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**The Betrayal of the Urban Poor**


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In *Betrayal of the Urban Poor*, Slessarev asks a central and compelling question in urban politics and political economy: Why have social policies failed to alleviate the problems of the urban poor? The governmental solutions to the problem of the urban poor were myriad: equal employment opportunity legislation (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), job training programs, fair housing acts, and minority set-asides, among others, all of which Slessarev critiques as ineffectual. In the current environment, it is both refreshing and rare that a scholar (or activist) is asking this question, either from a normative or an empirical perspective. In the 1960s this question dominated the social discourse, and there was an urgency to it being answered, since there were several mass mobilizing movements: the civil rights movement, the community organizing movements among the urban poor, and the anger boiling over into urban riots. In my view, the question of how best to end urban poverty remains an important and compelling question in terms of justice and in terms of social science research, and I applaud Slessarev’s efforts at keeping the question alive. Slessarev is uniquely situated to address this issue, being a Chicago insider, former activist, and social researcher.

The richest parts of this book are the tales from Chicago about urban political experiments, grassroots organizing efforts, and social reforms, with the fascinating Chicago politics as a backdrop. I found the author’s analysis of Mayor Harold Washington’s time in power particularly poignant. In fact, I found the Chicago story subtext much more convincing and interesting than the general federal policy subtext.

Slessarev’s thesis is that the raft of social programs passed in the 1960s failed to ameliorate the problems of the urban poor. This is not startling news, since many liberals and conservatives alike wrote the obituaries of these programs, some of which are now defunct. Slessarev’s conclusion is really also her starting premise. The author does not adduce an overwhelming amount of evidence to support her conclusion, but instead accepts it as a given, although not a controversial one. She spends more time and data on explaining the failure of the programs and developing the reasons for their failure. She blames the very interest groups and advocates who lobbied to get these programs passed—the Democratic Party, organized labor (and particularly the craft unions in the construction industry), and middle-class blacks.

The strong points of this book lie in the analysis of the social history that is conveyed vividly to the reader: the context in which each of these policy solutions was born, how the flaws were evident at the program’s inception, and the fact that some of the weaknesses in the policy or program were deliberate. Chapters 1-4 are a good read as regards the social case for the goal of economic equality for the urban poor. As such the book should be required reading for every new student of urban politics. For the many undergraduates who may ask themselves or their instructors why a particular program was needed, Slessarev provides a full and compelling answer.

The book is ambitious in the range of policies it examines: equal employment opportunity legislation (such as Title VII); job training and job creation programs; a Chicago case study of problems of access for minorities to skilled trades jobs; minority business set-aside programs and the inevitable capture by civil rights and black political leaders of the benefits from minority set-asides; Community Development Corporations; Office of Economic
Opportunity; the modern-day enterprise zones; and business tax subsidies. It is to the author's credit that the book addresses the wide gamut of social solutions.

This book excels at social history and social dialogue but does less well at objective social science research. It seeks to explain the context in which each of the legislative ideas was born—such as its origins and social history—and the author does this extraordinarily well. The book also seeks to identify the culprits (the actors who derailed the purpose of each of these policies) and whose interests dominated over the quiet and powerless interests of the urban poor. The author blames organized labor (and its effort to protect seniority) for the failure of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, middle-class blacks for exploiting the profits of the minority set-aside programs without doling out the benefits to the underclass (the "trickle-down" effects of economics), and the Democratic Party, particularly the Democratic machine in Chicago.

There are two social policy cases in which I found Slessarev's analysis to be less than convincing. The author could have explored some alternative hypotheses or at least moderated her indictment of her "usual suspects." These cases were (1) the equal employment opportunity legislation (Title VII), with regard to which Slessarev argues that unions blocked attempts to make the civil rights act benefit the urban poor, and (2) the access of minorities to the building trades, regarding which she again argues that unions blocked the upward mobility of the urban poor. I will spend some time amplifying why the equal employment case is not as simple as she describes. The goal of that legislation in the view of many scholars was not necessarily to redistribute income from rich to poor, as the author suggests. It was to end discrimination in employment. Most congresspersons who voted for it probably conceived of it as ending overt acts of discrimination, but the courts later defined discrimination to include discriminatory effects. The legislative history would bear out this point, for example, the amendment to include "no preferential treatment" in the bill.

