6. Social Class as a Factor in Ethnic and Racial Segregation

WILFRED G. MARSTON

York University, Toronto, Canada

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to analyze, by means of a brief review of the literature, the relationship between social class position and residential location with particular emphasis on ethnic and racial groups, and (2) to demonstrate the importance of conceptualizing the assimilation process for minority groups in ecological terms. As is the case in most lines of sociological enquiry, the explanatory power of social class needs to be assessed when focusing on the residential patterns of ethnic and racial groups. The fundamental question is: To what extent can ethnic and/or racial residential segregation be accounted for by knowing the social class structure of these groups? In an attempt to partially answer this question, studies from various countries are reviewed, although American cities provide most of the evidence to be cited.

In this discussion, the term ethnic is confined to national origin groups (i.e., Italian, Irish, Germans, etc.) with the exception of the Jewish ethnic group. Race refers primarily to the Negro population in the United States. No attempt is made to distinguish between social class and socioeconomic status, both referring to a relative position with respect to income, education and occupation levels. Segregation simply means the physical separation of population groups in space.

The first part of the discussion is confined to an analysis of social class segregation in general. Following this, class segregation is analyzed with respect to ethnic groups. Negro segregation is then considered in terms of the relevance of social class.

Social Class Segregation: The General Case

The tendency for social differences to be manifested spatially is a well-known and established fact. Park was one of the first sociologists to consider seriously the implications of spatial factors for the social order. “It is because social relations are so frequently correlated with spatial relations; because physical distances so frequently are, or seem to be, the indexes of social distances, that statistics have any significance whatever for sociology.”

The relationship between social and spatial structure is clearly seen in the extent to which social classes are segregated in the urban community. That differences in residential location tend to be coterminous with differences in socioeconomic status is by no means a recent development. In pre-industrial cities there was a marked tendency for the lower classes to be located at the periphery and the upper levels to be in and around the city center.

The concentric, sector, and multiple nuclei models as well as the more

recent neighborhood evolutionary model have emerged as attempts to account for the close association between social and spatial structure in modern cities. Despite the fact that each model conceptualizes the physical shape and location of the segregated neighborhoods differently, each similarly acknowledges the existence and persistence of social class segregation.

Due in part to the increasing interest in suburbs and to the influence of concentric model, a considerable portion of class segregation research has been conceptualized in terms of city-suburban differences. Relying on income and housing value data for 12 large American cities, Davis discovered that central cities are becoming increasingly lower and upper class residential areas while the proportion of middle class housing is steadily decreasing. "A polarization of housing values into the relatively high and relatively low is a feature of most of the cities studied."2

Based on the traditional indicators of socioeconomic status — income, occupation, and education — Schnore presents evidence that the older and larger the urban area, the more likely that suburbs will contain the higher classes.3 This has been confirmed by a number of other studies of American cities and by a study of Copenhagen, Denmark.5 Goldsmith and Lee claim, however, that city-suburban differences are reduced when race is controlled.6 They found that for the white population alone, in the older and larger metropolitan areas of the United States in 1960, the average status levels of cities were only slightly below those of suburbs. Newer and smaller areas (even before controlling for race), on the other hand, are characterized by a pattern of either no city-suburban class differences or one where the city actually contains the higher classes. In summary, the city-suburban segregation of social classes clearly varies according to a range of factors, but it is not always and not everywhere the same.7

Another perspective on social class segregation postulates a sectoral rather than concentric pattern. Anderson and Égeland and Berry have suggested

2 J. Tait Davis, "Middle Class Housing in the Central City," Economic Geography, 41 (July, 1965), 238-251.
6 Goldsmith and Lee, op. cit., 207.
7 There is scattered evidence that even in Central and South America, social class varies according to the city-suburban distinction in much the same pattern as in North American cities. See Leo F. Schnore, "On the Spatial Structure of Cities in the Two Americas," in Philip M. Hauser and Leo F. Schnore (eds.) The Study of Urbanization (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1965), 347-398.
9 Brian J. Berry, "Internal Structure of the City," in Robinson O. Everett and Richard H.