



Christopher Mele, *Race and the Politics of Deception: The Making of an American City*, New York: NYU Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781479866090 (cloth); ISBN: 9781479880430 (paper)

The field of urban studies has witnessed the launch of yet another informative work by Christopher Mele. Entitled *Race and the Politics of Deception*, it promises to add more depth to the ever growing debate about the socio-historical circumstances and political decisions shaping and, more often than not, determining the growth and decline of cities and neighborhoods in the United States. In addition to being an interesting read in itself, Mele's work is also very likely to have a far-reaching impact on the field of urban studies that could manifest in a wide-ranging reconsideration of previous works as well as the reconceptualization of key aspects and trends in the field. For instance, one could not resist the temptation to revisit Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton's (1998) seminal work *American Apartheid* each time they read Mele's book. Though each work adopts a different approach toward the issue of black urban exclusion, both come to the same conclusion about its underlying forces. While Massey and Denton's book depicts a country-wide topographic picture of the development of residential segregation in the US, suggesting that "race remains the dominant organizing principle of US urban housing markets" (1998: 110), Mele's probes deeper into the local aspects of the phenomenon, asserting in the same way that race has strategically been the "ordering mechanism for the development of the city [Chester, Pennsylvania] and its suburbs" (p.42).

Besides its scholarly import, Mele's work is also timely, reflecting, in one way or another, some of the changes and vagaries that are currently permeating the American political scene. Mele's book comes at a time when the country seems torn between the professed claims of embarking on a post-racial era, marked by the unprecedented elections of a Black president and a public commitment to racial equality, and the forcibly continuing salience of racial antagonism on the ground, whether in the form of racially-motivated assaults against people of color or, lately, the ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency. In its broadest sense, this book

contests the assumption that American society has managed to leave its racial conflicts behind and is progressively developing into a race-neutral country.

Mele's *Race and the Politics of Deception* exposes the manipulation of racial rhetoric and discourses by what he calls "the corporate-machine alliance" (p.36—a term he frequently uses to describe the strong ties between Chester's leading industrialists and politicians), primarily for their own benefit but also for the purpose of upholding the long-held racial *status quo* that has incessantly invested whites with special privileges. By taking the city of Chester as a archetype, Mele reveals the catalytic role of racial ideologies and prejudices in the production and reproduction of differentiated spaces in the US. His major argument is that the urban and residential segregation against blacks has deeper historical roots and aspects that, for the most part, have worked to feed and foster racial injustice. He makes it clear that the employment of race and racism has determined the historical trajectory of urban development and decay in Chester, arguing that racial rhetoric not only forms the background and context where racial exclusion has thrived in Chester, but is instrumental and strategic to it. The declining socio-economic situation of the city and its aging infrastructure are testament to the continuing workings of racial ideologies in the drawing of urban landscapes. The location of Chester in the North also leads us to another important conclusion that segregation in the US is not typically a Southern issue as it is often portrayed, but is actually a country-wide pattern that generated and continues to generate white-black divisions.

Mele's indictment of the deployment of racial discourses and rhetoric to keep blacks in their "place" does not, however, exclude the relevance of socioeconomic factors to the issue of white-black racial divide. Although sporadically and fleetingly discussed in a theoretically explicit manner, social class is presented as an equally key player in the constitution and shaping of urban restructuring in general. Ironically, Mele's inclusion of a brief synthesis about the dialectical role of socio-economic factors in the generation and perpetuation of racial segregation and urban development comes in response to the marginalization of the race variable on the part of "established theories of political economy" (p.15). A more theoretical discussion reflecting the

ongoing debate in the literature on the respective roles of class and race in the (re)production of unequal spaces in America could have enhanced and sharpened the author's argument underscoring the primacy of racial strategies in the color-based demarcation of Chester and other areas with a black majority.

My understanding is that Mele shares the view that, in principle, urban development in the US is jointly impacted and determined by socioeconomic and racial factors. But in the case of Chester, and by extension other cities comprised predominantly of black residents, racial rhetoric and practices figure more prominently to the degree that they develop into "a strategic means for local elites and governments to shape and advance the direction of metropolitan change" (p.9). The examples and figures cited by the author chronicling white flight to the suburbs in the 1950s and the barring of working- and middle-class black families from these newly constructed enclaves attest to the notion that social class cannot stand on its own as an explanatory framework. Mele's stance on the race-vs-class debate, however, with his clear bias toward institutional racism as a more potent factor explaining the generation and perpetuation of black inferiority in Chester, can sometimes be ill-founded as in his framing of the struggle over the siting of an incinerator in Chester's West End in the 1980s as a form of environmental racism despite the fact that the then incumbent black mayor—Willie Leake—and the majority of the city's black residents were leading an aggressive campaign to convince the reluctant Delaware county officials and industrialists of the economic spillover effects of such a project on the city. That said, Mele's attempt to lay the blame exclusively on institutional racism for the targeting of Chester as a "dumping ground" might in this case be dismissed as part of using "the race card" strategy to exonerate blacks from any responsibility for their situation.

