



“The Anti-Poverty Hoax”: Development, pacification, and the making of community in the global 1960s



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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an alternative history of U.S. community development by establishing a global context for such policies. It demonstrates that the emergence of poverty as a domestic and international public policy issue in the 1960s was closely linked to anxieties about racialized violence in American cities and wars of insurgency in the global South. In doing so, it traces how programs of pacification, both at home and abroad, sought to deal with delinquent youth, to marry policing to economic development, and to grapple with poverty and insecurity. Such a global view provides new insights into American-style community development, specifically how a double system of pacification was an integral part of this approach to urban policy. By focusing on an important precursor to the War on Poverty, the Ford Foundation's Gray Areas program, the essay also highlights how the problem of poverty came to be territorialized not only in the city but specifically in a unit understood as community. However, “community” was a space of contestation. Community action was rapidly transformed into programs of community development, especially those animated by the ethos of self-help. But, in cities like Oakland, the first of the Gray Areas cities, and described as a “racial tinderbox,” the bureaucracy of poverty became the platform for radical visions and practices of self-determination, notably by the Black Panther Party. Understood in this way, community is a key site for the analysis of liberal government. In particular, urban policy mandates such as community development and community participation reveal the enduring contradictions between ideologies of self-help and struggles for self-determination.

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Introduction

“Our slums are not foreign nations to be worked with in such manner as never to constitute a challenge to the status quo.”

Saul Alinsky “The War on Poverty – Political Pornography”, 1965: 41

In the lexicon of American urban policy, community development is a prominent force. Typically, histories of community development trace its origins to the Great Society programs of the 1960s and their efforts to negotiate the complex and contradictory entwining of civil rights movements, anti-poverty policy, and community organizing. In this essay, we expand such interpretations of community development by providing a globalized history of this field of ideas and practices. We argue that the emergence of poverty as a domestic and international public policy issue in the

1960s was closely linked to anxieties about racialized violence in American cities and wars of insurgency in the global South. By holding the War on Poverty at home and American programs of pacification and counterinsurgency overseas in simultaneous view, we demonstrate the co-constitution of urban policy and imperial policy. Indeed, pacification was not just an American practice abroad, in the hamlets of Southeast Asia. After ghetto rebellions rocked US cities in the mid-1960s, police tactics and technologies for dealing with such unrest were directly adopted from military manuals and from the police assistance and training programs run by the United States Agency for International Development in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Ultimately such tactics and technologies, rooted in global counterinsurgency, were central in the reconstruction of US urban policing in the 1970s and 1980s.

With such histories in mind, the title of this essay refers to a 1970 article published by F. Nunes in *Freedomways*, the premier intellectual journal of Black freedom struggles. Titled “The Anti-Poverty Hoax,” it is a scathing critique of the War on Poverty, billing it as a “massive sham operation of which the poor are victims, not beneficiaries” (Nunes, 1970: 15). The critique echoes an earlier analysis by

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Saul Alinsky (1965: 42) which argued that the War on Poverty was a “huge political pork barrel,” a “political pornography.” Writing from the trenches of neighborhood action, Alinsky (1965: 42) lamented that the War on Poverty was being used to “suffocate militant independent leadership and action organizations which have been arising to arm the poor with their share of power.” Alinsky identifies a key feature of American-style community development: the inherent tension between community action’s possible militant instantiations and the bureaucracy of poverty which cannot tolerate such unruly practices. In the 1960s, this tension took on a distinctive form. As community development emerged as a crucial component of the War on Poverty, so the mandate of participation, specifically “maximum feasible participation,” became central to this new policy approach. However, as O’Connor (2012: 14) notes, participation was a “troublesome” idea, on the one hand evoking a long tradition of educating and civilizing the urban poor through self-help reforms, what Nunes (1970: 15) calls a “do-it-yourself ideology,” and on the other hand tapping into movements for self-determination. Such struggles mark the shift, in the 1960s, from community action to community development.

We see the case of community development to be an important example for the examination of the nexus of power and policy, the theme of this special issue. In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, David Graeber (2004: 9) has argued that “policy is the negation of politics. . . something concocted by some form of elite,” an instantiation of the “state or governing apparatus which imposes its will on others.” Inspired by Kropotkin, he imagines an anarchism that is “society without government,” a society constituted through “free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional (Graeber, 2004: 6). In contrast, we see policy, or more broadly liberal government, to be the terrain of politics. This politics includes the complex and contradictory entanglement of poor people’s movements and bureaucracies of poverty. Following the classic text by Piven and Cloward (1977: x), we conceptualize poor people’s movements as those “both formed by and directed against institutional arrangements.” By bureaucracies of poverty we mean the institutional arrangements through which poverty is governed as a social problem. The government of poverty can be understood as a broad field of discourses, practices, and techniques. However, we use the term bureaucracy to indicate the apparatus of urban policy through which the problem of poverty is made visible and known, acted upon, and regulated. For the purposes of this essay, our interest lies in the community development organizations that emerged in the city of Oakland after the mid-1950s, first under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, then replicated within President Johnson’s War on Poverty, and eventually transformed by poor people’s movements such as the Black Panther Party.

