan's (1997) analysis of the politics of race in Boston begins to get at several key questions, and provides a solid starting point for examining the significance of racism in shaping local political outcomes. Imbroscio (1997) also highlights some of the deficiencies of regime theory in terms of addressing inequality. But his assumption that the deterioration of residential neighborhoods has been the product of economic processes, exacerbated by the downtown business elite, does not address how racial conflict has shaped the creation of segregated places suffering from extreme economic deprivation.

To be sure, several scholars in the field have been critical of regime theory's lack of emphasis on racial politics. Nelson (2000) argues that the regime approach "fails to give adequate attention to the hierarchical racial structures and relations that systematically screen

Blacks out of informal bargaining and therefore blunt Black incorporation into local govern-ing coalitions" (p. 17). Other critiques have focused on questions related to development and electoral politics, including the relationship between racial politics and development policy (Cook & Lauria, 1995; D. Wilson, 1996), the role of racial politics in electoral and governing regimes (Whelan, Young, & Lauria, 1994), the effects of African American incorporation on black political activity (Reed, 1995), and the dynamics of black urban regimes themselves (Horan, 2002; Reed, 1988). But because these works tend to focus on issues related to elections/coalition building and development policy, none gives much attention to the full extent of racial politics. Much of the recent scholarship on education policy also places more emphasis on race, and examines the potential benefits of improvements in urban schools for students living in concentrated poverty (Portz, Stein, & Jones, 1999; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). But this work emphasizes how race affects the creation and implemen-tation of urban educational reforms, not how racial conflict has influenced the creation and maintenance of segregated schools, which contemporary reforms are intended to address.

There is a long line of research in urban politics that gives primary attention to race, but still focuses mainly on electoral politics, including the tangible benefits of a more diverse group of elected officials for minority communities (Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 1984, 1990, 1997; Eisenger, 1984; Karnig & Welch, 1980), and how race shapes the dynamics of urban electoral coalitions (Perry, 1999; Persons, 1993; Soneshein, 1993). Although each of these works is an important contribution to our understanding the relationship between race and local electoral politics, none examines questions related to the many ways that local conflicts structured by race have both directly and indirectly segregated housing and educational facilities as well as shaped patterns of development. Before discussing racial politics and policy making in Buffalo, it is necessary to discuss concentrated poverty and residential segregation in greater detail in order to illuminate the political dimensions of these phenomena.

3. Concentrated urban poverty

A large body of scholarship has developed that traces the causes and effects of con-centrated urban poverty (Boger and Wegner, 1996; Galster and Hill, 1992; Goldsmith & Blakely, 1992; Jargowsky, 1997, 2003; Jencks & Peterson, 1991; Katz, 1993; Massey & Denton, 1993; Murray, 1984; O'Connor, Tilly, & Bobo, 2001; D. Wilson, 1996; Wilson, 1987; W.J. Wilson, 1996). Structural approaches have focused on economic and residential patterns as main causal factors in their analyses (Jargowsky, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987; W.J. Wilson, 1996), while more conservative scholars have argued that exces-sive federal social welfare spending has been the main influence on current patterns of urban poverty (Murray, 1984). Numerous controversies have arisen regarding policy prescriptions for concentrated poverty, including the debate about race-specific policies versus univer-salistic policies (W.J. Wilson, 1996; Wilson, 1999), the desirability of either residential mobility or place-based policies (Fainstein & Markusen, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993), and even the usefulness of the term "underclass" to describe persons living in high-poverty areas (Feagin & Innis, 1989; Reed, 1992). The extensive attention given to the subject by scholars across a variety of disciplines speaks to its significance. I suggest that the field

of urban politics has not been a major participant in this discussion largely because of the field's treatment of racial politics.

For several reasons, segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods are a political phenomenon. First, geographically concentrated poverty is to a large extent the product of local and federal public policy choices. In addition, the mere existence of concentrated poverty is critical for American political discourse today because it enables commentators and elected officials to argue that urban, social welfare, and affirmative action policies have failed, and therefore should be scaled back or even eliminated. Liberal public policies have become the most commonly accepted, yet uncritically examined, explanations for a variety of social problems associated with concentrated poverty. Moreover, the existence of very poor neighborhoods has allowed the stigmatization of cities to flourish, caused further migration of the white population to the suburbs, and made multi-racial coalition building at all levels of government a much more challenging task.

