

# Separation by Avoidance During Counter-Urbanization

by *Brian J. L. Berry*

Black gains in the past two decades cannot be gainsayed, yet spatial separation of blacks and whites remains profound. According to the indicators developed by Levitan, Johnston and Taggart, black progress has been substantial in employment, earnings and education; in these realms black Americans gained on white Americans in both absolute and relative terms.<sup>1</sup> In housing, on the other hand, despite marked increases in the quality of units occupied by black Americans, that of white Americans improved even more. The housing gap widened, and residential separation remained as intense as before, although its bases appear to have shifted from deliberate segregation to accelerated avoidance.

This differential progress is part cause and part consequence of the extraordinary demographic shifts that have revealed themselves so dramatically in the United States since 1970. Yet it has roots in certain fundamental traits of the American culture that find their expression in the links between amenity, neighborhood, status and mobility. Both the shifts and their roots will be examined here.

## CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS: THE MIGRATION REVERSAL

While the dominating demographic trends continue to be the long-term decline in the nation's rate of population growth due to a declining birth rate and changing attitudes to the family, marriage, and work leading to decreasing numbers of young and increasing numbers of the elderly, shifts in the nation's settlement geography have been rapid and dramatic, and it is these shifts that lie at the base of the continuing separation of black and white.<sup>2</sup> Signs of a reversal of the long-term pattern whereby metropolitan growth rates exceeded those of nonmetropolitan areas first appeared during the 1960s, surfacing first in central cities with large, rapidly-growing minority populations. During this time, several nonmetropolitan regions experienced a turnaround from population decline to modest increase, and it appeared that at least in some of these areas outmigration had peaked during the previous decade. Despite these sagas of change, however, the number of individuals

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residing in metropolitan areas increased 16.6 percent or 8½ times the rate for nonmetropolitan areas in the period 1960-70. Not so since 1970, however. A reversal has occurred, resulting in the growth rates for nonmetropolitan areas that exceed those of metropolitan areas. Nationwide statistics for the first half of the 1970s indicate that population has increased 6.3 percent in nonmetropolitan areas and only 3.6 percent in metropolitan regions.

When the nation's metropolitan areas are divided between their central cities and surrounding suburbs, the change is revealed more dramatically. The lower metropolitan area population growth of the 1970s resulted from a combination of the depopulation of the central cities and a slackening of the suburban boom. Since 1970, central cities have experienced an absolute population loss of nearly two million persons, or three percent of the total number of residents at the beginning of the decade. Five million persons were added due to an excess of births over deaths, but net outmigration from the central cities to the suburbs and to nonmetropolitan areas exceeded seven million persons, largely white.

What is new, of course, is the current *nationwide* trend of absolute central city population decline; the proportion of metropolitan residents living in the central city rather than the suburbs reached a peak during the 1920s and has declined continually since. Absolute losses of population in *certain* central cities did occur prior to 1970; however gains in the remaining central cities always more than offset these losses to create overall central city growth. The decade of the 1950s saw 56 central cities lose population while the national total of central city residents increased 11.6 percent. During the 1960s, in which nationwide central city population increased 6.5 percent, the number of central cities which lost population increased to 95, or 39 percent of all central cities in the nation.

Central city population losses during the 1950s and 1960s were largely confined to the largest industrial heartland cities of the North Central and Northeast regions of the country, including Baltimore, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. In the 1970s, the greatest concentration of central cities losing residents continues to lie within this northern region. In the South, the central city portions of metropolitan areas containing over one million total residents have joined the losers, as have the largest places in the West, while the central cities of metropolitan areas of less than one million continue to increase.

### **NONMETROPOLITAN AMERICA: THE NEW GAINER**

The experience of nonmetropolitan America has been the opposite of the foregoing. From the 1940s through the 1950s, outmigration from the nation's rural areas continued apace. Certain rural areas reached a turning point during the 1960s, but it was not until the 1970s that nonmetropolitan areas as a whole shifted to the status of gainers through net immigration from metropolitan areas. The number of individuals residing in the nation's nonmetropolitan areas during the 1960s grew by 6.8 percent, a rate of increase

that was only half the national average. During the first half of this decade, however, the nonmetropolitan population increase of 6.3 percent was above the national average of 4.4 percent and well above the increase of 3.6 percent for metropolitan areas.

