Designing for Democracy in the United States

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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 naive. 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 Locke’s arguments to justify seizing Native American land by essentially calling Native Americans’ approach to land greedy. Locke’s 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.

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Land taken from Native Americans was parcelled 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” (Freedmen’s Bureau Act, 1865). Congress
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>$5,781</td>
<td>$90,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>$28,500</td>
<td>$265,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These large wealth disparities resulting from historical discrimination in government land and housing policies have translated into racialized gentrification in many Americans 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 Crow1. 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.

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.

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 priorities and values in allocating space. 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.
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


FREEDMAN’S BUREAU ACT. (1865).


