

‘Black’ Suburbanization: American Dream or the New Banlieue?’

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By Kimberley S.
Johnson

In urban America, for much of the 20th century, the poor and the socially marginalized were concentrated in the urban core, while the wealthier and more politically powerful were located on the urban periphery. This spatial pattern is far different from European or Latin American cities, where the well-to-do occupy the urban core while the poor and the marginalized are located in the *favelas*, council estates, and *banlieus* of the metropolitan edge. Recent trends suggest that perhaps the U.S. is no longer an outlier in terms of the spatial organization of its cities. This paper briefly examines the implication of a new pattern of urban arrangements: the redistribution of minority populations, specifically African American populations, from the center to the periphery of metropolitan space; from a position of political incorporation and social inclusion, to an existence of political marginalization and social isolation. This transformation affects both the cities where blacks have left, and the suburbs that have received them. Here I focus on some of the ways in which black suburbanization faces a distinct set of challenges that do not fit the political economy of American suburbs. In turn, this development, as well as broader transformations across America’s metropolitan regions, suggests that not only do new ways of thinking about the intersection of inequality and urban/suburban space needs to be developed; but also better ways of understanding the connections between urban spaces and institutional structures.

Since at least the beginning of the 20th century, America’s urban centers have been marked by concentration of poverty, inequality and disinvestment. With the rise of the Great Migration of African Americans, these urban centers marked increasingly by race. Cities were seen as the natural home of problematic racial/economic groups such as the urban underclass (Wilson 1987). Meanwhile, for a host of reasons ranging from consumer/class preferences; to government policy; and, to racial/ethnic animus, suburban areas became the embodiment of a particular kind of political, economic and physical landscape. A landscape of low-density residential areas that were racially/ethnically homogenous, purged of the poor and working class, and positioned to strategically siphon off economic activity or residents from the urban center. A division of labor between cities and suburbs seemed to take shape by the 1970s: chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs.¹ Cities were places of economic stagnation, racial tension, and societal dysfunction, while suburbs were the spaces of economic growth and social harmony.

By 2010, this division of labor had begun to de-stabilize. High-profile cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles have rebounded from the economic and social challenges they faced in the 1980s. Meanwhile, economically vibrant “creative class” cities such as Portland, Seattle, Salt Lake City and San Francisco (“diverse” but with relative small minority populations, especially African Americans), have become objects of policy emulation. Across this backdrop, many cities have seen dramatic declines in their black population. Some observers, such as Alan Ehrenhalt, suggest that a “great inversion” is taking place, with upper income whites remaining and/or returning to cities, while middle-class (and poorer) African Americans and Latinos leave for more affordable and safer suburbs (Ehrenhalt 2012).

This great inversion may have some support in the numbers. Cities such as New York and Chicago, as well as black meccas such as Washington, D.C. and Atlanta, have seen dramatic drops in their African American population. Meanwhile, the image of American suburbs as racially and economically homogeneous spaces has been challenged on a variety of fronts. First, the suburbanization of minority groups has rapidly increased. For example, in 1990, 37 percent of the black metropolitan population of large metropolitan areas lived in suburbs. By 2010, 51 percent of the black population lived in the suburbs (Frey 2001; Orfield and Luce 2012). Immigration to suburbs, as opposed to central cities (the traditional receptors of immigrants) also increased, with 40% of immigrants immigrating directly to the suburbs (Roberts 2007). In the west and the southwest, Latino and Asians have contributed heavily to the transformation of suburbs (Suro and Singer 2002).

In addition to increasing racial and ethnic diversity, suburbs have also experienced higher rates of poverty especially in the wake of the housing market meltdown and the Great Recession. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of suburban residents living in poverty increased by 25% (Garr and Kneebone 2010). The rise of suburban poverty not only revealed a new kind of suburban experience for many of its residents; but also revealed significant weakness in the social safety net outside of core urban areas (Allard and Roth 2010). This is not surprising, as “sub”-urban areas are envisioned by many of its traditional residents (white and middle-class) as well as policymakers as places that are “free” of urban problems such as poverty and inequality.² The emergence of a new American suburbia characterized by growing diverse racial/ethnic populations as well as by increased levels of poverty points to a need to see how suburban governments grapple with these new challenges.