To say that segregated neighborhoods are a political phenomenon, however, is not to dismiss how changing economic patterns have shaped the formation of urban poverty. Clearly any neighborhood with high rates of poverty and unemployment, compounded by little business activity, is in an extremely difficult economic predicament. But to assume that fundamental economic change has been the primary cause of the concentration of poverty rests on several assumptions, the most obvious of which is that African Americans were highly dependent on the kinds of manufacturing employment that urban areas (especially those in the Northeast and Midwest) have lost. Recognizing the problems with the deindustrialization approach, some scholars have questioned this argument as the cause of geographically concentrated poverty. For example, Fainstein has argued that rather than deindustrialization being the main cause of the current economic plight of urban minorities, African Americans suffer from "segmentation into low wage employment in growth industries" (Fainstein, 1986, p. 403). Steinberg (1995) has also discussed the empirical problems with relying on the deindustrialization thesis as the main cause of the geographic concentration of poverty in African American neighborhoods today. And historical scholarship has demonstrated the degree to which minorities have been discriminated against in terms of labor union membership and benefits, providing further evidence blacks were not full participants in the industrial economy (Iton, 2000; Quadagno, 1994; Sugrue, 1996).

Certainly the decreasing number of jobs located in many central cities has made the economic prospects for urban residents, particularly lower-income individuals, more daunting. The spatial mismatch between jobs and workers – the growth of entry level jobs in suburbs while potential employees for these jobs reside mainly in central cities – has received extensive scholarly attention (Yinger, 1995, pp. 147–153). But one needs to look beyond the changing macro economy in order to assess why very poor, segregated neighborhoods have developed in cities, which entails a closer examination of the role that local political structures have played in shaping contemporary urban residential patterns.

4. Racial politics in buffalo

In this section I examine the politics of race over the past several decades in Buffalo, New York, and argue that the residential segregation and concentrated poverty have been

Table 1
Buffalo population, 1930–2000

Year	Total population	African American population	Percent African American
1930	573,076	13,563	2.4
1940	575,901	17,563	3.1
1950	580,132	36,645	6.3
1960	532,759	70,904	13.3
1970	462,759	94,329	20.4
1980	357,870	95,116	26.6
1990	328,123	100,579	30.7
2000	292,648	134,645	36.6

substantially shaped by local policy making. Thus the Buffalo case is mainly a story of racial conflict, not cooperation. Segregation is the key component of the analysis because residential and institutional segregation reinforce preexisting patterns of economic inequality, and contribute directly to further discrimination. As Yinger (1995, p. 214) has suggested: "Segregation is not simply an incidental outcome of the discriminatory system, but is, in fact, a key reason why discrimination is so hard to eliminate—an outcome that becomes a cause."

Several of the events discussed occurred simultaneously with many regime-driven development projects in and around the central business district. But as an alternative to regime analysis, my approach goes beyond development policy and examines how race has shaped many policies that have impacted residential neighborhoods. Because of the emphasis on the role of local governing institutions and policy making, my approach is similar to the pluralist method (Dahl, 1961). But my emphasis on the continued role of race and racism in the policy making and implementation processes is fundamentally at odds with basic tenets of pluralist thought, most notably the assumption that African Americans and Latinos are essentially analogous to previous immigrant groups (Irish, Poles, Italians, and so forth), and will therefore move up the socioeconomic ladder accordingly over time.

In terms of demographic characteristics, Buffalo is fairly representative of older Northeastern and Midwestern cities. As shown in Table 1, total city population peaked in 1950, and the minority population (the substantial majority of whom are African American), has consistently increased over the past several decades. The 2000 census revealed that Buffalo remains a majority white city, but only by a slim margin. Just below 52% of the city today is white, with African Americans and Latinos making up roughly 37% and 8% of the population, respectively.