The significance of these institutional arrangements of community development is that they were organized around a theory of poverty and in turn a theory of the city. Alinsky (1965: 41) argued that the War on Poverty focused on the “poverty of economy” but ignored the “poverty of power.” Nunes goes a step further by pointing out the specific conceptualization of poverty at stake in community development: the delineation of poverty as a territorial phenomenon.

A unique achievement of this Scheme is that zones of poverty are demarcated. Thus poverty is no longer seen as a condition which exists at a particular stratum within the social structure, but as a phenomenon of certain areas. These areas are labelled communities (Nunes, 1970: 15).

In this essay, based on archival research using local publications and records from elite interventions into poverty in the city of Oakland, as well as records drawn from US foreign-relations and security expertise, in which poverty was thematized as a threat

to security, we argue that this territorialization of poverty is an important legacy of the War on Poverty. Our reading practice in these archives is alert to resonances that bridged geographic divides, an important methodological effort that aims to be adequate to the worldviews of poverty and security experts, whose conceptualizations of problems to be solved were not easily hemmed in by borders or jurisdictions and who were always alert to cross-border solidarities among political radicals—but this practice also attempts to be adequate to the vocabularies and practical efforts of these radicals themselves, who thought it necessary to ground their organizations firmly to gather political strength but also to share ideas, draw inspiration, and coordinate tactically with fellows separated by great distances, in order to overcome the very territorialization we are discussing. Not only did the city, and indeed the city as crisis, animate a new apparatus of policy, but also the space of community came to be the locus of policy interventions and even radical struggle.

As we demonstrate, the precursor to the territorial concept of community was that of “gray areas.” Taking shape in the programs of the Ford Foundation, gray areas was meant to serve as a social remedy for racial fractures. But the crisis of the city was to deepen. The 1966 President’s Task Force on the Cities was unflinching in its diagnosis of the urban crisis: American cities were bound by “apartheid,” a dire “segregation by race and income” that was generating “civil discontent and potential guerilla warfare” (*President’s Task Force on the Cities*, 1966: 4, i, vii). Community development, in its moment of emergence, was to tackle these questions of race and revolution in American cities. As Modarres (2003: 42) has argued, the “magic pill” of development dominated the moment, and served as an “instrument in building citizens in places where disgruntled communities had existed before.” In this essay, we demonstrate how community emerged in the shadow of global counterinsurgency and its distinctive territorial imaginations and practices.

To hold in simultaneous view urban policy and foreign policy also reveals what in the following section we describe as a “double system of pacification.” The US War on Poverty was bound up, as Goldstein (2012: 3) has argued, with “Cold War doctrines of international development and modernization . . . as well as their anxieties about anticolonial insurrections and socialist revolutions.” Nunes presents a forceful argument on this front. In keeping with Black Power discourses of the time, Nunes draws an analogy between ghetto and colony, noting that such zones of poverty do not promise “self-rule.” “Autonomy requires ownership or control of resources, and until that is achieved, we will continue to pay rent,” Nunes poignantly concludes (1970: 23). But for this critic, the ghetto and colony are more than an analogy; they are inextricably linked in a global formation of power. Nunes holds the War on Poverty and the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration’s ambitious economic reform plan for Latin America, in simultaneous view, arguing that the former was simply the “domestic version” of the same plot. The plot, Nunes (1970: 24) noted, was to combine “hard and soft approaches . . . tanks and trinkets.” Thus, in American cities, he argued, “the National Guard is expanded in weaponry and in size” while “a fountain spurting cash into the ghetto is engineered” (Nunes, 1970: 15). Following Nunes, we see these interventions at home and abroad as components of a double system of pacification, in the 1960s and thereafter. Nunes was writing in 1970; while this is beyond the scope of this essay, in short time the fountain spurting cash into the ghetto would be shut off, and the expansion of law and order would transform the “Anti-Poverty Hoax” entirely.

A double system of pacification

“The objective of police is everything from being to well-being, everything that may produce this well-being beyond being, and

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