Obama in Hyde Park: “Black and White Together, Against the Lower Classes”

written by Jesse Lemisch | August 8, 2011

> “Black and white together, against the lower classes”—Nichols and May routine about Hyde Park (Chicago), late 1950s

Liberals, and some leftists, have been disputing about whether Obama has “caved,” or is simply being Obama. I think the latter, and see no novelty in his behavior. I never had illusions to be crushed, never voted for him, and won’t. In addition to the blatant evidence before all of us of his essential conservatism, my views are influenced by having lived in, around and in spite of Obama’s communities—Hyde Park and the University of Chicago. This relevant background has been missing from the discussion of who he was and who he is.

Negro Removal Nichols and May performed with the Compass Players, which Wikipedia describes as “a 1950s cabaret revue show started by alumni, dropouts and hangers-on from the University of Chicago…. active from 1955-1958,” which gave birth to Second City in 1959. Their black-and-white-together routine grabbed hold of the University of Chicago’s Hyde Park Negro Removal program (as many of us understood what was euphemistically called “slum clearance”). By the time I arrived at 53rd and Dorchester in 1963 as an assistant professor in the Boorstinian History Department and the Straussian College, the neighborhood had a bombed-out look which reminded me of the London I had seen a few years after the Blitz. And there was a clear correlation between destroyed spaces and formerly lower-class black residences. All of this was overseen by the hideous Julian Levi of the University of Chicago, who the University later celebrated for having “saved the Hyde Park area around the University of Chicago from urban decay.” The neighborhood, surrounded by the vast South Side Ghetto, boasted endlessly of its racially integrated quality, which included famous black people like John Hope Franklin and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad (who greeted me by rear-ending my car, but that’s another story). There was resistance to this bombardment from the residents as well as a pioneering anti-segregation sit-in by CORE at the University of Chicago Administration building in 1962 (participated in by, among others, future Senator Bernie Sanders).

Obama first moved into Hyde Park in 1984, and in 2005 bought a house at 50th and Greenwood (just over the line in classier Kenwood). Obama was not responsible for the above horrors. But it seems relevant to his later career and his distance from blacks of classes other than his own that he lived amidst the hypocrisy that dared to call all this “racial integration.”

University of Chicago Law School Obama taught at the University of Chicago Law School for twelve years beginning in 1991. The U of C Law School is a notoriously conservative place, with ideas compatible with the University’s Friedmanite economics department. One of many telling examples of this orientation may be found in Obama’s colleague Judge Richard Posner’s proposal in the 1990’s to reduce litigation in the federal courts by indigent prisoners who need lawyers but cannot pay. If their case has merit, Posner believes, a lawyer will take it on a contingent basis, so

judges should apply this “market test” in deciding to refuse to appoint counsel. (For discussion, see here.)

Was Obama at home with this truly Dickensian idea? Presumably not (though g_d knows where things are headed with the marketization of everything proceeding apace under Obama). But the U of C Law School offered Obama tenure. It’s a conservative place, and certainly Obama made no waves in the face of the reigning conservatism. Colleagues, the *New York Times* reported,

> “sometimes wanted him to take a stand. When two fellow faculty members asked him to support a controversial antigang measure, allowing the Chicago police to disperse and eventually arrest loiterers who had no clear reason to gather, Mr. Obama discussed the issue with unusual thoughtfulness, they say, but gave little sign of who should prevail—the American Civil Liberties Union, which opposed the measure, or the community groups that supported it out of concern about crime.
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> "'He just observed it with a kind of interest,' said Daniel Kahan, now a professor at Yale."

The evasions in this episode are sooo 2011.

A Face for the University of Chicago in the Ghetto Michelle Obama’s job before she became First Lady was as Vice President for Community and External Affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center, for which she had worked since 2002. Her responsibilities in this and her previous positions at the University of Chicago included “community relations [and] neighborhood outreach.” In other words, in the face of a long record of hostility between the University and the surrounding ghetto, her job was to present to the black community a U of C with a human face.

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What does this all add up to? Obama was not responsible for Negro Removal in Hyde Park. But those familiar with the hypocritical ethos of the place will not be surprised by the inattention of his administration to the plight of poor blacks and the resultant increased suffering brought down on them by his policies. Obama is (not yet) responsible for the marketization of the right to counsel but certainly has advanced the cause of privatization and dependence on the market. Consider his cuts and intended cuts in Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security, and the immense gift to private insurers of his health care scam. And both Obamas’ coziness with the University of Chicago seems a good fit with Obama’s accommodation to the dominant conservative institutions in the society.