Whether addressed from a class or race perspective, or both, Chester's black residents are the truly disadvantaged. They have been vulnerable to the *quid pro quo* deals between the political machine and the private sector negotiating ways to control and maneuver black votes and party allegiance. The use of blacks as workers, operatives, and strikebreakers by major industries to twist the arm of political leaders and union representatives, the wielding of race

riots to stoke the embers of white fears and racial antagonism, the exploitation and dissemination of prejudices and stereotypes about black culture and city life, and the stirring up of tensions and conflicts among black leaders so as to weaken the fervor of civil rights demands are all indications that the black community in Chester has had little, if any, control over their urban space and life choices. The dilemma becomes even more agonizing for black residents and leaders when they find themselves torn between choices that seem equally difficult to make, like in the case of the opening of Sun Ship's Yard No.4 (a project by Chester's largest employer that was supposed to employ only blacks) or the building of an all-black residential area called Day's Village in the early 1940s. Chester's black residents' views on these matters were not aligned with those of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which found that the two projects, while promising employment and housing opportunities to an aging city and needy population, did not comply with the organization's major tenet of racial integration.

The manipulation of black residents and their racial identity by local white politicians and industrial leaders for mere socioeconomic ends, and the little control they have had over their built environment, do not mean that blacks have remained passive towards these encroachments. Ever since the steady growth of Chester's black population following migrations from the South in the early decades of the 20th century, blacks have tirelessly condemned and contested institutionalized pattern of racial exclusion and exploitation. To their dismay, however, most of their battles for reparations and recognition have barely been rewarding, yielding instead very few victories that have, for the most part, proven too transient to endure white backlash. In fact, this sense of "short-livedness", which forms the backbone of the book's thesis of the politics of deception and dishonesty, runs across most of Chester's contemporary history.

To illustrate, the promise of federal housing projects in the 1940s as part of the country's overall policy of government-subsidized projects quickly turned into a segregated public housing project in Chester with one for blacks (Lamokin Village) and two for whites (McCaffrey Village and William Penn Homes). The US Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) had little effect on school desegregation in Chester in the 1960s:

“[w]ith the exception of the racially integrated high school,” according to Mele, “all the other schools were either fully or highly segregated” (p.83). The hopes that most blacks pinned on President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” program were quickly dashed when federal and state anti-poverty funds were siphoned-off and hijacked by the local political elites for mere personal ends. Last, but not least, in 1997 the Third Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection’s decision to grant a permit for a fifth waste treatment facility in Chester on the basis that such a decision involved blatant discrimination against minority residents; the Supreme Court dismissed the case the following year, thus thwarting the possibility to prove that disproportionate exposure to environmental stressors in the city emanated from structural forms of racism. As part of the strategy of blaming the victim, most local white officials, businessmen, and even laymen attributed the failure of these and other projects to the inherent deficiencies in black culture and conduct.

Mele addresses a very important point in his book that might go unnoticed. Throughout his work, Mele insists that the racial divide characterizing the history of Chester has been intentional and strategic but by no means inevitable. Not explicitly pronounced, though forming the binding thread of the book’s argument, is the notion of the inevitability of racial mix in America. In fact, certain national and international circumstances coalesced to turn the process of the integration of the two racial groups into a *fait accompli*. Particularly significant, the United States’ participation in WWII brought the idea of the imminence of racial integration into sharp focus. According to cultural critic Richard Slotkin, “the real-world mixing of races and ethnicities, in the army and in war plants, allowed people to see the positive value in a more open society” (2001: 486). More importantly, and in light of the growing socio-demographic changes that started to sweep the country (Chester included) as a result of the return of troops from the war zones, black migrations to the North, and the progressive pro-integration laws and statutes enacted by federal and state courts and legislators, it was inevitable that the process of partial racial integration, though moving at a snail’s pace, would be in the making. It only needed the presence of the Quakers and some other white liberals, alongside with people like George

Raymond (president of the Chester Branch of the NAACP) and the Bakers (an African American family) in Chester, to break the ice of the local corporate-machine bigotry and intransigence and unseat assumptions about the inevitability of physical racial separation in America.

No discussion of Mele's work is complete without according a special attention to the style that guides his book from start to finish. The first impression you get when reading *Race and the Politics of Deception* is the feeling that you're reading a literary work. Mele's dexterity in providing an easy flow of the major events and details that constitute Chester's history and development, his skillful portrayal of vivid pictures of the city's infrastructure and landscape, and, more importantly, his masterful display of some of the prominent political and business figures that have ruled Chester, lend more credence to his judgments and arguments. The omnipresence of John McClure (a major force in the Republican Party in Delaware County and a perfect embodiment of the corporate-machine alliance) throughout the book even after his death in 1965 reminds the reader of George Orwell's "Big Brother", and the description of the city, though sometimes hyperbolically cast as an American version of Aleppo, makes it quite familiar to his audience. Mele's easy-going and fluid treatment of tricky concepts, like color-blindness, post-raciality, and blockbusting, to name a few, renders them accessible to a wider audience, thus making the reading process even more enjoyable.

References

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Elyes Hanafi
Department of English
Manouba University, Tunisia
hanafielyes@yahoo.ca

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