More significant for nonmetropolitan areas than their current faster growth rate is the turnaround that has occurred in migration between the nonmetropolitan and metropolitan portions of the nation. During the 1950s, nonmetropolitan areas lost over five million persons. This high level of out-migration continued into the 1960s as the nation's farm population declined at an annual rate of only 1.8 percent. With fewer outmigrants and greater numbers of immigrants, nonmetropolitan areas have experienced a net immigration of approximately two million persons since 1970, thus reversing the trend of population loss that has existed since the 1940s.

This net migration reversal has occurred in almost every nonmetropolitan subregion of the country. Generally, those nonmetropolitan areas located immediately adjacent to metropolitan centers (accounting for 51.5 percent of all nonmetropolitan residents) have experienced the highest nonmetropolitan growth rates during the 1970s: a 4.7 percent increase through 1973 for adjacent counties compared with 3.7 percent for non-adjacent counties. Nonmetropolitan areas that have a high level of integration of their residents into metropolitan labor markets, in particular, have experienced larger recent growth rates due to exurban sprawl beyond metropolitan boundaries. Through 1973, population increased 9.1 percent in those nonmetropolitan areas where 20 percent or more of the residents commute to a metropolitan place for work, but only 4.8 percent in those areas where less than 3 percent of the residents commute to metropolitan places for employment. Even this relatively lower nonmetropolitan growth of 4.8 percent in the latter case is, however, higher than the average growth rate of metropolitan places during this same period.

The subregions of nonmetropolitan America that underwent turnarounds from population decline during the 1960s to growth during the 1970s are quite diverse. In the South, a region extending from the Ozarks through eastern Texas and containing a predominantly white population underwent a shift during the 1960s from reliance upon agricultural employment to development of manufacturing, as well as benefitting from newly developed recreational areas. The Upper Great Lakes area bordering the southern coast of Lake Superior is a second nonmetropolitan region that experienced growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s—again primarily as the result of manufacturing decentralization and the development of recreational facilities and retirement communities. The nonmetropolitan areas of the Blue Ridge-Piedmont, Florida, the Southwest, and the northern Pacific Coast regions all experienced growth in both the 1960s and 1970s as the result of either decentralization of manufacturing, recreational-retirement developments, the opening up of new resources, or the expansion of improved transportation facilities (the interstate highway system) which enable persons to reside in rural areas but participate in metropolitan labor markets.

## THE BLACK EXPERIENCE: NOT ON TREND

How have America's blacks generally fared within this overall set of reversals? The major shifts appear to be these:

1. The long-term net outmigration by blacks from the South to the North in search of better opportunities was reversed during the first half of the 1970s. During the five-year period from 1965-1970 the black population of the South decreased by 216,000 due to outmigration, but since 1970 there has been a net migration gain of 14,000 blacks from other regions of the country. During the first half of the 1970s, immigration by blacks to the south has increased 86.4 percent and outmigration decreased 23.8 percent, compared to the last half of the 1960s. In this respect, black Americans have been on trend.

2. Blacks are, however, off trend with all the other reversals. Since 1970, the metropolitan areas of the United States have grown more slowly than the nation as a whole, and substantially less rapidly than nonmetropolitan America, a development that stands in sharp contrast to all preceding decades back to the early nineteenth century. On a net basis, metropolitan areas are now losing migrants to nonmetropolitan territory, although they still show slight population increases due to natural increases and immigration from abroad. The overall decline in metropolitan growth is largely accounted for by the largest metropolitan areas, particularly those located in the Northeast and North Central regions. Through 1974 the eight metropolitan areas exceeding three million population added only 285,000 residents to a 1970 population base of 56 million, while their central cities declined in population absolutely. Yet it is precisely in these central cities that we now find the greatest concentrations of the nation's blacks. In 1974, 58 percent of all black Americans lived in the nation's central cities, 17 percent in metropolitan rings and 24 percent in nonmetropolitan areas, compared with 26, 41 and 33 percent of white Americans respectively. Central cities of the nation's SMSAs grew at an average annual rate of 0.6 percent between 1960 and 1970, but declined at an average annual rate of 0.4 percent since 1970 (annexations excluded). Much of the decrease is attributable to the post-1970 decline in the number of *white* central city residents, which has occurred at a rate of one percent per annum—higher in larger cities, where black concentrations are greatest and/or growing most rapidly, and lower elsewhere.

