New York's Own Political Cleansing

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Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City.* (Columbus: Ohio State Press, 1993), 375 p.p.; hardback.

The substance of Professor Schwartz's work is best summed up in his own preface: This book traces the origins of the New York approach back to the Progressive Era, when municipal reformers first recognized the need for inner-city renewal and the related question of rehousing the poor. That recognition pitted municipal priorities against the residential need of the working class, a weighing of values that struck a blow against the tenements of the poor (xviii).

What the New York Approach turns out to mean is that urban renewal basically amounted to building middle-class housing to accommodate the sort of people who would work at the educational, medical, and other professional complexes which were also being built on a grand scale. This meant, in turn, that manufacturing and related industries were pressed out of the city—as were, of course, the working-class people they employed.

When even reformers like Jacob Riis expressed a preference for the "reliably employed" to other kinds of tenants, it made it easy for Moses to persuade LaGuardia and those who called themselves liberals—including social scientists and especially planners—into policies benefiting the (white) middle class. Schwartz has excelled at digging up documents revealing the devious details of the games played by those who really wielded the power in the city—not terribly surprisingly the folks with money, like bankers, insurance companies, and persons named Rockefeller. (It is, evidently, true that money talks.) And documentation there is aplenty here. Different people kept copies of Moses's memos articulating the need to promote middle-class housing and values and to keep out those not quite yet meeting these criteria—Puerto-Ricans and African-Americans, for example. Race was obviously the chief issue and this is why urban renewal quickly became known as "negro removal," as Schwartz aptly reminds us.

One of Schwartz's chief purposes is to address some of the questions he feels Robert Caro left unaddressed in his 1,200-page monograph on the *Power Broker*, such as how Moses actually got the various political forces on his side. Caro's answers had been reasonably satisfactory to me, and Marshall Berman's brief but brilliant socio-political explanation of Moses's spectacular rise to *Master Builder of Greater New York* as well as of his ultimate fall from grace in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* had been very persuasive to me as well.

Schwartz, of course, has gone into immensely more depth and detail, and concretely documented his case but does not offer a theoretically superior explanation to these or to others pertaining to urban development. The fact that Berman's volume, like practically all the literature on urban affairs (be it historical, political, or sociological), is not cited here raises some difficulties: Is there, for example, really a New York Approach that differs significantly from the urban development approaches that can be traced in other cities? This negro removal phenomenon hardly seems novel to New York, but, of course, the exclusive focus on New York here makes any generalizability, any theory, impossible.

One local historico-political lesson we learn is that Moses early on sold his bill of goods to Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia and that this mayor, much to the dismay of those less middle class than Moses's favored people, gave him increasing powers, and that LaGuardia's successor, knowing (and caring) even less about the problems of urban housing, granted Moses even greater power in this area so that he became ultimately the "czar" of the complete (re)construction of greater New York. He was able to make this sale partly because of the racism cited and partly because of the growing schism between middle-class liberals and actual leftists (what with the perceived Communist "menace"). Racism did not, of course, legally prevent "people of color" from moving into Moses's housing; it was, after all, "open" housing, as he never ceased preaching (it just required that middle-class income of the "reliably employed").

Just as I doubt the New York Approach was indeed unique, I have to question Schwartz's seeming assumption that the manufacturing industries which would have

supported lower-income housing would have remained in the city if other policies had been pursued. History suggests they would not; they left New York as they did other cities, and then they left the country altogether.

Schwartz rightly points out that planners did not really like industry, which tends to interfere with their aesthetics, and other housing professionals did not really like people of color—or at least believed it was best for blacks to remain among blacks. The Rockefellers, for example, as exceedingly large Manhattan property owners, wanted and were able "to block the negroes" (p. 65) and keep them confined to Harlem.

Not all the motives were that bad, and it is easy to understand why most people took Moses's suggestions, supported as they were by his immense past successes: Moses wanted to locate low-rent housing far out (though he later rejected greenbelts), partly because he firmly believed, as did a majority of his contemporaries, that housing and recreation (Moses's parks) came together in some sort of hygienic and educative way that would reform slum dwellers and right the aberrance of growing juvenile delinquency.

Schwartz does offer a couple of apt conclusions, one pertaining to the person of Moses and one to the development of American cities. Moses embodied what Dostoevsky long ago warned us would be the problem of modern politics—the fatal combination of a "love for humanity" with an actual "hatred of people." FDR's secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, who long worked closely with Moses and basically admired him, corroborated this opinion of Moses when she said: "He loves the public, but not as people."

Schwartz comes to the general conclusion that "the melding of public spirit and private gain resembled traditional urban boost-erism, except that never before did boosters find so much public domain up for grabs, or thanks to postwar politics and social science, so many rationales for their operations" (p. 300). There were no capitalist master plans at work—it was just American urban boosterism at its best.

The one thing that was unique about the New York Approach was Robert Moses, the man who was able to construct a veritable empire with relatively little official but vast personal authority. In other major cities across the country, urban (re)development usually required powerful coalitions, chambers of commerce or even quieter behind-the-scenes groups, but for the greater part of the 20th century in New York, Robert Moses, almost alone, shaped the city, sometimes for better—often for worse.