

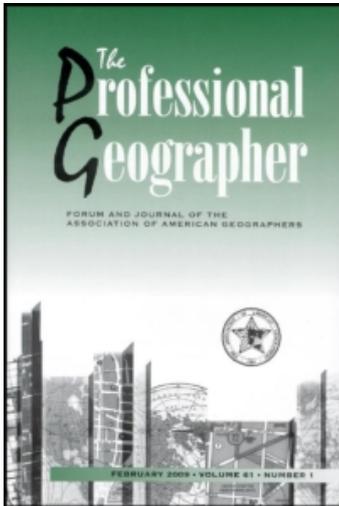
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Back to Revolutionary Theory Through Racialized Poverty: The McGee Family's Utopian Struggle for Milwaukee*

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In this article, I consider possible political action that can reverse deepening racialized poverty in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At its core, this article uses the efforts of the McGee family, an important activist family spanning three generations within Milwaukee, to offer insights into conceptualizing alternative strategies for confronting racialized poverty in Milwaukee. I also use the McGees's story to reconsider the ways geographers might generate revolutionary theory. The article is based on more than thirty interviews and several focus groups with a mixed array of people related to a broad temporal, spatial, and political research project on poverty, race, and inequality within Milwaukee. **Key Words:** racialized poverty, revolutionary theory, utopia.

在这篇文章中, 笔者探讨了可能采取的政治行动, 以扭转威斯康星州密尔沃基市不断加深的种族贫困。麦吉家族是密尔沃基市横跨三代的一个重要政治活动家族。本文的核心, 既是要通过使用麦吉家族的努力, 为面临种族贫困的密尔沃基市提供替代战略所需要的深刻概念。笔者还使用麦吉家族的故事反思了如何以地理学者的方式产生可能的革命性理论。这篇文章基于超过三十多个采访, 涵盖广泛时间和空间以及各色人等的多个团体, 也包括了密尔沃基市有关贫困, 种族, 和不平等的多个政治研究项目。关键词: 种族贫困, 革命理论, 乌托邦。

En este artículo considero la posible acción política que pueda invertir la profunda pobreza racializada de Milwaukee, Wisconsin. En esencia, este artículo utiliza los esfuerzos de los McGee, una importante familia de activistas cuya gestión en la ciudad compromete a tres generaciones, para contribuir a la conceptualización de estrategias alternativas que ayuden a confrontar la pobreza de origen racial en Milwaukee. También me apoyo en la historia de los McGee para reconsiderar la manera como los geógrafos podrían generar teoría revolucionaria. El artículo se basa en más de treinta entrevistas y el estudio de grupos focales formados por un conjunto heterogéneo de personas, relacionadas dentro de un amplio proyecto de investigación que incide sobre los aspectos temporales, espaciales y políticos de pobreza, raza y desigualdad en aquella ciudad. **Palabras clave:** pobreza racializada, teoría revolucionaria, utopía.

In this article, I explore possible political actions that can reverse the deepening uneven development and racialized poverty in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My focus is deliberately radical and Marxist rooted; liberal efforts to eradicate poverty have failed and the search for alternatives is a necessity. Milwaukee has a tumultuous history that has to ground any understanding of racialized poverty, as well as responses to it. Unlike the robust scholarship on industrial ruin and radicalism in other Rust Belt cities (see Bunge 1969, 1971; Georgakas and Surkin 1975; Darden 1987; Sugrue 1996),

Milwaukee's history has been less discussed by academics (for key exceptions see Trotter 1985; Coleman 1997; DeParle 2004). Understanding Milwaukee's recent racialized poverty must begin with recognizing that from 1970 to 2004 the rate of residents with incomes below the poverty line increased from 11 percent to 26 percent. This devastating decline led the city to be the seventh poorest in the United States in the mid-2000s. In 2004, Milwaukee's child poverty rate ranked fourth highest among U.S. cities. Currently, 50 percent of minority single mothers live in poverty (Wisconsin's Women

*I would like to thank the reviewers for their thoughtfulness and patience toward this article as it developed. I would especially like to thank David Wilson for playing such a supportive role in seeing this article and focus section through to publication.

Council 2006). Milwaukee's 39.3 percent of concentrated urban poverty nearly equals post-Katrina New Orleans's rate of 42.6 percent (Berube and Katz 2005). Finally, Milwaukee's forty-two high-poverty tracts is just slightly less than the forty-seven in New Orleans (Schmid 2005).