The weakness of suburban safety nets is symptomatic of much larger structural issues. By accident of history, but also by intent, most suburban governments are far weaker than most central cities in overall fiscal capacity as well as their ability to engage in re-distributional policy. Indeed, most theories of suburban political economy are premised on developmental policy as being the overarching organizing structure on which suburban governance rests (Lewis 1996; Schneider 1989). For the post-war white middle-class suburb, the weakness of suburban government was not problematic as the favored position of these suburbs and their inhabitants, in terms of federal spending priorities coupled with the expansion of the U.S. economy, largely masked many of these structural issues.

For minority groups, there are potentially troublesome implications of moving to the suburban context in terms of political fragmentation. For example, in the case of African Americans, dispersal to suburbs could have deleterious impacts on political and social capital. In many central cities, where African American exercise[d] a degree of political influence, the black political class as well as interest groups could bargain amongst each other or with other groups for access to the resources available from relatively robust set of urban endowments. These urban endowments ranged from fiscal tools including favorable access to national bond markets, targeted intergovernmental aid, an extensive physical infrastructure, a spatially concentrated network of non-profits and NGOs, as well as an array of social and cultural institutions. The concentrated poverty of the inner city was counterbalanced by the ability of more politically and economically successful black politicians/groups to access these urban endowments. As the African American population of cities declines, the ability to tap into these resources will also decline, relatively for those who remain in the city; and absolutely for those who leave the cities. Suburbs, especially the ones to which many blacks are relocating, lack many if not all of these urban endowments. Indeed, I suggest that the political fragmentation of suburbs as well as the fiscal straitjacket of suburban economies may place blacks in a far worse political and fiscal position than they experienced before they ascended to height of black urban power in the late 20th century.

An example of the troubling implications arises when we examine “black” suburbs. Black suburbs are defined as suburbs whose population is majority (or strong plurality) African American.³ They range from poverty stricken, decaying inner-ring, *spillover* suburbs adjacent to central city ghettos, to traditional middle-income “dormitory” suburbs, to upscale “exurban” suburbs populated by black doctors, lawyers and other professionals (Patillo-McCoy 1999; Cashin 2000-2001; Lacy 2007; Smithsimon 2012). The average black suburb occupies a “precarious space” in the political economy of suburbia, as black suburbs experience higher than average levels of poverty and crime, lower school funding, and limited fiscal capacity (Ascher and Branch-Smith 2005; Phelan and Schneider 1996, Schneider and Logan 1982). For black homeowners, residing in a black suburb has meant lower average property values than whites, and less ability to build assets that can contribute to generational wealth transfers, a major cause of the black-white wealth gap (Shapiro, Meschede and Osoro 2013; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Beyond residential separation, the last decade demonstrated how the U.S.’s racial housing market facilitated a massive surge of predatory lending, which focused on low-income communities as well as communities of color (Rugh and Massey 2010). Many black suburbs, both the poorest as well as some of the most affluent, bear the mark of this racialized lending pattern (Powell 2009; Kellogg 2011).

Spillover suburbs are probably in an even more disadvantaged position. Their physical proximity to the city, as well as continued patterns of racial and economic discrimination, put these suburbs into the position of shouldering the burden of suburban poverty while also suffering the effects of urban displacement. Poorer, darker, suburban

residents are shunted to these suburbs, while those displaced by urban re-development and/or further inner-city decay are displaced to these more affordable suburban options. Indeed one of the criticisms of the deployment of Section 8 vouchers is that they have simply moved blacks from the inner city slums to adjacent, low-income neighborhoods or transitional suburbs. Some critics allege that this population movement has destabilized vulnerable areas, which do not have the physical, economic or social service infrastructure needed to support a high-need population (Main 2012; Moore 2008).

Politically, what does suburbanization of the poor mean? In many ways, the central city spillover suburbs are symbolic of disengaged politics: residents are largely transient, local social capital is low, and an infrastructure of local civic organizations is underdeveloped, if not absent. In light of these conditions, the politicians who dominate these suburbs often use the resources of the suburbs as a source of patronage. Local politics is about jobs first; physical safety and economic development second; and, education often a distant third.

