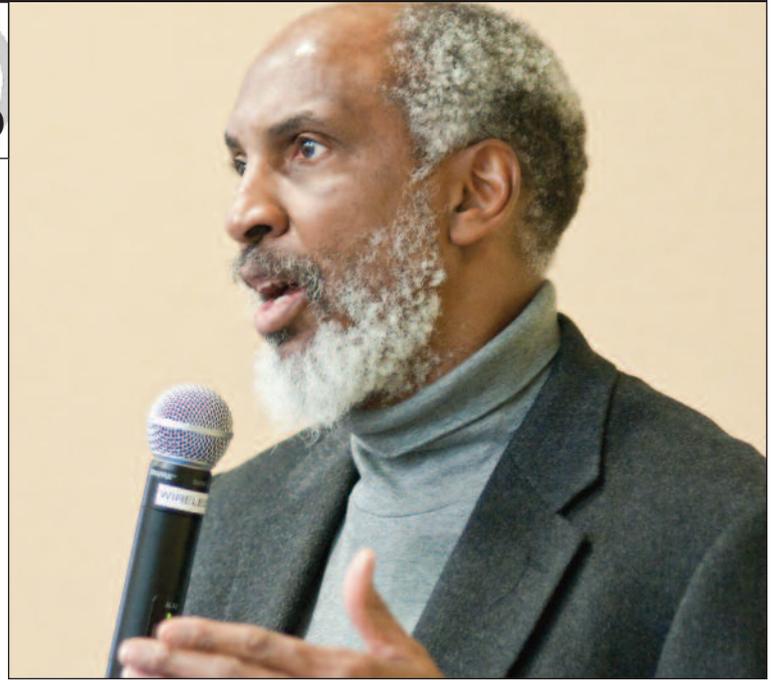




Regionalism and Race

A speech by John A. Powell



I grew up in Detroit, in a very large, very loving family. My family was from the South, where my parents were sharecroppers. Which meant, for the most part, they didn't deal in the cash economy. They dealt in barter. If any of you don't know about Mississippi and sharecroppers, it's poorer than poor. Although, I didn't realize we were poor until I left to go to college at Stanford.

Growing up on the east side of Detroit, I used to hear about all these white people but I couldn't see very many of them. So I thought it was a myth, until I got to Stanford. Then I started getting a perspective of the community that I had lived in.

In my childhood neighborhood you now see a lot of vacant lots. They are not parks or "open space." In Detroit, about one-third of the lots—and the houses—are vacant. Today, the average cost of a house is \$6,000. Needless to say, the tax base has completely eroded. The people who have left are the people with resources who would help the tax base. They've left behind an infrastructure built for two million people that is serving less than a million. The school system has recently been given the dubious honor of being the worst in the country.

So, I would say that I grew up in a place where there was declining opportunity—where the chance of succeeding was constantly moving further and further away.

My family had moved to Detroit from the South for the opportunity, but opportunity moved away. Not arbitrarily, but through planning, and the use of public resources to redistribute opportunity in such a way that once again, many families like mine were living in a situation of declining and low opportunity.

I think that the language of opportunity actually is a nuanced way of talking about regionalism—region-

al equity. How is opportunity distributed throughout a region spatially, socially, and racially? What are the opportunities for low-income communities and communities of color?

First of all, we know that opportunity actually includes a number of things: health care, employment, education, services, healthy environment. If any of them are missing, opportunity is ripped out of the community. But when those things are truly available and accessible—spatially, socially and economically—you have a viable community.

Segregation by Any Other Name

In today's discourse we don't talk about segregation anymore. We talk about choice. But no one chooses to live in a low opportunity place. So another way of thinking about segregation is to think in terms of opportunity. Segregation is about isolating people from opportunity and creating situations where they have different access to real life chances.