These statistics are simply a place to begin, however. Human faces emerge when politicians, activists, and residents open up and discuss the on-the-ground trials and tribulations of human survival amidst such suffering. Thus, as shown by comments from former Socialist Mayor Frank Zeidler (1948–1960), struggles to survive amid the deprivation of racialized poverty were and continue to be intense. He noted in a 2004 interview just prior to his death:

If you're talking about the recent times, the manifestation of recent hunger came with the increase in number of black residents. Black residents came up here from the South for obvious reasons. They thought things would be better here, but they came up unable to carry out the high-tech industry things that the Germans and Swedish and English had so they couldn't get jobs working and they also came up where they had families. They were mothers and fathers and would be teenagers and they were unprepared and that led to the problem of having to have food banks that was carried out by the churches. In the meantime, under the Reagan and Clinton administration the county support disappeared. They got rid of the welfare system, so that produced a demand for food supplies on the part of the hungry. And that continues to be pretty substantial. It is related also to the fact that the people can't pay rent, they can't pay their heating bills and their lighting bills. And it's a major concern, but you don't read much about it in the paper. (Interview with the author, 27 July 2004)

While Zeidler's narrative only illustrates one perspective on the roots of racialized poverty in Milwaukee, it corroborates a collaborative project undertaken by sixteen mostly African American scholars and activists that depicts *The State of Black Milwaukee* (Battle and Hornung 2000). This project, seen as a modern version of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1967), illuminates the historic welter of inequalities that have beset Milwaukee's poor black community: minimal government support, deindustrialization, declining wages for

black workers, and racist public and private-sector housing practices. The introductory chapter to this project states, "If Milwaukee is committed to equality and fairness for all of its residents, then the claim must be aired and debated. All sectors of Milwaukee's society have to face the serious possibility that the city has not yet created the opportunities for poor blacks to earn their way out of poverty" (Battle and Hornung 2000, 11).

My analysis offers insights into what a radicalized fight against racialized poverty might involve. Using Milwaukee as proxy for urban struggle more generally, I focus on the life and times of one of Milwaukee's most controversial activist households, the McGee family. My research suggests that the McGee family has played an important and heuristically illustrative role in the grassroots struggle against racialized poverty.¹ I lucked into the opportunity to speak with the matriarch of the McGee family, Ms. Geneva McGee, on a hot July day on which I was only scheduled to interview her grandson, Alderman Michael McGee, Jr. This interview, and a succession of others, helped me to understand this poverty and what an alternative poverty agenda might involve. Also of note, as it is central to this story, genealogically situated on the family tree between Geneva McGee and Michael McGee, Jr., is one of Milwaukee's most historically dramatic and controversial figures, former Alderman Michael McGee, Sr.

The McGee family's history in Milwaukee is explosive and contentious. Supported by some and vilified by others, they have persisted in their radicalism against great odds. Despite this, or more likely because of it, the McGees' struggles in Milwaukee offer a powerful lens through which to understand decidedly utopian efforts to ameliorate racialized poverty in the city. The ideologically loaded spatial tactics at the center of their collective efforts offer important inroads for considering new strands of revolutionary theory in the face of trenchant dejection and hopelessness that has afflicted this community.

My fieldwork involved many participatory interviews with people whose life work has been to ameliorate the suffering caused by racialized poverty.² Interviewees included municipally elected socialists (the city had a socialist government between 1910 and 1960), founders of Milwaukee's branch of the Black Panther Party

(BPP), and activists working at Wisconsin's largest food bank, Milwaukee's Hunger Task Force. I also turned to abundant archival resources from both personal holdings and the local press. Interviewees talked about the historic and current circumstances of the African American poor and the activist role of the McGee family. Archival work was enriched by the family having received considerable press coverage over the last several decades. Before turning to the historical specifics of Milwaukee, I briefly discuss some of my broader ideas about the dialectics of nihilism and utopianism that frame the political contours of, and possibilities to ameliorate, racialized poverty in Milwaukee.

Dialectics of Nihilism and Utopianism: Racialized Poverty as Trigger for Revolutionary Theory

Since the mid-1990s, a popular body of geographic scholarship has produced useful empirical research on the severity, growth, intensity, and spatial clustering of poverty (see Jargowsky 1996; Shaw 1996; Strait 2000). However, much of this research ignores the complex role of uneven power and class relations and their impacts. From a political perspective, much of this work does little more than offer suggestions that serve as momentary palliatives for millions living in poverty. Despite the insights produced about the form and patterning of poverty, these kinds of responses are insufficient both as insights into and frames for actually ameliorating poverty.

In a recent article, Glasmeier (2005) seeks to refocus the kind of research done around uneven development and poverty. Using a decidedly liberal edge, she suggests:

Today I believe geographers want not only to contribute to but also to lead public discussions of such issues as uneven development, globalization and social ostracism. We have the tools to analyze such problems and to make useful commentary. . . . We must come out from behind our ideologically bounded theoretical frameworks and recognize the deeply human side of uneven development. This is not a call to abandon theory, but rather a plea to assert the meaning and implications of the assumptions of our theories. (Glasmeier 2005, 157–58)

Although I agree with the need to consider the “deeply human side of uneven deployment,” I believe Glasmeier’s recipe loses sight of the complex realities of capitalist dynamics that help produce poverty. In short, the ideology and theoretical frameworks called into question by Glasmeier help us understand the uneven social power relations that have materially and discursively produced racialized poverty. My response to the kinds of liberal arguments put forth by Glasmeier and others is that it makes little sense to keep trying to repair a capitalist system that has always produced uneven development and racialized poverty. Solutions to this rooted reality require something too often marginalized in mainstream public policy: a serious critique and response to the rhythms and designs of capitalist political economies. To this end, revolutionary change necessitates revolutionary thinking (see Harvey 1973).

Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962) points out an alternative to the dominant liberal perspective. Harrington’s intellectual efforts, first through the Catholic Worker and then the U.S. Socialist party, provided him the insights to write *The Other America*. On the potentially misleading power of liberal approaches to poverty, Harrington (1962, 186) suggests, “These are the figures, and there is legitimate reason for sincere men [*sic*] to argue over the details. . . until these facts shame us, until they stir us to action, the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world.” Through his emergent socialist ideology, he was able to articulate and communicate the powerful intellectual arguments that ignited John F. Kennedy’s interest in U.S. poverty and Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty (see Kaplan and Cuciti 1986; Isserman 2000). In fact, Isserman (2001) suggests that Harrington invented discourse about poverty in the United States that was made possible via a powerful universal, that is, socialist ideology. This is a significant moment in the production of revolutionary thinking, even if this discourse was eventually watered down by liberal politicians, policy-makers, and pundits.

Closer to our disciplinary home, Harvey (1973) offers similar sentiments about the impediments of liberal approaches, which are still useful thirty-five years later for considering

racialized poverty. One of the largely unmet challenges Harvey posed in *Social Justice and the City* was the need of, and potential for, revolutionary theory production within geography. To Harvey, this need is for an explosion of imaginative theory and practices, against which existing thought and entrenched ways of doing must be confronted. He said:

Let me say what it [revolutionary theory production] does not entail. It does not entail yet another empirical investigation of the social conditions in the ghettos. In fact, mapping even more evidence of man's [sic] patent inhumanity to man is counter-revolutionary in the sense that it allows the bleeding-heart liberal in us to pretend we are contributing to a solution when in fact we are not. . . . There is already enough information in congressional reports, newspapers, books, articles and so on to provide us with all the evidence we need. (Harvey 1973, 144)

A crucial obstacle to the challenge put forth by Harvey involves the slow pace of recognizing the interlocking relations among class, race, gender, and the production of poverty (see Katz 2006 and Wright 2006 for more on this). To this end, recent socialist feminist scholarship, which gets too little attention in geography, offers powerful insights into the impediments facing the production of revolutionary theory (see Eisenstein 1979; Hartsock 1986; Bhavnani and Coulson 2005; Russell 2007). Russell (2007, 35) suggests that we (a broader "we" than just geographers) continue to "lack an articulated epistemology and ontology that spell out the nature of the social whole and its parts and that provide a methodology for theory construction. . . . Current scholarship seems to be caught in a bind between collapsing social categories together and separating them out as a list."

So what would such an epistemology and ontology enable us to say about racialized poverty? For starters, this should allow us to specify particulars in line with Glasmeier's desire to better understand the deeply human side of uneven development but not at the cost of producing revolutionary theory. Capturing both of these, for instance, is Gilmore's use of Hall's (1992) notion of the fatal couplings of power and difference. She suggests,

Racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories. Racism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of *political* distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs. (Gilmore 2002, 16)

In short, Gilmore begins to highlight new ways of conceptualizing such fatal couplings.

However, we can bring more into these dialectical approaches to racialized poverty. Specifically, it is crucial to incorporate the poverty-producing realities of angst and anomie. To West, and myself, this is imperative. West (1993, 14) suggests that the necessary point of departure crucial for theorizing racialized poverty "is an examination of the nihilism that increasingly pervades black communities." To West (1993, 14), "Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness."

By incorporating the dynamics of nihilism into our understanding of racialized poverty, we unearth a powerful trigger for deploying perhaps the most abstract of ideological notions, that of utopia. Together, these two concepts can potentially lead to a deeper understanding of what is necessary to produce revolutionary theory. Indeed, we need to inject hope for the hopeless within our revolutionary theory, which can then be used to mobilize particular kinds of political action. Here, we need to treat the interlocking relations of race, poverty, gender, and emotion in a collective way but in a larger bracketed bundle that unites utopian possibility with concrete forms of everyday revolutionary praxis.

Of course, it is easy to note what we need to do. A potential problem emerges immediately from the vexing "end of Utopia" thesis. As a broad intellectual project, Jacoby (1999) laments the dismantling of utopian thought, which he argues is necessary for the sake of imagining an alternative, that is, a fundamentally different, future. If we follow Jacoby's

thinking, and believe that in fact There is No Alternative (TINA) market rationality has killed utopia, of an egalitarian ilk, we must face the unsettling prospect that alternatives to nihilism are indeed also impossible. What this means is that we will be forced to sanction the liberal acceptance of rampant misery and suffering within the United States as experienced through racialized poverty. As “naive” as this no doubt makes me, I am unwilling to do this.

Fortunately, other voices tell us that utopian ideology and theory might not be dead. For instance, Jameson (2005, 1) tells us we need to reconsider how we interpret utopian futures: “It has often been observed that we need to distinguish between the Utopian form and the Utopian wish: between the written text or genre and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices by a specialized hermeneutic or interpretive method.” Here, Jameson opens up more flexible possibilities for utopian ideology. He says, “Why not add political practice to this list, inasmuch as whole social movements have tried to realize Utopian vision, communities have been founded and revolutions waged in its name . . . the term itself is once again current in present-day discursive struggles” (Jameson 2005, 1).

