



MIAMI UNIVERSITY'S
**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT**
IN OVER-THE-RHINE

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**INDIAN RESERVATIONS, TROJAN HORSES, AND
ECONOMIC MIX**

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“It’s all just a little bit of history repeating” (Shirley Bassey and the Propeller Heads)

In Cincinnati today the mantra guiding development is “economic mix.” It’s curious, this economic mix. In a country arguably more geographically segregated than it has ever been in its history, one wonders why economic mix dominates the developmental imagination. But on closer inspection, while the hum is ubiquitous, resonating at high frequencies and drowning out all challengers, economic mix is not really evenly applied. No, economic mix is pronounced worthy only in underdeveloped neighborhoods like Over-the-Rhine. Nobody talks of pursuing economic mix in Indian Hill or Hyde Park.

The prevailing assumptions circulating in and through economic mix, animating it with a false and deceptive commonsense that is beyond reproach, are many:

-It is an absolute good, well beyond question or justification. Having neighborhoods with a range of incomes and races is automatically positive.

-Economic mix travels under many aliases, including “mixed-income development,” “Over-the-Rhine is everybody’s neighborhood,” and “all current residents will be protected from displacement.”

-Economic mix is delivered through gentrification (which is not the same thing as equitable development). This too has its automatic pretensions. Developers and planners need only to stir in some market-rate housing in neighborhoods like OTR then, presto, “economic mix”! Over-the-Rhine, it is said, will now be a better neighborhood because it will have a “better mix of people.”

Apparently, poor folks are better off with rich people living around them.

You will pardon local community activists and the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement for resisting these prevailing assumptions and their chauvinistic core, and for having a more nuanced and complete understanding of the false promises of economic mix.

All terms have political connotations, and economic mix is no different. Constituencies struggle over the meaning of various terms—it is an important political project, on which much rides. Why else did Republicans, for example, invest so heavily in substituting the “death tax” for the estate tax, and “climate change” for global warming? Economic mix comes on down courtesy of the power structure; it did not come from the People's Movement. And the political meanings surrounding the term serve that structure's interests. Example? By its very essence economic mix presumes the existence and continued acceptance of a class-based society. If you are one, like me, who still holds to the goal of eliminating poverty, especially race-based, ghettoized poverty, even advocating a progressive concept of economic mix already positions you to a rearguard action (more on this in a moment).

Is economic mix actually possible in America today? A more nuanced understanding of economic mix begins by calling mainstream America to task about the way it thinks about race relations and racism today, with particular regards to ghettoized inner-cities. That racial inequality and discrimination abound should be obvious, but how do we account for racism and discrimination at a time when few Americans ever consider themselves racist? “How is it possible,” writes sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in his *Racism Without Racists*, “to have [a] tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant? More important, how do whites explain the apparent contradiction between their professed color blindness and the United States' color-coded inequality?” (Bonilla-Silva, 2). For Bonilla-Silva and many other scholars, “Most whites assert they ‘don't see any color, just people,’” and that they aspire to live according to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s challenge to judge people “by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin” (1). Such are the contours of what many scholars call the “new racism”—the new commonsense of the colorblind or post civil rights era, characterized by a new racial ideology that actually sustains racial inequality while allowing whites and racial structures of privilege (white supremacy) off the hook.

How does this new racism of colorblindness play itself out in the black inner-city, in a community like Over-the-Rhine? Indeed, what does it mean to advocate colorblindness at an historical time where too many African Americans experience “mass unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disenfranchisement” (Marable); are trapped in intractable, ghettoized poverty with few well-paying jobs available;

and where the prison-industrial complex and the police state are merely the latest vehicles to “racially enclose” blacks to keep them in their place? Just how does white America perceive the inner-city? If the recent book *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City* by Steve Macek is any indication, not so well. This book concerns itself mostly with the decades of the 1980s and 90s in looking at how downtown, inner-city America became painted as “violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts, and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behavior no longer apply” (viii). Macek convincingly argues how this conscious, ideological campaign came to depict inner-city conditions as a “moral panic,” where an urban underclass of working-class blacks and Latinos became “so deviant, murderous, and immoral as to constitute a serious danger to the nation’s security and well-being” (xiv). From the point of view of the white imagination, colorblinded by the filters of the new racism, such conditions of the black inner-city is a black problem, having nothing to do with whites and fixable only by blacks.