One way I like to explain this is: imagine some people standing on an escalator going up. Assuming that opportunity is on the third floor, most of the people standing on the escalator (yes, there are always a few knuckle-heads that will fall off!) doing nothing will eventually arrive at the third floor. That's how our opportunity structure works.

Photo:

John A. Powell, Social Equity Caucus State of the Region Convening.

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Now imagine some other people on an escalator that is going down. They have to run up the down escalator to get to the third floor. There will always be a few extraordinary people who will do it. However, most of the people on the down escalator will not arrive at the third floor. But we point to the few people who got up the down escalator and say, “Well, what’s wrong with the escalator? It worked for them!”

We actually use that phenomenon to justify a system that’s structured in a very unfair way and end up blaming people who don’t go up a down escalator. Not surprisingly, many of the people on the escalator going down are people from poor communities and communities of color.

The Intersection of Poverty and Life Chances

A recent study by Pew Charitable Trusts, *Neighborhoods and the Black-White Mobility Gap* by Patrick Sharkey, found that in terms of life chances, living in a high poverty neighborhood has more negative impacts than any other single factor. Whether you have two parents in a household or one is significant, but just living in a poor neighborhood has more negative impacts than just being poor. It depresses the life chances of not only poor families but also middle-income families living there.

And the kicker, which won’t surprise you, is that whether you live in a poor neighborhood or not is determined by your race. So, poor whites are less likely to live in a poor neighborhood than middle class blacks. And about 96 percent of people who live in extreme poverty in urban areas are African American.

I am not saying that poor whites or Latinos don’t have it hard. And we all know that Native Americans get kicked in the teeth coming and going. But African Americans are situated differently in relationship to these structures, which we only understand when we look at how the various factors—income, family status, and the environment that we live in—interact.

Any sociologist will tell you it is hard being poor. But it’s harder being poor in a poor neighborhood. And harder still being poor in a poor neighborhood in a poor city. And yes, it’s hell to be a poor family, in a

poor neighborhood, in a poor city, in a poor state! But that’s Detroit with its high school graduation rate of 25 percent—less than 20 percent for African American males.

The rate of incarceration for African American males is over 60 percent at present. So, if you are an African American male living in Detroit, you are three times more likely to go to jail than graduate from high school.

Now that’s an escalator not just going down, but going down fast!

Finding a Way Out

We need to really understand relationships, not just things in isolation. We cannot focus on transportation or housing, but need to look at the relationship between transportation and housing. Or even between transportation, housing, jobs, and schools.

We have to think of the levers that actually move the system and be very deliberate about making sure that these systems actually benefit marginalized communities. To do that you have to make sure that marginalized communities have a voice and an input.

I’m not talking about redistribution or handouts but about bringing folks into the system in a healthy way, so that they contribute to the health of the system. It is crucial to growing and sustaining opportunity for the entire community.

There are ways in which you can rebuild the built environment so that it does not serve the people. Consider Hunters Point in San Francisco. The percentage of people of color—particularly blacks and Latinos—in San Francisco has been on the decline. As San Francisco goes up the escalator, people of color have been going down, pushed further and further away from opportunity—from jobs, good schools, and transportation.

Regionalist Pitfalls and Opportunities

So, what are some positive examples of regionalism focused on equity and opportunity? People talk about Portland, Seattle, and Minneapolis. All those cities are doing great things but they have three people of color in the whole city!

Can you do this in Detroit? Or Oakland? Or Cleveland? It is much harder because race has played such an important part in land-use planning in these regions.

I do some work in Portland but I don't think it's instructive as to what you would do in Cleveland. Because part of doing this right means you have to have a racial analysis, which is much less important in a place like Portland.

In Cleveland, we got folks to invest in the central city. We have 18 mayors cooperating in increased tax-base sharing. They have created a 100+ million dollar equity fund that helps minority businesses and we've got them to build a regional school. Cleveland is the only metropolitan area that I know of where a metropolitan effort in regionalism has been led by the inner city and the black community.