There is another important caveat about this notion regarding utopian ideology: the degree to which the claim of its end is defined within a European intellectual tradition. I say this because there seem to be many forms of vibrant utopian political praxis within countless social movement groups (see Graeber 2002). Here again, we return to Jameson as he suggests there is a more historically and geographically heterogeneous vibrancy related to utopian thinking than realized by Jacoby. Jameson (2005, xii) says, “Indeed, a whole new generation of the post-globalization Left—one which subsumes remnants of the old Left and the New Left, along with those of a radical wing of democracy, and First World cultural minorities and Third World proletarianized peasants and landless or structurally unemployable masses—has more and more frequently been willing to adopt this slogan [utopian].”

Jacoby and Jameson have earned respect regarding the debate about the death or continued importance of utopian ideologies, but it is necessary to juxtapose their positionality

(i.e., white intellectuals) with the long tradition of grassroots utopian thinking within minority and poor people’s movements throughout U.S. history (see histories of the BPP, Young Lords, and Yellow Berets in Pulido 2006, for instance). Related to the power of grassroots utopian thinking to generate revolutionary theory, Kelley (2002, 9) suggests that “social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression. For instance, the academic study of race has always been inextricably intertwined with political struggles.” Kelley (2002, 9) goes on to show how

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive the horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way.

Along these lines, we look to how 500 years of cultural struggle helped Huey P. Newton, cofounder of the BPP, formulate revolutionary theory that has been realized in existing utopian politics in contemporary Milwaukee. Newton (2002, 236) suggested:

The present fact is that we cannot ask our grandparents to teach us some “native” tongue, or dance or point out our “homeland” on a map. Certainly, we are not citizens of the United States. Our hopes for freedom then lie in the future, a future which may hold a positive elimination of national boundaries and ties; a future of the world, where a human world society may be so structured as to benefit all the earth’s people.

While imprisoned for manslaughter following a shootout with Oakland police, Newton spent twenty-two months theorizing the scalar foundations of the BPP’s revolutionary praxis. Newton’s frustration with the scaling of BPP revolutionary praxis was profound. His ideas evolved into what would be one of his most provocative activist notions, that of *revolutionary intercommunalism*. Newton argued

that the United States was no longer a nation-state but instead had become a boundless empire controlling the world's lands and people through the mobilization of disciplining technologies and state actions. Because people and economies had become so integrated within the U.S. empire, Newton suggested it was impossible for them to "decolonize." Spatially, political units that might support the BPP's political vision were no longer possible. As such, efforts to mobilize grassroots support had to center around such discourses as "You are connected to that rebel in Mozambique, so fight with us here in Oakland." Newton suggested that oppressed people in the world had to struggle as a collectivity. They had to organize from the base of their local communities, to take control of economic, political, and cultural institutions. To Newton, oppressed people were scattered through a dispersed collection of capitalist communities, each with its own set of institutions geared toward sustaining capitalist social relations and realities.

David Hilliard, former Chief of Staff for the BPP, summarizes Newton's notions of revolutionary intercommunalism as follows:

In prison, Huey has developed an analysis of the present political movement. Nation-states, he argues are things of the past. Nationalist struggles, even revolutionary ones, are besides the point. Capital dominates the world; ignoring borders, international finance has transformed the world into communities rather than nations. Some of the communities are under siege—like Vietnam—and others conduct the siege, like the United States Government. The people of the world are united in their desire to run their own communities: the black people in Oakland and the Vietnamese. We need to band together as communities, create a revolutionary intercommunalism that will resist capital's reactionary intercommunalism. (Hilliard and Cole 1993, 319)

Tyner (2006) and Heynen (forthcoming a, forthcoming b) have looked at how revolutionary intercommunalism was theorized and put into practice within particular moments in BPP history, but the contemporary uses of the notion in Milwaukee offer useful insights toward imagining what revolutionary theory might look like. Here the spatial importance of revolutionary intercommunalism has led to new ways of conceiving struggle against the

horrors of racialized poverty in Milwaukee, and it is producing material changes in people's everyday lives.

Revolutions Across Space: A Return to Revolutionary Intercommunalism?

Given my interest in coupling emotion with racialized poverty in Milwaukee, I start with one case of how nihilism was described to me. When I interviewed Alderman Michael McGee, Jr., it was clear that he understood West's insights about nihilism. The notion served as a platform for his actions; as a trigger for his utopian politics. In discussing the impediments facing Milwaukee's African American community, he talked about "the loss of hope . . . meaningfulness and lovelessness in the community." He went on to say:

When you don't have any meaning or any hope, and even if you do, you have those structures that are not there and then you don't have any cultural . . . the fabric of the culture for instance . . . our cultural institutions are no different than your mother hitting you in the head with a broom. You'll protect yourself naturally with your arms and that's what the cultural institutions are like, are like a protection against oppression. And that's what kept us where we are now. Without the church, and the schools, that were all black schools in particular, and then the family structure of course . . . without those, the oppression is greater. The oppression always going to be there because it's a struggle while we're here but without those institutions being strengthened we gonna lose. You're gonna have these young kids who are out there right now and they don't care about the next person, they don't have any love because nobody's loving them. They don't have any hope. You can provide jobs and that's a good thing, that's an inspiration, but if you don't have the skills or you don't have any of the, you know, support mechanisms to keep that job, you are going to go back to that same situation. So really it has to be a like a politics of conversion going on. We got to attack this whole sense of being worthless by these institutions.