Like several cities discussed above, Buffalo has been found to be hypersegregated (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 76). Of the 16 urban areas with this designation based on 1980 census data, only Buffalo and Newark experienced increases in all five dimensions of segregation between 1980 and 1990 (Denton, 1994), and anecdotal evidence suggests little change since that time. The city also has a high rate of poverty, with approximately 27% of residents living in poverty recently (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). As shown in Table 2, however, poverty has been about twice as common among blacks as whites in recent decades.[2]

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[2] The census did not publish poverty rates for specific racial groups in municipalities prior to 1980.

Table 2
Poverty rates in buffalo by race, 1980–2000

Year	Whites	African Americans
1980	15.0%	36.3%
1990	17.7%	37.7%
2000	18.3%	34.4%

In terms of neighborhood patterns, the black community developed on the lower east side early in the 20th century, and has migrated throughout much of the east side since that time. Most of the lowest-income areas today are located on the lower and central east side, and are overwhelmingly African American. In recent years, census tracts in this area have had poverty rates ranging between roughly 20% and 50% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001).[3] While in certain respects the social organization of high-poverty east side neighborhoods remains strong (Taylor, 1991), without question concentrated poverty has become a chronic problem in Buffalo.

Since Buffalo has been among the nation's hardest hit areas in terms of the loss of industry, at the outset it should be made clear that African Americans were never heavily dependent on manufacturing employment in western New York. Data from the mid-20th century show high unemployment rates among blacks, with roughly 26%, 17% and 18% officially counted as unemployed in 1940, 1950, and 1960, respectively. African Americans were also substantially over-represented in lower-paying service sector jobs, and under-represented in higher-paying manufacturing employment (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1941, 1951, 1961). In fact, discrimination was so widespread in the steel industry that in 1970 the federal government filed suit against the largest manufacturing employer, Bethlehem Steel, along with affiliated unions, for failure to comply with federal civil rights law (*U. S. v. Bethlehem Steel*, 312 F. Supp. 977), which the defendants did not even contest. The only question for resolution was the nature of the remedy. Prior to the suit, Bethlehem employed close to 20,000 individuals. In the early 1970s, however, the company began to lay off thousands of workers, and so the case never really had the chance to trigger any significant progress for African Americans in the steel industry. The suit did, however, reveal the extent of discrimination faced by racial minorities in manufacturing.

In terms of descriptive representation in city government, Buffalo has followed the pattern of many other African American minority cities. The city has a standard strong mayor-council form of government, with a common council of nine members, each elected from a geographic district. In November 2002, city residents supported a referendum that reduced the number of council members to nine by eliminating all four at-large seats, including

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[3] The census tracts used in this analysis of the east side are the following: 14.02, 15, 25.01, 25.02, 26, 27.01, 27.02, 31, 32.01, 32.02, 33.01, 33.02, 34, and 35. In 1970, African Americans made up 76% of the residents of this area; by 1980, this figure increased to 84%; by 1990, to 89%; and to 90% by 2000. The poverty rates in these tracts between 1970 and 2000 were as follows: 1970: 35.7%, 31.8%, 28.0%, 35.7%, 32.9%, 20.7%, 13.5%, 31.6%, 27.7%, 29.7%, 14.6%, 20.1%, 18.9%, and 19.7%; 1980: 48.1%, 35.0%, 47.9%, 47.7%, 33.0%, 44.1%, 22.3%, 50.3%, 41.8%, 39.5%, 19.5%, 31.2%, 31.6%, and 36.8%; 1990: 49.4%, 48.1%, 25.5%, 44.7%, 43.6%, 39.8%, 46.6%, 49.3%, 46.4%, 48.0%, 22.8%, 37.6%, 37.1%, and 44.9%; 2000: 37.3%, 29.9%, 59.5%, 37.4%, 36.8%, 32.9%, 50.2%, 44.7%, 32.9%, 35.2%, 25.5%, 30.2%, 36.9%, and 40.2%.

council president. This vote was racially divisive as three of the four most recent at-large members were African Americans. The new council faced several unsuccessful legal challenges, but was implemented in January 2004.