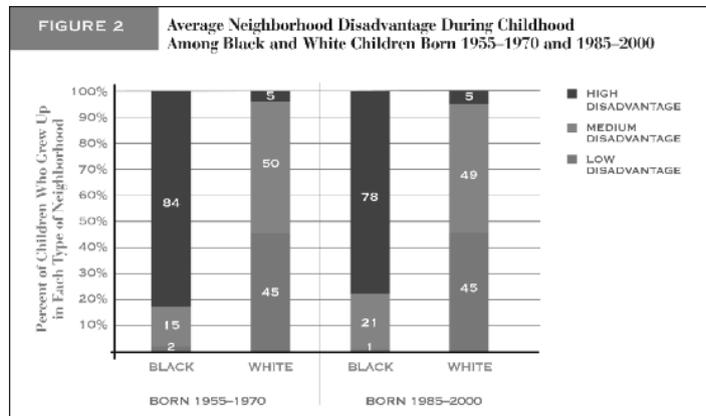
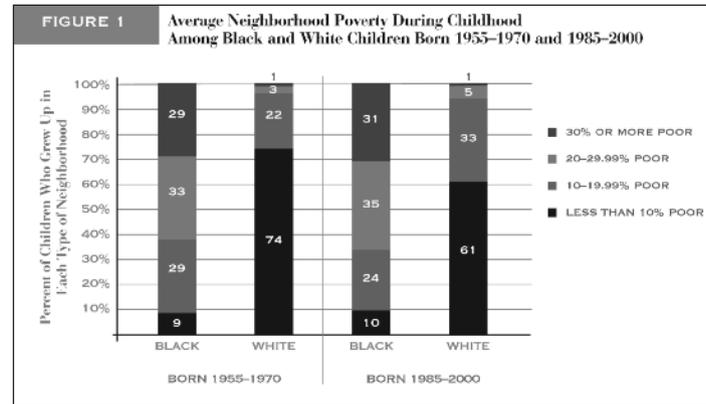
When we started this work five years ago, people were saying it's not possible because the racial tensions were too great and a relationship between the city and the suburbs couldn't happen. But it's happening and now Detroit is asking our help to come up with a platform that will replicate Cleveland. It can be done, but it has to be embraced in a very deliberate way.

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A Story for the Future (and How to Tell it)

So what is our vision for the future and how do we get there? We have to apply strategies that open up opportunity in very deliberate ways to families. We must bring opportunities to communities, and take communities to opportunity. We have to have an approach that's universal but also targeted towards marginalized populations.

If you have a plan to fix the region but you don't look at how particular populations are situated within the region, they will get left out. It's not



enough to fix a region but ignore marginalized populations. And if you are part of the marginalized populations, don't wait for the people who are making the decisions to invite you into the conversation. Most of these conversations are public and you are part of the public. Just make sure you are involved in more than name only. And tell a good story. Part of this fight is about what's the dominant story.

The dominant story right now around subprime lending is that some not very sophisticated African Americans and Latinos took out bad loans they couldn't afford and almost brought down the whole global economy. Doesn't matter that it doesn't comport with facts. That's the story everyone tells and it's the story that propels policies.

If you look at what's happening in refinancing and mortgages, the black community is now actually getting further behind than it was before the crisis. There is no strategy to get appropriate credit to those communities because the strategies are being driven by the stories being told. So we have to participate in telling good stories.

Figures 1 & 2:

Neighborhoods and the Black-White Mobility Gap.

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Pew Charitable Trusts

Building Coalitions

No community is powerful enough to work by itself. But how do we build linkages and coalitions across racial and sector groups to make something happen?

That something, of course, has to benefit not just your community but the whole region. Otherwise it sounds like a special pleader. If we are concerned about the environment, the earth, the whales, but you are only concerned about the black people in east Oakland, you sound parochial. So, you have to have a story that's inclusive but also targeted.