The cause of it all, for McGee, Jr., is "institutional white supremacy that is still maintained." Although McGee talked about the afflicting effects of nihilism within his community, he quickly changed course and redeployed it as a means through which to imagine alternatives.

The reality of a despairing community motivated him to activate ideas and initiatives that would move beyond liberally grounded, racist (not necessarily connected from my perspective, but indeed from his) politics of the past. The stark racialized poverty of his district and Milwaukee's African American community at a larger scale were his empirical reference points. His positionality flowed from two contexts: the radical traditions embedded in his family and the utopian ideology of other radical black traditions, especially the BPP.

Geneva McGee, a powerful black woman whose life I had traced through several decades of archival material, discussed how her engagement with Milwaukee's racialized poverty was related to the poor health care access of African Americans. Pursuing Geneva McGee's archival trail, I found documents relating to her 1960s and 1970s efforts to operate one of the first free health clinics in Milwaukee's African American community. She noted that the aggressive push for a more just provision of health care was for a reason: Her community had been systematically neglected. She told me:

Big momma [Geneva McGee's mother] was given away when she was very young and raised by distant relatives. My mother told me the story of when they were little there used to be hobos...and they'd be traveling and my Grandma Anna would send them to the butcher shop to get all the old thrown away bacon and ham and all of the meats. They would get those and throw them in a big black pot in the backyard and the different other neighbors would bring what they had, like a potato or a bowl of beans and throw it in the pot. And that pot would cook. And at the end, they would invite all the hobos and everybody in the neighborhood there to eat. . . . I think it started with her, back then.

Within the interlocking social relations that gave rise to the McGee family's radicalization are several characteristics of the "Black community." First, there has been the importance of going beyond formal (often liberal-inspired) institutions to provide the necessary means for survival. Facilitating social reproduction and replenishing life has always been a struggle given the black community's structural realities. Second, there has been the necessity of intense engagement with those socio-spatial processes produced across thick spatial net-

works (e.g., "hobos from all over"). These notions, evident in Newton's thinking about revolutionary intercommunalism, are an important backdrop for the pervasive power of nihilism as the McGee family's efforts against racialized poverty have evolved. This is especially true when we look at Michael McGee, Sr.'s, political efforts.

Prior to going to fight in the Vietnam War, Michael McGee, Sr., was described to me as "a young smart boy that liked to read...he was a nerd."³ On returning from war, however, he was one of the founding, and very influential, members of Milwaukee's BPP (founded in Milwaukee in 1969). McGee's early radicalization is fascinating, but he gained national attention as an older and even more radical Alderman on the Milwaukee City Council. He appeared on *Donabue* and *60 Minutes* and was one of the first guests on the *Jerry Springer Show*; his was the very first fight, with a white supremacist, to have occurred on that show. Articles about his politics and life have appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Essence*, *The Economist*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and other national media outlets. This attention had to do with a promise the Alderman made on 28 February 1990.

Within a politically charged manifesto, McGee, Sr., first announced the formation of what he called the Black Panther Militia (BPM; different from the BPP). Although McGee, Sr., had left, or some have said "was thrown out of," the BPP in the early 1970s, he continued to believe in the spirit and spatial implications of the BPP's utopian political tactics. He and other Milwaukee BPP members had read and thought through Newton's early notions that gave way to revolutionary intercommunalism. This was clear almost twenty years later through the revolutionary delivery of this statement. He used word for word the language of another revolutionary, Thomas Jefferson, to make his point. As the BPP's ten-point political platform began similarly to Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, so, too, did the BPM's platform.

McGee added his own take on the situation, suggesting, "We are destined for incarceration, death and complete and absolute sadness, instead of life liberty and pursuit of happiness promised by the Declaration of Independence." His polemic continued with a notion

that rocked Milwaukee and sent shockwaves through the United States. As both “commander” of the BPM and a Milwaukee Alderman, McGee, Sr., promised that if substantial funds for economic and human development were not spent in Milwaukee’s inner city by the end of 1995, the BPM and other volunteers would unleash ferocious guerilla warfare. McGee suggested this would include sniper attacks, dismantling of electrical infrastructure, and widespread burning and looting. He promised a total siege if the city refused to take seriously the racialized poverty in Milwaukee. When asked about the fear he invoked, McGee (1991b, 136A-8) responded, “This is where the war is at anyway, so of course people are apprehensive about violence because they don’t understand that violence is being done to them everyday anyway.”