Is it really too extreme to suggest that white society never intended to fully include blacks and other people of color and shows no inclination to bring about such inclusion and equality? History verifies this. After abolishing slavery and establishing Black Reconstruction, white America retrenched to establish the legal segregation of Jim Crow legislation. And then after the overthrow of Jim Crow by the Second Black Reconstruction of the 1950s and 60s, white society again regrouped to establish the new racism, less overt, and completely effective in vacating any theory that might hold society responsible for the problems of socially and economically oppressed groups. As black legal scholar Derrick Bell bleakly puts it, “each wave of racial change, reform and apparent progress, in the end, merely reconstitutes black subordination on a new plane” (Bobo and Smith, 184).

Hold this thought and consider a second example of a more nuanced understanding of economic mix that does not bode well for its success. It is a lesson from the history of US-Native American relations from the mid 19th century, a lesson that illuminates interesting parallels with Over-the-Rhine.

In his *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* Jeffrey Ostler reflects upon two competing conceptions about the Sioux Indians by American citizens. In the 1870s,

The stated purpose of U.S. policy was assimilation. Although many officials and missionaries were undoubtedly sincere when they professed a desire to rescue savages for civilization, assimilation functioned in the larger scheme of things as a rationale for the dispossession of Indian lands and the destruction of diversity in the name of national homogeneity. In practice, Christian and secular ideas about the common humanity of all peoples were

overwhelmed by the corollary belief that existing Indian ways of life were heathen and primitive. The result was a form of management that was at best paternalistic and often simply racist (8).

Ostler gets more interesting:

Remarkably, as the Sioux began living on reservations in the late 1870s, many Sioux leaders genuinely thought they might be able to work out a relationship with the United States that would allow them to preserve some of their land and ways of life, while adjusting to new conditions and demands. By the late 1880s, however, as the United States relentlessly cracked down on Sioux ways of life and demanded further cessions of land, these hopes began to seem elusive (8).

There's plenty to unpack in these two passages. The first quote fascinatingly depicts how two irreconcilable ideas came to be resolved in the American psyche of the time. On one hand, there was the "undoubtedly sincere" belief that assimilation for Indians was possible and desirable. But on the other hand was the corollary belief about Indians being heathen and savage, a view that facilitated extermination and dispossession. The corollary belief won out.

The lesson here for Over-the-Rhine is also grim. In ways reminiscent of what Ostler portrays about the Sioux, two irreconcilable ideas are battling themselves out in the current American psyche about the inner-city. While, on the one hand Cincinnatians chant their mantra about economic mix, the corollary belief permeating mainstream America on the other hand is the gripping fear associated with the black inner-city. How does economic mix come to resolve the "moral panic" of a "wild" and "deviant" black underclass sitting on prime real estate? How will the contemporary societal mindset resolve this fissure? With history as our guide, why should anyone believe that economic mix is possible? Will not the contemporary corollary belief that fears the Other, fears blacks and homeless folks, and that automatically equates young, black males with criminality, win out? History is repeating itself.

Need more evidence? Consider the intriguing concept introduced by social scientist Arjun Appadurai in his *Fear of Small Numbers*. Appadurai evokes the term "econocide," which refers to new modes of violence playing out across the world in the wake of massive inequalities and the rapidity of change produced by world capitalism. To Appadurai econocide does not just mean that whole sections of the world are undergoing death by economic means. He says something else: "Econocide is a worldwide tendency to arrange the disappearance of the losers in the great drama of globalization" (41). "Arranging the disappearance of the losers" sounds just like the contemporary version of Ostler's corollary belief about the Sioux that

led to their “disappearance” by extermination and dispossession of their land. For Over-the-Rhine econocide is precisely what is transpiring. “Arranging the disappearance of the losers” is the game plan, evidenced by “crime prevention” through police sweeps (Operation Vortex), mass incarceration, calls for a new jail, more police officers, more surveillance cameras, more punitive legislation on panhandling, and more procurements for military hardware; displacement by gentrification; and social cleansing by criminalizing the homeless and relocating the Drop Inn Center—to name a few of the obvious occurrences.