Despite the fact that African American candidates have twice won the Democratic mayoral primary, the city has yet to elect a black mayor. The African American community gained representation on the common council, board of the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA), boards related to urban redevelopment, and the board of education in 1952, 1959, 1960, and 1963, respectively. By the late 1960s, African Americans had achieved a measure of descriptive representation commensurate with the population characteristics of the city. However, many issues, particularly those involving housing and the school system, pitted most whites against most African Americans, which has often neutralized the black minority. Although having a majority for one term on the common council (2000–2001), African Americans are now again a minority on the council.

The first significant actions of local government which clearly showed the influence of racial politics were in the 1930s, when the city adopted a public housing program. The federal government stressed the desirability of maintaining residential segregation when it formulated the neighborhood composition rule, which held that any public housing development should not alter the racial composition of the community in which it was located (Meyerson & Banfield, 1955, p. 121). Because of the rule's vagueness, however, municipal housing authorities often used their discretion to racially segregate residents. Thus developments with African American residents were generally built (after bitter public debates) in neighborhoods already possessing significant numbers of black residents (Bauman, Hummon, & Muller, 1991; Hirsch, 1983; Meyerson & Banfield, 1955; Sugrue, 1996). This is precisely what happened in Buffalo.

Beginning in the mid-1930s, several public housing developments were built in neighborhoods around the city, but African Americans were only allowed to live in the Willert Park apartments, located on the lower east side, because this was the neighborhood where the small black population lived. Whether to allow African Americans to live in public housing located in white neighborhoods became a major public debate in 1941–1942, when several white neighborhoods mobilized to prevent housing for blacks employed in war-related industries from being built in their communities. For several months, the federal government proposed a variety of sites for the housing, almost all of which were in white neighborhoods. However, one white neighborhood after another successfully kept the housing out, and so it was eventually constructed adjacent to the Willert Park apartments (Evans, 1946). This decision increased the residential segregation of African Americans, and sent a clear signal that enough anti-integration sentiment among whites could translate directly into local public policy.

Despite the local Urban League's staunch opposition to public housing segregation, which it repeatedly made clear beginning in the early days of the program (Evans, 1942), the policy of complete segregation continued for several decades. In 1989, civil rights advocates filed a suit against the BMHA and HUD, with one of its central issues being the segregation of public housing (*Comer v. Kemp*, 824 F. Supp. 1113). The case was settled in 1993, but desegregation of public housing has become extremely challenging as the vast majority of non-elderly residents of the city's developments are African American.

The implementation of federal urban renewal in Buffalo also revealed racial divisions and adversely affected the east side.[4] Many scholars have noted that urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s disproportionately impacted African American residents and businesses (Gans, 1966; Greer, 1965; Jacobs, 1961; Kaplan, 1963; Zimmer, 1964). But as Teaford (2000) has pointed out, the federal urban renewal program was complex, and was originally supported by many different constituencies, albeit for different reasons. Central city business leaders and local elected officials, both with strong ties to Washington, wanted to clean up low-income areas adjacent to downtown, and social welfare and housing advocates wanted to improve the housing of lower-income residents. This odd coalition was also evident in Buffalo. Initially the program enjoyed the support of several different groups, including most African Americans. Black support was based on the very poor living conditions of the lower east side, which had been noted by the national media and a state commission (Bart & Kraar, 1958; Krumholz, 1965; TSHC, 1956). Despite the vocal objections of some black organizations, associated with the Republican Party and certain religious congregations, the project was adopted and the city acquired the land in the renewal area.

The negative consequences of the project for the black community became painfully apparent after demolition was completed in 1961. The Ellicott District Redevelopment Project covered a 36-square block area on the lower east side, and displaced 2219 families, over 80% of who were African Americans (Buffalo Urban League, 1959). Yet after demolition, the land sat vacant for several years as the common council and mayor engaged in a partisan debate regarding the selection of a developer. The lack of progress on housing construction was critical because the African American population was increasing substantially, but still prevented from living in many parts of the city and suburbs. Although housing was built sporadically in and around the renewal area in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it had become clear that race was driving neighborhood politics, and that concentrated poverty was increasing on much of the east side.