Although McGee, Sr., was often divisive, he also talked about the ways in which Milwaukee’s brand of racialized poverty reproduced itself. He did so to raise consciousness and to mobilize radical social action. At a BPM rally in July 1991, McGee, Sr. (1991a, 20A-25), said to a large crowd of mostly African American onlookers:

In other words what we are to them is a bunch of cattle. In other words we can’t go to the store and have people buy their own meals, we’ve got to have some white people come down here and get their conscience off and feed us meals. . . . All they want to do is feed us. Now what do you do with a buncha cows, you throw the hay out, you throw the oats and what do they do, they come along and they eat and you know in other words that is all they think of us. You know you see the Bill Cosbys of the world but I’m talking about you and me, the average everyday black people here and around the United States, we’re starving to death. And things are not getting any better. And eventually we’re gonna have to wake up to that matter.

After his threats of urban warfare, McGee and other BPM members attracted considerable attention, not just from the media but from those who felt the BPM’s project was a just response to the dismal realities of racialized poverty in the city and the failure of liberal politics to address these problems. As a student of the successes of the BPP and in providing inner-city relief services through “survival programs,” McGee, Sr., sought to use the strength of the

BPM to engage in a wide range of direct action efforts through Milwaukee’s inner city. Beyond the ideological parallels with the BBP, here we also see the similar notions of direct action back in those foundational moments in the McGee’s family history (as told by McGee’s mother). “Survival”-style direct action programs served material benefits to community members, just as they had with the BPP in chapters throughout the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and reaching out to people created important spatial networks that thickened with every meal shared and every dose of hypertension medication offered.

Efforts toward spatial networking went far beyond Milwaukee, and even the boundaries of the United States. The lessons McGee took from the BPP and Newton’s notions of revolutionary intercommunalism were at work in the early 1990s. Efforts at networking with other groups that McGee saw as oppressed were perhaps best demonstrated when on 10 September 1990, McGee wrote a letter to then President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, in an attempt at intercommunal solidarity. The letter was controversial because of the content and because he wrote it as an Alderman on city of Milwaukee stationary. In the letter to Hussein, McGee said:⁴

I would like you and your people to know that not every American citizen is opposed to Iraq. I am presently advocating and will continue to advocate to the Black men of the United States community that we should take no part in another foreign war on behalf of an America that continually mistreats our race and that our next fight should be a domestic one. . . . Anyone that is really looking at the situation can see that Europeans will always join together with Europeans. Therefore I feel that it is important for people of color to support other people of color. . . . Related to the Europeans completely restructuring the geographical makeup of your country. Mr. Hussein, the same thing has happened in our native land, which as you know is Africa. All the boundaries that exist in present day Africa were drawn by Europeans after they invaded Africa.

In his book, *Long Way to Go: Black & White in America*, Jonathan Coleman (1997) uses nearly 450 pages to explore the contours of Michael McGee, Sr.’s, BPM and the almost unimaginable political tensions within Milwaukee during

the 1990s. As often happens in such politicized families, young “Mike Jr.” (many I talked to referenced him this way) observed his father’s anger and stress. Mike observed this in his father’s demeanor, style of interaction, and common gait.

“Warrior When Necessary”

It is anything but surprising that Mike Jr. would become so politically engaged. He told me: “In some ways it’s a rhetorical question. If I was a Klan’s member son I’d end up being a racist and hate people.” He talked about how when growing up, “Being Mike McGee’s son has been my first job.” As a young child, he and his siblings grew up under a particular set of expectations, formed as a result of family social norms and realities. McGee, Jr.’s, education in a fiercely radical black tradition helped initiate a string of events that offers rich insight into the potential of contemporary manifestations of revolutionary intercommunalism and utopian thought more generally.

A Milwaukee journalist suggested in 2004 that McGee, Jr., and a host of other younger African American leaders within the city, best described as “professionals,” were different from leaders of their parents’ generation, better understood as “warriors.” When asked about this distinction, McGee, Jr., suggested:

I think I am more from the warrior mode than the professional mode. There are still some obstacles that are in the way. The Warriors did kick the door in, and went through the public scrutiny to make sure equality existed, and make sure people like myself can advance the cause. The difference is that we are better prepared. We can learn from their mistakes. (Zipperer 2004)

After several failed attempts at running for public office in the late 1990s and early 2000s, McGee, Jr., was elected to Milwaukee’s Common Council in 2004. Alderman McGee, Jr., and his father were the first father and son in the history of Milwaukee to be elected to the City Council. Like his father, McGee, Jr.’s, main issues related to community initiatives aimed at reducing violent crime, empowering young people, promoting job creation, and stimulating economic development within Milwaukee’s inner-city neighborhoods. McGee,

Jr., certainly experienced trials and tribulations, including a political recall attempt due to his incendiary language and several skirmishes with law enforcement. However, his radical political style enabled him to successfully raise consciousness about the disempowering contradictions between race and class within the city.