Right now the rules of the game are being changed across the country. We are redoing mortgages, credit, education, employment, and transportation. At this time of re-doing, we can write rules that actually deliver. There's some complexity in that but there are a lot of smart people in the country that you could work with.

Working Upstream to Keep the Jobs Home

We have to participate upstream when rules are being made. When you look at SB375, think about what will be the actual impact of that very important legislation on communities that you serve.

Green jobs, for example, are place-specific in many ways. You have to be in place to install a solar panel. How do we make sure that opportunities deliver? It doesn't happen automatically, as we learned from New Orleans. They had a lot of jobs in New Orleans but the residents didn't get them because they brought new people in. Then they made the black community look like they were sitting on the side crying.

How do we structure things to ensure that if they are going to put solar panels on buildings, the people in the neighborhoods actually get the training and the jobs? We need to think about that upstream before the jobs get taken out of the community.



Keeping Race in the Conversation

The dominant discourse in this country is “you don't talk about race because it's divisive and truly progressive people don't even notice race.” It's based on polling data from the 1980s and '90s. We need to move beyond polling data and talk about how the mind actually works, taking into account the phenomenon we call implicit bias.

Only two percent of our emotional and cognitive processes are directly accessible to us. When we poll people, we ask what's in that two percent. But we have seen that the unconscious 98 percent recognizes race very fast. We think about race a lot in this country and it affects the way we design institutions. I talked about this at the Democratic Convention and people thought I was crazy.

I also wrote a piece called “The Race Class of the '90s” because in the United States we say, “It's not race, it's class,” not understanding that here the two concepts are radically linked because class was formed in an extremely racialized way. In fact, there's a book by David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, which talks about the formation of the white working class in opposition to the black slave class.

So, it's already racialized even though it's talking about class. I don't think, at least in the short term, we can expect the president to really lead on this issue. We have to find a way of leading it and pushing him on this issue. It's not “if” we talk about race. It's “how.” ■

Photo:

john a. powell
talking with participants at the
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Caucus State of
the Region Con-
vening.

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Scott Braley

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Listen online at www.urbanhabitat.org/20years/powell.

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Economic Justice

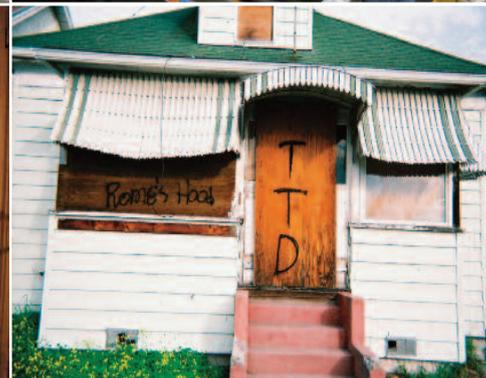


Environmental Justice



Racial Justice

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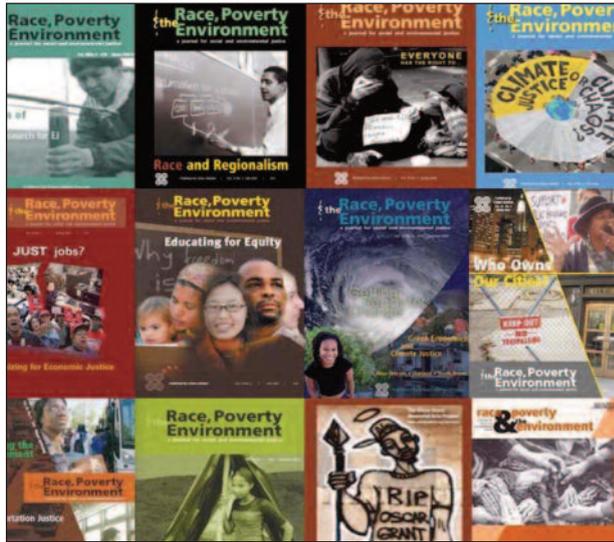
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