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He Got Game

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Invited commentary on David L. Imbroscio, “Shaming the Inside Game: A Critique of the Liberal Expansionist Approach to Addressing Urban Problems,” forthcoming, November, 2006, *Urban Affairs Review*.

Abstract: Listening to the score heard in David L. Imbroscio’s “Shaming the Inside Game,” a composition that challenges us to re-evaluate the questions we ask and the questions we ignore, our commentary suggests that urbanists tune in to the historical and contextual politics of today’s urban axioms; to the localized histories, actors, and events that nurture ideas and catalyze policy development; and to the changing urban dynamics that are traducing the inside/outside binary that Imbroscio identifies in the work of the liberal expansionists. To this end, we suggest various lines of investigation that urbanists might undertake to engender a metropolitics that really makes some noise.

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“The discourse offers explanations; it gives answers to the ‘why’ of urban decline by, for example, linking the various ‘problems’ of the cities to the ‘opportunities’ in the suburbs, seemingly within the same coherent story. ... By isolating decay and decline in the cities, the discourse additionally subverts a society-wide sharing of responsibility for the dire city conditions faced by those too poor or too powerless to flee. Moral obligations vanish.” (Beauregard, 2003, pp. 244-245).

“The task is formidable. Are suburbanites ready to give up their single-family homes, lawns, and multiple cars? Do they really care about community? Are they willing to share tax bases or support other measures to reduce disparities in urban regions? Judging from past history, the answers to these questions are not likely to be positive.” (Judd and Swanstrom, 2002, p. 331).

In “Shaming the Inside Game,” David L. Imbroscio challenges what he sees as the latest conventional wisdom of urbanism: the “expansionist” notion that urban problems can only be solved by “crossing the city line” to build coalitions and appeal – in equal parts – to the self-interest and moral fortitude of suburbanites who control regional economic, institutional, and political resources (see Dreier et al., 2001, p. 230, 233). Well-intentioned as it might be, Imbroscio suggests, the expansionist turn relies on implicit yet potent ideological commitments to a problematic philosophical liberalism. Imbroscio argues that despite a base of evidence that is inconclusive, incomplete, and contradictory, many urbanists now embrace expansionist solutions because of an ideological bias that favors policies emphasizing individual initiative and personal responsibility, social and spatial mobility, traditional public/private divisions, and universal rights claims. In the process, expansionists shame the “inside game” of community development and central-city urbanism, “with its emphasis on preserving or enhancing place-based communities, cultural commitments, group-oriented political claims, local control, and populist politics.” (Imbroscio, p. 7).

Imbroscio’s challenge is jarring. It is troubling to see Peter Dreier, Todd Swanstrom, and John Mollenkopf lined up with David Rusk, Bruce Katz, and Richard Florida, and to see them portrayed as latecomer Petersonians blinded by an ideological enchantment with strategies that (despite the best of intentions) amount to a fundamentally anti-urban urban agenda. It’s like going to a concert

hall run jointly by Brookings and the Urban Institute to hear a new composition – a distinctively American performance with a sharp, hard-hitting urbanity, something like Spike Lee’s [1998] *He Got Game*, for which Public Enemy is credited for “Songs” while Aaron Copland (1900-1990) is listed for “Music” (Gabbard, 2000). The harmonies, cadences, and modal inflections of Public Enemy and the composer once dubbed “Mr. Musical Americana” (Tommasini, 1999, p. 1) mesh well together, linking “a composer widely associated, perhaps inaccurately, with the American heartland to an urban, highly political rap group” (Gabbard, 2000, p. 370). A similar dissonance can be heard in the score for *Place Matters* and the movements of “Shaming the Inside Game.” Imbroscio’s performance, aggressive and political as it is, offers harmony and percussion that embroiders progressive hopes for a genuinely new metropolitics. Imbroscio got game. Some may hear his composition as a hostile attack on progressives who share goals but differ as to means. But we hope that urbanists can listen carefully, and discern in the score a theme that cautions us against equating causes and consequences, explanations and strategies, policies and politics. Imbroscio challenges us to re-evaluate the questions we ask, the questions we ignore, the urbanism that defines our work, and the politics of our division of labor among analysts, advocates, advisors, and activists.