Similar to the efforts of his father to spatially network via the logic of revolutionary intercommunalism, on 1 February 2006, again on *City of Milwaukee* stationary, McGee, Jr., wrote a letter to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. He addressed Chavez as “Fellow Revolutionary.” In the letter he said:

I, like you, come from a strong, Revolutionary, political and social family. I currently am a City Councilman in the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I represent one of the most economically depressed areas of the city. Government policy has for decades given special privilege to corporations over the struggling impoverished citizens of Milwaukee. The disenfranchised citizens that I represent experience poverty; the dissolution of family; and the reverberating effects of United States neo-colonialism and expansion every day. Milwaukee has one of the highest unemployment rates for Black and Latino men (59%), as well as increasingly high rates of murder, dropout rates, and drug dependency in the United States.⁵

McGee, Jr.’s, efforts to establish intercommunal solidarity with the Venezuelan people are reflected in such passages as “we are both oppressed brethren” and “similar to the oppressed people of Venezuela.” Moreover, McGee proposed establishing sister city relations between Milwaukee and Caracas. This kind of connection would fit ideally what Newton had discussed more than thirty-five years before. This proposal ended with a final call to solidarity using a quote from Simón Bolívar, who led the fight for independence in what are now Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, and Bolivia: “I swear before you, and I swear before the God of my fathers, that I will not allow my arm to relax, nor my soul to rest, until I have broken the chains that oppress us” (letter from Mike McGee, Jr., to President Hugo Chavez, 1 February 2006).

The audacity for a young African American alderman from Milwaukee to write the President of Venezuela represents utopian spatial

practice similar to that initiated by his father and Huey Newton. Of course, the letter received substantial local press, most of it negative. Despite the fact that McGee's letter was not taken seriously by many Milwaukeeans, especially white Milwaukeeans, it was taken seriously by the Chavez government. The letter's first concrete response was provided by Juilo Chavez,⁶ the mayor of the Venezuelan city of Carona, who eventually scheduled a trip to Milwaukee through the Venezuelan consulate in Chicago. The purpose of the trip was to discuss setting up a sister cities agreement between Milwaukee and Carona. More important, Mayor Chavez wanted to discuss economic and technical cooperation with Milwaukee's mayor and former U.S. congressman Tom Barrett and the Milwaukee Common Council. When I talked to McGee, Jr., about the situation he said:

I just felt he [Hugo Chavez] was a comrade in the struggle and we can reach out and we knew they had resources. In Milwaukee, the priorities are not the same with the socialist regime. I just wanted to see if he'd be interested in kind of distributing what they have amongst the poor people of the world and they want to have diplomatic relationships with people of color in America. And you know we reached out. I talked to his consulate general who I contact often, you know he's a Marxist [Martine Sanchez], and if you look at it most of the professionals that are working in the regime of President Chavez are all young people because the older generations were all the sell-outs. They all came to America; most of them ran out the country after they tried to throw the coup on them. They have a really young staff in Chicago. And also we connected with the Afro-Venezuelan city. Most of the masses of people in Milwaukee just thought I was reaching out to the Latino community when really it's Afro-Latino and they had the same oppressors.

The headline in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that announced the trip on 15 June 2006 read, "Venezuela Bypasses Bush, Offers Help Here." Through McGee, Jr.'s, efforts at revolutionary intercommunalism, the Venezuelan government was ready to offer discounted heating oil and free eye surgery to Milwaukee's poor. When asked about the programs, Mayor Tom Barrett said, "The natural question is whether we would work with the Venezuelan government, which is not a close ally of

the United States. My view is that if we can improve communications and help our people at the same time, I would support that, with the emphasis on helping our people" (Sandler 2006).

The local left's response to this set of events was extremely supportive and speaks to the potential prowess of intercommunal tactics. Within the African American community, strong support was articulated by one of Milwaukee's best known African American columnists, Gregory Stanford. Through impassioned prose, Stanford (2007) prominently quoted James Brown: "Say it loud—I'm Black and I'm proud." Stanford's column, with its pragmatic title, "Whatever the Motives, Aid from Chavez a Good Thing," suggested, "The South American nation, which is poised to aid Milwaukee's poor, is reclaiming its African roots and reaching out to African people and their descendants around the world, including in the United States." Here, Stanford connects racialized poverty and intercommunal solidarity. Poverty, to Stanford, can be ameliorated only through creating solidarities that span the borders of nation and continent. Black people across these vast stretches, he notes, share a class plight, a history, a bond. This mobilizing of solidarities, to Stanford, is a necessary starting point for confronting racialized poverty.

The local conservative media criticized Venezuela's offer of assistance as a scalar manipulation of state-to-state tension. Instead of focusing on the potential assistance to poor inner-city residents, many commentators fixated on Chavez's rhetorical jabs delivered on the floor of the United Nations (e.g., he called President Bush "el Diablo" [the devil]). Whether they are in fact legitimate political concerns or not for Venezuela, Bernardo Alvarez (Venezuela's ambassador to the United States who suggested) publicly pondered why so much poverty, deprivation, and stigma marked racial minorities in the United States (Stanford 2007). He noted that amidst such wealth, poor African Americans in Milwaukee frequently had to choose between heat, health care, and food to survive on a daily basis. Driving this point home, Alvarez recollected the TV images of socionatural carnage that left poor people to fend for themselves after Hurricane Katrina with so little help from a powerful government. He said, "The world was shocked,

because we never thought we'd see things as we saw in New Orleans, because we never thought we'd see that happening in the United States" (Stanford 2007).