3. Metropolitan decline is not universal. Rapid growth has taken place in smaller metropolitan areas, particularly in Florida, the South, and the West, and in ex-urban counties located immediately outside metropolitan areas as currently defined, but with substantially daily commuting to metropolitan areas, but these are essentially white areas; blacks have not contributed to the growth.

4. Particularly impressive are the reversals in migration trends between the largest metropolitan areas and the furthestmost peripheral counties; the metropolitan regions with populations exceeding three million gained migrants between 1960 and 1970 but have lost residents since 1970; the nation's peripheral nonmetropolitan counties lost migrants between 1960 and 1970 but have gained migrants since 1970. The balance of migration flows has been reversed. But the losers have the greatest black concentrations and continue to gain blacks via natural increase; the gainers are predominantly white, via immigration. High growth rates prevail in nonmetropolitan areas with manufacturing, centers of higher education, resources for recreational development, and retirement communities. The nonmetropolitan areas *not* benefitting from this new growth have the greatest rural black concentrations.

## COUNTER-URBANIZATION AND AMERICAN CULTURAL PREDISPOSITIONS

The evidence is clear. An increasing number of U.S. central cities and a widening ring of their older suburbs must now learn to cope with population decline, especially within the nation's largest metropolitan areas. As mobile whites move away, the remaining populations are increasingly homogeneous: black and other minorities and/or poor and disadvantaged. New black leaders elected to political office as minorities become local majorities must thus cope with the worst possible economic and demographic circumstances. Halfway through the decade, the central cities of U.S. metropolitan areas already have lost 3.1 percent of their 1970 residential population. Suburban areas have grown by 15 percent in five years. In short, a turning point has been reached in the American urban experience. *Counter-urbanization* has replaced urbanization as the dominant force shaping the nation's settlement patterns. To those who wrote about nineteenth and early twentieth-century industrial urbanization, the essence was increasing size, density, and heterogeneity (via immigration). "Urbanization is a process of population concentration," wrote Hope Tisdale in 1942. "It implies a movement from a state of less concentration to a state of more concentration."<sup>3</sup> But since 1970 American metropolitan regions have grown less rapidly than the nation, and have actually lost population to nonmetropolitan territory. And because this outmigration has been selective of upwardly-mobile social and economic groups, very specific sub-groups have been left behind—blacks and other minorities, and various disadvantaged groups of whites.

The process of counter-urbanization has as its essence *decreasing* size, *decreasing* density, and *decreasing* heterogeneity. To mimic Tisdale: *counter-urbanization is a process of population deconcentration; it implies a movement from a state of more concentration to a state of less concentration.* Yet this is a process only. For the black minority, concentration remains the rule.

### NOT A PASSING PHASE

There are some who argue that the trends are a temporary perturbation, a product of recession that will vanish when the health of the economy improves. But such an attitude is hardly credible; twentieth-century trends have all pointed in the same direction—*creation of nothing less than an urban civilization without cities*, at least in the classical sense. As early as 1902, H. G. Wells wrote that the giant cities he knew were "in all probability destined to such a process of dissection and diffusion as to amount almost to obliteration within a measurable further space of years. These coming cities will present a new and entirely different phase of human distribution. The city will diffuse itself until it has taken up considerable areas and many of the characteristics of what is now country. The country will take itself many of the qualities of the city. The old antithesis will cease, the boundary lines will altogether disappear."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Adna Weber suggested in his remarkable 1899 study that "the most encouraging feature of the whole situation is the tendency [towards] a diminution in the *intensity* of concentration, which

furnishes the solid basis of hope that the evils of city life, so far as they result from over-crowding, may in large part be removed. If concentration of population seems desired to continue, it will be a modified concentration which offers the advantages of both city and country life."<sup>5</sup> Later Frank Lloyd Wright argued that "Broadacre City" was the most desirable settlement pattern for mankind, and Lewis Mumford called for a new reintegration of men and nature in dispersed urban regions, to cite but a few cases.

Throughout the twentieth century all trends have pointed in the directions suggested by these writers. Every public opinion survey has indicated that popular preferences are for smaller places and lower densities, with richer environmental amenities.<sup>6</sup> The trend has been one leading unremittingly towards the reversal of the processes of population concentration unleashed by technologies of the industrial revolution, a reversal finally achieved after 1970.