The design of the expressway system in Buffalo and western New York also reveals the impact of racial politics. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was a fair amount of support in many neighborhoods (both white and African American) for the construction of expressways. But the effects of highway construction were far from racially neutral. The persistent housing discrimination faced by African Americans meant that blacks had few residential options when displaced by a highway, unlike whites, even those of lower income, who had many more residential choices. The problem of housing discrimination has been exacerbated by the city's inability to pass a comprehensive fair housing ordinance on several occasions between 1968 and 1989.[5] Thus while the white population dispersed throughout the city and region, the vast majority of African Americans were confined to the east side.

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[4] This discussion is not meant to be a comprehensive account of the complexities of urban renewal in Buffalo but only to show that the slow pace of renewal, in conjunction with other discriminatory policies, negatively impacted the east side and also illustrated racial divisions in city politics.

[5] Both federal and state housing law exempt owner-occupied, one- and two-family dwellings from coverage, but such housing is quite common in Buffalo. In 1960, 42% of all residences were owner-occupied, most of which were one and two family units (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1961). In 2000, 44% of residences were owner-occupied (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001).

Education policy also illustrates the significant influence of race. During the 1950s, because of changing demographics and public pressure, the school board, mayor, and common council, took several actions, including redrawing attendance lines and altering district policies regarding student transfers, among several others, which deliberately segregated the school system. In 1976, the federal district court found several local and state level governmental actors responsible for the intentional segregation of the schools (*Arthur v. Nyquist*, 415 F. Supp. 904). But this hardly made Buffalo unique, even among Northern cities. In the years following *Brown*, dozens of cities, in all regions of the country, were found to have intentionally segregated their school systems.

The effects of segregated schools were substantial. Dropout rates at the African American academic high school during segregation were much higher than at other schools, reaching 22–24% by the mid-1960s (Buffalo Board of Education, 1983–1984). Along with the segregation of students, the district court also found that staff were segregated, and that minority staff were significantly under-represented in the schools (*Arthur v. Nyquist*, 415 F. Supp. 904). In a city that is experiencing greater levels of residential segregation, public schools offer one of the only places where significant inter-racial contact could occur. The segregation of schools, however, eliminated any real opportunity for this type of contact, greatly circumscribed African American students' connection with the opportunity structure, thus ultimately contributed to high unemployment and poverty rates in black neighborhoods. The school desegregation court order was lifted in 1995, but because of the nagging presence of residential segregation, the re-segregation of the schools in the future remains a real possibility.

The 16-year reign of Mayor James Griffin, who, despite being a Democrat, was first elected in 1977 with an electoral plurality on the Conservative Party ticket, was the logical continuation of the policies discussed above. Griffin was extremely popular among the city's white working class, socially conservative voters. He opposed school desegregation, open housing, and public housing, and was a strong supporter of downtown development. Griffin's supporters shared his values and outlook, and also benefited tremendously from preferential service delivery and patronage. Moreover, Griffin's public comments often conveyed nostalgia and a longing for the past, when the city was a much less racially diverse place. Notwithstanding his populist rhetoric, however, Griffin was closely tied to the downtown business community, and he pushed several major development projects forward during his four terms in office. In return, major elements of the business community, including the Chamber of Commerce and several downtown financial institutions, backed him generously in his reelection efforts. Thus an assessment of development policy during his tenure would clearly reveal the existence of regimes. Two of his reelections, 1985 and 1989, were quite divisive and illustrated the cleavages not only within the Democratic Party, but also between whites and African Americans generally. The current mayor, Democrat Anthony Masiello, first elected in 1993 and reelected in 1997 and 2001, has successfully put together a biracial coalition, and enjoys support among many constituencies that Griffin alienated. Masiello's biracial coalition is precarious, however, especially in the aftermath of the reduction of the common council, which the mayor supported but many African Americans opposed.

