
As I write this review there is major uproar over TV sitcom star Roseanne Barr’s racist tweet against Valerie Jarrett, an African American woman and leading advisor to President Obama both during his administration and political ascent. Yet, lost in all the hand-wringing over Barr’s revolting words have been Jarrett’s own anti-black poor and working class deeds. Through her political posts and real estate ventures in Chicago in the 1990s and 2000s Jarrett promoted substantively racist gentrification initiatives, particularly the destruction of public housing. As CEO of the Habitat Company—a for-profit entity which managed poorly-maintained low-income housing developments in Chicago where many displaced from public housing sought refuge—Jarrett defended her profit-making by invoking neoliberal commonsense: “Government is just not as good at owning and managing as the private sector because the incentives are not there.” (Applebaum 2008).1

Aaron Schneider’s fascinating study, *Renew Orleans? Globalized Development and Worker Resistance after Katrina*, opens by recounting the police violence used against those opposing the very same racist capitalist development agenda Jarrett advocated and oversaw while in the halls of power in Chicago and Washington. On 20 December 2007, just two years after Hurricane Katrina and in the midst of the city’s worst affordable housing crisis since the Civil War, the New Orleans police unleashed tasers and pepper spray inside and outside the city council chambers against people protesting a vote to green-light the mass demolition of the city’s public housing. The successor, Jarrett-advised, Obama administration, which maintained federal control of New Orleans’ housing authority begun under the Bush administration, continued and
furthered his predecessor’s demolition and privatization makeover of public housing in New Orleans and across the country.

The tumult in New Orleans’ city council chambers, and the role of the black elite in Washington and New Orleans in the broader attack, captures the central concern and focus of Schneider’s study: the exclusionary new economic development model, backed by white and black elites, that solidified in post-Katrina New Orleans and the working class resistance this super-exploitative and oppressive regime generated. In a model for a politically-engaged, thoroughly researched, relevant social science, Schneider makes clear—rather than obscure, as most studies do—what side of the class barricades he stands on. “[T]his book seeks”, he explains in the introduction, “to tell the story of New Orleans”, and through that “engage in the political struggle for equitable development” both in New Orleans and beyond (p.3).

Schneider’s central argument is that post-Katrina New Orleans represents, in concentrated form, broader capitalist globalization processes taking place around the world. New Orleans underwent a rapid, post-Katrina political consolidation of a new globally-oriented local elite that displaced the previous “black urban regime” political machine. The now hegemonic local elite tied to global capital accumulated power over decades in various “satellite government” entities—“boards, commissions, and public-benefit corporations … [that] exercise public authority in combination, and occasionally in competition, with formal legislative and executive powers” (p.41). Schneider emphasizes that the “local members of the globally oriented elites” do not directly “call the shots”, but rather they “position themselves as the necessary intermediaries” for the formal members of what sociologist William Robinson (2004) terms the “transnational capitalist class”.

The post-Katrina dislocation of low-income black communities, combined with the elite-capture of the massive post-Katrina infusion of public and private dollars, allowed this globally oriented faction of capital to move beyond the satellite agencies and seize and consolidate its
control of the pinnacle of the local state, the mayor’s office. This elite–oriented toward international accumulation in tourism, services, and construction–used its control over the local state, and satellite governance, to deepen a “dualist” development model, one in which “sectors and actors adapted to global accumulation could flourish”, while most of the economy, without linkages to the global circuits, are left behind (p.27). The bulk of workers that labor in the high-profit, globally-ascendant enclave sectors are by no means privileged, but rather confront low wages, abusive working conditions, job insecurity, and a segmented labor force divided by race, gender and citizenship. The local, globally-oriented political elite protect these conditions by guaranteeing limited regulation, and repress, or at least provide no protections for, worker organizing efforts.

The first half of the book elaborates the study’s key concepts–dual development, class formation, labor segmentation along ascriptive categories, satellite governance, and urban regimes–and outlines a regime-theory informed historical analysis of political and economic transformation in New Orleans. In the final chapter of this section, on the post-Katrina political rise of the new globally-oriented elite, Schneider takes on the much-debated question of the fate of black political power. Drawing on the insightful analyses of Adolph Reed and Cedric Johnson, Schneider argues the black political class, and what Reed calls the larger “Black Professional Managerial Class” (BPMC), served capital well under the previous “black urban regime”. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the global elite, the old forms of rule, in part due to some concessions provided to the regime’s black working class electoral base, were now seen as a fetter to consolidating the dual development model.

The post-Katrina elite reshuffling by no means signifies the BPMC being discarded, but rather they have been included as partners in the new, multi-racial, dualist development regime. This is measured by their incorporation into elected office, satellite governance, and–although Schneider does not provide much discussion of this–in various real estate and other development
projects (as are other sections of local capital). The recent election of LaToya Cantrell as the city’s first black woman as mayor—a fulsome supporter of the dual-development model—following two four-year terms of the previous white mayor, provides further support for Schneider’s thesis.