### REAFFIRMING AN AMERICAN TRADITION

Viewed more generally, though, what finally has been achieved in the 1970s is not something new, but something old, the reassertion of fundamental predispositions of the majority American culture that, because they are antithetical to the urban concentration that was produced by large-scale industry and primitive intra-urban transportation during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, have resulted in many of the contradictions and conflicts of recent decades.

It was 200 years ago that Hector de Crèvecoeur outlined these fundamental values in his *Letters from an American Farmer*. "Who, then, is this new man, the American?" he asked, and his answer was a description of basic American culture traits. Foremost among these was a love of newness. Second was the overwhelming desire to be near to nature. Freedom to move was essential if goals were to be realized, and individualism was basic to the self-made man's pursuit of his goals, yet violence was the accompaniment if not the condition of success—the competitive urge, the struggle to succeed, the fight to win.<sup>7</sup>

There has been no more evocative description of the consequences of the love of newness for American metropolitan structure, in a context of upward mobility and growth, than Homer Hoyt's discussion of *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities*, published in 1939.<sup>8</sup> Hoyt said that,

the erection of new dwellings on the periphery sets in motion forces tending to draw population from older houses and to cause all groups to move up a step, leaving the oldest and cheapest houses to be occupied by the poorest families or to be vacated. The constant competition of new areas is in itself a cause of neighborhood shifts. Every building boom, with its crop of structures equipped with the latest modern devices, pushes all existing structures a notch down in the scale of desirability. The high grade areas tend to preempt the most desirable residential land, intermediate rental groups tend to occupy the sectors in each city that are adjacent to the high rent area. Occupants of houses in the low rent categories tend to move out in bands from the center of the city by filtering up. There is a constant outward movement

of neighborhoods because as neighborhoods become older they tend to be less desirable. A neighborhood composed of new houses in the latest modern style is at its apex. Physical deterioration of structures and the aging of families constantly lessen the vital powers of the neighborhood. The steady process of deterioration is hastened by obsolescence; a new and more modern type of structure relegates all existing structures to lower ranks of desirability.

Hoyt's perceptions cut right to the core of much of that which has transpired, for the accompaniment of the process of counter-urbanization, driven by upward social mobility and outward spatial mobility, is urban decay. And so long as there is a link between status and race, Hoyt's model applies not simply to neighborhood filtering, but to the outward move of upper-status whites and the relegation of blacks—perceived to be of lower status even if attainment is equal—to neighborhoods on the lower rungs of the desirability ladder.

The love of newness joins with the desire to be near nature and away from urban disamenities—including crowding, crime, poverty, and minorities. H. G. Wells' 1902 forecasts should be recalled.

Many of our railway-begotten giant cities are destined to such a process of dissection and diffusion as to amount almost to obliteration within a measurable further space of years. These coming cities will present a new and entirely different phase of human distribution: The social history of the middle and later thirds of the nineteenth century all over the civilized world has been the history of a gigantic rush of population into the magic radius of—for most people—four miles, to suffer there physical and moral disaster far more appalling than any famine or pestilence that ever swept the world. But new forces bring with them the distinct promise of a centrifugal application that may finally be equal to the complete reduction of all our present congestions. What will be the forces acting upon the prosperous household? The passion for nature and that craving for a little private *imperium* are the chief centrifugal inducements. The city will diffuse itself until it has taken upon considerable areas and many of the characteristics of what is now country.

### THE AMERICAN LIFE—A PROLONGED ODYSSEY

To occupy this new frontier, close to nature, and to keep on adjusting to succeeding waves of growth has demanded freedom to move. Americans are the world's most mobile people. Forty million Americans change residence each year. The typical American's life might be characterized as a prolonged odyssey. Marriage, childbearing, military service, higher education, changes from one employer to another or shifts from one plant or office location to another with the same employer, divorce, retirement—all may bring a change in residence and locale. The resulting migration is an *assortive* mechanism, filtering and sifting the population as its members undergo social mobility. Yet there are antiphonal notes. Minorities have generally not had the same opportunities as whites to use mobility as an adjustment mechanism. And filtering in housing markets, for example, is a process that has positive welfare consequences if new construction exceeds the rate necessary to house normal growth and produces an excess housing supply at the point where the filtering originates; if such new construction exerts a downward pressure on the rents