The current hegemony of the outside game might remind us of the paradoxical and invisible influence of historical context (described below): yet it is rare to see explicit consideration of the historical-political climates that nurture urban ‘truths’ – and rarer still to encounter studies which examine the ‘play’ of such truths as they become woven into the policy infrastructure (Hall, 2002, Chapter 13). And we suggest that such ‘play’ is quite serious: the historical, contextual axioms seem remarkably durable. On one level, our point here is simply to emphasize that the analytical and methodological tendencies challenged by Imbroscio are nothing new. Indeed, it would be worth investigating the genealogies between today’s liberal expansionism, with earlier debates over people-based and place-based policies (Winnick, 1966; Bolton, 1992), with ideological constructions of urban decline and the natural inevitability of inner-city neighborhood life-cycles (Beauregard, 1993; Metzger, 2000; Smith et al., 2001), with supply/demand battles in assisted housing policy (especially at the moment when progressive “pro-production forces” were vanquished by conservative, free-marketeer “voucherists” [Winnick, 1995, p. 96]), or with aggressive moves by ‘dispersal’ theorists to discredit inner-city redevelopment efforts as “gilding the ghetto” (Kain and Persky, 1969; Kain, 1992, 2004). Such genealogical work would not be mere genuflection to earlier scholarship, but rather a necessary first step in moving beyond the simplistic and disempowering stereotypes that

separate contemporary urban knowledge from historical insight. As Beauregard (2004) has suggested, in much current work on the city “we are offered a ‘radical break’ or a flight to the past that never touches down on the intervening terrain” (p. 633) such that “time is reduced to two values: past and present” (p. 634).

Today’s influential “truths” of urban theory and policy are made, not given; in order to evaluate the *retrospective* explanations offered by liberal expansionists, and to assess the feasibility of their *prospective* outside-game strategies, we must investigate the localized histories, actors, and events that nurture ideas and catalyze policy development (McCann, forthcoming; Peck and Tickell, 2002). We need to remain sensitive to the urban settings that nurture influential theories. Consider the historical-geographical specificity of just a few of the origins of today’s consensus on inner-city “isolation”: Kain’s (1968) use of travel-survey data from Detroit in 1952 and Chicago in 1956 to develop the spatial mismatch hypothesis, and Wilson’s (1987) analysis of 1970 and 1980 Census data and community surveys mostly on Chicago’s South Side to “describe the problems of the ghetto underclass candidly and openly so that they can be fully explained and appropriate policy programs can be devised” (p. 149). And we also need to map the partial, selective, and strategic co-optation of urban theory – mindful of the precise meaning of the term (a “technique for maintaining organizational stability by absorbing new ideas and/or persons into the policymaking structure” [Lexicon Publications, 1990, p. 215]) – as people, ideas, and data travel to the policymaking “metropolitan talk machine” of Washington, D.C. (cf. Thrift, 2004). Hence simplified findings from mismatch and underclass studies of particular times and places are used to frame research elsewhere, to shape the production of new databases documenting the contours of inner-city isolation (the “Underclass Databases,” Tatian, 1993, Kasarda, 1993) and eventually to provide the social-science rationale for the harshest policies affecting economically and racially marginalized urbanites. When new data undermine the isolation axiom, such policies are automatically heralded for success (even when their implementation came far too late to have had any hypothesized causal effects) and policy attention turns to other themes (moving to opportunity, regional housing ‘choice,’ school vouchers, etc.) that build on the sedimented, assumed truths of inner-city isolation. Imbroscio’s critique of these assumptions, and his careful consideration of redistricting proposals and the refusal of Clintonite electoral coalitions to undertake metropolitan reform, should remind us of the long history of compromises wrought between progressive urban theory and political coalitions held together by neoliberal (and neoconservative) material-ideological commitments.

