



“Summary of article by Douglas S. Massey: The Age of Extremes: Concentrated Affluence and Poverty in the Twenty-First Century” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 5: The Political Economy of Inequality. Island Press: Washington DC, 2000. pp. 155-158

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The resurgence of inequality at the end of the twentieth century is occurring in tandem with rapid growth in urbanization. The geography of population is at once becoming more dense and more stratified. Increasingly, the poor live in a world of crime, disease, violence and family breakdown. The world of the rich is more and more one of isolation and privilege.

The article summarized here projects these trends into the twenty-first century, arguing that “we have entered a new age of inequality in which class lines will grow more rigid as they are amplified and reinforced by a powerful process of geographic concentration,” [395] and predicting that without positive interventions, the future will be bleak, divided and violent.

Spatial Concentrations of Poverty and Wealth

In Latin America, the region of the developing world with the best statistics on poverty, there has been a rapid change in the location of the poor. In 1970, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the region’s poor people lived in the countryside. By 1980, only a narrow majority (54%) of the poor lived in rural areas. And by 1990, the urban poor outnumbered their rural counterparts, 60% to 40%. “The typical poor Latin American of the twenty-first century will not live in a village or town but in a city, and most likely a very large one.” [396]

The same process is even more advanced in the United States, where the proportion of the poor living outside of metropolitan areas fell from 44% in 1970 to 28% in 1990. Geographic concentration of the poor is occurring within cities as well: the proportion of central-city poor people living in predominantly poor neighborhoods has risen sharply; by any of several measures, income segregation is growing in urban America. The average urban poor person lives in a neighborhood where roughly one-quarter of the population is poor.

The affluent traditionally clustered in core cities to enhance their ability to control and administer territory and enterprises. However, before modern advances in transportation and communication, the masses who produced goods and services for the wealthy were situated nearby. New technologies in the nineteenth century enabled separation of work from residence and segregation of classes. The middle and upper classes moved to suburbs, while the working classes stayed near factory jobs in central cities.

The fluid economy of the early post WWII era began to break down this class stratification. As the middle class grew, residential class segregation dropped. More and more people lived in neighborhoods among people with different occupational status. However, this pattern also reversed in the 1970s. The affluent population became even more concentrated than the poor. In the ten largest metropolitan areas in 1970, the typical affluent person (defined here as someone with an income of more than four times the poverty level) lived in a neighborhood that was 39% affluent; by 1990, the figure had risen to 52%.

The New World Order

The emerging spatial world order is one in which powerful economic forces drive the poor out of the countryside into the cities and then block their upward economic mobility. Racial and ethnic biases further stymie geographic mobility.

The urbanization of poverty is well advanced in the developed world, where the urban population was 74% of the total in 1990 and is projected to reach 82% by 2020 (figures for the U.S. alone are slightly higher in both cases). In the developing world only 35% of the population was urban in 1990. These countries are rapidly urbanizing and should become 47% urban by 2010.

In the past, rural migrants to the cities could take advantage of numerous routes to eventual upward mobility; studies done in the 1970s documented this, both in developed countries like the U.S. and in developing countries like Mexico. But since the 1970s the structure of opportunities has changed, with a dwindling proportion of middle-income jobs for the modestly educated. Those entering at the bottom of the urban economy are now more likely to stay there.

Segregation by Class, Race and Ethnicity

Class-based spatial segregation, which has risen since 1970, is magnified by racial discrimination. Persistent white prejudice and a history of discriminatory real estate and lending practices have left blacks in the U.S. extremely segregated. The increase in black poverty in the 1970s and 1980s “was absorbed by a small set of racially homogeneous, geographically isolated, densely settled neighborhoods packed densely around the urban core; and because class segregation was increasing as well..., a disproportionate share of the economic pain was absorbed by neighborhoods that were not only black but also poor.” [404]

In 1990, 83% of poor central city blacks lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates of over 20%; the corresponding figure was 43% for poor central city whites. The problem was not confined to central cities: for the 50 largest metropolitan areas as a whole, 64% of poor blacks, but only 13% of poor whites, lived in neighborhoods with a poverty rate over 20% in 1980.

Racial segregation accounts for a large share of the spatial concentration of poverty in the U.S. In previous research co-authored by the present author, sixteen metropolitan areas were designated *hypersegregated*, that is geographically segregated on several dimensions, based on an analysis of 1980 data. Fourteen remained hypersegregated in 1990; the two areas that escaped

the list barely did so, while six more areas were added. These twenty areas contain over one third of the black population of the U.S.

Political and Cultural Ecology of Inequality

“In a society where most people live in small towns and villages, rich and poor families must mix socially, share the same public services, and inhabit the same political units....the poor benefit from public institutions to which the rich are committed by reason of self-interest.”[406]

The trend toward economic segregation fractures this shared polity at the same time as it diminishes shared space. The danger is that advantages and disadvantages will be compounded if political boundaries correspond to class differences. The rich can withdraw from the cost of providing services to the poor by decentralizing government. Rich enclaves will have low tax rates on high property values and abundant public services. Poor communities will have high demand for services, and will need high tax rates on low property values in order to support them. School systems are the most significant manifestation of this syndrome. As education becomes increasingly important to success in the global marketplace, disadvantaged children are shunted into resource poor school systems while rich children attend well-funded learning-oriented schools.

In small communities, informal measures, such as ostracism, ridicule, or physical discipline, hold crime and violence in check. These devices tend to break down in the anonymity of large-scale settings. Louis Wirth perceived this breakdown as the cause of alienation and anti-social behavior, while other analysts maintained that urban dwellers reconstruct networks based on friendship rather than kinship. As a researcher in Depression era Chicago, Wirth probably mistook the effects of concentrated poverty for results of urbanism in general.

A more recent theorist, Claude Fischer, proposed that the concentrated spaces in cities are conducive to subculture formation in which intense interaction reinforces behavior which others may consider unconventional. This theory is consonant with the emergence of divergent subcultures of poverty and affluence. Joblessness, crime, family problems, violence and other social ills concentrate in poor neighborhoods, while the rich share a privileged environment with affluent neighbors.

The most troubling result of concentrated poverty is the reinforcement of criminal and violent behavior. This behavior can become a survival mechanism in response to threatening actions from others. A constant condition of threat may even trigger physiological changes which produce reflexive violence. Poor children will be socialized in an environment in which supervision, respect for education and successful role models are scarce. The effects will spill over into many areas of life: “Concentrated poverty is a stronger predictor of violent crime than of property crime, and of violence between people known to one another than between strangers.” [408] Oppositional subcultures will form in the most impoverished, segregated areas, seeking to preserve self-esteem by legitimizing failure to meet conventional educational and other social standards. Once formed, such subcultures are difficult to change, and contribute independently to the perpetuation of the problems of poverty.

We are facing an age of extremes. Social scientists devote a great deal of attention to the poor. But in order to understand the new regime, it is necessary to investigate the culture of affluence as well. If present trends continue, the future looks bleak. Self-conscious actions are required to change course; sacrifice by the affluent will inevitably be required to reduce inequality and class segregation.