

44 Years After King's Death, American Neighborhoods and Schools Remain Deeply Segregated

Daniel Denvir

Martin Luther King, a giant of the movement for integration, was assassinated nearly 44 years ago, the national holiday in his honor established in 1983. Yet American neighborhoods and schools remain profoundly segregated.

As I reported in *Salon* [1], the 2010 census showed that racial segregation in housing remains extremely high and is “decreasing [only] slowly, although the dividing lines are shifting as middle-income blacks, Latinos and Asians move to once all-white suburbs — whereupon whites often move away, turning older suburbs into new, if less distressed, ghettos.”

Our schools are similarly separate and unequal: an August 2011 study [2] by Brown University sociologist John Logan found that the average white student attended an elementary school that scored nearly twice as high on state tests than the school attended by the average black child.

“It is hard,” says Logan, “to imagine how the disadvantages in schools attended by black and Hispanic children can be redressed unless there are major changes in the segregation of schools by race and class. And the issue of segregation is not on the policy agenda.”

It's not on the agenda in part because of the big distinction people make between the *de jure* segregation of the Jim Crow South and the *de facto* segregation of the industrial North. But the segregation King marched against in Chicago—where protesters were attacked by a white mob, and King hit in the head with a brick—was established by whites-only deeds that were as ferociously exclusive as any North Carolina lunch counter. And while working class white “ethnics” often catch the blame for opposing neighborhood integration, rich people are just more subtle: witness the limousine liberal suburbs of Westchester, New York, currently defying a court order [3] to integrate housing.

Southern cities are often deeply segregated [4] too, though historically the region's racial hierarchy relied more on social distance furnished by Jim Crow than the physical separation of the industrial metropolises of the North. And the 2008 election provided strong evidence of lingering racism of the old-fashioned sort: in much of the region, 9 out of 10 whites supported John McCain. There were few other places in the United States, red or blue, where McCain outdid George W. Bush's 2004 performance.

Conservatives have nonetheless become obsessed—and have obsessed over distorting—Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. Indeed, they have fixated on a single sentence of his I Have a Dream speech, his “dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

The political establishment, and conservatives in particu-

lar, have opposed any solution to the enduring crisis of racial segregation—and they have done so in the most disingenuous of terms.

As Daniel Rodgers writes in his history *Age of Fracture*, the right moved from strenuously opposing civil rights to arguing for a “color-blind” society and touting themselves as the movement's true heirs. They say that it is in fact the collective solutions that are racist—or, as the formulation has it, “reverse racist” against individual whites—seemingly unaware that the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow were applied collectively to all black Americans.

“One wonders,” Justice Harry Blackmun wrote in 1989 [5], “whether the majority still believes that race discrimination – or, more accurately, race discrimination against nonwhites – is a problem in our society, or even remembers that it ever was.”

Conservatives don't frequently quote from King's 1967 speech against the Vietnam War, when he noted “the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. And so we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago.”

That divide continues.

A 2011 Pew study [6] discovered that the recession decimated wealth gains made by blacks and Latinos: black household wealth fell by 55% and Hispanics lost 66%, while whites lost just 16%. The average white American now has a net worth twenty times larger than blacks and 18 times larger than Hispanics—the largest racial wealth gap in at least a quarter century.

Segregation is not natural. Rather, it's political—and economic.

Yet Republican presidential candidates insist on regurgitating hackneyed “culture of poverty” fairytales that script the black underclass as pathologically enfeebled by government handouts. The newly credible Rick Santorum, for example, said he doesn't want to “make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money.” (He now insists that he said “blah,” not black).

While racist derision grabs headlines, it is malign neglect that holds segregation in place. American politics are now controlled by people living in racially homogenous exurbs [7] or pleasantly gentrified downtowns. 20 years after the LA riots, the endurance of a deeply impoverished black ghetto is increasingly out-of-site and very much out-of-mind. There's no longer even gangster rap blasting out of exurban teenage bedrooms to annoy white conservatives and remind them

that poor black people still exist. Today, Jay-Z congenially shares a very race-neutral dream: “There’s nothing you can’t do, now you’re in New York.”

The solutions to segregation—what sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton call **American Apartheid** [8]—are also political and economic. Metropolitan regions, a single economic unit, should equitably share revenues to fund schools instead of depending on municipal property taxes. Affordable housing, including public housing and Section 8 vouchers, should be equitably spread across the region and not ghettoized in neighborhoods with high violent crime and the worst schools.

But in the era of Occupy Wall Street it’s important to remember that segregation is today also a function of class (not that this makes things any better for poor black people): a 2011 Stanford University study [9] finds that the rich are increasingly likely to live in rich neighborhoods, the poor even more likely to live in poor neighborhoods. Our hollowed-out service economy is a segregated hour-glass structure with a big bottom, small middle, and tiny top.

Whites have collectively reaped the benefits of segregation. But we have in no way profited equally. King, who died in Memphis supporting striking sanitation workers, believed that “our needs are identical with labor’s needs.” Indeed, his dream was much bigger than today’s conventional—and reactionary—wisdom would have you believe, as he makes clear in this 1961 speech to the AFL-CIO.

“A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality.”

On a day full of solemn speeches signifying nothing, remember that you can judge a nation’s character by the welfare of its people. We shouldn’t need King to remind us that we’re in bad shape. 

- [1] http://www.salon.com/2011/03/29/most_segreated_cities/singleton/
- [2] <http://www.citypaper.net/blogs/nakedcity/Segregation-New-Study-Shows-Philly-Has-Nations-Most-Separate-and-Unequal-Schools-Neighborhoods.html>
- [3] http://www.salon.com/2011/07/01/denvir_westchester_segregation/singleton/
- [4] http://www.salon.com/2011/04/03/myth_10_segreated_cities/singleton/
- [5] http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0490_0642_ZD.html

- [6] http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/census-data-show-wealth-of-whites-is-20-times-that-of-blacks-widest-us-gap-in-quarter-century/2011/07/25/gIQAvOw4YI_story.html
- [7] http://www.salon.com/2012/01/03/io-wa-centric_candidates_ignore_the_urban_crisis/
- [8] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674018211>
- [9] <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/RussellSageIncomeSegregationreport.pdf>

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