I’m not suggesting that what is happening in OTR today is the equivalent of the genocidal force of power and forced dispossession of life experienced by the Indians. There is no equality of pain in this equation. But pain there is. And community activists should not pursue the same path as the Indians, which is the lesson of the second quote above by Ostler. Think of what it must have been like for Sioux leaders on the reservations in the 1870s/80s, motivated by the official buzz about Indian assimilation, genuinely trying to work out a relationship with the United States because they saw an opening to preserve some of their ways of life, only then to have their people cruelly broken down from the full genocidal thrust of extermination, removing all hope.

Learning from this lesson, Over-the-Rhine activists remain leery of mainstream jubilations of economic mix and its lure of inclusion, not wanting to find later that they have been displaced and dispossessed of their land. What happened to the Sioux was that two irreconcilable positions—assimilation and extermination—became conflated: assimilation came to be extermination. The Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement cannot allow a parallel conflation: that economic mix comes to be displacement and dispossession.

Is there a way out for the People’s Movement? Yes, there is. The commonsense meanings of economic mix need radical redefinition, something the Sioux could not do with the concepts of assimilation swirling in their time. In its prevailing, mainstream understanding, supposedly delivered seamlessly through gentrification, economic mix will never bear fruit for the poor and oppressed. Economic mix sounds well and fine, but it’s more like a Trojan Horse—seemingly a gift for OTR residents to include them in their own neighborhood undergoing drastic transition, but really harboring a sinister force plotting their demise.

It’s hard to argue against economic mix because the knee-jerk response is to evoke the binary and say that one advocates separatism. Such has been the fate projected onto the People’s Movement by the likes of Jim Tarbell, former Mayor Charlie Luken, Laure Quinlivan, and scholars who should know better such as Zane Miller and Bruce Tucker. Separatism has never been the goal of the People’s Movement. Its position is more in line with what professor Iris Marion Young

provocatively puts on the table in her *Inclusion and Democracy*. Young is an anti-segregationist, but also holds that people “desire to live and associate with others for whom they feel particular affinity” (Young, 2000, 216). Clearly there is a fine line here between affinity and segregation, and policy makers need to be vigilant to ensure that affinity doesn’t devolve into segregation.

But what worries Young more is the manner by which integration/economic mix typically unfolds, which is usually very simplistic and falls far short of being socially just. “According to the ideal of integration,” says Young, “the problem of segregation is that groups are spatially and institutionally distinguishable and the remedy is spatial and institutional mixing in proper proportions” (217). While this sounds correct, doing so does not address at all the “primary wrong of segregation,” which is “not that groups are distinguished but that through its processes certain groups establish or retain material privilege” (218). In other words, the issue is not spatial distinction per se but the uneven distribution of wealth and material privilege that takes form in exclusionary spatial processes. Understanding this maxim takes fundamental solutions in another direction. Instead of focusing on moving people from one place to another, which “requires members of the segregated group to change their lives and conform to the expectations of the dominant group” and “hardly makes a ripple in the processes that reproduce the privileges of segregation” (217, 227), urban policy should focus more on the movement of resources. Only this can address the inequalities of socio-economic privilege that plays out materially and spatially.

For economic mix then to have purchase for the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement, it will be a tool to redistribute wealth and resources, counter the colorblindness of the new racism, as well as the criminalization of the poor, homeless, and a whole class of people of color tossed aside by a capitalist machine now chugging at global levels. And if Cincinnatians could open their ears, this is what organizers of the People’s Movement and activists on other terrains have been saying for a very long time.

One last thought about economic mix before I end. For Over-the-Rhine, right now, debating economic mix may be mostly moot. There are not many poor people left to even constitute an equitable mix. Because of the urban unrest of April 2001, the police slowdowns in the wake of that unrest, the opt-outs of project-based Section 8 housing by Denhart and others, the Housing Impaction Ordinance that ties the hands of non-profit housing development corporations to address the housing needs of lower income citizens, punitive legislation that criminalizes panhandlers and the homeless, the shutting down of laundromats, the closing of public schools, the militarization of public space through Operation Vortex and other forms of police sweeps and raids, the blaring of classical music 24/7 on street corners to dissuade drug dealing, and 3CDC’s exclusive focus to promote homeownership in their new developments, many poor folks have moved or have been

pushed out. All these actions have been systematic, if not concerted. Displacing the poor and arranging their disappearance is the game plan. Less for the dominant to account for that way.

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