Conclusions

The McGee Family, spanning generations from Geneva McGee's mother to her grandson Mike Jr., provide insights into conceptualizing alternative strategies for confronting racialized poverty in Milwaukee and beyond. Their imaginings and actions have followed this family's hope for emancipatory possibility and new urban spatial relations gleaned from Newton's revolutionary intercommunalism. The McGees's radical efforts show that a focus on the deeply human side of uneven development need not dispense with attention to the core realities of capitalist social relations, economic structures, and political configurations. It is in this context, they suggest, that we must push ourselves to imagine emancipatory utopian alternatives. To say "they are just not being realistic" is to say how out of touch we are about their everyday struggles for survival.

Coleman (1997), examining McGee, Sr., invokes an unexpected character: Thomas Jefferson. Coleman wonders what Jefferson would make of America's contradictory social relations. Under an idealist rendering of democracy, Coleman asks, what would Jefferson have to say about such entrenched and deepening poverty? "Would he [Jefferson] think that the words he had written in the Declaration of Independence had been ineffective—accepted in theory but not in practice?" (Coleman 1997, 7). Although this question is itself perplexing given that Jefferson owned slaves, it does help connect various kinds of utopian thinking. The Jeffersonian paradox also serves to point out how we often make excuses about the inefficiency of theory and ideology as our social realities misalign with our ideals. Such nonalignment can be informing and catalyze change, however: Out of this, the production of radicalized spatial theory becomes a possibility (see Heynen 2006, 2008).

One of my final interviews, with longtime community leader and activist Ron Johnson, jolted me. He had been very active in forming the BPP in Milwaukee, having worked with at-

risk and "gang-banging" youth. He had been McGee, Sr.'s, right-hand man in the BPM and now served as a trusted advisor to McGee, Jr. His commitment to Milwaukee had been unblinking and staunch the first two times I interviewed him, his optimism unyielding in the face of much adversity. When I asked him about what kind of thinking and theorizing was necessary to combat the problems in Milwaukee the third time I interviewed him, he responded:

I sit on the Mayor's homicide review committee and every quarter we review homicides. It's usually law enforcement that does that, but here it's community based, and it's just remarkable. Whenever we leave these sessions everybody is like... has a long face and is in a sour mood because the level of violence in this community and around the country is incredible. And a lot of it these days is not gang violence but personal issues that blow up and get out of control, which I am sure is based on frustration and hopelessness and all that kind of stuff, but for the first time in a long time I am not as optimistic as I have always been about solutions. A lot of kids I know, working with gangs, they live in a whole different world. A lot of them don't give a damn about our society, the norms, the regulations, role models and shit like that. I'm afraid that there is a population of kids (you researchers call them the underclass... I don't like that term, but I guess that's what it pretty much is), there is a culture, if you will (I don't like that term either) of people that are growing up with a different value system and that bodes tough for the future. So I think urban America is in a heap of trouble. The violence and the crime and the killing and the hopelessness in the schools... in talking with these kids in the schools you get a real cloudy picture of what they see as the future... there is a large groups of kids who do not care, sociopathic even. These kids are the future, but when you have antiquated thoughts about jobs and hyper-segregation, you have violence. Milwaukee's imploding.

I take Johnson's ominous warnings as motivation to think more deeply about the dynamics and horrors of racialized poverty. Changing the way we think about this poverty will not be easy; creating revolutionary theory necessitates the kind of imagining that recognizes utopian creativity and realities of difficult struggle. This kind of rethinking must move to incorporate more integrative bundles of human identity while recognizing the behavioral-afflicting nature of capitalist structures. At the moment,

discursive productions of race coupled with the material repercussions of racism must be politically interrogated and acted on. This kind of change can come; the McGees have begun to show us how this is possible.

I am not so presumptuous as to suggest I know what revolutionary theory necessarily looks like, but I suggest that it seems absolutely necessary for us to collectively expand, nuance, and use our geographical imaginations to better incorporate radically utopian alternatives. The trials and tribulations of the McGee family can serve as such an exemplar. From this, it is crucial that we take full account of the emancipatory capacity, creativity, and of course the ideologies inherent in those struggles. This is in line with the notion that "Geography is too important to be left to geographers. . . . The geography we make must be a people's geography" (Harvey 1984, 7). The historical and geographical ramifications of this show at least in relation to the utopian efforts to speak out against oppression within Milwaukee that many poor African American residents are going to have a warmer house in the winter and be able to see much better because of the spatial implications inherent within an actually existing moment of revolutionary intercommunalism. ■

Notes

¹ I am using the term *family* here as a historical-geographical unit, not as an epistemological device. In making this point, I am recognizing, in line with Oyewumi (2002), the difficulties that can come from focusing on the nuclear family system, which is a specifically European form and yet is the original source of many of the concepts that are used universally in feminist scholarship.

² I conducted more than thirty interviews, and conducted several focus groups, with a mixed array of people related to a broad temporal, spatial, and political research project on hunger and inequality within Milwaukee.

³ This quote came from an interview I did with somebody very close to the entire McGee family, 12 April 2006.

⁴ A duplicate of McGee, Sr.'s, letter was provided to me by McGee, Jr., from his personal family archive.

⁵ McGee, Jr.'s, letter was also provided to me by McGee, Jr., from his personal family archive.

⁶ The mayor is not a direct family relation to President Hugo Chavez as far as I could determine.

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