

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

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Originally posted on *CincinnatiBeacon.com* (September 2008) and published in *StreetVibes* (October 2008).

**WHEN PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY BECOMES
ABUSIVE**

August 25, 2008

Exactly when did the American mind become comfortable with the notion that punishment solves deep social problems? I suppose we should have seen this coming that, as U.S. society becomes not just a society with prisons but a veritable prison society, a kind of incarcerative logic would ooze into the social consciousness brandishing punishment—wielded as a stick to force behavioral change and exact personal responsibility—as social policy.

Case in point is the article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* (August 5, 2008) as well as the paper's lead editorial (August 8) urging removal of the Drop Inn Center from the Washington Park area as the "ultimate" solution: "Ultimately, with a new School for Creative and Performing Arts being built and other major changes nearby, the solution must include moving the Center, coupled with more comprehensive services to homeless citizens, as City Council member Roxanne Qualls has been advocating. Anything less is a short-term, feel-good solution." Calling for the Drop Inn Center's removal comes as no surprise as the *Enquirer* has been playing this broken record forever.

The Drop Inn Center is well aware of the pressure bearing down upon it as changes occur in the neighborhood. Even though most of this pressure is likely motivated by stereotypes and ignorance about what the Center really does, the Center is implementing policy and even costly changes to its physical plant in response. One such policy is referred to by the *Enquirer* as the "three-strikes-and-you're out rule for residents who get into trouble." As part of the "deal," Cincinnati police will compile a monthly list of arrests of people within 500 feet of the Center (virtually all of Washington Park), which will then be reviewed by the Center to see who should receive

a warning. If shelter residents don't change their behavior, they can be kicked out. "The Drop Inn Center must hold its clients to higher standards of behavior," says the editorial.

The language here is straight up punitive. And worse, the assumptions lurking behind that language stem from the same malevolent sources that in other contexts take form as racism, or sexism, or xenophobia, or chauvinism, or you name it. The *Enquirer's* problem is that it judges the homeless as de facto bad neighbors in Over-the-Rhine, not because of their behavior, but because of their status.

That the *Enquirer* insists in substituting status over character is pernicious on its own terms, but the issue worsens when we look at the facts. In his report to the City Council Committee on Health, Environment, and Education (August 4, 2008), Executive Director of the Drop Inn Center Pat Clifford said, "Out of the 163 citations in the month of July [given out to people in Washington Park], only 15% or 24 were from people who stayed at the Drop Inn Center during that period." Even in light of these facts, the *Enquirer* chooses ignorance as its strength.

The Center's goal is not to kick people out—doing that would be just internalizing the oppressive discourse—but to actually reach out to people more directly to get them the help and resources they need in light of a stagnating economy closing off job and housing opportunities. We should be praising the Drop Inn Center in its efforts to approach the discarded with dignity rather than with the penalizing and castigatory logic that pervades the *Enquirer* and the social contract these days.

We should not be fooled by what's really at work here. Underlying both the three-strikes deal and the call for the Center's removal from the neighborhood is a discourse with a long history that has come to frame our conventional understanding about what urban poverty is and how it should be addressed. That understanding? That poverty is simply a behavioral problem, and if homeless individuals and the poverty-stricken more generally were to make the right choices to exercise personal responsibility, all would be solved. Poverty, concentrated and otherwise, is merely an individual, private matter in this view. Its solution rests with people changing their behavior by simply making better choices in their lives.

The dominance and persistence of this discourse should not be surprising. It's been perfected through the last thirty some-odd years as part of the world's shift in politics and economics, which many the world over now refer to as neoliberalism. Harking back to the classic liberalism of Adam Smith and more recently to the ideas of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, neoliberalism is a fusion of ideology, economic practices, and political laws that reject the Keynesian welfare state in favor of an unbridled marketplace.

Resulting in a kind of all-encompassing governmentality, neoliberalism was ushered into place during the last years of the Carter administration, amplified and formalized by Reagan (and Thatcher), and exalts in near-Gospel status today. For a very long time now we have been told:

-that so-called free markets are the magic elixir to bring forth not just an equality of opportunity for everyone, but prosperity as well;

-that the role of cities and states is to provide a good business climate for the unfettered and corporate-dominated economy;

-that the privatization of public assets and the deregulation of private operations are the surest means to advance the public good;

-that with the institution of corporate welfare, we can eliminate social welfare.

The consequences of all these years of neoliberal policy has been devastating, resulting in:

-massive inequality and misery on both the national and world scales;

-the transition from a production economy to a service economy in the U.S. has effected a massive redistribution of wealth upward as well as unemployment and underemployment downward for the middle class and below;

-incarceration rates have gone off the charts, with the U.S. becoming now the most incarcerated nation in the world;

-the U.S. now doesn't even make the top 40 in life expectancy, and infant mortality rates within the black inner city of Cincinnati have reached as high as 23 deaths per 1000.

