

American Babylon: Black Panthers and Proposition 13

By Robert O. Self

In 1969, the Black Panther Party warned that fundamental change must come to the United States, lest it “perish like Babylon,” the biblical city that fell under the weight of its own corruption and imperial ambitions. “Babylon” as place and concept passed into the lexicon of radical black politics, borrowed from African American religious tradition, as well as from the Jamaican Rastafarians for whom Babylon denoted Western capitalism and imperialism. In the hands of the Panthers, Babylon acquired a new rhetorical provocativeness: “in the concrete inner city jungles of Babylon” men and women would join together “to cast aside their personal goals and aspirations, and begin to work unselfishly together.” So, Babylon stood for both, the inevitability of imperialism’s demise and for the possibility that something better might be erected in its place, something more democratic. “The people of Babylon” could, through struggle, throw off oppression and create a new day.

Babylon provides a powerful metaphor through which to think about a particular moment in postwar American urban history. Indeed, it reminds us that black power, and contests over its meaning and implications, are a fundamental part of the political history of urban America. Facing a national crisis of unprecedented dimensions—following decades of segregation and industrial restructuring—African American radicals and liberals alike responded politically. Black communities were not solely victims of an “urban crisis”; they were burdened with, and engaged in, conceiving remedies. In Babylon, black power advocates found an urban referent through which to conceive the plight of the black nation and evoke the essential realities of the postwar American city: poverty amidst wealth, national economic growth with urban decline, and the hardening of apartheid within the liberal state. The journey through those seeming paradoxes inevitably takes us to the connections between the city and political power and to three decades of intense contest over the uses, value, and nature of urban space.

The Twin Ideologies of Space

The most significant political, economic, and spatial transformation in the postwar United States

was the overdevelopment of suburbs and the underdevelopment of cities. As ostensible signifiers of this transformation, “white flight” and “urban decline” mask volatile and protracted social and political struggles over land, taxes, jobs, and public policy in the 30 years between 1945 and the late 1970s. Such struggles dominated postwar Oakland, California, and its nearby suburbs, ultimately giving rise to two of the nation’s most controversial political ideologies: a politics of community defense and empowerment among blacks, and a neopopulist conservative homeowner politics among whites. As the home of both, the Black Panther Party and the tax revolt, California’s story is postwar America’s story—black and white, urban and suburban, rebellion and backlash—narratives that are inextricably linked and demand to be told as one.

In Oakland and the East Bay, as the tax revolt and black power evolved together, in tension, they faced off over how the region’s assets and prosperity would be distributed. Suburban city building drew homeowners, almost exclusively white and Anglo, into political battles to shape their new communities. In conflicts over land, taxes, and housing, a combination of federal policy, homeowner self-interest, and the real estate industry’s profit-driven embrace of racial exclu-