In sum, race has been at the center of neighborhood politics in Buffalo over the past several decades. Since blacks were not full participants in the prosperity of industrial

manufacturing, economic restructuring should not be viewed as the primary cause of concentrated poverty. Numerous political decisions, almost all of which were publicly debated, have been structured around race, and the local political process has significantly shaped residential segregation and concentrated poverty. The pro-growth regimes that numerous scholars have identified elsewhere have also existed in Buffalo, and several major development projects, including a baseball stadium, hockey arena, office buildings, and upscale housing, have resulted from the influence of these regimes. But while private business interests have worked with mayoral administrations to advance development projects, the common council, school board, housing authority, redevelopment boards, and mayor have adopted numerous policies which have reflected the racist sentiments of their white constituents and have substantially impacted residential neighborhoods.

5. Conclusion

An empirical focus on regimes fails to recognize the tremendous influence of race in urban politics and does not properly consider the many ways that local policies have shaped patterns of residential segregation thus the concentration of poverty. While regime theory is correct in its assessment of pro-growth coalitions driving downtown development, another policy realm exists in urban politics, the realm of neighborhood politics. Housing policy, the school system, small-scale development, and even law enforcement and basic service delivery are critical neighborhood issues, and are not primarily influenced by elite-driven regimes. As the Buffalo case illustrates, elites did not manufacture the complete segregation of public housing beginning in the 1930s; the segregation of the schools beginning in the 1950s; the shape of the expressway system beginning in the 1950s; neighborhood opposition to open housing beginning in the 1960s; or the election of a backward-looking mayor in the 1970s. While elites certainly influenced the nature of urban renewal policy in the 1950s, the project was initially supported by many groups and the majority of residents, and the council's failure to follow through on the project in a timely fashion revealed the white majority's lack of interest in housing for the black community. Admittedly, elites often went along with the policies discussed above, and in some cases took actions which reinforced them. But the racism of white neighborhoods was the main influence on these events, and, in most cases, local officials acted under the intense pressure of their constituents to enact policies that directly and indirectly segregated African Americans.

The lack of attention to racist politics and policies in the urban politics literature has important implications. First, the tacit acceptance of the explanation that macro-economic change has been the main cause of concentrated poverty deflects attention away from questions related to the racism of local residents. Such a perspective substantially downplays the white population's vocal support for segregated neighborhoods and institutions, while it also de-emphasizes racism among white elites. Second, scholars of urban politics have been virtually absent from the debate about residential segregation and concentrated poverty. Without a more complete recognition of the local political causes of segregation, arguments associating urban decline with either the alleged failure of liberal public policies or social problems become increasingly unquestioned.

Scholars of urban political economy (Logan & Moloch, 1987; Molotch, 1976; Swanstrom, 1985) have made a strong case against the arguments of the public choice school (Peterson, 1981) by showing the many ways that urban governments promote economic growth, effectively undermining the assumptions of a "free market" perspective. And these arguments have contributed to policy debate. For example, today the public seems more willing to question the fairness of government subsidies for business, such as public funding for professional sports stadiums and arenas.

Arguments linking concentrated urban poverty either with social welfare or affirmative action policies, crime, or deindustrialization, are often accepted at face value, however, because scholars of urban politics have not paid sufficient attention to local racial politics. Without critically examining how race has shaped urban politics and development, it is much more difficult to challenge analyses suggesting that liberal public policies, social problems, or economic changes have caused the current plight of the nation's poorest neighborhoods.

Local governments face many constraints today (Judd & Swanstrom, 2002), and are dependent on many external variables over which they have little control. This is especially true in Buffalo. Because of chronic fiscal problems, the city's finances were placed under the direction of a New York State-created control board in 2003. But local governments continue to make decisions that impact residential neighborhoods. Considering the continued segregation of urban areas, studying the local policies that affect residential neighborhoods necessarily requires an emphasis on racial and ethnic politics. Thorough assessment of the role of race in influencing these policies and careful reflection on policies that could positively impact disadvantaged areas is critically important for the study of urban politics, and could help redirect the larger debate about urban policy as well.

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