Black suburbs which fit the more classic pattern of middle-income, low-density housing and limited commercialization also suffer from class/color lines in ways that non-black suburbs do not. Indeed, both Smithsimon's (2012) as well as Cashin's (2000-2001) accounts of black suburban governance challenge the economic orientation of suburban governance theories. Smithsimon's case study of Randallstown, a black Baltimore suburb, traces the contentious and uncertain attempts by its residents to maintain an approximation of the white middle-class ideal of racial and class exclusivity. The fragility and "precariousness" of black suburbia intensifies the fear of Randallstown's black residents of falling down the status ladder, and thus decreasing the long-term value of their real estate investment and social status. This fear is present, though not as intense for white suburban residents. Indeed, in a neat reversal of suburban NIMBY-ism, residents of black suburbs actively court and welcome markers of suburban sprawl usually resisted by white suburbanites. Large national chain stores and restaurants such as Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Applebee's, etc., have largely refused to invest in heavily black areas despite these areas in some case being more affluent than predominantly white areas. This leads to "status disequilibrium" for black middle class residents as the commercial and retail establishments that do exist in these areas do not reflect their residents' aspirations to belong to mainstream consumer society (see Smithsimon 2010, Cashin 2000-2001). While residents would like to encourage commercial development, inequality in retail investment blocks this goal. In a suburban marketplace structured by race, there is little response to demand from black suburbs.

This effort to maintain class status goes beyond a desire for a big box store. In Prince George's County, affluent black suburbanites via their representatives moved to reshape school attendance boundaries and limit neighborhood recreational amenities, in order to dissuade the use of these public spaces by lower class blacks. Thus a local athletic complex was built with a limited number of basketball courts in order to keep out bad elements (see Johnson 2002). Despite these efforts, Cashin (2000-2001) suggests that any effort to maintain long-term survival of healthy autonomous black middle-class suburbs is futile given the fragility of black suburban middle class life. The enduring power of racial housing markets and resultant segregation; and, the role of black suburbs as shouldering a disproportionate burden of the region's poor; both lead to the on-going erosion of black middle-class suburbs. Thus, from middle-class dormitory suburb to black Greenfield development, lines of color/class have proven to be enduring, though this varies across metropolitan space and time.

The black "exurban" suburbs of newer areas of suburbanization face a different set of challenges. Unlike older suburbs, these new suburbs often developed in areas of the country in which strong county governments existed, rather than in the fragmented political jurisdictions of the Northeast and Midwest. Indeed, in the 1990s it was believed that their location in areas with strong regional governments augured for the future success of these suburbs as well as for the regions as a whole (see Rusk 1993; Orfield 1997). Recently, however, this type of regional governance is under attack. For example, in suburban Atlanta, rather than sharing governance with non-white suburban areas, predominately white suburbs are establishing independent cities (Gross 2007; see also Kruse 2005). The appearance of suburban secession movements in areas of strong regional potential suggests the diffusion of a politically fragmented suburban landscape in which the benefits of regional governance are sacrificed

on the altar of racial and economic autonomy.

This discussion of black suburbanization (and the significant decline in the African American population of center cities) points to the need to develop new models of politics – whether “suburban,” “local,” or “race/ethnic.” These new models will need to reflect the shifting landscape of American population; and, to take into account a restructuring of urban life where class, race/ethnicity and space continue to shape the life chances of rich and poor, white and brown. Drawing from the work of David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, and others, we should ask what is the “city” in this context? And, what does a “right to the city” or a right to the metropolis mean?

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1. "Chocolate City" was the title of a 1975 album and song by Parliament, an African American musical group. The imagery was revived by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, who pushed back against the notion of


permanent black depopulation, and the concomitant loss of political power, of the city after Hurricane Katrina. See "Nagin apologizes for 'chocolate' city comments,"



<http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/01/17/nagin.city/index.html>.

2. The exclusion of the poor and people of color has been one of the primary functions of post-war suburbia; see





Kruse (2005) and Sugrue (1996).

3. The definition of what constitutes a predominately black suburb varies; Orfield and Luce (2012) use a population threshold of 60% non-white, while Owens and Wright (1998) use a 50% threshold on non-Hispanic



black population. By contrast, Rose (1965) uses a threshold of 95%.

