

Designing for Democracy in the United States

J. Phillip Thompson, III

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, USA
jt71@mit.edu

Keywords: United States, racial segregation, gentrification, wealth disparities, xenophobia

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of slavery, racial segregation, and discriminatory government land distribution programs in structuring current patterns of inequality and group prejudice in the United States.

It may surprise the reader that in the United States, a country dedicated for more than a century to profound and legalized spatial segregation by race – from housing, schools, trains, and buses, bathrooms, water fountains, and even separate bibles for swearing in witnesses in courts – there has been so little theorizing in the social sciences or in design about the effects of spatial segregation on the American (U.S.) social personality and democracy. While there are clear and widely accepted theories in political science about basic procedural requirements for democracy, such as equal voting rights – one person, one vote – nothing of the sort exists when it comes to spatial organization. What does a democratic society look like, physically? Where do citizens interact with one another? How do citizens come to recognize one another as part of the same community? These are basic questions that impact on democracy as

the most fundamental levels; all central involve the organization of space.

Although legal segregation of public facilities was banned in the 1960s, the average White American today lives in a community that is 84% White (Berube, 2003). Blacks similarly live in communities that are overwhelmingly Black. One may think that this is a simple reflection of differences in wealth, e.g., what members of each group can afford. Yet, such a view is naïve. These racial differences in wealth are a consequence of government policies historically, especially those having to do with land and housing.

LAND, PROPERTY, AND WEALTH IN THE U.S.

To better understand this issue, it is helpful to review a bit of history. European settlers to the U.S. (like elsewhere in the Americas) took land by force and trickery from Native Americans. Native Americans, like millions of Africans forced into slavery, were excluded from American democracy, and many so-called heroes of American democracy were genocidal in their treatment of Native Americans.

The colonial U.S.'s grab of Native American land was justified mainly using the argument of the political theorist John Locke. Locke argued that it was unfair for any group to use more land than they needed for their self-preservation, and that those who could use land to support the most people (what he called 'improvement') were entitled to have it (Wood, 2012).

Those most capable of improvement, in Locke's view, were the early capitalist – and limited to Whites. Locke's view of 'improvement' is what we now call profitable 'development'; it continues to frame land-use law decisions, as in the common term, 'highest and best' use of land (e.g., making money on land trumps all other uses). Ironically, British settlers used Lockes' arguments to justify seizing Native American land by essentially calling Native Americans' approach to land greedy. Lockes' arguments today make even less sense. Locke assumed a world of scarcity. We do not live in a world of genuine scarcity – although goods are withheld from needy people.

Land taken from Native Americans was parceled out to White settlers. In allocating land taken from Native Americans in the 18th century, for example, the Georgia state government "distributed land under the headright system, allotting 200 acres to every family head, with an additional 50 acres for each child and slave up to the number of ten, thus laying the foundation for the emergence of large estates [plantations]" (Hahn, 1983, p. 19). Black people, obviously, were not entitled to these land give-aways.

After working on plantations as slaves for more than two hundred years, the Civil War freed the slaves. In March 1865, at the close of the war, Congress passed legislation stating that, to "every male citizen, whether refugee or freedman, there shall be assigned not more than forty acres of land" (Freedman's Bureau Act, 1865). Congress

acknowledged at the time that slaves could not actually be 'free' with no property and no resources; they would be forced back into another kind of slave-like condition. This legislation was never put into effect due to President Lincoln's assassination. Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, vetoed the bill. Johnson, a former plantation owner himself, returned land seized during the war to plantation owners once they pledged loyalty to the U.S. government. This decision changed the course of history. It left the ex-slaves landless and penniless, forcing African Americans to work as debt farmers and low-wage laborers barely distinguishable from their former condition as slaves.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Homestead Act, which opened government-owned land to small family farmers ('homesteaders'). The act gave any citizen who was the head of a family 160 acres for five years after which they had to pay only \$18.00. After 1866, as penniless ex-slaves, very few had the ability to move and build a house as the program required. By 1900, settlers had obtained 80 million acres of land through the Homestead Act. To make way for homesteaders, the federal government forced Native American tribes onto reservations.