What ties all the different factions of the local elite together is their full agreement with the “dual development” model of funneling state resources to this sector and maintaining repressive conditions for labor. “Diversity”, defined in narrow upper-class terms, we might say is the legitimating ideology. At times conflict, often framed in “racial justice” terms, does emerge over a “division of the spoils” among the local elite (p.159). But what is never questioned are the core features of the model, ones that offer the working class few benefits, particularly the black working class majority. Thus, as with the Barr-Jarrett controversy, how the various members of the elite, in violation of diversitarian ideology, are disrespected becomes a controversy. In contrast, in a classic example of the second and third faces of power, questions over the class inequities of the dualist development model—including the privatization of housing, hospitals, and schools that workers rely on for social reproduction—are either kept off the agenda or rejected on “common sense” grounds (Gaventa 1980).

The second section of this rich study examines the ascending sectors and the pockets of labor resistance that emerged, as well as a concluding chapter on the demise of manufacturing that did not fit the dual development model. The closure of the Avondale shipyards, formerly one of the largest employers in the area, underscores that deindustrialization is by no means inevitable, but driven by class interests. The local, globally-oriented elite—in part because of the threat to the super-exploitative dualist sectors posed by the relatively high wages and good working conditions in manufacturing produced over decades of “joined-up” labor-community struggle—had no interest in using their political influence to keep the yards open.
Another key factor behind Avondale’s demise—reflecting broader patterns—is growing financialization of the manufacturing sector. In a classic example of what labor educator Les Leopold (2013) calls “financial strip mining”, Northrop Grumman, a major defense contractor, spun off the shipyards to a new entity, piled it up with debt, and used the proceeds to finance a $4 billion stock buyback (p.153). In a parable of the broader financialization of the US economy, the stock holders made a fortune from deindustrialization, while, as we have seen across the US, yet another working class community was left, as Samuel Bowles and colleagues titled their 1983 book on deindustrialization, a “wasteland”.

As with all important works, Schneider leaves us with unexplored lines of inquiry for future research. The most urgent and pressing question for those in New Orleans and across the US and world “engage[d] in the political struggle for equitable development”—the primary audience for Schneider—is how to develop an effective political challenge to growing inequality. Schneider does document various forms of working class resistance—or, as he conceptualizes them, “working classes”, underscoring the division by ascriptive categories—that did emerge. Yet, this resistance, he acknowledges, was unable to forge an alternative counter-hegemonic challenge to the dualist development model, including a “political vehicle for working classes” (p.96, 158).

How can that advance be made? How can we move from resistance, from fighting what we are against, to uniting behind a coherent political alternative? To engage this crucial question we need more in-depth studies of movements (and internal study, debate, and discussions within our movements), including the role played by the ubiquitous non-profit industrial complex, which is a major player in New Orleans and many other urban contexts. How, for example, do single-issue struggles that foundations tend to fund, often based on some ascriptive category, became a block on what Schneider terms “joined-up” struggles that unite workplace and community issues? How, furthermore, does insertion into the non-profit structure create
obstacles to forging a working class “political vehicle” that Schneider convincingly argues is needed? How, if forged, can this political vehicle extend “direct action in the streets” into “boundaries of normal politics” without at the same time undermining and bureaucratizing those very struggles that are the basis of popular power? Establishing, as Rosa Luxemburg (1970) emphasized, democratic forms of organization becomes paramount.

Another important question raised by Schneider’s study is that of scale. While clearly an alternative development agenda has to be forged at the local level, it cannot be limited to that terrain. Schneider’s study highlights the limitations of David Imbroscio’s (2010) call—in his otherwise convincing critique of the solutions to urban problems proffered by regime theory and the “liberal expansionism” school of Peter Dreier and colleagues (2004)—for “local economic alternative development strategies” (or LEADS). This localist approach can be too easily corralled by the non-profit structure, often framed along identity lines, into an initiative fully compatible with neoliberal market logic, what Adolph Reed (2015) calls the “left-wing of neoliberalism”. Likewise, a purely localist project is susceptible to being harnessed by a contending elite that is primarily concerned with gaining a larger “division of the spoils”.

Clearly, as Cedric Johnson (2017) argues, any viable alternative working class project to the reigning dual development model has to be based on challenging market logic. Concretely, this means a political set of demands calling for the decommodification of basic needs like health, education, housing, and transportation, while guaranteeing well paying, socially productive jobs for all. This is a program that offers an alternative to dual development in New Orleans and across the country, urban and rural communities alike, one that speaks to the pressing needs of millions of workers across all ascriptive categories. A movement based on these demands could build real working class political power. Just as surely, this movement would confront intense hostility from the capitalist class, including the faction represented by Valerie Jarrett as well as their ostensible elite foes.
Endnote

1 For more on Jarrett’s role in promoting gentrification and public housing demolition as head of the city’s planning and development department, see Pattillo (2008: 240-257).

References


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