Again, none of this is new. What is remarkable is the enduring faith of outside-game players in the face of a hostile political climate after so many years of failure. Some of those who were influential in laying the foundations of the inner-city isolation framework later regretted passing through the “decontamination chamber” of censored U.S. policy research (Wacquant, 2004, p. 99). Many years after belittling inner-city redevelopment ghetto-gilding, John Kain lamented, “With the benefit of hindsight, our use of the term dispersal to describe our strategy was unfortunate, as many critics interpreted it as a call for the forced or involuntary dispersal of Afro-Americans from central-city ghettos. Nothing could have been further from our minds.” (Kain, 1992, p. 445). William Julius Wilson invested years of work to develop a comprehensive analysis of a social category defined by anti-urban neoconservatives (see Gans’ 1993 political etymology of the “urban underclass”), only to see the work ripped out of context and chopped apart to fit the re-election triangulation pursuit of the Clinton electoral coalition so lauded by Dreier et al. (2001, 2004). Today, the theory returns home as policy from Washington to Chicago (and so many other cities), underwriting the implosion of public housing projects as new waves of speculative gentrification flood the empty towers of Cabrini-Green on the Near North Side and venture closer to the windswept empty South Side corridor where the Robert Taylor Homes once stood. There is no need to defend Cabrini-Green or Robert Taylor housing models; but we must challenge the affordability crisis worsened by a demolition-derby housing policy that offers interminable waiting lists for vouchers that may (or may not) provide regional housing “choice” (Crump, 2002; Goetz, 2003), and we must challenge the political perversion of theory in other realms of urban policy, from revanchist policing and anti-homeless ordinances to punitive workfare regimes.

Yet Imbroscio’s concerns about the wisdom of liberal expansionism raise an even more fundamental question: What are the risks of binary oppositions like inside/outside game? Imbroscio (p. 21) draws a sharp line between inside politics “with its grass-roots, populist, protest, and working class/minority-empowerment orientations” and outside-game movements that are often “corporate-driven, elite-oriented, middle-class/white dominated, and more civil/consensus oriented.” But he certainly recognizes that such political, demographic, and sociological binaries are not always aligned so neatly, nor are they always etched along tidy city-suburb lines. Inside-game defense, therefore, requires identifying the unique constellation of factors maintaining inequality and injustice in particular settings; metropolitan fragmentation and various forms of elite suburban exclusion are almost always involved, but we cannot ignore corporate-driven, elite-oriented inside-game city

machines. The political linkages of inside/outside, city-suburb divisions are geographically contingent, with the best 'fit' in large cities with sharp, spatialized class divisions between native-born White Anglos and native-born, non-Latino African Americans. Contingency should not distract us from the prevailing political cleavages Imbroscio identifies: it is better to be generally correct than to be precisely wrong. Nevertheless, we must recognize the distinctive contours of an urbanization that reflected, produced, and reinforced American political culture between the 1950s and the later years of the twentieth century. These contours are shifting in ways that urban theory and policy are just now beginning to acknowledge. Most prominently, we must redraw Imbroscio's twin binaries of political geography woven into the "inside/outside" debate to address the rising political mobilization of immigrants – punctuated most recently by marches, demonstrations, and rallies in April, 2006 with millions of Latinas and Latinos, many of them undocumented. It is worth recalling that California, once a battleground state, became somewhat safer Democratic terrain after Pete Wilson's ignition of anti-immigrant forces in his 1994 re-election. Now we see similar dilemmas between the Republicans' frantic short-term need to energize red-meat, red-state Minuteman constituents and the GOP's longstanding dream of attracting a rapidly-growing Hispanic population with appeals to faith, family, and social conservatism. Republican pollsters are deeply troubled over the complexity of data showing that the immigration issue "does not cut the same way in all competitive districts" (Balz, 2006, p. A1), creating enormous political uncertainty that will be magnified by demography, varied configurations of ethnic identity and class interest amongst different immigrant groups, and lagged increases in naturalization rates and voter participation. Ultimately, the inside/outside binary at the heart of Imbroscio's analysis is changing, both at the federal level and in metropolitan mosaics of ethnoburbs (Li, 1998), ethni-cities (Roseman et al., 1996), and diverse suburban centers of "parachuted plurality" (Peach, 2000). This transformation goes well beyond the large national gateways to include agricultural market centers, exurbs reliant on low-wage service workers, meatpacking towns and poultry processing outposts from Iowa to the Carolinas, and hundreds of other new threads in the settlement fabric that shapes metropolitics and regionalisms old and new. *This* game, at once inside *and* outside, will be hotly contested for at least a generation. And so we hope that Imbroscio's challenge to *Place Matters* (Dreier et al., 2001, 2004) can find some common ground with the kind of multiethnic coalitions portrayed in Dreier's collaborative inside game, *The Next Los Angeles* (Gottlieb et al., 2005).