By the end of the 19th century, large numbers of European immigrants flocked to American cities to work in factories. Being poor and propertyless, these workers often lived in urban slums. At the end of World War II, with millions of these workers returning home, finding solutions for their urban condition became a high priority. The U.S. passed legislation called the 'GI Bill' (GI, meaning government issued gear, was an acronym for U.S. soldiers) for returning war veterans. The GI

Bill financed more than 200,000 farm acquisitions and new businesses. It paid for higher education, including living stipends, for more than 2.2 million veterans. It paid for vocational training for more than 5.6 million veterans – creating the modern construction Building Trades. The bill paid for 5 million new homes with low interest rates, and down payments waived. At the same time, the federal government invested more than \$1 trillion to build highways, renovate cities through urban renewal, and build hospitals. The government also maintained military spending at near wartime levels to arm against the Soviet Union. All of this created work for millions. It led to the creation of a vast middle class, but only a White middle class. Blacks, for the most part, were excluded from GI Bill benefits because administration of the bill did not preclude discrimination. The federal government not only allowed the discrimination, but advised private realtors to charge higher interest rates to non-White homebuyers. Because of rampant, purposeful exclusion, the GI Bill increased already huge disparities between Black and White workers. Massive federal support for White worker housing created the deeply racially-segregated modern physical landscape of today's U.S.

The government-subsidized private homes for White workers increased in value over time, and this has been the primary source of the large wealth differentials between Black and White households today (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). The chart below shows wealth disparities between Black and White households between 1985 and 2009; the wealth disparity increased by \$150,000 in this fourteen-year period alone.

Black and White Household Wealth (2009 dollars)

	Black	White
1984	\$5,781	\$90,851
2009	\$28,500	\$265,500

These large wealth disparities resulting from historical discrimination in government land and housing policies have translated into racialized gentrification in many American cities. Low-income Blacks have been pushed out or 'priced out,' because of rising rent and property tax, of desirable parts of central cities into isolated and impoverished suburbs. Thus a new form of American segregation has emerged, more like Western European cities, with wealthier Whites in the center, and lower income minorities on the peripheries. This landscape is not the result of a neutral and fair operation of the market, rather it is a legacy of slavery and racial discrimination. Given this history, without strong government intervention to racially integrate communities, racial segregation will continue.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS OF RACIAL SEGREGATION

It is difficult to force people to live and work together if they really don't want to. The geographic separation between Black and White workers is one of the lasting effects of slavery and Jim Crow⁽¹⁾. It is also one of the most powerful forces shaping the racialized personalities of American workers. Since slavery, the most powerful argument against progressive social movements, from socialist movements to the labor and civil rights movements, has been that these movements will lead to 'social

equality': having Whites and Blacks live together, and go to school and church together.

When people of different groups grow up in isolation from one another, it is fertile ground for stereo-types of other groups to take hold. It is hard to imagine, for example, that supporters of presidential candidate Donald Trump who actually knew and socialized with Latino immigrant families would support Trumps' call for their wholesale round-up and deportation. The powerful effects, and dangers, of physical separation on cultivating racism has been a constant theme in Black discourse in the U.S. Writing in 1849, the escaped slave and preeminent Black leader Frederick Douglass warned Blacks not to become physically distant from Whites, as this could pave the way for what we would now call genocide:

"Once get the free colored man confined in any one territory or locality – let us once be separated from the white people of this country, and we shall become the mere game of American trappers and other adventurers, and there is no reason to believe that our fate will be in any respect better than the noble Seminoles and other Indians who have perished by the perfidy and rapacity of the proud Anglo-Saxon race." (Douglass, 1975)

Douglass anticipated the construction of a racially segregated physical landscape after slavery, and he worried that Blacks could be physically isolated and thus targeted like playthings ('mere game') for White aspirations all over again. Much of what Douglass predicted happened. Racial housing segregation allows property taxes for predominantly White schools to be separated from money for predominately Black schools.