The major problem with Title VII compliance was weak enforcement, not the labor movement's protection of seniority. As a policy of regulating race relations (which admittedly was potentially redistributive), Title VII suffered many more severe handicaps than just the labor movement's insistence on inserting in Title VII the 703h. clause, which preserved bona fide seniority systems. The enforcing agency for Title VII, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, was crippled from the outset, since it had no enforcement powers until the statutory amendments to the Civil Rights Act in 1972. It had to rely on the Department of Justice to enforce the law. Enforcement of Title VII can only occur when an individual employee is brave or foolish enough to file a charge against the employer, as opposed to the automatic review of wage data that occurs in Great Britain, which increases compliance. Weakness in compliance is just one rival explanation that the author could have developed a bit more.

Another factor Slessarev ignores is labor's broader social and economic role. For example, without the support of organized labor, Title VII would probably never have been passed. Also, the role unions play in upward wage mobility for workers, especially for blacks and females, is understated in the book, except for a passing reference that Martin Luther King signed on to the union organizing campaigns for black workers in the South. Even today, union representation is a major predictor of whether black and women workers will experience the black-white or male-female wage gap or will achieve wage parity by occupation with their white male counterparts.

It also needs to be pointed out that seniority is not in and of itself discriminatory. Why do unions (and congresspersons) fight so hard to preserve seniority? Is it because older is better? No. It is because seniority is a conflict-free neutral way of distributing scarce resources, such as promotions, premium vacation days, or office space (Congress), and for eliminating the favoritism, even racism, that employers might use as a selection criterion in the absence of seniority. I am not refuting what the author says about the practice of segregated locals. To put this practice in an accurate social historical context, however, she should give the reader some notion of just how segregated all the other American institutions were at the time, particularly the ones governed by the democracy of a white majority, such as Congress, school boards, and state legislatures.
While the courts did rule from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, in cases such as Quarles v. Phillip Mom's, that narrow forms of seniority locked in present effects of past discrimination (hiring, for instance), three additional things need to be pointed out. First, the Supreme Court in 1977 reversed Quarles, a fact not mentioned by Slessarev. In Teamsters v. United States (431 US. 324, 1977) the Court upheld any seniority system which was bona fide.

Second, the seniority system is neutral. Only if it is combined with point of hiring discrimination, that is, hiring all blacks into one department and all whites into another, would there be any discriminatory effects of even narrow forms of seniority. For instance, at the time the United Steelworkers of America and thirteen major steel companies signed the consent decree ending a federal court case of discrimination, the average number of years of company seniority did not differ for blacks and whites, nor did the average total earnings (counting overtime) for blacks and whites in the Alabama steel mills. Yet, some departments within the steel mills were all black and others all white, a function of employer hiring.

Third, unions are bound by the regulation of labor laws, such as the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959, requiring that they hold democratic elections, so they are often caught on the double pincers of a white male majority constituency versus advocacy of minority rights. In summary, Slessarev blames unions for what under U.S. labor law is solely a management right, the right to hire.

I am not claiming that unions had totally clean hands, but their hands were no dirtier than other democratic, majoritarian institutions in that era. There is much evidence, not looked at by Slessarev, that union bureaucracies such as the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) and United Steelworkers of America did bring considerable pressure to bear on locals to comply with civil rights laws. Winn Newman, legal counsel for IUE and others, was a champion of civil rights within the labor movement, and he brought landmark pregnancy discrimination and comparable worth suits against employers in the federal courts when employers resisted Title VII compliance at the collective bargaining table. The United Auto Workers also has a much more aggressive record on social policies than is suggested by Slessarev, although her archival research on the internal review boards was certainly interesting and original. The United Steelworkers of America invested enormous resources in setting up a network of regional civil rights compliance officers solely to assist locals in complying with civil rights goals. The Textile Workers of America and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America were successful in organizing integrated shops or majority black shops in the South, to bring the dual gain of economic and social justice to workers in Oneita Mills and J.P. Stevens, far ahead of the social curve in the Carolinas.

Thirty years after these programs, we still have urban poor. The author paints the picture a bit too starkly. I am not as certain as she that the villains would be labor, the black middle class (“Black leaders representing interests of middle class supporters was one of the four reasons why the Black economic goals were not fulfilled,” p. 6), and the Democratic Party. What is clear is that Slessarev asks a very important question and engages the social dialogue on this point. Again, kudos are deserved for keeping this ember alive.