In the end, Imbroscio's game draws out the fundamental contradictions of liberalism: while progressive expansionists favor the goals of redistribution and equity-oriented regionalism, they will only consider universalist, race- and place-neutral means. So they shame the inside game and the many different people who play it, thereby undermining the political possibilities for a more just urbanism. Liberal expansionist discourse constitutes the actors of the inside game as illegitimate figures, reinforcing a) political-economic processes at 'higher' scales that reproduce urban inequality and marginalization, and b) the hierarchy itself, culminating in a fatalist scalar race-to-the-bottom in which Petersonian city limits play out across a global space of flows. Imbroscio rightly calls for rigorous empirical scrutiny of the claims of liberal expansionism, and defends central-city urbanism, populist politics, and minority/working-class power. Our challenge now is to play the inside game as it is being transformed in ways that subvert local-global hierarchies – through transnational grassroots politics and overlapping webs of political, economic, and social relations in emerging immigrant translocalities (Smith, 2001, Chapter 7; Smith, 2005). Transnational urban research, with its 'bifocal' view of localized relations from above and below (Smith, 2001), certainly complicates the inside/outside political analysis and policy recommendations of *Place Matters* as well as Imbroscio's game. Yet if we do not analyze, advocate, and mobilize for emancipatory rules in these new transnational inside games, we lose the chance to resist the revanchist principles that have become the ubiquitous truisms underwriting neoliberal urban policy. The alluvial deposition of the theoretical stream from inner-city isolation and underclass behavioral pathology to dispersal and expansionism is spread thickly across the urban system of the entire Gulf Coast. Reconstructing is proceeding without any moral humility in policies from above that ignore social position while dismissing systematic marginalization as nothing more than the unfortunate cost of a broader benevolence (Young, 1997, p. 49). The outlines of this new city-state, built stubbornly against nature on perennially naturalized urban discourses, began to come into view barely a week after the storm surge of Katrina – most vividly in David Brooks' "Silver Lining" essay. The storm "separated tens of thousands of poor people from the run-down, isolated neighborhoods in which they were trapped," giving us "as close to a blank slate as we get in human affairs" so that we can break up concentrated poverty, disperse the poor and minorities "into middle-class areas nationwide," and lure middle-class families "into the rebuilt city" (Brooks, 2005, p. 29). Unfortunately, the neoliberal and neoconservative expansionism designed by think tanks and implemented from Washington (Peck, 2006) received considerable legitimacy when William Julius Wilson led a petition signed by scores of prominent social scientists advocating "Moving to Opportunity in the Wake of Hurricane

Katrina.” Signatories with unimpeachable liberal credentials endorsed a dispersal-redevelopment model that briefly cautioned against forced removal before citing “a growing body of research” demonstrating the benefits of breaking up concentrated poverty. As Reed and Steinberg (2006) emphasize, the scholarly signatories “remain strangely oblivious of their potential for playing into the hands of the retrograde political forces that would use their call to justify displacement. ... they provide liberal cover for those who have already put a resettlement policy into motion that is reactionary and racist at its core.” We must not lose this game. To advance alternatives to the neoliberal expansionism now being etched along the Coast – no doubt the template for future redevelopment in other cities – we need to heed Imbroscio’s caution on the outside game. And we need to refine new games of progressive, multiracial and multiethnic working-class coalitions suited to the distinctive transnational urban circumstances of the *Next Los Angeles* (Gottlieb et al., 2005), the next New Orleans, and other American cities of tomorrow.

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