and prices of existing housing, permitting lower income families to obtain better housing bargains relative to their existing housing quarters; if the upward mobility is apart from any changes caused by rising incomes and/or declining rent/income ratios and if a decline in quality is not necessarily forced by reductions in maintenance and repair to the extent that rents and prices are forced down; and finally if a mechanism exists to remove the worst housing from the market without adversely affecting rents and prices of housing at the lowest level. Part of the reason for urban decay is that the last two conditions have not been met: deterioration has accelerated in many older neighborhoods occupied by members of minority groups. Social malaise has set in, crime rates have risen, abandonment has become contagious, frequently adversely affecting access by low-income residents to the better-quality housing available locally.<sup>9</sup> And the disease has become associated with the skin color of the inner city residents; fear and avoidance behavior—movement towards the pastoral “elsewhere”—has been the response of the white majority.

### AMERICAN PRIVATISM AND URBAN DECAY

Contrary to the views of most radicals, however, urban expansion and urban decay are not caused by a single-minded conspiracy among large-scale institutions and investors. They result instead from myriad decisions made individually, within a tradition of privatism. This tradition has been called by Sam Bass Warner “the most important element of American culture for understanding the development of cities. It has meant that the cities of the United States depended for their wages, employment, and general prosperity on the aggregate successes and failures of thousands of individual enterprises, not upon community action. It has also meant that the physical forms of American cities, their lots, houses, factories and streets have been the outcome of a real estate market of profit-seeking builders, land speculators, and large investors. And it has meant that the local politics of American cities have depended for their actors, and for a good deal of their subject matter, on the changing focus of men’s private economic activities.”<sup>10</sup> Privatism has prevailed throughout America’s history, and a consequence is a preference for governmental fragmentation and for interest-group politics under presumed conditions of democratic pluralism. This has set the stage for the availability of a myriad of opportunities for avoidance and escape by central-city whites, and a myriad of like-minded decisions based upon common perceptions of central-city problems.

While achievement in the mainstream has involved an individual fight to succeed, violence also is a pervasive underpinning of American life. It surfaces in the fight to succeed and achieve status, and in the acrimonious confrontations that mark the fights to control turf within cities, as the least advantaged whites seek to exclude minority group members, and preserve their perceived status—for regardless of socio-economic characteristics, a concentration of blacks is perceived negatively by whites as a threat to their own status. In other words, so long as race remains a status-determining trait, it is likely that racial separation will remain profound, eliciting either white flight to



avoid the threat of neighborhood decline, or violent attempts to protect a neighborhood turf against minority intrusion in the case of the least mobile whites.

For the underclass abandoned in deteriorating ghettos, crime and violence is a way of life, and this contributes to white fears. President Johnson's *Commission on Crimes of Violence* sensed the directions of change correctly when it reported that if present trends continue "we can expect further social fragmentation of the urban environment, greater segregation of different racial groups and economic classes, and the polarization of attitudes on a variety of issues. It is logical to expect the establishment of the 'defensive city' consisting of a declining central business district in the inner city protected by people shopping or working in buildings during daylight hours and 'sealed off' by police during night-time hours. Highrise apartments and residential 'compounds' will be fortified cells for upper, middle, and high income populations living in prime locations. Suburban neighborhoods, geographically removed from the central city, will be 'safe areas,' protected by racial and economic homogeneity."

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF RACE AND STATUS

In the expanding frontiers of suburban and exurban America, upwardly-mobile individuals from a variety of backgrounds have been readily integrated into the achievement-oriented mainstream of society, there to resegregate themselves along lines of age and status. When the heterogeneity of American cities was caused primarily by the influx of successive waves of European immigrants, the policy of encouraging such assimilation was taken for granted ideologically. But the marriage of race and status in the racist mind has meant that the assimilating and resegregating process of the traditional melting pot has not been available to the nation's blacks. Without the intervening opportunity to be fully assimilated into the nation's mainstream, and regardless of socio-economic achievement, darker pigmentation is equated with lower status. The perception extends further, to an equation of the ills bred out of enslavement of the most disadvantaged to all who share the same skin color. And out of this perception comes fear—fear that, in the eyes of others, one will lose status because one's neighborhood loses status as a consequence of minority entry. The response is to oppose entry and, failing, to flee—away from "urban problems" and towards the exurban/small town ideal.

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