The same goes for other local services and infrastructure. This manner of local control of finance and even federal program money has been a mainstay of anti-Black policy demands starting with slave-owners, continuing with the 'states rights' movement against the civil rights movement in the 1960s; and, it continues to be a key demand of the Republican Party today (Einhorn, 2006). The goal and effect is to starve Black (and Latino) communities of resources.

There has been an even more important aim in separating White and Black communities: it is to foster political divisions between White and Black workers. Racial segregation has here been supremely successful. During the period of Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War over slavery (1861-1865), former Confederates (pro-slavery rebels) formed a coalition with Northern business elites to stifle emerging solidarity between White and Black workers and farmers. The racial conservatives enacted legislation in states allowing racial segregation in public and private facilities. Blacks challenging segregation took their case to the country highest court, and they lost. The landmark Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, made 'private' discrimination, and 'separate but equal' governmental segregation legal. The Supreme Court decision, strongly supported by business elites, was the culmination of a national and extremely violent campaign to reverse the advances of the Civil War, and to stamp down the multi-racial radical farmer and labor movements that came after the war. Along with *Plessy*, many states issued voting rights restrictions that not only prevented Blacks from voting, but blocked millions of poor Whites from voting as well. None of this was lost on Black advocates. When arguing against

racial discrimination of public schools during the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, lawyers for the Black plaintiffs highlighted the political effects of racial segregation:

"Plessy v. Ferguson chilled the development in the South of opinion conducive to the acceptance of Negroes on the basis of equality because those of the white South desiring to afford Negroes the equalitarian status which the Civil War Amendments had hoped to achieve were barred by state law from acting in accordance with their beliefs. In this connection, it is significant that the Populist movement flourished for a short period during the 1890's and threatened to take over political control of the South through a coalition of the poor Negro and poor white farmers. This movement was completely smashed and since Plessy v. Ferguson no similar phenomenon has taken hold." (Magliocca, 2011, p. 97)

CONCLUSION

There is a finite amount of space in cities and at core the public must decide priorities and values in allocating space. Currently, in the U.S., the market decides most often. Cash-strapped cities are selling off public space for the highest bidders. Businesses that can pay less rent are forced out, regardless of their importance to local communities. Gated communities are proliferating. Racial integration matters little, if at all. It hasn't occurred to the media or academia to connect the xenophobic and racist trends in American politics to the spatial segregation of Americans over such a long period of time. It is high time to do so. **m**

NOTES

(1) Jim Crow laws “were state and local laws enforcing racial segregation in the Southern United States. Enacted after the Reconstruction period, these laws continued in force until 1965. They mandated de jure racial segregation in all public facilities in states of the former Confederate States of America, starting in 1890 with a “separate but equal” status for African Americans. Conditions for African Americans were consistently inferior and underfunded compared to those available to white Americans” (Wikipedia, 2015).

REFERENCES

BERUBE, A. (2003). Racial and Ethnic Change in the Nation's Largest Cities. In B. Katz, & R. E. Lang (Eds.), *Redefining Urban and Suburban America Vol. 1* (pp. 137-153). Washington D.C., USA: Brookings Institution Press.

DOUGLASS, F. (1975). *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (P. Foner, Ed.). New York, USA: International Publishers.

EINHORN, R. L. (2006). *American Taxation, American Slavery*. Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press.

FREEDMAN'S BUREAU ACT. (1865).

HAHN, S. (1983). *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry 1850-1890*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

MAGLIOCCA, G. N. (2011). *The Tragedy of William Jennings Bryan: Constitutional Law and the Politics of Backlash*. New Haven, USA: Yale University Press.

OLIVER, M. L., & SHAPIRO, T. M. (1995). *Black Wealth, White Wealth*. New York, USA: Routledge.

WIKIPEDIA. (2015). *Jim Crow laws*. Retrieved october 22, 2015, from wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws

WOOD, E. (2012). *Liberty & Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*. London, England: Verso.