The list could go on.

What accounts for this huge disparity between the neoliberal reality and its professed goals of prosperity for all? Why do so many people subscribe to the neoliberal line?

Never underestimate the power of ideology. On a popular level, neoliberal ideology taps into the founding principles of the American experiment of individual freedom, liberty, and personal responsibility, based upon free markets and private enterprise. The principles run deep, and apparently any contemporary encumbrances in material life that prove how these principles are actually being undermined are having little effect in shifting that ideology. What should be a glaring contradiction smoothes out under the ideological gloss.

Which brings me back to the discourse accentuating behavioral change and personal responsibility underlying the Drop Inn Center's future. It's a travesty really. Is personal responsibility all we have as a societal answer to the structural realities of homelessness and poverty? How is it that thirty-five years of political-economic and governmental shifts that have produced jobless ghettos, underemployment elsewhere, cuts and rollbacks in the social safety net, and wealth inequality escape notice as causes of all this mess? Is it even within the bounds of thinkable thought today for citizens to believe they can make claims on the state?

And what are the answers bandied about to address these concerns?

One answer comes from the private marketeer types, who in their unshaken belief in the ideology of the market, feel that Over-the-Rhine will be saved simply by adding more market-rate everything—housing, commercial development, cultural activities. This is just like the “add-and-stir” logic that women and people of color have come to realize is no answer to addressing glass ceilings and all the subtle yet effective sexism and racism that keep people from overcoming workplace inequities. The market in Over-the-Rhine will likely succeed and a certain class of people will be well served. But what about those who have fallen below the reach of the market? Mixing in benefits for wealthier populations offers little for those who cannot afford such benefits.

Another answer comes from the advocates for behavior modification and personal responsibility. This is nothing more than the age-old, blame-the-victim of abuse ideology but only up to date. Now in addition to welfare queens, the undeserving poor, and welfare dependents generally, we can add to the list whole communities of color as well as the homeless, and portray them as crime-ridden and inhabiting a culture of poverty where the rules of normalcy no longer apply. The instant criminalization of black youth here is especially egregious.

We are in trouble. And those troubles will get worse. The neoliberal end-game of inequality plays out all too starkly in Over-the-Rhine: gentrification and calls to spank or remove the homeless; upscale commercial development and not enough neighborhood serving businesses for poorer residents; and two dog runs planned for Washington Park and no place for kids to swim and dive in a deep water pool.

As the impoverishment deepens and polarization thusly widens, we already can see what's in store for urban policy. Indian theorist Arjun Appadurai calls it “econocide,” by which he means “the worldwide tendency to arrange the disappearance of the losers in the great drama of globalization.” It's a powerful concept, wondering what the world will do with a “surplus humanity” that will never

approach a decent standard of living in light of the global political-economic structures producing inequality. The U.S. is not off the hook here. As Ethel Long-Scott, board member of BlackCommentor.com, explains, “the fundamentally inhumane contradiction of the American economy is that it doesn’t need American workers anymore—of any color.” The question becomes: what to do with this surplus population?

For Long-Scott, the answer she fears is the one the U.S. is pursuing: “We are becoming more of a police state as this impoverished low-wage and no-wage class is seen as potentially explosive and must be held in check...Managing and controlling the new class of dispossessed is the new paradigm of policing and incarceration.”

A perfect example of econocide though this is, it is not just a paradigm for policing.

Econocide is what passes for urban policy these days. Whether by incarceration, active ignoring, criminalization, or outright removal, arranging disappearances is the game plan for the Drop Inn Center and Over-the-Rhine more generally. This is clearly evident in the two answers above. Displacing the new class of undesirables—homeless, poor white and black people—is the *Enquirer’s* ultimate answer (and the newspaper does not speak for itself). This is the same logic that historically produced reservations, race ghettos, and concentration camps. In Over-the-Rhine today this means more police, more surveillance, more sweeps, and now, apparently, the issuing of more tickets in Washington Park in order to increase the strikeout record at the Drop.

At a time when the Drop Inn Center has not seen its summer numbers decline from their usual high in winter, and as our nation becomes more and more marked by hyper-segregation, racial profiling, a corporate wealth-fare state with runaway jobs, accompanied by material inequity and voter apathy, the turn to econocide and an incarcerative logic is no answer to the kinds of conditions we need for a democratic realm that is inclusive. In fact, the opposite is the more likely result: a widespread culture of fear and loathing that only serves to produce stereotypes and homogeneity—a rejection of those not like you and those considered less-than. We must do better.