Written by Tim Rosenberger, Reporter
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Preston Smith, director of African studies at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, spoke Monday about how housing policy in postwar Chicago helped to segregate African-Americans economically.

The speech was part of the ISU Speaker Series and was based off of Smith's book published in March 2012. He was chosen in honor of Black History Month.

Part of Smith's argument is how class interest affects race politics.

"I conclude that black policy elites made a Faustian bargain with Cold War capitalism," Smith said.

The elites "were committed to a capitalist political economy" and "accepted or turned a blind eye to class inequality," seeing it as a price to pay for racial group progress, Smith added.

Chicago was chosen as the focus of Smith's work because of its status as the black metropolis,

the city having the second highest population of blacks in the country.

It was also picked because it had a diverse economic and political class for the first time in African-American history, Smith said.

Among its different economic classes, the most prevalent were those who lived in poor conditions, such as small, one room apartments.

“We cannot take racial politics at face value,” Smith said. “We need to understand that class interest shapes all racial politics.”

Chicago was also a battleground for housing policy, which was another reason for its selection.

Two terms Smith used frequently were racial and social democracy.

These are concepts he prefers over race relations, which he finds focuses on the externals of class instead of the internal.

Racial and social democracy emphasize the internal debates and conflicts between African-Americans.

Social democracy aims to allow all citizens “access to goods and services regardless of their

ability to pay," Smith said.

The latter term was adopted by black elites for a time, but was eventually abandoned for a multitude of reasons.

Smith also emphasized the postwar political environment, black doubt regarding social democracy, the private housing expansion and the material benefits of pushing for private housing.

If African-Americans had fought harder for better policies, Smith thinks blacks would have a superior model to look at to fight current neoliberalism.

The recognition of class politics in the black community was a recent development, Smith added.

The postwar scholars of black politics did not pay attention to it because they thought it did not exist, due to racial segregation.

Smith's book, "Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago," is available in paperback.